

STEPHEN KING

THE GUNSLINGER

THE DARK TOWER



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THE
GUNSLINGER
—
THE DARK TOWER



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THE GUNSLINGER

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On Writing

To ED FERMAN,
Who took a chance on these stories, one by one.

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INTRODUCTION

On Being Nineteen (and a Few Other Things)

I

Hobbits were big when I was nineteen (a number of some import in the stories you are about to read).

There were probably half a dozen Merrys and Pippins slogging through the mud at Max Yasgur's farm during the Great Woodstock Music Festival, twice as many Frodos, and hippie Gandalfs without number. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was madly popular in those days, and while I never made it to Woodstock (say sorry), I suppose I was at least a halfling-hippie. Enough of one, at any rate, to have read the books and fallen in love with them. The *Dark Tower* books, like most long fantasy tales written by men and women of my generation (*The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, by Stephen Donaldson, and *The Sword of Shannara*, by Terry Brooks, are just two of many), were born out of Tolkien's.

But although I read the books in 1966 and 1967, I held off writing. I responded (and with rather touching wholeheartedness) to the sweep of Tolkien's imagination—to the ambition of his story—but I wanted to write my own kind of story, and had I started then, I would have written his. That, as the late Tricky Dick Nixon was fond of saying, would have been wrong. Thanks to Mr. Tolkien, the twentieth century had all the elves and wizards it needed.

In 1967, I didn't have any idea what my kind of story might be, but that didn't matter; I felt positive I'd know it when it passed me on the street. I was nineteen and arrogant. Certainly arrogant enough to feel I could wait a little while on my muse and my masterpiece (as I

was sure it would be). At nineteen, it seems to me, one has a right to be arrogant; time has usually not begun its stealthy and rotten subtractions. It takes away your hair and your jump-shot, according to a popular country song, but in truth it takes away a lot more than that. I didn't know it in 1966 and '67, and if I had, I wouldn't have cared. I could imagine—barely—being forty, but fifty? No. *Sixty?* Never! Sixty was out of the question. And at nineteen, that's just the way to be. Nineteen is the age where you say *Look out, world, I'm smokin' TNT and I'm drinkin' dynamite, so if you know what's good for ya, get out of my way—here comes Stevie.*

Nineteen's a selfish age and finds one's cares tightly circumscribed. I had a lot of reach, and I cared about that. I had a lot of ambition, and I cared about that. I had a typewriter that I carried from one shithole apartment to the next, always with a deck of smokes in my pocket and a smile on my face. The compromises of middle age were distant, the insults of old age over the horizon. Like the protagonist in that Bob Seger song they now use to sell the trucks, I felt endlessly powerful and endlessly optimistic; my pockets were empty, but my head was full of things I wanted to say and my heart was full of stories I wanted to tell. Sounds corny now; felt wonderful then. Felt very cool. More than anything else I wanted to get inside my readers' defenses, wanted to rip them and ravish them and change them forever with nothing but story. And I felt I could do those things. I felt I had been *made* to do those things.

How conceited does that sound? A lot or a little? Either way, I don't apologize. I was nineteen. There was not so much as a strand of gray in my beard. I had three pairs of jeans, one pair of boots, the idea that the world was my oyster, and nothing that happened in the next twenty years proved me wrong. Then, around the age of thirty-nine, my troubles set in: drink, drugs, a road accident that changed the way I walked (among other things). I've written about them at length and need not write about them here. Besides, it's the same for you, right? The world eventually sends out a mean-ass Patrol Boy to slow your progress and show you who's boss. You reading this have undoubtedly met yours (or will); I met mine, and I'm sure he'll be back. He's got my address. He's a mean guy, a Bad Lieutenant, the

sworn enemy of goofery, fuckery, pride, ambition, loud music, and all things nineteen.

But I still think that's a pretty fine age. Maybe the best age. You can rock and roll all night, but when the music dies out and the beer wears off, you're able to think. And dream big dreams. The mean Patrol Boy cuts you down to size eventually, and if you start out small, why, there's almost nothing left but the cuffs of your pants when he's done with you. "Got another one!" he shouts, and strides on with his citation book in his hand. So a little arrogance (or even a lot) isn't such a bad thing, although your mother undoubtedly told you different. Mine did. *Pride goeth before a fall, Stephen*, she said . . . and then I found out—right around the age that is 19×2 —that eventually you fall down, anyway. Or get pushed into the ditch. At nineteen they can card you in the bars and tell you to get the fuck out, put your sorry act (and sorrier ass) back on the street, but they can't card you when you sit down to paint a picture, write a poem, or tell a story, by God, and if you reading this happen to be very young, don't let your elders and supposed betters tell you any different. Sure, you've never been to Paris. No, you never ran with the bulls at Pamplona. Yes, you're a pissant who had no hair in your armpits until three years ago—but so what? If you don't start out too big for your britches, how are you gonna fill 'em when you grow up? Let it rip regardless of what anybody tells you, that's my idea; sit down and *smoke* that baby.

II

I think novelists come in two types, and that includes the sort of fledgling novelist I was by 1970. Those who are bound for the more literary or "serious" side of the job examine every possible subject in light of this question: *What would writing this sort of story mean to me?* Those whose destiny (or ka, if you like) is to include the writing of popular novels are apt to ask a very different one: *What would writing this sort of story mean to others?* The "serious" novelist is looking for answers and keys to the self; the "popular" novelist is

looking for an audience. Both kinds of writer are equally selfish. I've known a good many, and will set my watch and warrant upon it.

Anyway, I believe that even at the age of nineteen, I recognized the story of Frodo and his efforts to rid himself of the One Great Ring as one belonging to the second group. They were the adventures of an essentially British band of pilgrims set against a backdrop of vaguely Norse mythology. I liked the idea of the quest—*loved* it, in fact—but I had no interest in either Tolkien's sturdy peasant characters (that's not to say I didn't like them, because I did) or his bosky Scandinavian settings. If I tried going in that direction, I'd get it all wrong.

So I waited. By 1970 I was twenty-two, the first strands of gray had showed up in my beard (I think smoking two and a half packs of Pall Malls a day probably had something to do with that), but even at twenty-two, one can afford to wait. At twenty-two, time is still on one's side, although even then that bad old Patrol Boy's in the neighborhood and asking questions.

Then, in an almost completely empty movie theater (the Bijou, in Bangor, Maine, if it matters), I saw a film directed by Sergio Leone. It was called *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and before the film was even half over, I realized that what I wanted to write was a novel that contained Tolkien's sense of quest and magic but set against Leone's almost absurdly majestic Western backdrop. If you've only seen this gonzo Western on your television screen, you don't understand what I'm talking about—cry your pardon, but it's true. On a movie screen, projected through the correct Panavision lenses, *TG, TB, & TU* is an epic to rival *Ben-Hur*. Clint Eastwood appears roughly eighteen feet tall, with each wiry jut of stubble on his cheeks looking roughly the size of a young redwood tree. The grooves bracketing Lee Van Cleef's mouth are as deep as canyons, and there could be a thinny (see *Wizard and Glass*) at the bottom of each one. The desert settings appear to stretch at least out as far as the orbit of the planet Neptune. And the barrel of each gun looks to be roughly as large as the Holland Tunnel.

What I wanted even more than the setting was that feeling of epic, apocalyptic *size*. The fact that Leone knew jack shit about American geography (according to one of the characters, Chicago is

somewhere in the vicinity of Phoenix, Arizona) added to the film's sense of magnificent dislocation. And in my enthusiasm—the sort only a young person can muster, I think—I wanted to write not just a *long* book, but *the longest popular novel in history*. I did not succeed in doing that, but I feel I had a decent rip; *The Dark Tower*, volumes one through seven, really comprise a single tale, and the first four volumes run to just over two thousand pages in paperback. The final three volumes run another twenty-five hundred in manuscript. I'm not trying to imply here that length has anything whatsoever to do with quality; I'm just saying that I wanted to write an epic, and in some ways, I succeeded. If you were to ask me *why* I wanted to do that, I couldn't tell you. Maybe it's a part of growing up American: build the tallest, dig the deepest, write the longest. And that head-scratching puzzlement when the question of motivation comes up? Seems to me that that is also part of being an American. In the end we are reduced to saying *It seemed like a good idea at the time*.

III

Another thing about being nineteen, do it please ya: it is the age, I think, where a lot of us somehow get stuck (mentally and emotionally, if not physically). The years slide by and one day you find yourself looking into the mirror with real puzzlement. *Why are those lines on my face?* you wonder. *Where did that stupid potbelly come from? Hell, I'm only nineteen!* This is hardly an original concept, but that in no way subtracts from one's amazement.

Time puts gray in your beard, time takes away your jump-shot, and all the while you're thinking—silly you—that it's still on your side. The logical side of you knows better, but your heart refuses to believe it. If you're lucky, the Patrol Boy who cited you for going too fast and having too much fun also gives you a dose of smelling salts. That was more or less what happened to me near the end of the twentieth century. It came in the form of a Plymouth van that knocked me into the ditch beside a road in my hometown.

About three years after that accident I did a book signing for *From a Buick 8* at a Borders store in Dearborn, Michigan. When one guy got to the head of the line, he said he was really, really glad that I was still alive. (I get this a lot, and it beats the *shit* out of “Why the hell didn’t you die?”)

“I was with this good friend of mine when we heard you got popped,” he said. “Man, we just started shaking our heads and saying ‘There goes the Tower, it’s tilting, it’s falling, ahhh, shit, he’ll never finish it now.’”

A version of the same idea had occurred to me—the troubling idea that, having built the Dark Tower in the collective imagination of a million readers, I might have a responsibility to make it safe for as long as people wanted to read about it. That might be for only five years; for all I know, it might be five hundred. Fantasy stories, the bad as well as the good (even now, someone out there is probably reading *Varney the Vampire* or *The Monk*), seem to have long shelf lives. Roland’s way of protecting the Tower is to try to remove the threat to the Beams that hold the Tower up. I would have to do it, I realized after my accident, by finishing the gunslinger’s story.

During the long pauses between the writing and publication of the first four *Dark Tower* tales, I received hundreds of “pack your bags, we’re going on a guilt trip” letters. In 1998 (when I was laboring under the mistaken impression that I was still basically nineteen, in other words), I got one from an “82-yr-old Gramma, don’t mean to Bother You w/My Troubles BUT!! very Sick These Days.” The Gramma told me she probably had only a year to live (“14 Mo’s at Outside, Cancer all thru Me”), and while she didn’t expect me to finish Roland’s tale in that time just for her, she wanted to know if I couldn’t please (*please*) just tell her how it came out. The line that wrenched my heart (although not quite enough to start writing again) was her promise to “not tell a Single Soul.” A year later—probably after the accident that landed me in the hospital—one of my assistants, Marsha DiFilippo, got a letter from a fellow on death row in either Texas or Florida, wanting to know essentially the same thing: how does it come out? (He promised to take the secret to the grave with him, which gave me the creeps.)

I would have given both of these folks what they wanted—a summary of Roland’s further adventures—if I could have done, but alas, I couldn’t. I had no idea of how things were going to turn out with the gunslinger and his friends. To know, I have to write. I once had an outline, but I lost it along the way. (It probably wasn’t worth a tin shit, anyway.) All I had was a few notes (“Chussit, chissit, chassit, something-something-basket” reads one lying on the desk as I write this). Eventually, starting in July of 2001, I began to write again. I knew by then I was no longer nineteen, nor exempt from any of the ills to which the flesh is heir. I knew I was going to be sixty, maybe even seventy. And I wanted to finish my story before the bad Patrol Boy came for the last time. I had no urge to be filed away with *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

The result—for better or worse—lies before you, Constant Reader, whether you reading this are starting with Volume One or are preparing for Volume Five. Like it or hate it, the story of Roland is now done. I hope you enjoy it.

As for me, I had the time of my life.

Stephen King
January 25, 2003

Foreword

Most of what writers write about their work is ill-informed bullshit.* That is why you have never seen a book entitled *One Hundred Great Introductions of Western Civilization* or *Best-Loved Forewords of the American People*. This is a judgment call on my part, of course, but after writing at least fifty introductions and forewords—not to mention an entire book about the craft of fiction—I think it’s one I have a right to make. And I think you can take me seriously when I tell you this might be one of those rare occasions upon which I actually have something worth saying.

A few years ago, I created some furor among my readers by offering a revised and expanded version of my novel *The Stand*. I was justifiably nervous about that book, because *The Stand* has always been the novel my readers have loved the best (as far as the most passionate of the “*Stand*-fans” are concerned, I could have died in 1980 without making the world a noticeably poorer place).

If there is a story that rivals *The Stand* in the imagination of King readers, it’s probably the tale of Roland Deschain and his search for the Dark Tower. And now—goddamn!—I’ve gone and done the same thing again.

Except I haven’t, not really, and I want you to know it. I also want you to know what I *have* done, and why. It may not be important to you, but it’s *very* important to me, and thus this foreword is exempt (I hope) from King’s Bullshit Rule.

First, please be reminded that *The Stand* sustained deep cuts in manuscript not for editorial reasons but for financial ones. (There were binding limitations, too, but I don’t even want to go there.) What I reinstated in the late eighties were revised sections of preexisting

manuscript. I also revised the work as a whole, mostly to acknowledge the AIDS epidemic, which blossomed (if that is the word) between the first issue of *The Stand* and the publication of the revised version eight or nine years later. The result was a volume about 100,000 words longer than the original.

In the case of *The Gunslinger*, the original volume was slim, and the added material in this version amounts to a mere thirty-five pages, or about nine thousand words. If you have read *The Gunslinger* before, you'll only find two or three totally new scenes here. Dark Tower purists (of which there are a surprising number—just check the Web) will want to read the book again, of course, and most of them are apt to do so with a mixture of curiosity and irritation. I sympathize, but must say I'm less concerned with them than with readers who have never encountered Roland and his katet.*

In spite of its fervent followers, the tale of the Tower is far less known by my readers than is *The Stand*. Sometimes, when I do readings, I'll ask those present to raise their hands if they've read one or more of my novels. Since they've bothered to come at all—sometimes going to the added inconvenience of hiring a baby-sitter and incurring the added expense of gassing up the old sedan—it comes as no surprise that most of them raise their hands. Then I'll ask them to keep their hands up if they've read one or more of the Dark Tower stories. When I do that, at least half the hands in the hall invariably go down. The conclusion is clear enough: although I've spent an inordinate amount of time writing these books in the thirty-three years between 1970 and 2003, comparatively few people have read them. Yet those who have are passionate about them, and I'm fairly passionate myself—enough so, in any case, that I was never able to let Roland creep away into that exile which is the unhappy home of unfulfilled characters (think of Chaucer's pilgrims on the way to Canterbury, or the people who populate Charles Dickens's unfinished final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*).

I think that I'd always assumed (somewhere in the back of my mind, for I cannot ever remember thinking about this consciously) that there would be time to finish, that perhaps God would even send me a singing telegram at the appointed hour: "Deedle-dum, deedle-

dower/Get back to work, Stephen,/Finish the Tower.” And in a way, something like that really did happen, although it wasn’t a singing telegram but a close encounter with a Plymouth minivan that got me going again. If the vehicle that struck me that day had been a little bigger, or if the hit had been just a little squarer, it would have been a case of mourners please omit flowers, the King family thanks you for your sympathy. And Roland’s quest would have remained forever unfinished, at least by me.

In any case, in 2001—by which time I’d begun to feel more myself again—I decided the time had come to finish Roland’s story. I pushed everything else aside and set to work on the final three books. As always, I did this not so much for the readers who demanded it as for myself.

Although the revisions of the last two volumes still remain to be done as I write this in the winter of 2003, the books themselves were finished last summer. And, in the hiatus between the editorial work on Volume Five (*Wolves of the Calla*) and Volume Six (*Song of Susannah*), I decided the time had come to go back to the beginning and start the final overall revisions. Why? Because these seven volumes were never really separate stories at all, but sections of a single long novel called *The Dark Tower*, and the beginning was out of sync with the ending.

My approach to revision hasn’t changed much over the years. I know there are writers who do it as they go along, but my method of attack has always been to plunge in and go as fast as I can, keeping the edge of my narrative blade as sharp as possible by constant use, and trying to outrun the novelist’s most insidious enemy, which is doubt. Looking back prompts too many questions: How believable are my characters? How interesting is my story? How good is this, really? Will anyone care? Do I care myself?

When my first draft of a novel is done, I put it away, warts and all, to mellow. Some period of time later—six months, a year, two years, it doesn’t really matter—I can come back to it with a cooler (but still loving) eye, and begin the task of revising. And although each book of the Tower series was revised as a separate entity, I never really looked at the work as a whole until I’d finished Volume Seven, *The Dark Tower*.

When I looked back at the first volume, which you now hold in your hands, three obvious truths presented themselves. The first was that *The Gunslinger* had been written by a very young man, and had all the problems of a very young man's book. The second was that it contained a great many errors and false starts, particularly in light of the volumes that followed.* The third was that *The Gunslinger* did not even *sound* like the later books—it was, frankly, rather difficult to read. All too often I heard myself apologizing for it, and telling people that if they persevered, they would find the story really found its voice in *The Drawing of the Three*.

At one point in *The Gunslinger*, Roland is described as the sort of man who would straighten pictures in strange hotel rooms. I'm that sort of guy myself, and to some extent, that is all that rewriting amounts to: straightening the pictures, vacuuming the floors, scrubbing the toilets. I did a great deal of housework in the course of this revision, and have had a chance to do what any writer wants to do with a work that is finished but still needs a final polish and tune-up: *just make it right*. Once you know how things come out, you owe it to the potential reader—and to yourself—to go back and put things in order. That is what I have tried to do here, always being careful that no addition or change should give away the secrets hidden in the last three books of the cycle, secrets I have been patiently keeping for as long as thirty years in some cases.

Before I close, I should say a word about the younger man who dared to write this book. That young man had been exposed to far too many writing seminars, and had grown far too used to the ideas those seminars promulgate: that one is writing for other people rather than one's self; that language is more important than story; that ambiguity is to be preferred over clarity and simplicity, which are usually signs of a thick and literal mind. As a result, I was not surprised to find a high degree of pretension in Roland's debut appearance (not to mention what seemed like thousands of unnecessary adverbs). I removed as much of this hollow blather as I could, and do not regret a single cut made in that regard. In other places—invariably those where I'd been seduced into forgetting the writing seminar ideas by some particularly entrancing piece of story—I was able to let the writing almost entirely alone, save for the

usual bits of revision any writer needs to do. As I have pointed out in another context, only God gets it right the first time.

In any case, I didn't want to muzzle or even really change the way this story is told; for all its faults, it has its own special charms, it seems to me. To change it too completely would have been to repudiate the person who first wrote of the gunslinger in the late spring and early summer of 1970, and that I did not want to do.

What I *did* want to do—and before the final volumes of the series came out, if possible—was to give newcomers to the tale of the Tower (and old readers who want to refresh their memories) a clearer start and a slightly easier entry into Roland's world. I also wanted them to have a volume that more effectively foreshadowed coming events. I hope I have done that. And if you are one of those who have never visited the strange world through which Roland and his friends move, I hope you will enjoy the marvels you find there. More than anything else, I wanted to tell a tale of wonder. If you find yourself falling under the spell of the Dark Tower, even a little bit, I reckon I will have done my job, which was begun in 1970 and largely finished in 2003. Yet Roland would be the first to point out that such a span of time means very little. In fact, when one quests for the Dark Tower, time is a matter of no concern at all.

—February 6, 2003

. . . a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a leaf, a stone, a door. And of all the forgotten faces.

Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb, we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?

. . . O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.

Thomas Wolfe
Look Homeward, Angel

RESUMPTION

The
GUNSLINGER



CHAPTER ONE

The Gunslinger

I

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

The desert was the apotheosis of all deserts, huge, standing to the sky for what looked like eternity in all directions. It was white and blinding and waterless and without feature save for the faint, cloudy haze of the mountains which sketched themselves on the horizon and the devil-grass which brought sweet dreams, nightmares, death. An occasional tombstone sign pointed the way, for once the drifted track that cut its way through the thick crust of alkali had been a highway. Coaches and buckas had followed it. The world had moved on since then. The world had emptied.

The gunslinger had been struck by a momentary dizziness, a kind of yawning sensation that made the entire world seem ephemeral, almost a thing that could be looked through. It passed and, like the world upon whose hide he walked, he moved on. He passed the miles stolidly, not hurrying, not loafing. A hide waterbag was slung around his middle like a bloated sausage. It was almost full. He had progressed through the *khef* over many years, and had reached perhaps the fifth level. Had he been a Manni holy man, he might not have even been thirsty; he could have watched his own body dehydrate with clinical, detached attention, watering its crevices and dark inner hollows only when his logic told him it must be done. He was not a Manni, however, nor a follower of the Man Jesus, and considered himself in no way holy. He was just an ordinary pilgrim, in other words, and all he could say with real certainty was that he was thirsty. And even so, he had no particular urge to drink. In a vague way, all this pleased him. It was what the country required, it was a

thirsty country, and he had in his long life been nothing if not adaptable.

Below the waterbag were his guns, carefully weighted to his hands; a plate had been added to each when they had come to him from his father, who had been lighter and not so tall. The two belts crisscrossed above his crotch. The holsters were oiled too deeply for even this Philistine sun to crack. The stocks of the guns were sandalwood, yellow and finely grained. Rawhide tie-downs held the holsters loosely to his thighs, and they swung a bit with his step; they had rubbed away the bluing of his jeans (and thinned the cloth) in a pair of arcs that looked almost like smiles. The brass casings of the cartridges looped into the gunbelts heliographed in the sun. There were fewer now. The leather made subtle creaking noises.

His shirt, the no-color of rain or dust, was open at the throat, with a rawhide thong dangling loosely in hand-punched eyelets. His hat was gone. So was the horn he had once carried; gone for years, that horn, spilled from the hand of a dying friend, and he missed them both.

He breasted a gently rising dune (although there was no sand here; the desert was hardpan, and even the harsh winds that blew when dark came raised only an aggravating harsh dust like scouring powder) and saw the kicked remains of a tiny campfire on the lee side, the side the sun would quit earliest. Small signs like this, once more affirming the man in black's possible humanity, never failed to please him. His lips stretched in the pitted, flaked remains of his face. The grin was gruesome, painful. He squatted.

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

The burned grass was crisscrossed in the now familiar ideographic pattern, and crumbled to gray senselessness before the gunslinger's prodding hand. There was nothing in the remains but a charred scrap of bacon, which he ate thoughtfully. It had always been this

way. The gunslinger had followed the man in black across the desert for two months now, across the endless, screamingly monotonous purgatorial wastes, and had yet to find spoor other than the hygienic sterile ideographs of the man in black's campfires. He had not found a can, a bottle, or a waterbag (the gunslinger had left four of those behind, like dead snakeskins). He hadn't found any dung. He assumed the man in black buried it.

Perhaps the campfires were a message, spelled out one Great Letter at a time. *Keep your distance, partner*, it might say. Or, *The end draweth nigh*. Or maybe even, *Come and get me*. It didn't matter what they said or didn't say. He had no interest in messages, if messages they were. What mattered was that these remains were as cold as all the others. Yet he had gained. He knew he was closer, but did not know how he knew. A kind of smell, perhaps. That didn't matter, either. He would keep going until something changed, and if nothing changed, he would keep going, anyway. There would be water if God willed it, the oldtimers said. Water if God willed it, even in the desert. The gunslinger stood up, brushing his hands.

No other trace; the wind, razor-sharp, had of course filed away even what scant tracks the hardpan might once have held. No man-scat, no cast-off trash, never a sign of where those things might have been buried. Nothing. Only these cold campfires along the ancient highway moving southeast and the relentless range-finder in his own head. Although of course it was more than that; the pull southeast was more than just a sense of direction, was even more than magnetism.

He sat down and allowed himself a short pull from the waterbag. He thought of that momentary dizziness earlier in the day, that sense of being almost untethered from the world, and wondered what it might have meant. Why should that dizziness make him think of his horn and the last of his old friends, both lost so long ago at Jericho Hill? He still had the guns—his father's guns—and surely they were more important than horns . . . or even friends.

Weren't they?

The question was oddly troubling, but since there seemed to be no answer but the obvious one, he put it aside, possibly for later consideration. He scanned the desert and then looked up at the sun,

which was now sliding into a far quadrant of the sky that was, disturbingly, not quite true west. He got up, removed his threadbare gloves from his belt, and began to pull devil-grass for his own fire, which he laid over the ashes the man in black had left. He found the irony, like his thirst, bitterly appealing.

He did not take the flint and steel from his purse until the remains of the day were only fugitive heat in the ground beneath him and a sardonic orange line on the monochrome horizon. He sat with his gunna drawn across his lap and watched the southeast patiently, looking toward the mountains, not hoping to see the thin straight line of smoke from a new campfire, not expecting to see an orange spark of flame, but watching anyway because watching was a part of it, and had its own bitter satisfaction. *You will not see what you do not look for, maggot*, Cort would have said. *Open the gobs the gods gave ya, will ya not?*

But there was nothing. He was close, but only relatively so. Not close enough to see smoke at dusk, or the orange wink of a campfire.

He laid the flint down the steel rod and struck his spark to the dry, shredded grass, muttering the old and powerful nonsense words as he did: "Spark-a-dark, where's my sire? Will I lay me? Will I stay me? Bless this camp with fire." It was strange how some of childhood's words and ways fell at the wayside and were left behind, while others clamped tight and rode for life, growing the heavier to carry as time passed.

He lay down upwind of his little blazon, letting the dream-smoke blow out toward the waste. The wind, except for occasional gyrating dust-devils, was constant.

Above, the stars were unwinking, also constant. Suns and worlds by the million. Dizzying constellations, cold fire in every primary hue. As he watched, the sky washed from violet to ebony. A meteor etched a brief, spectacular arc below Old Mother and winked out. The fire threw strange shadows as the devil-grass burned its slow way down into new patterns—not ideograms but a straightforward crisscross vaguely frightening in its own no-nonsense surety. He had laid his fuel in a pattern that was not artful but only workable. It spoke of blacks and whites. It spoke of a man who might straighten

bad pictures in strange hotel rooms. The fire burned its steady, slow flame, and phantoms danced in its incandescent core. The gunslinger did not see. The two patterns, art and craft, were welded together as he slept. The wind moaned, a witch with cancer in her belly. Every now and then a perverse downdraft would make the smoke whirl and puff toward him and he breathed some of it in. It built dreams in the same way that a small irritant may build a pearl in an oyster. The gunslinger occasionally moaned with the wind. The stars were as indifferent to this as they were to wars, crucifixions, resurrections. This also would have pleased him.

II

He had come down off the last of the foothills leading the mule, whose eyes were already dead and bulging with the heat. He had passed the last town three weeks before, and since then there had only been the deserted coach track and an occasional huddle of border dwellers' sod dwellings. The huddles had degenerated into single dwellings, most inhabited by lepers or madmen. He found the madmen better company. One had given him a stainless steel Silva compass and bade him give it to the Man Jesus. The gunslinger took it gravely. If he saw Him, he would turn over the compass. He did not expect that he would, but anything was possible. Once he saw a taheen—this one a man with a raven's head—but the misbegotten thing fled at his hail, cawing what might have been words. What might even have been curses.

Five days had passed since the last hut, and he had begun to suspect there would be no more when he topped the last eroded hill and saw the familiar low-backed sod roof.

The dweller, a surprisingly young man with a wild shock of strawberry hair that reached almost to his waist, was weeding a scrawny stand of corn with zealous abandon. The mule let out a wheezing grunt and the dweller looked up, glaring blue eyes coming target-center on the gunslinger in a moment. The dweller was unarmed, with no bolt nor bah the gunslinger could see. He raised

both hands in curt salute to the stranger and then bent to the corn again, humping up the row next to his hut with back bent, tossing devil-grass and an occasional stunted corn plant over his shoulder. His hair flopped and flew in the wind that now came directly from the desert, with nothing to break it.

The gunslinger came down the hill slowly, leading the donkey on which his waterskins sloshed. He paused by the edge of the lifeless-looking cornpatch, drew a drink from one of his skins to start the saliva, and spat into the arid soil.

“Life for your crop.”

“Life for your own,” the dweller answered and stood up. His back popped audibly. He surveyed the gunslinger without fear. The little of his face visible between beard and hair seemed unmarked by the rot, and his eyes, while a bit wild, seemed sane. “Long days and pleasant nights, stranger.”

“And may you have twice the number.”

“Unlikely,” the dweller replied, and voiced a curt laugh. “I don’t have nobbut corn and beans,” he said. “Corn’s free, but you’ll have to kick something in for the beans. A man brings them out once in a while. He don’t stay long.” The dweller laughed shortly. “Afraid of spirits. Afraid of the bird-man, too.”

“I saw him. The bird-man, I mean. He fled me.”

“Yar, he’s lost his way. Claims to be looking for a place called Algul Siento, only sometimes he calls it Blue Haven or Heaven, I can’t make out which. Has thee heard of it?”

The gunslinger shook his head.

“Well . . . he don’t bite and he don’t bide, so fuck him. Is thee alive or dead?”

“Alive,” the gunslinger said. “You speak as the Manni do.”

“I was with ’em awhile, but that was no life for me; too chummy, they are, and always looking for holes in the world.”

This was true, the gunslinger reflected. The Manni-folk were great travelers.

The two of them looked at each other in silence for a moment, and then the dweller put out his hand. “Brown is my name.”

The gunslinger shook and gave his own name. As he did so, a scrawny raven croaked from the low peak of the sod roof. The

dweller gestured at it briefly: "That's Zoltan."

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

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

The gunslinger nodded amiably.

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

"You teach him that?"

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

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

"Thought your kind was gone."

"Then you see different, don't you?"

"Did'ee come from In-World?"

"Long ago," the gunslinger agreed.

"Anything left there?"

To this the gunslinger made no reply, but his face suggested this was a topic better not pursued.

"After the other one, I guess."

"Yes." The inevitable question followed: "How long since he passed by?"

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

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

"Did he lay by?" the gunslinger asked.

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

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

about?”

Brown cocked an eyebrow at him. “Not much. Did it ever rain and when did I come here and had I buried my wife. He asked was she of the Manni-folk and I said yar, because it seemed like he already knew. I did most of the talking, which ain’t usual.” He paused, and the only sound was the stark wind. “He’s a sorcerer, ain’t he?”

“Among other things.”

Brown nodded slowly. “I knew. He dropped a rabbit out of his sleeve, all gutted and ready for the pot. Are you?”

“A sorcerer?” He laughed. “I’m just a man.”

“You’ll never catch him.”

“I’ll catch him.”

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

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

“Thanks.”

“You’ll want to fill your skins,” the dweller said, turning away.

“Spring’s under the eaves in back. I’ll start dinner.”

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

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

The gunslinger looked up, startled. The shaft was about fifteen feet deep: easy enough for Brown to drop a rock on him, break his head, and steal everything on him. A crazy or a rotter wouldn’t do it; Brown was neither. Yet he liked Brown, and so he pushed the thought out of his mind and got the rest of the water God had willed. Whatever else God willed was ka’s business, not his.

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

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

Brown did not look up. "The water's a gift from God, as I think thee knows. Pappa Doc brings the beans."

The gunslinger grunted a laugh and sat down with his back against one rude wall, folded his arms, and closed his eyes. After a little, the smell of roasting corn came to his nose. There was a pebbly rattle as Brown dumped a paper of dry beans into the pot. An occasional *tak-tak-tak* as Zoltan walked restlessly on the roof. He was tired; he had been going sixteen and sometimes eighteen hours a day between here and the horror that had occurred in Tull, the last village. And he had been afoot for the last twelve days; the mule was at the end of its endurance, only living because it was a habit. Once he had known a boy named Sheemie who'd had a mule. Sheemie was gone now; they were all gone now and there was only the two of them: him, and the man in black. He had heard rumor of other lands beyond this, green lands in a place called Mid-World, but it was hard to believe. Out here, green lands seemed like a child's fantasy.

Tak-tak-tak.

Two weeks, Brown had said, or as many as six. Didn't matter. There had been calendars in Tull, and they had remembered the man in black because of the old man he had healed on his way through. Just an old man dying of the weed. An old man of thirty-five. And if Brown was right, he had closed a good deal of distance on the man in black since then. But the desert was next. And the desert would be hell.

Tak-tak-tak . . .

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

III

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

“Your mule has passed on,” Brown said. “Tell ya sorry. Dinner’s ready.”

“How?”

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

“No, the mule.”

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

“Oh.” He might have expected it. “All right.”

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

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

Brown nodded. “I think this is it.”

IV

The beans were like bullets, the corn tough. Outside, the prevailing wind snuffled and whined around the ground-level eaves. The gunslinger ate quickly, ravenously, drinking four cups of water with the meal. Halfway through, there was a machine-gun rapping at the door. Brown got up and let Zoltan in. The bird flew across the room and hunched moodily in the corner.

“Musical fruit,” he muttered.

“You ever think about eating him?” the gunslinger asked.

The dweller laughed. “Animals that talk be tough,” he said. “Birds, billy-bumblers, human beans. They be tough eatin’.”

After dinner, the gunslinger offered his tobacco. The dweller, Brown, accepted eagerly.

Now, the gunslinger thought. Now the questions will come.

But Brown asked no questions. He smoked tobacco that had been grown in Garlan years before and looked at the dying embers of the fire. It was already noticeably cooler in the hovel.

“Lead us not into temptation,” Zoltan said suddenly, apocalyptically.

The gunslinger started as if he had been shot at. He was suddenly sure all this was an illusion, that the man in black had spun a spell and was trying to tell him something in a maddeningly obtuse, symbolic way.

“Do you know Tull?” he asked suddenly.

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

“You don’t like town?”

“No.”

“I almost got killed there,” the gunslinger said.

“Do you say so?”

“Set my watch and warrant on it. And I killed a man that was touched by God,” the gunslinger said. “Only it wasn’t God. It was the man with the rabbit up his sleeve. The man in black.”

“He laid you a trap.”

“You say true, I say thank ya.”

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

Now *the questions will come*.

But Brown still had no questions to ask. His cigarette was down to a smoldering roach, but when the gunslinger tapped his poke, Brown shook his head.

Zoltan shifted restlessly, seemed about to speak, subsided.

“Will I tell you about it?” the gunslinger asked. “Ordinarily I’m not much of a talker, but . . .”

“Sometimes talking helps. I’ll listen.”

The gunslinger searched for words to begin and found none. “I have to pass water,” he said.

Brown nodded. “Pass it in the corn, please.”

“Sure.”

He went up the stairs and out into the dark. The stars glittered overhead. The wind pulsed. His urine arched out over the powdery cornfield in a wavering stream. The man in black had drawn him here. It wasn’t beyond possibility that Brown was the man in black. He might be . . .

The gunslinger shut these useless and upsetting thoughts away. The only contingency he had not learned how to bear was the possibility of his own madness. He went back inside.

“Have you decided if I’m an enchantment yet?” Brown asked, amused.

The gunslinger paused on the tiny landing, startled. Then he came down slowly and sat. “The thought crossed my mind. Are you?”

“If I am, I don’t know it.”

This wasn’t a terribly helpful answer, but the gunslinger decided to let it pass. “I started to tell you about Tull.”

“Is it growing?”

“It’s dead,” the gunslinger said. “I killed it.” He thought of adding: *And now I’m going to kill you, if for no other reason than I don’t want to have to sleep with one eye open.* But had he come to such behavior? If so, why bother to go on at all? Why, if he had become what he pursued?

Brown said, “I don’t want nothing from you, gunslinger, except to still be here when you move on. I won’t beg for my life, but that don’t mean I don’t want it yet awhile longer.”

The gunslinger closed his eyes. His mind whirled.

“Tell me what you are,” he said thickly.

“Just a man. One who means you no harm. And I’m still willing to listen if you’re willing to talk.”

To this the gunslinger made no reply.

“I guess you won’t feel right about it unless I invite you,” Brown said, “and so I do. Will you tell me about Tull?”

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

V

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

The forests were long gone now, replaced by the monotonous flat prairie country: endless, desolate fields gone to timothy and low shrubs; eerie, deserted estates guarded by brooding, shadowed mansions where demons undeniably walked; leering, empty shanties where the people had either moved on or had been moved along; an occasional dweller's hovel, given away by a single flickering point of light in the dark, or by sullen, inbred clan-fams toiling silently in the fields by day. Corn was the main crop, but there were beans and also some pokeberries. An occasional scrawny cow stared at him lumpishly from between peeled alder poles. Coaches had passed him four times, twice coming and twice going, nearly empty as they came up on him from behind and bypassed him and his mule, fuller as they headed back toward the forests of the north. Now and then a farmer passed with his feet up on the splashboard of his bucka, careful not to look at the man with the guns.

It was ugly country. It had showered twice since he had left Pricetown, grudgingly both times. Even the timothy looked yellow and dispirited. Pass-on-by country. He had seen no sign of the man in black. Perhaps he had taken a coach.

The road made a bend, and beyond it the gunslinger clucked the mule to a stop and looked down at Tull. It was at the floor of a

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

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

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

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

There were people on the streets, but not many. Three ladies wearing black slacks and identical high-collared blouses passed by on the opposite boardwalk, not looking at him with pointed curiosity. Their faces seemed to swim above their all-but-invisible bodies like pallid balls with eyes. A solemn old man with a straw hat perched firmly on top of his head watched him from the steps of a boarded-up mercantile store. A scrawny tailor with a late customer paused to watch him go by; he held up the lamp in his window for a better look. The gunslinger nodded. Neither the tailor nor his customer nodded back. He could feel their eyes resting heavily upon the low-slung holsters that lay against his hips. A young boy, perhaps thirteen, and a girl who might have been his sissa or his jilly-child crossed the street a block up, pausing imperceptibly. Their footfalls raised little hanging clouds of dust. Here in town most of the streetside lamps worked, but they weren't electric; their isinglass sides were cloudy with congealed oil. Some had been crashed out. There was a livery with a just-hanging-on look to it, probably depending on the coach

line for its survival. Three boys were crouched silently around a marble ring drawn in the dust to one side of the barn's gaping maw, smoking cornshuck cigarettes. They made long shadows in the yard. One had a scorpion's tail poked in the band of his hat. Another had a bloated left eye bulging sightlessly from its socket.

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

"Hey!" the gunslinger called.

The fork faltered and the hostler looked around with yellow-tinged eyes. "Hey yourself!"

"I got a mule here."

"Good for you."

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

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

"How long you want him put up?"

"A night or two. Maybe longer."

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

"Didn't ask for any."

"Shoot-up money," the hostler muttered.

"What did you say?"

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

"Rub him down!" the gunslinger called. "I expect to smell it on him when I come back, hear me well!"

The old man did not turn. The gunslinger walked out to the boys crouched around the marble ring. They had watched the entire exchange with contemptuous interest.

"Long days and pleasant nights," the gunslinger offered conversationally.

No answer.

"You fellas live in town?"

No answer, unless the scorpion's tail gave one: it seemed to nod.

One of the boys removed a crazily tilted twist of cornshuck from his mouth, grasped a green cat's-eye marble, and squirted it into the

dirt circle. It struck a croaker and knocked it outside. He picked up the cat's-eye and prepared to shoot again.

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

One of them looked up, the youngest. There was a huge cold-sore at the corner of his mouth, but his eyes were both the same size, and full of an innocence that wouldn't last long in this shithole. He looked at the gunslinger with hooded brimming wonder that was touching and frightening.

"Might get a burger at Sheb's."

"That the honky-tonk?"

The boy nodded. "Yar." The eyes of his mates had turned ugly and hostile. He would probably pay for having spoken up in kindness.

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

He walked past, mounted the boardwalk, and started down toward Sheb's, hearing the clear, contemptuous voice of one of the others, hardly more than a childish treble: "Weed-eater! How long you been screwin' your sister, Charlie? Weed-eater!" Then the sound of a blow and a cry.

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

Heads swiveled to look at him and his guns. There was a moment of near silence, except for the oblivious piano player, who continued

to tinkle. Then the woman mopped at the bar, and things shifted back.

“Watch me,” one of the players in the corner said and matched three hearts with four spades, emptying his hand. The one with the hearts swore, pushed over his stake, and the next hand was dealt.

The gunslinger approached the woman at the bar. “You got meat?” he asked.

“Sure.” She looked him in the eye, and she might have been pretty when she started out, but the world had moved on since then. Now her face was lumpy and there a livid scar went corkscrewing across her forehead. She had powdered it heavily, and the powder called attention to what it had been meant to camouflage. “Clean beef. Threaded stock. It’s dear, though.”

Threaded stock, my ass, the gunslinger thought. What you got in your cooler came from something with three eyes, six legs, or both—that’s my guess, lady-sai.

“I want three burgers and a beer, would it please ya.”

Again that subtle shift in tone. Three hamburgers. Mouths watered and tongues licked at saliva with slow lust. Three hamburgers. Had anyone here ever seen anyone eat three hamburgers at a go?

“That would go you five bocks. Do you ken bocks?”

“Dollars?”

She nodded, so she was probably saying *bucks*. That was his guess, anyway.

“That with the beer?” he asked, smiling a little. “Or is the beer extra?”

She didn’t return the smile. “I’ll throw in the suds. Once I see the color of your money, that is.”

The gunslinger put a gold piece on the bar, and every eye followed it.

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

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

“Go sit down,” the gunslinger said. “Do yourself a favor, cully.”

The man stopped. His upper lip lifted unconsciously, like a dog’s, and there was a moment of silence. Then he went back to his table, and the atmosphere shifted back again.

Beer came in a cracked glass schooner. “I ain’t got change for gold,” the woman said truculently.

“Don’t expect any.”

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

“Do you have salt?”

She gave it to him in a little crock she took from underneath the bar, white lumps he’d have to crumble with his fingers. “Bread?”

“No bread.” He knew she was lying, but he also knew why and didn’t push it. The bald man was staring at him with cya-nosed eyes, his hands clenching and unclenching on the splintered and gouged surface of his table. His nostrils flared with pulsating regularity, scooping up the smell of the meat. That, at least, was free.

The gunslinger began to eat steadily, not seeming to taste, merely chopping the meat apart and forking it into his mouth, trying not to think of what the cow this had come from must have looked like. Threaded stock, she had said. Yes, quite likely! And pigs would dance the commala in the light of the Peddler’s Moon.

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

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

The woman behind the bar made a small moaning sound.

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

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

And on the heels of that: *The man in black did this.*

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

He spoke, and the gunslinger, dumbfounded, heard himself addressed in the High Speech of Gilead.

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

The High Speech. For a moment his mind refused to track it. It had been years—God!—centuries, millenniums; there was no more High Speech; he was the last, the last gunslinger. The others were all . . .

Numbed, he reached into his breast pocket and produced a gold piece. The split, scabbed, gangrenous hand reached for it, fondled it, held it up to reflect the greasy glare of the kerosene lamps. It threw off its proud civilized glow; golden, reddish, bloody.

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

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

"Sheb!" the woman screamed after him, her voice an odd mixture of fear and shrewishness, "Sheb, you come back here! Goddammit!" Was that a name the gunslinger had heard before? He thought yes, but there was no time to reflect upon it now, or to cast his mind back.

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

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

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

“Not tonight they won’t.”

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

“Go fuck yourself. *Sai*.”

“I have to know,” the gunslinger said patiently. “He—”

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

“I’m looking for a man. You would know him.”

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

“I guess maybe you know my price,” she said. “I got an itch I used to be able to take care of, but now I can’t.”

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

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

“Don’t *look!* You don’t have to look at me so mean!”

“I’m sorry,” the gunslinger said. “I didn’t mean to be mean.”

“None of you mean it!” she cried at him.

“Close the place up and put out the lights.”

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

“Will he steal anything? I’ll put him out if he will.”

“No,” she whispered. “Nort don’t steal.”

“Then put out the lights.”

She would not remove her hands until she was behind him and she doused the lamps one by one, turning down the wicks and

breathing the flames into extinction. Then she took his hand in the dark and it was warm. She led him upstairs. There was no light to hide their act.

VI

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

“His name is Nort,” she said. No harshness had been worn out of her voice. “Just Nort. He died.”

The gunslinger waited.

“He was touched by God.”

The gunslinger said, “I have never seen Him.”

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

“Yes.”

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

“Yes.”

“He died right in front of this place,” she said. “Came clumping down the boardwalk—his boots wouldn’t wear out, they were engineer boots he found in the old trainyard—with the children and dogs behind him. He looked like wire clothes hangers all wrapped and twirled together. You could see all the lights of hell in his eyes, but he was grinning, just like the grins the children carve into their sharproots and pumpkins, come Reap. You could smell the dirt and the rot and the weed. It was running down from the corners of his mouth like green blood. I think he meant to come in and listen to Sheb play the piano. And right in front, he stopped and cocked his head. I could see him, and I thought he heard a coach, although

there was none due. Then he puked, and it was black and full of blood. It went right through that grin like sewer water through a grate. The stink was enough to make you want to run mad. He raised up his arms and just threw over. That was all. He died in his own vomit with that grin on his face.”

“A nice story.”

“Oh yes, thankee-sai. This be a nice place.”

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

“The man in black,” he said.

“You have to have it, don’t you? You couldn’t just throw me a fuck and go to sleep.”

“I have to have it.”

“All right. I’ll tell you.” She grasped his hand in both of hers and told him.

VII

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

The gunslinger’s quarry came in a rickety rig with a rippling tarp tied across its bed. There was a big howdy-do of a grin on his face. They watched him come, and old man Kennerly, lying by the window with a bottle in one hand and the loose, hot flesh of his second-

eldest daughter's left breast in the other, resolved not to be there if he should knock.

But the man in black went by without slowing the bay that pulled his rig, and the spinning wheels spumed up dust that the wind clutched eagerly. He might have been a priest or a monk; he wore a black robe that had been floured with dust, and a loose hood covered his head and obscured his features, but not that horrid happy grin. The robe rippled and flapped. From beneath the garment's hem there peeped heavy buckled boots with square toes.

He pulled up in front of Sheb's and tethered the horse, which lowered its head and grunted at the ground. Around the back of the rig he untied one flap, found a weathered saddlebag, threw it over his shoulder, and went in through the batwings.

Alice watched him curiously, but no one else noticed his arrival. The regulars were drunk as lords. Sheb was playing Methodist hymns ragtime, and the grizzled layabouts who had come in early to avoid the storm and to attend Nort's wake had sung themselves hoarse. Sheb, drunk nearly to the point of senselessness, intoxicated and horny with his own continued existence, played with hectic, shuttlecock speed, fingers flying like looms.

Voices screeched and hollered, never overcoming the wind but sometimes seeming to challenge it. In the corner, Zachary had thrown Amy Feldon's skirts over her head and was painting Reap-charms on her knees. A few other women circulated. A fever seemed to be on all of them. The dull stormglow that filtered through the batwings seemed to mock them, however.

Nort had been laid out on two tables in the center of the room. His engineer boots made a mystical V. His mouth hung open in a slack grin, although someone had closed his eyes and put slugs on them. His hands had been folded on his chest with a sprig of devil-grass in them. He smelled like poison.

The man in black pushed back his hood and came to the bar. Alice watched him, feeling trepidation mixed with the familiar want that hid within her. There was no religious symbol on him, although that meant nothing by itself.

"Whiskey," he said. His voice was soft and pleasant. "I want the good stuff, honey."

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

"Hey, Allie!"

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

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

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

"Wake," she said.

"I noticed the departed."

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

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

"He was their butt when he was alive. It's not right that he should be their butt now. It's . . ." She trailed off, not able to express what it was, or how it was obscene.

"Weed-eater?"

"Yes! What else did he have?"

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

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

they say in the world next door.”

She had no idea what that might mean, and was afraid to ask. “I’ll have to see the color of your coin first. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be.”

He put a rough silver coin on the counter, thick on one edge, thin on the other, and she said as she would say later: “I don’t have change for this.”

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

“Are you only passing through?” she asked.

He did not reply for a long time, and she was about to repeat when he shook his head impatiently. “Don’t talk trivialities. You’re here with death.”

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

“You cared for him,” he said flatly. “Isn’t that true?”

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

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

“What are you, drunk?”

“Mistuh Norton, he *daid*,” the man in black intoned, giving the words a sardonic little twist. “Dead as anybody. Dead as you or anybody.”

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

“It’s all right,” he said softly. “It’s all right. Wait. Just wait.”

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

“Dead as anybody,” he said. “Do you see?”

She nodded dumbly and he laughed aloud—a fine, strong, untainted laugh that swung heads around. He whirled and faced them, suddenly the center of attention. Aunt Mill faltered and subsided, leaving a cracked high note bleeding on the air. Sheb

struck a discord and halted. They looked at the stranger uneasily. Sand rattled against the sides of the building.

The silence held, spun itself out. Her breath had clogged in her throat and she looked down and saw both hands pressed to her belly beneath the bar. They all looked at him and he looked at them. Then the laugh burst forth again, strong, rich, beyond denial. But there was no urge to laugh along with him.

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

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

“It’s better, isn’t it?”

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

The man in black stood over Nort, grinning down at him. The wind howled and shrieked and thrummed. Something large struck the side of the building hard enough to make it shake and then bounced away. One of the men at the bar tore himself free and headed for some quieter locale, moving in great grotesque strides. Thunder racketed the sky with a sound like some god coughing.

“All *right!*” the man in black grinned. “All right, let’s get down *to* it!”

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

Under the bar, her hands worked faster.

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

Some fled. Others gathered in a loose ring around Nort. His face and the dewlapped rooster-wrinkles of his neck and upper chest

gleamed with liquid—liquid so precious in this dry country. And suddenly the rain of spit stopped, as if on signal. There was ragged, heavy breathing.

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

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

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

There came the moment when Nort drew a deep, dry breath. His hands rattled and pounded aimlessly on the table. Sheb screeched and exited. One of the women followed him, her eyes wide and her wimple billowing.

The man in black went across once more, twice, thrice. The body on the table was vibrating now, trembling and rapping and twitching like a large yet essentially lifeless doll with some monstrous clockwork hidden inside. The smell of rot and excrement and decay billowed up in choking waves. There came a moment when his eyes opened.

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

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

She began to giggle then, rocking back and forth on her haunches by the door. The sound rose to a keening wail that mixed with the wind. She kept hearing the sound Nort had made when he came back to life—the sound of fists knocking blindly on the lid of a coffin. What thoughts, she wondered, could be left in his reanimated brain? What had he seen while dead? How much did he remember? Would he tell? Were the secrets of the grave waiting downstairs? The most terrible thing about such questions, she reckoned, was that part of you really wanted to ask.

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

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

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

“Hello, Nort.” She put the stovewood down and began lighting the lamps, not turning her back to him.

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

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

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

“Then why don’t you stop?”

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

“I shake,” he said. “And I want it. I can’t stop. Allie, you was always good to me . . .” He began to weep. “I can’t even stop peeing myself. What am I? *What am I?*”

She walked to the table and hesitated there, uncertain.

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

“Maybe it’s a joke. He seemed to have quite a sense of humor.”

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

“I can’t help it, Allie, I can’t,” and he made a crippled dive for the poke. She could have stopped him, but she made no effort. She went back to lighting the lamps, tired although the evening had barely begun. But nobody came in that night except old man Kennerly, who had missed everything. He did not seem particularly surprised to see Nort. Perhaps someone had told him what had happened. He ordered beer, asked where Sheb was, and pawed her.

Later, Nort came to her and held out a folded piece of paper in one shaky no-right-to-be-alive hand. “He left you this,” he said. “I near forgot. If I’d forgot, he woulda come back and killed me, sure.”

Paper was valuable, a commodity much to be treasured, but she didn’t like to handle this. It felt heavy, nasty. Written on it was a single word:

Allie

“How’d he know my name?” she asked Nort, and Nort only shook his head.

She opened it and read this:

You want to know about Death. I left him a word. That word is NINETEEN. If you say it to him his mind will be opened. He will tell you what lies beyond. He will tell you what he saw.

The word is NINETEEN.

Knowing will drive you mad.

But sooner or later you will ask.

You won't be able to help yourself.

Have a nice day! 😊

Walter o' Dim

P.S. The word is NINETEEN.

You will try to forget but sooner or later it will come out of your mouth like vomit.

NINETEEN.

And oh dear God, she knew that she would. Already it trembled on her lips. *Nineteen*, she would say—*Nort, listen: Nineteen*. And the secrets of Death and the land beyond would be opened to her.

Sooner or later you will ask.

The next day things were almost normal, although none of the children followed Nort. The day after that, the catcalls resumed. Life had gotten back on its own sweet keel. The uprooted corn was gathered together by the children, and a week after Nort's resurrection, they burned it in the middle of the street. The fire was momentarily bright and most of the barflies stepped or staggered out to watch. They looked primitive. Their faces seemed to float between the flames and the ice-chip brilliance of the sky. Allie watched them and felt a pang of fleeting despair for the sad times of this world. The loss. Things had stretched apart. There was no glue at the center anymore. Somewhere something was tottering, and when it fell, all would end. She had never seen the ocean, never would.

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

Nort raised his head at the sound of her voice and smiled emptily at her from hell. She had no guts. Only a bar and a scar. And a word. It struggled behind her closed lips. Suppose she were to call him over now and draw him close despite his stink? Suppose she said the word into the waxy buggerlug he called an ear? His eyes would

change. They would turn into *his* eyes—those of the man in the robe. And then Nort would tell what he'd seen in the Land of Death, what lay beyond the earth and the worms.

I'll never say that word to him.

But the man who had brought Nort back to life and left her a note—left her a word like a cocked pistol she would someday put to her temple—had known better.

Nineteen would open the secret.

Nineteen *was* the secret.

She caught herself writing it in a puddle on the bar—19—and skidded it to nothingness when she saw Nort watching her.

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

VIII

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

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

"Um." He was rolling another cigarette.

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

"No."

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

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

"I should. I think he's left a trap for me here. Just like he left one for you."

"Do you really think that number would—"

"If you like your sanity, you don't ever want to say that word to Nort," the gunslinger said. "Put it out of your head. If you can, teach yourself that the number after eighteen is twenty. That half of thirty-eight is seventeen. The man who signed himself Walter o' Dim is a lot of things, but a liar isn't one of them."

“But—”

“When the urge comes and it’s strong, come up here and hide under your quilts and say it over and over again—scream it, if you have to—until the urge passes.”

“A time will come when it won’t pass.”

The gunslinger made no reply, for he knew this was true. The trap had a ghastly perfection. If someone told you you’d go to hell if you thought about seeing your mother naked (once when the gunslinger was very young he had been told this very thing), you’d eventually do it. And why? Because you did *not* want to imagine your mother naked. Because you did *not* want to go to hell. Because, if given a knife and a hand in which to hold it, the mind would eventually eat itself. Not because it wanted to; because it did *not* want to.

Sooner or later Allie would call Nort over and say the word.

“Don’t go,” she said.

“We’ll see.”

He turned on his side away from her, but she was comforted. He would stay, at least for a little while. She drowsed.

On the edge of sleep she thought again about the way Nort had addressed him, in that strange talk. It was the only time she had seen her strange new lover express emotion. Even his love-making had been a silent thing, and only at the last had his breathing roughened and then stopped for a second or two. He was like something out of a fairytale or a myth, a fabulous, dangerous creature. Could he grant wishes? She thought the answer was yes, and that she would have hers. He would stay awhile. That was wish enough for a luckless scarred bitch such as she. Tomorrow was time enough to think of another, or a third. She slept.

IX

In the morning she cooked him grits, which he ate without comment. He shoveled them in without thinking about her, hardly seeing her. He knew he should go. Every minute he sat here the man in black was further away—probably out of the hardpan and arroyos and into

the desert by now. His path had been undeviatingly southeast, and the gunslinger knew why.

“Do you have a map?” he asked, looking up.

“Of the town?” she laughed. “There isn’t enough of it to need a map.”

“No. Of what’s southeast of here.”

Her smile faded. “The desert. Just the desert. I thought you’d stay for a little.”

“What’s on the other side of the desert?”

“How would I know? Nobody crosses it. Nobody’s tried since I was here.” She wiped her hands on her apron, got potholders, and dumped the tub of water she had been heating into the sink, where it splashed and steamed. “The clouds all go that way. It’s like something sucks them—”

He got up.

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

“To the stable. If anyone knows, the hostler will.” He put his hands on her shoulders. The hands were hard, but they were also warm. “And to arrange for my mule. If I’m going to be here, he should be taken care of. For when I leave.”

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

“Thank you, Allie.”

When he left she turned to the sink, feeling the hot, warm drift of her grateful tears. How long since anyone had thanked her? Someone who mattered?

X

Kennerly was a toothless and unpleasant old satyr who had buried two wives and was plagued with daughters. Two half-grown ones peeked at the gunslinger from the dusty shadows of the barn. A baby drooled happily in the dirt. A full-grown one, blond, dirty, and sensual, watched with a speculative curiosity as she drew water from

the groaning pump beside the building. She caught the gunslinger's eye, pinched her nipples between her fingers, dropped him a wink, and then went back to pumping.

The hostler met him halfway between the door to his establishment and the street. His manner vacillated between a kind of hateful hostility and craven fawning.

"Hit's bein' cared for, never fear 'at," he said, and before the gunslinger could reply, Kennerly turned on his daughter with his fists up, a desperate scrawny rooster of a man. "You get in, Soobie! You get right the hell in!"

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

"You meant my mule," the gunslinger said.

"Yes, sai. Ain't seen no mule in quite a time, specially one that looks as threaded as your'n—two eyes, four legs . . ." His face squinched together alarmingly in an expression meant to convey either extreme pain or the notion that a joke had been made. The gunslinger assumed it was the latter, although he had little or no sense of humor himself.

"Time was they used to grow up wild for want of 'em," Kennerly continued, "but the world has moved on. Ain't seen nothin' but a few mutie oxen and the coach horses and—Soobie, I'll whale you, 'fore God!"

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

Kennerly cringed and grinned. The gunslinger saw the murder in his eyes quite clearly, and although he did not fear it, he marked it as a man might mark a page in a book, one that contained potentially valuable instructions. "It ain't *you*. Gods, no, it ain't *you*." He grinned loosely. "She just naturally gawky. She got a devil. She wild." His eyes darkened. "It's coming to Last Times, mister. You know how it says in the Book. Children won't obey their parents, and a plague'll be visited on the multitudes. You only have to listen to the preacher-woman to know it."

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

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

eyes measured the gunslinger coldly.

“How big is the desert?”

“Big.” Kennerly endeavored to look serious, as if answering a serious question. “Maybe a thousand wheels. Maybe two thousand. I can’t tell you, mister. There’s nothin’ out there but devil-grass and maybe demons. Heard there was a speakin-ring sommers on the far side, but that ’us proolly a lie. That’s the way the other fella went. The one who fixed up Norty when he was sick.”

“Sick? I heard he was dead.”

Kennerly kept grinning. “Well, well. Maybe. But we’re growed-up men, ain’t we?”

“But you believe in demons.”

Kennerly looked affronted. “That’s a lot different. Preacher-woman says . . .”

He blathered and palavered ever onward. The gunslinger took off his hat and wiped his forehead. The sun was hot, beating steadily. Kennerly seemed not to notice. Kennerly had a lot to say, none of it sensible. In the thin shadow by the livery, the baby girl was gravely smearing dirt on her face.

The gunslinger finally grew impatient and cut the man off in mid-spate. “You don’t know what’s after the desert?”

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

“Drivel,” the gunslinger said shortly.

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

“You see my mule is looked after.” He flicked Kennerly another coin, which Kennerly caught on the fly. The gunslinger thought of the way a dog will catch a ball.

“Surely. You stayin’ a little?”

“I guess I might. There’ll be water—”

“—if God wills it! Sure, sure!” Kennerly laughed unhappily, and his eyes went on wanting the gunslinger stretched out dead at his feet.

“That Allie’s pretty nice when she wants to be, ain’t she?” The hostler made a loose circle with his left fist and began poking his right finger rapidly in and out of it.

“Did you say something?” the gunslinger asked remotely.

Sudden terror dawned in Kennerly’s eyes, like twin moons coming over the horizon. He put his hands behind his back like a naughty child caught with the jamjar. “No, sai, not a word. And I’m right sorry if I did.” He caught sight of Soobie leaning out a window and whirled on her. “I’ll whale you now, you little slut-whore! ’Fore God! I’ll—”

The gunslinger walked away, aware that Kennerly had turned to watch him, aware of the fact that he could whirl and catch the hostler with some true and untinged emotion distilled on his face. Why bother? It was hot, and he knew what the emotion would be: just hate. Hate of the outsider. He’d gotten all the man had to offer. The only sure thing about the desert was its size. The only sure thing about the town was that it wasn’t all played out here. Not yet.

XI

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

It had been four days, and they had gone by in a blinking haze. He ate. He slept. He had sex with Allie. He found that she played the fiddle and he made her play it for him. She sat by the window in the milky light of daybreak, only a profile, and played something haltingly that might have been good if she’d had some training. He felt a growing (but strangely absentminded) affection for her and thought this might be the trap the man in black had left behind. He walked out sometimes. He thought very little about everything.

He didn’t hear the little piano player come up—his reflexes had sunk. That didn’t seem to matter either, although it would have frightened him badly in another time and place.

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

“Please,” she was saying. “Like before, I want that, I want—”

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

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

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

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

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

She led him to the table and set his wrists with slats of kindling from the fire box. He wept weakly and without volition.

"Mejis," the gunslinger said, and the little piano player looked around, eyes wide. The gunslinger nodded, amiably enough now that Sheb was no longer trying to stick a knife in his lights. "*Mejis*," he said again. "On the Clean Sea."

"What about it?"

"You were there, weren't you? Many and many-a, as they did say."

"What if I was? I don't remember you."

"But you remember the girl, don't you? The girl named Susan? And Reap night?" His voice took on an edge. "Were you there for the bonfire?"

The little man's lips trembled. They were covered with spit. His eyes said he knew the truth: he was closer to dead now than when he'd come bursting in with a knife in his hand.

"Get out of here," the gunslinger said.

Understanding dawned in Sheb's eyes. "But you was just a *boy!* One of them three *boys!* You come to count stock, and Eldred Jonas was there, the Coffin Hunter, and—"

"Get out while you still can," the gunslinger said, and Sheb went, holding his broken wrists before him.

She came back to the bed. "What was that about?"

"Never mind," he said.

"All right—then where were we?"

"Nowhere." He rolled on his side, away from her.

She said patiently, "You knew about him and me. He did what he could, which wasn't much, and I took what I could, because I had to. There's nothing to be done. What else is there?" She touched his shoulder. "Except I'm glad that you are so strong."

"Not now," he said.

"Who was she?" And then, answering her own question: "A girl you loved."

"Leave it, Allie."

"I can make you strong—"

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

XII

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

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

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

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

No description could take the measure of the woman. Breasts like earthworks. A huge pillar of a neck overtopped by a pasty white moon of a face, in which blinked eyes so large and so dark that they seemed to be bottomless tarns. Her hair was a beautiful rich brown and it was piled atop her head in a haphazard sprawl, held by a hairpin almost big enough to be a meat skewer. She wore a dress that seemed to be made of burlap. The arms that held the hymnal were slabs. Her skin was creamy, unmarked, lovely. He thought that she must top three hundred pounds. He felt a sudden red lust for her that made him feel shaky, and he turned his head and looked away.

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

The last note of the last chorus faded off, and there was a moment of shuffling and coughing.

She waited. When they were settled, she spread her hands over them, as if in benediction. It was an evocative gesture.

"My dear little brothers and sisters in Christ."

It was a haunting line. For a moment the gunslinger felt mixed feelings of nostalgia and fear, stitched in with an eerie feeling of *déjà vu*, and he thought: *I dreamed this. Or I was here before. If so, when? Not Mejis.* No, not there. He shook the feeling off. The

audience—perhaps twenty-five all told—had become dead silent. Every eye touched the preacher-woman.

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

A little rustle ran through the audience.

“I feel,” Sylvia Pittston said reflectively, “that I know almost everyone in the Good Book personally. In the last five years I have worn out three of ’em, precious though any book be in this ill world, and uncountable numbers before that. I love the story, and I love the players in that story. I have walked arm in arm in the lion’s den with Daniel. I stood with David when he was tempted by Bathsheba as she bathed at the pool. I have been in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego. I slew two thousand with Samson when he swung the jawbone, and was blinded with St. Paul on the road to Damascus. I wept with Mary at Golgotha.”

A soft, shurring sigh in the audience.

“I have known and loved them. There is only *one*”—she held up a finger—“only one player in the greatest of all dramas that I do not know.

“Only *one* who stands outside with his face in the shadow.

“Only *one* who makes my body tremble and my spirit quail.

“I fear him.

“I don’t know his mind and I fear him.

“I fear The Interloper.”

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

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

Moans, nods.

“The Interloper!

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

“Yes, O Jesus—” This was the man the gunslinger had first noticed coming into town, the one with the straw hat.

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

“O Jesus Savior—”

“It was *him* who took our Lord up on the mountain—”

“Yes—”

“It was *him* that tempted him and shewed him all the world and the world’s pleasures—”

“Yesss—”

“It’s *him* that will return when Last Times come on the world . . . and they are coming, my brothers and sisters, can’t you feel they are?”

“Yesss—”

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

“It’s *him* that will come as the Antichrist, a crimson king with bloody eyes, to lead men into the flaming bowels of perdition, to the bloody end of wickedness, as Star Wormword hangs blazing in the sky, as gall gnaws at the vitals of the children, as women’s wombs give forth monstrosities, as the works of men’s hands turn to blood—”

“Ahhh—”

“Ah, God—”

“Gawwwwwwww—”

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

“It’s *him* that stands behind every fleshly pleasure . . . him who made the machines with LaMerk stamped on them, *him!* The Interloper!”

LaMerk, the gunslinger thought. *Or maybe she said LeMark.* The word had some vague resonance for him, but nothing he could put his finger on. Nonetheless, he filed it away in his memory, which was capacious.

“Yes, Lord!” they were screaming.

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

“When you take a drink, who holds the bottle?”

“*The Interloper!*”

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

“*The Interloper!*”

“When you riot in the flesh of another’s body, when you pollute yourself with your solitary hand, to whom do you sell your soul?”

“*In—*”

“*ter—*”

“Oh, Jesus . . . Oh—”

“*—loper—*”

“Aw . . . Aw . . . Aw . . .”

“And who is he?” she cried. But calm within, he could sense the calmness, the mastery, the control and domination. He thought suddenly, with terror and absolute surety, that the man who called himself Walter had left a demon in her. She was haunted. He felt the hot ripple of sexual desire again through his fear, and thought this was somehow like the word the man in black had left in Allie’s mind like a loaded trap.

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

“I’m in hell!” he screamed up at her. His face twisted and writhed as if snakes crawled beneath his skin. “I done fornications! I done gambling! I done weed! I done *sins!* I—” But his voice rose skyward in a dreadful, hysterical wail that drowned articulation. He held his head as if it would burst like an overripe cantaloupe at any moment.

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

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

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

“The . . . The Interloper.”

“Called who?”

“Called Lord High Satan.” Raw, oozing whisper.

“Will you renounce?”

Eagerly: “Yes! Yes! Oh, my Jesus Savior!”

She rocked his head; he stared at her with the blank, shiny eyes of the zealot. “If he walked through that door”—she hammered a finger at the vestibule shadows where the gunslinger stood—“would you renounce him to his face?”

“On my mother’s name!”

“Do you believe in the eternal love of Jesus?”

He began to weep. “You’re fucking-A I do—”

“He forgives you that, Jonson.”

“Praise God,” Jonson said, still weeping.

“I know he forgives you just as I know he will cast out the unrepentant from his palaces and into the place of burning darkness beyond the end of End-World.”

“*Praise God.*” The congregation, drained, spoke it solemnly.

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

“Yes and praise God!” Jonson wept. “Wit’ bote feet!”

“Will you crush him if you see him, brothers and sisters?”

“Yess . . .” Sated.

“If you see him sashaying down Main Street tomorrow?”

“Praise God . . .”

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

Almost.

XIII

In bed again.

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

“How long has she been here?”

“Twelve years. Or maybe only two. Time’s funny, as thou knows. Let’s not talk about her.”

“Where did she come from? Which direction?”

“I don’t know.” Lying.

“Allie?”

“I don’t know!”

“Allie?”

“All right! All right! She came from the dwellers! From the desert!”

“I thought so.” He relaxed a little. Southeast, in other words. Along the path he followed. The one he could even see in the sky, sometimes. And he guessed the preacher-woman had come a lot further than from the dwellers or even the desert. How had she traveled so far? By way of some old machine that still worked? A train, mayhap? “Where does she live?”

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

“I’ll make love to you, anyway. But I want to know.”

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

“No. Not yet.” And he rolled on top of her.

XIV

It was the last day, and he knew it.

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

She served him without a word. He ate rapidly, chewing, swallowing, chasing each bite with hot coffee. Allie went to the

batwings and stood staring out at the morning, at the silent battalions of slow-moving clouds.

“It’s going to dust up today.”

“I’m not surprised.”

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

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

XV

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

There was a large wooden cross nailed to the door of the place, which was leaning and tired. He rapped and waited. No answer. He rapped again. No answer. He drew back and kicked in the door with one hard shot of his right boot. A small bolt on the inside ripped free. The door banged against a haphazardly planked wall and scared rats into skittering flight. Sylvia Pittston sat in the hall, in a mammoth ironwood rocker, and looked at him calmly with those great and dark eyes. The stormlight fell on her cheeks in crazy half-tones. She wore a shawl. The rocker made tiny squeaking noises.

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

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

“He came to you,” the gunslinger said.

“And to my bed. He spoke to me in the Tongue. The High Speech. He—”

“He screwed you. In every sense of the word.”

She did not flinch. “You walk an evil way, gunslinger. You stand in shadows. You stood in the shadows of the holy place last night. Did you think I couldn’t see you?”

“Why did he heal the weed-eater?”

“He’s an angel of God. He said so.”

“I hope he smiled when he said it.”

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

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

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

"Did you ever meet a man who didn't want to bed you?"

"The price of my flesh would be your life, gunslinger. He has got me with child. Not his, but the child of a great king. If you invade me . . ." She let the lazy smile complete her thought. At the same time she gestured with her huge, mountainous thighs. They stretched beneath her garment like pure marble slabs. The effect was dizzying.

The gunslinger dropped his hands to the butts of his pistols. "You have a demon, woman, not a king. Yet fear not. I can remove it."

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

"Want to bet?" the gunslinger said. He stepped toward her. "As the gambler said when he laid down a handful of cups and wands, just watch me."

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

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

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

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

"No!"

"Answer me!"

"No!"

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

"The demon, then," he said. "Out it comes."

"No—"

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

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

“Answer me.”

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

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

She screamed something, high and inarticulate.

“What?”

“*Mountains!*”

“What about them?”

“He stops . . . on the other side . . . s-s-sweet *Jesus!* . . . to m-make his strength. Med-m-meditation, do you understand? Oh. . .I’m. . .I’m. . .”

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

Then she seemed to wilt and grow smaller, and she wept with her hands in her lap.

“So,” he said, getting up. “The demon is served, eh?”

“Get out. You’ve killed the child of the Crimson King. But you will be repaid. I set my watch and warrant on it. Now get out. Get out.”

He stopped at the door and looked back. “No child,” he said briefly. “No angel, prince, no demon.”

“Leave me alone.”

He did.

XVI

By the time he arrived at Kennerly’s, a queer obscurity had come over the northern horizon and he knew it was dust. Over Tull the air was still dead quiet.

Kennerly was waiting for him on the chaff-strewn stage that was the floor of his barn. “Leaving?” He grinned abjectly at the gunslinger.

“Yar.”

“Not before the storm?”

“Ahead of it.”

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

“I’ll want the mule now,” the gunslinger said simply.

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

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

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

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

“The mule,” the gunslinger prodded gently.

“Sure, sure, sure,” Kennerly whispered, the grin now touched with incredulity that he should still be alive. He shuffled to get it.

The gunslinger moved to where he could watch the man go. The hostler brought the mule back and handed him the bridle. “You get in an’ tend your sister,” he said to Soobie.

Soobie tossed her head and didn’t move.

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

XVII

He walked the mule up the center of the street, his boots sending up squirts of dust. His waterbags, swollen with water, were strapped

across the mule's back.

He stopped at the tonk, but Allie was not there. The place was deserted, battened down for the storm, but still dirty from the night before. It stank of sour beer.

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

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

There was a shrill, harried scream from behind him, and doors suddenly threw themselves open. Forms lunged. The trap was sprung. Men in longhandles and men in dirty dungarees. Women in slacks and in faded dresses. Even children, tagging after their parents. And in every hand there was a chunk of wood or a knife.

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

"Kill me, Roland, kill me! I said the word, *nineteen*, I said, and he told me . . . *I can't bear it—*"

The hands were trained to give her what she wanted. He was the last of his breed and it was not only his mouth that knew the High Speech. The guns beat their heavy, atonal music into the air. Her mouth flapped and she sagged and the guns fired again. The last

expression on her face might have been gratitude. Sheb's head snapped back. They both fell into the dust.

They've gone to the land of Nineteen, he thought. Whatever is there.

Sticks flew through the air, rained on him. He staggered, fended them off. One with a nail pounded raggedly through it ripped at his arm and drew blood. A man with a beard stubble and sweat-stained armpits lunged, flying at him with a dull kitchen knife held in one paw. The gunslinger shot him dead and the man thumped into the street. His false teeth shot out as his chin struck and grinned, spit-shiny, in the dirt.

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

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

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

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

They never hesitated or faltered, although every shot he fired found a vital spot and although they had probably never seen a gun.

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

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

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

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

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

The guns were empty and they boiled at him, transmogrified into an Eye and a Hand, and he stood, screaming and reloading, his mind far away and absent, letting his hands do their reloading trick. Could he hold up a hand, tell them he had spent a thousand years learning this trick and others, tell them of the guns and the blood that

had blessed them? Not with his mouth. But his hands could speak their own tale.

They were in throwing range as he finished reloading, and a stick struck him on the forehead and brought blood in abraded drops. In two seconds they would be in gripping distance. In the forefront he saw Kennerly; Kennerly's younger daughter, perhaps eleven; Soobie; two male barflies; a whore named Amy Feldon. He let them all have it, and the ones behind them. Their bodies thumped like scarecrows. Blood and brains flew in streamers.

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

He had time to reload one gun.

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

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

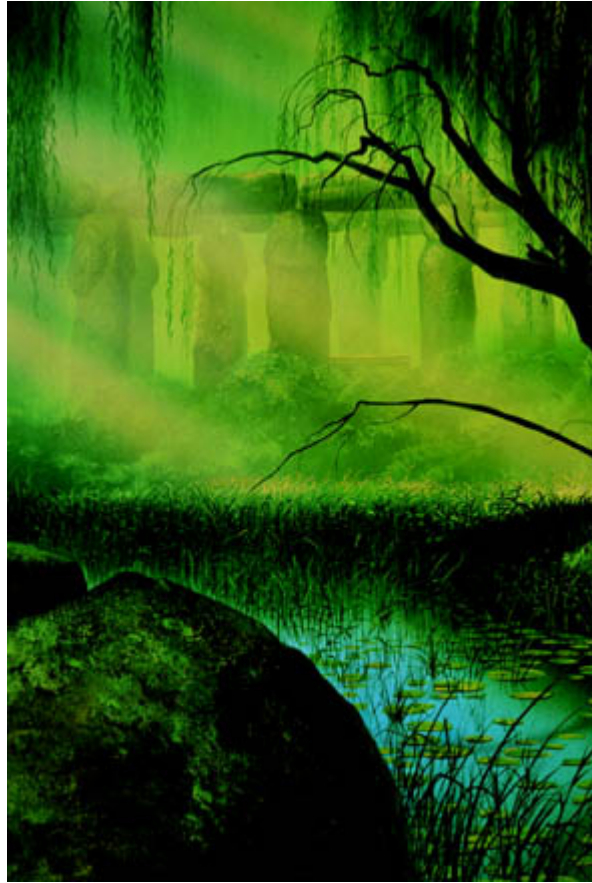
They all stared at her for a moment in tableau, while the gunslinger's fingers did their reloading trick. The tips of his fingers sizzled and burned. Neat circles were branded into the tips of each one.

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

But they were on him, the ones that were left. He fired the four shells he had reloaded, and then they were beating him, stabbing him. He threw a pair of them off his left arm and rolled away. His

hands began doing their infallible trick. He was stabbed in the shoulder. He was stabbed in the back. He was hit across the ribs. He was stabbed in the ass with what might have been a meat-fork. A small boy squirmed at him and made the only deep cut, across the bulge of his calf. The gunslinger blew his head off.





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

Silence came back in, filling jagged spaces.

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

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

He followed the trail of death, counting as he went. In the general store, one man sprawled with his arms wrapped lovingly around the cracked candy jar he had dragged down with him.

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

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

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

XVIII

He thought Brown had fallen asleep. The fire was down to no more than a spark and the bird, Zoltan, had put his head under his wing.

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

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

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

“I didn’t lie.” He felt the grudging admittance in him: he liked Brown. Honestly did. And he hadn’t lied to the dweller in any way. “Who are you, Brown? Really, I mean.”

“Just me,” he said, unperturbed. “Why do you have to think you’re in the middle of such a mystery?”

The gunslinger lit a smoke without replying.

“I think you’re very close to your man in black,” Brown said. “Is he desperate?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you?”

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

“That’s good then,” Brown said and turned over and went to sleep.

XIX

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

“The mule?” the gunslinger asked.

“I’ll eat it,” Brown said.

“Okay.”

Brown offered his hand and the gunslinger shook it. The dweller nodded to the southeast. “Walk easy. Long days and pleasant nights.”

“May you have twice the number.”

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

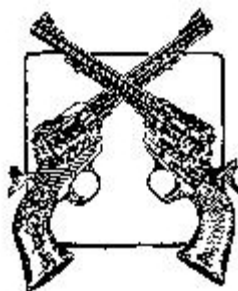
XX

The fire was down, and the stars had begun to pale off. The wind walked restlessly, told its tale to no one. The gunslinger twitched in his sleep and was still again. He dreamed a thirsty dream. In the darkness the shape of the mountains was invisible. Any thoughts of guilt, any feelings of regret, had faded. The desert had baked them out. He found himself thinking more and more about Cort, who had taught him to shoot. Cort had known black from white.

He stirred again and woke. He blinked at the dead fire with its own shape superimposed over the other, more geometrical one. He was a romantic, he knew it, and he guarded the knowledge jealously. It was a secret he had shared with only a few over the years. The girl named Susan, the girl from Mejis, had been one of them.

That, of course, made him think of Cort again. Cort was dead. They were all dead, except for him. The world had moved on.

The gunslinger shouldered his gunna and moved on with it.



The
WAY STATION



CHAPTER TWO

The Way Station

I

A nursery rhyme had been playing itself through his mind all day, the maddening kind of thing that will not let go, that mockingly ignores all commands of the conscious mind to cease and desist. The rhyme was:

*The rain in Spain falls on the plain.
There is joy and also pain
but the rain in Spain falls on the plain.*

*Time's a sheet, life's a stain,
All the things we know will change
and all those things remain the same,
but be ye mad or only sane,
the rain in Spain falls on the plain.*

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

He didn't know what a plane was in the context of the rhyme's last couplet, but knew why the rhyme had occurred to him in the first place. There had been the recurring dream of his room in the castle and of his mother, who had sung it to him as he lay solemnly in the tiny bed by the window of many colors. She did not sing it at bedtimes because all small boys born to the High Speech must face the dark alone, but she sang to him at naptimes and he could remember the heavy gray rainlight that shivered into rainbows on the

counterpane; he could feel the coolness of the room and the heavy warmth of blankets, love for his mother and her red lips, the haunting melody of the little nonsense lyric, and her voice.

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

He watched his feet move up and down like the heddles of a loom, listened to the nonsense rhyme sing itself into a pitiful garble in his mind, and wondered when he would fall down for the first time. He didn't want to fall, even though there was no one to see him. It was a matter of pride. A gunslinger knows pride, that invisible bone that keeps the neck stiff. What hadn't come to him from his father had been kicked into him by Cort, a boy's gentleman if there ever was one. Cort, yar, with his red bulb of a nose and his scarred face.

He stopped and looked up suddenly. It made his head buzz and for a moment his whole body seemed to float. The mountains dreamed against the far horizon. But there was something else up ahead, something much closer. Perhaps only five miles away. He squinted at it, but his eyes were sandblasted and going glareblind. He shook his head and began to walk again. The rhyme circled and buzzed. About an hour later he fell down and skinned his hands. He looked at the tiny beads of blood on his flaked skin with disbelief. The blood looked no thinner; it looked like any blood, now dying in the air. It seemed almost as smug as the desert. He dashed the drops away, hating them blindly. Smug? Why not? The blood was not thirsty. The blood was being served. The blood was being made sacrifice unto. Blood sacrifice. All the blood needed to do was run . . . and run . . . and run.

He looked at the splashes that had landed on the hardpan and watched as they were sucked up with uncanny suddenness. How do you like that, blood? How does that suit you?

O Jesus, I'm far gone.

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

Him, then. At last. The man in black.

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

. . . the rain in Spain . . .

He moved forward, drawing one gun.

. . . falls on the plain.

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

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

“You’re covered! You’re covered! Hands up, you whoreson, you’re —”

The figure moved restlessly and stood up. The gunslinger thought: *My God, he is worn away to nothing, what’s happened to him?* Because the man in black had shrunk two full feet and his hair had gone white.

He paused, struck dumb, his head buzzing tunelessly. His heart was racing at a lunatic rate and he thought, *I’m dying right here—*

He sucked the white-hot air into his lungs and hung his head for a moment. When he raised it again, he saw it wasn’t the man in black but a boy with sun-bleached hair, regarding him with eyes that did not even seem interested. The gunslinger stared at him blankly and then shook his head in negation. But the boy survived his refusal to believe; he was a strong delusion. One wearing blue jeans with a patch on one knee and a plain brown shirt of rough weave.

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

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

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

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

"Would you want something to eat, sir?"

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

"My name is John Chambers. You can call me Jake. I have a friend—well, sort of a friend, she works for us—who calls me 'Bama sometimes, but you can call me Jake."

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

"There's more," Jake said. He took the can and walked toward the rear of the stable. He paused and smiled back at the gunslinger uncertainly. The gunslinger nodded at him and then put his head down and propped it with his hands. The boy was well-made, handsome, perhaps ten or eleven. There had been a shadow of fear on his face, but that was all right; the gunslinger would have trusted him far less if the boy hadn't shown fear.

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

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

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

"Maybe I was. I thought you were somebody else."

"The priest?"

The gunslinger looked up sharply.

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

"What did he look like?"

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

"A hood and a cassock?"

"What's a cassock?"

"A robe. Like a dress."

The boy nodded. "That's about right."

The gunslinger leaned forward, and something in his face made the boy recoil a little. "How long ago? Tell me, for your father's sake."

"I . . . I . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

The boy looked at him distractedly. "Yes."

"Which?"

"A week. Or two." He looked aside, blushing a little. "Three poops ago, that's the only way I can measure things now. He didn't even drink. I thought he might be the ghost of a priest, like in this movie I saw once, only Zorro figured out he wasn't a priest at all, or a ghost, either. He was just a banker who wanted some land because there was gold on it. Mrs. Shaw took me to see that movie. It was in Times Square."

None of this made any sense to the gunslinger, so he did not comment on it.

"I was scared," the boy said. "I've been scared almost all the time." His face quivered like crystal on the edge of the ultimate, destructive high note. "He didn't even build a fire. He just sat there. I don't even know if he went to sleep."

Close! Closer than he had ever been, by the gods! In spite of his extreme dehydration, his hands felt faintly moist; greasy.

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

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

The boy got up to fetch it, his knees popping slightly. He made a fine straight figure. The desert had not yet sapped him. His arms were thin, but the skin, although tanned, had not dried and cracked. *He's got juice*, the gunslinger thought. *Mayhap some sand in his craw, as well, or he would have taken one of my guns and shot me right where I lay.*

Or perhaps the boy simply hadn't thought of it.

The gunslinger drank from the can again. *Sand in his craw or not, he didn't come from this place.*

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

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

"I don't know." The boy frowned. "I *did* know. I knew when I came here, but it's all fuzzy now, like a bad dream when you wake up. I have lots of bad dreams. Mrs. Shaw used to say it was because I watched too many horror movies on Channel Eleven."

"What's a channel?" A wild idea occurred to him. "Is it like a beam?"

"No—it's TV."

"What's teevee?"

"I—" The boy touched his forehead. "Pictures."

"Did somebody tote you here? This Mrs. Shaw?"

“No,” the boy said. “I just *was* here.”

“Who is Mrs. Shaw?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did she call you ‘Bama?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You’re not making any sense,” the gunslinger said flatly.

Quite suddenly the boy was on the verge of tears. “I can’t help it. I was just here. If you asked me about TV and channels yesterday, I bet I still could have remembered! Tomorrow I probably won’t even remember I’m Jake—not unless you tell me, and you won’t be here, will you? You’re going to go away and I’ll starve because you ate up almost all my food. I didn’t ask to be here. I don’t like it. It’s spooky.”

“Don’t feel so sorry for yourself. Make do.”

“I didn’t ask to be here,” the boy repeated with bewildered defiance.

The gunslinger ate another piece of the meat, chewing the salt out of it before swallowing. The boy had become part of it, and the gunslinger was convinced he told the truth—he had not asked for it. It was too bad. He himself . . . *he* had asked for it. But he had not asked for the game to become this dirty. He had not asked to turn his guns on the townsfolk of Tull; had not asked to shoot Allie, with her sadly pretty face at the end marked by the secret she had finally asked to be let in on, using that word, that nineteen, like a key in a lock; had not asked to be faced with a choice between duty and flat-out murder. It was not fair to ring in innocent bystanders and make them speak lines they didn’t understand on a strange stage. *Allie*, he thought, *Allie was at least part of this world, in her own self-illusory way. But this boy . . . this Goddamned boy . . .*

“Tell me what you can remember,” he told Jake.

“It’s only a little. It doesn’t seem to make any sense anymore.”

“Tell me. Maybe I can pick up the sense.”

The boy thought about how to begin. He thought about it very hard. “There was a place . . . the one before this one. A high place with lots of rooms and a patio where you could look at tall buildings and water. There was a statue that stood in the water.”

“A statue in the water?”

“Yes. A lady with a crown and a torch and . . . I think . . . a book.”

“Are you making this up?”

“I guess I must be,” the boy said hopelessly. “There were things to ride in on the streets. Big ones and little ones. The big ones were blue and white. The little ones were yellow. A lot of yellow ones. I walked to school. There were cement paths beside the streets. Windows to look in and more statues wearing clothes. The statues sold the clothes. I know it sounds crazy, but the statues sold the clothes.”

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

“I walked to school,” the boy repeated doggedly. “And I had a”—his eyes tilted closed and his lips moved gropingly—“a brown . . . book . . . bag. I carried a lunch. And I wore”—the groping again, agonized groping—“a tie.”

“A cravat?”

“I don’t know.” The boy’s fingers made a slow, unconscious clinching motion at his throat, one the gunslinger associated with hanging. “I don’t know. It’s just all gone.” And he looked away.

“May I put you to sleep?” the gunslinger asked.

“I’m not sleepy.”

“I can make you sleepy, and I can make you remember.”

Doubtfully, Jake asked, “How could you do that?”

“With this.”

The gunslinger removed one of the shells from his gunbelt and twirled it in his fingers. The movement was dexterous, as flowing as oil. The shell cartwheeled effortlessly from thumb and index to index and second, to second and ring, to ring and pinky. It popped out of sight and reappeared; seemed to float briefly, then reversed. The shell walked across the gunslinger’s fingers. The fingers themselves marched as his feet had marched on his last miles to this place. The boy watched, his initial doubt first replaced with plain delight, then by raptness, then by dawning blankness as he opened. His eyes slipped shut. The shell danced back and forth. Jake’s eyes opened again, caught the steady, limpid movement between the gunslinger’s fingers a little while longer, and then they closed once more. The gunslinger continued the howken, but Jake’s eyes did not open again. The boy breathed with slow and steady calmness. Did this

have to be part of it? Yes. It did. There was a certain cold beauty to it, like the lacy frettings that fringe hard blue ice-packs. He once more seemed to hear his mother singing, not the nonsense about the rain in Spain this time, but sweeter nonsense, coming from a great distance as he rocked on the rim of sleep: *Baby-bunting, baby dear, baby bring your basket here.*

Not for the first time the gunslinger tasted the smooth, loden taste of soul-sickness. The shell in his fingers, manipulated with such unknown grace, was suddenly horrific, the spoor of a monster. He dropped it into his palm, made a fist, and squeezed it with painful force. Had it exploded, in that moment he would have rejoiced at the destruction of his talented hand, for its only true talent was murder. There had always been murder in the world, but telling himself so was no comfort. There was murder, there was rape, there were unspeakable practices, and all of them were for the good, the bloody good, the bloody myth, for the grail, for the Tower. Ah, the Tower stood somewhere in the middle of things (so they did say), rearing its black-gray bulk to the sky, and in his desert-scoured ears, the gunslinger heard the faint sweet sound of his mother's voice: *Chussit, chissit, chassit, bring enough to fill your basket.*

He brushed the song, and the sweetness of the song, aside. "Where are you?" he asked.

III

Jake Chambers—sometimes 'Bama—is going downstairs with his bookbag. There is Earth Science, there is Geography, there is a notepad, a pencil, a lunch his mother's cook, Mrs. Greta Shaw, has made for him in the chrome-and-Formica kitchen where a fan whirrs eternally, sucking up alien odors. In his lunch sack he has a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; a bologna, lettuce, and onion sandwich; and four Oreo cookies. His parents do not hate him, but they do seem to have overlooked him. They have abdicated and left him to Mrs. Greta Shaw, to nannies, to a tutor in the summer and The Piper School (which is Private and Nice, and most of all, White) the rest of

the time. None of these people have ever pretended to be more than what they are—professional people, the best in their fields. None have folded him to a particularly warm bosom as usually happens in the historical romance novels his mother reads and which Jake has dipped into, looking for the “hot parts.” Hysterical novels, his father sometimes calls them, and sometimes “bodice-rippers.” You should talk, his mother says with infinite scorn from behind some closed door where Jake listens. His father works for The Network, and Jake could pick him out of a line-up of skinny men with crewcuts. Probably.

Jake does not know that he hates all the professional people but Mrs. Shaw. People have always bewildered him. His mother, who is scrawny in a sexy way, often goes to bed with sick friends. His father sometimes talks about people at The Network who are doing “too much Coca-Cola.” This statement is always accompanied by a humorless grin and a quick little sniff of the thumbnail.

Now he is on the street, Jake Chambers is on the street, he has “hit the bricks.” He is clean and well-mannered, comely, sensitive. He bowls once a week at Mid-Town Lanes. He has no friends, only acquaintances. He has never bothered to think about this, but it hurts him. He does not know or understand that a long association with professional people has caused him to take on many of their traits. Mrs. Greta Shaw (better than the rest of them, but gosh, is that ever a consolation prize) makes very professional sandwiches. She quarters them and cuts off the breadcrusts so that when he eats in the gym period four he looks like he ought to be at a cocktail party with a drink in his other hand instead of a sports novel or a Clay Blaisdell Western from the school library. His father makes a great deal of money because he is a master of “the kill”—that is, placing a stronger show on his Network against a weaker show on a rival Network. His father smokes four packs of cigarettes a day. His father does not cough, but he has a hard grin, and he’s not averse to the occasional shot of the old Coca-Cola.

Down the street. His mother leaves cab fare, but he walks every day it doesn’t rain, swinging his bookbag (and sometimes his bowling bag, although mostly he leaves it in his locker), a small boy who looks very American with his blond hair and blue eyes. Girls

have already begun to notice him (with their mothers' approval), and he does not shy away with skittish little-boy arrogance. He talks to them with unknowing professionalism and puzzles them away. He likes geography and bowling in the afternoon. His father owns stock in a company that makes automatic pin-setting machinery, but Mid-Town Lanes does not use his father's brand. He does not think he has thought about this, but he has.

Walking down the street, he passes Bloomie's, where the models stand dressed in fur coats, in six-button Edwardian suits, some in nothing at all; some are "barenaked." These models—these mannequins—are perfectly professional, and he hates all professionalism. He is too young to have learned to hate himself yet, but that seed is already there; given time, it will grow, and bear bitter fruit.

He comes to the corner and stands with his bookbag at his side. Traffic roars by—grunting blue-and-white busses, yellow taxis, Volkswagens, a large truck. He is just a boy, but not average, and he sees the man who kills him out of the corner of his eye. It is the man in black, and he doesn't see the face, only the swirling robe, the outstretched hands, and the hard, professional grin. He falls into the street with his arms outstretched, not letting go of the bookbag which contains Mrs. Greta Shaw's extremely professional lunch. There is a brief glance through a polarized windshield at the horrified face of a businessman wearing a dark-blue hat in the band of which is a small, jaunty feather. Somewhere a radio is blasting rock and roll. An old woman on the far curb screams—she is wearing a black hat with a net. Nothing jaunty about that black net; it is like a mourner's veil. Jake feels nothing but surprise and his usual sense of headlong bewilderment—is this how it ends? Before he's bowled better than two-seventy? He lands hard in the street and looks at an asphalt-sealed crack some two inches from his eyes. The bookbag is jolted from his hand. He is wondering if he has skinned his knees when the car belonging to the businessman wearing the blue hat with the jaunty feather passes over him. It is a big blue 1976 Cadillac with whitewall Firestone tires. The car is almost exactly the same color as the businessman's hat. It breaks Jake's back, mashes his guts to gravy, and sends blood from his mouth in a high-pressure jet. He

turns his head and sees the Cadillac's flaming taillights and smoke spurting from beneath its locked rear wheels. The car has also run over his bookbag and left a wide black tread on it. He turns his head the other way and sees a large gray Ford screaming to a stop inches from his body. A black fellow who has been selling pretzels and sodas from a pushcart is coming toward him on the run. Blood runs from Jake's nose, ears, eyes, rectum. His genitals have been squashed. He wonders irritably how badly he has skinned his knees. He wonders if he'll be late for school. Now the driver of the Cadillac is running toward him, babbling. Somewhere a terrible, calm voice, the voice of doom, says: "I am a priest. Let me through. An Act of Contrition . . ."

He sees the black robe and knows sudden horror. It is him, the man in black. Jake turns his face away with the last of his strength. Somewhere a radio is playing a song by the rock group Kiss. He sees his own hand trailing on the pavement, small, white, shapely. He has never bitten his nails.

Looking at his hand, Jake dies.

IV

The gunslinger hunkered in frowning thought. He was tired and his body ached and the thoughts came with aggravating slowness. Across from him the amazing boy slept with his hands folded in his lap, still breathing calmly. He had told his tale without much emotion, although his voice had trembled near the end, when he had come to the part about the "priest" and the "Act of Contrition." He had not, of course, told the gunslinger about his family and his own sense of bewildered dichotomy, but that had seeped through anyway—enough for the gunslinger to make out its shape. The fact that there had never been such a city as the boy described (unless it was the mythic city of Lud) was not the most upsetting part of the story, but it was disturbing. It was all disturbing. The gunslinger was afraid of the implications.

"Jake?"

“Uh-huh?”

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

“Forget it,” the boy said promptly. “When the blood came out of my mouth I could taste my own shit.”

“All right. You’re going to sleep, understand? Real sleep now. Go ahead and lie over, if it do please ya.”

Jake laid over, looking small and peaceful and harmless. The gunslinger did not believe he was harmless. There was a deadly feeling about him, the stink of yet another trap. He didn’t like the feeling, but he liked the boy. He liked him a great deal.

“Jake?”

“Shhh. I’m sleeping. I want to sleep.”

“Yes. And when you wake up you won’t remember any of this.”

“ ’Kay. Good.”

The gunslinger watched him for a brief time, thinking of his own boyhood, which usually seemed to have happened to another person—to a person who had leaped through some fabulous lens of time to become someone else—but which now seemed poignantly close. It was very hot in the stable of the way station, and he carefully drank some more water. He got up and walked to the back of the building, pausing to look into one of the horse stalls. There was a small pile of white hay in the corner, and a neatly folded blanket, but there was no smell of horse. There was no smell of anything in the stable. The sun had bled away every smell and left nothing. The air was perfectly neutral.

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

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

Demons, perhaps.

He shuddered abruptly, an abrupt twisting of his back. Heat-flesh poked out on his skin, then receded. He went to the control switch

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

He went back and sat down beside the boy, who had put one hand under his cheek. Nice-looking boy. The gunslinger drank some more water and crossed his legs so he was sitting Indian fashion. The boy, like the squatter on the edge of the desert who kept the bird (Zoltan, the gunslinger remembered abruptly, the bird's name was Zoltan), had lost his sense of time, but the fact that the man in black was closer seemed beyond doubt. Not for the first time, the gunslinger wondered if the man in black was letting him catch up for some reason of his own. Perhaps the gunslinger was playing into his hands. He tried to imagine what the confrontation might be like, and could not.

He was very hot, but no longer felt sick. The nursery rhyme occurred to him again, but this time instead of his mother, he thought of Cort—Cort, an ageless engine of a man, his face stitched with the scars of bricks and bullets and blunt instruments. The scars of war and instruction in the arts of war. He wondered if Cort had ever had a love to match those monumental scars. He doubted it. He thought of Susan, and his mother, and of Marten, that incomplete enchanter.

The gunslinger was not a man to dwell on the past; only a shadowy conception of the future and of his own emotional make-up saved him from being a man without imagination, a dangerous dullard. His present run of thought therefore rather amazed him. Each name called up others—Cuthbert, Alain, the old man Jonas with his quavery voice; and again Susan, the lovely girl at the window. Such thoughts always came back to Susan, and the great

rolling plain known as the Drop, and fishermen casting their nets in the bays on the edge of the Clean Sea.

The piano player in Tull (also dead, all dead in Tull, and by his hand) had known those places, although he and the gunslinger had only spoken of them that once. Sheb had been fond of the old songs, had once played them in a saloon called the Traveller's Rest, and the gunslinger hummed one tunelessly under his breath:

*Love o love o careless love
See what careless love has done.*

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

V

When he awoke, it was almost dark and the boy was gone.

The gunslinger got up, hearing his joints pop, and went to the stable door. There was a small flame dancing in darkness on the porch of the inn. He walked toward it, his shadow long and black and trailing in the reddish-ochre light of sunset.

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

"You did just right." The gunslinger sat down, seeing but not thinking about the dust of years that puffed up around his rump. He thought it something of a wonder that the porch didn't simply collapse beneath their combined weight. The flame from the lamp shadowed the boy's face with delicate tones. The gunslinger produced his poke and rolled a cigarette.

"We have to palaver," he said.

Jake nodded, smiling a little at the word.

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

"Are you going to kill him?"

“I don’t know. I have to make him tell me something. I may have to make him take me someplace.”

“Where?”

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

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

“Only a little.”

“Corn?”

“A little more.”

The gunslinger nodded. “Is there a cellar?”

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

“We’ll get up early and see if there’s anything down there worth taking. Then we’ll go.”

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

“What would you be afraid of?”

The boy looked at him ominously. “Spooks. Of *him* coming back.”

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

“Yes. Is he a bad man?”

“I guess that depends on where you’re standing,” the gunslinger said absently. He got up and pitched his cigarette out onto the hardpan. “I’m going to sleep.”

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

“Of course.”

The gunslinger stood on the steps, looking up, and the boy joined him. Old Star was up there, and Old Mother. It seemed to the gunslinger that if he closed his eyes he would be able to hear the croaking of the first spring peepers, smell the green, almost-summer smell of the court lawns after their first cutting (and hear, perhaps,

the indolent click of wooden balls as the ladies of the East Wing, attired only in their shifts as dusk glimmered toward dark, played at Points), could almost see Cuthbert and Jamie as they came through the break in the hedges, calling for him to ride out with them . . .

It was not like him to think so much of the past.

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

They crossed to the stable together.

VI

The next morning he explored the cellar.

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

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

The gunslinger peered around and waited for his nighteyes.

"You all right?" Jake called down nervously.

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

He went carefully to the corner, ducking his head. There was an old box with one side folded down. The cans were vegetables—green beans, yellow beans—and three cans of corned beef.

He scooped up an armload and went back to the ladder. He climbed halfway up and handed them to Jake, who knelt to receive them. He went back for more.

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

He turned, looked, and felt a kind of dreamy terror wash over him, a feeling both languid and repellent.

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

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

“Come up!” Jake screamed. “Oh Jesus, mister, come up!”

“Go away,” the gunslinger said calmly. “Wait outside. If I don’t come up by the time you count to two . . . no, three hundred, get the hell out.”

“*Come up!*” Jake screamed again.

The gunslinger didn’t answer. He pulled leather with his right hand.

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

“Who are you?” the gunslinger asked.

No answer.

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

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

“What do you mean? Speak on!”

But the breathing was gone.

The gunslinger stood for a moment, frozen, and then one of the huge spiders dropped on his arm and scrambled frantically up to his shoulder. With an involuntary grunt he brushed it away and got his feet moving. He did not want to do the next thing, but custom was strict, inviolable. Take the dead from the dead, the old proverb said; only a corpse may speak true prophecy. He went to the hole and punched at it. The sandstone crumbled easily at the edges, and with a bare stiffening of muscles, he thrust his hand through the wall.

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

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

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

“I thought it got you, that it got you. I thought—”

“It didn’t. Nothing got me.” He held the boy to him, feeling his face, hot against his chest, and his hands, dry against his ribcage. He could feel the rapid beating of the boy’s heart. It occurred to him later that this was when he began to love the boy—which was, of course, what the man in black must have planned all along. Was there ever a trap to match the trap of love?

“Was it a demon?” The voice was muffled.

“Yes. A speaking-demon. We don’t have to go back there anymore. Come on. Let’s shake a mile.”

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

“You carry one of the waterbags,” the gunslinger said. “Wear it around your shoulders—see?”

“Yes.” The boy looked up at him worshipfully, the look quickly masked. He slung one of the bags over his shoulders.

“Is it too heavy?”

“No. It’s fine.”

“Tell me the truth, now. I can’t carry you if you get a sunstroke.”

“I won’t have a sunstroke. I’ll be okay.”

The gunslinger nodded.

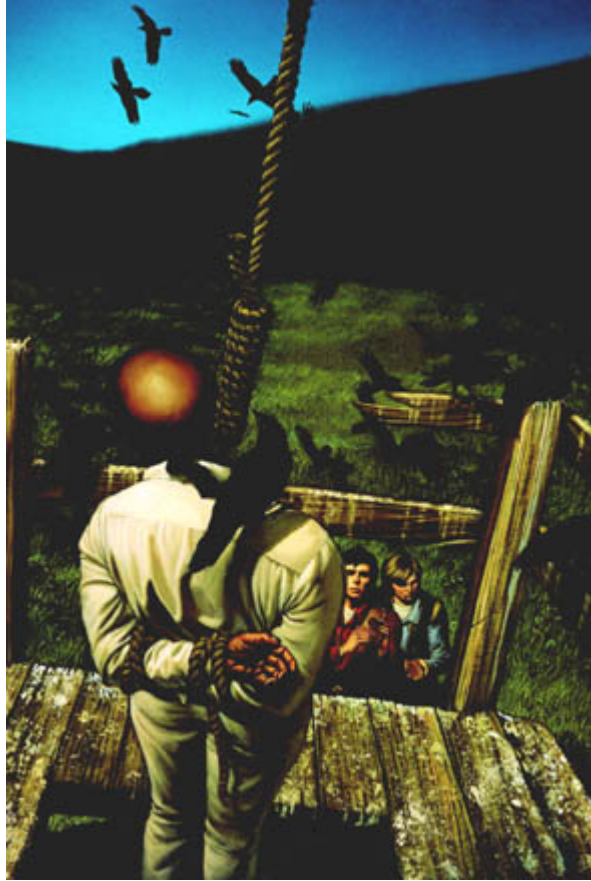
“We’re going to the mountains, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

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

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

“Goodbye!” Jake cried. “Goodbye!” Then he turned back to the gunslinger, looking troubled. “I feel like something’s watching us.”



“Something or someone,” the gunslinger agreed.

“Was someone hiding there? Hiding there all along?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Should we go back? Go back and—”

“No. We’re done with that place.”

“Good,” Jake said fervently.

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

VII

They were three days out of the way station; the mountains were deceptively clear now. They could see the smooth, stepped rise of the desert into foothills, the first naked slopes, the bedrock bursting

through the skin of the earth in sullen, eroded triumph. Further up, the land gentled off briefly again, and for the first time in months or years the gunslinger could see real, living green. Grass, dwarf spruces, perhaps even willows, all fed by snow runoff from further up. Beyond that the rock took over again, rising in cyclopean, tumbled splendor all the way to the blinding snowcaps. Off to the left, a huge slash showed the way to the smaller, eroded sandstone cliffs and mesas and buttes on the far side. This draw was obscured in the almost continual gray membrane of showers. At night, Jake would sit fascinated for the few minutes before he fell into sleep, watching the brilliant swordplay of the far-off lightning, white and purple, startling in the clarity of the night air.

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

They passed the symmetrical campfire leavings of the man in black at regular intervals, and it seemed to the gunslinger that these leavings were much fresher now. On the third night, the gunslinger was sure that he could see the distant spark of another campfire, somewhere in the first rising swell of the foothills. This did not please him as much as he once might have believed. One of Cort's sayings occurred to him: *'Ware the man who fakes a limp.*

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

"Here, sit down," the gunslinger said.

"No, I'm okay."

"Sit down."

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

“Drink.”

“I’m not supposed to until—”

“Drink.”

The boy drank, three swallows. The gunslinger wet the tail of the blanket, which held a good deal less now, and applied the damp fabric to the boy’s wrists and forehead, which were fever-dry.

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

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

“That’s neat,” he said.

The gunslinger nodded. “Yar!” He paused. “When I was your age, I lived in a walled city, did I tell you that?”

The boy shook his head sleepily.

“Sure. And there was an evil man—”

“The priest?”

“Well, sometimes I wonder about that, tell you true,” the gunslinger said. “If they *were* two, I think now they must have been brothers. Maybe even twins. But did I ever see ’em together? No, I never did. This bad man . . . this Marten . . . he was a wizard. Like Merlin. Do they ken Merlin where you come from?”

“Merlin and Arthur and the knights of the Round Table,” Jake said dreamily.

The gunslinger felt a nasty jolt go through him. “Yes,” he said. “Arthur Eld, you say true, I say thank ya. I was very young . . .”

But the boy was asleep sitting up, his hands folded neatly in his lap.

“Jake.”

“Yar!”

The sound of this word from the boy’s mouth startled him badly, but the gunslinger wouldn’t let his voice show it. “When I snap my fingers, you’ll wake up. You’ll be rested and fresh. Do you kennit?”

“Yes.”

“Lie over, then.”

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

What would follow?

The question was too vague to catch his interest. Cuthbert would have found interest in it, lively interest (and probably a joke), but Cuthbert was as gone as the Horn o' Deschain, and the gunslinger could only go forward in the way he knew.

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

Except maybe at the end.

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

VIII

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

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

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

"Get ready," Roland whispered to Cuthbert.

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

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

Cort abruptly raised the trap in his hands and let the side fall open. The dove was out and up, trying for the sky in a quick, fluttering blast of its wings. Cuthbert pulled the leash, but he was slow; the hawk was already up and his takeoff was awkward. The hawk recovered with a brief twitch of its wings. It struck upward, trudging the air, gaining altitude over the dove, moving bullet-swift.

Cort walked over to where the boys stood, casually, and swung his huge and twisted fist at Cuthbert's ear. The boy fell over without a sound, although his lips writhed back from his gums. A trickle of blood flowed slowly from his ear and onto the rich green grass.

"You were slow, maggot," he said.

Cuthbert was struggling to his feet. "I cry your pardon, Cort. It's just that I—"

Cort swung again, and Cuthbert fell over again. The blood flowed more swiftly now.

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

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

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

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

"Look!" Roland cried. He pointed up.

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

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

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

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

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

He stood up proudly, the hawk on his arm.

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

"He struck me," Roland said.

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

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

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

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

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

“You learn,” Cort said, “but your tongue has a bad habit of lolling from your stupid mouth when your instructor’s back is turned. Mayhap the day will come when it and you will learn their respective places.” He struck Cuthbert again, this time solidly between the eyes and hard enough so that Roland heard a dull thud—the sound a mallet makes when a scullion taps a keg of beer. Cuthbert fell backward onto the lawn, his eyes cloudy and dazed at first. Then they cleared and he stared burningly up at Cort, his usual easy grin nowhere to be seen, his hatred unveiled, a pinprick as bright as the dove’s blood in the center of each eye. He nodded and parted his lips in a scarifying smile that Roland had never seen.

“Then there’s hope for you,” Cort said. “When you think you can, you come for me, maggot.”

“How did you know?” Cuthbert said between his teeth.

Cort turned toward Roland so swiftly that Roland almost fell back a step—and then both of them would have been on the grass, decorating the new green with their blood. “I saw it reflected in this maggot’s eyes,” he said. “Remember it, Cuthbert Allgood. Last lesson for today.”

Cuthbert nodded again, the same frightening smile on his face. “I grieve,” he said. “I have forgotten the face—”

“Cut that shit,” Cort said, losing interest. He turned to Roland. “Go on, now. The both of you. If I have to look at your stupid maggot faces any longer I’ll puke my guts and lose a good dinner.”

“Come on,” Roland said.

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

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

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

“He’ll tell Cort.”

“He’s no friend of Cort’s,” Roland said, and then shrugged. “And what if he did?”

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

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

IX

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

two boys bolt the gravied meat scraps he had produced. Behind, before, and all around, cookboys, scullions, and various underlings rushed through the steaming, humid air, rattling pans, stirring stew, slaving over potatoes and vegetables in nether regions. In the dimly lit pantry alcove, a washerwoman with a doughy, miserable face and hair caught up in a rag splashed water around on the floor with a mop.

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

"All right." Hax nodded to the Guard, and he nodded back. "You boys," he said. "Go over to Maggie, she'll give you some pie. Then scat. Don't get me in trouble."

Later they would both remember he'd said that: *Don't get me in trouble.*

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

"Let's eat it understairs," Cuthbert said.

"All right."

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

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

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

"Farson?"

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

"Risky."

“Ask not what the good man can do for you—” the Guard began.

“But what you can do for him.” Hax sighed. “Soldier, ask not.”

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

“Yar. And I know my responsibilities to him; you don’t need to lecture me. I love him just as you do. Would foller him into the sea if he asked; so I would.”

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

“There are children in Taunton?” the cook asked. It was not really a question.

“Children everywhere,” the Guard said gently. “It’s the children we—and he—care about.”

“Poisoned meat. Such a strange way to care for children.” Hax uttered a heavy, whistling sigh. “Will they curdle and hold their bellies and cry for their mammas? I suppose they will.”

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

“Of course,” Hax said, and laughed.

“You said it yourself. ‘Soldier, ask not.’ Do you enjoy seeing children under the rule of the gun, when they could be under his hands, ready to start making a new world?”

Hax did not reply.

“I go on duty in twenty minutes,” the Guard said, his voice once more calm. “Give me a joint of mutton and I’ll pinch one of your girls and make her giggle. When I leave—”

“My mutton will give no cramps to your belly, Robeson.”

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

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

“Roland.”

He looked at Cuthbert. They looked at each other for a long moment in the fragrant semidarkness, and a taste of warm despair rose in Roland’s throat. What he felt might have been a sort of death—something as brutal and final as the death of the dove in the white

sky over the games field. *Hax?* he thought, bewildered. *Hax who put a poultice on my leg that time? Hax?* And then his mind snapped closed, cutting the subject off.

What he saw, even in Cuthbert's humorous, intelligent face, was nothing—nothing at all. Cuthbert's eyes were flat with Hax's doom. In Cuthbert's eyes, it had already happened. He had fed them and they had gone understairs to eat and then Hax had brought the Guard named Robeson to the wrong corner of the kitchen for their treasonous little *tete-a-tete*. Ka had worked as ka sometimes did, as suddenly as a big stone rolling down a hillside. That was all.

Cuthbert's eyes were gunslinger's eyes.

X

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

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

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

He looked more closely at his son. "It preys on you."

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

His father smiled.

“Yes,” Roland said. “I guess it . . . it preys on me.”

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

“Yes.”

“He fed both of you when Cort—”

“Yes.”

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

“I don’t know.” Nor did he care. He was not concerned with how his feelings compared with those of others.

“It preys on you because you feel you’ve caused a man’s death?”

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

“Yet you told. Why?”

The boy’s eyes widened. “How could I not? Treason was—”

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

“I didn’t!” The words jerked out of him violently. “I wanted to kill him—both of them! Liars! *Black* liars! Snakes! They—”

“Go ahead.”

“They hurt me,” he finished, defiant. “They changed something and it hurt. I wanted to kill them for it. I wanted to kill them right there.”

His father nodded. “That’s crude, Roland, but not unworthy. Not moral, either, but it is not your place to be moral. In fact . . .” He peered at his son. “Morals may always be beyond you. You are not quick, like Cuthbert or Vannay’s boy. That’s all right, though. It will make you formidable.”

The boy felt both pleased and troubled by this. “He’ll—”

“Oh, he’ll hang.”

The boy nodded. “I want to see it.”

The elder Deschain threw his head back and roared laughter. “Not as formidable as I thought . . . or perhaps just stupid.” He closed his mouth abruptly. An arm shot out and grabbed the boy’s upper arm painfully. Roland grimaced but didn’t flinch. His father peered at him steadily, and the boy looked back, although it was more difficult than hooding the hawk had been.

“All right,” he said, “thee may.” And turned abruptly to go.

“Father?”

“What?”

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” Roland said, grasping the concept instantly—it was one he never forgot. “But if you got the good man—”

“No,” his father said flatly.

“Why not? Why wouldn’t that end it?”

For a moment his father seemed on the verge of saying why, but then shook his head. “We’ve talked enough for now, I think. Go out from me.”

He wanted to tell his father not to forget his promise when the time came for Hax to step through the trap, but he was sensitive to his father’s moods. He put his fist to his forehead, crossed one foot in front of the other, and bowed. Then he went out, closing the door quickly. He suspected that what his father wanted now was to fuck. He was aware that his mother and father did that, and he was reasonably well informed as to how it was done, but the mental picture that always condensed with the thought made him feel both uneasy and oddly guilty. Some years later, Susan would tell him the story of Oedipus, and he would absorb it in quiet thoughtfulness, thinking of the odd and bloody triangle formed by his father, his mother, and by Marten—known in some quarters as Farson, the good man. Or perhaps it was a quadrangle, if one wished to add himself.

XI

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

The two boys had been let out of Morning Exercises—Cort had read the notes from their fathers laboriously, lips moving, nodding here and there. When he finished with them, he had carefully put the papers away in his pocket. Even here in Gilead, paper was easily as valuable as gold. When these two sheets of it were safe, he'd looked up at the blue-violet dawn sky and nodded again.

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

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

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

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

"Let's go up," Roland said.

Cuthbert looked at him with something like horror. "Up *there*? Do you think—"

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

"All right."

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

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

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

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

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

"You can, Bert."

"I won't sleep tonight if I do."

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

Cuthbert suddenly seized Roland's hand and looked at him with such mute agony that Roland's own doubt came back, and he wished sickly that they had never gone to the west kitchen that night. His father had been right. Better not to know. Better every man, woman, and child in Taunton dead and stinking than this.

But still. Still. Whatever the lesson was, rusty, whatever half-buried thing with sharp edges, he would not let it go or give up his grip on it.

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

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

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

“Why did you do that?” Cuthbert asked.

He wished to answer something swaggering: *Oh, the luck of the gallows . . .*, but he only looked at Cuthbert and shook his head.

“Just so I’ll have it,” he said. “Always have it.”

They walked away from the gallows, sat down, and waited. In an hour or so the first of the townfolk began to gather, mostly families who had come in broken-down wagons and beat-up buckas, carrying their breakfasts with them—hampers of cold pancakes folded over fillings of wild pokeberry jam. Roland felt his stomach growl hungrily and wondered again, with despair, where the honor and the nobility was. He had been taught of such things, and was now forced to wonder if they had been lies all along, or only treasures buried deep by the wise. He *wanted* to believe that, but it seemed to him that Hax in his dirty whites, walking around and around his steaming, subterranean kitchen and yelling at the potboys, had more honor than this. He fingered the splinter from the gallows tree with sick bewilderment. Cuthbert lay beside him with his face drawn impassive.

XII

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

A gunslinger whom the boy did not know well (he was glad his father had not drawn the black stone) led the fat cook carefully up the steps. Two Guards of the Watch had gone ahead and stood on either side of the trap. When Hax and the gunslinger reached the top, the gunslinger threw the noosed rope over the crosstree and then put it over the cook’s head, dropping the knot until it lay just

below the left ear. The birds had all flown, but Roland knew they were waiting.

“Do you wish to make confession?” the gunslinger asked.

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

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

“Roland?”

“I’m here.” He took Cuthbert’s hand, and their fingers locked together like iron.

“Charge be capital murder and sedition,” the gunslinger said. “You have crossed the white, and I, Charles son of Charles, consign you ever to the black.”

The crowd murmured, some in protest.

“I never—”

“Tell your tale in the underworld, maggot,” said Charles of Charles, and yanked the lever with both yellow-gauntleted hands.

The trap dropped. Hax plummeted through, still trying to talk. Roland never forgot that. The cook went *still trying to talk*. And where did he finish the last sentence he would ever begin on earth? His words were ended by the sound an exploding pineknot makes on the hearth in the cold heart of a winter night.

But on the whole he thought it not so much. The cook's legs kicked out once in a wide Y; the crowd made a satisfied whistling noise; the Guards of the Watch dropped their military pose and began to gather things up negligently. Charles son of Charles walked back down the steps slowly, mounted his horse, and rode off, cutting roughly through one gaggle of picnickers, quirting a few of the slowcoaches, making them scurry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roland was not shocked by this, although he had not particularly cared for the scene. But he thought he could perhaps understand what Bert was saying. Perhaps he'd not finish as a diplomat after all, jokes and easy line of talk or not.

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

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

The long years and long rides had begun.

“Look,” Jake said, pointing upward.

The gunslinger looked up and felt a twinge in his right hip. He winced. They had been in the foothills two days now, and although the waterskins were almost empty again, it didn't matter now. There would soon be all the water they could drink.

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

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

“Is that him?” Jake asked.

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

“That's him, Jake.”

“Do you think we'll catch him?”

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

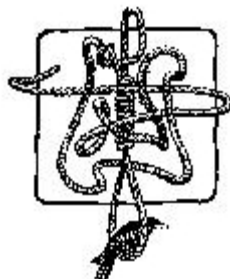
“They're so high,” Jake said. “What's on the other side?”

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

They began to move upward again, sending small runnels of pebbles and sand down toward the desert that washed away behind them in a flat bake-sheet that seemed to never end. Above them, far above, the man in black moved up and up and up. It was impossible to see if he looked back. He seemed to leap across impossible gulfs, to scale sheer faces. Once or twice he disappeared, but always they saw him again, until the violet curtain of dusk shut him from their view. When they made their camp for the evening, the boy spoke little, and the gunslinger wondered if the boy knew what he himself had already intuited. He thought of Cuthbert's face, hot, dismayed, excited. He thought of the bread. He thought of the birds. It ends this way, he thought. Again and again it ends this way. There are quests and roads that lead ever onward, and all of them end in the same place—upon the killing ground.

Except, perhaps, the road to the Tower. There ka might show its true face.

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



The
**ORACLE AND THE
MOUNTAINS**



CHAPTER THREE

The Oracle and the Mountains

I

The boy found the oracle and it almost destroyed him.

Some thin instinct brought the gunslinger up from sleep to the velvet darkness which had fallen on them at dusk. That had been when he and Jake reached the grassy, nearly level oasis above the first rise of tumbled foothills. Even on the hardscrabble below, where they had toiled and fought for every foot in the killer sun, they had been able to hear the sound of crickets rubbing their legs seductively together in the perpetual green of willow groves above them. The gunslinger remained calm in his mind, and the boy had kept up at least the pretense of a façade, and that had made the gunslinger proud. But Jake hadn't been able to hide the wildness in his eyes, which were white and starey, the eyes of a horse scenting water and held back from bolting only by the tenuous chain of its master's mind; like a horse at the point where only understanding, not the spur, could hold it steady. The gunslinger could gauge the need in Jake by the madness the sounds of the crickets bred in his own body. His arms seemed to seek out shale to scrape on, and his knees seemed to beg to be ripped in tiny, maddening, salty gashes.

The sun trampled them all the way; even when it turned a swollen, feverish red with sunset, it shone perversely through the knife-cut in the hills off to their left, blinding them and making every teardrop of sweat into a prism of pain.

Then there was sawgrass: at first only yellow scrub, clinging with gruesome vitality to the bleak soil where the last of the runoff reached. Further up there was witchgrass, first sparse, then green and rank . . . then the sweet smell of real grass, mixed with timothy

and shaded by the first of the dwarfed firs. There the gunslinger saw an arc of brown moving in the shadows. He drew, fired, and felled the rabbit all before Jake could begin to cry out his surprise. A moment later he had reholstered the gun.

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

The boy said, “I’ll get some wood.”

The gunslinger smiled. “No, you won’t. Sit yourself, Jake.” Whose phrase had that been? Some woman. Susan? He couldn’t remember. *Time’s the thief of memory*: that one he knew. That one had been Vannay’s.

The boy sat. When the gunslinger got back, Jake was asleep in the grass. A large praying mantis was performing ablutions on the springy stem of the kid’s cowlick. The gunslinger snorted laughter—the first in gods knew how long—and set the fire and went after water.

The willow jungle was deeper than he had suspected, and confusing in the failing light. But he found a spring, richly guarded by frogs and peepers. He filled one of their waterskins . . . and paused. The sounds that filled the night awoke an uneasy sensuality in him, a feeling that not even Allie, the woman he had bedded with in Tull, had been able to bring out—too much of his time with Allie had been business. He chalked it up to the sudden blinding change from the desert. After all those miles of bleak hardpan, the softness of the dark seemed nearly decadent.

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

“We stay here tomorrow,” the gunslinger said.

“But that man you’re after . . . that priest . . .”

“He’s no priest. And don’t worry. He’ll keep.”

“How do you know that?”

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

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

His cigarette drooped toward the grass, and he tossed it into the fire. He looked at it, the clear yellow burn so different, so much cleaner, from the way the devil-grass burned. The air was wonderfully cool, and he lay down with his back to the fire.

Far away, through the gash that led the way into the mountains, he heard the thick mouth of the perpetual thunder. He slept. And dreamed.

II

Susan Delgado, his beloved, was dying before his eyes.

He watched, his arms held by two villagers on each side, his neck dog-caught in a huge, rusty iron collar. This wasn’t the way it had happened—he hadn’t even been there—but dreams had their own logic, didn’t they?

She was dying. He could smell her burning hair, could hear their cries of Charyou tree. And he could see the color of his own madness. Susan, lovely girl at the window, horseman’s daughter. How she had flown across the Drop, her shadow that of horse and girl merged, a fabulous creature out of an old story, something wild and free! How they had flown together in the corn! Now they were flinging cornhusks at her and the husks caught fire even before they caught in her hair. Charyou tree, charyou tree, they cried, these enemies of light and love, and somewhere the witch was cackling.

Rhea, the witch's name had been, and Susan was turning black in the flames, her skin cracking open, and—

And what was she calling?

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

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

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

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

"Nnnnnnnnn—"

III

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

"Nnnnnnnnn—"

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

"Nnnnnnnnn—"

Jake.

The gunslinger was up and on the run. A bitter circle of moon had risen and he could follow the boy's track in the dew. He ducked under the first of the willows, splashed through the spring, and

legged up the far bank, skidding in the dampness (even now his body could relish it). Willow withes slapped at his face. The trees were thicker here, and the moon was blotted out. Tree-trunks rose in lurching shadows. The grass, now knee-high, caressed him, as if pleading with him to slow down, to enjoy the cool. To enjoy the life. Half-rotted dead branches reached for his shins, his *cojones*. He paused for a moment, lifting his head and scenting at the air. A ghost of a breeze helped him. The boy did not smell good, of course; neither of them did. The gunslinger's nostrils flared like those of an ape. The younger, lighter odor of the boy's sweat was faint, oily, unmistakable. He crashed over a deadfall of grass and bramble and downed branches, sprinted through a tunnel of overhanging willow and sumac. Moss struck his shoulders like flabby corpse-hands. Some clung in sighing gray tendrils.

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

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

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

The gunslinger stepped inside the ring and Jake screamed, recoiling and throwing up his arms. Now his face could be seen clearly. The gunslinger read fear and terror at war with some excruciating pleasure.

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

He didn't think about what he was doing when he pulled the half-rotted jawbone from the pocket where he had carried it since he

found it in the lair of the speaking-demon at the way station. He didn't think, but it had never frightened him to operate on pure instinct. That had ever been the best and truest place for him. He held the jawbone's frozen, prehistoric grin up before his eyes, holding his other arm out stiffly, first and last fingers poked out in the ancient forked sign, the ward against the evil eye.

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

The gunslinger walked to him and held the jawbone in front of Jake's warring eyes.

"See this, Jake—see it very well."

What came in response was a wet sound of agony. The boy tried to pull his gaze away, could not. For a moment it seemed that he might be pulled apart—mentally if not physically. Then, suddenly, both eyes rolled up to the whites. Jake collapsed. His body struck the earth limply, one hand almost touching the squat basalt arm that supported the altar. The gunslinger dropped to one knee and picked him up. He was amazingly light, as dehydrated as a November leaf from their long walk through the desert.

Around him Roland could feel the presence that dwelt in the circle of stones whirring with a jealous anger—its prize was being taken from it. Once the gunslinger passed out of the circle, the sense of frustrated jealousy faded quickly. He carried Jake back to their camp. By the time they got there, the boy's twitching unconsciousness had become deep sleep.

The gunslinger paused for a moment above the gray ruin of the fire. The moonlight on Jake's face reminded him again of a church saint, alabaster purity all unknown. He hugged the kid and put a dry kiss on his cheek, knowing that he loved him. Well, maybe that wasn't quite right. Maybe the truth was that he'd loved the kid from the first moment he'd seen him (as he had Susan Delgado), and was only now allowing himself to recognize the fact. For it was a fact.

And it seemed that he could almost feel the laughter from the man in black, someplace far above them.

IV

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

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

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

"I was?" Jake looked at him suspiciously. "I never did anything like that be—"

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

"See?"

Jake nodded, bewildered. "What happened?"

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

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

The gunslinger only looked at him.

"No," Jake said after a moment. "I guess if you were going to leave me, you already would have."

"That's using your head. Now listen, and hear me very well. I want you to stay here while I'm gone. Right here in camp. Don't stray, even if it seems like the best idea in the world. And if you feel strange—funny in any way—you pick up this bone and hold it in your hands."

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

"You can. You may have to. Especially after midday. It's important. You may feel pukey or headachey when you first lay hold of it, but that'll pass. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"And will you do what I say?"

"Yes, but why do you have to go away?" Jake burst out.

“I just do.”

The gunslinger caught another fascinating glimpse of the steel that lay under the boy’s surface, as enigmatic as the story he had told about coming from a city where the buildings were so tall they actually scraped the sky. It wasn’t Cuthbert the boy reminded him of so much as his other close friend, Alain. Alain had been quiet, in no way prone to Bert’s grandstanding quackery, and he’d been dependable and afraid of nothing.

“All right,” Jake said.

The gunslinger laid the jawbone carefully on the ground next to the ruins of the fire, where it grinned up through the grass like some eroded fossil that has seen the light of day after a night of five thousand years. Jake wouldn’t look at it. His face was pale and miserable. The gunslinger wondered if it would profit them for him to put the boy to sleep and question him, then decided there would be little gain. He knew well enough that the spirit of the stone circle was surely a demon, and very likely an oracle as well. A demon with no shape, only a kind of unformed sexual glare with the eye of prophecy. He wondered briefly if it might not be the soul of Sylvia Pittston, the giant woman whose religious huckstering had led to the final showdown in Tull . . . but no. Not her. The stones in the circle were ancient. Sylvia Pittston was a jilly-come-lately compared to the thing that made its den here. It was old . . . and sly. But the gunslinger knew the forms of speaking quite well and did not think the boy would have to use the jawbone mojo. The voice and mind of the oracle would be more than occupied with him. The gunslinger needed to know things, in spite of the risk . . . and the risk was high. Yet for both Jake and himself, he needed desperately to know.

The gunslinger opened his tobacco poke and pawed through it, pushing the dry strands of leaf aside until he came to a miniscule object wrapped in a fragment of white paper. He rolled it between fingers that would all too soon be gone and looked absently up at the sky. Then he unwrapped it and held the contents—a tiny white pill with edges that had been much worn with traveling—in his hand.

Jake looked at it curiously. “What’s that?”

The gunslinger uttered a short laugh. “The story Cort used to tell us was that the Old Gods pissed over the desert and made

mescaline.”

Jake only looked puzzled.

“This is a drug,” the gunslinger said. “But not one that puts you to sleep. One that wakes you up all the way for a little while.”

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

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said. “It just popped out. I think it came from . . . you know, before.”

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

“Will it hurt you?” Jake asked.

“It never has,” the gunslinger said, conscious of the evasion.

“I don’t like it.”

“Never mind.”

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

“When does something happen to you?” Jake asked.

“Not for a little while. Be quiet.”

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

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

Jake pulled his faded shirt reluctantly over his head, revealing the skinny stack of his ribs, and gave it to Roland.

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

“I have to go,” he said, getting up. “It’s time.”

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

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

V

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

The drug had often disturbed him: his ego was too strong (or perhaps just too simple) to enjoy being eclipsed and peeled back, made a target for more sensitive emotions—they tickled at him (and sometimes maddened him) like the touch of a cat’s whiskers. But this time he felt fairly calm. That was good.

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

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

He went to the altar, stood beside it for a moment. Coherent thought was now almost impossible. His teeth felt strange in his head, tiny tombstones set in pink moist earth. The world held too much light. He climbed up on the altar and lay back. His mind was

becoming a jungle full of strange thought-plants that he had never seen or suspected before, a willow-jungle that had grown up around a mescaline spring. The sky was water and he hung suspended over it. The thought gave him a vertigo that seemed faraway and unimportant.

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

*Beyond the reach of human range
A drop of hell, a touch of strange . . .*

The trees which overhung the altar contained faces. He watched them with abstracted fascination: Here was a dragon, green and twitching, here a wood-nymph with beckoning branch arms, here a living skull overgrown with slime. Faces. Faces.

The grasses of the clearing suddenly whipped and bent.

I come.

I come.

Vague stirrings in his flesh. How far I have come, he thought. From lying with Susan in sweet grass on the Drop to this.

She pressed over him, a body made of the wind, a breast of fragrant jasmine, rose, and honeysuckle.

"Make your prophecy," he said. "Tell me what I need to know." His mouth felt full of metal.

A sigh. A faint sound of weeping. The gunslinger's genitals felt drawn and hard. Over him and beyond the faces in the leaves, he could see the mountains—hard and brutal and full of teeth.

The body moved against him, struggled with him. He felt his hands curl into fists. She had sent him a vision of Susan. It was Susan above him, lovely Susan Delgado, waiting for him in an abandoned

drover's hut on the Drop with her hair spilled down her back and over her shoulders. He tossed his head, but her face followed.

Jasmine, rose, honeysuckle, old hay . . . the smell of love. Love me.

"Speak prophecy," he said. "Speak truth."

Please, the oracle wept. Don't be cold. It's always so cold here—
Hands slipping over his flesh, manipulating, lighting him on fire.
Pulling him. Drawing. A perfumed black crevice. Wet and warm—
No. Dry. Cold. Sterile.

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

Would you have mercy on the boy?

What boy? I know no boy. It's not boys I need. O please.

Jasmine, rose, honeysuckle. Dry hay with its ghost of summer clover. Oil decanted from ancient urns. A riot for flesh.

"After," he said. "If what you tell me is useful."

Now. Please. Now.

He let his mind coil out at her, the antithesis of emotion. The body that hung over him froze and seemed to scream. There was a brief, vicious tug-of-war between his temples—his mind was the rope, gray and fibrous. For long moments there was no sound but the quiet hush of his breathing and the faint breeze which made the green faces in the trees shift, wink, and grimace. No bird sang.

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

"Prophecy," he said, and then an even bleaker noun. "Truth."

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

Sleep then.

"No."

Then half-sleep.

What she asked was dangerous, but also probably necessary. The gunslinger turned his eyes up to the faces in the leaves. A play was

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

And half-slept.

Three. This is the number of your fate.

Three?

Yes, three is mystic. Three stands at the heart of your quest.

Another number comes later. Now the number is three.

Which three?



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

Tell me what you can.

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

Which demon is that? I know it not, even from my tutor's lessons.

*"We see in part, and thus is the mirror of prophecy darkened."
There are other worlds, gunslinger, and other demons. These waters are deep. Watch for the doorways. Watch for the roses and the unfound doorways.*

The second?

She comes on wheels. I see no more.

The third?

Death . . . but not for you.

The man in black? Where is he?

Near. You will speak with him soon.

Of what will we speak?

The Tower.

The boy? Jake?

...

Tell me of the boy!

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

How? How can that be? Why must it be?

"We see in part, and thus is the mirror—"

God damn you.

No God damned me.

Don't patronize me, Thing.

...

What shall I call you, then? Star-slut? Whore of the Winds?

Some live on love that comes to the ancient places . . . even in these sad and evil times. Some, gunslinger, live on blood. Even, I understand, on the blood of young boys.

May he not be spared?

Yes.

How?

Cease, gunslinger. Strike your camp and turn back northwest. In the northwest there is still a need for men who live by the bullet.

I am sworn by my father's guns and by the treachery of Marten.
Marten is no more. The man in black has eaten his soul. This you know.

I am sworn.

Then you are damned.

Have your way with me, bitch.

VI

Eagerness.

The shadow swung over him, enfolded him. There was sudden ecstasy broken only by a galaxy of pain, as faint and bright as ancient stars gone red with collapse. Faces came to him unbidden at the climax of their coupling: Sylvia Pittston; Alice, the woman from Tull; Susan; a dozen others.

And finally, after an eternity, he pushed her away from him, once again in his right mind, bone-weary and disgusted.

No! It isn't enough! It—

"Let me be," the gunslinger said. He sat up and almost fell off the altar before regaining his feet. She touched him tentatively

(honeysuckle, jasmine, sweet attar)

and he pushed her violently, falling to his knees.

He made his drunken way to the perimeter of the circle. He staggered through, feeling a huge weight fall from his shoulders. He drew a shuddering, weeping breath. Had he learned enough to justify this feeling of defilement? He didn't know. In time he supposed he would. As he started away, he could feel her standing at the bars of her prison, watching him go from her. He wondered how long it might be before someone else crossed the desert and found her, hungry and alone. For a moment he felt dwarfed by the possibilities of time.

VII

“You’re sick!”

Jake stood up fast when the gunslinger shambled back through the last trees and came into camp. He’d been huddled by the ruins of the tiny fire, the jawbone across his knees, gnawing disconsolately on the bones of the rabbit. Now he ran toward the gunslinger with a look of distress that made Roland feel the full, ugly weight of a coming betrayal.

“No,” he said. “Not sick. Just tired. Whipped.” He gestured absently at the jawbone. “You can let go of that, Jake.”

The boy threw it down quickly and violently, rubbing his hands across his shirt after doing it. His upper lip rose and fell in a snarl that was, the gunslinger believed, perfectly unconscious.

The gunslinger sat down—almost fell down—feeling the aching joints and the pummeled, thick mind that was the unlovely afterglow of mescaline. His crotch also pulsed with a dull ache. He rolled a cigarette with careful, unthinking slowness. Jake watched. The gunslinger had a sudden impulse to speak to the boy dan-dinh after telling him all he had learned, then thrust the idea away with horror. He wondered if a part of him—mind or soul—might not be disintegrating. To open one’s mind and heart to the command of a child? The idea was insane.

“We sleep here tonight. Tomorrow we start climbing. I’ll go out a little later and see if I can’t shoot something for supper. We need to make strength. I’ve got to sleep now. Okay?”

“Sure. Knock yourself out.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Do what you want.”

“Ah.” The gunslinger nodded and lay back. *Knock myself out*, he thought. *Knock. Myself out.*

When he woke up the shadows were long across the small grass clearing. “Build up the fire,” he told Jake and tossed him his flint and steel. “Can you use that?”

“Yes, I think so.”

The gunslinger walked toward the willow grove and then stopped at the sound of the boy’s voice. Stopped dead.

“Spark-a-dark, where’s my sire?” the boy murmured, and Roland heard the sharp *chik!chik!chik!* of the flint. It sounded like the cry of a

small mechanical bird. “Will I lay me? Will I stay me? Bless this camp with fire.”

Picked it up from me, the gunslinger thought, not in the least surprised to discover he was all over goosebumps and on the verge of shivering like a wet dog. *Picked it up from me, words I don't even remember saying, and will I betray such? Ah, Roland, will thee betray such true thread as this in a sad unthreaded world? Could anything justify it?*

'Tis just words.

Aye, but old ones. Good ones.

“Roland?” the boy called. “Are you all right?”

“Yar,” he said gruffly, and the tang of smoke stung faintly in his nose. “Thee’s made fire.”

“Yes,” the boy said simply, and Roland did not need to turn to know the boy was smiling.

The gunslinger got moving and bore left, this time skirting the willow grove. At a place where the ground opened out and upward in heavy open grass, he stepped back into the shadows and stood silently. Faintly, clearly, he could hear the crackle of the campfire Jake had rekindled. The sound made him smile.

He stood without moving for ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Three rabbits came, and once they were at silflay the gunslinger pulled leather. He took them down, skinned them, gutted them, and brought them back to the camp. Jake had water already steaming over the low flames.

The gunslinger nodded to him. “That’s a good piece of work.”

Jake flushed with pleasure and silently handed back the flint and steel.

While the stew cooked, the gunslinger used the last of the light to go back into the willow grove. Near the first pool he began to hack at the tough vines that grew near the water’s marshy verge. Later, as the fire burned down to coals and Jake slept, he would plait them into ropes that might be of some limited use later. But his intuition was that the climb would not be a particularly difficult one. He felt ka at work on the surface of things and no longer even considered it odd.

The vines bled green sap over his hands as he carried them back to where Jake waited.

They were up with the sun and packed in half an hour. The gunslinger hoped to shoot another rabbit in the meadow as they fed, but time was short and no rabbit showed itself. The bundle of their remaining food was now so small and light that Jake carried it easily. He had toughened up, this boy; you could see it.

The gunslinger carried their water, freshly drawn from one of the springs. He looped his three vine ropes around his belly. They gave the circle of stones a wide berth (the gunslinger was afraid the boy might feel a recurrence of fear, but when they passed above it on a stony rise, Jake only offered it a passing glance and then looked at a bird that hovered upwind). Soon enough, the trees began to lose their height and lushness. Trunks were twisted and roots seemed to struggle with the earth in a tortured hunt for moisture.

"It's all so old," Jake said glumly when they paused for a rest. "Isn't there anything young in this world?"

The gunslinger smiled and gave Jake an elbow. "You are," he said. Jake responded with a wan smile. "Will it be hard to climb?"

The gunslinger looked at him, curious. "The mountains are high. Don't you think it will be a hard climb?"

Jake looked back at him, his eyes clouded, puzzled.

"No."

They went on.

VIII

The sun climbed to its zenith, seemed to hang there more briefly than it ever had during the desert crossing, and then passed on, returning them their shadows. Shelves of rock protruded from the rising land like the arms of giant easychairs buried in the earth. The scrub grass turned yellow and sere. Finally they were faced with a deep, chimney-like crevasse in their path and they scaled a short, peeling rise of rock to get around and above it. The ancient granite had faulted on lines that were step-like, and as they had both

intuited, the beginning of their climb, at least, was easy. They paused on the four-foot-wide scarp at the top and looked back over the land to the desert, which curled around the upland like a huge yellow paw. Further off it gleamed at them in a white shield that dazzled the eye, receding into dim waves of rising heat. The gunslinger felt faintly amazed at the realization that this desert had nearly murdered him. From where they stood, in a new coolness, the desert certainly appeared momentous, but not deadly.

They turned back to the business of the climb, scrambling over jackstraw falls of rock and crouch-walking up inclined planes of stone shot with glitters of quartz and mica. The rock was pleasantly warm to the touch, but the air was definitely cooler. In the late afternoon the gunslinger heard the faint sound of thunder. The rising line of the mountains obscured the sight of the rain on the other side, however.

When the shadows began to turn purple, they camped in the overhang of a jutting brow of rock. The gunslinger anchored their blanket above and below, fashioning a kind of shanty lean-to. They sat at the mouth of it, watching the sky spread a cloak over the world. Jake dangled his feet over the drop. The gunslinger rolled his evening smoke and eyed Jake half humorously. "Don't roll over in your sleep," he said, "or you may wake up in hell."

"I won't," Jake replied seriously. "My mother says—" He broke it off.

"She says what?"

"That I sleep like a dead man," Jake finished. He looked at the gunslinger, who saw that the boy's mouth was trembling as he strove to keep back tears—*only a boy*, he thought, and pain smote him, the icepick that too much cold water can sometimes plant in the forehead. *Only a boy. Why?* Silly question. When a boy, wounded in body or spirit, called that question out to Cort, that ancient, scarred battle-engine whose job it was to teach the sons of gunslingers the beginning of what they had to know, Cort would answer: *Why is a crooked letter and can't be made straight . . . never mind why, just get up, pus-head! Get up! The day's young!*

"Why am I here?" Jake asked. "Why did I forget everything from before?"

“Because the man in black has drawn you here,” the gunslinger said. “And because of the Tower. The Tower stands at a kind of . . . power-nexus. In time.”

“I don’t understand that!”

“Nor do I,” the gunslinger said. “But something has been happening. Just in my own time. ‘The world has moved on,’ we say . . . we’ve always said. But it’s moving on faster now. Something has happened to time. It’s softening.”

They sat in silence. A breeze, faint but with an edge, picked at their legs. Somewhere it made a hollow *whooooo* in a rock fissure.

“Where do you come from?” Jake asked.

“From a place that no longer exists. Do you know the Bible?”

“Jesus and Moses. Sure.”

The gunslinger smiled. “That’s right. My land had a Biblical name—New Canaan, it was called. The land of milk and honey. In the Bible’s Canaan, there were supposed to be grapes so big that men had to carry them on sledges. We didn’t grow them that big, but it was sweet land.”

“I know about Ulysses,” Jake said hesitantly. “Was he in the Bible?”

“Maybe,” the gunslinger said. “I was never a scholar of it, and can’t say for sure.”

“But the others . . . your friends—”

“No others,” the gunslinger said. “I’m the last.”

A tiny wasted moon began to rise, casting its slitted gaze down into the tumble of rocks where they sat.

“Was it pretty? Your country . . . your land?”

“It was beautiful,” the gunslinger said. “There were fields and forests and rivers and mists in the morning. But that’s only pretty. My mother used to say that the only real beauty is order and love and light.”

Jake made a noncommittal noise.

The gunslinger smoked and thought of how it had been—the nights in the huge central hall, hundreds of richly clad figures moving through the slow, steady waltz steps or the faster, light ripples of the *pol-kam*, Aileen Ritter on his arm, the one his parents had chosen for him, he supposed, her eyes brighter than the most precious gems,

the light of the crystal-enclosed sparklights shining in the newly done hair of the courtesans and their half-cynical amours. The hall had been huge, an island of light whose age was beyond telling, as was the whole Central Place, which was made up of nearly a hundred stone castles. It had been unknown years since he had seen it, and leaving for the last time, Roland had ached as he turned his face away from it and began his first cast for the trail of the man in black. Even then the walls had fallen, weeds grew in the courtyards, bats roosted amongst the great beams of the central hall, and the galleries echoed with the soft swoop and whisper of swallows. The fields where Cort had taught them archery and gunnery and falconry were gone to hay and timothy and wild vines. In the huge kitchen where Hax had once held his fuming and aromatic court, a grotesque colony of Slow Mutants nested, peering at him from the merciful darkness of pantries and shadowed pillars. The warm steam that had been filled with the pungent odors of roasting beef and pork had changed to the clammy damp of moss. Giant white toadstools grew in corners where not even the Slow Muties dared to encamp. The huge oak subcellar bulkhead stood open, and the most poignant smell of all had issued from that, an odor that seemed to express with a flat finality all the hard facts of dissolution and decay: the high sharp odor of wine gone to vinegar. It had been no struggle to turn his face to the south and leave it behind—but it had hurt his heart.

“Was there a war?” Jake asked.

“Even better,” the gunslinger said and pitched the last smoldering ember of his cigarette away. “There was a revolution. We won every battle, and lost the war. No one won the war, unless maybe it was the scavengers. There must have been rich pickings for years after.”

“I wish I’d lived there,” Jake said wistfully.

“Do you say so?”

“I do.”

“Time to turn in, Jake.”

The boy, now only a dim shadow, turned on his side and curled up with the blanket tossed loosely over him. The gunslinger sat sentinel over him for perhaps an hour after, thinking his long, sober thoughts. Such meditation was a novel thing for him, sweet in a melancholy sort of way, but still utterly without practical value: there was no

solution to the problem of Jake other than the one the Oracle had offered—and turning away was simply not possible. There might have been tragedy in the situation, but the gunslinger did not see that; he saw only the predestination that had always been there. And finally, his more natural character reasserted itself and he slept deeply, with no dreams.

IX

The climb became grimmer on the following day as they continued to angle toward the narrow V of the pass through the mountains. The gunslinger pushed slowly, still with no sense of hurry. The dead stone beneath their feet left no trace of the man in black, but the gunslinger knew he had been this way before them—and not only from the path of his climb as he and Jake had observed him, tiny and bug-like, from the foothills. His aroma was printed on every cold down-draft of air. It was an oily, sardonic odor, as bitter to the nose as the stench of the devil-grass.

Jake's hair had grown much longer, and it curled slightly at the base of his sunburned neck. He climbed tough, moving with sure-footedness and no apparent acrophobia as they crossed gaps or scaled their way up ledged facings. Twice already he'd gone up in places the gunslinger could not have managed, and anchored one of the ropes so the gunslinger could climb up hand over hand.

The following morning they climbed through a coldly damp snatch of cloud that blotted out the tumbled slopes below them. Patches of hard, granulated snow began to appear nestled in some of the deeper pockets of stone. It glittered like quartz and its texture was as dry as sand. That afternoon they found a single footprint in one of these snowpatches. Jake stared at it for a moment with awful fascination, then looked up frightfully, as if expecting to see the man in black materialize into his own footprint. The gunslinger tapped him on the shoulder then and pointed ahead. "Go. The day's getting old."

Later, they made camp in the last of the daylight on a wide, flat ledge to the east and north of the cut that slanted into the heart of

the mountains. The air was frigid; they could see the puffs of their breath, and the humid sound of thunder in the red-and-purple afterglow of the day was surreal, slightly lunatic.

The gunslinger thought the boy might begin to question him, but there were no questions from Jake. The boy fell almost immediately into sleep. The gunslinger followed his example. He dreamed again of Jake as an alabaster saint with a nail through his forehead. He awoke with a gasp, tasting the cold thinness of altitude in his lungs. Jake was asleep beside him, but his sleep was not easy; he twisted and mumbled to himself, chasing his own phantoms. The gunslinger lay over uneasily, and slept again.

X

A week after Jake saw the footprint, they faced the man in black for a brief moment in time. In that moment, the gunslinger felt he could almost understand the implication of the Tower itself, for that moment seemed to stretch out forever.

They continued southeast, reaching a point perhaps halfway through the cyclopean mountain range, and just as the going seemed about to become really difficult for the first time (above them, seeming to lean out, the icy ledges and screaming buttes made the gunslinger feel an unpleasant reverse vertigo), they began to descend again along the side of the narrow pass. An angular zigzagging path led them toward a canyon floor where an ice-edged stream boiled with slatey, headlong power from higher country still.

On that afternoon the boy paused and looked back at the gunslinger, who had paused to wash his face in the stream.

"I smell him," Jake said.

"So do I."

Ahead of them the mountain threw up its final defense—a huge slab of insurmountable granite facing that climbed into cloudy infinity. At any moment the gunslinger expected a twist in the stream to bring them upon a high waterfall and the insurmountable smoothness of rock—dead end. But the air here had that odd magnifying quality that

is common to high places, and it was another day before they reached that great granite face.

The gunslinger began to feel the tug of anticipation again, the feeling that it was all finally in his grasp. He'd been through this before—many times—and still he had to fight himself to keep from breaking into an eager trot.

“Wait!” The boy had stopped suddenly. They faced a sharp elbow-bend in the stream; it boiled and frothed around the eroded hang of a giant sandstone boulder. All that morning they had been in the shadow of the mountains as the canyon narrowed.

Jake was trembling violently and his face had gone pale.

“What’s the matter?”

“Let’s go back,” Jake whispered. “Let’s go back quick.”

The gunslinger’s face was wooden.

“Please?” The boy’s face was drawn, and his jawline shook with suppressed agony. Through the heavy blanket of stone they still heard thunder, as steady as machines in the earth. The slice of sky they could see had itself assumed a turbulent, gothic gray above them as warm and cold currents met and warred.

“Please, *please!*” The boy raised a fist, as if to strike the gunslinger’s chest.

“No.”

The boy’s face took on wonder. “You’re going to kill me. He killed me the first time and you’re going to kill me this time. *And I think you know it.*”

The gunslinger felt the lie on his lips, then spoke it: “You’ll be all right.” And a greater lie yet. “I’ll take care.”

Jake’s face went gray, and he said no more. He put an unwilling hand out, and he and the gunslinger went around the elbow-bend that way, hand in hand. On the other side they came face-to-face with that final rising wall and the man in black.

He stood no more than twenty feet above them, just to the right of the waterfall that crashed and spilled from a huge ragged hole in the rock. Unseen wind rippled and tugged at his hooded robe. He held a staff in one hand. The other hand he held out to them in a mocking gesture of welcome. He seemed a prophet, and below that rushing

sky, mounted on a ledge of rock, a prophet of doom, his voice the voice of Jeremiah.

“Gunslinger! How well you fulfill the prophecies of old! Good day and good day and good day!” He laughed and bowed, the sound echoing over the bellow of the falling water.

Without a thought the gunslinger had drawn his pistols. The boy cowered to his right and behind, a small shadow.

Roland fired three times before he could gain control of his traitor hands—the echoes bounced their bronze tones against the rock valley that rose around them, over the sound of the wind and water.

A spray of granite puffed over the head of the man in black; a second to the left of his hood; a third to the right. He had missed cleanly all three times.

The man in black laughed—a full, hearty laugh that seemed to challenge the receding echo of gunshots. “Would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?”

“Come down,” the gunslinger said. “Do that I beg ya, and we’ll have answers all around.”

Again that huge, derisive laugh. “It’s not your bullets I fear, Roland. It’s your idea of answers that scares me.”

“Come down.”

“We’ll speak on the other side, I think,” the man in black said. “On the other side we will hold much council and long palaver.”

His eyes flicked to Jake and he added:

“Just the two of us.”

Jake flinched away from him with a small, whining cry, and the man in black turned, his robe swirling in the gray air like a batwing. He disappeared into the cleft in the rock from which the water spewed at full force. The gunslinger exercised grim will and did not send a bullet after him—*would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?*

There was only the sound of wind and water, a sound that had been in this place of desolation for a thousand years. Yet the man in black had stood there. Twelve years after his last glimpse, Roland had seen him close-up again, had spoken to him. And the man in black had laughed.

On the other side we will hold much council and long palaver.

The boy looked up at him, his body trembling. For a moment the gunslinger saw the face of Allie, the girl from Tull, superimposed over Jake's, the scar standing out on her forehead like a mute accusation, and felt brute loathing for them both (it wouldn't occur to him until much later that both the scar on Alice's forehead and the nail he saw spiked through Jake's forehead in his dreams were in the same place). Jake perhaps caught a whiff of his thought; a moan slipped from his throat. Then he twisted his lips and cut the sound off. He held the makings of a fine man, perhaps a gunslinger in his own right if given time.

Just the two of us.

The gunslinger felt a great and unholy thirst in some deep unknown pit of his body, one no draft of water or wine could touch. Worlds trembled, almost within reach of his fingers, and in some instinctual way he strove not to be corrupted, knowing in his colder mind that such strife was vain and always would be. In the end there was only ka.

It was noon. He looked up, letting the cloudy, unsettled daylight shine for the last time on the all-too-vulnerable sun of his own righteousness. *No one ever really pays for betrayal in silver*, he thought. *The price of any betrayal always comes due in flesh.*

"Come with me or stay," the gunslinger said.

The boy responded to this with a hard and humorless grin—his father's grin, had he but known it. "And I'll be fine if I stay," he said. "Fine all by myself, here in the mountains. Someone will come and save me. They'll have cake and sandwiches. Coffee in a Thermos, too. Do you say so?"

"Come with me or stay," the gunslinger repeated, and felt something happen in his mind. An uncoupling. That was the moment at which the small figure before him ceased to be Jake and became only the boy, an impersonality to be moved and used.

Something screamed in the windy stillness; he and the boy both heard.

The gunslinger began to climb, and after a moment Jake came after. Together they mounted the tumbled rock beside the steely-cold falls, and stood where the man in black had stood before them. And

together they entered in where he had disappeared. The darkness
swallowed them.



The
SLOW MUTANTS



CHAPTER FOUR

The Slow Mutants

I

The gunslinger spoke slowly to Jake in the rising and falling inflections of one who speaks in his sleep:

“There were three of us that night: Cuthbert, Alain, and me. We weren’t supposed to be there, because none of us had passed from the time of children. We were still in our clouts, as the saying went. If we’d been caught, Cort would have striped us bloody. But we weren’t. I don’t think any of the ones that went before us were caught, either. Boys must put on their fathers’ pants in private, strut them in front of the mirror, and then sneak them back on their hangers; it was like that. The father pretends he doesn’t notice the new way the pants are hung up, or the traces of boot-polish mustaches still under their noses. Do you see?”

The boy said nothing. He’d said nothing since they had passed from the daylight. The gunslinger, on the other hand, had talked hectically, feverishly, to fill the silence. He had not looked back at the light as they passed into the land beneath the mountains, but the boy had. The gunslinger had read the failing of day in the soft mirror of Jake’s cheek: now faint rose, now milk-glass, now pallid silver, now the last dusk-glow touch of evening, now nothing. The gunslinger had struck a false light and they had gone on.

Finally they camped. No echo from the man in black returned to them. Perhaps he had stopped to rest, too. Or perhaps he floated onward and without running lights, through nighted chambers.

“The Sowing Night Cotillion—the Commala, some of the older folk called it, after the word for rice—was held once a year in the West’rd

Hall,” the gunslinger went on. “The proper name was The Hall of Grandfathers, but to us it was only the West’rd Hall.”

The sound of dripping water came to their ears.

“A courting rite, as any spring dance surely is.” The gunslinger laughed deprecatingly; the insensate walls turned the sound into a loon-like wheeze. “In the old days, the books say, it was the welcoming of spring, what was sometimes called New Earth or Fresh Commala. But civilization, you know . . .”

He trailed off, unable to describe the change inherent in that featureless noun, the death of romance and the lingering of its sterile, carnal revenant, a world living on the forced respiration of glitter and ceremony; the geometric steps of make-believe courtship during the Sowing Night Cotil’ that had replaced the truer, madder, scribble-scrabble of love which he could only intuit dimly; hollow grandeur in place of true passions which might once have built kingdoms and sustained them. He found the truth with Susan Delgado in Mejis, only to lose it again. *Once there was a king, he might have told the boy; the Eld whose blood, attenuated though it may be, still flows in my veins. But kings are done, lad. In the world of light, anyway.*

“They made something decadent out of it,” the gunslinger said at last. “A play. A game.” In his voice was all the unconscious distaste of the ascetic and the eremite. His face, had there been stronger light to illumine it, would have shown harshness and sorrow, the purest kind of condemnation. His essential force had not been cut or diluted by the passage of years. The lack of imagination that still remained in that face was remarkable.

“But the Ball,” the gunslinger said. “The Sowing Night Cotil’ . . .”

The boy did not speak, did not ask.

“There were crystal chandeliers, heavy glass with electric sparklights. It was all light, it was an island of light.

“We sneaked into one of the old balconies, the ones that were supposed to be unsafe and roped off. But we were boys, and boys will be boys, so they will. To us everything was dangerous, but what of that? Had we not been made to live forever? We thought so, even when we spoke to each other of our glorious deaths.

“We were above everyone and could look down on everything. I don’t remember that any of us said anything. We only drank it up with our eyes.

“There was a great stone table where the gunslingers and their women sat at meat, watching the dancers. A few of the gunslingers also danced, but only a few. And they were the young ones. The one who sprang the trap on Hax was one of the dancers, I seem to recall. The elders only sat, and it seemed to me they were half embarrassed in all that light, all that civilized light. They were revered ones, the feared ones, the guardians, but they seemed like hostlers in that crowd of cavaliers with their soft women . . .

“There were four circular tables loaded with food, and they turned all the time. The cooks’ boys never stopped coming and going from seven until three o’ the clock the next morning. The tables were *like* clocks, and we could smell roast pork, beef, lobster, chickens, baked apples. The odors changed as the tables turned. There were ices and candies. There were great flaming skewers of meat.

“Marten sat next to my mother and father—I knew them even from so high above—and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. The gunslingers did not clap, but my father stood slowly and held his hands out to her. And she went to him, smiling, holding out her own.

“It was a moment of enormous gravity, even we felt it in our high hiding place. My father had by then taken control of his ka-tet, you must ken—the Tet of the Gun—and was on the verge of becoming Dinh of Gilead, if not all In-World. The rest knew it. Marten knew it better than any . . . except, perhaps, for Gabrielle Verriss that was.”

The boy spoke at last, and with seeming reluctance. “She was your mother?”

“Aye. Gabrielle-of-the-Waters, daughter of Alan, wife of Steven, mother of Roland.” The gunslinger spread his hands apart in a mocking little gesture that seemed to say *Here I am, and what of it?* Then he dropped them into his lap again.

“My father was the last lord of light.”

The gunslinger looked down at his hands. The boy said nothing more.

“I remember how they danced,” the gunslinger said. “My mother and Marten, the gunslingers’ counselor. I remember how they danced, revolving slowly together and apart, in the old steps of courtship.”

He looked at the boy, smiling. “But it meant nothing, you know. Because power had been passed in some way that none of them knew but all understood, and my mother was grown root and branch to the holder and wielder of that power. Was it not so? She went to him when the dance was over, didn’t she? And clasped his hands. Did they applaud? Did the hall ring with it as those pretty boys and their soft ladies applauded and lauded him? Did it? Did it?”

Bitter water dripped distantly in the darkness. The boy said nothing.

“I remember how they danced,” the gunslinger said softly. “I remember how they danced.” He looked up at the unseeable stone roof and it seemed for a moment that he might scream at it, rail at it, challenge it blindly—those blind and tongueless tonnages of granite that now bore their tiny lives like microbes in its stone intestine.

“What hand could have held the knife that did my father to his death?”

“I’m tired,” the boy said, and then again said no more.

The gunslinger lapsed into silence, and the boy laid over and put one hand between his cheek and the stone. The little flame in front of them guttered. The gunslinger rolled a smoke. It seemed he could see the crystal light still, in the eye of his memory; hear the shout of accolade, empty in a husked land that stood even then hopeless against a gray ocean of time. Remembering that island of light hurt him bitterly, and he wished he had never held witness to it, or to his father’s cuckoldry.

He passed smoke between his mouth and nostrils, looking down at the boy. *How we make large circles in earth for ourselves*, he thought. *Around we go, back to the start and the start is there again: resumption, which was ever the curse of daylight.*

How long before we see daylight again?

He slept.

After the sound of his breathing had become long and steady and regular, the boy opened his eyes and looked at the gunslinger with

an expression of sickness and love. The last light of the fire caught in one pupil for a moment and was drowned there. He went to sleep.

II

The gunslinger had lost most of his time sense in the desert, which was changeless; he lost the rest of it here in the passage under the mountains, which was lightless. Neither of them had any means of telling the clock, and the concept of hours became meaningless, abnegate. In a sense, they stood outside of time. A day might have been a week, or a week a day. They walked, they slept, they ate thin meals that did not satisfy their bellies. Their only companion was a steady thundering rush of the water, drilling its auger path through the stone. They followed it and drank from its flat, mineral-salted depth, hoping there was nothing in it that would make them sick or kill them. At times the gunslinger thought he saw fugitive drifting lights like corpse-lamps beneath its surface, but supposed they were only projections of his brain, which had not forgotten the light. Still, he cautioned the boy not to put his feet in the water.

The range-finder in his head took them on steadily.

The path beside the river (for it was a path—smooth, sunken to a slight concavity) led always upward, toward the river's head. At regular intervals they came to curved stone pylons with sunken ringbolts; perhaps once oxen or stagehorses had been tethered there. At each was a steel flagon holding an electric torch, but these were all barren of life and light.

During the third period of rest-before-sleep, the boy wandered away a little. The gunslinger could hear small conversations of rattled pebbles as Jake moved cautiously.

"Careful," he said. "You can't see where you are."

"I'm crawling. It's . . . say!"

"What is it?" The gunslinger half crouched, touching the haft of one gun.

There was a slight pause. The gunslinger strained his eyes uselessly.

"I think it's a railroad," the boy said dubiously.

The gunslinger got up and walked toward the sound of Jake's voice, leading with one foot lightly to test for pitfalls.

"Here." A hand reached out and cat's-pawed the gunslinger's face. The boy was very good in the dark, better than Roland himself. His eyes seemed to dilate until there was no color left in them: the gunslinger saw this as he struck a meager light. There was no fuel in this rock womb, and what they had brought with them was going rapidly to ash. At times the urge to strike a light was well-nigh insatiable. They had discovered one could grow as hungry for light as for food.

The boy was standing beside a curved rock wall that was lined with parallel metal staves running off into the darkness. Each carried black nodes that might once have been conductors of electricity. And beside and below, set only inches off the stone floor, were tracks of bright metal. What might have run on those tracks at one time? The gunslinger could only imagine sleek electric bullets, firing their courses through this forever night with affrighted searchlight eyes going before. He had never heard of such things, but there were many remnants of the gone world, just as there were demons. The gunslinger had once come upon a hermit who'd gained a quasi-religious power over a miserable flock of kine-keepers by possession of an ancient gasoline pump. The hermit crouched beside it, one arm wrapped possessively around it, and preached wild, guttering sermons. He occasionally placed the still-bright steel nozzle, which was attached to a rotted rubber hose, between his legs. On the pump, in perfectly legible (although rust-clotted) letters, was a legend of unknown meaning: *AMOCO. Lead Free.* Amoco had become the totem of a thunder-god, and they had worshipped Him with the slaughter of sheep and the sound of engines: *Rumm! Rummm! Rum-rum-rummmmm!*

Hulks, the gunslinger thought. Only meaningless hulks poking from sands that once were seas.

And now a railroad.

"We'll follow it," he said.

The boy said nothing.

The gunslinger extinguished the light and they slept.

When Roland awoke, the boy was up before him, sitting on one of the rails and watching him sightlessly in the dark.

They followed the rails like blindmen, Roland leading, Jake following. They slipped their feet along one rail always, also like blindmen. The steady rush of the river off to the right was their companion. They did not speak, and this went on for three periods of waking. The gunslinger felt no urge to think coherently, or to plan. His sleep was dreamless.

During the fourth period of waking and walking, they literally stumbled on a handcar.

The gunslinger ran into it chest-high, and the boy, walking on the other side, struck his forehead and went down with a cry.

The gunslinger made a light immediately. "Are you all right?" The words sounded sharp, angry, and he winced at them.

"Yes." The boy was holding his head gingerly. He shook it once to make sure he had told the truth. They turned to look at what they had run into.

It was a flat square plate of metal that sat mutely on the tracks. There was a seesaw handle in the center of the square. It descended into a connection of cogs. The gunslinger had no immediate sense of the thing's purpose, but the boy grasped it at once.

"It's a handcar."

"What?"

"Handcar," the boy said impatiently, "like in the old cartoons. Look."

He pulled himself up and went to the handle. He managed to push it down, but it took all his weight hung over the handle to turn the trick. The handcar moved a foot, with silent timelessness, on the rails.

"Good!" said a faint mechanical voice. It made them both jump.

"Good, push ag . . ." The mechanical voice died out.

"It works a little hard," the boy said, as if apologizing for the thing.

The gunslinger pulled himself up beside Jake and shoved the handle down. The handcar moved forward obediently, then stopped.

"Good, push again!" the mechanical voice encouraged.

He had felt a driveshaft turn beneath his feet. The operation pleased him, and so did the mechanical voice (although he intended

to listen to *that* no longer than necessary). Other than the pump at the way station, this was the first machine he'd seen in years that still worked well. But the thing disquieted him, too. It would take them to their destination that much the quicker. He had no doubt whatever that the man in black had meant for them to find this, too.

"Neat, huh?" the boy said, and his voice was full of loathing. The silence was deep. Roland could hear his organs at work inside his body, and the drip of water, and nothing else.

"You stand on one side, I stand on the other," Jake said. "You'll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good. Then I can help. First you push, then I push. We'll go right along. Get it?"

"I get it," the gunslinger said. His hands were in helpless, despairing fists.

"But you'll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good," the boy repeated, looking at him.

The gunslinger had a sudden vivid picture of the Great Hall a year or so after the Sowing Night Cotillion. By then it had been nothing but shattered shards in the wake of revolt, civil strife, and invasion. This image was followed by one of Allie, the scarred woman from Tull, pushed and pulled by bullets that were killing her for no reason at all . . . unless reflex was a reason. Next came Cuthbert Allgood's face, laughing as he went downhill to his death, still blowing that gods-damned horn . . . and then he saw Susan's face, twisted, made ugly with weeping. *All my old friends*, the gunslinger thought, and smiled hideously.

"I'll push," the gunslinger said.

He began to push, and when the voice began to speak ("Good, push again! Good, push again!") he sent his hand fumbling along the post upon which the seesaw handle had been balanced. At last he found what he was surely looking for: a button. He pushed it.

"Goodbye, pal!" the mechanical voice said cheerily, and was then blessedly silent for some hours.

They rolled on through the dark, faster now, no longer having to feel their way. The mechanical voice spoke up once, suggesting they eat Crisp-A-La, and again to say that nothing satisfied at the end of a hard day like Larchies. Following this second piece of advice, it spoke no more.

Once the awkwardness of a buried age had been run off the handcar, it went smoothly. The boy tried to do his share, and the gunslinger allowed him small shifts, but mostly he pumped by himself, in large and chest-stretching risings and fallings. The underground river was their companion, sometimes closer on their right, sometimes further away. Once it took on huge and thunderous hollowness, as if passing through some great cathedral narthex. Once the sound of it disappeared almost altogether.

The speed and the made wind against their faces seemed to take the place of sight and to drop them once again into a frame of time. The gunslinger estimated they were making anywhere from ten to fifteen miles an hour, always on a shallow, almost imperceptible uphill grade that wore him out deceptively. When they stopped he slept like the stone itself. Their food was almost gone again. Neither of them worried about it.

For the gunslinger, the tenseness of a coming climax was as imperceivable but as real (and accretive) as the fatigue of propelling the handcar. They were close to the end of the beginning . . . or at least *he* was. He felt like a performer placed on center stage minutes before the rise of the curtain; settled in position with his first line held securely in his mind, he heard the unseen audience rattling programs and settling in their seats. He lived with a tight, tidy ball of unholy anticipation in his belly and welcomed the exercise that let him sleep. And when he *did* sleep, it was like the dead.

The boy spoke less and less, but at their stopping place one sleep-period not long before they were attacked by the Slow Mutants, he asked the gunslinger almost shyly about his coming of age.

“For I would hear more of that,” he said.

The gunslinger had been leaning with his back against the handle, a cigarette from his dwindling supply of tobacco clamped in his lips.

He'd been on the verge of his usual unthinking sleep when the boy asked his question.

"Why would thee sill to know that?" he asked, amused.

The boy's voice was curiously stubborn, as if hiding embarrassment. "I just would." And after a pause, he added: "I always wondered about growing up. I bet it's mostly lies."

"What you'd hear of wasn't my growing-up," the gunslinger said. "I suppose I did the first of that not long *after* what thee'd hear of—"

"When you fought your teacher," Jake said remotely. "That's what I want to hear."

Roland nodded. Yes, of course, the day he had tried the line; that was a story any boy might want to hear, all right. "My real growing-up didn't start until after my Da' sent me away. I finished doing it at one place and another along the way." He paused. "I saw a not-man hung once."

"A not-man? I don't understand."

"You could feel him but couldn't see him."

Jake nodded, seeming to understand. "He was invisible."

Roland raised his eyebrows. He had never heard the word before. "Do you say so?"

"Yes."

"Then let it be so. In any case, there were folk who didn't want me to do it—felt they'd be cursed if I did it, but the fellow had gotten a taste for rape. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes," Jake said. "And I bet an invisible guy would be good at it, too. How did you catch him?"

"That's a tale for another day." Knowing there would be no other days. Both of them knowing there would be no others. "Two years after that, I left a girl in a place called King's Town, although I didn't want to—"

"Sure you did," the boy said, and the contempt in his voice was no less for the softness of his tone. "Got to catch up with that Tower, am I right? Got to keep a-ridin', just like the cowboys on my Dad's Network."

Roland felt his face flush with heat in the dark, but when he spoke his voice was even. "That was the last part, I guess. Of my growing-

up, I mean. I never knew any of the parts when they happened. Only later did I know that.”

He realized with some unease that he was avoiding what the boy wanted to hear.

“I suppose the coming of age *was* part of it, at that,” he said, almost grudgingly. “It was formal. Almost stylized; like a dance.” He laughed unpleasantly.

The boy said nothing.

“It was necessary to prove one’s self in battle,” the gunslinger began.

IV

Summer, and hot.

Full Earth had come to the land like a vampire lover that year, killing the land and the crops of the tenant farmers, turning the fields of the castle-city of Gilead white and sterile. In the west, some miles distant and near the borders that were the end of the civilized world, fighting had already begun. All reports were bad, and all of them paled to insignificance before the heat that rested over this place of the center. Cattle lolled empty-eyed in the pens of the stockyards. Pigs grunted lustlessly, unmindful of sows and sex and knives whetted for the coming fall. People whined about taxes and conscription, as they always did; but there was an apathy beneath the empty passion-play of politics. The center had frayed like a rag rug that had been washed and walked on and shaken and hung and dried. The thread that held the last jewel at the breast of the world was unraveling. Things were not holding together. The earth drew in its breath in the summer of the coming eclipse.



The boy idled along the upper corridor of this stone place which was home, sensing these things, not understanding. He was also dangerous and empty, waiting to be filled.

It was three years since the hanging of the cook who had always been able to find snacks for hungry boys; Roland had lengthened and filled out both at shoulder and hip. Now, dressed only in faded denim pants, fourteen years old, he had come to look like the man he would become: lean and lank and quick on his feet. He was still unbedded, but two of the younger slatterns of a West-Town merchant had cast eyes on him. He had felt a response and felt it more strongly now. Even in the coolness of the passage, he felt sweat on his body.

Ahead were his mother's apartments and he approached them incuriously, meaning only to pass them and go upward to the roof, where a thin breeze and the pleasure of his hand awaited.

He had passed the door when a voice called him: "You. Boy."

It was Marten, the counselor. He was dressed with a suspicious, upsetting casualness—black whipcord trousers almost as tight as leotards, and a white shirt open halfway down his hairless chest. His hair was tousled.

The boy looked at him silently.

“Come in, come in! Don’t stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you.” He was smiling with his mouth, but the lines of his face held a deeper, more sardonic humor. Beneath that—and in his eyes—there was only coldness.

In truth, his mother did not seem to want to see him. She sat in the low-backed chair by the large window in the central parlor of her apartments, the one which overlooked the hot blank stone of the central courtyard. She was dressed in a loose, informal gown that kept slipping from one white shoulder and looked at the boy only once—a quick, glinting rueful smile, like autumn sun on a rill of water. During the interview which followed, she studied her hands rather than her son.

He saw her seldom now, and the phantom of cradle songs (*chussit, chissit, chassit*)

had almost faded from his brain. But she was a beloved stranger. He felt an amorphous fear, and an inchoate hatred for Marten, his father’s closest advisor, was born.

“Are you well, Ro’?” she asked him softly. Marten stood beside her, a heavy, disturbing hand near the juncture of her white shoulder and white neck, smiling on them both. His brown eyes were dark to the point of blackness with smiling.

“Yes,” he said.

“Your studies go well? Vannay is pleased? And Cort?” Her mouth quirked at this second name, as if she had tasted something bitter.

“I’m trying,” he said. They both knew he was not flashingly intelligent like Cuthbert, or even quick like Jamie. He was a plodder and a bludgeoner. Even Alain was better at studies.

“And David?” She knew his affection for the hawk.

The boy looked up at Marten, still smiling paternally down on all this. “Past his prime.”

His mother seemed to wince; for a moment Marten’s face seemed to darken, his grip on her shoulder to tighten. Then she looked out

into the hot whiteness of the day, and all was as it had been.

It's a charade, he thought. A game. Who is playing with whom?

"You have a cut on your forehead," Marten said, still smiling, and pointed a negligent finger at the mark of Cort's latest

(thank you for this instructive day)

bashing. "Are you going to be a fighter like your father or are you just slow?"

This time she did wince.

"Both," the boy said. He looked steadily at Marten and smiled painfully. Even in here, it was very hot.

Marten stopped smiling abruptly. "You can go to the roof now, boy. I believe you have business there."

"My mother has not yet dismissed me, bondsman!"

Marten's face twisted as if the boy had lashed him with a quirt. The boy heard his mother's dreadful, woeful gasp. She spoke his name.

But the painful smile remained intact on the boy's face and he stepped forward. "Will you give me a sign of fealty, bondsman? In the name of my father whom you serve?"

Marten stared at him, rankly unbelieving.

"Go," Marten said gently. "Go and find your hand."

Smiling rather horribly, the boy went.

As he closed the door and went back the way he came, he heard his mother wail. It was a banshee sound. And then, unbelievably, the sound of his father's man striking her and telling her to shut her quack.

To shut her quack!

And then he heard Marten's laugh.

The boy continued to smile as he went to his test.

V

Jamie had come from the shops, and when he saw the boy crossing the exercise yard, he ran to tell Roland the latest gossip of bloodshed and revolt to the west. But he fell aside, the words all unspoken. They had known each other since the time of infancy, and

as boys they had dared each other, cuffed each other, and made a thousand explorations of the walls within which they had both been birthed.

The boy strode past him, staring without seeing, grinning his painful grin. He was walking toward Cort's cottage, where the shades were drawn to ward off the savage afternoon heat. Cort napped in the afternoon so that he could enjoy to the fullest extent his evening tomcat forays into the mazed and filthy brothels of the lower town.

Jamie knew in a flash of intuition, knew what was to come, and in his fear and ecstasy he was torn between following Roland and going after the others.

Then his hypnotism was broken and he ran toward the main buildings, screaming, "Cuthbert! Alain! Thomas!" His screams sounded puny and thin in the heat. They had known, all of them, in that intuitive way boys have, that Roland would be the first of them to try the line. But this was too soon.

The hideous grin on Roland's face galvanized him as no news of wars, revolts, and witchcrafts could have done. This was more than words from a toothless mouth given over fly-specked heads of lettuce.

Roland walked to the cottage of his teacher and kicked the door open. It slammed backward, hit the plain rough plaster of the wall, and rebounded.

He had never been inside before. The entrance opened on an austere kitchen that was cool and brown. A table. Two straight chairs. Two cabinets. A faded linoleum floor, tracked in black paths from the cooler set in the floor to the counter where knives hung, and to the table.

Here was a public man's privacy. The faded refuge of a violent midnight carouser who had loved the boys of three generations roughly, and made some of them into gunslingers.

"Cort!"

He kicked the table, sending it across the room and into the counter. Knives from the wall rack fell in twinkling jackstraws.

There was a thick stirring in the other room, a half-sleep clearing of the throat. The boy did not enter, knowing it was sham, knowing

that Cort had awakened immediately in the cottage's other room and stood with one glittering eye beside the door, waiting to break the intruder's unwary neck.

"Cort, I want you, bondsman!"

Now he spoke the High Speech, and Cort swung the door open. He was dressed in thin underwear shorts, a squat man with bow legs, runneled with scars from top to toe, thick with twists of muscle. There was a round, bulging belly. The boy knew from experience that it was spring steel. The one good eye glared at him from the bashed and dented hairless head.

The boy saluted formally. "Teach me no more, bondsman. Today I teach you."

"You are early, puler," Cort said casually, but he also spoke the High Speech. "Two years early at the very best, I should judge. I will ask only once. Will you cry off?"

The boy only smiled his hideous, painful smile. For Cort, who had seen the smile on a score of bloodied, scarlet-skied fields of honor and dishonor, it was answer enough—perhaps the only answer he would have believed.

"It's too bad," the teacher said absently. "You have been a most promising pupil—the best in two dozen years, I should say. It will be sad to see you broken and set upon a blind path. But the world has moved on. Bad times are on horseback."

The boy still did not speak (and would have been incapable of any coherent explanation, had it been required), but for the first time the awful smile softened a little.

"Still, there is the line of blood," Cort said, "revolt and witchcraft to the west or no. I am your bondsman, boy. I recognize your command and bow to it now—if never again—with all my heart."

And Cort, who had cuffed him, kicked him, bled him, cursed him, made mock of him, and called him the very eye of syphilis, bent to one knee and bowed his head.

The boy touched the leathery, vulnerable flesh of his neck with wonder. "Rise, bondsman. In love."

Cort stood slowly, and there might have been pain behind the impassive mask of his reamed features. "This is waste. Cry off, you foolish boy. I break my own oath. Cry off and wait."

The boy said nothing.

“Very well; if you say so, let it be so.” Cort’s voice became dry and business-like. “One hour. And the weapon of your choice.”

“You will bring your stick?”

“I always have.”

“How many sticks have been taken from you, Cort?” Which was tantamount to asking: How many boys have entered the square yard beyond the Great Hall and returned as gunslinger apprentices?

“No stick will be taken from me today,” Cort said slowly. “I regret it. There is only the once, boy. The penalty for overeagerness is the same as the penalty for unworthiness. Can you not wait?”

The boy recalled Marten standing over him. The smile. And the sound of the blow from behind the closed door. “No.”

“Very well. What weapon do you choose?”

The boy said nothing.

Cort’s smile showed a jagged ring of teeth. “Wise enough to begin. In an hour. You realize you will in all probability never see your father, your mother, or your ka-babbies again?”

“I know what exile means,” Roland said softly.

“Go now, and meditate on your father’s face. Much good will it do ya.”

The boy went, without looking back.

VI

The cellar of the barn was spuriously cool, dank, smelling of cobwebs and earthwater. The sun lit it in dusty rays from narrow windows, but here was none of the day’s heat. The boy kept the hawk here and the bird seemed comfortable enough.

David no longer hunted the sky. His feathers had lost the radiant animal brightness of three years ago, but the eyes were still as piercing and motionless as ever. You cannot friend a hawk, they said, unless you are half a hawk yourself, alone and only a sojourner in the land, without friends or the need of them. The hawk pays no coinage to love or morals.

David was an old hawk now. The boy hoped that he himself was a young one.

“Hai,” he said softly and extended his arm to the tethered perch.

The hawk stepped onto the boy’s arm and stood motionless, unhooded. With his other hand the boy reached into his pocket and fished out a bit of dried jerky. The hawk snapped it deftly from between his fingers and made it disappear.

The boy began to stroke David very carefully. Cort most probably would not have believed it if he had seen it, but Cort did not believe the boy’s time had come, either.

“I think you die today,” he said, continuing to stroke. “I think you will be made a sacrifice, like all those little birds we trained you on. Do you remember? No? It doesn’t matter. After today I am the hawk and each year on this day I’ll shoot the sky in your memory.”

David stood on his arm, silent and unblinking, indifferent to his life or death.

“You are old,” the boy said reflectively. “And perhaps not my friend. Even a year ago you would have had my eyes instead of that little string of meat, isn’t it so? Cort would laugh. But if we get close enough . . . close enough to that chary man . . . if he don’t suspect . . . which will it be, David? Age or friendship?”

David did not say.

The boy hooded him and found the jesses, which were looped at the end of David’s perch. They left the barn.

VII

The yard behind the Great Hall was not really a yard at all, but only a green corridor whose walls were formed by tangled, thick-grown hedges. It had been used for the rite of coming of age since time out of mind, long before Cort and his predecessor, Mark, who had died of a stab-wound from an overzealous hand in this place. Many boys had left the corridor from the east end, where the teacher always entered, as men. The east end faced the Great Hall and all the civilization and intrigue of the lighted world. Many more had slunk

away, beaten and bloody, from the west end, where the boys always entered, as boys forever. The west end faced the farms and the hut-dwellers beyond the farms; beyond that, the tangled barbarian forests; beyond that, Garlan; and beyond Garlan, the Mohaine Desert. The boy who became a man progressed from darkness and unlearning to light and responsibility. The boy who was beaten could only retreat, forever and forever. The hallway was as smooth and green as a gaming field. It was exactly fifty yards long. In the middle was a swatch of shaven earth. This was the line.

Each end was usually clogged with tense spectators and relatives, for the ritual was usually forecast with great accuracy—eighteen was the most common age (those who had not made their test by the age of twenty-five usually slipped into obscurity as freeholders, unable to face the brutal all-or-nothing fact of the field and the test). But on this day there were none but Jamie DeCurry, Cuthbert Allgood, Alain Johns, and Thomas Whitman. They clustered at the boy's end, gape-mouthed and frankly terrified.

"Your weapon, stupid!" Cuthbert hissed, in agony. "You forgot your weapon!"

"I have it," the boy said. Dimly he wondered if the news of this lunacy had reached yet to the central buildings, to his mother—and to Marten. His father was on a hunt, not due back for days. In this he felt a sense of shame, for he felt that in his father he would have found understanding, if not approval. "Has Cort come?"

"Cort is here." The voice came from the far end of the corridor, and Cort stepped into view, dressed in a short singlet. A heavy leather band encircled his forehead to keep sweat from his eyes. He wore a dirty girdle to hold his back straight. He held an ironwood stick in one hand, sharp on one end, heavily blunted and spatulate on the other. He began the litany which all of them, chosen by the blind blood of their fathers all the way back to the Eld, had known since early childhood, learned against the day when they would, perchance, become men.

"Have you come here for a serious purpose, boy?"

"I have come for a serious purpose."

"Have you come as an outcast from your father's house?"

"I have so come." And would remain outcast until he had bested Cort. If Cort bested him, he would remain outcast forever.

"Have you come with your chosen weapon?"

"I have."

"What is your weapon?" This was the teacher's advantage, his chance to adjust his plan of battle to the sling or spear or bah or bow.

"My weapon is David."

Cort halted only briefly. He was surprised, and very likely confused. That was good.

Might be good.

"So then have you at me, boy?"

"I do."

"In whose name?"

"In the name of my father."

"Say his name."

"Steven Deschain, of the line of Eld."

"Be swift, then."

And Cort advanced into the corridor, switching his stick from one hand to the other. The boys sighed flutteringly, like birds, as their dan-dinh stepped to meet him.

My weapon is David, teacher.

Did Cort understand? And if so, did he understand fully? If he did, very likely all was lost. It turned on surprise—and on whatever stuff the hawk had left in him. Would he only sit, disinterested and stupid, on the boy's arm, while Cort struck him brainless with the ironwood? Or seek escape in the high, hot sky?

As they drew close together, each for the nonce still on his side of the line, the boy loosened the hawk's hood with nerveless fingers. It dropped to the green grass, and Cort halted in his tracks. He saw the old warrior's eyes drop to the bird and widen with surprise and slow-dawning comprehension. *Now* he understood.

"Oh, you little fool," Cort nearly groaned, and Roland was suddenly furious that he should be spoken to so.

"At him!" he cried, raising his arm.

And David flew like a silent brown bullet, stubby wings pumping once, twice, three times, before crashing into Cort's face, talons searching, beak digging. Red drops flew up into the hot air.

“Hai! Roland!” Cuthbert screamed deliriously. “First blood! First blood to my bosom!” He struck his chest hard enough to leave a bruise there that would not fade for a week.

Cort staggered backwards, off balance. The ironwood staff rose and beat futilely at the air about his head. The hawk was an undulating, blurred bundle of feathers.

The boy, meanwhile, arrowed forward, his hand held out in a straight wedge, his elbow locked. This was his chance, and very likely the only one he’d have.

Still, Cort was almost too quick for him. The bird had covered ninety percent of his vision, but the ironwood came up again, spatulate end forward, and Cort coldbloodily performed the only action that could turn events at that point. He beat his own face three times, biceps flexing mercilessly.

David fell away, broken and twisted. One wing flapped frantically at the ground. His cold, predator’s eyes stared fiercely into the teacher’s bloody, streaming face. Cort’s bad eye now bulged blindly from its socket.

The boy delivered a kick to Cort’s temple, connecting solidly. It should have ended it, but it did not. For a moment Cort’s face went slack; and then he lunged, grabbing for the boy’s foot.

The boy skipped back and tripped over his own feet. He went down asprawl. He heard, from far away, the sound of Jamie screaming in dismay.

Cort was ready to fall on him and finish it. Roland had lost his advantage and both of them knew it. For a moment they looked at each other, the teacher standing over the pupil with gouts of blood pouring from the left side of his face, the bad eye now closed except for a thin slit of white. There would be no brothels for Cort this night.

Something ripped jaggedly at the boy’s hand. It was David, tearing blindly at whatever he could reach. Both wings were broken. It was incredible that he still lived.

The boy grabbed him like a stone, unmindful of the jabbing, diving beak that was taking the flesh from his wrist in ribbons. As Cort flew at him, all spread-eagled, the boy threw the hawk upward.

“Hai! David! Kill!”

Then Cort blotted out the sun and came down atop of him.

VIII

The bird was smashed between them, and the boy felt a callused thumb probe for the socket of his eye. He turned it, at the same time bringing up the slab of his thigh to block Cort's crotch-seeking knee. His own hand flailed against the tree of Cort's neck in three hard chops. It was like hitting ribbed stone.

Then Cort made a thick grunting. His body shuddered. Faintly, the boy saw one hand flailing for the dropped stick, and with a jackknifing lunge, he kicked it out of reach. David had hooked one talon into Cort's right ear. The other battered mercilessly at the teacher's cheek, making it a ruin. Warm blood splattered the boy's face, smelling of sheared copper.

Cort's fist struck the bird once, breaking its back. Again, and the neck snapped away at a crooked angle. And still the talon clutched. There was no ear now; only a red hole tunneled into the side of Cort's skull. The third blow sent the bird flying, at last clearing Cort's face.

The moment it was clear, the boy brought the edge of his hand across the bridge of his teacher's nose, using every bit of his strength and breaking the thin bone. Blood sprayed.

Cort's grasping, unseeing hand ripped at the boy's buttocks, trying to pull his trousers down, trying to hobble him. Roland rolled away, found Cort's stick, and rose to his knees.

Cort came to his own knees, grinning. Incredibly, they faced each other that way from either side of the line, although they had switched positions and Cort was now on the side where Roland had begun the contest. The old warrior's face was curtained with gore. The one seeing eye rolled furiously in its socket. The nose was smashed over to a haunted, leaning angle. Both cheeks hung in flaps.

The boy held the man's stick like a Gran' Points player waiting for the pitch of the rawhide bird.

Cort double-fainted, then came directly at him.

Roland was ready, not fooled in the slightest by this last trick, which both knew was a poor one. The ironwood swung in a flat arc, striking Cort's skull with a dull thudding noise. Cort fell on his side,

looking at the boy with a lazy unseeing expression. A tiny trickle of spit came from his mouth.

“Yield or die,” the boy said. His mouth was filled with wet cotton.

And Cort smiled. Nearly all consciousness was gone, and he would remain tended in his cottage for a week afterward, wrapped in the blackness of a coma, but now he held on with all the strength of his pitiless, shadowless life. He saw the need to palaver in the boy’s eyes, and even with a curtain of blood between the two of them, understood that the need was desperate.

“I yield, gunslinger. I yield smiling. You have this day remembered the face of your father and all those who came before him. What a wonder you have done!”

Cort’s clear eye closed.

The gunslinger shook him gently, but with persistence. The others were around him now, their hands trembling to thump his back and hoist him to their shoulders; but they held back, afraid, sensing a new gulf. Yet this was not as strange as it could have been, because there had always been a gulf between this one and the rest.

Cort’s eye rolled open again.

“The key,” the gunslinger said. “My birthright, teacher. I need it.”

His birthright was the guns, not the heavy ones of his father—weighted with sandalwood—but guns, all the same. Forbidden to all but a few. In the heavy vault under the barracks where he by ancient law was now required to abide, away from his mother’s breast, hung his apprentice weapons, heavy cumbersome barrel-shooters of steel and nickel. Yet they had seen his father through his apprenticeship, and his father now ruled—at least in name.

“Is your need so fearsome, then?” Cort muttered, as if in his sleep. “So pressing? Aye, I feared so. So much need should have made you stupid. And yet you won.”

“The key.”

“The hawk was a fine ploy. A fine weapon. How long did it take you to train the bastard?”

“I never trained David. I friended him. The key.”

“Under my belt, gunslinger.” The eye closed again.

The gunslinger reached under Cort’s belt, feeling the heavy press of the man’s belly, the huge muscles there now slack and asleep.

The key was on a brass ring. He clutched it in his hand, restraining the mad urge to thrust it up to the sky in a salutation of victory.

He got to his feet and was finally turning to the others when Cort's hand fumbled for his foot. For a moment the gunslinger feared some last attack and tensed, but Cort only looked up at him and beckoned with one crusted finger.

"I'm going to sleep now," Cort whispered calmly. "I'm going to walk the path. Perhaps all the way to the clearing at the end of it, I don't know. I teach you no more, gunslinger. You have surpassed me, and two years younger than your father, who was the youngest. But let me counsel."

"What?" Impatiently.

"Wipe that look off your face, maggot."

In his surprise, Roland did as he was bid (although, being crouched hidden behind his face as we all are, could not know it).

Cort nodded, then whispered a single word. "Wait."

"*What?*"

The effort it took the man to speak lent his words great emphasis. "Let the word and the legend go before you. There are those who will carry both." His eyes flicked over the gunslinger's shoulder. "Fools, perchance. Let your shadow grow hair on its face. Let it become dark." He smiled grotesquely. "Given time, words may even enchant an enchanter. Do you take my meaning, gunslinger?"

"Yes. I think I do."

"Will you take my last counsel as your teacher?"

The gunslinger rocked back on his heels, a hunkered, thinking posture that foreshadowed the man. He looked at the sky. It was deepening, purpling. The heat of the day was failing and thunderheads in the west foretold rain. Lightning tines jabbed the placid flank of the rising foothills miles distant. Beyond that, the mountains. Beyond that, the rising fountains of blood and unreason. He was tired, tired into his bones and beyond.

He looked back at Cort. "I will bury my hawk tonight, teacher. And later go into lower town to inform those in the brothels that will wonder about you. Perhaps I will comfort one or two a little."

Cort's lips parted in a pained smile. And then he slept.

The gunslinger got to his feet and turned to the others. "Make a litter and take him to his house. Then bring a nurse. No, two nurses. Okay?"

They still watched him, caught in a bated moment that none of them could immediately break. They still looked for a corona of fire, or a magical change of features.

"Two nurses," the gunslinger repeated, and then smiled. They smiled in return. Nervously.

"You goddamned horse drover!" Cuthbert suddenly yelled, grinning. "You haven't left enough meat for the rest of us to pick off the bone!"

"The world won't move on tomorrow," the gunslinger said, quoting the old adage with a smile. "Alain, you butter-butt! Move your freight."

Alain set about the business of making the litter; Thomas and Jamie went together to the main hall and the infirmary.

The gunslinger and Cuthbert looked at each other. They had always been the closest—or as close as they could be under the particular shades of their characters. There was a speculative, open light in Bert's eyes, and the gunslinger controlled only with great difficulty the need to tell him not to call for the test for a year or even eighteen months, lest he go west. But they had been through a great ordeal together, and the gunslinger did not feel he could risk saying such a thing without a look on his face that might be taken for arrogance. *I've begun to scheme*, he thought, and was a little dismayed. Then he thought of Marten, of his mother, and he smiled a deceiver's smile at his friend.

I am to be the first, he thought, knowing it for the first time, although he had thought of it idly many times before. *I am the first*.

"Let's go," he said.

"With pleasure, gunslinger."

They left by the east end of the hedge-bordered corridor; Thomas and Jamie were returning with the nurses already. They looked like ghosts in their white and gauzy summer robes, crossed at the breast with red.

"Shall I help you with the hawk?" Cuthbert asked.

"Yes," the gunslinger said. "That would be lovely, Bert."

And later, when darkness had come and the rushing thundershowers with it; while huge, phantom caissons rolled across the sky and lightning washed the crooked streets of the lower town in blue fire; while horses stood at hitching rails with their heads down and their tails drooping, the gunslinger took a woman and lay with her.

It was quick and good. When it was over and they lay side by side without speaking, it began to hail with a brief, rattling ferocity. Downstairs and far away, someone was playing “Hey Jude” ragtime. The gunslinger’s mind turned reflectively inward. It was in that hail-splattered silence, just before sleep overtook him, that he first thought that he might also be the last.

IX

The gunslinger didn’t tell the boy all of this, but perhaps most of it came through anyway. He had already realized that this was an extremely perceptive boy, not so different from Alain, who was strong in that half-empathy, half-telepathy they called the touch.

“You asleep?” the gunslinger asked.

“No.”

“Did you understand what I told you?”

“Understand it?” the boy asked with surprising scorn. “Understand it? Are you kidding?”

“No.” But the gunslinger felt defensive. He had never told anyone about his coming of age before, because he felt ambivalent about it. Of course, the hawk had been a perfectly acceptable weapon, yet it had been a trick, too. And a betrayal. The first of many. *And tell me —am I really preparing to throw this boy at the man in black?*

“I understood it, all right,” the boy said. “It was a game, wasn’t it? Do grown men always have to play games? Does everything have to be an excuse for another kind of game? Do any men grow up or do they only come of age?”

“You don’t know everything,” the gunslinger said, trying to hold his slow anger. “You’re just a boy.”

“Sure. But I know what I am to you.”

“And what is that?” the gunslinger asked, tightly.

“A poker chip.”

The gunslinger felt an urge to find a rock and brain the boy. Instead, he spoke calmly.

“Go to sleep. Boys need their sleep.”

And in his mind he heard Marten’s echo: *Go and find your hand.*

He sat stiffly in the darkness, stunned with horror and terrified (for the first time in his existence) of the self-loathing that might come afterward.

X

During the next period of waking, the railway angled closer to the underground river, and they came upon the Slow Mutants.

Jake saw the first one and screamed aloud.

The gunslinger’s head, which had been fixed straight forward as he pumped the handcar, jerked to the right. There was a rotten jack-o’-lantern greenness below them, pulsating faintly. For the first time he became aware of odor—faint, unpleasant, wet.

The greenness was a face—what might be called a face by one of charitable bent. Above the flattened nose was an insectile node of eyes, peering at them expressionlessly. The gunslinger felt an atavistic crawl in his intestines and privates. He stepped up the rhythm of arms and handcar handle slightly.

The glowing face faded.

“What the hell was *that?*” the boy asked, crawling to him. “What—” The words stopped dumb in his throat as they came upon and then passed a group of three faintly glowing forms, standing between the rails and the invisible river, watching them, motionless.

“They’re Slow Mutants,” the gunslinger said. “I don’t think they’ll bother us. They’re probably just as frightened of us as we are of—”

One of the forms broke free and shambled toward them. The face was that of a starving idiot. The faint naked body had been transformed into a knotted mess of tentacular limbs and suckers.

The boy screamed again and crowded against the gunslinger's leg like a frightened dog.

One of the thing's tentacle arms pawed across the flat platform of the handcar. It reeked of the wet and the dark. The gunslinger let loose of the handle and drew. He put a bullet through the forehead of the starving idiot face. It fell away, its faint swamp-fire glow fading, an eclipsed moon. The gunflash lay bright and branded on their dark retinas, fading only reluctantly. The smell of expended powder was hot and savage and alien in this buried place.

There were others, more of them. None moved against them overtly, but they were closing in on the tracks, a silent, hideous party of rubbernecks.

"You may have to pump for me," the gunslinger said. "Can you?"

"Yes."

"Then be ready."

The boy stood close to him, his body poised. His eyes took in the Slow Mutants only as they passed, not traversing, not seeing more than they had to. The boy assumed a psychic bulge of terror, as if his very id had somehow sprung out through his pores to form a shield. If he had the touch, the gunslinger reasoned, that was not impossible.

The gunslinger pumped steadily but did not increase his speed. The Slow Mutants could smell their terror, he knew that, but he doubted if terror alone would be enough to motivate them. He and the boy were, after all, creatures of the light, and whole. *How they must hate us*, he thought, and wondered if they had hated the man in black in the same way. He thought not, or perhaps he had passed among them only like the shadow of a dark wing in this greater darkness.

The boy made a noise in his throat and the gunslinger turned his head almost casually. Four of them were charging the handcar in a stumbling way—one of them in the process of finding a handgrip.

The gunslinger let go of the handle and drew again, with the same sleepy casual motion. He shot the lead mutant in the head. The mutant made a sighing, sobbing noise and began to grin. Its hands were limp and fish-like, dead; the fingers clove to one another like

the fingers of a glove long immersed in drying mud. One of these corpse-hands found the boy's foot and began to pull.

The boy shrieked aloud in the granite womb.

The gunslinger shot the mutant in the chest. It began to slobber through the grin. Jake was going off the side. The gunslinger caught one of his arms and was almost pulled off balance himself. The thing was surprisingly strong. The gunslinger put another bullet in the mutant's head. One eye went out like a candle. Still it pulled. They engaged in a silent tug of war for Jake's jerking, wriggling body. The Slow Mutants yanked on him like a wishbone. The wish would undoubtedly be to dine.

The handcar was slowing down. The others began to close in—the lame, the halt, the blind. Perhaps they only looked for a Jesus to heal them, to raise them Lazarus-like from the darkness.

It's the end for the boy, the gunslinger thought with perfect coldness. This is the end he meant. Let go and pump or hold on and be buried. The end for the boy.

He gave a tremendous yank on the boy's arm and shot the mutant in the belly. For one frozen moment its grip grew even tighter and Jake began to slide off the edge again. Then the dead mud-mitts loosened, and the Slow Mutie fell on its face behind the slowing handcar, still grinning.

"I thought you'd leave me," the boy was sobbing. "I thought . . . I thought . . ."

"Hold on to my belt," the gunslinger said. "Hold on just as tight as you can."

The hand worked into his belt and clutched there; the boy was breathing in great convulsive, silent gasps.

The gunslinger began to pump steadily again, and the handcar picked up speed. The Slow Mutants fell back a step and watched them go with faces hardly human (or pathetically so), faces that generated the weak phosphorescence common to those weird deep-sea fishes that live under incredible black pressure, faces that held no anger or hate but only what seemed to be a semiconscious, idiot regret.

"They're thinning," the gunslinger said. The drawn-up muscles of his lower belly and privates relaxed the smallest bit. "They're—"

The Slow Mutants had put rocks across the track. The way was blocked. It had been a quick, poor job, perhaps the work of only a minute to clear, but they were stopped. And someone would have to get down and move them. The boy moaned and shuddered closer to the gunslinger. The gunslinger let go of the handle and the handcar coasted noiselessly to the rocks, where it thumped to rest.

The Slow Mutants began to close in again, almost casually, almost as if they had been passing by, lost in a dream of darkness, and had found someone of whom to ask directions. A street-corner congregation of the damned beneath the ancient rock.

“Are they going to get us?” the boy asked calmly.

“Never in life. Be quiet a second.”

He looked at the rocks. The mutants were weak, of course, and had not been able to drag any of the boulders to block their way. Only small rocks. Only enough to stop them, to make someone—

“Get down,” the gunslinger said. “You’ll have to move them. I’ll cover you.”

“No,” the boy whispered. “Please.”

“I can’t give you a gun and I can’t move the rocks and shoot, too. You have to get down.”

Jake’s eyes rolled terribly; for a moment his body shuddered in tune with the turnings of his mind, and then he wriggled over the side and began to throw rocks to the right and the left, working with mad speed, not looking up.

The gunslinger drew and waited.

Two of them, lurching rather than walking, went for the boy with arms like dough. The guns did their work, stitching the darkness with red-white lances of light that pushed needles of pain into the gunslinger’s eyes. The boy screamed and continued to throw away rocks to either side. Witch-glow leaped and danced. Hard to see now, that was the worst. Everything had gone to shadows and afterimages.

One of them, glowing hardly at all, suddenly reached for the boy with rubber boogeyman arms. Eyes that ate up half the mutie’s head rolled wetly.

Jake screamed again and turned to struggle.

The gunslinger fired without allowing himself to think before his spotty vision could betray his hands into a terrible quiver; the two heads were only inches apart. It was the mutie who fell.

Jake threw rocks wildly. The mutants milled just outside the invisible line of trespass, closing a little at a time, now very close. Others had caught up, swelling their number.

“All right,” the gunslinger said. “Get on. Quick.”

When the boy moved, the mutants came at them. Jake was over the side and scrambling to his feet; the gunslinger was already pumping again, all out. Both guns were holstered now. They must run. It was their only chance.

Strange hands slapped the metal plane of the car’s surface. The boy was holding his belt with both hands now, his face pressed tightly into the small of the gunslinger’s back.

A group of them ran onto the tracks, their faces full of that mindless, casual anticipation. The gunslinger was full of adrenaline; the car was flying along the tracks into the darkness. They struck the four or five pitiful hulks full force. They flew like rotten bananas struck from the stem.

On and on, into the soundless, flying, banshee darkness.

After an age, the boy raised his face into the made wind, dreading and yet needing to know. The ghost of gunflashes still lingered on his retinas. There was nothing to see but the darkness and nothing to hear but the rumble of the river.

“They’re gone,” the boy said, suddenly fearing an end to the tracks in the darkness, and the wounding crash as they jumped the rails and plunged to twisted ruin. He had ridden in cars; once his humorless father had driven at ninety on the New Jersey Turnpike and had been stopped by a cop who ignored the twenty Elmer Chambers offered with his license and gave him a ticket anyway. But he had never ridden like this, with the wind and the blindness and the terrors behind and ahead, with the sound of the river like a chuckling voice—the voice of the man in black. The gunslinger’s arms were pistons in a lunatic human factory.

“They’re gone,” the boy said timidly, the words ripped from his mouth by the wind. “You can slow down now. We left them behind.”

But the gunslinger did not hear. They careened onward into the strange dark.

XI

They went on for three “days” without incident.

XII

During the fourth period of waking (halfway through? three-quarters? they didn't know—knew only that they weren't tired enough yet to stop) there was a sharp thump beneath them; the handcar swayed, and their bodies immediately leaned to the right against gravity as the rails took a gradual turn to the left.

There was a light ahead—a glow so faint and alien that it seemed at first to be a totally new element, not earth, air, fire, nor water. It had no color and could only be discerned by the fact that they had regained their hands and faces in a dimension beyond that of touch. Their eyes had become so light-sensitive that they noticed the glow more than five miles before they approached its source.

“The end,” the boy said tightly. “It's the end.”

“No.” The gunslinger spoke with odd assurance. “It isn't.”

And it was not. They reached light but not day.

As they approached the source of the glow, they saw for the first time that the rock wall to the left had fallen away and their tracks had been joined by others which crossed in a complex spiderweb. The light laid them in burnished vectors. On some of them there were dark boxcars, passenger coaches, a stage that had been adapted to rails. They made the gunslinger nervous, like ghost galleons trapped in an underground Sargasso.

The light grew stronger, hurting their eyes a little, but growing slowly enough to allow them to adapt. They came from dark to light like divers coming up from deep fathoms in slow stages.

Ahead, drawing nearer, was a huge hangar stretching up into the dark. Cut into it, showing yellow squares of light, were a series of perhaps twenty-four entranceways, growing from the size of toy windows to a height of twenty feet as they drew closer. They passed inside through one of the middle ways. Written above were a series of characters, in various languages, the gunslinger presumed. He was astounded to find that he could read the last one; it was an ancient root of the High Speech itself and said:

TRACK 10 TO SURFACE AND POINTS WEST

The light inside was brighter; the tracks met and merged through a series of switchings. Here some of the traffic lanterns still worked, flashing eternal reds and greens and ambers.

They rolled between the rising stone piers caked black with the passage of thousands of vehicles, and then they were in some kind of central terminal. The gunslinger let the handcar coast slowly to a stop, and they peered around.

“It’s like a subway,” the boy said.

“Subway?”

“Never mind. You wouldn’t know what I was talking about. / don’t even know what I’m talking about, not anymore.”

The boy climbed up onto the cracked cement. They looked at silent, deserted booths where newspapers and books had once been traded or sold; a bootery; a weapon shop (the gunslinger, suddenly feverish with excitement, saw revolvers and rifles; closer inspection showed that their barrels had been filled with lead; he did, however, pick out a bow, which he slung over his back, and a quiver of almost useless, badly weighted arrows); a women’s apparel shop.

Somewhere a converter was turning the air over and over, as it had for thousands of years—but perhaps would not for much longer. It had a grating noise somewhere in its cycle which served to remind that perpetual motion, even under strictly controlled conditions, was still a fool’s dream. The air had a mechanized taste. The boy’s shoes and the gunslinger’s boots made flat echoes.

The boy cried out: “Hey! Hey . . .”

The gunslinger turned around and went to him. The boy was standing, transfixed, at the book stall. Inside, sprawled in the far corner, was a mummy. It was wearing a blue uniform with gold piping

—a trainman’s uniform, by the look. There was an ancient, perfectly preserved newspaper on the dead thing’s lap, and it crumbled to dust when the gunslinger touched it. The mummy’s face was like an old, shriveled apple. Cautiously, the gunslinger touched the cheek. There was a small puff of dust. When it cleared, they were able to look through the flesh and into the mummy’s mouth. A gold tooth twinkled there.

“Gas,” the gunslinger murmured. “The old people made a gas that would do this. Or so Vannay told us.”

“The one who taught from books.”

“Yes. He.”

“I bet these old people fought wars with it,” the boy said darkly. “Killed *other* old people with it.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

There were perhaps a dozen other mummies. All but two or three were wearing the blue and gold ornamental uniforms. The gunslinger supposed that the gas had been used when the place was empty of most incoming and outgoing traffic. Perhaps once in the dim ago, the station had been a military objective of some long-gone army and cause.

The thought depressed him.

“We better go on,” he said, and started toward Track 10 and the handcar again. But the boy stood rebelliously behind him.

“Not going.”

The gunslinger turned back, surprised.

The boy’s face was twisted and trembling. “You won’t get what you want until I’m dead. I’ll take my chances by myself.”

The gunslinger nodded noncommittally, hating himself for what he was going to do. “Okay, Jake,” he said mildly. “Long days, pleasant nights.” He turned around, walked across to the stone piers, leaped easily down onto the handcar.

“You made a deal with someone!” the boy screamed after him. “I know you did!”

The gunslinger, not replying, carefully put the bow in front of the T-post rising out of the handcar’s floor, out of harm’s way.

The boy’s fists were clenched, his features drawn in agony.

How easily you bluff this young boy, the gunslinger told himself. Again and again his wonderful intuition—his touch—has led him to this point, and again and again you have led him on past it. And how difficult could it be—after all, he has no friends but you.

In a sudden, simple thought (almost a vision) it came to him that all he had to do was give it over, turn around, take the boy with him, and make him the center of a new force. The Tower did not have to be obtained in this humiliating, nose-rubbing way, did it? Let his quest resume after the boy had a growth of years, when the two of them could cast the man in black aside like a cheap wind-up toy.

Surely, he thought cynically. Surely.

He knew with sudden coldness that turning backward would mean death for both of them—death or worse: entombment with the Slow Muties behind them. Decay of all the faculties. With, perhaps, the guns of his father living long after both of them, kept in rotten splendor as totems not unlike the unforgotten gas pump.

Show some guts, he told himself falsely.

He reached for the handle and began to pump it. The handcar moved away from the stone piers.

The boy screamed: “*Wait!*” And began running on the diagonal, toward where the handcar would emerge nearer the darkness ahead. The gunslinger had an impulse to speed up, to leave the boy alone yet at least with an uncertainty.

Instead, he caught him as he leaped. The heart beneath the thin shirt thrummed and fluttered as Jake clung to him.

The end was very close now.

XIII

The sound of the river had become very loud, filling even their dreams with its thunder. The gunslinger, more as a whim than anything else, let the boy pump them ahead while he shot a number of the bad arrows, tethered by fine white lengths of thread, into the dark.

The bow was also very bad, incredibly preserved but with a terrible pull and aim despite that, and the gunslinger knew nothing would improve it. Even re-stringing would not help the tired wood. The arrows would not fly far into the dark, but the last one he sent out came back wet and slick. The gunslinger only shrugged when the boy asked him how far to the water, but privately he didn't think the arrow could have traveled more than sixty yards from the rotted bow—and lucky to get that far.

And still the river's thunder grew louder, closer.

During the third waking period after the station, a spectral radiance began to grow again. They had entered a long tunnel of some weird phosphorescent rock, and the wet walls glittered and twinkled with thousands of minute starbursts. The boy called them *fof-suls*. They saw things in a kind of eerie, horror-house surreality.

The brute sound of the river was channeled to them by the confining rock, magnified in its own natural amplifier. Yet the sound remained oddly constant, even as they approached the crossing point the gunslinger was sure lay ahead, because the walls were widening, drawing back. The angle of their ascent became more pronounced.

The tracks arrowed through the new light. To the gunslinger the clumps of *fof-suls* looked like the captive tubes of swamp gas sometimes sold for a pretty at the Feast of Reaptide fair; to the boy they looked like endless streamers of neon tubing. But in its glow they could both see that the rock that had enclosed them so long ended up ahead in ragged twin peninsulas that pointed toward a gulf of darkness—the chasm over the river.

The tracks continued out and over that unknowable drop, supported by a trestle aeons old. And beyond, what seemed an incredible distance, was a tiny pinprick of light, not phosphorescence or fluorescence, but the hard, true light of day. It was as tiny as a needle-prick in a dark cloth, yet weighted with frightful meaning.

“Stop,” the boy said. “Stop for a minute. Please.”

Unquestioning, the gunslinger let the handcar coast to a stop. The sound of the river was a steady, booming roar, coming from beneath and ahead. The artificial glow from the wet rock was suddenly hateful. For the first time he felt a claustrophobic hand touch him,

and the urge to get out, to get free of this living burial, was strong and nearly undeniable.

“We’ll go on,” the boy said. “Is that what he wants? For us to drive the handcar out over . . . *that* . . . and fall down?”

The gunslinger knew it was not but said: “I don’t know what he wants.”

They got down and approached the lip of the drop carefully. The stone beneath their feet continued to rise until, with a sudden, angling drop, the floor fell away from the tracks and the tracks continued alone, across blackness.

The gunslinger dropped to his knees and peered down. He could dimly make out a complex, nearly incredible webwork of steel girders and struts, disappearing down toward the roar of the river, all in support of the graceful arch of the tracks across the void.

In his mind’s eye he could imagine the work of time and water on the steel, in deadly tandem. How much support was left? Little? Hardly any? None? He suddenly saw the face of the mummy again, and the way the flesh, seemingly solid, had crumbled to powder at the effortless touch of his finger.

“We’ll walk now,” the gunslinger said.

He half expected the boy to balk again, but he preceded the gunslinger out onto the rails, crossing on the welded steel slats calmly, with sure feet. The gunslinger followed him out over the chasm, ready to catch him if Jake should put a foot wrong.

The gunslinger felt a fine slick of sweat cover his skin. The trestle was rotten, very rotten. It thrummed beneath his feet with the heady motion of the river far beneath, swaying a little on unseen guy wires. *We’re acrobats*, he thought. *Look, Mother, no net. I’m flying.*

He knelt once and examined the crossties they were walking on. They were caked and pitted with rust (he could feel the reason on his face—fresh air, the friend of corruption; they must be very close to the surface now), and a strong blow of the fist made the metal quiver sickly. Once he heard a warning groan beneath his feet and felt the steel settle preparatory to giving way, but he had already moved on.

The boy, of course, was over a hundred pounds lighter and safe enough, unless the going became progressively worse.

Behind them, the handcar had melted into the general gloom. The stone pier on the left extended out perhaps twenty yards. It jutted further than the one on the right, but this was also left behind and then they were alone over the gulf.

At first it seemed that the tiny prick of daylight remained mockingly constant (perhaps even drawing away from them at the exact pace they approached it—that would be a fine bit of magic indeed), but gradually the gunslinger realized that it was widening, becoming more defined. They were still below it, but the tracks were rising to meet it.

The boy gave a surprised grunt and suddenly lurched to the side, arms pinwheeling in slow, wide revolutions. It seemed that he tottered on the brink for a very long time indeed before stepping forward again.

“It almost went on me,” he said softly, without emotion. “There’s a hole. Step over if you don’t want to take a quick trip to the bottom. Simon says take one giant step.”

That was a game the gunslinger knew as Mother Says, remembered well from childhood games with Cuthbert, Jamie, and Alain, but he said nothing, only stepped over.

“Go back,” Jake said, unsmiling. “You forgot to say ‘May I?’ ”

“Cry your pardon, but I think not.”

The crosstie the boy had stepped on had given way almost entirely and flopped downward lazily, swinging on a rotten rivet.

Upward, still upward. It was a nightmare walk and so seemed to go on much longer than it did; the air itself seemed to thicken and become like taffy, and the gunslinger felt as if he might be swimming rather than walking. Again and again his mind tried to turn itself to thoughtful, lunatic consideration of the awful space between this trestle and the river below. His brain viewed it in spectacular detail, and how it would be: the scream of twisting, giving metal, the lurch as his body slid off to the side, the grabbing for nonexistent handholds with the fingers, the swift rattle of bootheels on treacherous, rotted steel—and then down, turning over and over, the warm spray in his crotch as his bladder let go, the rush of wind against his face, rippling his hair up in a caricature of fright, pulling

his eyelids back, the dark water rushing to meet him, faster, outstripping even his own scream—



Metal screamed beneath him and he stepped past it unhurriedly, shifting his weight, at that crucial moment not thinking of the drop, or of how far they had come, or of how far might be left. Not thinking that the boy was expendable and that the sale of his honor was now, at last, nearly negotiated. What a relief it would be when the deal was done!

“Three ties out,” the boy said coolly. “I’m gonna jump. Here! Right here! *Geronimo!*”

The gunslinger saw him silhouetted for a moment against the daylight, an awkward, hunched spread-eagle, arms out as if, should all else fail, there was the possibility of flight. He landed and the whole edifice swayed drunkenly under his weight. Metal beneath them protested and something far below fell, first with a crash, then with a splash.

“Are you over?” the gunslinger asked.

“Yar,” the boy said, “but it’s very rotten. Like the ideas of certain people, maybe. I don’t think it will hold you any further than where you are now. Me, but not you. Go back. Go back now and leave me alone.”

His voice was cold, but there was hysteria underneath, beating as his heart had beat when he jumped back onto the handcar and Roland had caught him.

The gunslinger stepped over the break. One large step did it. One giant step. *Mother, may I? Yes-you-may.* The boy was shuddering helplessly. “Go back. I don’t want you to kill me.”

“For love of the Man Jesus, *walk,*” the gunslinger said roughly. “It’s going to fall down for sure if we stand here palavering.”

The boy walked drunkenly now, his hands held out shudderingly before him, fingers splayed.

They went up.

Yes, it was much more rotten now. There were frequent breaks of one, two, even three ties, and the gunslinger expected again and again that they would find the long empty space between rails that would either force them back or make them walk on the rails themselves, balanced giddily over the chasm.

He kept his eyes fixed on the daylight.

The glow had taken on a color—blue—and as it came closer it became softer, paling the radiance of the *fat-suls*. Fifty yards or a hundred still to cover? He could not say.

They walked, and now he looked at his feet, crossing from tie to tie. When he looked up again, the glow ahead had grown to a hole, and it was not just light but a way out. They were almost there.

Thirty yards now. No more than that. Ninety short feet. It could be done. Perhaps they would have the man in black yet. Perhaps, in the bright sunlight the evil flowers in his mind would shrivel and anything would be possible.

The sunlight was blocked out.

He looked up, startled, peering like a mole from its hole, and saw a silhouette filling the light, eating it up, allowing only chinks of mocking blue around the outline of shoulders and the fork of crotch.

“Hello, boys!”

The man in black's voice echoed to them, amplified in this natural throat of stone, the sarcasm of his good cheer taking on mighty overtones. Blindly, the gunslinger sought the jawbone, but it was gone, lost somewhere, used up.

He laughed above them and the sound crashed around them, reverberating like surf in a filling cave. The boy screamed and tottered, a windmill again, arms gyrating through the scant air.

Metal ripped and sloughed beneath them; the rails canted through a slow and dreamy twisting. The boy plunged, and one hand flew up like a gull in the darkness, up, up, and then he hung over the pit; he dangled there, his dark eyes staring up at the gunslinger in final blind lost knowledge.

"Help me."

Booming, racketing: "No more games. Come now, gunslinger. Or catch me never."

All the chips on the table. Every card up but one. The boy dangled, a living Tarot card, the Hanged Man, the Phoenician sailor, innocent lost and barely above the wave of a stygian sea.

Wait then, wait awhile.

"Do I go?"

His voice is so loud, he makes it hard to think.

"Help me. Help me, Roland."

The trestle had begun to twist further, screaming, pulling loose from itself, giving—

"Then I shall leave you."

"No! You shall NOT!"

The gunslinger's legs carried him in a sudden leap, breaking the paralysis that held him; he took a true giant's step above the dangling boy and landed in a skidding, plunging rush toward the light that offered the Tower frozen on his mind's eye in a black still life . . .

Into sudden silence.

The silhouette was gone, even the beat of his heart was gone as the trestle settled further, beginning its final slow dance to the depths, tearing loose, his hand finding the rocky, lighted lip of damnation; and behind him, in the dreadful silence, the boy spoke from too far beneath him.

"Go then. There are other worlds than these."

Then the trestle tore away, the whole weight of it; and as the gunslinger pulled himself up and through to the light and the breeze and the reality of a new ka, he twisted his head back, for a moment in his agony striving to be Janus—but there was nothing, only plummeting silence, for the boy made no cry as he fell.

Then Roland was up, pulling himself onto the rocky escarpment that looked toward a grassy plain, toward where the man in black stood spread-legged, with arms crossed.

The gunslinger stood drunkenly, pallid as a ghost, eyes huge and swimming beneath his forehead, shirt smeared with the white dust of his final, lunging crawl. It came to him that there would be further degradations of the spirit ahead that might make this one seem infinitesimal, and yet he would still flee it, down corridors and through cities, from bed to bed; he would flee the boy's face and try to bury it in cunts and killing, only to enter one final room and find it looking at him over a candle flame. He had become the boy; the boy had become him. He was become a werewolf of his own making. In deep dreams he would become the boy and speak the boy's strange city tongue.

This is death. Is it? Is it?

He walked slowly, drunkenly down the rocky hill toward where the man in black waited. Here the tracks had been worn away, under the sun of reason, and it was as if they had never been.

The man in black pushed his hood away with the backs of both hands, laughing.

"So!" he cried. "Not an end, but the end of the beginning, eh? You progress, gunslinger! You progress! Oh, how I admire you!"

The gunslinger drew with blinding speed and fired twelve times. The gunflashes dimmed the sun itself, and the pounding of the explosions slammed back from the rock-faced escarpments behind them.

"Now-now," the man in black said, laughing. "Oh, now-now- *now*. We make great magic together, you and I. You kill me no more than you kill yourself."

He withdrew, walking backwards, facing the gunslinger, grinning and beckoning. "Come. Come. Come. Mother, may I? Yes-you-may."

The gunslinger followed him in broken boots to the place of counseling.



The
**GUNSLINGER AND
THE MAN IN BLACK**



CHAPTER FIVE

The Gunslinger and the Man in Black

I

The man in black led him to an ancient killing ground to make palaver. The gunslinger knew it immediately: a golgotha, place-of-the-skull. And bleached skulls stared blandly up at them—cattle, coyotes, deer, rabbits, bumbler. Here the alabaster xylophone of a hen pheasant killed as she fed; there the tiny, delicate bones of a mole, perhaps killed for pleasure by a wild dog.

The golgotha was a bowl indented into the descending slope of the mountain, and below, in easier altitudes, the gunslinger could see Joshua trees and scrub firs. The sky overhead was a softer blue than he had seen for a twelve-month, and there was an indefinable something that spoke of the sea in the not-too-great distance.

I am in the West, Cuthbert, he thought wonderingly. *If this is not Mid-World, it's close by.*

The man in black sat on an ancient ironwood log. His boots were powdered white with dust and the uneasy bonemeal of this place. He had put his hood up again, but the gunslinger could see the square shape of his chin clearly, and the shading of his jaw.

The shadowed lips twitched in a smile. "Gather wood, gunslinger. This side of the mountains is gentle, but at this altitude, the cold still may put a knife in one's belly. And this is a place of death, eh?"

"I'll kill you," the gunslinger said.

"No you won't. You can't. But you can gather wood to remember your Isaac."

The gunslinger had no understanding of the reference. He went wordlessly and gathered wood like a common cook's boy. The pickings were slim. There was no devil-grass on this side and the

ironwood would not burn. It had become stone. He returned finally with a large armload of likely sticks, powdered and dusted with disintegrated bone, as if dipped in flour. The sun had sunk beyond the highest Joshua trees and had taken on a reddish glow. It peered at them with baleful indifference.

“Excellent,” the man in black said. “How exceptional you are! How methodical! How resourceful! I salute you!” He giggled, and the gunslinger dropped the wood at his feet with a crash that ballooned up bone dust.

The man in black did not start or jump; he merely began laying the fire. The gunslinger watched, fascinated, as the ideogram (fresh, this time) took shape. When it was finished, it resembled a small and complex double chimney about two feet high. The man in black lifted his hand skyward, shaking back the voluminous sleeve from a tapered, handsome hand, and brought it down rapidly, index and pinky fingers forked out in the traditional sign of the evil eye. There was a blue flash of flame, and their fire was lighted.

“I have matches,” the man in black said jovially, “but I thought you might enjoy the magic. For a pretty, gunslinger. Now cook our dinner.”

The folds of his robe shivered, and the plucked and gutted carcass of a plump rabbit fell on the dirt.

The gunslinger spitted the rabbit wordlessly and roasted it. A savory smell drifted up as the sun went down. Purple shadows drifted hungrily over the bowl where the man in black had chosen to finally face him. The gunslinger felt hunger begin to rumble endlessly in his belly as the rabbit browned; but when the meat was cooked and its juices sealed in, he handed the entire skewer wordlessly to the man in black, rummaged in his own nearly flat knapsack, and withdrew the last of his jerky. It was salty, painful to his mouth, and tasted like tears.

“That’s a worthless gesture,” the man in black said, managing to sound angry and amused at the same time.

“Nevertheless,” the gunslinger said. There were tiny sores in his mouth, the result of vitamin deprivation, and the salt taste made him grin bitterly.

“Are you afraid of enchanted meat?”

“Yes indeed.”

The man in black slipped his hood back.

The gunslinger looked at him silently. In a way, the face that the hood had hidden was an uneasy disappointment. It was handsome and regular, with none of the marks and twists which indicate a man who has been through awesome times and has been privy to great secrets. His hair was black and of a ragged, matted length. His forehead was high, his eyes dark and brilliant. His nose was nondescript. The lips were full and sensual. His complexion was pallid, as was the gunslinger’s own.

The gunslinger said finally, “I expected an older man.”

“Why? I am nearly immortal, as are you, Roland—for now, at least. I could have taken a face with which you would have been more familiar, but I elected to show you the one I was—ah—born with. See, gunslinger, the sunset.”

The sun had departed already, and the western sky was filled with sullen furnace light.

“You won’t see another sunrise for what may seem a very long time,” the man in black said.

The gunslinger remembered the pit under the mountains and then looked at the sky, where the constellations sprawled in clockspring profusion.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said softly, “now.”

II

The man in black shuffled the cards with flying hands. The deck was huge, the designs on the back convoluted. “These are Tarot cards, gunslinger—of a sort. A mixture of the standard deck to which have been added a selection of my own development. Now watch carefully.”

“What will I watch?”

“I’m going to tell your future. Seven cards must be turned, one at a time, and placed in conjunction with the others. I’ve not done this since the days when Gilead stood and the ladies played at Points on

the west lawn. And I suspect I've *never* read a tale such as yours." Mockery was creeping into his voice again. "You are the world's last adventurer. The last crusader. How that must please you, Roland! Yet you have no idea how close you stand to the Tower now, as you resume your quest. Worlds turn about your head."

"What do you mean, resume? I never left off."

At this the man in black laughed heartily, but would not say what he found so funny. "Read my fortune then," Roland said harshly.

The first card was turned.

"The Hanged Man," the man in black said. The darkness had given him back his hood. "Yet here, in conjunction with nothing else, it signifies strength, not death. You, gunslinger, are the Hanged Man, plodding ever onward toward your goal over the pits of Na'ar. You've already dropped one co-traveler into that pit, have you not?"

The gunslinger said nothing, and the second card was turned.

"The Sailor! Note the clear brow, the hairless cheeks, the wounded eyes. He drowns, gunslinger, and no one throws out the line. The boy Jake."

The gunslinger winced, said nothing.

The third card was turned. A baboon stood grinningly astride a young man's shoulder. The young man's face was turned up, a grimace of stylized dread and horror on his features. Looking more closely, the gunslinger saw the baboon held a whip.

"The Prisoner," the man in black said. The fire cast uneasy, flickering shadows over the face of the ridden man, making it seem to move and writhe in wordless terror. The gunslinger flicked his eyes away.

"A trifle upsetting, isn't he?" the man in black said, and seemed on the verge of sniggering.

He turned the fourth card. A woman with a shawl over her head sat spinning at a wheel. To the gunslinger's dazed eyes, she appeared to be smiling craftily and sobbing at the same time.

"The Lady of the Shadows," the man in black remarked. "Does she look two-faced to you, gunslinger? She is. Two faces at least. She broke the blue plate!"

"What do you mean?"

“I don’t know.” And—in this case, at least—the gunslinger thought his adversary was telling the truth.

“Why are you showing me these?”

“Don’t ask!” the man in black said sharply, yet he smiled. “Don’t ask. Merely watch. Consider this only pointless ritual if it eases you and cools you to do so. Like church.”

He tittered and turned the fifth card.

A grinning reaper clutched a scythe with bony fingers. “Death,” the man in black said simply. “Yet not for you.”

The sixth card.

The gunslinger looked at it and felt a strange, crawling anticipation in his guts. The feeling was mixed with horror and joy, and the whole of the emotion was unnameable. It made him feel like throwing up and dancing at the same time.

“The Tower,” the man in black said softly. “Here is the Tower.”

The gunslinger’s card occupied the center of the pattern; each of the following four stood at one corner, like satellites circling a star.

“Where does that one go?” the gunslinger asked.

The man in black placed the Tower over the Hanged Man, covering it completely.

“What does that mean?” the gunslinger asked.

The man in black did not answer.

“What does that mean?” he asked raggedly.

The man in black did not answer.

“Goddamn you!”

No answer.

“Then be damned to you. What’s the seventh card?”

The man in black turned the seventh. A sun rose in a luminously blue sky. Cupids and sprites sported around it. Below the sun was a great red field upon which it shone. Roses or blood? The gunslinger could not tell. *Perhaps*, he thought, *it’s both*.

“The seventh card is Life,” the man in black said softly. “But not for you.”

“Where does it fit the pattern?”

“That is not for you to know now,” the man in black said. “Or for me to know. I’m not the great one you seek, Roland. I am merely his emissary.” He flipped the card carelessly into the dying fire. It

charred, curled, and flashed to flame. The gunslinger felt his heart quail and turn icy in his chest.

“Sleep now,” the man in black said carelessly. “Perchance to dream and that sort of thing.”

“What my bullets won’t do, mayhap my hands will,” the gunslinger said. His legs coiled with savage, splendid suddenness, and he flew across the fire at the other, arms outstretched. The man in black, smiling, swelled in his vision and then retreated down a long and echoing corridor. The world filled with the sound of sardonic laughter, he was falling, dying, sleeping.

He dreamed.

III

The universe was void. Nothing moved. Nothing was.

The gunslinger drifted, bemused.

“Let’s have a little light,” the voice of the man in black said nonchalantly, and there was light. The gunslinger thought in a detached way that light was pretty good.

“Now darkness overhead with stars in it. Water down below.”

It happened. He drifted over endless seas. Above, the stars twinkled endlessly, yet he saw none of the constellations which had guided him across his long life.

“Land,” the man in black invited, and there was; it heaved itself out of the water in endless, galvanic convulsions. It was red, arid, cracked and glazed with sterility. Volcanoes blurted endless magma like giant pimples on some ugly adolescent’s baseball head.

“Okay,” the man in black was saying. “That’s a start. Let’s have some plants. Trees. Grass and fields.”

There was. Dinosaurs rambled here and there, growling and whoofing and eating each other and getting stuck in bubbling, odiferous tarpits. Huge tropical rain-forests sprawled everywhere. Giant ferns waved at the sky with serrated leaves. Beetles with two heads crawled on some of them. All this the gunslinger saw. And yet he felt big.

“Now bring man,” the man in black said softly, but the gunslinger was falling . . . falling up. The horizon of this vast and fecund earth began to curve. Yes, they had all said it curved, his teacher Vannay had claimed it had been proved long before the world had moved on. But this—

Further and further, higher and higher. Continents took shape before his amazed eyes, and were obscured with clocksprings of clouds. The world’s atmosphere held it in a placental sac. And the sun, rising beyond the earth’s shoulder—

He cried out and threw an arm before his eyes.

“Let there be light!”

The voice no longer belonged to the man in black. It was gigantic, echoing. It filled space, and the spaces between space.

“Light!”

Falling, falling.

The sun shrank. A red planet stamped with canals whirled past him, two moons circling it furiously. Beyond this was a whirling belt of stones and a gigantic planet that seethed with gases, too huge to support itself, oblate in consequence. Further out was a ringed world that glittered like a precious gem within its engirdlement of icy spicules.

“Light! Let there be—”

Other worlds, one, two, three. Far beyond the last, one lonely ball of ice and rock twirled in dead darkness about a sun that glittered no brighter than a tarnished penny.

Beyond this, darkness.

“No,” the gunslinger said, and his word on it was flat and echoless in the black. It was darker than dark, blacker than black. Beside this, the darkest night of a man’s soul was as noonday, the darkness under the mountains a mere smudge on the face of Light. “No more. Please, no more now. No more—”

“LIGHT!”

“No more. No more, please—”

The stars themselves began to shrink. Whole nebulae drew together and became glowing smudges. The whole universe seemed to be drawing around him.

“Please no more no more no more—”

The voice of the man in black whispered silkily in his ear: "Then renege. Cast away all thoughts of the Tower. Go your way, gunslinger, and begin the long job of saving your soul."

He gathered himself. Shaken and alone, enwrapt in the darkness, terrified of an ultimate meaning rushing at him, he gathered himself and uttered the final answer on that subject:

"NEVER!"

"THEN LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

And there *was* light, crashing in on him like a hammer, a great and primordial light. Consciousness had no chance of survival in that great glare, but before it perished, the gunslinger saw something clearly, something he believed to be of cosmic importance. He clutched it with agonized effort and then went deep, seeking refuge in himself before that light should blind his eyes and blast his sanity.

He fled the light and the knowledge the light implied, and so came back to himself. Even so do the rest of us; even so the best of us.

IV

It was still night—whether the same or another, he had no immediate way of knowing. He pushed himself up from where his demon spring at the man in black had carried him and looked at the ironwood where Walter o' Dim (as some along Roland's way had named him) had been sitting. He was gone.

A great sense of despair flooded him—God, all that to do over again—and then the man in black said from behind him: "Over here, gunslinger. I don't like you so close. You talk in your sleep." He tittered.

The gunslinger got groggily to his knees and turned around. The fire had burned down to red embers and gray ashes, leaving the familiar decayed pattern of exhausted fuel. The man in black was seated next to it, smacking his lips with unlovely enthusiasm over the greasy remains of the rabbit.

"You did fairly well," the man in black said. "I never could have sent that vision to your father. He would have come back drooling."

“What was it?” the gunslinger asked. His words were blurred and shaky. He felt that if he tried to rise, his legs would buckle.

“The universe,” the man in black said carelessly. He burped and threw the bones into the fire where they first glistened and then blackened. The wind above the cup of the golgotha keened and moaned.

“Universe?” the gunslinger said blankly. It was a word with which he was unfamiliar. His first thought was that the other was speaking poetry.

“You want the Tower,” the man in black said. It seemed to be a question.

“Yes.”

“Well, you shan’t have it,” the man in black said, and smiled with bright cruelty. “No one cares in the counsels of the great if you pawn your soul or sell it outright, Roland. I have an idea of how close to the edge that last pushed you. The Tower will kill you half a world away.”

“You know nothing of me,” the gunslinger said quietly, and the smile faded from the other’s lips.

“I made your father and I broke him,” the man in black said grimly. “I came to your mother as Marten—there’s a truth you always suspected, is it not?—and took her. She bent beneath me like a willow . . . although (this may comfort you) she never broke. In any case it was written, and it was. I am the furthest minion of he who now rules the Dark Tower, and Earth has been given into that king’s red hand.”

“Red? Why do you say red?”

“Never mind. We’ll not speak of him, although you’ll learn more than you cared to if you press on. What hurt you once will hurt you twice. This is not the beginning but the beginning’s end. You’d do well to remember that . . . but you never do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No. You don’t. You never did. You never will. You have no imagination. You’re blind that way.”

“What did I see?” the gunslinger asked. “What did I see at the end? What was it?”

“What did it seem to be?”

The gunslinger was silent, thoughtful. He felt for his tobacco, but there was none. The man in black did not offer to refill his poke by either black magic or white. Later he might find more in his grow-bag, but later seemed very far away now.

“There was light,” the gunslinger said finally. “Great white light. And then—” He broke off and stared at the man in black. He was leaning forward, and an alien emotion was stamped on his face, writ too large for lies or denial. It was awe or wonder. Perhaps they were the same.

“You don’t know,” he said, and began to smile. “O great sorcerer who brings the dead to life. You don’t know. You’re a fake!”

“I know,” the man in black said. “But I don’t know . . . what.”

“White light,” the gunslinger repeated. “And then—a blade of grass. One single blade of grass that filled everything. And I was tiny. Infinitesimal.”

“Grass.” The man in black closed his eyes. His face looked drawn and haggard. “A blade of grass. Are you sure?”

“Yes.” The gunslinger frowned. “But it was purple.”

“Hear me now, Roland, son of Steven. Would you hear me?”

“Yes.”

And so the man in black began to speak.

V

The universe (he said) is the Great All, and offers a paradox too great for the finite mind to grasp. As the living brain cannot conceive of a nonliving brain—although it may think it can—the finite mind cannot grasp the infinite.

The prosaic fact of the universe’s existence alone defeats both the pragmatist and the romantic. There was a time, yet a hundred generations before the world moved on, when mankind had achieved enough technical and scientific prowess to chip a few splinters from the great stone pillar of reality. Even so, the false light of science (knowledge, if you like) shone in only a few developed countries. One company (or cabal) led the way in this regard; North

Central Positronics, it called itself. Yet, despite a tremendous increase in available facts, there were remarkably few insights.

“Gunslinger, our many-times-great grandfathers conquered the disease-which-rots, which they called cancer, almost conquered aging, walked on the moon—”

“I don’t believe that,” the gunslinger said flatly.

To this the man in black merely smiled and answered, “You needn’t. Yet it was so. They made or discovered a hundred other marvelous baubles. But this wealth of information produced little or no insight. There were no great odes written to the wonders of artificial insemination—having babies from frozen mansperm—or to the cars that ran on power from the sun. Few if any seemed to have grasped the truest principle of reality: new knowledge leads always to yet more awesome mysteries. Greater physiological knowledge of the brain makes the existence of the soul less possible yet more probable by the nature of the search. Do you see? Of course you don’t. You’ve reached the limits of your ability to comprehend. But never mind—that’s beside the point.”

“What *is* the point, then?”

“The greatest mystery the universe offers is not life but size. Size encompasses life, and the Tower encompasses size. The child, who is most at home with wonder, says: Daddy, what is above the sky? And the father says: The darkness of space. The child: What is beyond space? The father: The galaxy. The child: Beyond the galaxy? The father: Another galaxy. The child: Beyond the other galaxies? The father: No one knows.

“You see? Size defeats us. For the fish, the lake in which he lives is the universe. What does the fish think when he is jerked up by the mouth through the silver limits of existence and into a new universe where the air drowns him and the light is blue madness? Where huge bipeds with no gills stuff it into a suffocating box and cover it with wet weeds to die?

“Or one might take the tip of a pencil and magnify it. One reaches the point where a stunning realization strikes home: The pencil-tip is not solid; it is composed of atoms which whirl and revolve like a trillion demon planets. What seems solid to us is actually only a loose net held together by gravity. Viewed at their actual size, the

distances between these atoms might become leagues, gulfs, aeons. The atoms themselves are composed of nuclei and revolving protons and electrons. One may step down further to subatomic particles. And then to what? Tachyons? Nothing? Of course not. Everything in the universe denies nothing; to suggest an ending is the one absurdity.

“If you fell outward to the limit of the universe, would you find a board fence and signs reading DEAD END? No. You might find something hard and rounded, as the chick must see the egg from the inside. And if you should peck through that shell (or find a door), what great and torrential light might shine through your opening at the end of space? Might you look through and discover our entire universe is but part of one atom on a blade of grass? Might you be forced to think that by burning a twig you incinerate an eternity of eternities? That existence rises not to one infinite but to an infinity of them?

“Perhaps you saw what place our universe plays in the scheme of things—as no more than an atom in a blade of grass. Could it be that everything we can perceive, from the microscopic virus to the distant Horsehead Nebula, is contained in one blade of grass that may have existed for only a single season in an alien time-flow? What if that blade should be cut off by a scythe? When it begins to die, would the rot seep into our own universe and our own lives, turning everything yellow and brown and desiccated? Perhaps it’s already begun to happen. We say the world has moved on; maybe we really mean that it has begun to dry up.

“Think how small such a concept of things makes us, gunslinger! If a God watches over it all, does He actually mete out justice for a race of gnats among an infinitude of races of gnats? Does His eye see the sparrow fall when the sparrow is less than a speck of hydrogen floating disconnected in the depth of space? And if He does see . . . what must the nature of such a God be? Where does He live? How is it possible to live beyond infinity?

“Imagine the sand of the Mohaine Desert, which you crossed to find me, and imagine a trillion universes—not worlds but *universes*—encapsulated in each grain of that desert; and within each universe an infinity of others. We tower over these universes from our pitiful

grass vantage point; with one swing of your boot you may knock a billion billion worlds flying off into darkness, in a chain never to be completed.

“Size, gunslinger . . . *size* . . .

“Yet suppose further. Suppose that all worlds, all universes, met in a single nexus, a single pylon, a Tower. And within it, a stairway, perhaps rising to the Godhead itself. Would you dare climb to the top, gunslinger? Could it be that somewhere above all of endless reality, there exists a Room? . . .

“You dare not.”

And in the gunslinger’s mind, those words echoed: *You dare not.*

VI

“Someone has dared,” the gunslinger said.

“Who would that be?”

“God,” the gunslinger said softly. His eyes gleamed. “God has dared . . . or the king you spoke of . . . or . . . is the room empty, seer?”

“I don’t know.” Fear passed over the man in black’s bland face, as soft and dark as a buzzard’s wing. “And, furthermore, I don’t ask. It might be unwise.”

“Afraid of being struck dead?”

“Perhaps afraid of . . . an accounting.”

The man in black was silent for a while. The night was very long. The Milky Way sprawled above them in great splendor, yet terrifying in the emptiness between its burning lamps. The gunslinger wondered what he would feel if that inky sky should split open and let in a torrent of light.

“The fire,” he said. “I’m cold.”

“Build it up yourself,” said the man in black. “It’s the butler’s night off.”

VII

The gunslinger drowsed awhile and awoke to see the man in black regarding him avidly, unhealthily.

“What are you staring at?” An old saying of Cort’s occurred to him. “Do you see your sister’s bum?”

“I’m staring at you, of course.”

“Well, don’t.” He poked up the fire, ruining the precision of the ideogram. “I don’t like it.” He looked to the east to see if there was the beginning of light, but this night went on and on.

“You seek the light so soon.”

“I was made for light.”

“Ah, so you were! And so impolite of me to forget the fact! Yet we have much to discuss yet, you and I. For so has it been told to me by my king and master.”

“Who is this king?”

The man in black smiled. “Shall we tell the truth then, you and I? No more lies?”

“I thought we had been.”

But the man in black persisted as if Roland hadn’t spoken. “Shall there be truth between us, as two men? Not as friends, but as equals? There is an offer you will get rarely, Roland. Only equals speak the truth, that’s my thought on’t. Friends and lovers lie endlessly, caught in the web of regard. How tiresome!”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to tire you, so let us speak the truth.” He had never spoken less on this night. “Start by telling me what exactly you mean by glammer.”

“Why, enchantment, gunslinger! My king’s enchantment has prolonged this night and will prolong it until our palaver is done.”

“How long will that be?”

“Long. I can tell you no better. I do not know myself.” The man in black stood over the fire, and the glowing embers made patterns on his face. “Ask. I will tell you what I know. You have caught me. It is fair; I did not think you would. Yet your quest has only begun. Ask. It will lead us to business soon enough.”

“Who is your king?”

“I have never seen him, but you must. But before you meet him, you must first meet the Ageless Stranger.” The man in black smiled

spitelessly. "You must slay him, gunslinger. Yet I think it is not what you wished to ask."

"If you've never seen your king and master, how do you know him?"

"He comes to me in dreams. As a stripling he came to me, when I lived, poor and unknown, in a far land. A sheaf of centuries ago he imbued me with my duty and promised me my reward, although there were many errands in my youth and the days of my manhood, before my apotheosis. You are that apotheosis, gunslinger. You are my climax." He tittered. "You see, someone has taken you seriously."

"And this Stranger, does he have a name?"

"O, he is named."

"And what is his name?"

"Legion," the man in black said softly, and somewhere in the easterly darkness where the mountains lay, a rockslide punctuated his words and a puma screamed like a woman. The gunslinger shivered and the man in black flinched. "Yet I do not think that is what you wished to ask, either. It is not your nature to think so far ahead."

The gunslinger knew the question; it had gnawed him all this night, and he thought, for years before. It trembled on his lips but he didn't ask it . . . not yet.

"This Stranger is a minion of the Tower? Like yourself?"

"Yar. He *darkles*. He *tincts*. He is in all times. Yet there is one greater than he."

"Who?"

"Ask me no more!" the man in black cried. His voice aspired to sternness and crumbled into beseechment. "I know not! I do not wish to know. To speak of the things in End-World is to speak of the ruination of one's own soul."

"And beyond the Ageless Stranger is the Tower and whatever the Tower contains?"

"Yes," whispered the man in black. "But none of these things are what you wish to ask."

True.

"All right," the gunslinger said, and then asked the world's oldest question. "Will I succeed? Will I win through?"

“If I answered that question, gunslinger, you’d kill me.”

“I *ought* to kill you. You need killing.” His hands had dropped to the worn butts of his guns.

“Those do not open doors, gunslinger; those only close them forever.”

“Where must I go?”

“Start west. Go to the sea. Where the world ends is where you must begin. There was a man who gave you advice . . . the man you bested so long ago—”

“Yes, Cort,” the gunslinger interrupted impatiently.

“The advice was to wait. It was bad advice. For even then my plans against your father had proceeded. He sent you away and when you returned—”

“I’d not hear you speak of that,” the gunslinger said, and in his mind he heard his mother singing: *Baby-bunting, baby dear, baby bring your basket here.*

“Then hear this: when you returned, Marten had gone west, to join the rebels. So all said, anyway, and so you believed. Yet he and a certain witch left you a trap and you fell into it. Good boy! And although Marten was long gone by then, there was a man who sometimes made you think of him, was there not? A man who affected the dress of a monk and the shaven head of a penitent—”

“Walter,” the gunslinger whispered. And although he had come so far in his musings, the bald truth still amazed him. “*You*. Marten never left at all.”

The man in black tittered. “At your service.”

“I ought to kill you now.”

“That would hardly be fair. Besides, all of that was long ago. Now comes the time of sharing.”

“You never left,” the gunslinger repeated, stunned. “You only changed.”

“Sit,” the man in black invited. “I’ll tell you stories, as many as you would hear. Your own stories, I think, will be much longer.”

“I don’t talk of myself,” the gunslinger muttered.

“Yet tonight you must. So that we may understand.”

“Understand what? My purpose? You know that. To find the Tower is my purpose. I’m sworn.”

“Not your purpose, gunslinger. Your mind. Your slow, prodding, tenacious mind. There has never been one quite like it, in all the history of the world. Perhaps in the history of creation.

“This is the time of speaking. This is the time of histories.”

“Then speak.”

The man in black shook the voluminous arm of his robe. A foil-wrapped package fell out and caught the dying embers in many reflective folds.

“Tobacco, gunslinger. Would you smoke?”

He had been able to resist the rabbit, but he could not resist this. He opened the foil with eager fingers. There was fine crumbled tobacco inside, and green leaves to wrap it in, amazingly moist. He had not seen such tobacco for ten years.

He rolled two cigarettes and bit the ends of each to release the flavor. He offered one to the man in black, who took it. Each of them took a burning twig from the fire.

The gunslinger lit his cigarette and drew the aromatic smoke deep into his lungs, closing his eyes to concentrate the senses. He blew out with long, slow satisfaction.

“Is it good?” the man in black inquired.

“Yes. Very good.”

“Enjoy it. It may be the last smoke for you in a very long time.”

The gunslinger took this impassively.

“Very well,” the man in black said. “To begin then:

“You must understand the Tower has always been, and there have always been boys who know of it and lust for it, more than power or riches or women . . . boys who look for the doors that lead to it . . .”

VIII

There was talk then, a night’s worth of talk and God alone knew how much more (or how much was true), but the gunslinger remembered little of it later . . . and to his oddly practical mind, little of it seemed to matter. The man in black told him again that he must go to the sea,

which lay no more than twenty easy miles to the west, and there he would be invested with the power of *drawing*.

“But that’s not exactly right, either,” the man in black said, pitching his cigarette into the remains of the campfire. “No one wants to invest you with a power of any kind, gunslinger; it is simply *in* you, and I am compelled to tell you, partly because of the sacrifice of the boy, and partly because it is the law; the natural law of things. Water must run downhill, and you must be told. You will draw three, I understand . . . but I don’t really care, and I don’t really want to know.”

“The three,” the gunslinger murmured, thinking of the Oracle.

“And then the fun begins! But, by then, I’ll be long gone. Goodbye, gunslinger. My part is done now. The chain is still in your hands. ‘Ware it doesn’t wrap itself around your neck.”

Compelled by something outside him, Roland said, “You have one more thing to say, don’t you?”

“Yes,” the man in black said, and he smiled at the gunslinger with his depthless eyes and stretched one of his hands out toward him. “Let there be light.”

And there was light, and this time the light was good.

IX

Roland awoke by the ruins of the campfire to find himself ten years older. His black hair had thinned at the temples and there had gone the gray of cobwebs at the end of autumn. The lines in his face were deeper, his skin rougher.

The remains of the wood he had carried had turned to something like stone, and the man in black was a laughing skeleton in a rotting black robe, more bones in this place of bones, one more skull in this golgotha.

Or is it really you? he thought. *I have my doubts, Walter o’ Dim . . . I have my doubts, Marten-that-was.*

He stood up and looked around. Then, with a sudden quick gesture, he reached toward the remains of his companion of the

night before (if it was indeed the remains of Walter), a night that had somehow lasted ten years. He broke off the grinning jawbone and jammed it carelessly into the left hip pocket of his jeans—a fitting enough replacement for the one lost under the mountains.

“How many lies did you tell me?” he asked. Many, he was sure, but what made them good lies was that they had been mixed with the truth.

The Tower. Somewhere ahead, it waited for him—the nexus of Time, the nexus of Size.

He began west again, his back set against the sunrise, heading toward the ocean, realizing that a great passage of his life had come and gone. “I loved you, Jake,” he said aloud.

The stiffness wore out of his body and he began to walk more rapidly. By that evening he had come to the end of the land. He sat on a beach which stretched left and right forever, deserted. The waves beat endlessly against the shore, pounding and pounding. The setting sun painted the water in a wide strip of fool’s gold.

There the gunslinger sat, his face turned up into the fading light. He dreamed his dreams and watched as the stars came out; his purpose did not flag, nor did his heart falter; his hair, finer now and gray at the temples, blew around his head, and the sandalwood-inlaid guns of his father lay smooth and deadly against his hips, and he was lonely but did not find loneliness in any way a bad or ignoble thing. The dark came down and the world moved on. The gunslinger waited for the time of the *drawing* and dreamed his long dreams of the Dark Tower, to which he would someday come at dusk and approach, winding his horn, to do some unimaginable final battle.



* For a fuller discussion of the Bullshit Factor, see *On Writing*, published by Scribner's in 2000.

* Those bound by destiny.

* One example of this will probably serve for all. In the previously issued text of *The Gunslinger*, Farson is the name of a town. In later volumes, it somehow became the name of a *man*: the rebel John Farson, who engineers the fall of Gilead, the city-state where Roland spends his childhood.

STEPHEN
KING

THE
DRAWING
OF THE
THREE

THE DARK TOWER



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

THE DRAWING OF THE THREE

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ALSO BY STEPHEN KING

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'Salem's Lot
The Shining
The Stand
The Dead Zone
Firestarter
Cujo

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Pet Sematary
Cycle of the Werewolf
The Talisman (*with Peter Straub*)
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The Eyes of the Dragon
Misery
The Tommyknockers

THE DARK TOWER III:

The Waste Lands
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Desperation
The Green Mile

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On Writing

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who's taken a chance on these *novels*,
one by one.

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INTRODUCTION

On Being Nineteen

(and a Few Other Things)

1

Hobbits were big when I was nineteen (a number of some import in the stories you are about to read).

There were probably half a dozen Merrys and Pippins slogging through the mud at Max Yasgur's farm during the Great Woodstock Music Festival, twice as many Frodos, and hippie Gandalfs without number. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was madly popular in those days, and while I never made it to Woodstock (say sorry), I suppose I was at least a halfling-hippie. Enough of one, at any rate, to have read the books and fallen in love with them. The *Dark Tower* books, like most long fantasy tales written by men and women of my generation (*The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, by Stephen Donaldson, and *The Sword of Shannara*, by Terry Brooks, are just two of many), were born out of Tolkien's.

But although I read the books in 1966 and 1967, I held off writing. I responded (and with rather touching wholeheartedness) to the sweep of Tolkien's imagination—to the ambition of his story—but I wanted to write my own kind of story, and had I started then, I would have written his. That, as the late Tricky Dick Nixon was fond of saying, would have been wrong. Thanks to Mr. Tolkien, the twentieth century had all the elves and wizards it needed.

In 1967, I didn't have any idea what my kind of story might be, but that didn't matter; I felt positive I'd know it when it passed me on the street. I was nineteen and arrogant. Certainly arrogant enough to feel I could wait a little while on my muse and my masterpiece (as I was sure it would be). At nineteen, it seems to me, one has a right to be arrogant; time has usually not begun its stealthy and rotten

subtractions. It takes away your hair and your jump-shot, according to a popular country song, but in truth it takes away a lot more than that. I didn't know it in 1966 and '67, and if I had, I wouldn't have cared. I could imagine—barely—being forty, but fifty? No. *Sixty?* Never! *Sixty* was out of the question. And at nineteen, that's just the way to be. Nineteen is the age where you say *Look out, world, I'm smokin' TNT and I'm drinkin' dynamite, so if you know what's good for ya, get out of my way—here comes Stevie.*

Nineteen's a selfish age and finds one's cares tightly circumscribed. I had a lot of reach, and I cared about that. I had a lot of ambition, and I cared about that. I had a typewriter that I carried from one shithole apartment to the next, always with a deck of smokes in my pocket and a smile on my face. The compromises of middle age were distant, the insults of old age over the horizon. Like the protagonist in that Bob Seger song they now use to sell the trucks, I felt endlessly powerful and endlessly optimistic; my pockets were empty, but my head was full of things I wanted to say and my heart was full of stories I wanted to tell. Sounds corny now; felt wonderful then. Felt very cool. More than anything else I wanted to get inside my readers' defenses, wanted to rip them and ravish them and change them forever with nothing but story. And I felt I could do those things. I felt I had been *made* to do those things.

How conceited does that sound? A lot or a little? Either way, I don't apologize. I was nineteen. There was not so much as a strand of gray in my beard. I had three pairs of jeans, one pair of boots, the idea that the world was my oyster, and nothing that happened in the next twenty years proved me wrong. Then, around the age of thirty-nine, my troubles set in: drink, drugs, a road accident that changed the way I walked (among other things). I've written about them at length and need not write about them here. Besides, it's the same for you, right? The world eventually sends out a mean-ass Patrol Boy to slow your progress and show you who's boss. You reading this have undoubtedly met yours (or will); I met mine, and I'm sure he'll be back. He's got my address. He's a mean guy, a Bad Lieutenant, the sworn enemy of goofery, fuckery, pride, ambition, loud music, and all things nineteen.

But I still think that's a pretty fine age. Maybe the best age. You can rock and roll all night, but when the music dies out and the beer wears off, you're able to think. And dream big dreams. The mean Patrol Boy cuts you down to size eventually, and if you start out small, why, there's almost nothing left but the cuffs of your pants when he's done with you. "Got another one!" he shouts, and strides on with his citation book in his hand. So a little arrogance (or even a lot) isn't such a bad thing, although your mother undoubtedly told you different. Mine did. *Pride goeth before a fall, Stephen*, she said . . . and then I found out—right around the age that is 19×2 —that eventually you fall down, anyway. Or get pushed into the ditch. At nineteen they can card you in the bars and tell you to get the fuck out, put your sorry act (and sorrier ass) back on the street, but they can't card you when you sit down to paint a picture, write a poem, or tell a story, by God, and if you reading this happen to be very young, don't let your elders and supposed betters tell you any different. Sure, you've never been to Paris. No, you never ran with the bulls at Pamplona. Yes, you're a pissant who had no hair in your armpits until three years ago—but so what? If you don't start out too big for your britches, how are you gonna fill 'em when you grow up? Let it rip regardless of what anybody tells you, that's my idea; sit down and *smoke* that baby.

2

I think novelists come in two types, and that includes the sort of fledgling novelist I was by 1970. Those who are bound for the more literary or "serious" side of the job examine every possible subject in light of this question: *What would writing this sort of story mean to me?* Those whose destiny (or ka, if you like) is to include the writing of popular novels are apt to ask a very different one: *What would writing this sort of story mean to others?* The "serious" novelist is looking for answers and keys to the self; the "popular" novelist is looking for an audience. Both kinds of writer are equally selfish. I've known a good many, and will set my watch and warrant upon it.

Anyway, I believe that even at the age of nineteen, I recognized the story of Frodo and his efforts to rid himself of the One Great Ring as one belonging to the second group. They were the adventures of an essentially British band of pilgrims set against a backdrop of vaguely Norse mythology. I liked the idea of the quest—*loved* it, in fact—but I had no interest in either Tolkien's sturdy peasant characters (that's not to say I didn't like them, because I did) or his bosky Scandinavian settings. If I tried going in that direction, I'd get it all wrong.

So I waited. By 1970 I was twenty-two, the first strands of gray had showed up in my beard (I think smoking two and a half packs of Pall Malls a day probably had something to do with that), but even at twenty-two, one can afford to wait. At twenty-two, time is still on one's side, although even then that bad old Patrol Boy's in the neighborhood and asking questions.

Then, in an almost completely empty movie theater (the Bijou, in Bangor, Maine, if it matters), I saw a film directed by Sergio Leone. It was called *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and before the film was even half over, I realized that what I wanted to write was a novel that contained Tolkien's sense of quest and magic, but set against Leone's almost absurdly majestic Western backdrop. If you've only seen this gonzo Western on your television screen, you don't understand what I'm talking about—cry your pardon, but it's true. On a movie screen, projected through the correct Panavision lenses, *TG, TB, & TU* is an epic to rival *Ben-Hur*. Clint Eastwood appears roughly eighteen feet tall, with each wiry jut of stubble on his cheeks looking roughly the size of a young redwood tree. The grooves bracketing Lee Van Cleef's mouth are as deep as canyons, and there could be a thinny (see *Wizard and Glass*) at the bottom of each one. The desert settings appear to stretch at least out as far as the orbit of the planet Neptune. And the barrel of each gun looks to be roughly as large as the Holland Tunnel.

What I wanted even more than the setting was that feeling of epic, apocalyptic *size*. The fact that Leone knew jack shit about American geography (according to one of the characters, Chicago is somewhere in the vicinity of Phoenix, Arizona) added to the film's

sense of magnificent dislocation. And in my enthusiasm—the sort only a young person can muster, I think—I wanted to write not just a *long* book, but *the longest popular novel in history*. I did not succeed in doing that, but I feel I had a decent rip; *The Dark Tower*, Volumes One through Seven, really comprise a single tale, and the first four volumes run to just over two thousand pages in paperback. The final three volumes run another twenty-five hundred in manuscript. I'm not trying to imply here that length has anything whatsoever to do with quality; I'm just saying that I wanted to write an epic, and in some ways, I succeeded. If you were to ask me *why* I wanted to do that, I couldn't tell you. Maybe it's a part of growing up American: build the tallest, dig the deepest, write the longest. And that head-scratching puzzlement when the question of motivation comes up? Seems to me that that is also part of being an American. In the end we are reduced to saying *It seemed like a good idea at the time*.

3

Another thing about being nineteen, do it please ya: it is the age, I think, where a lot of us somehow get stuck (mentally and emotionally, if not physically). The years slide by and one day you find yourself looking into the mirror with real puzzlement. *Why are those lines on my face?* you wonder. *Where did that stupid potbelly come from? Hell, I'm only nineteen!* This is hardly an original concept, but that in no way subtracts from one's amazement.

Time puts gray in your beard, time takes away your jump-shot, and all the while you're thinking—silly you—that it's still on your side. The logical side of you knows better, but your heart refuses to believe it. If you're lucky, the Patrol Boy who cited you for going too fast and having too much fun also gives you a dose of smelling salts. That was more or less what happened to me near the end of the twentieth century. It came in the form of a Plymouth van that knocked me into the ditch beside a road in my hometown.

About three years after that accident I did a book signing for *From a Buick 8* at a Borders store in Dearborn, Michigan. When one guy

got to the head of the line, he said he was really, really glad that I was still alive. (I get this a lot, and it beats the *shit* out of “Why the hell didn’t you die?”)

“I was with this good friend of mine when we heard you got popped,” he said. “Man, we just started shaking our heads and saying ‘There goes the Tower, it’s tilting, it’s falling, ahhh, shit, he’ll never finish it now.’”

A version of the same idea had occurred to me—the troubling idea that, having built the Dark Tower in the collective imagination of a million readers, I might have a responsibility to make it safe for as long as people wanted to read about it. That might be for only five years; for all I know, it might be five hundred. Fantasy stories, the bad as well as the good (even now, someone out there is probably reading *Varney the Vampire* or *The Monk*), seem to have long shelf lives. Roland’s way of protecting the tower is to try to remove the threat to the Beams that hold the Tower up. I would have to do it, I realized after my accident, by finishing the gunslinger’s story.

During the long pauses between the writing and publication of the first four *Dark Tower* tales, I received hundreds of “pack your bags, we’re going on a guilt trip” letters. In 1998 (when I was laboring under the mistaken impression that I was still basically nineteen, in other words), I got one from an “82-yr-old Gramma, don’t mean to Bother You w/My Troubles BUT!! very Sick These Days.” The Gramma told me she probably had only a year to live (“14 Mo’s at Outside, Cancer all thru Me”), and while she didn’t expect me to finish Roland’s tale in that time just for her, she wanted to know if I couldn’t please (*please*) just tell her how it came out. The line that wrenched my heart (although not quite enough to start writing again) was her promise to “not tell a Single Soul.” A year later—probably after the accident that landed me in the hospital—one of my assistants, Marsha DiFilippo, got a letter from a fellow on death row in either Texas or Florida, wanting to know essentially the same thing: how does it come out? (He promised to take the secret to the grave with him, which gave me the creeps.)

I would have given both of these folks what they wanted—a summary of Roland’s further adventures—if I could have done, but

alas, I couldn't. I had no idea of how things were going to turn out with the gunslinger and his friends. To know, I have to write. I once had an outline, but I lost it along the way. (It probably wasn't worth a tin shit, anyway.) All I had was a few notes ("Chussit, chissit, chassit, something-something-basket") reads one lying on the desk as I write this). Eventually, starting in July of 2001, I began to write again. I knew by then I was no longer nineteen, nor exempt from any of the ills to which the flesh is heir. I knew I was going to be sixty, maybe even seventy. And I wanted to finish my story before the bad Patrol Boy came for the last time. I had no urge to be filed away with *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

The result—for better or worse—lies before you, Constant Reader, whether you reading this are starting with Volume One or are preparing for Volume Five. Like it or hate it, the story of Roland is now done. I hope you enjoy it.

As for me, I had the time of my life.

Stephen King

January 25, 2003

RENEWAL

Argument

The Drawing of the Three is the second volume of a long tale called *The Dark Tower*, a tale inspired by and to some degree dependent upon Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (which in its turn owes a debt to *King Lear*).

The first volume, *The Gunslinger*, tells how Roland, the last gunslinger of a world which has "moved on," finally catches up with the man in black . . . a sorcerer he has chased for a very long time—just *how* long we do not yet know. The man in black turns out to be a fellow named Walter, who falsely claimed the friendship of Roland's father in those days before the world moved on.

Roland's goal is not this half-human creature but the Dark Tower; the man in black—and, more specifically, what the man in black *knows*—is his first step on his road to that mysterious place.

Who, exactly, is Roland? What was his world like before it "moved on"? What is the Tower, and why does he pursue it? We have only fragmentary answers. Roland is a gunslinger, a kind of knight, one of those charged with holding a world Roland remembers as being "filled with love and light" as it is; to keep it from moving on.

We know that Roland was forced to an early trial of manhood after discovering that his mother had become the mistress of Marten, a much greater sorcerer than Walter (who, unknown to Roland's father, is Marten's ally); we know Marten has planned Roland's discovery, expecting Roland to fail and to be "sent West" we know that Roland triumphs in his test.

What else do we know? That the gunslinger's world is not completely unlike our own. Artifacts such as gasoline pumps and certain songs ("Hey Jude," for instance, or the bit of doggerel that begins "Beans, beans, the musical fruit . . .") have survived; so have customs and rituals oddly like those from our own romanticized view of the American west.

And there is an umbilicus which somehow connects our world to the world of the gunslinger. At a way-station on a long-deserted coach-road in a great and sterile desert, Roland meets a boy named Jake who *died* in our world. A boy who was, in fact, pushed from a street-corner by the ubiquitous (and iniquitous) man in black. The last thing Jake, who was on his way to school with his book-bag in one hand and his lunch-box in the other, remembers of his world—*our* world—is being crushed beneath the wheels of a Cadillac . . . and dying.

Before reaching the man in black, Jake dies again . . . this time because the gunslinger, faced with the second-most agonizing choice of his life, elects to sacrifice this symbolic son. Given a choice between the Tower and child, possibly between damnation and salvation, Roland chooses the Tower.

“Go, then,” Jake tells him before plunging into the abyss. “There are other worlds than these.”

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs in a dusty golgotha of decaying bones. The dark man tells Roland’s future with a deck of Tarot cards. These cards, showing a man called The Prisoner, a woman called The Lady of Shadows, and a darker shape that is simply Death (“but not for you, gunslinger,” the man in black tells him), are prophecies which become the subject of this volume . . . and Roland’s second step on the long and difficult path to the Dark Tower.

The Gunslinger ends with Roland sitting upon the beach of the Western Sea, watching the sunset. The man in black is dead, the gunslinger’s own future course unclear; *The Drawing of the Three* begins on that same beach, less than seven hours later.

PROLOGUE

THE SAILOR



PROLOGUE

The gunslinger came awake from a confused dream which seemed to consist of a single image: that of the Sailor in the Tarot deck from which the man in black had dealt (or purported to deal) the gunslinger's own moaning future.

He drowns, gunslinger, the man in black was saying, *and no one throws out the line. The boy Jake.*

But this was no nightmare. It was a good dream. It was good because *he* was the one drowning, and that meant he was not Roland at all but Jake, and he found this a relief because it would be far better to drown as Jake than to live as himself, a man who had, for a cold dream, betrayed a child who had trusted him.

Good, all right, I'll drown, he thought, listening to the roar of the sea. *Let me drown.* But this was not the sound of the open deeps; it was the grating sound of water with a throatful of stones. *Was he the Sailor?* If so, why was land so close? And, in fact, was he not *on* the land? It felt as if—

Freezing cold water doused his boots and ran up his legs to his crotch. His eyes flew open then, and what snapped him out of the dream wasn't his freezing balls, which had suddenly shrunk to what felt like the size of walnuts, nor even the horror to his right, but the thought of his guns . . . his guns, and even more important, his shells. Wet guns could be quickly disassembled, wiped dry, oiled, wiped dry again, oiled again, and re-assembled; wet shells, like wet matches, might or might not ever be usable again.

The horror was a crawling thing which must have been cast up by a previous wave. It dragged a wet, gleaming body laboriously along the sand. It was about four feet long and about four yards to the right. It regarded Roland with bleak eyes on stalks. Its long serrated beak dropped open and it began to make a noise that was weirdly like human speech: plaintive, even desperate questions in an alien tongue.

"Did-a-chick? Dum-a-chum? Dad-a-cham? Ded-a-check?"

The gunslinger had seen lobsters. This wasn't one, although lobsters were the only things he had ever seen which this creature even vaguely resembled. It didn't seem afraid of him at all. The gunslinger didn't know if it was dangerous or not. He didn't care about his own mental confusion—his temporary inability to remember where he was or how he had gotten there, if he had actually caught the man in black or if all that had only been a dream. He only knew he had to get away from the water before it could drown his shells.

He heard the grinding, swelling roar of water and looked from the creature (it had stopped and was holding up the claws with which it had been pulling itself along, looking absurdly like a boxer assuming his opening stance, which, Cort had taught them, was called The Honor Stance) to the incoming breaker with its curdle of foam.

It hears the wave, the gunslinger thought. *Whatever it is, it's got ears*. He tried to get up, but his legs, too numb to feel, buckled under him.

I'm still dreaming, he thought, but even in his current confused state this was a belief much too tempting to really be believed. He tried to get up again, almost made it, then fell back. The wave was breaking. There was no time again. He had to settle for moving in much the same way the creature on his right seemed to move: he dug in with both hands and dragged his butt up the stony shingle, away from the wave.

He didn't progress enough to avoid the wave entirely, but he got far enough for his purposes. The wave buried nothing but his boots. It reached almost to his knees and then retreated. *Perhaps the first one didn't go as far as I thought. Perhaps—*

There was a half-moon in the sky. A caul of mist covered it, but it shed enough light for him to see that the holsters were too dark. The guns, at least, had suffered a wetting. It was impossible to tell how bad it had been, or if either the shells currently in the cylinders or those in the crossed gunbelts had also been wetted. Before checking, he had to get away from the water. Had to—

"Dod-a-chock?" This was much closer. In his worry over the water he had forgotten the creature the water had cast up. He looked

around and saw it was now only four feet away. Its claws were buried in the stone- and shell-littered sand of the shingle, pulling its body along. It lifted its meaty, serrated body, making it momentarily resemble a scorpion, but Roland could see no stinger at the end of its body.

Another grinding roar, this one much louder. The creature immediately stopped and raised its claws into its own peculiar version of the Honor Stance again.

This wave was bigger. Roland began to drag himself up the slope of the strand again, and when he put out his hands, the clawed creature moved with a speed of which its previous movements had not even hinted.

The gunslinger felt a bright flare of pain in his right hand, but there was no time to think about that now. He pushed with the heels of his soggy boots, clawed with his hands, and managed to get away from the wave.

“Did-a-chick?” the monstrosity enquired in its plaintive *Won’t you help me? Can’t you see I am desperate?* voice, and Roland saw the stumps of the first and second fingers of his right hand disappearing into the creature’s jagged beak. It lunged again and Roland lifted his dripping right hand just in time to save his remaining two fingers.

“Dum-a-chum? Dad-a-cham?”

The gunslinger staggered to his feet. The thing tore open his dripping jeans, tore through a boot whose old leather was soft but as tough as iron, and took a chunk of meat from Roland’s lower calf.

He drew with his right hand, and realized two of the fingers needed to perform this ancient killing operation were gone only when the revolver thumped to the sand.

The monstrosity snapped at it greedily.

“No, bastard!” Roland snarled, and kicked it. It was like kicking a block of rock . . . one that bit. It tore away the end of Roland’s right boot, tore away most of his great toe, tore the boot itself from his foot.

The gunslinger bent, picked up his revolver, dropped it, cursed, and finally managed. What had once been a thing so easy it didn’t

even bear thinking about had suddenly become a trick akin to juggling.

The creature was crouched on the gunslinger's boot, tearing at it as it asked its garbled questions. A wave rolled toward the beach, the foam which curdled its top looking pallid and dead in the netted light of the half-moon. The lobstrosity stopped working on the boot and raised its claws in that boxer's pose.

Roland drew with his left hand and pulled the trigger three times. *Click, click, click.*

Now he knew about the shells in the chambers, at least.

He holstered the left gun. To holster the right he had to turn its barrel downward with his left hand and then let it drop into its place. Blood slimed the worn ironwood handgrips; blood spotted the holster and the old jeans to which the holster was thong-tied. It poured from the stumps where his fingers used to be.

His mangled right foot was still too numb to hurt, but his right hand was a bellowing fire. The ghosts of talented and long-trained fingers which were already decomposing in the digestive juices of that thing's guts screamed that they were still there, that they were burning.

I see serious problems ahead, the gunslinger thought remotely.

The wave retreated. The monstrosity lowered its claws, tore a fresh hole in the gunslinger's boot, and then decided the wearer had been a good deal more tasty than this bit of skin it had somehow sloughed off.

"Dud-a-chum?" it asked, and scurried toward him with ghastly speed. The gunslinger retreated on legs he could barely feel, realizing that the creature must have some intelligence; it had approached him cautiously, perhaps from a long way down the strand, not sure what he was or of what he might be capable. If the dousing wave hadn't wakened him, the thing would have torn off his face while he was still deep in his dream. Now it had decided he was not only tasty but vulnerable; easy prey.

It was almost upon him, a thing four feet long and a foot high, a creature which might weigh as much as seventy pounds and which

was as single-mindedly carnivorous as David, the hawk he had had as a boy—but without David's dim vestige of loyalty.

The gunslinger's left bootheel struck a rock jutting from the sand and he tottered on the edge of falling.

"Dod-a-chock?" the thing asked, solicitously it seemed, and peered at the gunslinger from its stalky, waving eyes as its claws reached . . . and then a wave came, and the claws went up again in the Honor Stance. Yet now they wavered the slightest bit, and the gunslinger realized that it responded to the sound of the wave, and now the sound was—for it, at least—fading a bit.

He stepped backward over the rock, then bent down as the wave broke upon the shingle with its grinding roar. His head was inches from the insectile face of the creature. One of its claws might easily have slashed the eyes from his face, but its trembling claws, so like clenched fists, remained raised to either side of its parrotlike beak.

The gunslinger reached for the stone over which he had nearly fallen. It was large, half-buried in the sand, and his mutilated right hand howled as bits of dirt and sharp edges of pebble ground into the open bleeding flesh, but he yanked the rock free and raised it, his lips pulled away from his teeth.

"Dad-a—" the monstrosity began, its claws lowering and opening as the wave broke and its sound receded, and the gunslinger swept the rock down upon it with all his strength.

There was a crunching noise as the creature's segmented back broke. It lashed wildly beneath the rock, its rear half lifting and thudding, lifting and thudding. Its interrogatives became buzzing exclamations of pain. Its claws opened and shut upon nothing. Its maw of a beak gnashed up clots of sand and pebbles.

And yet, as another wave broke, it tried to raise its claws again, and when it did the gunslinger stepped on its head with his remaining boot. There was a sound like many small dry twigs being broken. Thick fluid burst from beneath the heel of Roland's boot, splashing in two directions. It looked black. The thing arched and wriggled in a frenzy. The gunslinger planted his boot harder.

A wave came.

The monstrosity's claws rose an inch . . . two inches . . . trembled and then fell, twitching open and shut.

The gunslinger removed his boot. The thing's serrated beak, which had separated two fingers and one toe from his living body, slowly opened and closed. One antenna lay broken on the sand. The other trembled meaninglessly.

The gunslinger stamped down again. And again.

He kicked the rock aside with a grunt of effort and marched along the right side of the monstrosity's body, stamping methodically with his left boot, smashing its shell, squeezing its pale guts out onto dark gray sand. It was dead, but he meant to have his way with it all the same; he had never, in all his long strange time, been so fundamentally hurt, and it had all been so unexpected.

He kept on until he saw the tip of one of his own fingers in the dead thing's sour mash, saw the white dust beneath the nail from the golgotha where he and the man in black had held their long palaver, and then he looked aside and vomited.

The gunslinger walked back toward the water like a drunken man, holding his wounded hand against his shirt, looking back from time to time to make sure the thing wasn't still alive, like some tenacious wasp you swat again and again and still twitches, stunned but not dead; to make sure it wasn't following, asking its alien questions in its deadly despairing voice.

Halfway down the shingle he stood swaying, looking at the place where he had been, remembering. He had fallen asleep, apparently, just below the high tide line. He grabbed his purse and his torn boot.

In the moon's glabrous light he saw other creatures of the same type, and in the caesura between one wave and the next, heard their questioning voices.

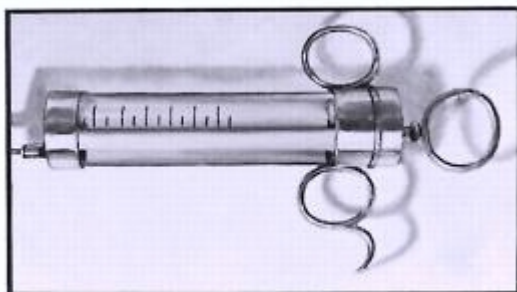
The gunslinger retreated a step at a time, retreated until he reached the grassy edge of the shingle. There he sat down, and did all he knew to do: he sprinkled the stumps of fingers and toe with the last of his tobacco to stop the bleeding, sprinkled it thick in spite of the new stinging (his missing great toe had joined the chorus), and then he only sat, sweating in the chill, wondering about infection, wondering how he would make his way in this world with two fingers

on his right hand gone (when it came to the guns both hands had been equal, but in all other things his right had ruled), wondering if the thing had some poison in its bite which might already be working its way into him, wondering if morning would ever come.



THE

PRISONER



CHAPTER 1

The Door

1

Three. This is the number of your fate.

Three?

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

Which three?

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

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

He tried to speak but his voice was gone, the voice of the oracle, Star-Slut, Whore of the Winds, both were gone; he saw a card fluttering down from nowhere to nowhere, turning and turning in the lazy dark. On it a baboon grinned from over the shoulder of a young man with dark hair; its disturbingly human fingers were buried so deeply in the young man's neck that their tips had disappeared in flesh. Looking more closely, the gunslinger saw the baboon held a whip in one of those clutching, strangling hands. The face of the ridden man seemed to writhe in wordless terror.

The Prisoner, the man in black (who had once been a man the gunslinger trusted, a man named Walter) whispered chummily. A trifle upsetting, isn't he? A trifle upsetting . . . a trifle upsetting . . . a trifle—

2

The gunslinger snapped awake, waving at something with his mutilated hand, sure that in a moment one of the monstrous shelled

things from the Western Sea would drop on him, desperately enquiring in its foreign tongue as it pulled his face off his skull.

Instead a sea-bird, attracted by the glister of the morning sun on the buttons of his shirt, wheeled away with a frightened squawk.

Roland sat up.

His hand throbbed wretchedly, endlessly. His right foot did the same. Both fingers and toe continued to insist they were there. The bottom half of his shirt was gone; what was left resembled a ragged vest. He had used one piece to bind his hand, the other to bind his foot.

Go away, he told the absent parts of his body. *You are ghosts now. Go away.*

It helped a little. Not much, but a little. They were ghosts, all right, but lively ghosts.

The gunslinger ate jerky. His mouth wanted it little, his stomach less, but he insisted. When it was inside him, he felt a little stronger. There was not much left, though; he was nearly up against it.

Yet things needed to be done.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and looked about. Birds swooped and dived, but the world seemed to belong to only him and them. The monstrosities were gone. Perhaps they were nocturnal; perhaps tidal. At the moment it seemed to make no difference.

The sea was enormous, meeting the horizon at a misty blue point that was impossible to determine. For a long moment the gunslinger forgot his agony in its contemplation. He had never seen such a body of water. Had heard of it in children's stories, of course, had even been assured by his teachers—some, at least—that it existed—but to actually see it, this immensity, this amazement of water after years of arid land, was difficult to accept . . . difficult to even see.

He looked at it for a long time, enrapt, *making* himself see it, temporarily forgetting his pain in wonder.

But it was morning, and there were still things to be done.

He felt for the jawbone in his back pocket, careful to lead with the palm of his right hand, not wanting the stubs of his fingers to encounter it if it was still there, changing that hand's ceaseless sobbing to screams.

It was.

All right.

Next.

He clumsily unbuckled his gunbelts and laid them on a sunny rock. He removed the guns, swung the chambers out, and removed the useless shells. He threw them away. A bird settled on the bright gleam tossed back by one of them, picked it up in its beak, then dropped it and flew away.

The guns themselves must be tended to, should have been tended to before this, but since no gun in this world or any other was more than a club without ammunition, he laid the gunbelts themselves over his lap before doing anything else and carefully ran his left hand over the leather.

Each of them was damp from buckle and clasp to the point where the belts would cross his hips; from that point they seemed dry. He carefully removed each shell from the dry portions of the belts. His right hand kept trying to do this job, insisted on forgetting its reduction in spite of the pain, and he found himself returning it to his knee again and again, like a dog too stupid or fractious to heel. In his distracted pain he came close to swatting it once or twice.

I see serious problems ahead, he thought again.

He put these shells, hopefully still good, in a pile that was dishearteningly small. Twenty. Of those, a few would almost certainly misfire. He could depend on none of them. He removed the rest and put them in another pile. Thirty-seven.

Well, you weren't heavy loaded, anyway, he thought, but he recognized the difference between fifty-seven live rounds and what might be twenty. Or ten. Or five. Or one. Or none.

He put the dubious shells in a second pile.

He still had his purse. That was one thing. He put it in his lap and then slowly disassembled his guns and performed the ritual of cleaning. By the time he was finished, two hours had passed and his pain was so intense his head reeled with it; conscious thought had become difficult. He wanted to sleep. He had never wanted that more in his life. But in the service of duty there was never any acceptable reason for denial.

“Cort,” he said in a voice that he couldn’t recognize, and laughed dryly.

Slowly, slowly, he reassembled his revolvers and loaded them with the shells he presumed to be dry. When the job was done, he held the one made for his left hand, cocked it . . . and then slowly lowered the hammer again. He wanted to know, yes. Wanted to know if there would be a satisfying report when he squeezed the trigger or only another of those useless clicks. But a click would mean nothing, and a report would only reduce twenty to nineteen . . . or nine . . . or three . . . or none.

He tore away another piece of his shirt, put the other shells—the ones which had been wetted—in it, and tied it, using his left hand and his teeth. He put them in his purse.

Sleep, his body demanded. Sleep, you must sleep, now, before dark, there’s nothing left, you’re used up—

He tottered to his feet and looked up and down the deserted strand. It was the color of an undergarment which has gone a long time without washing, littered with sea-shells which had no color. Here and there large rocks protruded from the gross-grained sand, and these were covered with guano, the older layers the yellow of ancient teeth, the fresher splotches white.

The high-tide line was marked with drying kelp. He could see pieces of his right boot and his waterskins lying near that line. He thought it almost a miracle that the skins hadn’t been washed out to sea by high-surfing waves. Walking slowly, limping exquisitely, the gunslinger made his way to where they were. He picked up one of them and shook it by his ear. The other was empty. This one still had a little water left in it. Most would not have been able to tell the difference between the two, but the gunslinger knew each just as well as a mother knows which of her identical twins is which. He had been travelling with these waterskins for a long, long time. Water sloshed inside. That was good—a gift. Either the creature which had attacked him or any of the others could have torn this or the other open with one casual bite or slice of claw, but none had and the tide had spared it. Of the creature itself there was no sign, although the two of them had finished far above the tide-line. Perhaps other

predators had taken it; perhaps its own kind had given it a burial at sea, as the *elaphaunts*, giant creatures of whom he had heard in childhood stories, were reputed to bury their own dead.

He lifted the waterskin with his left elbow, drank deeply, and felt some strength come back into him. The right boot was of course ruined . . . but then he felt a spark of hope. The foot itself was intact—scarred but intact—and it might be possible to cut the other down to match it, to make something which would last at least awhile. . . .

Faintness stole over him. He fought it but his knees unhinged and he sat down, stupidly biting his tongue.

You won't fall unconscious, he told himself grimly. *Not here, not where another of those things can come back tonight and finish the job.*

So he got to his feet and tied the empty skin about his waist, but he had only gone twenty yards back toward the place where he had left his guns and purse when he fell down again, half-fainting. He lay there awhile, one cheek pressed against the sand, the edge of a seashell biting against the edge of his jaw almost deep enough to draw blood. He managed to drink from the waterskin, and then he crawled back to the place where he had awakened. There was a Joshua tree twenty yards up the slope—it was stunted, but it would offer at least some shade.

To Roland the twenty yards looked like twenty miles.

Nonetheless, he laboriously pushed what remained of his possessions into that little puddle of shade. He lay there with his head in the grass, already fading toward what could be sleep or unconsciousness or death. He looked into the sky and tried to judge the time. Not noon, but the size of the puddle of shade in which he rested said noon was close. He held on a moment longer, turning his right arm over and bringing it close to his eyes, looking for the telltale red lines of infection, of some poison seeping steadily toward the middle of him.

The palm of his hand was a dull red. Not a good sign.

I jerk off left-handed, he thought, *at least that's something.*

Then darkness took him, and he slept for the next sixteen hours with the sound of the Western Sea pounding ceaselessly in his

dreaming ears.

3

When the gunslinger awoke again the sea was dark but there was faint light in the sky to the east. Morning was on its way. He sat up and waves of dizziness almost overcame him.

He bent his head and waited.

When the faintness had passed, he looked at his hand. It was infected, all right—a tell-tale red swelling that spread up the palm and to the wrist. It stopped there, but already he could see the faint beginnings of other red lines, which would lead eventually to his heart and kill him. He felt hot, feverish.

I need medicine, he thought. But there is no medicine here.

Had he come this far just to die, then? He would not. And if he were to die in spite of his determination, he would die on his way to the Tower.

How remarkable you are, gunslinger! the man in black tittered inside his head. *How indomitable! How romantic in your stupid obsession!*

“Fuck you,” he croaked, and drank. Not much water left, either. There was a whole sea in front of him, for all the good it could do him; water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. Never mind.

He buckled on his gunbelts, tied them—this was a process which took so long that before he was done the first faint light of dawn had brightened to the day’s actual prologue—and then tried to stand up. He was not convinced he could do it until it was done.

Holding to the Joshua tree with his left hand, he scooped up the not-quite-empty waterskin with his right arm and slung it over his shoulder. Then his purse. When he straightened, the faintness washed over him again and he put his head down, waiting, willing.

The faintness passed.

Walking with the weaving, wavering steps of a man in the last stages of ambulatory drunkenness, the gunslinger made his way back down to the strand. He stood, looking at an ocean as dark as

mulberry wine, and then took the last of his jerky from his purse. He ate half, and this time both mouth and stomach accepted a little more willingly. He turned and ate the other half as he watched the sun come up over the mountains where Jake had died—first seeming to catch on the cruel and treeless teeth of those peaks, then rising above them.

Roland held his face to the sun, closed his eyes, and smiled. He ate the rest of his jerky.

He thought: *Very well. I am now a man with no food, with two less fingers and one less toe than I was born with; I am a gunslinger with shells which may not fire; I am sickening from a monster's bite and have no medicine; I have a day's water if I'm lucky; I may be able to walk perhaps a dozen miles if I press myself to the last extremity. I am, in short, a man on the edge of everything.*

Which way should he walk? He had come from the east; he could not walk west without the powers of a saint or a savior. That left north and south.

North.

That was the answer his heart told. There was no question in it.

North.

The gunslinger began to walk.

4

He walked for three hours. He fell twice, and the second time he did not believe he would be able to get up again. Then a wave came toward him, close enough to make him remember his guns, and he was up before he knew it, standing on legs that quivered like stilts.

He thought he had managed about four miles in those three hours. Now the sun was growing hot, but not hot enough to explain the way his head pounded or the sweat pouring down his face; nor was the breeze from the sea strong enough to explain the sudden fits of shuddering which sometimes gripped him, making his body lump into gooseflesh and his teeth chatter.

Fever, gunslinger, the man in black tittered. What's left inside you has been touched afire.

The red lines of infection were more pronounced now; they had marched upward from his right wrist halfway to his elbow.

He made another mile and drained his waterbag dry. He tied it around his waist with the other. The landscape was monotonous and unpleasing. The sea to his right, the mountains to his left, the gray, shell-littered sand under the feet of his cut-down boots. The waves came and went. He looked for the lobstrosities and saw none. He walked out of nowhere toward nowhere, a man from another time who, it seemed, had reached a point of pointless ending.

Shortly before noon he fell again and knew he could not get up. This was the place, then. Here. This was the end, after all.

On his hands and knees, he raised his head like a groggy fighter . . . and some distance ahead, perhaps a mile, perhaps three (it was difficult to judge distances along the unchanging reach of the strand with the fever working inside him, making his eyeballs pulse in and out), he saw something new. Something which stood upright on the beach.

What was it?

(three)

Didn't matter.

(three is the number of your fate)

The gunslinger managed to get to his feet again. He croaked something, some plea which only the circling seabirds heard (*and how happy they would be to gobble my eyes from my head, he thought, how happy to have such a tasty bit!*), and walked on, weaving more seriously now, leaving tracks behind him that were weird loops and swoops.

He kept his eyes on whatever it was that stood on the strand ahead. When his hair fell in his eyes he brushed it aside. It seemed to grow no closer. The sun reached the roof of the sky, where it seemed to remain far too long. Roland imagined he was in the desert again, somewhere between the last outlander's hut (*the musical fruit the more you eat the more you toot*) and the way-station where the boy (*your Isaac*) had awaited his coming.

His knees buckled, straightened, buckled, straightened again. When his hair fell in his eyes once more he did not bother to push it back; did not have the strength to push it back. He looked at the object, which now cast a narrow shadow back toward the upland, and kept walking.

He could make it out now, fever or no fever.

It was a door.

Less than a quarter of a mile from it, Roland's knees buckled again and this time he could not stiffen their hinges. He fell, his right hand dragged across gritty sand and shells, the stumps of his fingers screamed as fresh scabs were scored away. The stumps began to bleed again.

So he crawled. Crawled with the steady rush, roar, and retreat of the Western Sea in his ears. He used his elbows and his knees, digging grooves in the sand above the twist of dirty green kelp which marked the high-tide line. He supposed the wind was still blowing—it must be, for the chills continued to whip through his body—but the only wind he could hear was the harsh gale which gusted in and out of his own lungs.

The door grew closer.

Closer.

At last, around three o'clock of that long delirious day, with his shadow beginning to grow long on his left, he reached it. He sat back on his haunches and regarded it wearily.

It stood six and a half feet high and appeared to be made of solid ironwood, although the nearest ironwood tree must grow seven hundred miles or more from here. The doorknob looked as if it were made of gold, and it was filigreed with a design which the gunslinger finally recognized: it was the grinning face of the baboon.

There was no keyhole in the knob, above it, or below it.

The door had hinges, but they were fastened to nothing—*or so it seems*, the gunslinger thought. *This is a mystery, a most marvellous mystery, but does it really matter? You are dying. Your own mystery—the only one that really matters to any man or woman in the end—approaches.*

All the same, it did seem to matter.

This door. This door where no door should be. It simply stood there on the gray strand twenty feet above the high-tide line, seemingly as eternal as the sea itself, now casting the slanted shadow of its thickness toward the east as the sun westered.

Written upon it in black letters two-thirds of the way up, written in the high speech, were two words:

THE PRISONER

A demon has infested him. The name of the demon is HEROIN.

The gunslinger could hear a low droning noise. At first he thought it must be the wind or a sound in his own feverish head, but he became more and more convinced that the sound was the sound of motors . . . and that it was coming from behind the door.

Open it then. It's not locked. You know it's not locked.

Instead he tottered gracelessly to his feet and walked above the door and around to the other side.

There *was* no other side.

Only the dark gray strand, stretching back and back. Only the waves, the shells, the high-tide line, the marks of his own approach—bootprints and holes that had been made by his elbows. He looked again and his eyes widened a little. The door wasn't here, but its shadow was.

He started to put out his right hand—oh, it was so slow learning its new place in what was left of his life—dropped it, and raised his left instead. He groped, feeling for hard resistance.

If I feel it I'll knock on nothing, the gunslinger thought. *That would be an interesting thing to do before dying!*

His hand encountered thin air far past the place where the door—even if invisible—should have been.

Nothing to knock on.

And the sound of motors—if that's what it really had been—was gone. Now there was just the wind, the waves, and the sick buzzing inside his head.

The gunslinger walked slowly back to the other side of what wasn't there, already thinking it had been a hallucination to start with, a—

He stopped.

At one moment he had been looking west at an uninterrupted view of a gray, rolling wave, and then his view was interrupted by the thickness of the door. He could see its keyplate, which also looked like gold, with the latch protruding from it like a stubby metal tongue. Roland moved his head an inch to the north and the door was gone. Moved it back to where it had been and it was there again. It did not *appear*; it was just there.

He walked all the way around and faced the door, swaying.

He could walk around on the sea side, but he was convinced that the same thing would happen, only this time he would fall down.

I wonder if I could go through it from the nothing side?

Oh, there were all sorts of things to wonder about, but the truth was simple: here stood this door alone on an endless stretch of beach, and it was for only one of two things: opening or leaving closed.

The gunslinger realized with dim humor that maybe he wasn't dying quite as fast as he thought. If he had been, would he feel this scared?

He reached out and grasped the doorknob with his left hand. Neither the deadly cold of the metal nor the thin, fiery heat of the runes engraved upon it surprised him.

He turned the knob. The door opened toward him when he pulled.

Of all the things he might have expected, this was not any of them.

The gunslinger looked, froze, uttered the first scream of terror in his adult life, and slammed the door. There was nothing for it to bang shut on, but it banged shut just the same, sending seabirds screeching up from the rocks on which they had perched to watch him.

5

What he had seen was the earth from some high, impossible distance in the sky—miles up, it seemed. He had seen the shadows of clouds lying upon that earth, floating across it like dreams. He had

seen what an eagle might see if one could fly thrice as high as any eagle could.

To step through such a door would be to fall, screaming, for what might be minutes, and to end by driving one's self deep into the earth.

No, you saw more.

He considered it as he sat stupidly on the sand in front of the closed door with his wounded hand in his lap. The first faint tracteries had appeared above his elbow now. The infection would reach his heart soon enough, no doubt about that.

It was the voice of Cort in his head.

Listen to me, maggots. Listen for your lives, for that's what it could mean some day. You never see all that you see. One of the things they send you to me for is to show you what you don't see in what you see—what you don't see when you're scared, or fighting, or running, or fucking. No man sees all that he sees, but before you're gunslingers—those of you who don't go west, that is—you'll see more in one single glance than some men see in a lifetime. And some of what you don't see in that glance you'll see afterwards, in the eye of your memory—if you live long enough to remember, that is. Because the difference between seeing and not seeing can be the difference between living and dying.

He had seen the earth from this huge height (and it had somehow been more dizzying and distorting than the vision of growth which had come upon him shortly before the end of his time with the man in black, because what he had seen through the door had been no vision), and what little remained of his attention had registered the fact that the land he was seeing was neither desert nor sea but some green place of incredible lushness with interstices of water that made him think it was a swamp, but—

What little remained of your attention, the voice of Cort mimicked savagely. You saw more!

Yes.

He had seen white.

White edges.

Bravo, Roland! Cort cried in his mind, and Roland seemed to feel the swat of that hard, callused hand. He winced.

He had been looking through a window.

The gunslinger stood with an effort, reached forward, felt cold and burning lines of thin heat against his palm. He opened the door again.

6

The view he had expected—that view of the earth from some horrendous, unimaginable height—was gone. He was looking at words he didn't understand. He *almost* understood them; it was as if the Great Letters had been twisted. . . .

Above the words was a picture of a horseless vehicle, a motor-car of the sort which had supposedly filled the world before it moved on. Suddenly he thought of the things Jake had said when, at the way station, the gunslinger had hypnotized him.

This horseless vehicle with a woman wearing a fur stole laughing beside it, could be whatever had run Jake over in that strange other world.

This is that other world, the gunslinger thought.

Suddenly the view . . .

It did not change; it *moved*. The gunslinger wavered on his feet, feeling vertigo and a touch of nausea. The words and the picture descended and now he saw an aisle with a double row of seats on the far side. A few were empty, but there were men in most of them, men in strange dress. He supposed they were suits, but he had never seen any like them before. The things around their necks could likewise be ties or cravats, but he had seen none like these, either. And, so far as he could tell, not one of them was armed—he saw no dagger nor sword, let alone a gun. What kind of trusting sheep were these? Some read papers covered with tiny words—words broken here and there with pictures—while others wrote on papers with pens of a sort the gunslinger had never seen. But the pens mattered little to him. It was the *paper*. He lived in a world

where paper and gold were valued in rough equivalency. He had never seen so much paper in his life. Even now one of the men tore a sheet from the yellow pad which lay upon his lap and crumpled it into a ball, although he had only written on the top half of one side and not at all on the other. The gunslinger was not too sick to feel a twinge of horror and outrage at such unnatural profligacy.

Beyond the men was a curved white wall and a row of windows. A few of these were covered by some sort of shutters, but he could see blue sky beyond others.

Now a woman approached the doorway, a woman wearing what looked like a uniform, but of no sort Roland had ever seen. It was bright red, and part of it was *pants*. He could see the place where her legs became her crotch. This was nothing he had ever seen on a woman who was not undressed.

She came so close to the door that Roland thought she would walk through, and he blundered back a step, lucky not to fall. She looked at him with the practiced solicitude of a woman who is at once a servant and no one's mistress but her own. This did not interest the gunslinger. What interested him was that her expression never changed. It was not the way you expected a woman—anybody, for that matter—to look at a dirty, swaying, exhausted man with revolvers crisscrossed on his hips, a blood-soaked rag wrapped around his right hand, and jeans which looked as if they'd been worked on with some kind of buzzsaw.

“Would you like . . .” the woman in red asked. There was more, but the gunslinger didn't understand exactly what it meant. Food or drink, he thought. That red cloth—it was not cotton. Silk? It looked a little like silk, but—

“Gin,” a voice answered, and the gunslinger understood that. Suddenly he understood much more:

It wasn't a door.

It was eyes.

Insane as it might seem, he was looking at part of a carriage that flew through the sky. He was looking through someone's eyes.

Whose?

But he knew. He was looking through the eyes of the prisoner.

CHAPTER 2

Eddie Dean

1

As if to confirm this idea, mad as it was, what the gunslinger was looking at through the doorway suddenly rose and slid sideways. The view *turned* (that feeling of vertigo again, a feeling of standing still on a plate with wheels under it, a plate which hands he could not see moved this way and that), and then the aisle was flowing past the edges of the doorway. He passed a place where several women, all dressed in the same red uniforms, stood. This was a place of steel things, and he would have liked to make the moving view stop in spite of his pain and exhaustion so he could see what the steel things were—machines of some sort. One looked a bit like an oven. The army woman he had already seen was pouring the gin which the voice had requested. The bottle she poured from was very small. It was glass. The vessel she was pouring it into *looked* like glass but the gunslinger didn't think it actually was.

What the doorway showed had moved along before he could see more. There was another of those dizzying turns and he was looking at a metal door. There was a lighted sign in a small oblong. This word the gunslinger could read. *VACANT*, it said.

The view slid down a little. A hand entered it from the right of the door the gunslinger was looking through and grasped the knob of the door the gunslinger was looking at. He saw the cuff of a blue shirt, slightly pulled back to reveal crisp curls of black hair. Long fingers. A ring on one of them, with a jewel set into it that might have been a ruby or a firedim or a piece of trumpery trash. The gunslinger rather thought it this last—it was too big and vulgar to be real.

The metal door swung open and the gunslinger was looking into the strangest privy he had ever seen. It was all metal.

The edges of the metal door flowed past the edges of the door on the beach. The gunslinger heard the sound of it being closed and latched. He was spared another of those giddy spins, so he supposed the man through whose eyes he was watching must have reached behind himself to lock himself in.

Then the view did turn—not all the way around but half—and he was looking into a mirror, seeing a face he had seen once before . . . on a Tarot card. The same dark eyes and spill of dark hair. The face was calm but pale, and in the eyes—eyes through which he saw now reflected back at him—Roland saw some of the dread and horror of that baboon-ridden creature on the Tarot card.

The man was shaking.

He's sick, too.

Then he remembered Nort, the weed-eater in Tull.

He thought of the Oracle.

A demon has infested him.

The gunslinger suddenly thought he might know what HEROIN was after all: something like the devil-grass.

A trifle upsetting, isn't he?

Without thought, with the simple resolve that had made him the last of them all, the last to continue marching on and on long after Cuthbert and the others had died or given up, committed suicide or treachery or simply recanted the whole idea of the Tower; with the single-minded and incurious resolve that had driven him across the desert and all the years before the desert in the wake of the man in black, the gunslinger stepped through the doorway.

2

Eddie ordered a gin and tonic—maybe not such a good idea to be going into New York Customs drunk, and he knew once he got started he would keep on going—but he had to have *something*.

When you got to get down and you can't find the elevator, Henry had told him once, you got to do it any way you can. Even if it's only with a shovel.

Then, after he'd given his order and the stewardess had left, he started to feel like he was maybe going to vomit. Not *for sure* going to vomit, only maybe, but it was better to be safe. Going through Customs with a pound of pure cocaine under each armpit with gin on your breath was not so good; going through Customs that way with puke drying on your pants would be disaster. So better to be safe. The feeling would probably pass, it usually did, but better to be safe.

Trouble was, he was going cool turkey. *Cool*, not cold. More words of wisdom from that great sage and eminent junkie Henry Dean.

They had been sitting on the penthouse balcony of the Regency Tower, not quite on the nod but edging toward it, the sun warm on their faces, done up so good . . . back in the good old days, when Eddie had just started to snort the stuff and Henry himself had yet to pick up his first needle.

Everybody talks about going cold turkey, Henry had said, but before you get there, you gotta go cool turkey.

And Eddie, stoned out of his mind, had cackled madly, because he knew exactly what Henry was talking about. Henry, however, had not so much as cracked a smile.

In some ways cool turkey's worse than cold turkey, Henry said. At least when you make it to cold turkey, you KNOW you're gonna puke, you KNOW you're going to shake, you KNOW you're gonna sweat until it feels like you're drowning in it. Cool turkey is, like, the curse of expectation.

Eddie remembered asking Henry what you called it when a needle-freak (which, in those dim dead days which must have been all of sixteen months ago, they had both solemnly assured themselves they would never become) got a hot shot.

You call that baked turkey, Henry had replied promptly, and then had looked surprised, the way a person does when he's said something that turned out to be a lot funnier than he actually thought it would be, and they looked at each other, and then they were both howling with laughter and clutching each other. Baked turkey, pretty funny, not so funny now.

Eddie walked up the aisle past the galley to the head, checked the sign—VACANT—and opened the door.

Hey Henry, o great sage & eminent junkie big brother, while we're on the subject of our feathered friends, you want to hear my definition of cooked goose? That's when the Customs guy at Kennedy decides there's something a little funny about the way you look, or it's one of the days when they got the dogs with the PhD noses out there instead of at Port Authority and they all start to bark and pee all over the floor and it's you they're all just about strangling themselves on their choke-chains trying to get to, and after the Customs guys toss all your luggage they take you into the little room and ask you if you'd mind taking off your shirt and you say yeah I sure would I'd mind like hell, I picked up a little cold down in the Bahamas and the air-conditioning in here is real high and I'm afraid it might turn into pneumonia and they say oh is that so, do you always sweat like that when the air-conditioning's too high, Mr. Dean, you do, well, excuse us all to hell, now do it, and you do it, and they say maybe you better take off the t-shirt too, because you look like maybe you got some kind of a medical problem, buddy, those bulges under your pits look like maybe they could be some kind of lymphatic tumors or something, and you don't even bother to say anything else, it's like a center-fielder who doesn't even bother to chase the ball when it's hit a certain way, he just turns around and watches it go into the upper deck, because when it's gone it's gone, so you take off the t-shirt and hey, looky here, you're some lucky kid, those aren't tumors, unless they're what you might call tumors on the corpus of society, yuk-yuk-yuk, those things look more like a couple of baggies held there with Scotch strapping tape, and by the way, don't worry about that smell, son, that's just goose. It's cooked.

He reached behind him and pulled the locking knob. The lights in the head brightened. The sound of the motors was a soft drone. He turned toward the mirror, wanting to see how bad he looked, and suddenly a terrible, pervasive feeling swept over him: a feeling of being watched.

Hey, come on, quit it, he thought uneasily. You're supposed to be the most unparanoid guy in the world. That's why they sent you. That's why—

But it suddenly seemed those were not his own eyes in the mirror, not Eddie Dean's hazel, almost-green eyes that had melted so many hearts and allowed him to part so many pretty sets of legs during the last third of his twenty-one years, not his eyes but those of a stranger. Not hazel but a blue the color of fading Levis. Eyes that were chilly, precise, unexpected marvels of calibration. Bombardier's eyes.

Reflected in them he saw—clearly saw—a seagull swooping down over a breaking wave and snatching something from it.

He had time to think *What in God's name is this shit?* and then he knew it wasn't going to pass; he was going to throw up after all.

In the half-second before he did, in the half-second he went on looking into the mirror, he saw those blue eyes disappear . . . but before that happened there was suddenly the feeling of being two people . . . of being *possessed*, like the little girl in *The Exorcist*.

Clearly he felt a new mind inside his own mind, and heard a thought not as his own thought but more like a voice from a radio: *I've come through. I'm in the sky-carriage.*

There was something else, but Eddie didn't hear it. He was too busy throwing up into the basin as quietly as he could.

When he was done, before he had even wiped his mouth, something happened which had never happened to him before. For one frightening moment there was nothing—only a blank interval. As if a single line in a column of newsprint had been neatly and completely inked out.

What is this? Eddie thought helplessly. *What the hell is this shit?*

Then he had to throw up again, and maybe that was just as well; whatever you might say against it, regurgitation had at least this much in its favor: as long as you were doing it, you couldn't think of anything else.

3

I've come through. I'm in the sky-carriage, the gunslinger thought. And, a second later: *He sees me in the mirror!*

Roland pulled back—did not leave but pulled back, like a child retreating to the furthest corner of a very long room. He was inside the sky-carriage; he was also inside a man who was not himself. Inside The Prisoner. In that first moment, when he had been close to *the front* (it was the only way he could describe it), he had been more than inside; he had almost *been* the man. He felt the man's illness, whatever it was, and sensed that the man was about to retch. Roland understood that if he needed to, he could take control of this man's body. He would suffer his pains, would be ridden by whatever demon-ape rode him, but if he needed to he *could*.

Or he could stay back here, unnoticed.

When the prisoner's fit of vomiting had passed, the gunslinger leaped forward—this time all the way to *the front*. He understood very little about this strange situation, and to act in a situation one does not understand is to invite the most terrible consequences, but there were two things he needed to know—and he needed to know them so desperately that the needing outweighed any consequences which might arise.

Was the door he had come through from his own world still there?

And if it was, was his physical self still there, collapsed, untenanted, perhaps dying or already dead without his self's self to go on unthinkingly running lungs and heart and nerves? Even if his body still lived, it might only continue to do so until night fell. Then the lobstrosities would come out to ask their questions and look for shore dinners.

He snapped the head which was for a moment *his* head around in a fast backward glance.

The door was still there, still behind him. It stood open on his own world, its hinges buried in the steel of this peculiar privy. And, yes, there he lay, Roland, the last gunslinger, lying on his side, his bound right hand on his stomach.

I'm breathing, Roland thought. *I'll have to go back and move me. But there are things to do first. Things . . .*

He let go of the prisoner's mind and retreated, watching, waiting to see if the prisoner knew he was there or not.

4

After the vomiting stopped, Eddie remained bent over the basin, eyes tightly closed.

Blanked there for a second. Don't know what it was. Did I look around?

He groped for the faucet and ran cool water. Eyes still closed, he splashed it over his cheeks and brow.

When it could be avoided no longer, he looked up into the mirror again.

His own eyes looked back at him.

There were no alien voices in his head.

No feeling of being watched.

You had a momentary fugue, Eddie, the great sage and eminent junkie advised him. A not uncommon phenomenon in one who is going cool turkey.

Eddie glanced at his watch. An hour and a half to New York. The plane was scheduled to land at 4:05 EDT, but it was really going to be high noon. Showdown time.

He went back to his seat. His drink was on the divider. He took two sips and the stewardess came back to ask him if she could do anything else for him. He opened his mouth to say no . . . and then there was another of those odd blank moments.

5

"I'd like something to eat, please," the gunslinger said through Eddie Dean's mouth.

"We'll be serving a hot snack in—"

"I'm really starving, though," the gunslinger said with perfect truthfulness. "Anything at all, even a popkin—"

"Popkin?" the army woman frowned at him, and the gunslinger suddenly looked into the prisoner's mind. *Sandwich* . . . the word was as distant as the murmur in a conch shell.

"A sandwich, even," the gunslinger said.

The army woman looked doubtful. “Well . . . I have some tuna fish . . .”

“That would be fine,” the gunslinger said, although he had never heard of tooter fish in his life. Beggars could not be choosers.

“You *do* look a little pale,” the army woman said. “I thought maybe it was air-sickness.”

“Pure hunger.”

She gave him a professional smile. “I’ll see what I can rustle up.”

Russel? the gunslinger thought dazedly. In his own world *to russel* was a slang verb meaning to take a woman by force. Never mind. Food would come. He had no idea if he could carry it back through the doorway to the body which needed it so badly, but one thing at a time, one thing at a time.

Russel, he thought, and Eddie Dean’s head shook, as if in disbelief.

Then the gunslinger retreated again.

6

Nerves, the great oracle and eminent junkie assured him. *Just nerves. All part of the cool turkey experience, little brother.*

But if nerves was what it was, how come he felt this odd sleepiness stealing over him—odd because he should have been itchy, ditsy, feeling that urge to squirm and scratch that came before the actual shakes; even if he had not been in Henry’s “cool turkey” state, there was the fact that he was about to attempt bringing two pounds of coke through U.S. Customs, a felony punishable by not less than ten years in federal prison, and he seemed to suddenly be having blackouts as well.

Still, that feeling of sleepiness.

He sipped at his drink again, then let his eyes slip shut.

Why’d you black out?

I didn’t, or she’d be running for all the emergency gear they carry.

Blanked out, then. It’s no good either way. You never blanked out like that before in your life. Nodded out, yeah, but never blanked out.

Something odd about his right hand, too. It seemed to throb vaguely, as if he had pounded it with a hammer.

He flexed it without opening his eyes. No ache. No throb. No blue bombardier's eyes. As for the blank-outs, they were just a combination of going cool turkey and a good case of what the great oracle and eminent et cetera would no doubt call the smuggler's blues.

But I'm going to sleep, just the same, he thought. How 'bout that?

Henry's face drifted by him like an untethered balloon. *Don't worry, Henry was saying. You'll be all right, little brother. You fly down there to Nassau, check in at the Aquinas, there'll be a man come by Friday night. One of the good guys. He'll fix you, leave you enough stuff to take you through the weekend. Sunday night he brings the coke and you give him the key to the safe deposit box. Monday morning you do the routine just like Balazar said. This guy will play; he knows how it's supposed to go. Monday noon you fly out, and with a face as honest as yours, you'll breeze through Customs and we'll be eating steak in Sparks before the sun goes down. It's gonna be a breeze, little brother, nothing but a cool breeze.*

But it had been sort of a warm breeze after all.

The trouble with him and Henry was they were like Charlie Brown and Lucy. The only difference was once in awhile Henry would hold onto the football so Eddie *could* kick it—not often, but once in awhile. Eddie had even thought, while in one of his heroin dazes, that he ought to write Charles Schultz a letter. *Dear Mr. Schultz, he would say. You're missing a bet by ALWAYS having Lucy pull the football up at the last second. She ought to hold it down there once in awhile. Nothing Charlie Brown could ever predict, you understand. Sometimes she'd maybe hold it down for him to kick three, even four times in a row, then nothing for a month, then once, and then nothing for three or four days, and then, you know, you get the idea. That would REALLY fuck the kid up, wouldn't it?*

Eddie *knew* it would really fuck the kid up.

From experience he knew it.

One of the good guys, Henry had said, but the guy who showed up had been a sallow-skinned thing with a British accent, a hairline

moustache that looked like something out of a 1940's *film noire*, and yellow teeth that all leaned inward, like the teeth of a very old animal trap.

"You have the key, *Senor*?" he asked, except in that British public school accent it came out sounding like what you called your last year of high school.

"The key's safe," Eddie said, "if that's what you mean."

"Then give it to me."

"That's not the way it goes. You're supposed to have something to take me through the weekend. Sunday night you're supposed to bring me something. I give you the key. Monday you go into town and use it to get something else. I don't know what, 'cause that's not my business."

Suddenly there was a small flat blue automatic in the sallow-skinned thing's hand. "Why don't you just give it to me, *Senor*? I will save time and effort; you will save your life."

There was deep steel in Eddie Dean, junkie or no junkie. Henry knew it; more important, Balazar knew it. That was why he had been sent. Most of them thought he had gone because he was hooked through the bag and back again. He knew it, Henry knew it, Balazar, too. But only he and Henry knew he would have gone even if he was as straight as a stake. For Henry. Balazar hadn't got quite that far in his figuring, but fuck Balazar.

"Why don't you just put that thing away, you little scuzz?" Eddie asked. "Or do you maybe want Balazar to send someone down here and cut your eyes out of your head with a rusty knife?"

The sallow thing smiled. The gun was gone like magic; in its place was a small envelope. He handed it to Eddie. "Just a little joke, you know."

"If you say so."

"I see you Sunday night."

He turned toward the door.

"I think you better wait."

The sallow thing turned back, eyebrows raised. "You think I won't go if I want to go?"

“I think if you go and this is bad shit, I’ll be gone tomorrow. Then you’ll be in *deep* shit.”

The sallow thing turned sulky. It sat in the room’s single easy chair while Eddie opened the envelope and spilled out a small quantity of brown stuff. It looked evil. He looked at the sallow thing.

“I know how it looks, it looks like shit, but that’s just the cut,” the sallow thing said. “It’s fine.”

Eddie tore a sheet of paper from the notepad on the desk and separated a small amount of the brown powder from the pile. He fingered it and then rubbed it on the roof of his mouth. A second later he spat into the wastebasket.

“You want to die? Is that it? You got a death-wish?”

“That’s all there is.” The sallow thing looked more sulky than ever.

“I have a reservation out tomorrow,” Eddie said. This was a lie, but he didn’t believe the sallow thing had the resources to check it. “TWA. I did it on my own, just in case the contact happened to be a fuck-up like you. I don’t mind. It’ll be a relief, actually. I wasn’t cut out for this sort of work.”

The sallow thing sat and cogitated. Eddie sat and concentrated on not moving. He *felt* like moving; felt like slipping and sliding, bipping and bopping, shucking and jiving, scratching his scratches and cracking his crackers. He even felt his eyes wanting to slide back to the pile of brown powder, although he knew it was poison. He had fixed at ten that morning; the same number of hours had gone by since then. But if he did any of those things, the situation would change. The sallow thing was doing more than cogitating; it was watching him, trying to calculate the depth of him.

“I might be able to find something,” it said at last.

“Why don’t you try?” Eddie said. “But come eleven, I turn out the light and put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door, and anybody that knocks after I do that, I call the desk and say someone’s bothering me, send a security guy.”

“You are a fuck,” the sallow thing said in its impeccable British accent.

“No,” Eddie said, “a fuck is what you *expected*. I came with my legs crossed. You want to be here before eleven with something that

I can use—it doesn't have to be great, just something I can use—or you will be one dead scuzz.”

7

The sallow thing was back long before eleven; he was back by nine-thirty. Eddie guessed the other stuff had been in his car all along.

A little more powder this time. Not white, but at least a dull ivory color, which was mildly hopeful.

Eddie tasted. It seemed all right. Actually better than all right. Pretty good. He rolled a bill and snorted.

“Well, then, until Sunday,” the sallow thing said briskly, getting to its feet.

“Wait,” Eddie said, as if he were the one with the gun. In a way he was. The gun was Balazar. Emilio Balazar was a high-caliber big shot in New York's wonderful world of drugs.

“*Wait?*” the sallow thing turned and looked at Eddie as if he believed Eddie must be insane. “For *what?*”

“Well, I was actually thinking of you,” Eddie said. “If I get really sick from what I just put into my body, it's off. If I die, of *course* it's off. I was just thinking that, if I only get a *little* sick, I might give you another chance. You know, like that story about how some kid rubs a lamp and gets three wishes.”

“It will not make you sick. That's China White.”

“If that's China White,” Eddie said, “I'm Dwight Gooden.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

The sallow thing sat down. Eddie sat by the motel room desk with the little pile of white powder nearby (the D-Con or whatever it had been had long since gone down the john). On TV the Braves were getting shellacked by the Mets, courtesy of WTBS and the big satellite dish on the Aquinas Hotel's roof. Eddie felt a faint sensation of calm which seemed to come from the back of his mind . . . except where it was really coming from, he knew from what he had read in the medical journals, was from the bunch of living wires at the base

of his spine, that place where heroin addiction takes place by causing an unnatural thickening of the nerve stem.

Want to take a quick cure? he had asked Henry once. *Break your spine, Henry. Your legs stop working, and so does your cock, but you stop needing the needle right away.*

Henry hadn't thought it was funny.

In truth, Eddie hadn't thought it was that funny either. When the only fast way you could get rid of the monkey on your back was to snap your spinal cord above that bunch of nerves, you were dealing with one heavy monkey. That was no capuchin, no cute little organ grinder's mascot; that was a big mean old baboon.

Eddie began to sniffle.

"Okay," he said at last. "It'll do. You can vacate the premises, scuzz."

The sallow thing got up. "I have friends," he said. "They could come in here and do things to you. You'd beg to tell me where that key is."

"Not me, champ," Eddie said. "Not this kid." And smiled. He didn't know how the smile looked, but it must not have looked all that cheery because the sallow thing vacated the premises, vacated them fast, vacated them without looking back.

When Eddie Dean was sure he was gone, he cooked.

Fixed.

Slept.

8

As he was sleeping now.

The gunslinger, somehow inside this man's mind (a man whose name he still did not know; the lowling the prisoner thought of as "the sallow thing" had not known it, and so had never spoken it), watched this as he had once watched plays as a child, before the world had moved on . . . or so he thought he watched, because plays were all he had ever seen. If he had ever seen a moving picture, he would have thought of that first. The things he did not actually see he had

been able to pluck from the prisoner's mind because the associations were close. It was odd about the name, though. He knew the name of the prisoner's brother, but not the name of the man himself. But of course names were secret things, full of power.

And neither of the things that mattered was the man's name. One was the weakness of the addiction. The other was the steel buried inside that weakness, like a good gun sinking in quicksand.

This man reminded the gunslinger achingly of Cuthbert.

Someone was coming. The prisoner, sleeping, did not hear. The gunslinger, not sleeping, did, and came forward again.

9

Great, Jane thought. He tells me how hungry he is and I fix something up for him because he's a little bit cute, and then he falls asleep on me.



Then the passenger—a guy of about twenty, tall, wearing clean, slightly faded blue jeans and a paisley shirt—opened his eyes a little and smiled at her.

“Thankee sai,” he said—or so it sounded. Almost archaic . . . or foreign. *Sleep-talk, that’s all,* Jane thought.

“You’re welcome.” She smiled her best stewardess smile, sure he would fall asleep again and the sandwich would still be there, uneaten, when it was time for the actual meal service.

Well, that was what they taught you to expect, wasn’t it?

She went back to the galley to catch a smoke.

She struck the match, lifted it halfway to her cigarette, and there it stopped, unnoticed, because that wasn’t *all* they taught you to expect.

I thought he was a little bit cute. Mostly because of his eyes. His hazel eyes.

But when the man in 3A had opened his eyes a moment ago, they *hadn’t* been hazel; they had been blue. Not sweet-sexy blue like Paul Newman’s eyes, either, but the color of icebergs. They—

“Ow!”

The match had reached her fingers. She shook it out.

“Jane?” Paula asked. “You all right?”

“Fine. Daydreaming.”

She lit another match and this time did the job right. She had only taken a single drag when the perfectly reasonable explanation occurred to her. He wore contacts. Of course. The kind that changed the color of your eyes. He had gone into the bathroom. He had been in there long enough for her to worry about him being airsick—he had that pallid complexion, the look of a man who is not quite well. But he had only been taking out his contact lenses so he could nap more comfortably. Perfectly reasonable.

You may feel something, a voice from her own not-so-distant past spoke suddenly. *Some little tickle. You may see something just a little bit wrong.*

Colored contact lenses.

Jane Dorning personally knew over two dozen people who wore contacts. Most of them worked for the airline. No one ever said

anything about it, but she thought maybe one reason was they all sensed the passengers didn't like to see flight personnel wearing glasses—it made them nervous.

Of all those people, she knew maybe four who had color-contacts. Ordinary contact lenses were expensive; colored ones cost the earth. All of the people of Jane's acquaintance who cared to lay out that sort of money were women, all of them extremely vain.

So what? Guys can be vain, too. Why not? He's goodlooking.

No. He wasn't. Cute, maybe, but that was as far as it went, and with the pallid complexion he only made it to cute by the skin of his teeth. So why the color-contacts?

Airline passengers are often afraid of flying.

In a world where hijacking and drug-smuggling had become facts of life, airline personnel are often afraid of passengers.

The voice that had initiated these thoughts had been that of an instructor at flight school, a tough old battle-axe who looked as if she could have flown the mail with Wiley Post, saying: *Don't ignore your suspicions. If you forget everything else you've learned about coping with potential or actual terrorists, remember this: don't ignore your suspicions. In some cases you'll get a crew who'll say during the debriefing that they didn't have any idea until the guy pulled out a grenade and said hang a left for Cuba or everyone on the aircraft is going to join the jet-stream. But in most cases you get two or three different people—mostly flight attendants, which you women will be in less than a month—who say they felt something. Some little tickle. A sense that the guy in 91C or the young woman in 5A was a little wrong. They felt something, but they did nothing. Did they get fired for that? Christ, no! You can't put a guy in restraints because you don't like the way he scratches his pimples. The real problem is they felt something . . . and then forgot.*

The old battle-axe had raised one blunt finger. Jane Dorning, along with her fellow classmates, had listened raptly as she said, *If you feel that little tickle, don't do anything . . . but that includes not forgetting. Because there's always that one little chance that you just might be able to stop something before it gets started . . . something*

like an unscheduled twelve-day layover on the tarmac of some shitpot Arab country.

Just colored contacts, but . . .

Thankee, sai.

Sleep-talk? Or a muddled lapse into some other language?

She would watch, Jane decided.

And she would not forget.

10

Now, the gunslinger thought. Now we'll see, won't we?

He had been able to come from his world into this body through the door on the beach. What he needed to find out was whether or not he could carry things back. Oh, not himself; he was confident that he could return through the door and reenter his own poisoned, sickening body at any time he should desire. But other things? *Physical* things? Here, for instance, in front of him, was food: something the woman in the uniform had called a tooter-fish sandwich. The gunslinger had no idea what tooter-fish was, but he knew a popkin when he saw it, although this one looked curiously uncooked.

His body needed to eat, and his body would need to drink, but more than either, his body needed some sort of medicine. It would die from the lobster's bite without it. There might be such medicine in this world; in a world where carriages rode through the air far above where even the strongest eagle could fly, anything seemed possible. But it would not matter how much powerful medicine there was here if he could carry nothing physical through the door.

You could live in this body, gunslinger, the voice of the man in black whispered deep inside his head. *Leave that piece of breathing meat over there for the lobster-things. It's only a husk, anyway.*

He would not do that. For one thing it would be the most murderous sort of thievery, because he would not be content to be

just a passenger for long, looking out of this man's eyes like a traveller looking out of a coach window at the passing scenery.

For another, he was Roland. If dying was required, he intended to die as Roland. He would die *crawling* toward the Tower, if that was what was required.

Then the odd harsh practicality that lived beside the romantic in his nature like a tiger with a roe reasserted itself. There was no need to think of dying with the experiment not yet made.

He picked up the popkin. It had been cut in two halves. He held one in each hand. He opened the prisoner's eyes and looked out of them. No one was looking at him (although, in the galley, Jane Dorning was *thinking* about him, and very hard).

Roland turned toward the door and went through, holding the popkin-halves in his hands.

11

First he heard the grinding roar of an incoming wave; next he heard the argument of many sea-birds arising from the closest rocks as he struggled to a sitting position (*cowardly buggers were creeping up, he thought, and they would have been taking pecks out of me soon enough, still breathing or no—they're nothing but vultures with a coat of paint*); then he became aware that one popkin half—the one in his right hand—had tumbled onto the hard gray sand because he had been holding it with a whole hand when he came through the door and now was—or *had* been—holding it in a hand which had suffered a forty per cent reduction.

He picked it up clumsily, pinching it between his thumb and ring finger, brushed as much of the sand from it as he could, and took a tentative bite. A moment later he was wolfing it, not noticing the few bits of sand which ground between his teeth. Seconds later he turned his attention to the other half. It was gone in three bites.

The gunslinger had no idea what tooter-fish was—only that it was delicious. That seemed enough.

In the plane, no one saw the tuna sandwich disappear. No one saw Eddie Dean's hands grasp the two halves of it tightly enough to make deep thumb-indentations in the white bread.

No one saw the sandwich fade to transparency, then disappear, leaving only a few crumbs.

About twenty seconds after this had happened, Jane Dorning snuffed her cigarette and crossed the head of the cabin. She got her book from her totebag, but what she really wanted was another look at 3A.

He appeared to be deeply asleep . . . but the sandwich was gone.

Jesus, Jane thought. He didn't eat it; he swallowed it whole. And now he's asleep again? Are you kidding?

Whatever was tickling at her about 3A, Mr. Now-They're-Hazel-Now-They're-Blue, kept right on tickling. Something about him was not right.

Something.

CHAPTER 3

Contact and Landing

1

Eddie was awakened by an announcement from the co-pilot that they should be landing at Kennedy International, where the visibility was unlimited, the winds out of the west at ten miles an hour, and the temperature a jolly seventy degrees, in forty-five minutes or so. He told them that, if he didn't get another chance, he wanted to thank them one and all for choosing Delta.

He looked around and saw people checking their duty declaration cards and their proofs of citizenship—coming in from Nassau your driver's licence and a credit card with a stateside bank listed on it was supposed to be enough, but most still carried passports—and Eddie felt a steel wire start to tighten inside him. He still couldn't believe he had gone to sleep, and so soundly.

He got up and went to the restroom. The bags of coke under his arms felt as if they were resting easily and firmly, fitting as nicely to the contours of his sides as they had in the hotel room where a soft-spoken American named William Wilson had strapped them on. Following the strapping operation, the man whose name Poe had made famous (Wilson had only looked blankly at Eddie when Eddie made some allusion to this) handed over the shirt. Just an ordinary paisley shirt, a little faded, the sort of thing any frat-boy might wear back on the plane following a short pre-exams holiday . . . except this one was specially tailored to hide unsightly bulges.

"You check everything once before you set down just to be sure," Wilson said, "but you're gonna be fine."

Eddie didn't know if he was going to be fine or not, but he had another reason for wanting to use the john before the FASTEN SEATBELTS light came on. In spite of all temptation—and most of last night it

hadn't been temptation but raging need—he had managed to hold on to the last little bit of what the sallow thing had had the temerity to call China White.

Clearing customs from Nassau wasn't like clearing customs from Haiti or Quincon or Bogota, but there were still people watching. Trained people. He needed any and every edge he could get. If he could go in there a little cooled out, just a little, it might be the one thing that put him over the top.

He snorted the powder, flushed the little twist of paper it had been in down the john, then washed his hands.

Of course, if you make it, you'll never know, will you? he thought. No. He wouldn't. And wouldn't care.

On his way back to his seat he saw the stewardess who had brought him the drink he hadn't finished. She smiled at him. He smiled back, sat down, buckled his seatbelt, took out the flight magazine, turned the pages, and looked at pictures and words. Neither made any impression on them. That steel wire continued to tighten around his gut, and when the FASTEN SEATBELTS light *did* come on, it took a double turn and cinched tight.

The heroin had hit—he had the sniffles to prove it—but he sure couldn't *feel* it.

One thing he did feel shortly before landing was another of those unsettling periods of blankness . . . short, but most definitely there.

The 727 banked over the water of Long Island Sound and started in.

2

Jane Dorning had been in the business class galley, helping Peter and Anne stow the last of the after-meal drinks glasses when the guy who looked like a college kid went into the first class bathroom.

He was returning to his seat when she brushed aside the curtain between business and first, and she quickened her step without even thinking about it, catching him with her smile, making him look up and smile back.

His eyes were hazel again.

All right, all right. He went into the john and took them out before his nap; he went into the john and put them in again afterwards. For Christ's sake, Janey! You're being a goose!

She wasn't, though. It was nothing she could put her finger on, but she was not being a goose.

He's too pale.

So what? Thousands of people are too pale, including your own mother since her gall-bladder went to hell.

He had very arresting blue eyes—maybe not as cute as the hazel contacts—but certainly arresting. So why the bother and expense?

Because he likes designer eyes. Isn't that enough?

No.

Shortly before FASTEN SEAT BELTS and final cross-check, she did something she had never done before; she did it with that tough old battle-axe of an instructor in mind. She filled a Thermos bottle with hot coffee and put on the red plastic top without first pushing the stopper into the bottle's throat. She screwed the top on only until she felt it catch the first thread.

Susy Douglas was making the final approach announcement, telling the geese to extinguish their cigarettes, telling them they would have to stow what they had taken out, telling them a Delta gate agent would meet the flight, telling them to check and make sure they had their duty-declaration cards and proofs of citizenship, telling them it would now be necessary to pick up all cups, glasses and speaker sets.

I'm surprised we don't have to check to make sure they're dry, Jane thought distractedly. She felt her own steel wire wrapping itself around her guts, cinching them tight.

"Get my side," Jane said as Susy hung up the mike.

Susy glanced at the Thermos, then at Jane's face. "Jane? Are you sick? You look as white as a—"

"I'm not sick. Get my side. I'll explain when you get back." Jane glanced briefly at the jump-seats beside the left-hand exit door. "I want to ride shotgun."

"Jane—"

“Get my side.”

“All right,” Susy said. “All right, Jane. No problem.”

Jane Dorning sat down in the jump-seat closest to the aisle. She held the Thermos in her hands and made no move to fasten the web-harness. She wanted to keep the Thermos in complete control, and that meant both hands.

Susy thinks I’ve flipped out.

Jane hoped she had.

If Captain McDonald lands hard, I’m going to have blisters all over my hands.

She would risk it.

The plane was dropping. The man in 3A, the man with the two-tone eyes and the pale face, suddenly leaned down and pulled his travelling bag from under the seat.

This is it, Jane thought. This is where he brings out the grenade or the automatic weapon or whatever the hell he’s got.

And the moment she saw it, the very moment, she was going to flip the red top off the Thermos in her slightly trembling hands, and there was going to be one very surprised Friend of Allah rolling around on the aisle floor of Delta Flight 901 while his skin boiled on his face.

3A unzipped the bag.

Jane got ready.

3

The gunslinger thought this man, prisoner or not, was probably better at the fine art of survival than any of the other men he had seen in the air-carriage. The others were fat things, for the most part, and even those who looked reasonably fit also looked open, unguarded, their faces those of spoiled and cosseted children, the faces of men who would fight—eventually—but who would whine almost endlessly before they did; you could let their guts out onto their shoes and their last expressions would not be rage or agony but stupid surprise.

The prisoner was better . . . but not good enough. Not at all.

The army woman. She saw something. I don't know what, but she saw something wrong. She's awake to him in a way she's not to the others.

The prisoner sat down. Looked at a limp-covered book he thought of as a "Magda-Seen," although who Magda might have been or what she might have seen mattered not a whit to Roland. The gunslinger did not want to look at a book, amazing as such things were; he wanted to look at the woman in the army uniform. The urge to come forward and take control was very great. But he held against it . . . at least for the time being.

The prisoner had gone somewhere and gotten a drug. Not the drug he himself took, nor one that would help cure the gunslinger's sick body, but one that people paid a lot of money for because it was against the law. He would give this drug to his brother, who would in turn give it to a man named Balazar. The deal would be complete when Balazar traded them the kind of drug *they* took for this one—if, that was, the prisoner was able to correctly perform a ritual unknown to the gunslinger (and a world as strange as this must of necessity have many strange rituals); it was called Clearing the Customs.

But the woman sees him.

Could she keep him from Clearing the Customs? Roland thought the answer was probably yes. And then? Gaol. And if the prisoner were gaoled, there would be no place to get the sort of medicine his infected, dying body needed.

He must Clear the Customs, Roland thought. *He must. And he must go with his brother to this man Balazar. It's not in the plan, the brother won't like it, but he must.*

Because a man who dealt in drugs would either know a man or *be* a man who also cured the sick. A man who could listen to what was wrong and then . . . maybe . . .

He must Clear the Customs, the gunslinger thought.

The answer was so large and simple, so close to him, that he very nearly did not see it at all. It was the *drug* the prisoner meant to smuggle in that would make Clearing the Customs so difficult, of course; there might be some sort of Oracle who might be consulted

in the cases of people who seemed suspicious. Otherwise, Roland gleaned, the Clearing ceremony would be simplicity itself, as crossing a friendly border was in his own world. One made the sign of fealty to that kingdom's monarch—a simple token gesture—and was allowed to pass.

He *was* able to take things from the prisoner's world to his own. The tooter-fish popkin proved that. He would take the bags of drugs as he had taken the popkin. The prisoner would Clear the Customs. And then Roland would bring the bags of drugs back.

Can you?

Ah, here was a question disturbing enough to distract him from the view of the water below . . . they had gone over what looked like a huge ocean and were now turning back toward the coastline. As they did, the water grew steadily closer. The air-carriage was coming down (Eddie's glance was brief, cursory; the gunslinger's as rapt as the child seeing his first snowfall). He could *take* things from this world, that he knew. But bring them back again? That was a thing of which he as yet had no knowing. He would have to find out.

The gunslinger reached into the prisoner's pocket and closed the prisoner's fingers over a coin.

Roland went back through the door.

4

The birds flew away when he sat up. They hadn't dared come as close this time. He ached, he was woozy, feverish . . . yet it was amazing how much even a little bit of nourishment had revived him.

He looked at the coin he had brought back with him this time. It looked like silver, but the reddish tint at the edge suggested it was really made of some baser metal. On one side was a profile of a man whose face suggested nobility, courage, stubbornness. His hair, both curled at the base of the skull and pigged at the nape of the neck, suggested a bit of vanity as well. He turned the coin over and saw something so startling it caused him to cry out in a rusty, croaking voice.

On the back was an eagle, the device which had decorated his own banner, in those dim days when there had still been kingdoms and banners to symbolize them.

Time's short. Go back. Hurry.

But he tarried a moment longer, thinking. It was harder to think inside this head—the prisoner's was far from clear, but it was, temporarily at least, a cleaner vessel than his own.

To try the coin both ways was only half the experiment, wasn't it?

He took one of the shells from his cartridge belt and folded it over the coin in his hand.

Roland stepped back through the door.

5

The prisoner's coin was still there, firmly curled within the pocketed hand. He didn't have to *come forward* to check on the shell; he knew it hadn't made the trip.

He *came forward* anyway, briefly, because there was one thing he had to know. Had to see.

So he turned, as if to adjust the little paper thing on the back of his seat (by all the gods that ever were, there was paper *everywhere* in this world), and looked through the doorway. He saw his body, collapsed as before, now with a fresh trickle of blood flowing from a cut on his cheek—a stone must have done it when he left himself and crossed over.

The cartridge he had been holding along with the coin lay at the base of the door, on the sand.

Still, enough was answered. The prisoner could Clear the Customs. Their guards o' the watch might search him from head to toe, from asshole to appetite, and back again.

They'd find nothing.

The gunslinger settled back, content, unaware, at least for the time being, that he still had not grasped the extent of his problem.

6

The 727 came in low and smooth over the salt-marshes of Long Island, leaving sooty trails of spent fuel behind. The landing gear came down with a rumble and a thump.

7

3A, the man with the two-tone eyes, straightened up and Jane saw—actually saw—a snub-nosed Uzi in his hands before she realized it was nothing but his duty declaration card and a little zipper bag of the sort which men sometimes use to hold their passports.

The plane settled like silk.

Letting out a deep, shaking shudder, she tightened the red top on the Thermos.

“Call me an asshole,” she said in a low voice to Susy, buckling the cross-over belts now that it was too late. She had told Susy what she suspected on the final approach, so Susy would be ready. “You have every right.”

“No,” Susy said. “You did the right thing.”

“I over-reacted. And dinner’s on me.”

“Like hell it is. And don’t look at him. Look at me. *Smile, Janey.*”

Jane smiled. Nodded. Wondered what in God’s name was going on *now*.

“You were watching his hands,” Susy said, and laughed. Jane joined in. “I was watching what happened to his shirt when he bent over to get his bag. He’s got enough stuff under there to stock a Woolworth’s notions counter. Only I don’t think he’s carrying the kind of stuff you can buy at Woolworth’s.”

Jane threw back her head and laughed again, feeling like a puppet. “How do we handle it?” Susy had five years’ seniority on her, and Jane, who only a minute ago had felt she had the situation under some desperate kind of control, now only felt glad to have Susy beside her.

“We don’t. Tell the Captain while we’re taxiing in. The Captain speaks to customs. Your friend there gets in line like everyone else, except then he gets pulled *out* of line by some men who escort him to a little room. It’s going to be the first in a very long succession of little rooms for him, I think.”

“Jesus.” Jane was smiling, but chills, alternately hot and cold, were racing through her.

She hit the pop-release on her harness when the reverse thrusters began to wind down, handed the Thermos to Susy, then got up and rapped on the cockpit door.

Not a terrorist but a drug-smuggler. Thank God for small favors. Yet in a way she hated it. He *had* been cute.

Not much, but a little.

8

He still doesn’t see, the gunslinger thought with anger and dawning desperation. *Gods!*

Eddie had bent to get the papers he needed for the ritual, and when he looked up the army woman was staring at him, her eyes bulging, her cheeks as white as the paper things on the backs of the seats. The silver tube with the red top, which he had at first taken for some kind of canteen, was apparently a weapon. She was holding it up between her breasts now. Roland thought that in a moment or two she would either throw it or spin off the red top and shoot him with it.

Then she relaxed and buckled her harness even though the thump told both the gunslinger and the prisoner the air-carriage had already landed. She turned to the army woman she was sitting with and said something. The other woman laughed and nodded, but if that was a real laugh, the gunslinger thought, he was a river-toad.

The gunslinger wondered how the man whose mind had become temporary home for the gunslinger’s own *ka*, could be so stupid. Some of it was what he was putting into his body, of course . . . one

of this world's versions of devil-weed. Some, but not all. He was not soft and unobservant like the others, but in time he might be.

They are as they are because they live in the light, the gunslinger thought suddenly. *That light of civilization you were taught to adore above all other things. They live in a world which has not moved on.*

If this was what people became in such a world, Roland was not sure he didn't prefer the dark. "That was before the world moved on," people said in his own world, and it was always said in tones of bereft sadness . . . but it was, perhaps, sadness without thought, without consideration.

She thought I/he—meant to grab a weapon when I/he—bent down to get the papers. When she saw the papers she relaxed and did what everyone else did before the carriage came down to the ground again. Now she and her friend are talking and laughing but their faces— her face especially, the face of the woman with the metal tube—are not right. They are talking, all right, but they are only pretending to laugh . . . and that is because what they are talking about is I/him.

The air-carriage was now moving along what seemed a long concrete road, one of many. Mostly he watched the women, but from the edges of his vision the gunslinger could see other air-carriages moving here and there along other roads. Some lumbered; some moved with incredible speed, not like carriages at all but like projectiles fired from guns or cannons, preparing to leap into the air. As desperate as his own situation had become, part of him wanted very much to *come forward* and turn his head so he could see these vehicles as they leaped into the sky. They were man-made but every bit as fabulous as the stories of the Grand Featherex which had supposedly once lived in the distant (and probably mythical) kingdom of Garlan—*more* fabulous, perhaps, simply because *these* were man-made.

The woman who had brought him the popkin unfastened her harness (this less than a minute since she had fastened it) and went forward to a small door. *That's where the driver sits,* the gunslinger thought, but when the door was opened and she stepped in he saw it apparently took three drivers to operate the air-carriage, and even

the brief glimpse he was afforded of what seemed like a million dials and levers and lights made him understand why.

The prisoner was looking at all but seeing nothing—Cort would have first sneered, then driven him through the nearest wall. The prisoner's mind was completely occupied with grabbing the bag under the seat and his light jacket from the overhead bin . . . and facing the ordeal of the ritual.

The prisoner saw nothing; the gunslinger saw everything.

The woman thought him a thief or a madman. He—or perhaps it was I, yes, that's likely enough—did something to make her think that. She changed her mind, and then the other woman changed it back . . . only now I think they know what's really wrong. They know he's going to try to profane the ritual.

Then, in a thunderclap, he saw the rest of his problem. First, it wasn't just a matter of taking the bags into his world as he had the coin; the coin hadn't been stuck to the prisoner's body with the glue-string the prisoner had wrapped around and around his upper body to hold the bags tight to his skin. This glue-string was only part of his problem. The prisoner hadn't missed the temporary disappearance of one coin among many, but when he realized that whatever it was he had risked his life for was suddenly gone, he was *surely* going to raise the racks . . . and what then?

It was more than possible that the prisoner would begin to behave in a manner so irrational that it would get him locked away in gaol as quickly as being caught in the act of profanation. The loss would be bad enough; for the bags under his arms to simply melt away to nothing would probably make him think he really *had* gone mad.

The air-carriage, ox-like now that it was on the ground, labored its way through a left turn. The gunslinger realized that he had no time for the luxury of further thought. He had to do more than *come forward*; he must make contact with Eddie Dean.

Right now.

Eddie tucked his declaration card and passport in his breast pocket. The steel wire was now turning steadily around his guts, sinking in deeper and deeper, making his nerves spark and sizzle. And suddenly a voice spoke in his head.

Not a thought; *a voice.*

Listen to me, fellow. Listen carefully. And if you would remain safe, let your face show nothing which might further rouse the suspicions of those army women. God knows they're suspicious enough already.

Eddie first thought he was still wearing the airline earphones and picking up some weird transmission from the cockpit. But the airline headphones had been picked up five minutes ago.

His second thought was that someone was standing beside him and talking. He almost snapped his head to the left, but that was absurd. Like it or not, the raw truth was that the voice had come from *inside* his head.

Maybe he was receiving some sort of transmission—AM, FM, or VHF on the fillings in his teeth. He had heard of such th—

Straighten up, maggot! They're suspicious enough without you looking as if you've gone crazy!

Eddie sat up fast, as if he had been whacked. That voice wasn't Henry's, but it was so much like Henry's when they had been just a couple of kids growing up in the Projects, Henry eight years older, the sister who had been between them now only a ghost of memory; Selina had been struck and killed by a car when Eddie was two and Henry ten. That rasping tone of command came out whenever Henry saw him doing something that might end with Eddie occupying a pine box long before his time . . . as Selina had.

What in the blue fuck is going on here?

You're not hearing voices that aren't there, the voice inside his head returned. No, not Henry's voice—older, dryer . . . stronger. But *like* Henry's voice . . . and impossible not to believe. *That's the first thing. You're not going crazy. I AM another person.*

This is telepathy?

Eddie was vaguely aware that his face was completely expressionless. He thought that, under the circumstances, that ought

to qualify him for the Best Actor of the Year Academy Award. He looked out the window and saw the plane closing in on the Delta section of Kennedy's International Arrivals Building.

I don't know that word. But I do know that those army women know you are carrying . . .

There was a pause. A feeling—odder beyond telling—of phantom fingers rummaging through his brain as if he were a living card catalogue.

. . . heroin or cocaine. I can't tell which except—except it must be cocaine because you're carrying the one you don't take to buy the one you do.

“What army women?” Eddie muttered in a low voice. He was completely unaware that he was speaking aloud. “What in the hell are you talking ab—”

That feeling of being slapped once more . . . so real he felt his head ring with it.

Shut your mouth, you damned jackass!

All right, all right! Christ!

Now that feeling of rummaging fingers again.

Army stewardesses, the alien voice replied. Do you understand me? I have no time to con your every thought, prisoner!

“What did you—” Eddie began, then shut his mouth. *What did you call me?*

Never mind. Just listen. Time is very, very short. They know. The army stewardesses know you have this cocaine.

How could they? That's ridiculous!

I don't know how they came by their knowledge, and it doesn't matter. One of them told the drivers. The drivers will tell whatever priests perform this ceremony, this Clearing of Customs—

The language of the voice in his head was arcane, the terms so off-kilter they were almost cute . . . but the message came through loud and clear. Although his face remained expressionless, Eddie's teeth came together with a painful click and he drew a hot little hiss in through them.

The voice was saying the game was over. He hadn't even gotten off the plane and the game was already over.

But this wasn't real. No way this could be real. It was just his mind, doing a paranoid little jig at the last minute, that was all. He would ignore it. Just ignore it and it would go awa—

You will NOT ignore it or you will go to jail and I will die! the voice roared.

Who in the name of God are you? Eddie asked reluctantly, fearfully, and inside his head he heard someone or something let out a deep and gusty sigh of relief.

10

He believes, the gunslinger thought. Thank all the gods that are or ever were, he believes!

11

The plane stopped. The FASTEN SEAT BELTS light went out. The jetway rolled forward and bumped against the forward port door with a gentle thump.

They had arrived.

12

There is a place where you can put it while you perform the Clearing of Customs, the voice said. A safe place. Then, when you are away, you can get it again and take it to this man Balazar.

People were standing up now, getting things out of the overhead bins and trying to deal with coats which were, according to the cockpit announcement, too warm to wear.

Get your bag. Get your jacket. Then go into the privy again.

Pr—

Oh. Bathroom. Head.

If they think I've got dope they'll think I'm trying to dump it.

But Eddie understood that part didn't matter. They wouldn't exactly break down the door, because that might scare the passengers. And they'd know you couldn't flush two pounds of coke down an airline toilet and leave no trace. Not unless the voice was really telling the truth . . . that there was some safe place. *But how could there be?*

Never mind, damn you! MOVE!

Eddie moved. Because he had finally come alive to the situation. He was not seeing all Roland, with his many years and his training of mingled torture and precision, could see, but he could see the faces of the stews—the *real* faces, the ones behind the smiles and the helpful passing of garment bags and cartons stowed in the forward closet. He could see the way their eyes flicked to him, whiplash quick, again and again.

He got his bag. He got his jacket. The door to the jetway had been opened, and people were already moving up the aisle. The door to the cockpit was open, and here was the Captain, also smiling . . . but also looking at the passengers in first class who were still getting their things together, spotting him—no, *targeting* him—and then looking away again, nodding to someone, tousling a youngster's head.

He was cold now. Not cold turkey, just cold. He didn't need the voice in his head to make him cold. Cold—sometimes that was okay. You just had to be careful you didn't get so cold you froze.

Eddie moved forward, reached the point where a left turn would take him into the jetway—and then suddenly put his hand to his mouth.

"I don't feel well," he murmured. "Excuse me." He moved the door to the cockpit, which slightly blocked the door to the first class head, and opened the bathroom door on the right.

"I'm afraid you'll have to exit the plane," the pilot said sharply as Eddie opened the bathroom door. "It's—"

"I believe I'm going to vomit, and I don't want to do it on your shoes," Eddie said, "or mine, either."

A second later he was in with the door locked. The Captain was saying something. Eddie couldn't make it out, didn't *want* to make it out. The important thing was that it was just talk, not yelling, he had

been right, no one was going to start yelling with maybe two hundred and fifty passengers still waiting to deplane from the single forward door. He was in, he was temporarily safe . . . but what good was it going to do him?

If you're there, he thought, you better do something very quick, whoever you are.

For a terrible moment there was nothing at all. That was a short moment, but in Eddie Dean's head it seemed to stretch out almost forever, like the Bonomo's Turkish Taffy Henry had sometimes bought him in the summer when they were kids; if he were bad, Henry beat the shit out of him, if he were good, Henry bought him Turkish Taffy. That was the way Henry handled his heightened responsibilities during summer vacation.

God, oh Christ, I imagined it all, oh Jesus, how crazy could I have b—

Get ready, a grim voice said. I can't do it alone. I can COME FORWARD but I can't make you COME THROUGH. You have to do it with me. Turn around.

Eddie was suddenly seeing through two pairs of eyes, feeling with two sets of nerves (but not all the nerves of this other person were here; parts of the other were gone, freshly gone, screaming with pain), sensing with ten senses, thinking with two brains, his blood beating with two hearts.

He turned around. There was a hole in the side of the bathroom, a hole that looked like a doorway. Through it he could see a gray, grainy beach and waves the color of old athletic socks breaking upon it.

He could hear the waves.

He could smell salt, a smell as bitter as tears in his nose.

Go through.

Someone was thumping on the door to the bathroom, telling him to come out, that he must deplane at once.

Go through, damn you!

Eddie, moaning, stepped toward the doorway . . . stumbled . . . and fell into another world.

He got slowly to his feet, aware that he had cut his right palm on an edge of shell. He looked stupidly at the blood welling across his lifeline, then saw another man rising slowly to his feet on his right.

Eddie recoiled, his feelings of disorientation and dreamy dislocation suddenly supplanted by sharp terror; this man was dead and didn't know it. His face was gaunt, the skin stretched over the bones of his face like strips of cloth wound around slim angles of metal almost to the point where the cloth must tear itself open. The man's skin was livid save for hectic spots of red high on each cheekbone, on the neck below the angle of jaw on either side, and a single circular mark between the eyes like a child's effort to replicate a Hindu caste symbol.

Yet his eyes—blue, steady, sane—were alive and full of terrible and tenacious vitality. He wore dark clothes of some homespun material; the shirt, its sleeves rolled up, was a black faded almost to gray, the pants something that looked like bluejeans. Gunbelts crisscrossed his hips, but the loops were almost all empty. The holsters held guns that looked like .45s—but .45s of an incredibly antique vintage. The smooth wood of their handgrips seemed to glow with their own inner light.

Eddie, who didn't know he had any intention of speaking—anything to say—heard himself saying something nevertheless. “Are you a ghost?”

“Not yet,” the man with the guns croaked. “The devil-weed. Cocaine. Whatever you call it. Take off your shirt.”

“Your arms—” Eddie had seen them. The arms of the man who looked like the extravagant sort of gunslinger one would only see in a spaghetti western were glowing with lines of bright, baleful red. Eddie knew well enough what lines like that meant. They meant blood-poisoning. They meant the devil was doing more than breathing up your ass; he was already crawling up the sewers that led to your pump.

“Never mind my fucking arms!” the pallid apparition told him. “*Take off your shirt and get rid of it!*”

He heard waves; he heard the lonely hoot of a wind that knew no obstruction; he saw this mad dying man and nothing else but desolation; yet from behind him he heard the murmuring voices of deplaning passengers and a steady muffled pounding.

“Mr. Dean!” *That voice*, he thought, *is in another world*. Not really doubting it; just trying to pound it through his head the way you’d pound a nail through a thick piece of mahogany. “You’ll really have to —”

“You can leave it, pick it up later,” the gunslinger croaked. “Gods, don’t you understand I have to *talk* here? It hurts! *And there is no time, you idiot!*”

There were men Eddie would have killed for using such a word . . . but he had an idea that he might have a job killing this man, even though the man looked like killing might do him good.

Yet he sensed the truth in those blue eyes; all questions were canceled in their mad glare.

Eddie began to unbutton his shirt. His first impulse was to simply tear it off, like Clark Kent while Lois Lane was tied to a railroad track or something, but that was no good in real life; sooner or later you had to explain those missing buttons. So he slipped them through the loops while the pounding behind him went on.

He yanked the shirt out of his jeans, pulled it off, and dropped it, revealing the strapping tape across his chest. He looked like a man in the last stages of recovery from badly fractured ribs.

He snapped a glance behind him and saw an open door . . . its bottom jamb had dragged a fan shape in the gray grit of the beach when someone—the dying man, presumably—had opened it. Through the doorway he saw the first-class head, the basin, the mirror . . . and in it his own desperate face, black hair spilled across his brow and over his hazel eyes. In the background he saw the gunslinger, the beach, and soaring seabirds that screeched and squabbled over God knew what.

He pawed at the tape, wondering how to start, how to find a loose end, and a dazed sort of hopelessness settled over him. This was the way a deer or a rabbit must feel when it got halfway across a

country road and turned its head only to be fixated by the oncoming glare of headlights.

It had taken William Wilson, the man whose name Poe had made famous, twenty minutes to strap him up. They would have the door to the first-class bathroom open in five, seven at most.

“I can’t get this shit off,” he told the swaying man in front of him. “I don’t know who you are or where I am, but I’m telling you there’s too much tape and too little time.”

14

Deere, the co-pilot, suggested Captain McDonald ought to lay off pounding on the door when McDonald, in his frustration at 3A’s lack of response, began to do so.

“Where’s he going to go?” Deere asked. “What’s he going to do? Flush himself down the john? He’s too big.”

“But if he’s carrying—” McDonald began.

Deere, who had himself used cocaine on more than a few occasions, said: “If he’s carrying, he’s carrying heavy. He can’t get rid of it.”

“Turn off the water,” McDonald snapped suddenly.

“Already have,” the navigator (who had also tooted more than his flute on occasion) said. “But I don’t think it matters. You can dissolve what goes into the holding tanks but you can’t make it not there.” They were clustered around the bathroom door, with its OCCUPIED sign glowing jeerily, all of them speaking in low tones. “The DEA guys drain it, draw off a sample, and the guy’s hung.”

“He could always say someone came in before him and dumped it,” McDonald replied. His voice was gaining a raw edge. He didn’t want to be talking about this; he wanted to be doing something about it, even though he was acutely aware that the geese were still filing out, many looking with more than ordinary curiosity at the flight-deck crew and stewardesses gathered around the bathroom door. For their part, the crew were acutely aware that an act that was—well, overly overt—could provoke the terrorist boogeyman that now lurked

in the back of every air-traveller's mind. McDonald knew his navigator and flight engineer were right, he knew that the stuff was apt to be in plastic bags with the scuzzball's prints on them, and yet he felt alarm bells going off in his mind. Something was not right about this. Something inside of him kept screaming *Fast one! Fast one!* as if the fellow from 3A were a riverboat gambler with palmed aces he was all ready to play.

"He's not trying to flush the john," Susy Douglas said. "He's not even trying to run the basin faucets. We'd hear them sucking air if he was. I hear something, but—"

"Leave," McDonald said curtly. His eyes flicked to Jane Dorning. "You too. We'll take care of this."

Jane turned to go, cheeks burning.

Susy said quietly: "Jane bird-dogged him and I spotted the bulges under his shirt. I think we'll stay, Captain McDonald. If you want to bring charges of insubordination, you can. But I want you to remember that you may be raping the *hell* out of what could be a really big DEA bust."

Their eyes locked, flint sparking off steel.

Susy said, "I've flown with you seventy, eighty times, Mac. I'm trying to be your friend."

McDonald looked at her a moment longer, then nodded. "Stay, then. But I want both of you back a step toward the cockpit."

He stood on his toes, looked back, and saw the end of the line now just emerging from tourist class into business. Two minutes, maybe three.

He turned to the gate agent at the mouth of the hatch, who was watching them closely. He must have sensed some sort of problem, because he had unholstered his walkie-talkie and was holding it in his hand.

"Tell him I want customs agents up here," McDonald said quietly to the navigator. "Three or four. Armed. Now."

The navigator made his way through the line of passengers, excusing himself with an easy grin, and spoke quietly to the gate agent, who raised his walkie-talkie to his mouth and spoke quietly into it.

McDonald—who had never put anything stronger than aspirin into his system in his entire life and that only rarely—turned to Deere. His lips were pressed into a thin white line like a scar.

“As soon as the last of the passengers are off, we’re breaking that shithouse door open,” he said. “I don’t care if Customs is here or not. Do you understand?”

“Roger,” Deere said, and watched the tail of the line make its way into first class.

15

“Get my knife,” the gunslinger said. “It’s in my purse.”

He gestured toward a cracked leather bag lying on the sand. It looked more like a big packsack than a purse, the kind of thing you expected to see hippies carrying as they made their way along the Appalachian trail, getting high on nature (and maybe a bomber joint every now and then), except this looked like the real thing, not just a prop for some airhead’s self-image; something that had done years and years of hard—maybe desperate—travelling.

Gestured, but did not point. *Couldn’t* point. Eddie realized why the man had a swatch of dirty shirting wrapped around his right hand: some of his fingers were gone.

“Get it,” he said. “Cut through the tape. Try not to cut yourself. It’s easy to do. You’ll have to be careful, but you’ll have to move fast just the same. There isn’t much time.”

“I know that,” Eddie said, and knelt on the sand. None of this was real. That was it, that was the answer. As Henry Dean, the great sage and eminent junkie would have put it, *Flip-flop, hippety-hop, offa your rocker and over the top, life’s a fiction and the world’s a lie, so put on some Creedence and let’s get high.*

None of it was real, it was all just an extraordinarily vivid nodder, so the best thing was just to ride low and go with the flow.

It sure was a vivid nodder. He was reaching for the zipper—or maybe it would be a Velcro strip—on the man’s “purse” when he saw it was held together by a crisscross pattern of rawhide thongs, some

of which had broken and been carefully reknotted—reknotted small enough so they would still slide through the grommetted eyelets.

Eddie pulled the drag-knot at the top, spread the bag's opening, and found the knife beneath a slightly damp package that was the piece of shirting tied around the bullets. Just the handle was enough to take his breath away . . . it was the true mellow gray-white of pure silver, engraved with a complex series of patterns that caught the eye, drew it—

Pain exploded in his ear, roared across his head, and momentarily puffed a red cloud across his vision. He fell clumsily over the open purse, struck the sand, and looked up at the pale man in the cut-down boots. This was no nodder. The blue eyes blazing from that dying face were the eyes of all truth.

"Admire it later, prisoner," the gunslinger said. "For now just use it."

He could feel his ear throbbing, swelling.

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Cut the tape," the gunslinger said grimly. "If they break into yon privy while you're still over here, I've got a feeling you're going to be here for a very long time. And with a corpse for company before long."

Eddie pulled the knife out of the scabbard. Not old; more than old, more than ancient. The blade, honed almost to the point of invisibility, seemed to be all age caught in metal.

"Yeah, it looks sharp," he said, and his voice wasn't steady.

16

The last passengers were filing out into the jetway. One of them, a lady of some seventy summers with that exquisite look of confusion which only first-time fliers with too many years or too little English seem capable of wearing, stopped to show Jane Dorning her tickets. "How will I ever find my plane to Montreal?" she asked. "And what about my bags? Do they do my Customs here or there?"

"There will be a gate agent at the top of the jetway who can give you all the information you need, ma'am," Jane said.

“Well, I don’t see why *you* can’t give me the information I need,” the old woman said. “That jetway thing is still full of people.”

“Move on, please, madam,” Captain McDonald said. “We have a problem.”

“Well, pardon me for living,” the old woman said huffily, “I guess I just fell off the hearse!”

And strode past them, nose tilted like the nose of a dog scenting a fire still some distance away, tote-bag clutched in one hand, ticket-folder (with so many boarding-pass stubs sticking out of it that one might have been tempted to believe the lady had come most of the way around the globe, changing planes at every stop along the way) in the other.

“There’s a lady who may never fly Delta’s big jets again,” Susy murmured.

“I don’t give a fuck if she flies stuffed down the front of Superman’s Jockies,” McDonald said. “She the last?”

Jane darted past them, glanced at the seats in business class, then poked her head into the main cabin. It was deserted.

She came back and reported the plane empty.

McDonald turned to the jetway and saw two uniformed Customs agents fighting their way through the crowd, excusing themselves but not bothering to look back at the people they jostled aside. The last of these was the old lady, who dropped her ticket-folder. Papers flew and fluttered everywhere and she shrilled after them like an angry crow.

“Okay,” McDonald said, “you guys stop right there.”

“Sir, we’re Federal Customs officers—”

“That’s right, and I requested you, and I’m glad you came so fast. Now you just stand right there because this is my plane and that guy in there is one of my geese. Once he’s off the plane and into the jetway, he’s your goose and you can cook him any way you want.” He nodded to Deere. “I’m going to give the son of a bitch one more chance and then we’re going to break the door in.”

“Okay by me,” Deere said.

McDonald whacked on the bathroom door with the heel of his hand and yelled, “Come on out, my friend! I’m done asking!”

There was no answer.

“Okay,” McDonald said. “Let’s do it.”

17

Dimly, Eddie heard an old woman say: “Well, pardon me for living! I guess I just fell off the hearse!”

He had parted half the strapping tape. When the old woman spoke his hand jerked a little and he saw a trickle of blood run down his belly.

“Shit,” Eddie said.

“It can’t be helped now,” the gunslinger said in his hoarse voice. “Finish the job. Or does the sight of blood make you sick?”

“Only when it’s my own,” Eddie said. The tape had started just above his belly. The higher he cut the harder it got to see. He got another three inches or so, and almost cut himself again when he heard McDonald speaking to the Customs agents: “Okay, you guys stop right there.”

“I can finish and maybe cut myself wide open or you can try,” Eddie said. “I can’t see what I’m doing. My fucking chin’s in the way.”

The gunslinger took the knife in his left hand. The hand was shaking. Watching that blade, honed to a suicidal sharpness, shaking like that made Eddie extremely nervous.

“Maybe I better chance it mys—”

“Wait.”

The gunslinger stared fixedly at his left hand. Eddie didn’t exactly disbelieve in telepathy, but he had never exactly *believed* in it, either. Nevertheless, he felt something now, something as real and palpable as heat baking out of an oven. After a few seconds he realized what it was: the gathering of this strange man’s will.

How the hell can he be dying if I can feel the force of him that strongly?

The shaking hand began to steady down. Soon it was barely shivering. After no more than ten seconds it was as solid as a rock.

“Now,” the gunslinger said. He took a step forward, raised the knife, and Eddie felt something else baking off him—rancid fever.

“Are you left-handed?” Eddie asked.

“No,” the gunslinger said.

“Oh Jesus,” Eddie said, and decided he might feel better if he closed his eyes for a moment. He heard the harsh whisper of the masking tape parting.

“There,” the gunslinger said, stepping back. “Now pull it off as far as you can. I’ll get the back.”

No polite little knocks on the bathroom door now; this was a hammering fist. *The passengers are out*, Eddie thought. *No more Mr. Nice Guy. Oh shit.*

“Come on out, my friend! I’m done asking!”

“*Yank* it!” the gunslinger growled.

Eddie grabbed a thick tab of strapping tape in each hand and yanked as hard as he could. It hurt, hurt like hell. *Stop bellyaching*, he thought. *Things could be worse. You could be hairy-chested, like Henry.*

He looked down and saw a red band of irritated skin about seven inches wide across his sternum. Just above the solar plexus was the place where he had poked himself. Blood welled in a dimple and ran down to his navel in a scarlet runnel. Beneath his armpits, the bags of dope now dangled like badly tied saddlebags.

“Okay,” the muffled voice beyond the bathroom door said to someone else. “Let’s d—”

Eddie lost the rest of it in the unexpected riptide of pain across his back as the gunslinger unceremoniously tore the rest of the girdle from him.

He bit down against a scream.

“Put your shirt on,” the gunslinger said. His face, which Eddie had thought as pallid as the face of a living man could become, was now the color of ancient ashes. He held the girdle of tape (now sticking to itself in a meaningless tangle, the big bags of white stuff looking like strange cocoons) in his left hand, then tossed it aside. Eddie saw fresh blood seeping through the makeshift bandage on the gunslinger’s right hand. “Do it fast.”

There was a thudding sound. This wasn't someone pounding for admittance. Eddie looked up in time to see the bathroom door shudder, to see the lights in there flicker. They were trying to break it in.

He picked his shirt up with fingers that suddenly seemed too large, too clumsy. The left sleeve was turned inside out. He tried to stuff it back through the hole, got his hand stuck for a moment, then yanked it out so hard he pulled the sleeve back again with it.

Thud, and the bathroom door shivered again.

"Gods, how can you be so clumsy?" the gunslinger moaned, and rammed his own fist into the left sleeve of Eddie's shirt. Eddie grabbed the cuff as the gunslinger pulled back. Now the gunslinger held the shirt for him as a butler might hold a coat for his master. Eddie put it on and groped for the lowest button.

"Not yet!" the gunslinger barked, and tore another piece away from his own diminishing shirt. "Wipe your gut!"

Eddie did the best he could. The dimple where the knife had actually pierced his skin was still welling blood. The blade was sharp, all right. Sharp enough.

He dropped the bloody wad of the gunslinger's shirt on the sand and buttoned his shirt.

Thud. This time the door did more than shudder; it buckled in its frame. Looking through the doorway on the beach, Eddie saw the bottle of liquid soap fall from where it had been standing beside the basin. It landed on his zipper bag.

He had meant to stuff his shirt, which was now buttoned (and buttoned straight, for a wonder), into his pants. Suddenly a better idea struck him. He unbuckled his belt instead.

"There's no time for that!" The gunslinger realized he was trying to scream and was unable. "That door's only got one hit left in it!"

"I know what I'm doing," Eddie said, hoping he did, and stepped back through the doorway between the worlds, unsnapping his jeans and raking the zipper down as he went.

After one desperate, despairing moment, the gunslinger followed him, physical and full of hot physical ache at one moment, nothing but cool *ka* in Eddie's head at the next.

“One more,” McDonald said grimly, and Deere nodded. Now that all the passengers were out of the jetway as well as the plane itself, the Customs agents had drawn their weapons.

“*Now!*”

The two men drove forward and hit the door together. It flew open, a chunk of it hanging for a moment from the lock and then dropping to the floor.

And there sat Mr. 3A, with his pants around his knees and the tails of his faded paisley shirt concealing—barely—his jackhandle. *Well, it sure does look like we caught him in the act*, Captain McDonald thought wearily. *Only trouble is, the act we caught him in wasn't against the law, last I heard.* Suddenly he could feel the throb in his shoulder where he had hit the door—what? three times? four?

Out loud he barked, “What in hell’s name are you doing in there, mister?”

“Well, I was taking a crap,” 3A said, “but if *all* you guys got a bad problem, I guess I could wipe myself in the terminal—”

“And I suppose you didn’t hear us, smart guy?”

“Couldn’t reach the door.” 3A put out his hand to demonstrate, and although the door was now hanging askew against the wall to his left, McDonald could see his point. “I suppose I could have gotten up, but I, like, had a desperate situation on my hands. Except it wasn’t exactly on my *hands*, if you get my drift. Nor did I *want* it on my hands, if you catch my *further* drift.” 3A smiled a winning, slightly daffy smile which looked to Captain McDonald approximately as real as a nine-dollar bill. Listening to him, you’d think no one had ever taught him the simple trick of leaning forward.

“Get up,” McDonald said.

“Be happy to. If you could just move the ladies back a little?” 3A smiled charmingly. “I know it’s outdated in this day and age, but I can’t help it. I’m modest. Fact is, I’ve got a lot to be modest about.” He held up his left hand, thumb and forefinger roughly half an inch apart, and winked at Jane Dorning, who blushed bright red and immediately disappeared up the jetway, closely followed by Susy.

You don't look modest, Captain McDonald thought. You look like a cat that just got the cream, that's what you look like.

When the stews were out of sight, 3A stood and pulled up his shorts and jeans. He then reached for the flush button and Captain McDonald promptly knocked his hand away, grabbed his shoulders, and pivoted him toward the aisle. Deere hooked a restraining hand into the back of his pants.

“Don't get personal,” Eddie said. His voice was light and just right—he thought so, anyway—but inside everything was in free fall. He could feel that other, feel him clearly. He was inside his mind, watching him closely, standing steady, meaning to move in if Eddie fucked up. God, it all had to be a dream, didn't it? *Didn't it?*

“Stand still,” Deere said.

Captain McDonald peered into the toilet.

“No shit,” he said, and when the navigator let out a bray of involuntary laughter, McDonald glared at him.

“Well, you know how it is,” Eddie said. “Sometimes you get lucky and it's just a false alarm. I let off a couple of real rippers, though. I mean, we're talking swamp gas. If you'd lit a match in here three minutes ago, you could have roasted a Thanksgiving turkey, you know? It must have been something I ate before I got on the plane, I g—”

“Get rid of him,” McDonald said, and Deere, still holding Eddie by the back of the pants, propelled him out of the plane and into the jetway, where each Customs officer took one arm.

“Hey!” Eddie cried. “I want my bag! And I want my jacket!”

“Oh, we want you to have *all* your stuff,” one of the officers said. His breath, heavy with the smell of Maalox and stomach acid, puffed against Eddie's face. “We're very interested in your stuff. Now let's go, little buddy.”

Eddie kept telling them to take it easy, mellow out, he could walk just fine, but he thought later the tips of his shoes only touched the floor of the jetway three or four times between the 727's hatch and the exit to the terminal, where three more Customs officers and half a dozen airport security cops stood, the Customs guys waiting for

Eddie, the cops holding back a small crowd that stared at him with uneasy, avid interest as he was led away.

CHAPTER 4

The Tower

1

Eddie Dean was sitting in a chair. The chair was in a small white room. It was the only chair in the small white room. The small white room was crowded. The small white room was smoky. Eddie was in his underpants. Eddie wanted a cigarette. The other six—no, seven—men in the small white room were dressed. The other men were standing around him, enclosing him. Three—no, four—of them were smoking cigarettes.

Eddie wanted to jitter and jive. Eddie wanted to hop and bop.

Eddie sat still, relaxed, looking at the men around him with amused interest, as if he wasn't going crazy for a fix, as if he wasn't going crazy from simple claustrophobia.

The *other* in his mind was the reason why. He had been terrified of the *other* at first. Now he thanked God the *other* was there.

The *other* might be sick, dying even, but there was enough steel left in his spine for him to have some left to loan this scared twenty-one-year-old junkie.

"That is a very interesting red mark on your chest," one of the Customs men said. A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. There was a pack in his shirt pocket. Eddie felt as if he could take about five of the cigarettes in that pack, line his mouth with them from corner to corner, light them all, inhale deeply, and be easier in his mind. "It looks like a stripe. It looks like you had something taped there, Eddie, and all at once decided it would be a good idea to rip it off and get rid of it."

"I picked up an allergy in the Bahamas," Eddie said. "I told you that. I mean, we've been through all of this several times. I'm trying to keep my sense of humor, but it's getting harder all the time."

“*Fuck* your sense of humor,” another said savagely, and Eddie recognized that tone. It was the way he himself sounded when he’d spent half a night in the cold waiting for the man and the man didn’t come. Because these guys were junkies, too. The only difference was guys like him and Henry were their junk.

“What about that hole in your gut? Where’d that come from, Eddie? Publishers Clearing House?” A third agent was pointing at the spot where Eddie had poked himself. It had finally stopped dribbling but there was still a dark purple bubble there which looked more than ready to break open at the slightest urging.

Eddie indicated the red band where the tape had been. “It itches,” he said. This was no lie. “I fell asleep on the plane—check the stew if you don’t believe me—”

“Why wouldn’t we believe you, Eddie?”

“I don’t know,” Eddie said. “Do you usually get big drug smugglers who snooze on their way in?” He paused, gave them a second to think about it, then held out his hands. Some of the nails were ragged. Others were jagged. When you went cool turkey, he had discovered, your nails suddenly became your favorite munchies. “I’ve been pretty good about not scratching, but I must have dug myself a damned good one while I was sleeping.”

“Or while you were on the nod. That could be a needlemark.” Eddie could see they both knew better. You shot yourself up that close to the solar plexus, which was the nervous system’s switchboard, you weren’t ever going to shoot yourself up again.

“Give me a break,” Eddie said. “You were in my face so close to look at my pupils I thought you were going to soul-kiss me. You know I wasn’t on the nod.”

The third Customs agent looked disgusted. “For an innocent lambikins, you know an awful lot about dope, Eddie.”

“What I didn’t pick up on *Miami Vice* I got from the *Reader’s Digest*. Now tell me the truth—how many times are we going to go through this?”

A fourth agent held up a small plastic Baggie. In it were several fibers.

“These are filaments. We’ll get the lab confirmation, but we know what sort they are. They’re filaments of strapping tape.”

“I didn’t take a shower before I left the hotel,” Eddie said for the fourth time. “I was out by the pool, getting some sun. Trying to get rid of the rash. The *allergy* rash. I fell asleep. I was damned lucky to make the plane at all. I had to run like hell. The wind was blowing. I don’t know what stuck to my skin and what didn’t.”

Another reached out and ran a finger up the three inches of flesh from the inner bend of Eddie’s left elbow.

“And these aren’t needle tracks.”

Eddie shoved the hand away. “Mosquito bites. I told you. Almost healed. Jesus Christ, you can see that for yourself!”

They could. This deal hadn’t come up overnight. Eddie had stopped arm-popping a month ago. Henry couldn’t have done that, and that was one of the reasons it had been Eddie, *had* to be Eddie. When he absolutely *had* to fix, he had taken it very high on his upper left thigh, where his left testicle lay against the skin of the leg . . . as he had the other night, when the sallow thing had finally brought him some stuff that was okay. Mostly he had just snorted, something with which Henry could no longer content himself. This caused feelings Eddie couldn’t exactly define . . . a mixture of pride and shame. If they looked there, if they pushed his testicles aside, he could have some serious problems. A blood-test could cause him problems even more serious, but that was one step further than they could go without some sort of evidence—and evidence was something they just didn’t have. They knew everything but could prove nothing. All the difference between world and want, his dear old mother would have said.

“Mosquito bites.”

“Yes.”

“And the red mark’s an allergic reaction.”

“Yes. I had it when I went to the Bahamas; it just wasn’t that bad.”

“He had it when he went down there,” one of the men said to another.

“Uh-huh,” the second said. “You believe it?”

“Sure.”

“You believe in Santa Claus?”

“Sure. When I was a kid I even had my picture taken with him once.” He looked at Eddie. “You got a picture of this famous red mark from before you took your little trip, Eddie?”

Eddie didn't reply.

“If you're clean, why won't you take a blood-test?” This was the first guy again, the guy with the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. It had almost burned down to the filter.

Eddie was suddenly angry—white-hot angry. He listened inside.

Okay, the voice responded at once, and Eddie felt more than agreement, he felt a kind of go-to-the-wall approval. It made him feel the way he felt when Henry hugged him, tousled his hair, punched him on the shoulder, and said *You done good, kid—don't let it go to your head, but you done good.*

“You *know* I'm clean.” He stood up suddenly—so suddenly they moved back. He looked at the smoker who was closest to him. “And I'll tell you something, babe, if you don't get that coffin-nail out of my face I'm going to *knock* it out.”

The guy recoiled.

“You guys have emptied the crap-tank on that plane already. God, you've had enough time to have been through it three times. You've been through my stuff. I bent over and let one of you stick the world's longest finger up my ass. If a prostate check is an exam, that was a motherfucking safari. I was scared to look down. I thought I'd see that guy's fingernail sticking out of my *cock.*”

He glared around at them.

“You've been up my ass, you've been through my stuff, and I'm sitting here in a pair of Jockies with you guys blowing smoke in my face. You want a bloodtest? Kay. Bring in someone to do it.”

They murmured, looked at each other. Surprised. Uneasy.

“But if you want to do it without a court order,” Eddie said, “whoever does it better bring a lot of extra hypos and vials, because I'll be damned if I'm gonna piss alone. I want a Federal marshal in here, and I want each one of you to take the same goddam test, and I want your names and IDs on each vial, and I want them to go into that Federal marshal's custody. And whatever you test mine for—

cocaine, heroin, bennies, pot, whatever—I want those same tests performed on the samples from you guys. And then I want the results turned over to my lawyer.”

“Oh boy, YOUR LAWYER,” one of them cried. “That’s what it always comes down to with you shitbags, doesn’t it, Eddie? You’ll hear from MY LAWYER. I’ll sic MY LAWYER on you. That crap makes me want to *puke!*”

“As a matter of fact I don’t currently have one,” Eddie said, and this was the truth. “I didn’t think I needed one. You guys changed my mind. You got nothing because I *have* nothing, but the rock and roll just doesn’t stop, does it? So you want me to dance? Great. I’ll dance. But I’m not gonna do it alone. You guys’ll have to dance, too.”

There was a thick, difficult silence.

“I’d like you to take down your shorts again, please, Mr. Dean,” one of them said. This guy was older. This guy looked like he was in charge of things. Eddie thought that maybe—just maybe—this guy had finally realized where the fresh tracks might be. Until now they hadn’t checked. His arms, his shoulders, his legs . . . but not there. They had been too sure they had a bust.

“I’m through taking things off, taking things down, and eating this shit,” Eddie said. “You get someone in here and we’ll do a bunch of blood-tests or I’m getting out. Now which do you want?”

That silence again. And when they started looking at each other, Eddie knew he had won.

WE won, he amended. What’s your name, fella?

Roland. Yours is Eddie. Eddie Dean.

You listen good.

Listen and watch.

“Give him his clothes,” the older man said disgustedly. He looked at Eddie. “I don’t know what you had or how you got rid of it, but I want you to know that we’re going to find out.”

The old dude surveyed him.

“So there you sit. There you sit, almost grinning. What you say doesn’t make me want to puke. What you *are* does.”

I make you want to puke.”

“That’s affirmative.”

“Oh, boy,” Eddie said. “I love it. I’m sitting here in a little room and I’ve got nothing on but my underwear and there’s seven guys around me with guns on their hips and *I make you want to puke?* Man, you have got a problem.”

Eddie took a step toward him. The Customs guy held his ground for a moment, and then something in Eddie’s eyes—a crazy color that seemed half-hazel, half-blue—made him step back against his will.

“I’M NOT CARRYING!” Eddie roared. *“QUIT NOW! JUST QUIT! LET ME ALONE!”*

The silence again. Then the older man turned around and yelled at someone, “Didn’t you hear me? *Get his clothes!*”

And that was that.

2

“You think we’re being tailed?” the cabbie asked. He sounded amused.

Eddie turned forward. “Why do you say that?”

“You keep looking out the back window.”

“I never thought about being tailed,” Eddie said. This was the absolute truth. He had seen the tails the first time he looked around. *Tails*, not tail. He didn’t have to keep looking around to confirm their presence. Out-patients from a sanitarium for the mentally retarded would have trouble losing Eddie’s cab on this late May afternoon; traffic on the L.I.E. was sparse. “I’m a student of traffic patterns, that’s all.”

“Oh,” the cabbie said. In some circles such an odd statement would have prompted questions, but New York cab drivers rarely question; instead they assert, usually in a grand manner. Most of these assertions begin with the phrase *This city!* as if the words were a religious invocation preceeding a sermon . . . which they usually were. Instead, this one said: “Because if you *did* think we were being tailed, we’re not. I’d know. This city! Jesus! I’ve tailed plenty of people in my time. You’d be surprised how many people jump into

my cab and say ‘Follow that car.’ I know, sounds like something you only hear in the movies, right? Right. But like they say, art imitates life and life imitates art. It really happens! And as for shaking a tail, it’s easy if you know how to set the guy up. You . . .”

Eddie tuned the cabbie down to a background drone, listening just enough so he could nod in the right places. When you thought about it, the cabbie’s rap was actually quite amusing. One of the tails was a dark blue sedan. Eddie guessed that one belonged to Customs. The other was a panel truck with GINELLI’S PIZZA written on the sides. There was also a picture of a pizza, only the pizza was a smiling boy’s face, and the smiling boy was smacking his lips, and written under the picture was the slogan “UMMMMMM! It’s-a GOOOOD Pizza!” Only some young urban artist with a spray-can and a rudimentary sense of humor had drawn a line through *Pizza* and had printed *PUSSY* above it.

Ginelli. There was only one Ginelli Eddie knew; he ran a restaurant called Four Fathers. The pizza business was a sideline, a guaranteed stiff, an accountant’s angel. Ginelli and Balazar. They went together like hot dogs and mustard.

According to the original plan, there was to have been a limo waiting outside the terminal with a driver ready to whisk him away to Balazar’s place of business, which was a midtown saloon. But of course the original plan hadn’t included two hours in a little white room, two hours of steady questioning from one bunch of Customs agents while another bunch first drained and then raked the contents of Flight 901’s wastetanks, looking for the big carry they also suspected, the big carry that would be unflushable, undissolvable.

When he came out, there was no limo, of course. The driver would have had his instructions: if the mule isn’t out of the terminal fifteen minutes or so after the rest of the passengers have come out, drive away fast. The limo driver would know better than to use the car’s telephone, which was actually a radio that could easily be monitored. Balazar would call people, find out Eddie had struck trouble, and get ready for trouble of his own. Balazar might have recognized Eddie’s steel, but that didn’t change the fact that Eddie was a junkie. A junkie could not be relied upon to be a stand-up guy.

This meant there was a possibility that the pizza truck just might pull up in the lane next to the taxi, someone just might stick an automatic weapon out of the pizza truck's window, and then the back of the cab would become something that looked like a bloody cheese-grater. Eddie would have been more worried about that if they held him for four hours instead of two, and seriously worried if it had been six hours instead of four. But only two . . . he thought Balazar would trust him to have hung on to his lip at least that long. He would want to know about his goods.

The real reason Eddie kept looking back was the door.

It fascinated him.

As the Customs agents had half-carried, half-dragged him down the stairs to Kennedy's administration section, he had looked back over his shoulder and there it had been, improbable but indubitably, inarguably real, floating along at a distance of about three feet. He could see the waves rolling steadily in, crashing on the sand; he saw that the day over there was beginning to darken.

The door was like one of those trick pictures with a hidden image in them, it seemed; you couldn't see that hidden part for the life of you at first, but once you had, you couldn't unsee it, no matter how hard you tried.

It had disappeared on the two occasions when the gunslinger went back without him, and that had been scary—Eddie had felt like a child whose nightlight has burned out. The first time had been during the customs interrogation.

I have to go, Roland's voice had cut cleanly through whatever question they were currently throwing at him. *I'll only be a few moments. Don't be afraid.*

Why? Eddie asked. *Why do you have to go?*

"What's wrong?" one of the Customs guys had asked him. "All of a sudden you look scared."

All of a sudden he had *felt* scared, but of nothing this yo-yo would understand.

He looked over his shoulder, and the Customs men had also turned. They saw nothing but a blank white wall covered with white panels drilled with holes to damp sound; Eddie saw the door, its

usual three feet away (now it was embedded in the room's wall, an escape hatch none of his interrogators could see). He saw more. He saw *things* coming out of the waves, *things* that looked like refugees from a horror movie where the effects are just a little more special than you want them to be, special enough so everything looks real. They looked like a hideous cross-breeding of prawn, lobster, and spider. They were making some weird sound.

"You getting the jim-jams?" one of the Customs guys had asked. "Seeing a few bugs crawling down the wall, Eddie?"

That was so close to the truth that Eddie had almost laughed. He understood why the man named Roland had to go back, though; Roland's mind was safe enough—at least for the time being—but the creatures were moving toward his body, and Eddie had a suspicion that if Roland did not soon vacate it from the area it currently occupied, there might not be any body left to go back to.

Suddenly in his head he heard David Lee Roth bawling: *Oh lyyyyy . . . ain't got nobody . . .* and this time he *did* laugh. He couldn't help it.

"What's so funny?" the Customs agent who had wanted to know if he was seeing bugs asked him.

"This whole situation," Eddie had responded. "Only in the sense of peculiar, not hilarious. I mean, if it was a movie it would be more like Fellini than Woody Allen, if you get what I mean."

You'll be all right? Roland asked.

Yeah, fine. TCB, man.

I don't understand.

Go take care of business.

Oh. All right. I'll not be long.

And suddenly that *other* had been gone. Simply gone. Like a wisp of smoke so thin that the slightest vagary of wind could blow it away. Eddie looked around again, saw nothing but drilled white panels, no door, no ocean, no weird monstrosities, and he felt his gut begin to tighten. There was no question of believing that it had all been a hallucination after all; the dope was gone, and that was all the proof Eddie needed. But Roland had . . . helped, somehow. Made it easier.

“You want me to hang a picture there?” one of the Customs guys asked.

“No,” Eddie said, and blew out a sigh. “I want you to let me *out* of here.”

“Soon as you tell us what you did with the skag,” another said, “or was it coke?” And so it started again: round and round she goes and where she stops nobody knows.

Ten minutes later—ten very *long* minutes—Roland was suddenly back in his mind. One second gone, next second there. Eddie sensed he was deeply exhausted.

Taken care of? he asked.

Yes. I'm sorry it took so long. A pause. I had to crawl.

Eddie looked around again. The doorway had returned, but now it offered a slightly different view of that world, and he realized that, as it moved with him here, it moved with Roland there. The thought made him shiver a little. It was like being tied to this other by some weird umbilicus. The gunslinger's body lay collapsed in front of it as before, but now he was looking down a long stretch of beach to the braided hightide line where the monsters wandered about, growling and buzzing. Each time a wave broke all of them raised their claws. They looked like the audiences in those old documentary films where Hitler's speaking and everyone is throwing that old *seig heil!* salute like their lives depended on it—which they probably did, when you thought about it. Eddie could see the tortured markings of the gunslinger's progress in the sand.

As Eddie watched, one of the horrors reached up, lightning quick, and snared a sea-bird which happened to swoop too close to the beach. The thing fell to the sand in two bloody, spraying chunks. The parts were covered by the shelled horrors even before they had stopped twitching. A single white feather drifted up. A claw snatched it down.

Holy Christ, Eddie thought numbly. *Look at those snappers.*

“Why do you keep looking back there?” the guy in charge had asked.

“From time to time I need an antidote,” Eddie said.

“From what?”

“Your face.”

3

The cab-driver dropped Eddie at the building in Co-Op City, thanked him for the dollar tip, and drove off. Eddie just stood for a moment, zipper bag in one hand, his jacket hooked over a finger of the other and slung back over his shoulder. Here he shared a two-bedroom apartment with his brother. He stood for a moment looking up at it, a monolith with all the style and taste of a brick Saltines box. The many windows made it look like a prison cellblock to Eddie, and he found the view as depressing as Roland—the *other*—did amazing.

Never, even as a child, did I see a building so high, Roland said. And there are so many of them!

Yeah, Eddie agreed. We live like a bunch of ants in a hill. It may look good to you, but I'll tell you, Roland, it gets old. It gets old in a hurry.

The blue car cruised by; the pizza truck turned in and approached. Eddie stiffened and felt Roland stiffen inside him. Maybe they intended to blow him away after all.

The door? Roland asked. Shall we go through? Do you wish it? Eddie sensed Roland was ready—for anything—but the voice was calm.

Not yet, Eddie said. Could be they only want to talk. But be ready.

He sensed that was an unnecessary thing to say; he sensed that Roland was readier to move and act in his deepest sleep than Eddie would ever be in his most wide-awake moment.

The pizza truck with the smiling kid on the side closed in. The passenger window rolled down and Eddie waited outside the entrance to his building with his shadow trailing out long in front of him from the toes of his sneakers, waiting to see which it would be—a face or a gun.

4

The second time Roland left him had been no more than five minutes after the Customs people had finally given up and let Eddie go.

The gunslinger had eaten, but not enough; he needed to drink; most of all he needed medicine. Eddie couldn't yet help him with the medicine Roland really needed (although he suspected the gunslinger was right and Balazar could . . . if Balazar wanted to), but simple aspirin might at least knock down the fever that Eddie had felt when the gunslinger stepped close to sever the top part of the tape girdle. He paused in front of the newsstand in the main terminal.

Do you have aspirin where you come from?

I have never heard of it. Is it magic or medicine?

Both, I guess.

Eddie went into the newsstand and bought a tin of Extra-Strength Anacin. He went over to the snack bar and bought a couple of foot-long dogs and an extra-large Pepsi. He was putting mustard and catsup on the franks (Henry called the foot-longs Godzilla-dogs) when he suddenly remembered this stuff wasn't for him. For all he knew, Roland might not *like* mustard and catsup. For all he knew, Roland might be a veggie. For all he knew, this crap might kill Roland.

Well, too late now, Eddie thought. When Roland spoke—when Roland *acted*—Eddie knew all this was really happening. When he was quiet, that giddy feeling that it must be a dream—an extraordinarily vivid dream he was having as he slept on Delta 901 inbound to Kennedy—insisted on creeping back.

Roland had told him he could carry the food into his own world. He had already done something similar once, he said, when Eddie was asleep. Eddie found it all but impossible to believe, but Roland assured him it was true.

Well, we still have to be damned careful, Eddie said. *They've got two Customs guys watching me. Us. Whatever the hell I am now.*

I know we have to be careful, Roland returned. *There aren't two; there are five.* Eddie suddenly felt one of the weirdest sensations of his entire life. He did not move his eyes but felt them *moved*. Roland moved them.

A guy in a muscle shirt talking into a telephone.

A woman sitting on a bench, rooting through her purse.

A young black guy who would have been spectacularly handsome except for the harelip which surgery had only partially repaired, looking at the tee-shirts in the newsstand Eddie had come from not long since.

There was nothing wrong about any of them on top, but Eddie recognized them for what they were nonetheless and it was like seeing those hidden images in a child's puzzle, which, once seen, could never be unseen. He felt dull heat in his cheeks, because it had taken the *other* to point out what he should have seen at once. He had spotted only two. These three were a little better, but not that much; the eyes of the phoneman weren't blank, imagining the person he was talking to but aware, actually *looking*, and the place where Eddie was . . . that was the place to which the phone-man's eyes just happened to keep returning. The purse-woman didn't find what she wanted or give up but simply went on rooting endlessly. And the shopper had had a chance to look at every shirt on the spindle-rack at least a dozen times.

All of a sudden Eddie felt five again, afraid to cross the street without Henry to hold his hand.

Never mind, Roland said. And don't worry about the food, either. I've eaten bugs while they were still lively enough for some of them to go running down my throat.

Yeah, Eddie replied, but this is New York.

He took the dogs and the soda to the far end of the counter and stood with his back to the terminal's main concourse. Then he glanced up in the left-hand corner. A convex mirror bulged there like a hypertensive eye. He could see all of his followers in it, but none was close enough to see the food and cup of soda, and that was good, because Eddie didn't have the slightest idea what was going to happen to it.

Put the astin on the meat-things. Then hold everything in your hands.

Aspirin.

Good. Call it flutergork if you want, pr . . . Eddie. Just do it.

He took the Anacin out of the stapled bag he had stuffed in his pocket, almost put it down on one of the hot-dogs, and suddenly realized that Roland would have problems just getting what Eddie thought of as the poison-proofing—off the tin, let alone opening it.

He did it himself, shook three of the pills onto one of the napkins, debated, then added three more.

Three now, three later, he said. If there is a later.

All right. Thank you.

Now what?

Hold all of it.

Eddie had glanced into the convex mirror again. Two of the agents were strolling casually toward the snack-bar, maybe not liking the way Eddie's back was turned, maybe smelling a little prestidigitation in progress and wanting a closer look. If something was going to happen, it better happen quick.

He put his hands around everything, feeling the heat of the dogs in their soft white rolls, the chill of the Pepsi. In that moment he looked like a guy getting ready to carry a snack back to his kids . . . and then the stuff started to *melt*.

He stared down, eyes widening, widening, until it felt to him that they must soon fall out and dangle by their stalks.

He could see the hotdogs through the rolls. He could see the Pepsi through the cup, the ice-choked liquid curving to conform to a shape which could no longer be seen.

Then he could see the red Formica counter through the foot-longs and the white wall through the Pepsi. His hands slid toward each other, the resistance between them growing less and less . . . and then they closed against each other, palm to palm. The food . . . the napkins . . . the Pepsi-Cola . . . the six Anacin . . . all the things which had been between his hands were gone.

Jesus jumped up and played the fiddle, Eddie thought numbly. He flicked his eyes up toward the convex mirror.

The doorway was gone . . . just as Roland was gone from his mind.

Eat hearty, my friend, Eddie thought . . . but was this weird alien presence that called itself Roland his friend? That was far from

proved, wasn't it? He had saved Eddie's bacon, true enough, but that didn't mean he was a Boy Scout.

All the same, *he* liked Roland. Feared him . . . but liked him as well.

Suspected that in time he could love him, as he loved Henry.

Eat well, stranger, he thought. *Eat well, stay alive . . . and come back.*

Close by were a few mustard-stained napkins left by a previous customer. Eddie balled them up, tossed them in the trash-barrel by the door on his way out, and chewed air as if finishing a last bite of something. He was even able to manufacture a burp as he approached the black guy on his way toward the signs pointing the way to LUGGAGE and GROUND TRANSPORTATION.

"Couldn't find a shirt you liked?" Eddie asked.

"I beg your pardon?" the black guy turned from the American Airlines departures monitor he was pretending to study.

"I thought maybe you were looking for one that said PLEASE FEED ME, I AM A U.S. GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE," Eddie said, and walked on.

As he headed down the stairs he saw the purse-rooter hurriedly snap her purse shut and get to her feet.

Oh boy, this is gonna be like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

It had been one fuck of an interesting day, and Eddie didn't think it was over yet.

5

When Roland saw the lobster-things coming out of the waves again (their coming had nothing to do with tide, then; it was the dark that brought them), he left Eddie Dean to move himself before the creatures could find and eat him.

The pain he had expected and was prepared for. He had lived with pain so long it was almost an old friend. He was appalled, however, by the rapidity with which his fever had increased and his strength decreased. If he had not been dying before, he most assuredly was

now. Was there something powerful enough in the prisoner's world to keep that from happening? Perhaps. But if he didn't get some of it within the next six or eight hours, he thought it wouldn't matter. If things went much further, no medicine or magic in that world or any other would make him well again.

Walking was impossible. He would have to crawl.

He was getting ready to start when his eye fixed upon the twisted band of sticky stuff and the bags of devil-powder. If he left the stuff here, the lobstrosities would almost surely tear the bags open. The sea-breeze would scatter the powder to the four winds. *Which is where it belongs*, the gunslinger thought grimly, but he couldn't allow it. When the time came, Eddie Dean would be in a long tub of trouble if he couldn't produce that powder. It was rarely possible to bluff men of the sort he guessed this Balazar to be. He would want to see what he had paid for, and until he saw it Eddie would have enough guns pointed at him to equip a small army.

The gunslinger pulled the twisted rope of glue-string over to him and slung it over his neck. Then he began to work his way up the beach.

He had crawled twenty yards—almost far enough to consider himself safe, he judged—when the horrible (yet cosmically funny) realization that he was leaving the doorway behind came to him. What in God's name was he going through this for?

He turned his head and saw the doorway, not down on the beach, but three feet behind him. For a moment Roland could only stare, and realize what he would have known already, if not for the fever and the sound of the Inquisitors, drumming their ceaseless questions at Eddie, *Where did you, how did you, why did you, when did you* (questions that seemed to merge eerily with the questions of the scabbling horrors that came crawling and wriggling out of the waves: *Dad-a-chock? Dad-a-chum? Did-a-chick?*), as mere delirium. Not so.

Now I take it with me everywhere I go, he thought, just as he does. It comes with us everywhere now, following like a curse you can never get rid of.

All of this felt so true as to be unquestionable . . . and so did one other thing.

If the door between them should close, it would be closed forever.

When that happens, Roland thought grimly, *he must be on this side. With me.*

What a paragon of virtue you are, gunslinger! the man in black laughed. He seemed to have taken up permanent residence inside Roland's head. *You have killed the boy; that was the sacrifice that enabled you to catch me and, I suppose, to create the door between worlds. Now you intend to draw your three, one by one, and condemn all of them to something you would not have for yourself: a lifetime in an alien world, where they may die as easily as animals in a zoo set free in a wild place.*

The Tower, Roland thought wildly. *Once I've gotten to the Tower and done whatever it is I'm supposed to do there, accomplished whatever fundamental act of restoration or redemption for which I was meant, then perhaps they—*

But the shrieking laughter of the man in black, the man who was dead but lived on as the gunslinger's stained conscience, would not let him go on with the thought.

Neither, however, could the thought of the treachery he contemplated turn him aside from his course.

He managed another ten yards, looked back, and saw that even the largest of the crawling monsters would venture no further than twenty feet above the high-tide line. He had already managed three times that distance.

It's well, then.

Nothing is well, the man in black replied merrily, *and you know it.*

Shut up, the gunslinger thought, and for a wonder, the voice actually did.

Roland pushed the bags of devil-dust into the cleft between two rocks and covered them with handfuls of sparse saw-grass. With that done he rested briefly, head thumping like a hot bag of waters, skin alternately hot and cold, then rolled back through the doorway into that other world, that other body, leaving the increasingly deadly infection behind for a little while.

The second time he returned to himself, he entered a body so deeply asleep that he thought for a moment it had entered a comatose state . . . a state of such lowered bodily function that in moments he would feel his own consciousness start down a long slide into darkness.

Instead, he forced his body toward wakefulness, punched and pummelled it out of the dark cave into which it had crawled. He made his heart speed up, made his nerves re-accept the pain that sizzled through his skin and woke his flesh to groaning reality.

It was night now. The stars were out. The popkin-things Eddie had brought him were small bits of warmth in the chill.

He didn't feel like eating them, but eat them he would. First, though . . .

He looked at the white pills in his hand. *Astin*, Eddie called it. No, that wasn't quite right, but Roland couldn't pronounce the word as the prisoner had said it. Medicine was what it came down to. Medicine from that other world.

If anything from your world is going to do for me, Prisoner, Roland thought grimly, I think it's more apt to be your potions than your popkins.

Still, he would have to try it. Not the stuff he really needed—or so Eddie believed—but something which might reduce his fever.

Three now, three later. If there is a later.

He put three of the pills in his mouth, then pushed the cover—some strange white stuff that was neither paper nor glass but which seemed a bit like both—off the paper cup which held the drink, and washed them down.

The first swallow amazed him so completely that for a moment he only lay there, propped against a rock, his eyes so wide and still and full of reflected starlight that he would surely have been taken for dead already by anyone who happened to pass by. Then he drank greedily, holding the cup in both hands, the rotted, pulsing hurt in the stumps of his fingers barely noticed in his total absorption with the drink.

Sweet! Gods, such sweetness! Such sweetness! Such—

One of the small flat icecubes in the drink caught in his throat. He coughed, pounded his chest, and choked it out. Now there was a new pain in his head: the silvery pain that comes with drinking something too cold too fast.

He lay still, feeling his heart pumping like a runaway engine, feeling fresh energy surge into his body so fast he felt as if he might actually explode. Without thinking of what he was doing, he tore another piece from his shirt—soon it would be no more than a rag hanging around his neck—and laid it across one leg. When the drink was gone he would pour the ice into the rag and make a pack for his wounded hand. But his mind was elsewhere.

Sweet! it cried out again and again, trying to get the sense of it, or to convince itself there *was* sense in it, much as Eddie had tried to convince himself of the *other* as an actual being and not some mental convulsion that was only another part of himself trying to trick him.

Sweet! Sweet! Sweet!

The dark drink was laced with sugar, even more than Marten—who had been a great glutton behind his grave ascetic's exterior—had put in his coffee mornings and at 'Downers.

Sugar . . . white . . . powder . . .

The gunslinger's eyes wandered to the bags, barely visible under the grass he had tossed over them, and wondered briefly if the stuff in this drink and the stuff in the bags might be one and the same. He knew that Eddie had understood him perfectly over here, where they were two separate physical creatures; he suspected that if he had crossed bodily to Eddie's world (and he understood instinctively it *could* be done . . . although if the door should shut while he was there, he would be there forever, as Eddie would be here forever if their positions were reversed), he would have understood the language just as perfectly. He knew from being in Eddie's mind that the languages of the two worlds were similar to begin with. Similar, but not the same. Here a sandwich was a popkin. There to rustle was finding something to eat. So . . . was it not possible that the drug Eddie called *cocaine* was, in the gunslinger's world, called *sugar*?

Reconsideration made it seem unlikely. Eddie had bought this drink openly, knowing that he was being watched by people who served the Priests of Customs. Further, Roland sensed he had paid comparatively little for it. Less, even, than for the popkins of meat. No, sugar was not cocaine, but Roland could not understand why anyone would want cocaine or any other illegal drug, for that matter, in a world where such a powerful one as sugar was so plentiful and cheap.

He looked at the meat popkins again, felt the first stirrings of hunger . . . and realized with amazement and confused thankfulness that *he felt better*.

The drink? Was that it? The sugar in the drink?

That might be part of it—but a small part. Sugar could revive one's strength for awhile when it was flagging; this was something he had known since he was a child. But sugar could not dull pain or damp the fever-fire in your body when some infection had turned it into a furnace. All the same, that was exactly what had happened to him . . . was still happening.

The convulsive shuddering had stopped. The sweat was drying on his brow. The fishhooks which had lined his throat seemed to be disappearing. Incredible as it was, it was also an inarguable fact, not just imagination or wishful thinking (in point of fact, the gunslinger had not been capable of such frivolity as the latter in unknown and unknowable decades). His missing fingers and toes still throbbed and roared, but he believed even these pains to be muted.

Roland put his head back, closed his eyes and thanked God.

God and Eddie Dean.

Don't make the mistake of putting your heart near his hand, Roland, a voice from the deeper ranges of his mind spoke—this was not the nervous, tittery-bitchy voice of the man in black or the rough one of Cort; to the gunslinger it sounded like his father. You know that what he's done for you he has done out of his own personal need, just as you know that those men—Inquisitors though they may be—are partly or completely right about him. He is a weak vessel, and the reason they took him was neither false nor base. There is steel in him, I dispute it not. But there is weakness as well. He is like

Hax, the cook. Hax poisoned reluctantly . . . but reluctance has never stilled the screams of the dying as their intestines rupture. And there is yet another reason to beware . . .

But Roland needed no voice to tell him what that other reason was. He had seen that in Jake's eyes when the boy finally began to understand his purpose.

Don't make the mistake of putting your heart near his hand.

Good advice. You did yourself ill to feel well of those to whom ill must eventually be done.

Remember your duty, Roland.

"I've never forgotten it," he husked as the stars shone pitilessly down and the waves grated on the shore and the lobster monstrosities cried their idiot questions. "I'm damned for my duty. And why should the damned turn aside?"

He began to eat the meat popkins which Eddie called "dogs."

Roland didn't much care for the idea of eating dog, and these things tasted like gutter-leavings compared to the tooter-fish, but after that marvellous drink, did he have any right to complain? He thought not. Besides, it was late in the game to worry overmuch about such niceties.

He ate everything and then returned to the place where now Eddie was, in some magical vehicle that rushed along a metal road filled with other such vehicles . . . dozens, maybe hundreds, and not a horse pulling a single one.

7

Eddie stood ready as the pizza truck pulled up; Roland stood even more ready inside of him.

Just another version of Diana's Dream, Roland thought. What was in the box? The golden bowl or the biter-snake? And just as she turns the key and puts her hands upon the lid she hears her mother calling "Wake up, Diana! It's time to milk!"

Okay, Eddie thought. *Which is it gonna be? The lady or the tiger?*

A man with a pale, pimply face and big buck teeth looked out of the pizza truck's passenger window. It was a face Eddie knew.

"Hi, Col," Eddie said without much enthusiasm. Beyond Col Vincent, sitting behind the wheel, was Old Double-Ugly, which was what Henry called Jack Andolini.

But Henry never called him that to his face, Eddie thought. No, of course not. Calling Jack something like that to his face would be a wonderful way to get yourself killed. He was a huge man with a bulging caveman's forehead and a prothagonous jaw to match. He was related to Enrico Balazar by marriage . . . a niece, a cousin, some fucking thing. His gigantic hands clung to the wheel of the delivery truck like the hands of a monkey clinging to a branch. Coarse sprouts of hair grew from his ears. Eddie could only see one of those ears now because Jack Andolini remained in profile, never looking around.

Old Double-Ugly. But not even Henry (who, Eddie had to admit, was not always the most perceptive guy in the world) had ever made the mistake of calling him Old Double-Stupid. Colin Vincent was no more than a glorified gofer. Jack, however, had enough smarts behind that Neanderthal brow to be Balazar's number one lieutenant. Eddie didn't like the fact that Balazar had sent a man of such importance. He didn't like it at all.

"Hi, Eddie," Col said. "Heard you had some trouble."

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Eddie said. He realized he was scratching first one arm then the other, one of the typical junkie moves he had tried so hard to keep away from while they had him in custody. He made himself stop. But Col was smiling, and Eddie felt an urge to slam a fist all the way through that smile and out the other side. He might have done it, too . . . except for Jack. Jack was still staring straight ahead, a man who seemed to be thinking his own rudimentary thoughts as he observed the world in the simple primary colors and elementary motions which were all a man of such intellect (or so you'd think, looking at him) could perceive. Yet Eddie thought Jack saw more in a single day than Col Vincent would in his whole life.

"Well, good," Col said. "That's good."

Silence. Col looked at Eddie, smiling, waiting for Eddie to start the Junkie Shuffle again, scratching, shifting from foot to foot like a kid who needs to go to the bathroom, waiting mostly for Eddie to ask what was up, and by the way, did they just happen to have any stuff on them?

Eddie only looked back at him, not scratching now, not moving at all.

A faint breeze blew a Ring Ding wrapper across the parking lot. The scratchy sound of its skittering passage and the wheezy thump of the pizza truck's loose valves were the only sounds.

Col's knowing grin began to falter.

"Hop in, Eddie," Jack said without looking around. "Let's take a ride."

"Where?" Eddie asked, knowing.

"Balazar's." Jack didn't look around. He flexed his hands on the wheel once. A large ring, solid gold except for the onyx stone which bulged from it like the eye of a giant insect, glittered on the third finger of his right as he did it. "He wants to know about his goods."

"I have his goods. They're safe."

"Fine. Then nobody has anything to worry about," Jack Andolini said, and did not look around.

"I think I want to go upstairs first," Eddie said. "I want to change my clothes, talk to Henry—"

"And get fixed up, don't forget that," Col said, and grinned his big yellow-toothed grin. "Except you got nothing to fix *with*, little chum."

Dad-a-chum? the gunslinger thought in Eddie's mind, and both of them shuddered a little.

Col observed the shudder and his smile widened. *Oh, here it is after all, that smile said. The good old Junkie Shuffle. Had me worried there for a minute, Eddie.* The teeth revealed by the smile's expansion were not an improvement on those previously seen.

"Why's that?"

"Mr. Balazar thought it would be better to make sure you guys had a clean place," Jack said without looking around. He went on observing the world an observer would have believed it impossible for such a man to observe. "In case anyone showed up."

“People with a Federal search warrant, for instance,” Col said. His face hung and leered. Now Eddie could feel Roland also wanting to drive a fist through the rotted teeth that made that grin so reprehensible, so somehow irredeemable. The unanimity of feeling cheered him up a little. “He sent in a cleaning service to wash the walls and vacuum the carpets and he ain’t going to charge you a red cent for it, Eddie!”

Now you’ll ask what I’ve got, Col’s grin said. Oh yeah, now you’ll ask, Eddie my boy. Because you may not love the candy-man, but you do love the candy, don’t you? And now that you know Balazar’s made sure your own private stash is gone—

A sudden thought, both ugly and frightening, flashed through his mind. If the stash was gone—

“Where’s Henry?” he said suddenly, so harshly that Col drew back, surprised.

Jack Andolini finally turned his head. He did so slowly, as if it was an act he performed only rarely, and at great personal cost. You almost expected to hear old oilless hinges creaking inside the thickness of his neck.

“Safe,” he said, and then turned his head back to its original position again, just as slowly.

Eddie stood beside the pizza truck, fighting the panic trying to rise in his mind and drown coherent thought. Suddenly the need to fix, which he had been holding at bay pretty well, was overpowering. He *had* to fix. With a fix he could think, get himself under control—

Quit it! Roland roared inside his head, so loud Eddie winced (and Col, mistaking Eddie’s grimace of pain and surprise for another little step in the Junkie Shuffle, began to grin again). *Quit it! I’ll be all the goddamned control you need!*

You don’t understand! He’s my brother! He’s my fucking brother! Balazar’s got my brother!

You speak as if it was a word I’d never heard before. Do you fear for him?

Yes! Christ, yes!

Then do what they expect. Cry. Pule and beg. Ask for this fix of yours. I’m sure they expect you to, and I’m sure they have it. Do all

those things, make them sure of you, and you can be sure all your fears will be justified.

I don't understand what you m—

I mean if you show a yellow gut, you will go far toward getting your precious brother killed. Is that what you want?

All right. I'll be cool. It may not sound that way, but I'll be cool.

Is that what you call it? All right, then. Yes. Be cool.

"This isn't the way the deal was supposed to go down," Eddie said, speaking past Col and directly at Jack Andolini's tufted ear. "This isn't why I took care of Balazar's goods and hung onto my lip while some other guy would have been puking out five names for every year off on the plea-bargain."

"Balazar thought your brother would be safer with him," Jack said, not looking around. "He took him into protective custody."

"Well good," Eddie said. "You thank him for me, and you tell him that I'm back, his goods are safe, and I can take care of Henry just like Henry always took care of me. You tell him I'll have a six-pack on ice and when Henry walks in the place we're going to split it and then we'll get in our car and come on into town and do the deal like it was supposed to be done. Like we talked about it."

"Balazar wants to see you, Eddie," Jack said. His voice was implacable, immovable. His head did not turn. "Get in the truck."

"Stick it where the sun doesn't shine, motherfucker," Eddie said, and started for the doors to his building.

8

It was a short distance but he had gotten barely halfway when Andolini's hand clamped on his upper arm with the paralyzing force of a vise-grip. His breath was hot as a bull's on the back of Eddie's neck. He did all this in the time you would have thought, looking at him, it would have taken his brain to convince his hand to pull the doorhandle up.

Eddie turned around.

Be cool, Eddie, Roland whispered.

Cool, Eddie responded.

"I could kill you for that," Andolini said. "No one tells me stick it up my ass, especially no shitass little junkie like you."

"Kill shit!" Eddie screamed at him—but it was a calculated scream. A *cool* scream, if you could dig that. They stood there, dark figures in the golden horizontal light of late spring sundown in the wasteland of housing developments that is the Bronx's Co-Op City, and people heard the scream, and people heard the word *kill*, and if their radios were on they turned them up and if their radios were off they turned them on and *then* turned them up because it was better that way, safer.

"Rico Balazar broke his word! I stood up for him and he didn't stand up for me! So I tell you to stick it up your fuckin ass, I tell him to stick it up his fuckin ass, I tell anybody I want to stick it up his fuckin ass!"

Andolini looked at him. His eyes were so brown the color seemed to have leaked into his corneas, turning them the yellow of old parchment.

"I tell President Reagan to stick it up his ass if he breaks his word to me, and fuck his fuckin rectal palp or whatever it is!"

The words died away in echoes on brick and concrete. A single child, his skin very black against his white basketball shorts and high-topped sneakers, stood in the playground across the street, watching them, a basketball held loosely against his side in the crook of his elbow.

"You done?" Andolini asked when the last of the echoes were gone.

"Yes," Eddie said in a completely normal tone of voice.

"Okay," Andolini said. He spread his anthropoid fingers and smiled . . . and when he smiled, two things happened simultaneously: the first was that you saw a charm that was so surprising it had a way of leaving people defenseless; the second was that you saw how bright he really was. How dangerously bright. "Now can we start over?"

Eddie brushed his hands through his hair, crossed his arms briefly so he could scratch both arms at the same time, and said, "I think we

better, because this is going nowhere.”

“Okay,” Andolini said. “No one has said nothing, and no one has ranked out nobody.” And without turning his head or breaking the rhythm of his speech he added, “Get back in the truck, dumbwit.”

Col Vincent, who had climbed cautiously out of the delivery truck through the door Andolini had left open retreated so fast he thumped his head. He slid across the seat and slouched in his former place, rubbing it and sulking.

“You gotta understand the deal changed when the Customs people put the arm on you,” Andolini said reasonably. “Balazar is a big man. He has interests to protect. *People* to protect. One of those people, it just so happens, is your brother Henry. You think that’s bullshit? If you do, you better think about the way Henry is now.”

“Henry’s fine,” Eddie said, but he knew better and he couldn’t keep the knowing out of his voice. He heard it and knew Jack Andolini heard it, too. These days Henry was always on the nod, it seemed like. There were holes in his shirts from cigarette burns. He had cut the shit out of his hand using the electric can-opener on a can of Calo for Potzie, their cat. Eddie didn’t know how you cut yourself with an electric can-opener, but Henry had managed it. Sometimes the kitchen table would be powdery with Henry’s leavings, or Eddie would find blackened curls of char in the bathroom sink.

Henry, he would say, Henry, you gotta take care of this, this is getting out of hand, you’re a bust walking around and waiting to happen.

Yeah, okay, little brother, Henry would respond, *zero perspiration, I got it all under control,* but sometimes, looking at Henry’s ashy face and burned out eyes, Eddie knew Henry was never going to have anything under control again.

What he *wanted* to say to Henry and couldn’t had nothing to do with Henry getting busted or getting them both busted. What he *wanted* to say was *Henry, it’s like you’re looking for a room to die in. That’s how it looks to me, and I want you to fucking quit it. Because if you die, what did I live for?*

“Henry *isn’t* fine,” Jack Andolini said. “He needs someone to watch out for him. He needs—what’s that song say? A bridge over troubled

waters. That's what Henry needs. A bridge over troubled waters. // *Roche* is being that bridge."

If *Roche is a bridge to hell*, Eddie thought. Out loud he said, "That's where Henry is? At Balazar's place?"

"Yes."

"I give him his goods, he gives me Henry?"

"And *your* goods," Andolini said, "don't forget that."

"The deal goes back to normal, in other words."

"Right."

"Now tell me you think that's really gonna happen. Come on, Jack. Tell me. I wanna see if you can do it with a straight face. And if you *can* do it with a straight face, I wanna see how much your nose grows."

"I don't understand you, Eddie."

"Sure you do. Balazar thinks I've *got* his goods? If he thinks that, he must be stupid, and I know he's not stupid."

"I don't know what he thinks," Andolini said serenely. "It's not my job to know what he thinks. He knows you *had* his goods when you left the Islands, he knows Customs grabbed you and then let you go, he knows you're here and not on your way to Riker's, he knows his goods have to be somewhere."

"And he knows Customs is still all over me like a wetsuit on a skin-diver, because *you* know it, and you sent him some kind of coded message on the truck's radio. Something like 'Double cheese, hold the anchovies,' right, Jack?"

Jack Andolini said nothing and looked serene.

"Only you were just telling him something he already knew. Like connecting the dots in a picture you can already see what it is."

Andolini stood in the golden sunset light that was slowly turning furnace orange and continued to look serene and continued to say nothing at all.

"He thinks they turned me. He thinks they're running me. He thinks I might be stupid enough to run. I don't exactly blame him. I mean, why not? A smackhead will do anything. You want to check, see if I'm wearing a wire?"

“I know you’re not,” Andolini said. “I got something in the van. It’s like a fuzz-buster, only it picks up short-range radio transmissions. And for what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re running for the Feds.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. So do we get in the van and go into the city or what?”

“Do I have a choice?”

No, Roland said inside his head.

“No,” Andolini said.

Eddie went back to the van. The kid with the basketball was still standing across the street, his shadow now so long it was a gantry.

“Get out of here, kid,” Eddie said. “You were never here, you never saw nothing or no one. Fuck off.”

The kid ran.

Col was grinning at him.

“Push over, champ,” Eddie said.

“I think you oughtta sit in the middle, Eddie.”

“Push over,” Eddie said again. Col looked at him, then looked at Andolini, who did not look at him but only pulled the driver’s door closed and looked serenely straight ahead like Buddha on his day off, leaving them to work the seating arrangements out for themselves. Col glanced back at Eddie’s face and decided to push over.

They headed into New York—and although the gunslinger (who could only stare wonderingly at spires even greater and more graceful, bridges that spanned a wide river like steel cobwebs, and rotored air-carriages that hovered like strange man-made insects) did not know it, the place they were headed for was the Tower.

9

Like Andolini, Enrico Balazar did not think Eddie Dean was running for the Feds; like Andolini, Balazar *knew* it.

The bar was empty. The sign on the door read CLOSED TONITE ONLY. Balazar sat in his office, waiting for Andolini and Col Vincent to arrive with the Dean kid. His two personal body-guards, Claudio Andolini,

Jack's brother, and 'Cimi Dretto, were with him. They sat on the sofa to the left of Balazar's large desk, watching, fascinated, as the edifice Balazar was building grew. The door was open. Beyond the door was a short hallway. To the right it led to the back of the bar and the little kitchen beyond, where a few simple pasta dishes were prepared. To the left was the accountant's office and the storage room. In the accountant's office three more of Balazar's "gentlemen"—this was how they were known—were playing Trivial Pursuit with Henry Dean.



"Okay," George Biondi was saying, "here's an easy one, Henry. Henry? You there, Henry? Earth to Henry, Earth people need you. Come in, Henry. I say again: come in, H—"

"I'm here, I'm here," Henry said. His voice was the slurry, muddy voice of a man who is still asleep telling his wife he's awake so she'll leave him alone for another five minutes.

“Okay. The category is Arts and Entertainment. The question is . . . Henry? Don’t you fuckin nod off on me, asshole!”

“I’m *not!*” Henry cried back querulously.

“Okay. The question is, ‘What enormously popular novel by William Peter Blatty, set in the posh Washington D.C. suburb of Georgetown, concerned the demonic possession of a young girl?’”

“Johnny Cash,” Henry replied.

“Jesus Christ!” Tricks Postino yelled. “That’s what you say to everythin! Johnny Cash, that’s what you say to fuckin *everythin!*”

“Johnny Cash *is* everything,” Henry replied gravely, and there was a moment of silence palpable in its considering surprise . . . then a gravelly burst of laughter not just from the men in the room with Henry but the two other “gentlemen” sitting in the storage room.

“You want me to shut the door, Mr. Balazar?” ’Cimi asked quietly.

“No, that’s fine,” Balazar said. He was second-generation Sicilian, but there was no trace of accent in his speech, nor was it the speech of a man whose only education had been in the streets. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the business, he had finished high school. Had in fact done more: for two years he had gone to business school—NYU. His voice, like his business methods, was quiet and cultured and American, and this made his physical aspect as deceiving as Jack Andolini’s. People hearing his clear, unaccented American voice for the first time almost always looked dazed, as if hearing a particularly good piece of ventriloquism. He looked like a farmer or innkeeper or small-time *mafioso* who had been successful more by virtue of being at the right place at the right time than because of any brains. He looked like what the wiseguys of a previous generation had called a “Mustache Pete.” He was a fat man who dressed like a peasant. This evening he wore a plain white cotton shirt open at the throat (there were spreading sweat-stains beneath the arms) and plain gray twill pants. On his fat sockless feet were brown loafers, so old they were more like slippers than shoes. Blue and purple varicose veins squirmed on his ankles.

’Cimi and Claudio watched him, fascinated.

In the old days they called him *// Roche*—The Rock. Some of the old-timers still did. Always in the right-hand top drawer of his desk,

where other businessmen might keep pads, pens, paper-clips, things of that sort, Enrico Balazar kept three decks of cards. He did not play games with them, however.

He built with them.

He would take two cards and lean them against each other, making an A without the horizontal stroke. Next to it he would make another A-shape. Over the top of the two he would lay a single card, making a roof. He would make A after A, overlaying each, until his desk supported a house of cards. You bent over and looked in, you saw something that looked like a hive of triangles. 'Cimi had seen these houses fall over hundreds of times (Claudio had also seen it happen from time to time, but not so frequently, because he was thirty years younger than 'Cimi, who expected to soon retire with his bitch of a wife to a farm they owned in northern New Jersey, where he would devote all his time to his garden . . . and to outliving the bitch he had married; not his mother-in-law, he had long since given up any wistful notion he might once have had of eating *fettucini* at the wake of *La Monstra*, *La Monstra* was eternal, but for outliving the bitch there was at least some hope; his father had had a saying which, when translated, meant something like “God pisses down the back of your neck every day but only drowns you once,” and while 'Cimi wasn't completely sure he thought it meant God was a pretty good guy after all, and so he could only hope to outlive the one if not the other), but had only seen Balazar put out of temper by such a fall on a single occasion. Mostly it was something errant that did it—someone closing a door hard in another room, or a drunk stumbling against a wall; there had been times when 'Cimi saw an edifice Mr. Balazar (whom he still called *Da Boss*, like a character in a Chester Gould comic strip) had spent hours building fall down because the bass on the juke was too loud. Other times these airy constructs fell down for no perceptible reason at all. Once—this was a story he had told at least five thousand times, and one of which every person he knew (with the exception of himself) had tired—*Da Boss* had looked up at him from the ruins and said: “You see this 'Cimi? For every mother who ever cursed God for her child dead in the road, for every father who ever cursed the man who sent him away from the factory

with no job, for every child who was ever born to pain and asked why, this is the answer. Our lives are like these things I build. Sometimes they fall down for a reason, sometimes they fall down for no reason at all.”

Carlocimi Dretto thought this the most profound statement of the human condition he had ever heard.

That one time Balazar had been put out of temper by the collapse of one of his structures had been twelve, maybe fourteen years ago. There was a guy who came in to see him about booze. A guy with no class, no manners. A guy who smelled like he took a bath once a year whether he needed it or not. A mick, in other words. And of course it was booze. With micks it was always booze, never dope. And this mick, he thought what was on *Da Boss's* desk was a joke. “Make a wish!” he yelled after *Da Boss* had explained to him, in the way one gentleman explains to another, why it was impossible for them to do business. And then the Mick, one of those guys with curly red hair and a complexion so white he looked like he had TB or something, one of those guys whose names started with O and then had that little curly mark between the O and the real name, had *blown* on *Da Boss's* desk, like a *niño* blowing out the candles on a birthday cake, and cards flew everywhere around Balazar's head, and Balazar had opened the *left* top drawer in his desk, the drawer where other businessmen might keep their personal stationery or their private memos or something like that, and he had brought out a .45, and he had shot the Mick in the head, and Balazar's expression never changed, and after 'Cimi and a guy named Truman Alexander who had died of a heart attack four years ago had buried the Mick under a chickenhouse somewhere outside of Sedonville, Connecticut, Balazar had said to 'Cimi, “It's up to men to build things, *paisan*. It's up to God to blow them down. You agree?”

“Yes, Mr. Balazar,” 'Cimi had said. He did agree.

Balazar had nodded, pleased. “You did like I said? You put him someplace where chickens or ducks or something like that could shit on him?”

“Yes.”

“That’s very good,” Balazar said calmly, and took a fresh deck of cards from the right top drawer of his desk.

One level was not enough for Balazar, *// Roche*. Upon the roof of the first level he would build a second, only not quite so wide; on top of the second a third; on top of the third a fourth. He would go on, but after the fourth level he would have to stand to do so. You no longer had to bend much to look in, and when you did what you saw wasn’t rows of triangle shapes but a fragile, bewildering, and impossibly lovely hall of diamond-shapes. You looked in too long, you felt dizzy. Once ‘Cimi had gone in the Mirror Maze at Coney and he had felt like that. He had never gone in again.

‘Cimi said (he believed no one believed him; the truth was no one cared one way or the other) he had once seen Balazar build something which was no longer a house of cards but a *tower* of cards, one which stood nine levels high before it collapsed. That no one gave a shit about this was something ‘Cimi didn’t know because everyone he told affected amazement because he was close to *Da Boss*. But they would have been amazed if he had had the words to describe it—how delicate it had been, how it reached almost three quarters of the way from the top of the desk to the ceiling, a lacy construct of jacks and deuces and kings and tens and Big Akers, a red and black configuration of paper diamonds standing in defiance of a world spinning through a universe of incoherent motions and forces; a tower that seemed to ‘Cimi’s amazed eyes to be a ringing denial of all the unfair paradoxes of life.

If he had known how, he would have said: *I looked at what he built, and to me it explained the stars.*

10

Balazar knew how everything would have to be.

The Feds had smelled Eddie—maybe he had been stupid to send Eddie in the first place, maybe his instincts were failing him, but Eddie had seemed somehow so right, so perfect. His uncle, the first man he had worked for in the business, said there were exceptions

to every rule but one: Never trust a junkie. Balazar had said nothing—it was not the place of a boy of fifteen to speak, even if only to agree—but privately had thought the only rule to which there was no exception was that there were some rules for which that was not true.

But if Tio Verone were alive today, Balazar thought, he would laugh at you and say look, Rico, you always were too smart for your own good, you knew the rules, you kept your mouth shut when it was respectful to keep it shut, but you always had that snot look in your eyes. You always knew too much about how smart you were, and so you finally fell into the pit of your own pride, just like I always knew you would.

He made an A shape and overlaid it.

They had taken Eddie and held him awhile and then let him go.

Balazar had grabbed Eddie's brother and the stash they shared. That would be enough to bring him . . . and he wanted Eddie.

He wanted Eddie because it had only been two hours, and two hours was *wrong*.

They had questioned him at Kennedy, not at 43rd Street, and that was wrong, too. That meant Eddie had succeeded in ditching most or all of the coke.

Or had he?

He thought. He wondered.

Eddie had walked out of Kennedy two hours after they took him off the plane. That was too short a time for them to have sweated it out of him and too long for them to have decided he was clean, that some stew had made a rash mistake.

He thought. He wondered.

Eddie's brother was a zombie, but Eddie was still smart, Eddie was still tough. He wouldn't have turned in just two hours . . . unless it was his brother. Something about his brother.

But still, how come no 43rd Street? How come no Customs van, the ones that looked like Post Office trucks except for the wire grilles on the back windows? Because Eddie really *had* done something with the goods? Ditched them? Hidden them?

Impossible to hide goods on an airplane.

Impossible to ditch them.

Of course it was also impossible to escape from certain prisons, rob certain banks, beat certain raps. But people did. Harry Houdini had escaped from straitjackets, locked trunks, fucking bank vaults. But Eddie Dean was no Houdini.

Was he?

He could have had Henry killed in the apartment, could have had Eddie cut down on the L.I.E. or, better yet, *also* in the apartment, where it would look to the cops like a couple of junkies who got desperate enough to forget they were brothers and killed each other. But it would leave too many questions unanswered.

He would get the answers here, prepare for the future or merely satisfy his curiosity, depending on what the answers were, and then kill both of them.

A few more answers, two less junkies. Some gain and no great loss.

In the other room, the game had gotten around to Henry again. "Okay, Henry," George Biondi said. "Be careful, because this one is tricky. The category is Geography. The question is, 'What is the only continent where kangaroos are a native form of life?'"

A hushed pause.

"Johnny Cash," Henry said, and this was followed by a bull-throated roar of laughter.

The walls shook.

'Cimi tensed, waiting for Balazar's house of cards (which would become a tower only if God, or the blind forces that ran the universe in His name, willed it), to fall down.

The cards trembled a bit. If one fell, all would fall.

None did.

Balazar looked up and smiled at 'Cimi. "*Piaskan,*" he said. "*Il Dio est bono; il Dio est malo; temps est poco-poco; tu est une grande peeparollo.*"

'Cimi smiled. "*Si, senior,*" he said. "*lo grande peeparollo; lo va fanculo por tu.*"

"*None va fanculo, catzarro,*" Balazar said. "*Eddie Dean va fanculo.*" He smiled gently, and began on the second level of his

tower of cards.

11

When the van pulled to the curb near Balazar's place, Col Vincent happened to be looking at Eddie. He saw something impossible. He tried to speak and found himself unable. His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth and all he could get out was a muffled grunt.

He saw Eddie's eyes change from brown to blue.

12

This time Roland made no conscious decision to *come forward*. He simply leaped without thinking, a movement as involuntary as rolling out of a chair and going for his guns when someone burst into a room.

The Tower! he thought fiercely. *It's the Tower, my God, the Tower is in the sky, the Tower! I see the Tower in the sky, drawn in lines of red fire! Cuthbert! Alan! Desmond! The Tower! The T—*

But this time he felt Eddie struggling—not against him, but trying to talk to him, trying desperately to explain something to him.

The gunslinger retreated, listening—listening desperately, as above a beach some unknown distance away in space and time, his mindless body twitched and trembled like the body of a man experiencing a dream of highest ecstasy or deepest horror.

13

Sign! Eddie was screaming into his own head . . . and into the head of that *other*.

It's a sign, just a neon sign, I don't know what tower it is you're thinking about but this is just a bar, Balazar's place, The Leaning Tower, he named it that after the one in Pisa! It's just a sign that's supposed to look like the fucking Leaning Tower of Pisa! Let up! Let

up! You want to get us killed before we have a chance to go at them?

Pitsa? the gunslinger replied doubtfully, and looked again.

A sign. Yes, all right, he could see now: it was not the Tower, but a Signpost. It leaned to one side, and there were many scalloped curves, and it was a marvel, but that was all. He could see now that the sign was a thing made of tubes, tubes which had somehow been filled with glowing red swamp-fire. In some places there seemed to be less of it than others; in those places the lines of fire pulsed and buzzed.

He now saw letters below the tower which had been made of shaped tubes; most of them were Great Letters. TOWER he could read, and yes, LEANING. LEANING TOWER. The first word was three letters, the first T, the last E, the middle one which he had never seen.

Tre? he asked Eddie.

THE. It doesn't matter. Do you see it's just a sign? That's what matters!

I see, the gunslinger answered, wondering if the prisoner really believed what he was saying or was only saying it to keep the situation from spilling over as the tower depicted in those lines of fire seemed about to do, wondering if Eddie believed *any* sign could be a trivial thing.

Then ease off! Do you hear me? Ease off!

Be cool? Roland asked, and both felt Roland smile a little in Eddie's mind.

Be cool, right. Let me handle things.

Yes. All right. He would let Eddie handle things.

For awhile.

14

Col Vincent finally managed to get his tongue off the roof of his mouth. "Jack." His voice was as thick as shag carpet.

Andolini turned off the motor and looked at him, irritated.

"His eyes."

“What about his eyes?”

“Yeah, what about my eyes?” Eddie asked.

Col looked at him.

The sun had gone down, leaving nothing in the air but the day's ashes, but there was light enough for Col to see that Eddie's eyes were brown again.

If they had ever been anything else.

You saw it, part of his mind insisted, but had he? Col was twenty-four, and for the last twenty-one of those years no one had really believed him trustworthy. Useful sometimes. Obedient almost always . . . if kept on a short leash. Trustworthy? No. Col had eventually come to believe it himself.

“Nothing,” he muttered.

“Then let's go,” Andolini said.

They got out of the pizza van. With Andolini on their left and Vincent on their right, Eddie and the gunslinger walked into The Leaning Tower.

CHAPTER 5

Showdown and Shoot-Out

1

In a blues tune from the twenties Billie Holiday, who would one day discover the truth for herself, sang: “*Doctor tole me daughter you got to quit it fast/Because one more rocket gonna be your last.*” Henry Dean’s last rocket went up just five minutes before the van pulled up in front of The Leaning Tower and his brother was herded inside.

Because he was on Henry’s right, George Biondi—known to his friends as “Big George” and to his enemies as “Big Nose”—asked Henry’s questions. Now, as Henry sat nodding and blinking owlshly over the board, Tricks Postino put the die in a hand which had already gone the dusty color that results in the extremities after long-term heroin addiction, the dusty color which is the precursor of gangrene.

“Your turn, Henry,” Tricks said, and Henry let the die fall from his hand.

When he went on staring into space and showed no intention of moving his game piece, Jimmy Haspio moved it for him. “Look at this, Henry,” he said. “You got a chance to score a piece of the pie.”

“Reese’s Pieces,” Henry said dreamily, and then looked around, as if awakening. “Where’s Eddie?”

“He’ll be here pretty soon,” Tricks soothed him. “Just play the game.”

“How about a fix?”

“Play the game, Henry.”

“Okay, okay, stop *leaning* on me.”

“Don’t *lean* on him,” Kevin Blake said to Jimmy.

“Okay, I won’t,” Jimmy said.

“You ready?” George Biondi said, and gave the others an enormous wink as Henry’s chin floated down to his breastbone and then slowly rose once more—it was like watching a soaked log not quite ready to give in and sink for good.

“Yeah,” Henry said. “Bring it on.”

“Bring it on!” Jimmy Haspio cried happily.

“You *bring* that fucker!” Tricks agreed, and they all roared with laughter (in the other room Balazar’s edifice, now three levels high, trembled again, but did not fall).

“Okay, listen close,” George said, and winked again. Although Henry was on a Sports category, George announced the category was Arts and Entertainment. “What popular country and western singer had hits with ‘A Boy Named Sue,’ ‘Folsom Prison Blues,’ and numerous other shitkicking songs?”

Kevin Blake, who actually *could* add seven and nine (if you gave him poker chips to do it with), howled with laughter, clutching his knees and nearly upsetting the board.

Still pretending to scan the card in his hand, George continued: “This popular singer is also known as The Man in Black. His first name means the same as a place you go to take a piss and his last name means what you got in your wallet unless you’re a fucking needle freak.”

There was a long expectant silence.

“Walter Brennan,” Henry said at last.

Bellows of laughter. Jimmy Haspio clutched Kevin Blake. Kevin punched Jimmy in the shoulder repeatedly. In Balazar’s office, the house of cards which was now becoming a tower of cards trembled again.

“Quiet down!” ‘Cimi yelled. “*Da Boss* is buildin!”

They quieted at once.

“Right,” George said. “You got that one right, Henry. It was a toughie, but you came through.”

“Always do,” Henry said. “Always come through in the fuckin clutch. How about a fix?”

“Good idea!” George said, and took a Roi-Tan cigar box from behind him. From it he produced a hypo. He stuck it into the scarred

vein above Henry's elbow, and Henry's last rocket took off.

2

The pizza van's exterior was grungy, but underneath the road-filth and spray-paint was a high-tech marvel the DEA guys would have envied. As Balazar had said on more than one occasion, you couldn't beat the bastards unless you could compete with the bastards—unless you could match their equipment. It was expensive stuff, but Balazar's side had an advantage: they stole what the DEA had to buy at grossly inflated prices. There were electronics company employees all the way down the Eastern Seaboard willing to sell you top secret stuff at bargain basement prices. These *catzzaroni* (Jack Andolini called them Silicon Valley Coke-Heads) practically *threw* the stuff at you.

Under the dash was a fuzz-buster; a UHF police radar jammer; a high-range/high-frequency radio transmissions detector; an h-r/hf jammer; a transponder-amplifier that would make anyone trying to track the van by standard triangulation methods decide it was simultaneously in Connecticut, Harlem, and Montauk Sound; a radiotelephone . . . and a small red button which Andolini pushed as soon as Eddie Dean got out of the van.

In Balazar's office the intercom uttered a single short buzz.

"That's them," he said. "Claudio, let them in. 'Cimi, you tell everyone to dummy up. So far as Eddie Dean knows, no one's with me but you and Claudio. 'Cimi, go in the storeroom with the other gentlemen."

They went, 'Cimi turning left, Claudio Andolini going right.

Calmly, Balazar started on another level of his edifice.

3

Just let me handle it, Eddie said again as Claudio opened the door.

Yes, the gunslinger said, but remained alert, ready to *come forward* the instant it seemed necessary.

Keys rattled. The gunslinger was very aware of odors—old sweat from Col Vincent on his right, some sharp, almost acerbic aftershave from Jack Andolini on his left, and, as they stepped into the dimness, the sour tang of beer.

The smell of beer was all he recognized. This was no tumble-down saloon with sawdust on the floor and planks set across sawhorses for a bar—it was as far from a place like Sheb's in Tull as you could get, the gunslinger reckoned. Glass gleamed mellowly everywhere, more glass in this one room than he had seen in all the years since his childhood, when supply-lines had begun to break down, partially because of interdicting raids carried out by the rebel forces of Farson, the Good Man, but mostly, he thought, simply because the world was moving on. Farson had been a symptom of that great movement, not the cause.

He saw their reflections everywhere—on the walls, on the glass-faced bar and the long mirror behind it; he could even see them reflected as curved miniatures in the graceful bell-shapes of wine glasses hung upside down above the bar . . . glasses as gorgeous and fragile as festival ornaments.

In one corner was a sculpted creation of lights that rose and changed, rose and changed, rose and changed. Gold to green; green to yellow; yellow to red; red to gold again. Written across it in Great Letters was a word he could read but which meant nothing to him: ROCKOLA.

Never mind. There was business to be done here. He was no tourist; he must not allow himself the luxury of behaving like one, no matter how wonderful or strange these things might be.

The man who had let them in was clearly the brother of the man who drove what Eddie called the van (as in *vanguard*, Roland supposed), although he was much taller and perhaps five years younger. He wore a gun in a shoulder-rig.

"Where's Henry?" Eddie asked. "I want to see Henry." He raised his voice. "Henry! *Hey, Henry!*"

No reply; only silence in which the glasses hung over the bar seemed to shiver with a delicacy that was just beyond the range of a human ear.

“Mr. Balazar would like to speak to you first.”

“You got him gagged and tied up somewhere, don’t you?” Eddie asked, and before Claudio could do more than open his mouth to reply, Eddie laughed. “No, what am I thinking about—you got him stoned, that’s all. Why would you bother with ropes and gags when all you have to do to keep Henry quiet is needle him? Okay. Take me to Balazar. Let’s get this over with.”

4

The gunslinger looked at the tower of cards on Balazar’s desk and thought: *Another sign.*

Balazar did not look up—the tower of cards had grown too tall for that to be necessary—but rather over the top. His expression was one of pleasure and warmth.

“Eddie,” he said. “I’m glad to see you, son. I heard you had some trouble at Kennedy.”

“I ain’t your son,” Eddie said flatly.

Balazar made a little gesture that was at the same time comic, sad, and untrustworthy: *You hurt me, Eddie, it said, you hurt me when you say a thing like that.*

“Let’s cut through it,” Eddie said. “You know it comes down to one thing or the other: either the Feds are running me or they had to let me go. You know they didn’t sweat it out of me in just two hours. And you know if they had I’d be down at 43rd Street, answering questions between an occasional break to puke in the basin.”

“Are they running you, Eddie?” Balazar asked mildly.

“No. They had to let me go. They’re following, but I’m not leading.”

“So you ditched the stuff,” Balazar said. “That’s fascinating. You must tell me how one ditches two pounds of coke when that one is on a jet plane. It would be handy information to have. It’s like a locked room mystery story.”

“I didn’t ditch it,” Eddie said, “but I don’t have it anymore, either.”

“So who does?” Claudio asked, then blushed when his brother looked at him with dour ferocity.

“*He* does,” Eddie said, smiling, and pointed at Enrico Balazar over the tower of cards. “It’s already been delivered.”

For the first time since Eddie had been escorted into the office, a genuine expression illuminated Balazar’s face: surprise. Then it was gone. He smiled politely.

“Yes,” he said. “To a location which will be revealed later, after you have your brother and your goods and are gone. To Iceland, maybe. Is that how it’s supposed to go?”

“No,” Eddie said. “You don’t understand. It’s *here*. Delivery right to your door. Just like we agreed. Because even in this day and age, there are some people who still believe in living up to the deal as it was originally cut. Amazing, I know, but true.”

They were all staring at him.

How’m I doing, Roland? Eddie asked.

I think you are doing very well. But don’t let this man Balazar get his balance, Eddie. I think he’s dangerous.

You think so, huh? Well, I’m one up on you there, my friend. I know he’s dangerous. Very fucking dangerous.

He looked at Balazar again, and dropped him a little wink. “That’s why *you’re* the one who’s gotta be concerned with the Feds now, not me. If they turn up with a search warrant, you could suddenly find yourself fucked without even opening your legs, Mr. Balazar.”

Balazar had picked up two cards. His hands suddenly shook and he put them aside. It was minute, but Roland saw it and Eddie saw it, too. An expression of uncertainty—even momentary fear, perhaps—appeared and then disappeared on his face.

“Watch your mouth with me, Eddie. Watch how you express yourself, and please remember that my time and my tolerance for nonsense are both short.”

Jack Andolini looked alarmed.

“He made a deal with them, Mr. Balazar! This little shit turned over the coke and they planted it while they were pretending to question him!”

“No one has been in here,” Balazar said. “No one could get close, Jack, and you know it. Beepers go when a pigeon farts on the roof.”

“But—”

“Even if they had managed to set us up somehow, we have so many people in their organization we could drill fifteen holes in their case in three days. We’d know who, when, and how.”

Balazar looked back at Eddie.

“Eddie,” he said, “you have fifteen seconds to stop bullshitting. Then I’m going to have ’Cimi Dretto step in here and hurt you. Then, after he hurts *you* for awhile, he will leave, and from a room close by you will hear him hurting your brother.”

Eddie stiffened.

Easy, the gunslinger murmured, and thought, *All you have to do to hurt him is to say his brother’s name. It’s like poking an open sore with a stick.*

“I’m going to walk into your bathroom,” Eddie said. He pointed at a door in the far left corner of the room, a door so unobtrusive it could almost have been one of the wall panels. “I’m going in by myself. Then I’m going to walk back out with a pound of your cocaine. Half the shipment. You test it. Then you bring Henry in here where I can look at him. When I see him, see he’s okay, you are going to give him our goods and he’s going to ride home with one of your gentlemen. While he does, me and . . .” *Roland*, he almost said, “. . . me and the rest of the guys we both know you got here can watch you build that thing. When Henry’s home and safe—which means no one standing there with a gun in his ear—he’s going to call and say a certain word. This is something we worked out before I left. Just in case.”

The gunslinger checked Eddie’s mind to see if this was true or bluff. It was true, or at least Eddie thought it was. Roland saw Eddie really believed his brother Henry would die before saying that word in falsity. The gunslinger was not so sure.

“You must think I still believe in Santa Claus,” Balazar said.

“I know you don’t.”

“Claudio. Search him. Jack, you go in my bathroom and search *it*. Everything.”

“Is there any place in there I wouldn’t know about?” Andolini asked.

Balazar paused for a long moment, considering Andolini carefully with his dark brown eyes. “There is a small panel on the back wall of the medicine cabinet,” he said. “I keep a few personal things in there. It is not big enough to hide a pound of dope in, but maybe you better check it.”

Jack left, and as he entered the little privy, the gunslinger saw a flash of the same frozen white light that had illuminated the privy of the air-carriage. Then the door shut.

Balazar’s eyes flicked back to Eddie.

“Why do you want to tell such crazy lies?” he asked, almost sorrowfully. “I thought you were smart.”

“Look in my face,” Eddie said quietly, “and tell me that I am lying.”

Balazar did as Eddie asked. He looked for a long time. Then he turned away, hands stuffed in his pockets so deeply that the crack of his peasant’s ass showed a little. His posture was one of sorrow—sorrow over an erring son—but before he turned Roland had seen an expression on Balazar’s face that had not been sorrow. What Balazar had seen in Eddie’s face had left him not sorrowful but profoundly disturbed.

“Strip,” Claudio said, and now he was holding his gun on Eddie.

Eddie started to take his clothes off.

5

I don’t like this, Balazar thought as he waited for Jack Andolini to come back out of the bathroom. He was scared, suddenly sweating not just under his arms or in his crotch, places where he sweated even when it was the dead of winter and colder than a well-digger’s belt-buckle, but all over. Eddie had gone off looking like a junkie—a *smart* junkie but still a junkie, someone who could be led anywhere by the skag fishhook in his balls—and had come back looking like . . . like what? Like he’d *grown* in some way, *changed*.

It’s like somebody poured two quarts of fresh guts down his throat.

Yes. That was it. And the dope. The fucking dope. Jack was tossing the bathroom and Claudio was checking Eddie with the

thorough ferocity of a sadistic prison guard; Eddie had stood with a stolidity Balazar would not previously have believed possible for him or any other dooper while Claudio spat four times into his left palm, rubbed the snot-flecked spittle all over his right hand, then rammed it up Eddie's asshole to the wrist and an inch or two beyond.

There was no dope in his bathroom, no dope on Eddie or in him. There was no dope in Eddie's clothes, his jacket, or his travelling bag. So it was all nothing but a bluff.

Look in my face and tell me that I am lying.

So he had. What he saw was upsetting. What he saw was that Eddie Dean was perfectly confident: he intended to go into the bathroom and come back with half of Balazar's goods.

Balazar almost believed it himself.

Claudio Andolini pulled his arm back. His fingers came out of Eddie Dean's asshole with a plopping sound. Claudio's mouth twisted like a fishline with knots in it.

"Hurry up, Jack, I got this junkie's shit on my hand!" Claudio yelled angrily.

"If I'd known you were going to be prospecting up there, Claudio, I would have wiped my ass with a chair-leg last time I took a dump," Eddie said mildly. "Your hand would have come out cleaner and I wouldn't be standing here feeling like I just got raped by Ferdinand the Bull."

"Jack!"

"Go on down to the kitchen and clean yourself up," Balazar said quietly. "Eddie and I have got no reason to hurt each other. Do we, Eddie?"

"No," Eddie said.

"He's clean, anyway," Claudio said. "Well, *clean* ain't the word. What I mean is he ain't holding. You can be goddam sure of that." He walked out, holding his dirty hand in front of him like a dead fish.

Eddie looked calmly at Balazar, who was thinking again of Harry Houdini, and Blackstone, and Doug Henning, and David Copperfield. They kept saying that magic acts were as dead as vaudeville, but Henning was a superstar and the Copperfield kid had blown the crowd away the one time Balazar had caught his act in Atlantic City.

Balazar had loved magicians from the first time he had seen one on a street-corner, doing card-tricks for pocket-change. And what was the first thing they always did before making something appear—something that would make the whole audience first gasp and then applaud? What they did was invite someone up from the audience to make sure that the place from which the rabbit or dove or bare-breasted cutie or the whatever was to appear was perfectly empty. More than that, to make sure there was no way to get anything *inside*.

I think maybe he's done it. I don't know how, and I don't care. The only thing I know for sure is that I don't like any of this, not one damn bit.

6

George Biondi also had something not to like. He doubted if Eddie Dean was going to be wild about it, either.

George was pretty sure that at some point after 'Cimi had come into the accountant's office and doused the lights, Henry had died. Died quietly, with no muss, no fuss, no bother. Had simply floated away like a dandelion spore on a light breeze. George thought maybe it had happened right around the time Claudio left to wash his shitty hand in the kitchen.

"Henry?" George muttered in Henry's ear. He put his mouth so close that it was like kissing a girl's ear in a movie theater, and that was pretty fucking gross, especially when you considered that the guy was probably dead—it was like narcophobia or whatever the fuck they called it—but he had to know, and the wall between this office and Balazar's was thin.

"What's wrong, George?" Tricks Postino asked.

"Shut up," 'Cimi said. His voice was the low rumble of an idling truck.

They shut up.

George slid a hand inside Henry's shirt. Oh, this was getting worse and worse. That image of being with a girl in a movie theater

wouldn't leave him. Now here he was, feeling her up, only it wasn't a *her* but a *him*, this wasn't just narcophobia, it was fucking *faggot* narcophobia, and Henry's scrawny junkie's chest wasn't moving up and down, and there wasn't anything inside going *thump-thump-thump*. For Henry Dean it was all over, for Henry Dean the ball-game had been rained out in the seventh inning. Wasn't nothing ticking but his watch.

He moved into the heavy Old Country atmosphere of olive oil and garlic that surrounded 'Cimi Dretto.

"I think we might have a problem," George whispered.

7

Jack came out of the bathroom.

"There's no dope in there," he said, and his flat eyes studied Eddie. "And if you were thinking about the window, you can forget it. That's ten-gauge steel mesh."

"I wasn't thinking about the window and it *is* in there," Eddie said quietly. "You just don't know where to look."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Balazar," Andolini said, "but this crock is getting just a little too full for me."

Balazar studied Eddie as if he hadn't even heard Andolini. He was thinking very deeply.

Thinking about magicians pulling rabbits out of hats.

You got a guy from the audience to check out the fact that the hat was empty. What other thing that never changed? That no one saw into the hat but the magician, of course. And what had the kid said? *I'm going to walk into your bathroom. I'm going in by myself.*

Knowing how a magic trick worked was something he usually wouldn't want to know; knowing spoiled the fun.

Usually.

This, however, was a trick he couldn't *wait* to spoil.

"Fine," he said to Eddie. "If it's in there, go get it. Just like you are. Bare-ass."

"Good," Eddie said, and started toward the bathroom door.

“But not alone,” Balazar said. Eddie stopped at once, his body stiffening as if Balazar had shot him with an invisible harpoon, and it did Balazar’s heart good to see it. For the first time something hadn’t gone according to the kid’s plan. “Jack’s going with you.”

“No,” Eddie said at once. “That’s not what I—”

“Eddie,” Balazar said gently, “you don’t tell me no. That’s one thing you never do.”

8

It’s all right, the gunslinger said. Let him come.

But. . .but. . .

Eddie was close to gibbering, barely holding onto his control. It wasn’t just the sudden curve-ball Balazar had thrown him; it was his gnawing worry over Henry, and, growing steadily ascendant over all else, his need for a fix.

Let him come. It will be all right. Listen:

Eddie listened.

9

Balazar watched him, a slim, naked man with only the first suggestion of the junkie’s typical cave-chested slouch, his head cocked to one side, and as he watched Balazar felt some of his confidence evaporate. It was as if the kid was listening to a voice only he could hear.

The same thought passed through Andolini’s mind, but in a different way: *What’s this? He looks like the dog on those old RCA Victor records!*

Col had wanted to tell him something about Eddie’s eyes. Suddenly Jack Andolini wished he had listened.

Wish in one hand, shit in the other, he thought.

If Eddie had been listening to voices inside his head, they had either quit talking or he had quit paying attention.

“Okay,” he said. “Come along, Jack. I’ll show you the Eighth Wonder of the World.” He flashed a smile that neither Jack Andolini nor Enrico Balazar cared for in the slightest.

“Is that so?” Andolini pulled a gun from the clamshell holster attached to his belt at the small of his back. “Am I gonna be amazed?”

Eddie’s smile widened. “Oh yeah. I think this is gonna knock your socks off.”

10

Andolini followed Eddie into the bathroom. He was holding the gun up because his wind was up.

“Close the door,” Eddie said.

“Fuck you,” Andolini answered.

“Close the door or no dope,” Eddie said.

“Fuck you,” Andolini said again. Now, a little scared, feeling that there was something going on that he didn’t understand, Andolini looked brighter than he had in the van.

“He won’t close the door,” Eddie yelled at Balazar. “I’m getting ready to give up on you, Mr. Balazar. You probably got six wiseguys in this place, every one of them with about four guns, and the two of you are going batshit over a kid in a crapper. *A junkie kid.*”

“Shut the fucking door, Jack!” Balazar shouted.

“That’s right,” Eddie said as Jack Andolini kicked the door shut behind him. “Is you a man or is you a m—”

“Oh boy, ain’t I had enough of this turd,” Andolini said to no one in particular. He raised the gun, butt forward, meaning to pistol-whip Eddie across the mouth.

Then he froze, gun drawn up across his body, the snarl that bared his teeth slackening into a slack-jawed gape of surprise as he saw what Col Vincent had seen in the van.

Eddie’s eyes changed from brown to blue.

“*Now grab him!*” a low, commanding voice said, and although the voice came from Eddie’s mouth, it was not Eddie’s voice.

Schizo, Jack Andolini thought. *He's gone schizo, gone fucking schi*

But the thought broke off when Eddie's hands grabbed his shoulders, because when that happened, Andolini saw a hole in reality suddenly appear about three feet behind Eddie.

No, not a hole. Its dimensions were too perfect for that.

It was a *door*.

"Hail Mary fulla grace," Jack said in a low breathy moan. Through that doorway which hung in space a foot or so above the floor in front of Balazar's private shower he could see a dark beach which sloped down to crashing waves. Things were moving on that beach. *Things*.

He brought the gun down, but the blow which had been meant to break off all of Eddie's front teeth at the gum-line did no more than mash Eddie's lips back and bloody them a little. All the strength was running out of him. Jack could *feel* it happening.

"I *told* you it was gonna knock your socks off, Jack," Eddie said, and then yanked him. Jack realized what Eddie meant to do at the last moment and began to fight like a wildcat, but it was too late—they were tumbling backward through that doorway, and the droning hum of New York City at night, so familiar and constant you never even heard it unless it wasn't there anymore, was replaced by the grinding sound of the waves and the grating, questioning voices of dimly seen horrors crawling to and fro on the beach.

11

We'll have to move very fast, or we'll find ourselves basted in a hot oast, Roland had said, and Eddie was pretty sure the guy meant that if they didn't shuck and jive at damn near the speed of light, their gooses were going to be cooked. He believed it, too. When it came to hard guys, Jack Andolini was like Dwight Gooden: you could rock him, yes, you could shock him, maybe, but if you let him get away in the early innings he was going to stomp you flat later on.

Left hand! Roland screamed at himself as they *went through* and he separated from Eddie. *Remember! Left hand! Left hand!*

He saw Eddie and Jack stumble backward, fall, and then go rolling down the rocky scree that edged the beach, struggling for the gun in Andolini's hand.

Roland had just time to think what a cosmic joke it would be if he arrived back in his own world only to discover that his physical body had died while he had been away . . . and then it was too late. Too late to wonder, too late to go back.

12

Andolini didn't know what had happened. Part of him was sure he had gone crazy, part was sure Eddie had doped him or gassed him or something like that, part believed that the vengeful God of his childhood had finally tired of his evils and had plucked him away from the world he knew and set him down in this weird purgatory.

Then he saw the door, standing open, spilling a fan of white light—the light from Balazar's john—onto the rocky ground—and understood it was possible to get back. Andolini was a practical man above all else. He would worry about what all this meant later on. Right now he intended to kill this creep's ass and get back through that door.

The strength that had gone out of him in his shocked surprise now flooded back. He realized Eddie was trying to pull his small but very efficient Colt Cobra out of his hand and had nearly succeeded. Jack pulled it back with a curse, tried to aim, and Eddie promptly grabbed his arm again.

Andolini hoisted a knee into the big muscle of Eddie's right thigh (the expensive gabardine of Andolini's slacks was now crusted with dirty gray beach sand) and Eddie screamed as the muscle seized up.

"Roland!" he cried. *"Help me! For Christ's sake, help me!"*

Andolini snapped his head around and what he saw threw him off-balance again. There was a guy standing there . . . only he looked

more like a ghost than a guy. Not exactly Casper the Friendly Ghost, either. The swaying figure's white, haggard face was rough with beard-stubble. His shirt was in tatters which blew back behind him in twisted ribbons, showing the starved stack of his ribs. A filthy rag was wrapped around his right hand. He looked sick, sick and dying, but even so he also looked tough enough to make Andolini feel like a soft-boiled egg.

And the joker was wearing a pair of guns.

They looked older than the hills, old enough to have come from a Wild West museum . . . but they were guns just the same, they might even really work, and Andolini suddenly realized he was going to have to take care of the white-faced man right away . . . unless he really *was* a spook, and if that was the case, it wouldn't matter fuck-all, so there was really no sense worrying about it.

Andolini let go of Eddie and snap-rolled to the right, barely feeling the edge of rock that tore open his five-hundred-dollar sport jacket. At the same instant the gunslinger drew left-handed, and his draw was as it had always been, sick or well, wide awake or still half asleep: faster than a streak of blue summer lightning.

I'm beat, Andolini thought, full of sick wonder. *Christ, he's faster than anybody I ever saw! I'm beat, holy Mary Mother of God, he's gonna blow me away, he's g—*

The man in the ragged shirt pulled the trigger of the revolver in his left hand and Jack Andolini thought—really thought—he was dead before he realized there had been only a dull click instead of a report.

Misfire.

Smiling, Andolini rose to his knees and raised his own gun.

"I don't know who you are, but you can kiss your ass good-bye, you fucking spook," he said.

Eddie sat up, shivering, his naked body pocked with goosebumps. He saw Roland draw, heard the dry snap that should have been a

bang, saw Andolini come up on his knees, heard him say something, and before he really knew what he was doing his hand had found a ragged chunk of rock. He pulled it out of the grainy earth and threw it as hard as he could.

It struck Andolini high on the back of the head and bounced away. Blood sprayed from a ragged hanging flap in Jack Andolini's scalp. Andolini fired, but the bullet that surely would have killed the gunslinger otherwise went wild.

14

Not really wild, the gunslinger could have told Eddie. *When you feel the wind of the slug on your cheek, you can't really call it wild.*

He thumbed the hammer of his gun back and pulled the trigger again as he recoiled from Andolini's shot. This time the bullet in the chamber fired—the dry, authoritative crack echoed up and down the beach. Gulls asleep on rocks high above the lobsterstrosities awoke and flew upward in screaming, startled packs.

The gunslinger's bullet would have stopped Andolini for good in spite of his own involuntary recoil, but by then Andolini was also in motion, falling sideways, dazed by the blow on the head. The crack of the gunslinger's revolver seemed distant, but the searing poker it plunged into his left arm, shattering the elbow, was real enough. It brought him out of his daze and he rose to his feet, one arm hanging broken and useless, the gun wavering wildly about in his other hand, looking for a target.

It was Eddie he saw first, Eddie the junkie, Eddie who had somehow brought him to this crazy place. Eddie was standing there as naked as the day he had been born, shivering in the chilly wind, clutching himself with both arms. Well, he might die here, but he would at least have the pleasure of taking Eddie Fucking Dean with him.

Andolini brought his gun up. The little Cobra now seemed to weigh about twenty pounds, but he managed.

15

This better not be another misfire, Roland thought grimly, and thumbed the hammer back again. Below the din of the gulls, he heard the smooth oiled click as the chamber revolved.

16

It was no misfire.

17

The gunslinger hadn't aimed at Andolini's head but at the gun in Andolini's hand. He didn't know if they still needed this man, but they might; he was important to Balazar, and because Balazar had proved to be every bit as dangerous as Roland had thought he might be, the best course was the safest one.

His shot was good, and that was no surprise; what happened to Andolini's gun and hence to Andolini was. Roland had seen it happen, but only twice in all the years he had seen men fire guns at each other.

Bad luck for you, fellow, the gunslinger thought as Andolini wandered off toward the beach, screaming. Blood poured down his shirt and pants. The hand which had been holding the Colt Cobra was missing below the middle of the palm. The gun was a senseless piece of twisted metal lying on the sand.

Eddie stared at him, stunned. No one would ever misjudge Jack Andolini's caveman face again, because now he had no face; where it had been there was now nothing but a churned mess of raw flesh and the black screaming hole of his mouth.

"My God, what happened?"

"My bullet must have struck the cylinder of his gun at the second he pulled the trigger," the gunslinger said. He spoke as dryly as a professor giving a police academy ballistics lecture. "The result was

an explosion that tore the back off his gun. I think one or two of the other cartridges may have exploded as well.”

“Shoot him,” Eddie said. He was shivering harder than ever, and now it wasn’t just the combination of night air, sea breeze, and naked body that was causing it. “Kill him. Put him out of his misery, for God’s s—”

“Too late,” the gunslinger said with a cold indifference that chilled Eddie’s flesh all the way in to the bone.

And Eddie turned away just too late to avoid seeing the lobstrosities swarm over Andolini’s feet, tearing off his Gucci loafers . . . with the feet still inside them, of course. Screaming, waving his arms spasmodically before him, Andolini fell forward. The lobstrosities swarmed greedily over him, questioning him anxiously all the while they were eating him alive: *Dad-a-chack? Did-a-chick? Dum-a-chum? Dod-a-chock?*

“Jesus,” Eddie moaned. “What do we do now?”

“Now you get exactly as much of the (*devil-powder* the gunslinger said; *cocaine* Eddie heard) as you promised the man Balazar,” Roland said, “no more and no less. And we go back.” He looked levelly at Eddie. “Only this time I have to go back with you. As myself.”

“Jesus Christ,” Eddie said. “Can you do that?” And at once answered his own question. “Sure you can. But why?”

“Because you can’t handle this alone,” Roland said. “Come here.”

Eddie looked back at the squirming hump of clawed creatures on the beach. He had never liked Jack Andolini, but he felt his stomach roll over just the same.

“Come here,” Roland said impatiently. “We’ve little time, and I have little liking for what I must do now. It’s something I’ve never done before. Never thought I *would* do.” His lips twisted bitterly. “I’m getting used to doing things like that.”

Eddie approached the scrawny figure slowly, on legs that felt more and more like rubber. His bare skin was white and glimmering in the alien dark. *Just who are you, Roland?* he thought. *What are you? And that heat I feel baking off you—is it just fever? Or some kind of madness? I think it might be both.*

God, he needed a fix. More: he *deserved* a fix.

“Never done *what* before?” he asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Take this,” Roland said, and gestured at the ancient revolver slung low on his right hip. Did not point; there was no finger to point *with*, only a bulky, rag-wrapped bundle. “It’s no good to me. Not now, perhaps never again.”

“I . . .” Eddie swallowed. “I don’t want to touch it.”

“I don’t want you to either,” the gunslinger said with curious gentleness, “but I’m afraid neither of us has a choice. There’s going to be shooting.”

“There is?”

“Yes.” The gunslinger looked serenely at Eddie. “Quite a lot of it, I think.”

18

Balazar had become more and more uneasy. Too long. They had been in there too long and it was too quiet. Distantly, maybe on the next block, he could hear people shouting at each other and then a couple of rattling reports that were probably firecrackers . . . but when you were in the sort of business Balazar was in, firecrackers weren’t the first thing you thought of.

A scream. Was that a scream?

Never mind. Whatever’s happening on the next block has nothing to do with you. You’re turning into an old woman.

All the same, the signs were bad. Very bad.

“Jack?” he yelled at the closed bathroom door.

There was no answer.

Balazar opened the left front drawer of his desk and took out the gun. This was no Colt Cobra, cozy enough to fit in a clamshell holster; it was a .357 Magnum.

“’Cimi!” he shouted. “I want you!”

He slammed the drawer. The tower of cards fell with a soft, sighing thump. Balazar didn’t even notice.

'Cimi Dretto, all two hundred and fifty pounds of him, filled the doorway. He saw that *Da Boss* had pulled his gun out of the drawer, and 'Cimi immediately pulled his own from beneath a plaid jacket so loud it could have caused flash-burns on anyone who made the mistake of looking at it too long.

"I want Claudio and Tricks," he said. "Get them quick. The kid is up to something."

"We got a problem," 'Cimi said.

Balazar's eyes flicked from the bathroom door to 'Cimi. "Oh, I got plenty of those already," he said. "What's this new one, 'Cimi?"

'Cimi licked his lips. He didn't like telling *Da Boss* bad news even under the best of circumstances; when he looked like this . . .

"Well," he said, and licked his lips. "You see—"

"*Will you hurry the fuck up?*" Balazar yelled.

19

The sandalwood grips of the revolver were so smooth that Eddie's first act upon receiving it was to nearly drop it on his toes. The thing was so big it looked prehistoric, so heavy he knew he would have to lift it two-handed. *The recoil, he thought, is apt to drive me right through the nearest wall. That's if it fires at all.* Yet there was some part of him that *wanted* to hold it, that responded to its perfectly expressed purpose, that sensed its dim and bloody history and wanted to be part of it.

No one but the best ever held this baby in his hand, Eddie thought. Until now, at least.

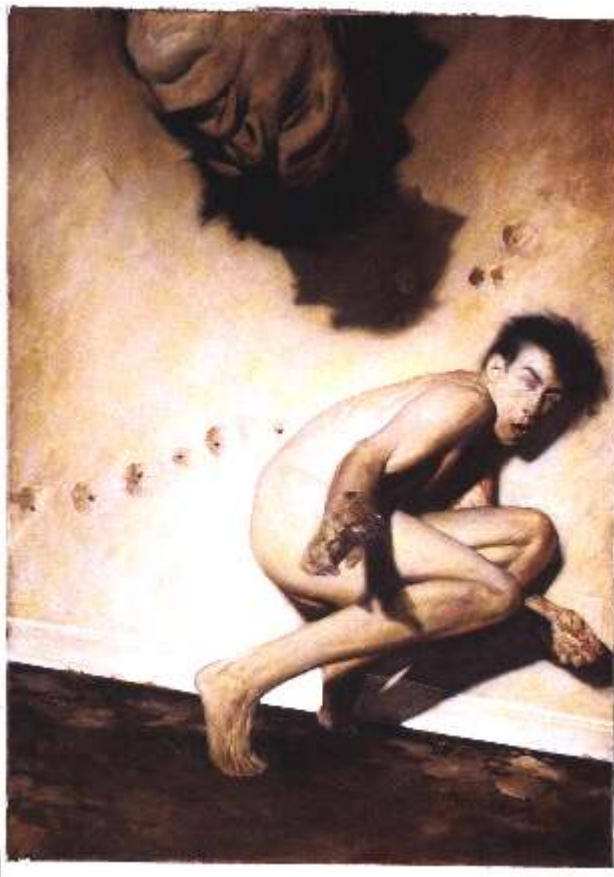
"Are you ready?" Roland asked.

"No, but let's do it," Eddie said.

He gripped Roland's left wrist with his left hand. Roland slid his hot right arm around Eddie's bare shoulders.

Together they stepped back through the doorway, from the windy darkness of the beach in Roland's dying world to the cool fluorescent glare of Balazar's private bathroom in The Leaning Tower.

Eddie blinked, adjusting his eyes to the light, and heard 'Cimi Dretto in the other room. "We got a problem," 'Cimi was saying. *Don't we all*, Eddie thought, and then his eyes riveted on Balazar's medicine chest. It was standing open. In his mind he heard Balazar telling Jack to search the bathroom, and heard Andolini asking if there was any place in there he wouldn't know about. Balazar had paused before replying. *There is a small panel on the back wall of the medicine cabinet, he had said. I keep a few personal things in there.*



Andolini had slid the metal panel open but had neglected to close it. "Roland!" he hissed.

Roland raised his own gun and pressed the barrel against his lips in a shushing gesture. Eddie crossed silently to the medicine chest.

A few personal things—there was a bottle of suppositories, a copy of a blearily printed magazine called *Child's Play* (the cover depicting

two naked girls of about eight engaged in a soul-kiss) . . . and eight or ten sample packages of Keflex. Eddie knew what Keflex was. Junkies, prone as they were to infections both general and local, usually knew.

Keflex was an antibiotic.

“Oh, I got plenty of those already,” Balazar was saying. He sounded harried. “What’s this new one, ’Cimi?”

If this doesn’t knock out whatever’s wrong with him nothing will, Eddie thought. He began to grab the packages and went to stuff them into his pockets. He realized he *had* no pockets and uttered a harsh bark that wasn’t even close to laughter.

He began to dump them into the sink. He would have to pick them up later . . . if there *was* a later.

“Well,” ’Cimi was saying, “you see—”

“Will you hurry the fuck up?” Balazar yelled.

“It’s the kid’s big brother,” ’Cimi said, and Eddie froze with the last two packages of Keflex still in his hand, his head cocked. He looked more like the dog on the old RCA Victor records than ever.

“What about him?” Balazar asked impatiently.

“He’s dead,” ’Cimi said.

Eddie dropped the Keflex into the sink and turned toward Roland.

“They killed my brother,” he said.

20

Balazar opened his mouth to tell ’Cimi not to bother him with a bunch of crap when he had important things to worry about—like this impossible-to-shake feeling that the kid was going to fuck him, Andolini or no Andolini—when he heard the kid as clearly as the kid had no doubt heard him and ’Cimi. “They killed my brother,” the kid said.

Suddenly Balazar didn’t care about his goods, about the unanswered questions, or anything except bringing this situation to a screeching halt before it could get any weirder.

“Kill him, Jack!” he shouted.

There was no response. Then he heard the kid say it again: “They killed my brother. They killed Henry.”

Balazar suddenly knew—*knew*—it wasn’t Jack the kid was talking to.

“Get all the gentlemen,” he said to ‘Cimi. “*All of them. We’re gonna burn his ass and when he’s dead we’re gonna take him in the kitchen and I’m gonna personally chop his head off.*”

21

“They killed my brother,” the prisoner said. The gunslinger said nothing. He only watched and thought: *The bottles. In the sink. That’s what I need, or what he thinks I need. The packets. Don’t forget. Don’t forget.*

From the other room: “*Kill him, Jack!*”

Neither Eddie nor the gunslinger took any notice of this.

“They killed my brother. They killed Henry.”

In the other room Balazar was now talking about taking Eddie’s head as a trophy. The gunslinger found some odd comfort in this: not everything in this world was different from his own, it seemed.

The one called ‘Cimi began shouting hoarsely for the others. There was an ungentlemanly thunder of running feet.

“Do you want to do something about it, or do you just want to stand here?” Roland asked.

“Oh, I want to do something about it,” Eddie said, and raised the gunslinger’s revolver. Although only moments ago he had believed he would need both hands to do it, he found that he could do it easily.

“And what is it you want to do?” Roland asked, and his voice seemed distant to his own ears. He was sick, full of fever, but what was happening to him now was the onset of a different fever, one which was all too familiar. It was the fever that had overtaken him in Tull. It was battle-fire, hazing all thought, leaving only the need to stop thinking and start shooting.

“I want to go to war,” Eddie Dean said calmly.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Roland said, “but you are going to find out. When we go through the door, you go right. I have to go left. My hand.”

Eddie nodded. They went to their war.

22

Balazar had expected Eddie, or Andolini, or both of them. He had not expected Eddie and an utter stranger, a tall man with dirty gray-black hair and a face that looked as if it had been chiseled from obdurate stone by some savage god. For a moment he was not sure which way to fire.

’Cimi, however, had no such problems. *Da Boss* was mad at Eddie. Therefore, he would punch Eddie’s clock first and worry about the other *catzarro* later. ’Cimi turned ponderously toward Eddie and pulled the trigger of his automatic three times. The casings jumped and gleamed in the air. Eddie saw the big man turning and went into a mad slide along the floor, whizzing along like some kid in a disco contest, a kid so jived-up he didn’t realize he’d left his entire John Travolta outfit, underwear included, behind; he went with his wang wagging and his bare knees first heating and then scorching as the friction built up. Holes punched through plastic that was supposed to look like knotty pine just above him. Slivers of it rained down on his shoulders and into his hair.

Don’t let me die naked and needing a fix, God, he prayed, knowing such a prayer was more than blasphemous; it was an absurdity. Still he was unable to stop it. *I’ll die, but please, just let me have one more—*

The revolver in the gunslinger’s left hand crashed. On the open beach it had been loud; over here it was deafening.

“*Oh Jeez!*” Cimi Dretto screamed in a strangled, breathy voice. It was a wonder he could scream at all. His chest suddenly caved in, as if someone had swung a sledgehammer at a barrel. His white shirt began to turn red in patches, as if poppies were blooming on it. “*Oh Jeez! Oh Jeez! Oh J—*”

Claudio Andolini shoved him aside. 'Cimi fell with a thud. Two of the framed pictures on Balazar's wall crashed down. The one showing *Da Boss* presenting the Sportsman of the Year trophy to a grinning kid at a Police Athletic League banquet landed on 'Cimi's head. Shattered glass fell on his shoulders.

"*oh jeez*" he whispered in a fainting little voice, and blood began to bubble from his lips.

Claudio was followed by Tricks and one of the men who had been waiting in the storage room. Claudio had an automatic in each hand; the guy from the storage room had a Remington shotgun sawed off so short that it looked like a derringer with a case of the mumps; Tricks Postino was carrying what he called The Wonderful Rambo Machine—this was an M-16 rapid-fire assault weapon.

"Where's my brother, you fucking needle-freak?" Claudio screamed. "What'd you do to Jack?" He could not have been terribly interested in an answer, because he began to fire with both weapons while he was still yelling. *I'm dead*, Eddie thought, and then Roland fired again. Claudio Andolini was propelled backwards in a cloud of his own blood. The automatics flew from his hands and slid across Balazar's desk. They thumped to the carpet amid a flutter of playing cards. Most of Claudio's guts hit the wall a second before Claudio caught up with them.

"*Get him!*" Balazar was shrieking. "*Get the spook! The kid ain't dangerous! He's nothing but a bare-ass junkie! Get the spook! Blow him away!*"

He pulled the trigger on the .357 twice. The Magnum was almost as loud as Roland's revolver. It did not make neat holes in the wall against which Roland crouched; the slugs smashed gaping wounds in the fake wood to either side of Roland's head. White light from the bathroom shone through the holes in ragged rays.

Roland pulled the trigger of his revolver.

Only a dry click.

Misfire.

"*Eddie!*" the gunslinger yelled, and Eddie raised his own gun and pulled the trigger.

The crash was so loud that for a moment he thought the gun had blown up in his hand, as Jack's had done. The recoil did not drive him back through the wall, but it did snap his arm up in a savage arc that jerked all the tendons under his arm.

He saw part of Balazar's shoulder disintegrate into red spray, heard Balazar screech like a wounded cat, and yelled, "*The junkie ain't dangerous, was that what you said? Was that it, you numb fuck? You want to mess with me and my brother? I'll show you who's dangerous! I'll sh—*"

There was a boom like a grenade as the guy from the storage room fired the sawed-off. Eddie rolled as the blast tore a hundred tiny holes in the walls and bathroom door. His naked skin was seared by shot in several places, and Eddie understood that if the guy had been closer, where the thing's pattern was tight, he would have been vaporized.

Hell, I'm dead anyway, he thought, watching as the guy from the storage room worked the Remington's jack, pumping in fresh cartridges, then laying it over his forearm. He was grinning. His teeth were very yellow—Eddie didn't think they had been acquainted with a toothbrush in quite some time.

Christ, I'm going to get killed by some fuckhead with yellow teeth and I don't even know his name, Eddie thought dimly. *At least I put one in Balazar. At least I did that much*. He wondered if Roland had another shot. He couldn't remember.

"I got him!" Tricks Postino yelled cheerfully. "Gimme a clear field, Dario!" And before the man named Dario could give him a clear field or anything else, Tricks opened up with The Wonderful Rambo Machine. The heavy thunder of machine-gun fire filled Balazar's office. The first result of this barrage was to save Eddie Dean's life. Dario had drawn a bead on him with the sawed-off, but before he could pull its double triggers, Tricks cut him in half.

"Stop it, you idiot!" Balazar screamed.

But Tricks either didn't hear, couldn't stop, or *wouldn't* stop. Lips pulled back from his teeth so that his spit-shining teeth were bared in a huge shark's grin, he raked the room from one end to the other, blowing two of the wall panels to dust, turning framed photographs

into clouds of flying glass fragments, hammering the bathroom door off its hinges. The frosted glass of Balazar's shower stall exploded. The March of Dimes trophy Balazar had gotten the year before bonged like a bell as a slug drove through it.

In the movies, people actually kill other people with hand-held rapid-fire weapons. In real life, this rarely happens. If it does, it happens with the first four or five slugs fired (as the unfortunate Dario could have testified, if he had ever been capable of testifying to anything again). After the first four or five, two things happen to a man—even a powerful one—trying to control such a weapon. The muzzle begins to rise, and the shooter himself begins to turn either right or left, depending on which unfortunate shoulder he has decided to bludgeon with the weapon's recoil. In short, only a moron or a movie star would attempt the use of such a gun; it was like trying to shoot someone with a pneumatic drill.

For a moment Eddie was incapable of any action more constructive than staring at this perfect marvel of idiocy. Then he saw other men crowding through the door behind Tricks, and raised Roland's revolver.

"*Got him!*" Tricks was screaming with the joyous hysteria of a man who has seen too many movies to be able to distinguish between what the script in his head says should be happening and what really is. "*Got him! I got him! I g—*"

Eddie pulled the trigger and vaporized Tricks from the eyebrows up. Judging from the man's behavior, that was not a great deal.

Jesus Christ, when these things do shoot, they really blow holes in things, he thought.

There was a loud *KA-BLAM* from Eddie's left. Something tore a hot gouge in his underdeveloped left bicep. He saw Balazar pointing the Mag at him from behind the corner of his card-littered desk. His shoulder was a dripping red mass. Eddie ducked as the Magnum crashed again.

Roland managed to get into a crouch, aimed at the first of the new men coming in through the door, and squeezed the trigger. He had rolled the cylinder, dumped the used loads and the duds onto the carpet, and had loaded this one fresh shell. He had done it with his teeth. Balazar had pinned Eddie down. *If this one's a dud, I think we're both gone.*

It wasn't. The gun roared, recoiled in his hand, and Jimmy Haspio spun aside, the .45 he had been holding falling from his dying fingers.

Roland saw the other man duck back and then he was crawling through the splinters of wood and glass that littered the floor. He dropped his revolver back into its holster. The idea of reloading again with two of his right fingers missing was a joke.

Eddie was doing well. The gunslinger measured just how well by the fact that he was fighting naked. That was hard for a man. Sometimes impossible.

The gunslinger grabbed one of the automatic pistols Claudio Andolini had dropped.

"What are the rest of you guys waiting for?" Balazar screamed. *"Jesus! Eat these guys!"*

Big George Biondi and the other man from the supply room charged in through the door. The man from the supply room was bawling something in Italian.

Roland crawled to the corner of the desk. Eddie rose, aiming toward the door and the charging men. *He knows Balazar's there, waiting, but he thinks he's the only one of us with a gun now, Roland thought. Here is another one ready to die for you, Roland. What great wrong did you ever do that you should inspire such terrible loyalty in so many?*

Balazar rose, not seeing the gunslinger was now on his flank. Balazar was thinking of only one thing: finally putting an end to the goddam junkie who had brought this ruin down on his head.

"No," the gunslinger said, and Balazar looked around at him, surprise stamped on his features.

"Fuck y—" Balazar began, bringing the Magnum around. The gunslinger shot him four times with Claudio's automatic. It was a

cheap little thing, not much better than a toy, and touching it made his hand feel dirty, but it was perhaps fitting to kill a despicable man with a despicable weapon.

Enrico Balazar died with an expression of terminal surprise on what remained of his face.

“Hi, George!” Eddie said, and pulled the trigger of the gunslinger’s revolver. That satisfying crash came again. *No duds in this baby*, Eddie thought crazily. *I guess I must have gotten the good one.* George got off one shot before Eddie’s bullet drove him back into the screaming man, bowling him over like a ninepin, but it went wild. An irrational but utterly persuasive feeling had come over him: a feeling that Roland’s gun held some magical, talismanic power of protection. As long as he held it, he couldn’t be hurt.

Silence fell then, a silence in which Eddie could hear only the man under Big George moaning (when George landed on Rudy Vechhio, which was this unfortunate fellow’s name, he had fractured three of Vechhio’s ribs) and the high ringing in his own ears. He wondered if he would ever hear right again. The shooting spree which now seemed to be over made the loudest rock concert Eddie had ever been to sound like a radio playing two blocks over by comparison.

Balazar’s office was no longer recognizable as a room of any kind. Its previous function had ceased to matter. Eddie looked around with the wide, wondering eyes of a very young man seeing something like this for the first time, but Roland knew the look, and the look was always the same. Whether it was an open field of battle where thousands had died by cannon, rifle, sword, and halberd or a small room where five or six had shot each other, it was the same place, always the same place in the end: another deadhouse, stinking of gunpowder and raw meat.

The wall between the bathroom and the office was gone except for a few struts. Broken glass twinkled everywhere. Ceiling panels that had been shredded by Tricks Postino’s gaudy but useless M-16 fireworks display hung down like pieces of peeled skin.

Eddie coughed dryly. Now he could hear other sounds—a babble of excited conversation, shouted voices outside the bar, and, in the distance, the warble of sirens.

“How many?” the gunslinger asked Eddie. “Can we have gotten all of them?”

“Yes, I think—”

“I got something for you, Eddie,” Kevin Blake said from the hallway. “I thought you might want it, like for a souvenir, you know?” What Balazar had not been able to do to the younger Dean brother Kevin had done to the elder. He lobbed Henry Dean’s severed head through the doorway.

Eddie saw what it was and screamed. He ran toward the door, heedless of the splinters of glass and wood that punched into his bare feet, screaming, shooting, firing the last live shell in the big revolver as he went.

“*No, Eddie!*” Roland screamed, but Eddie didn’t hear. He was beyond hearing.

He hit a dud in the sixth chamber, but by then he was aware of nothing but the fact that Henry was dead, *Henry*, they had cut off his head, some miserable son of a bitch had cut off Henry’s *head*, and that son of a bitch was going to *pay*, oh yes, you could count on that.

So he ran toward the door, pulling the trigger again and again, unaware that nothing was happening, unaware that his feet were red with blood, and Kevin Blake stepped into the doorway to meet him, crouched low, a Llama .38 automatic in his hand. Kevin’s red hair stood around his head in coils and springs, and Kevin was smiling.

24

He’ll be low, the gunslinger thought, knowing he would have to be lucky to hit his target with this untrustworthy little toy even if he had guessed right.

When he saw the ruse of Balazar’s soldier was going to draw Eddie out, Roland rose to his knees and steadied his left hand on his right fist, grimly ignoring the screech of pain making that fist caused. He would have one chance only. The pain didn’t matter.

Then the man with the red hair stepped into the doorway, smiling, and as always Roland’s brain was gone; his eye saw, his hand shot,

and suddenly the red-head was lying against the wall of the corridor with his eyes open and a small blue hole in his forehead. Eddie was standing over him, screaming and sobbing, dry-firing the big revolver with the sandalwood grips again and again, as if the man with the red hair could never be dead enough.

The gunslinger waited for the deadly crossfire that would cut Eddie in half and when it didn't come he knew it was truly over. If there had been other soldiers, they had taken to their heels.

He got wearily to his feet, reeled, and then walked slowly over to where Eddie Dean stood.

"Stop it," he said.

Eddie ignored him and went on dry-firing Roland's big gun at the dead man.

"Stop it, Eddie, he's dead. They're all dead. Your feet are bleeding."

Eddie ignored him and went on pulling the revolver's trigger. The babble of excited voices outside was closer. So were the sirens.

The gunslinger reached for the gun and pulled on it. Eddie turned on him, and before Roland was entirely sure what was happening, Eddie struck him on the side of the head with his own gun. Roland felt a warm gush of blood and collapsed against the wall. He struggled to stay on his feet—they had to get out of here, quick. But he could feel himself sliding down the wall in spite of his every effort, and then the world was gone for a little while in a drift of grayness.

25

He was out for no more than two minutes, and then he managed to get things back into focus and make it to his feet. Eddie was no longer in the hallway. Roland's gun lay on the chest of the dead man with the red hair. The gunslinger bent, fighting off a wave of dizziness, picked it up, and dropped it into its holster with an awkward, cross-body movement.

I want my damned fingers back, he thought tiredly, and sighed.

He tried to walk back into the ruins of the office, but the best he could manage was an educated stagger. He stopped, bent, and picked up all of Eddie's clothes that he could hold in the crook of his left arm. The howlers had almost arrived. Roland believed the men winding them were probably militia, a marshall's posse, something of that sort . . . but there was always the possibility they might be more of Balazar's men.

"Eddie," he croaked. His throat was sore and throbbing again, worse even than the swollen place on the side of his head where Eddie had struck him with the revolver.

Eddie didn't notice. Eddie was sitting on the floor with his brother's head cradled against his belly. He was shuddering all over and crying. The gunslinger looked for the door, didn't see it, and felt a nasty jolt that was nearly terror. Then he remembered. With both of them on this side, the only way to create the door was for him to make physical contact with Eddie.

He reached for him but Eddie shrank away, still weeping. "Don't touch me," he said.

"Eddie, it's over. They're all dead, and your brother's dead, too."

"*Leave my brother out of this!*" Eddie shrieked childishly, and another fit of shuddering went through him. He cradled the severed head to his chest and rocked it. He lifted his streaming eyes to the gunslinger's face.

"All the times he took care of me, man," he said, sobbing so hard the gunslinger could barely understand him. "All the times. Why couldn't I have taken care of him, just this once, after all the times he took care of me?"

He took care of you, all right, Roland thought grimly. Look at you, sitting there and shaking like a man who's eaten an apple from the fever-tree. He took care of you just fine.

"We have to go."

"Go?" For the first time some vague understanding came into Eddie's face, and it was followed immediately by alarm. "I ain't going nowhere. Especially not back to that other place, where those big crabs or whatever they are ate Jack."

Someone was hammering on the door, yelling to open up.

“Do you want to stay here and explain all these bodies?” the gunslinger asked.

“I don’t care,” Eddie said. “Without Henry, it doesn’t matter. Nothing does.”

“Maybe it doesn’t matter to you,” Roland said, “but there are others involved, prisoner.”

“Don’t call me that!” Eddie shouted.

“I’ll call you that until you show me you can walk out of the cell you’re in!” Roland shouted back. It hurt his throat to yell, but he yelled just the same. *“Throw that rotten piece of meat away and stop puling!”*

Eddie looked at him, cheeks wet, eyes wide and frightened.

“THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE!” an amplified voice said from outside. To Eddie the voice sounded eerily like the voice of a game-show host. *“THE S.W.A.T. SQUAD HAS ARRIVED—I REPEAT: THE S.W.A.T. SQUAD HAS ARRIVED!”*

“What’s on the other side of that door for me?” Eddie asked the gunslinger quietly. “Go on and tell me. If you can tell me, maybe I’ll come. But if you lie, I’ll know.”

“Probably death,” the gunslinger said. “But before that happens, I don’t think you’ll be bored. I want you to join me on a quest. Of course, all will probably end in death—death for the four of us in a strange place. But if we should win through . . .” His eyes gleamed. “If we win through, Eddie, you’ll see something beyond all the beliefs of all your dreams.”

“What thing?”

“The Dark Tower.”

“Where is this Tower?”

“Far from the beach where you found me. How far I know not.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know that, either—except that it may be a kind of . . . of a bolt. A central linchpin that holds all of existence together. All existence, all time, and all size.”

“You said four. Who are the other two?”

“I know them not, for they have yet to be drawn.”

“As I was drawn. Or as you’d like to draw me.”

“Yes.”

From outside there was a coughing explosion like a mortar round. The glass of The Leaning Tower’s front window blew in. The barroom began to fill with choking clouds of tear-gas.

“Well?” Roland asked. He could grab Eddie, force the doorway into existence by their contact, and pummel them both through. But he had seen Eddie risk his life for him; he had seen this hag-ridden man behave with all the dignity of a born gunslinger in spite of his addiction and the fact that he had been forced to fight as naked as the day he was born, and he wanted Eddie to decide for himself.

“Quests, adventures, Towers, worlds to win,” Eddie said, and smiled wanly. Neither of them turned as fresh teargas rounds flew through the windows to explode, hissing, on the floor. The first acrid tendrils of the gas were now slipping into Balazar’s office. “Sounds better than one of those Edgar Rice Burroughs books about Mars Henry used to read me sometimes when we were kids. You only left out one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“The beautiful bare-breasted girls.”

The gunslinger smiled. “On the way to the Dark Tower,” he said, “anything is possible.”

Another shudder wracked Eddie’s body. He raised Henry’s head, kissed one cool, ash-colored cheek, and laid the gore-streaked relic gently aside. He got to his feet.

“Okay,” he said. “I didn’t have anything else planned for tonight, anyway.”

“Take these,” Roland said, and shoved the clothes at him. “Put on your shoes if nothing else. You’ve cut your feet.”

On the sidewalk outside, two cops wearing plexiglass faceplates, flak-jackets, and Kelvar vests smashed in The Leaning Tower’s front door. In the bathroom, Eddie (dressed in his underpants, his Adidas sneakers, and nothing else) handed the sample packages of Keflex to Roland one by one, and Roland put them into the pockets of Eddie’s jeans. When they were all safely stowed, Roland slid his right arm around Eddie’s neck again and Eddie gripped Roland’s left hand again. The door was suddenly there, a rectangle of darkness.

Eddie felt the wind from that other world blow his sweaty hair back from his forehead. He heard the waves rolling up that stony beach. He smelled the tang of sour sea-salt. And in spite of everything, all his pain and sorrow, he suddenly wanted to see this Tower of which Roland spoke. He wanted to see it very much. And with Henry dead, what was there in this world for him? Their parents were dead, and there hadn't been a steady girl since he got heavily into the smack three years ago—just a steady parade of sluts, needlers, and nosers. None of them straight. Fuck that action.

They stepped through, Eddie actually leading a little.

On the other side he was suddenly wracked with fresh shudders and agonizing muscle-cramps—the first symptoms of serious heroin withdrawal. And with them he also had the first alarmed second thoughts.

“Wait!” he shouted. “I want to go back for a minute! His desk! His desk, or the other office! The scag! If they were keeping Henry doped, there's gotta be junk! Heroin! I need it! I need it!”

He looked pleadingly at Roland, but the gunslinger's face was stony.

“That part of your life is over, Eddie,” he said. He reached out with his left hand.

“*No!*” Eddie screamed, clawing at him. “*No, you don't get it, man, I need it! I NEED IT!*”

He might as well have been clawing stone.

The gunslinger swept the door shut.

It made a dull clapping sound that bespoke utter finality and fell backward onto the sand. A little dust puffed up from its edges. There was nothing behind the door, and now no word written upon it. This particular portal between the worlds had closed forever.

“*No!*” Eddie screamed, and the gulls screamed back at him as if in jeering contempt; the lobstrosities asked him questions, perhaps suggesting he could hear them a little better if he were to come a little closer, and Eddie fell over on his side, crying and shuddering and jerking with cramps.

“Your need will pass,” the gunslinger said, and managed to get one of the sample packets out of the pocket of Eddie's jeans, which

were so like his own. Again, he could read some of these letters but not all. *Cheeflet*, the word looked like.

Cheeflet.

Medicine from that other world.

“Kill or cure,” Roland murmured, and dry-swallowed two of the capsules. Then he took the other three *astin*, and lay next to Eddie, and took him in his arms as well as he could, and after some difficult time, both of them slept.

SHUFFLE



shuffle

The time following that night was broken time for Roland, time that didn't really exist as time at all. What he remembered was only a series of images, moments, conversation without context; images flashing past like one-eyed jacks and treys and nines and the Bloody Black Bitch Queen of Spiders in a card-sharp's rapid shuffle.

Later on he asked Eddie how long that time lasted, but Eddie didn't know either. Time had been destroyed for both of them. There was no time in hell, and each of them was in his own private hell: Roland the hell of the fever and infection, Eddie the hell of withdrawal.

"It was less than a week," Eddie said. "That's all I know for sure."

"How do you know that?"

“A week’s worth of pills was all I had to give you. After that, you were gonna have to do the one thing or the other on your own.”

“Get well or die.”

“Right.”

shuffle

There’s a gunshot as twilight draws down to dark, a dry crack impinging on the inevitable and ineluctable sound of the breakers dying on the desolate beach: *KA-BLAM!* He smells a whiff of gunpowder. *Trouble*, the gunslinger thinks weakly, and gropes for revolvers that aren’t there. *Oh no, it’s the end, it’s . . .*

But there’s no more. as something starts to smell

shuffle

good in the dark. Something, after all this long dark dry time, something is *cooking*. It’s not just the smell. He can hear the snap and pop of twigs, can see the faint orange flicker of a campfire. Sometimes, when the sea-breeze gusts, he smells fragrant smoke as well as that mouth-watering other smell. *Food*, he thinks. *My God, am I hungry? If I’m hungry, maybe I’m getting well.*

Eddie, he tries to say, but his voice is all gone. His throat hurts, hurts so bad. *We should have brought some astin, too*, he thinks, and then tries to laugh: all the drugs for him, none for Eddie.

Eddie appears. He’s got a tin plate, one the gunslinger would know anywhere: it came, after all, from his own purse. On it are streaming chunks of whitish-pink meat.

What? he tries to ask, and nothing comes out but a squeaky little farting sound.

Eddie reads the shape of his lips. “I don’t know,” he says crossly. “All I know is it didn’t kill me. Eat it, damn you.”

He sees Eddie is very pale, Eddie is shaking, and he smells something coming from Eddie that is either shit or death, and he

knows Eddie is in a bad way. He reaches out a groping hand, wanting to give comfort. Eddie strikes it away.

“I’ll feed you,” he says crossly. “Fucked if I know why. I ought to kill you. I would, if I didn’t think that if you could get through into my world once, maybe you could do it again.”

Eddie looks around.

“And if it wasn’t that I’d be alone. Except for *them*.”

He looks back at Roland and a fit of shuddering runs through him—it is so fierce that he almost spills the chunks of meat on the tin plate. At last it passes.

“Eat, God damn you.”

The gunslinger eats. The meat is more than not bad; the meat is delicious. He manages three pieces and then everything blurs into a new

shuffle

effort to speak, but all he can do is whisper. The cup of Eddie’s ear is pressed against his lips, except every now and then it shudders away as Eddie goes through one of his spasms. He says it again. “North. Up . . . up the beach.”

“How do you know?”

“Just know,” he whispers.

Eddie looks at him. “You’re crazy,” he says.

The gunslinger smiles and tries to black out but Eddie slaps him, slaps him hard. Roland’s blue eyes fly open and for a moment they are so alive and electric Eddie looks uneasy. Then his lips draw back in a smile that is mostly snarl.

“Yeah, you can drone off,” he said, “but first you gotta take your dope. It’s time. Sun says it is, anyway. I guess. I was never no Boy Scout, so I don’t know for sure. But I guess it’s close enough for Government work. Open wide, Roland. Open wide for Dr. Eddie, you kidnapping fuck.”

The gunslinger opens his mouth like a baby for the breast. Eddie puts two of the pills in his mouth and then slops fresh water

carelessly into Roland's mouth. Roland guesses it must be from a hill stream somewhere to the east. It might be poison; Eddie wouldn't know fair water from foul. On the other hand, Eddie seems fine himself, and there's really no choice, is there? No.

He swallows, coughs, and nearly strangles while Eddie looks at him indifferently.

Roland reaches for him.

Eddie tries to draw away.

The gunslinger's bullshooter eyes command him.

Roland draws him close, so close he can smell the stink of Eddie's sickness and Eddie can smell the stink of his; the combination sickens and compels them both.

"Only two choices here," Roland whispers. "Don't know how it is in your world, but only two choices here. Stand and maybe live, or die on your knees with your head down and the stink of your own armpits in your nose. Nothing . . ." He hacks out a cough. "Nothing to me."

"*Who are you?*" Eddie screams at him.

"Your destiny, Eddie," the gunslinger whispers.

"Why don't you just eat shit and die?" Eddie asks him. The gunslinger tries to speak, but before he can he floats off as the cards

shuffle

KA-BLAM!

Roland opens his eyes on a billion stars wheeling through the blackness, then closes them again.

He doesn't know what's going on but he thinks everything's okay. The deck's still moving, the cards still

shuffle

More of the sweet, tasty chunks of meat. He feels better. Eddie looks better, too. But he also looks worried.

“They’re getting closer,” he says. “They may be ugly, but they ain’t completely stupid. They know what I been doing. Somehow they know, and they don’t dig it. Every night they get a little closer. It might be smart to move on when daybreak comes, if you can. Or it might be the last daybreak we ever see.”

“What?” This is not exactly a whisper but a husk somewhere between a whisper and real speech.

“*Them*,” Eddie says, and gestures toward the beach. “*Dad-a-chack, dum-a-chum*, and all that shit. I think they’re like us, Roland—all for eating, but not too big on getting eaten.”

Suddenly, in an utter blast of horror, Roland realizes what the whitish-pink chunks of meat Eddie has been feeding him have been. He cannot speak; revulsion robs him of what little voice he has managed to get back. But Eddie sees everything he wants to say on his face.

“What did you think I was doing?” he nearly snarls. “Calling Red Lobster for take-out?”

“They’re poison,” Roland whispers. “That’s why—”

“Yeah, that’s why you’re *hors de combat*. What I’m trying to keep from you being, Roland my friend, is *hors d’oeuvres* as well. As far as poison goes, rattlesnakes are poison, but people eat them. Rattlesnake tastes real good. Like chicken. I read that somewhere. They looked like lobsters to me, so I decided to take a chance. What else were we gonna eat? Dirt? I shot one of the fuckers and cooked the living Christ out of it. There wasn’t anything else. And actually, they taste pretty good. I been shooting one a night just after the sun starts to go down. They’re not real lively until it gets completely dark. I never saw you turning the stuff down.”

Eddie smiles.

“I like to think maybe I got one of the ones that ate Jack. I like to think I’m eating that dink. It, like, eases my mind, you know?”

“One of them ate part of me, too,” the gunslinger husks out. “Two fingers, one toe.”

“That’s also cool,” Eddie keeps smiling. His face is pallid, sharklike . . . but some of that ill look has gone now, and the smell of

shit and death which has hung around him like a shroud seems to be going away.

“Fuck yourself,” the gunslinger husks.

“Roland shows a flash of spirit!” Eddie cries. “Maybe you ain’t gonna die after all! Dahling! I think that’s *mah-vellous!*”

“Live,” Roland says. The husk has become a whisper again. The fishhooks are returning to his throat.

“Yeah?” Eddie looks at him, then nods and answers his own question. “Yeah. I think you mean to. Once I thought you were going and once I thought you were gone. Now it looks like you’re going to get better. The antibiotics are helping, I guess, but mostly I think you’re *hauling* yourself up. What for? Why the fuck do you keep trying so hard to keep alive on this scuzzy beach?”

Tower, he mouths, because now he can’t even manage a husk.

“You and your fucking Tower,” Eddie says, starts to turn away, and then turns back, surprised, as Roland’s hand clamps on his arm like a manacle.

They look into each other’s eyes and Eddie says, “All right. All *right!*”

North, the gunslinger mouths. *North, I told you.* Has he told him that? He thinks so, but it’s lost. Lost in the shuffle.

“How do you *know?*” Eddie screams at him in sudden frustration. He raises his fists as if to strike Roland, then lowers them.

I just know—so why do you waste my time and energy asking me foolish questions? he wants to reply, but before he can, the cards

shuffle

being dragged along, bounced and bumped, his head lolling helplessly from one side to the other, bound to some kind of a weird *travois* by his own gunbelts, and he can hear Eddie Dean singing a song which is so weirdly familiar he at first believes this must be a delirium dream:

“Heyy Jude . . . don’t make it bad . . . take a saaad song . . . and make it better . . .”

Where did you hear that? he wants to ask. *Did you hear me singing it, Eddie? And where are we?*

But before he can ask anything

shuffle

Cort would bash the kid's head in if he saw that contraption, Roland thinks, looking at the *travois* upon which he has spent the day, and laughs. It isn't much of a laugh. It sounds like one of those waves dropping its load of stones on the beach. He doesn't know how far they have come, but it's far enough for Eddie to be totally bushed. He's sitting on a rock in the lengthening light with one of the gunslinger's revolvers in his lap and a half-full water-skin to one side. There's a small bulge in his shirt pocket. These are the bullets from the back of the gunbelts—the diminishing supply of “good” bullets. Eddie has tied these up in a piece of his own shirt. The main reason the supply of “good” bullets is diminishing so fast is because one of every four or five has also turned out to be a dud.

Eddie, who has been nearly dozing, now looks up. “What are you laughing about?” he asks.

The gunslinger waves a dismissive hand and shakes his head. Because he's wrong, he realizes. Cort wouldn't bash Eddie for the *travois*, even though it was an odd, lame-looking thing. Roland thinks it might even be possible that Cort might grunt some word of compliment—such a rarity that the boy to whom it happened hardly ever knew how to respond; he was left gaping like a fish just pulled from a cook's barrel.

The main supports were two cottonwood branches of approximately the same length and thickness. A blowdown, the gunslinger presumed. He had used smaller branches as supports, attaching them to the support poles with a crazy conglomeration of stuff: gunbelts, the glue-string that had held the devil-powder to his chest, even the rawhide thong from the gunslinger's hat and his, Eddie's, own sneaker laces. He had laid the gunslinger's bedroll over the supports.

Cort would not have struck him because, sick as he was, Eddie had at least done more than squat on his hunkers and bewail his fate. He had made *something*. Had *tried*.

And Cort might have offered one of his abrupt, almost grudging compliments because, crazy as the thing looked, it *worked*. The long tracks stretching back down the beach to a point where they seemed to come together at the rim of perspective proved that.

“You see any of them?” Eddie asks. The sun is going down, beating an orange path across the water, and so the gunslinger reckons he has been out better than six hours this time. He feels stronger. He sits up and looks down to the water. Neither the beach nor the land sweeping to the western slope of the mountains have changed much; he can see small variations of landscape and detritus (a dead seagull, for instance, lying in a little heap of blowing feathers on the sand about twenty yards to the left and thirty or so closer to the water), but these aside, they might as well be right where they started.

“No,” the gunslinger says. Then: “Yes. There’s one.”

He points. Eddie squints, then nods. As the sun sinks lower and the orange track begins to look more and more like blood, the first of the lobstrosities come tumbling out of the waves and begin crawling up the beach.

Two of them race clumsily toward the dead gull. The winner pounces on it, rips it open, and begins to stuff the rotting remains into its maw. “*Did-a-chick?*” it asks.

“*Dum-a-chum?*” responds the loser. “*Dod-a—*”

KA-BLAM!

Roland’s gun puts an end to the second creature’s questions. Eddie walks down to it and grabs it by the back, keeping a wary eye on its fellow as he does so. The other offers no trouble, however; it is busy with the gull. Eddie brings his kill back. It is still twitching, raising and lowering its claws, but soon enough it stops moving. The tail arches one final time, then simply drops instead of flexing downward. The boxers’ claws hang limp.

“Dinnah will soon be served, mawster,” Eddie says. “You have your choice: filet of creepy-crawler or filet of creepy-crawler. Which

strikes your fancy, mawster?”

“I don’t understand you,” the gunslinger said.

“Sure you do,” Eddie said. “You just don’t have any sense of humor. What happened to it?”

“Shot off in one war or another, I guess.”

Eddie smiles at that. “You look and sound a little more alive tonight, Roland.”

“I am, I think.”

“Well, maybe you could even walk for awhile tomorrow. I’ll tell you very frankly, my friend, dragging you is the pits and the shits.”

“I’ll try.”

“You do that.”

“You look a little better, too,” Roland ventures. His voice cracks on the last two words like the voice of a young boy. *If I don’t stop talking soon, he thought, I won’t be able to talk at all again.*

“I guess I’ll live.” He looks at Roland expressionlessly. “You’ll never know how close it was a couple of times, though. Once I took one of your guns and put it against my head. Cocked it, held it there for awhile, and then took it away. Eased the hammer down and shoved it back in your holster. Another night I had a convulsion. I think that was the second night, but I’m not sure.” He shakes his head and says something the gunslinger both does and doesn’t understand. “Michigan seems like a dream to me now.”

Although his voice is down to that husky murmur again and he knows he shouldn’t be talking at all, the gunslinger has to know one thing. “What stopped you from pulling the trigger?”

“Well, this is the only pair of pants I’ve got,” Eddie says. “At the last second I thought that if I pulled the trigger and it was one of those dud shells, I’d never get up the guts to do it again . . . and once you shit your pants, you gotta wash ’em right away or live with the stink forever. Henry told me that. He said he learned it in Nam. And since it was nighttime and Lester the Lobster was out, not to mention all his friends—”

But the gunslinger is laughing, laughing hard, although only an occasional cracked sound actually escapes his lips. Smiling a little himself, Eddie says: “I think maybe you only got your sense of humor

shot off up to the elbow in that war.” He gets up, meaning to go up the slope to where there will be fuel for a fire, Roland supposes.

“Wait,” he whispers, and Eddie looks at him. “Why, really?”

“I guess because you needed me. If I’d killed myself, you would have died. Later on, after you’re really on your feet again, I may, like, re-examine my options.” He looks around and sighs deeply.

“There may be a Disneyland or Coney Island somewhere in your world, Roland, but what I’ve seen of it so far really doesn’t interest me much.”

He starts away, pauses, and looks back again at Roland. His face is somber, although some of the sickly pallor has left it. The shakes have become no more than occasional tremors.

“Sometimes you really don’t understand me, do you?”

“No,” the gunslinger whispers. “Sometimes I don’t.”

“Then I’ll elucidate. There are people who need people to need them. The reason you don’t understand is because you’re not one of those people. You’d use me and then toss me away like a paper bag if that’s what it came down to. God fucked you, my friend. You’re just smart enough so it would hurt you to do that, and just hard enough so you’d go ahead and do it anyway. You wouldn’t be able to help yourself. If I was lying on the beach there and screaming for help, you’d walk over me if I was between you and your goddam Tower. Isn’t that pretty close to the truth?”

Roland says nothing, only watches Eddie.

“But not everyone is like that. There are people who need people to need them. Like the Barbra Streisand song. Corny, but true. It’s just another way of being hooked through the bag.”

Eddie gazes at him.

“But when it comes to that, you’re clean, aren’t you?”

Roland watches him.

“Except for your Tower.” Eddie utters a short laugh. “You’re a Tower junkie, Roland.”

“Which war was it?” Roland whispers.

“What?”

“The one where you got your sense of nobility and purpose shot off?”

Eddie recoils as if Roland has reached out and slapped him.

"I'm gonna go get some water," he says shortly. "Keep an eye on the creepy crawlers. We came a long way today, but I still don't know if they talk to each other or not."

He turns away then, but not before Roland has seen the last red rays of sunset reflected on his wet cheeks.

Roland turns back to the beach and watches. The lobstrosities crawl and question, question and crawl, but both activities seem aimless; they have some intelligence, but not enough to pass on information to others of their kind.

God doesn't always dish it in your face, Roland thinks. Most times, but not always.

Eddie returns with wood.

"Well?" he asks. "What do you think?"

"We're all right," the gunslinger croaks, and Eddie starts to say something but the gunslinger is tired now and lies back and looks at the first stars peeking through the canopy of violet sky and

shuffle

in the three days that followed, the gunslinger progressed steadily back to health. The red lines creeping up his arms first reversed their direction, then faded, then disappeared. On the next day he sometimes walked and sometimes let Eddie drag him. On the day following he didn't need to be dragged at all; every hour or two they simply sat for a period of time until the watery feeling went out of his legs. It was during these rests and in those times after dinner had been eaten but before the fire had burned all the way down and they went to sleep that the gunslinger heard about Henry and Eddie. He remembered wondering what had happened to make their brothering so difficult, but after Eddie had begun, haltingly and with that sort of resentful anger that proceeds from deep pain, the gunslinger could have stopped him, could have told him: *Don't bother, Eddie. I understand everything.*

Except that wouldn't have helped Eddie. Eddie wasn't talking to help Henry because Henry was dead. He was talking to bury Henry for good. And to remind himself that although Henry was dead, he, Eddie, wasn't.

So the gunslinger listened and said nothing.

The gist was simple: Eddie believed he had stolen his brother's life. Henry also believed this. Henry might have believed it on his own or he might have believed it because he so frequently heard their mother lecturing Eddie on how much both she and Henry had sacrificed for him, so Eddie could be as safe as anyone could be in this jungle of a city, so he could be *happy*, as happy as anyone could be in this jungle of a city, so he wouldn't end up like his poor sister that he didn't even hardly remember but she had been so beautiful, God love her. She was with the angels, and that was undoubtedly a wonderful place to be, but she didn't want Eddie to be with the angels just yet, run over in the road by some crazy drunken driver like his sister or cut up by some crazy junkie kid for the twenty-five cents in his pocket and left with his guts running out all over the sidewalk, and because she didn't think *Eddie* wanted to be with the angels yet, he just better listen to what his big brother said and do what his big brother said to do and always remember that Henry was making a love-sacrifice.

Eddie told the gunslinger he doubted if his mother knew some of the things they had done—filching comic books from the candy store on Rincon Avenue or smoking cigarettes behind the Bonded Electroplate Factory on Cohoes Street.

Once they saw a Chevrolet with the keys in it and although Henry barely knew how to drive—he was sixteen then, Eddie eight—he had crammed his brother into the car and said they were going to New York City. Eddie was scared, crying, Henry scared too and mad at Eddie, telling him to shut up, telling him to stop being such a fuckin baby, he had ten bucks and Eddie had three or four, they could go to the movies all fuckin day and then catch a Pelham train and be back before their mother had time to put supper on the table and wonder where they were. But Eddie kept crying and near the Queensboro Bridge they saw a police car on a side street and although Eddie

was pretty sure the cop in it hadn't even been looking their way, he said *Yeah* when Henry asked him in a harsh, quavering voice if Eddie thought that bull had seen them. Henry turned white and pulled over so fast that he had almost amputated a fire hydrant. He was running down the block while Eddie, now in a panic himself, was still struggling with the unfamiliar doorhandle. Henry stopped, came back, and hauled Eddie out of the car. He also slapped him twice. Then they had walked—well, actually they *slunk*—all the way back to Brooklyn. It took them most of the day, and when their mother asked them why they looked so hot and sweaty and tired out, Henry said it was because he'd spent most of the day teaching Eddie how to go one-on-one on the basketball court at the playground around the block. Then some big kids came and they had to run. Their mother kissed Henry and beamed at Eddie. She asked him if he didn't have the bestest big brother in the world. Eddie agreed with her. This was honest agreement, too. He thought he did.

"He was as scared as I was that day," Eddie told Roland as they sat and watched the last of the day dwindle from the water, where soon the only light would be that reflected from the stars. "Scareder, really, because he thought that cop saw us and I knew he didn't. That's why he ran. But he came back. That's the important part. *He came back.*"

Roland said nothing.

"You see that, don't you?" Eddie was looking at Roland with harsh, questioning eyes.

"I see."

"He was always scared, but he always came back."

Roland thought it would have been better for Eddie, maybe better for both of them in the long run, if Henry had just kept showing his heels that day . . . or on one of the others. But people like Henry never did. People like Henry always came back, because people like Henry *did* know how to use. First they changed trust into need, then they changed need into a drug, and once that was done, they—what was Eddie's word for it?—*push*. Yes. They pushed it.

"I think I'll turn in," the gunslinger said.

The next day Eddie went on, but Roland already knew it all. Henry hadn't played sports in high school because Henry couldn't stay after for practice. Henry had to take care of Eddie. The fact that Henry was scrawny and uncoordinated and didn't much care for sports in the first place had nothing to do with it, of course; Henry would have made a *wonderful* baseball pitcher or one of those basketball jumpers, their mother assured them both time and again. Henry's grades were bad and he needed to repeat a number of subjects—but that wasn't because Henry was stupid; Eddie and Mrs. Dean both knew Henry was just as smart as lickety-split. But Henry had to spend the time he should have spent studying or doing homework taking care of Eddie (the fact that this usually took place in the Dean living room, with both boys sprawled on the sofa watching TV or wrestling around on the floor somehow seemed not to matter). The bad grades meant Henry hadn't been able to be accepted into anything but NYU, and they couldn't afford it because the bad grades precluded any scholarships, and then Henry got drafted and then it was Viet Nam, where Henry got most of his knee blown off, and the pain was bad, and the drug they gave him for it had a heavy morphine base, and when he was better they weaned him from the drug, only they didn't do such a good job because when Henry got back to New York there was still a monkey on his back, a hungry monkey waiting to be fed, and after a month or two he had gone out to see a man, and it had been about four months later, less than a month after their mother died, when Eddie first saw his brother snorting some white powder off a mirror. Eddie assumed it was coke. Turned out it was heroin. And if you traced it all the way back, whose fault was it?

Roland said nothing, but heard the voice of Cort in his mind: *Fault always lies in the same place, my fine babies: with him weak enough to lay blame.*

When he discovered the truth, Eddie had been shocked, then angry. Henry had responded not by promising to quit snorting but by telling Eddie he didn't blame him for being mad, he knew Nam had turned him into a worthless shitbag, he was weak, he would leave, that was the best thing, Eddie was right, the last thing he needed

was a filthy junkie around, messing up the place. He just hoped Eddie wouldn't blame him too much. He had gotten weak, he admitted it; something in Nam had made him weak, had rotted him out the same way the moisture rotted the laces of your sneakers and the elastic of your underwear. There was also something in Nam that apparently rotted out your heart, Henry told him tearily. He just hoped that Eddie would remember all the years he had tried to be strong.

For Eddie.

For Mom.

So Henry tried to leave. And Eddie, of course, couldn't let him. Eddie was consumed with guilt. Eddie had seen the scarred horror that had once been an unmarked leg, a knee that was now more Teflon than bone. They had a screaming match in the hall, Henry standing there in an old pair of khakis with his packed duffle bag in one hand and purple rings under his eyes, Eddie wearing nothing but a pair of yellowing jockey shorts, Henry saying you don't need me around, Eddie, I'm poison to you and I know it, and Eddie yelling back You ain't going nowhere, get your ass back inside, and that's how it went until Mrs. McGursky came out of *her* place and yelled *Go or stay, it's nothing to me, but you better decide one way or the other pretty quick or I'm calling the police.* Mrs. McGursky seemed about to add a few more admonishments, but just then she saw that Eddie was wearing nothing but a pair of skivvies. She added: *And you're not decent, Eddie Dean!* before popping back inside. It was like watching a Jack-in-the-box in reverse. Eddie looked at Henry. Henry looked at Eddie. *Look like Angel-Baby done put on a few pounds,* Henry said in a low voice, and then they were howling with laughter, holding onto each other and pounding each other and Henry came back inside and about two weeks later Eddie was snorting the stuff too and he couldn't understand why the hell he had made such a big deal out of it, after all, it was only *snorting*, shit, it got you off, and as Henry (who Eddie would eventually come to think of as the great sage and eminent junkie) said, in a world that was clearly going to hell head-first, what was so low about getting high?

Time passed. Eddie didn't say how much. The gunslinger didn't ask. He guessed that Eddie knew there were a thousand excuses for getting high but no reasons, and that he had kept his habit pretty well under control. And that Henry had also managed to keep *his* under control. Not as well as Eddie, but enough to keep from coming completely unravelled. Because whether or not Eddie understood the truth (down deep Roland believed Eddie did), Henry must have: their positions had reversed themselves. Now Eddie held Henry's hand crossing streets.

The day came when Eddie caught Henry not snorting but skin-popping. There had been another hysterical argument, an almost exact repeat of the first one, except it had been in Henry's bedroom. It ended in almost exactly the same way, with Henry weeping and offering that implacable, inarguable defense that was utter surrender, utter admission: Eddie was right, he wasn't fit to live, not fit to eat garbage from the gutter. He would go. Eddie would never have to see him again. He just hoped he would remember all the . . .

It faded into a drone that wasn't much different from the rocky sound of the breaking waves as they trudged up the beach. Roland knew the story and said nothing. It was *Eddie* who didn't know the story, an Eddie who was really clear-headed for the first time in maybe ten years or more. Eddie wasn't telling the story to Roland; Eddie was finally telling the story to himself.

That was all right. So far as the gunslinger could see, time was something they had a lot of. Talk was one way to fill it.

Eddie said he was haunted by Henry's knee, the twisted scar tissue up and down his leg (of course that was all healed now, Henry barely even limped . . . except when he and Eddie were quarrelling; then the limp always seemed to get worse); he was haunted by all the things Henry had given up for him, and haunted by something much more pragmatic: Henry wouldn't last out on the streets. He would be like a rabbit let loose in a jungle filled with tigers. On his own, Henry would wind up in jail or Bellevue before a week was out.

So he begged, and Henry finally did him the favor of consenting to stick around, and six months after that Eddie also had a golden arm. From that moment things had begun to move in the steady and

inevitable downward spiral which had ended with Eddie's trip to the Bahamas and Roland's sudden intervention in his life.

Another man, less pragmatic and more introspective than Roland, might have asked (to himself, if not right out loud), *Why this one? Why this man to start? Why a man who seems to promise weakness or strangeness or even outright doom?*

Not only did the gunslinger never ask the question; it never even formulated itself in his mind. Cuthbert would have asked; Cuthbert had questioned everything, had been poisoned with questions, had died with one in his mouth. Now they were gone, all gone. Cort's last gunslings, the thirteen survivors of a beginning class that had numbered fifty-six, were all dead. All dead but Roland. He was the last gunslinger, going steadily on in a world that had grown stale and sterile and empty.

Thirteen, he remembered Cort saying on the day before the Presentation Ceremonies. *This is an evil number*. And on the following day, for the first time in thirty years, Cort had not been present at the Ceremonies. His final crop of pupils had gone to his cottage to first kneel at his feet, presenting defenseless necks, then to rise and receive his congratulatory kiss and to allow him to load their guns for the first time. Nine weeks later, Cort was dead. Of poison, some said. Two years after his death, the final bloody civil war had begun. The red slaughter had reached the last bastion of civilization, light, and sanity, and had taken away what all of them had assumed was so strong with the casual ease of a wave taking a child's castle of sand.

So he was the last, and perhaps he had survived because the dark romance in his nature was upset by his practicality and simplicity. He understood that only three things mattered: mortality, *ka*, and the Tower.

Those were enough things to think about.

Eddie finished his tale around four o'clock on the third day of their northward journey up the featureless beach. The beach itself never seemed to change. If a sign of progress was wanted, it could only be obtained by looking left, to the east. There the jagged peaks of the mountains had begun to soften and slump a bit. It was possible that

if they went north far enough, the mountains would become rolling hills.

With his story told, Eddie lapsed into silence and they walked without speaking for a half an hour or longer. Eddie kept stealing little glances at him. Roland knew Eddie wasn't aware that he was picking these glances up; he was still too much in himself. Roland also knew what Eddie was waiting for: a response. Some kind of response. *Any* kind. Twice Eddie opened his mouth only to close it again. Finally he asked what the gunslinger had known he would ask.

"So? What do you think?"

"I think you're here."

Eddie stopped, fisted hands planted on his hips. "That's *all*? That's *it*?"

"That's all I know," the gunslinger replied. His missing fingers and toe throbbed and itched. He wished for some of the *astin* from Eddie's world.

"You don't have any opinion on what the hell it all *means*?"

The gunslinger might have held up his subtracted right hand and said, *Think about what this means, you silly idiot*, but it no more crossed his mind to say this than it had to ask why it was Eddie, out of all the people in all the universes that might exist. "It's *ka*," he said, facing Eddie patiently.

"What's *ka*?" Eddie's voice was truculent. "I never heard of it. Except if you say it twice you come out with the baby word for shit."

"I don't know about that," the gunslinger said. "Here it means duty, or destiny, or, in the vulgate, a place you must go."

Eddie managed to look dismayed, disgusted, and amused all at the same time. "Then say it twice, Roland, because words like that sound like shit to this kid."

The gunslinger shrugged. "I don't discuss philosophy. I don't study history. All I know is what's past is past, and what's ahead is ahead. The second is *ka*, and takes care of itself."

"Yeah?" Eddie looked northward. "Well all I see ahead is about nine billion miles of this same fucking beach. If *that's* what's ahead, *ka* and *kaka* are the same thing. We might have enough good shells

to pop five or six more of those lobster dudes, but then we're going to be down to chucking rocks at them. So where are we *going*?"

Roland *did* wonder briefly if this was a question Eddie had ever thought to ask his brother, but to ask such a question would only be an invitation to a lot of meaningless argument. So he only cocked a thumb northward and said, "There. To begin with."

Eddie looked and saw nothing but the same reach of shell- and rock-studded gray shingle. He looked back at Roland, about to scoff, saw the serene certainty on his face, and looked again. He squinted. He shielded the right side of his face from the westering sun with his right hand. He wanted desperately to see something, *anything*, shit, even a mirage would do, but there was nothing.

"Crap on me all you want to," Eddie said slowly, "but I say it's a goddam mean trick. I put my life on the line for you at Balazar's."

"I know you did." The gunslinger smiled—a rarity that lit his face like a momentary flash of sunlight on a dismal louring day. "That's why I've done nothing but square-deal you, Eddie. It's there. I saw it an hour ago. At first I thought it was only a mirage or wishful thinking, but it's there, all right."

Eddie looked again, looked until water ran from the corners of his eyes. At last he said, "I don't see anything up ahead but more beach. And I got twenty-twenty vision."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means if there was something there to see, I'd see it!" But Eddie wondered. Wondered how much further than his own the gunslinger's blue bullshooter's eyes could see. Maybe a little.

Maybe a *lot*.

"You'll see it," the gunslinger said.

"See *what*?"

"We won't get there today, but if you see as well as you say, you'll see it before the sun hits the water. Unless you just want to stand here chin-jawing, that is."

"*Ka*," Eddie said in a musing voice.

Roland nodded. "*Ka*."

"*Kaka*," Eddie said, and laughed. "Come on, Roland. Let's take a hike. And if I *don't* see anything by the time the sun hits the water,

you owe me a chicken dinner. Or a Big Mac. Or *anything* that isn't lobster."

"Come on."

They started walking again, and it was at least a full hour before the sun's lower arc touched the horizon when Eddie Dean began to see the shape in the distance—vague, shimmering, indefinable, but definitely *something*. Something *new*.

"Okay," he said. "I see it. You must have eyes like Superman."

"Who?"

"Never mind. You've got a really incredible case of culture lag, you know it?"

"What?"

Eddie laughed. "Never mind. What is it?"

"You'll see." The gunslinger started walking again before Eddie could ask anything else.

Twenty minutes later Eddie thought he *did* see. Fifteen minutes after that he was sure. The object on the beach was still two, maybe three miles away, but he knew what it was. A door, of course. Another door.

Neither of them slept well that night, and they were up and walking an hour before the sun cleared the eroding shapes of the mountains. They reached the door just as the morning sun's first rays, so sublime and so still, broke over them. Those rays lighted their stubbly cheeks like lamps. They made the gunslinger forty again, and Eddie no older than Roland had been when he went out to fight Cort with his hawk David as his weapon.

This door was exactly like the first, except for what was writ upon it:

THE LADY OF SHADOWS

"So," Eddie said softly, looking at the door which simply stood here with its hinges grounded in some unknown jamb between one world and another, one universe and another. It stood with its graven message, real as rock and strange as starlight.

"So," the gunslinger agreed.

"*Ka.*"

“Ka.”

“Here is where you draw the second of your three?”

“It seems so.”

The gunslinger knew what was in Eddie’s mind before Eddie knew it himself. He saw Eddie make his move before Eddie knew he was moving. He could have turned and broken Eddie’s arm in two places before Eddie knew it was happening, but he made no move. He let Eddie snake the revolver from his right holster. It was the first time in his life he had allowed one of his weapons to be taken from him without an offer of that weapon having first been made. Yet he made no move to stop it. He turned and looked at Eddie equably, even mildly.

Eddie’s face was livid, strained. His eyes showed starey whites all the way around the irises. He held the heavy revolver in both hands and still the muzzle rambled from side to side, centering, moving off, centering again and then moving off again.

“Open it,” he said.

“You’re being foolish,” the gunslinger said in the same mild voice. “Neither of us has any idea where that door goes. It needn’t open on your *universe*, let alone upon your world. For all either of us know, the Lady of Shadows might have eight eyes and nine arms, like Suvia. Even if it does open on your world, it might be on a time long before you were born or long after you would have died.”

Eddie smiled tightly. “Tell you what, Monty: I’m more than willing to trade the rubber chicken and the shitty seaside vacation for what’s behind Door #2.”

“I don’t understand y—”

“I know you don’t. It doesn’t matter. Just open the fucker.”

The gunslinger shook his head.

They stood in the dawn, the door casting its slanted shadow toward the ebbing sea.

“*Open it!*” Eddie cried. “I’m going with you! Don’t you get it? I’m going *with* you! That doesn’t mean I won’t come back. Maybe I will. I mean, *probably* I will. I guess I owe you that much. You been square-john with me down the line, don’t think I’m not aware of the fact. But while you get whoever this Shadow-Babe is, I’m gonna find

the nearest Chicken Delight and pick me up some take-out. I think the Thirty-Piece Family Pak should do for starters.”

“You stay here.”

“You think I don’t mean it?” Eddie was shrill now, close to the edge. The gunslinger could almost see him looking down into the drifty depths of his own damnation. Eddie thumbed back the revolver’s ancient hammer. The wind had fallen with the break of the day and the ebb of the tide, and the click of the hammer as Eddie brought it to full cock was very clear. “You just try me.”

“I think I will,” the gunslinger said.

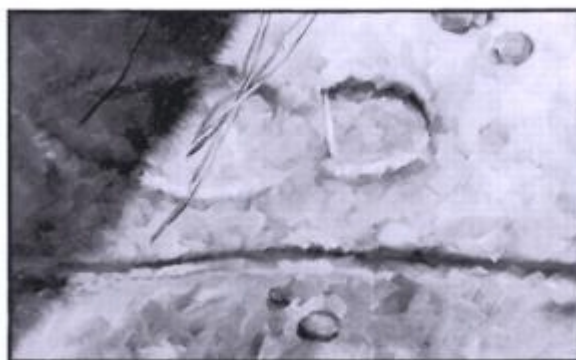
“I’ll shoot you!” Eddie screamed.

“*Ka,*” the gunslinger replied stolidly, and turned to the door. He was reaching for the knob, but his heart was waiting: waiting to see if he would live or die.

Ka.

THE

LADY OF SHADOWS



CHAPTER 1

Detta and Odetta

Stripped of jargon, what Adler said was this: the perfect schizophrenic—if there was such a person—would be a man or woman not only unaware of his other persona(e), but one unaware that anything at all was amiss in his or her life.

Adler should have met Detta Walker and Odetta Holmes.

1

“—last gunslinger,” Andrew said.

He had been talking for quite awhile, but Andrew always talked and Odetta usually just let it flow over her mind the way you let warm water flow over your hair and face in the shower. But this did more than catch her attention; it snagged it, as if on a thorn.

“I beg pardon?”

“Oh, it was just some column in the paper,” Andrew said. “I dunno who wrote it. I didn’t notice. One of those political fellas. Prob’ly you’d know, Miz Holmes. I loved him, and I cried the night he was elected—”

She smiled, touched in spite of herself. Andrew said his ceaseless chatter was something he couldn’t stop, wasn’t responsible for, that it was just the Irish in him coming out, and most of it was nothing—cluckings and chirrupings about relatives and friends she would never meet, half-baked political opinions, weird scientific commentary gleaned from any number of weird sources (among other things, Andrew was a firm believer in flying saucers, which he called *you-foes*)—but this touched her because she had also cried the night he was elected.

“But I didn’t cry when that son of a bitch—pardon my French, Miz Holmes—when that son of a bitch Oswald shot him, and I hadn’t

cried since, and it's been—what, two months?”

Three months and two days, she thought.

“Something like that, I guess.”

Andrew nodded. “Then I read this column—in *The Daily News*, it mighta been—yesterday, about how Johnson’s probably gonna do a pretty good job, but it won’t be the same. The guy said America had seen the passage of the world’s last gunslinger.”

“I don’t think John Kennedy was that at all,” Odetta said, and if her voice was sharper than the one Andrew was accustomed to hearing (which it must have been, because she saw his eyes give a startled blink in the rear-view mirror, a blink that was more like a wince), it was because she felt herself touched by this, too. It was absurd, but it was also a fact. There was something about that phrase—*America has seen the passage of the world’s last gunslinger*—that rang deeply in her mind. It was ugly, it was untrue—John Kennedy had been a peacemaker, not a leather-slapping Billy the Kid type, that was more in the Goldwater line—but it had also for some reason given her goosebumps.

“Well, the guy said there would be no shortage of shooters in the world,” Andrew went on, regarding her nervously in the rear-view mirror. “He mentioned Jack Ruby for one, and Castro, and this fellow in Haiti—”

“Duvalier,” she said. “Papa Doc.”

“Yeah, him, and Diem—”

“The Diem brothers are dead.”

“Well, he said Jack Kennedy was different, that’s all. He said he would draw, but only if someone weaker needed him to draw, and only if there was nothing else to do. He said Kennedy was savvy enough to know that sometimes talking don’t do no good. He said Kennedy knew if it’s foaming at the mouth you have to shoot it.”

His eyes continued to regard her apprehensively.

“Besides, it was just some column I read.”

The limo was gliding up Fifth Avenue now, headed toward Central Park West, the Cadillac emblem on the end of the hood cutting the frigid February air.

“Yes,” Odetta said mildly, and Andrew’s eyes relaxed a trifle. “I understand. I don’t agree, but I understand.”

You are a liar, a voice spoke up in her mind. This was a voice she heard quite often. She had even named it. It was the voice of The Goad. You understand perfectly and agree completely. Lie to Andrew if you feel it necessary, but for God’s sake don’t lie to yourself, woman.

Yet part of her protested, horrified. In a world which had become a nuclear powder keg upon which nearly a billion people now sat, it was a mistake—perhaps one of suicidal proportions—to believe there was a difference between good shooters and bad shooters. There were too many shaky hands holding lighters near too many fuses. This was no world for gunslingers. If there had ever been a time for them, it had passed.

Hadn’t it?

She closed her eyes briefly and rubbed at her temples. She could feel one of her headaches coming on. Sometimes they threatened, like an ominous buildup of thunderheads on a hot summer afternoon, and then blew away . . . as those ugly summer brews sometimes simply slipped away in one direction or another, to stomp their thunders and lightnings into the ground of some other place.

She thought, however, that this time the storm was going to happen. It would come complete with thunder, lightning, and hail the size of golf-balls.

The streetlights marching up Fifth Avenue seemed much too bright.

“So how was Oxford, Miz Holmes?” Andrew asked tentatively.

“Humid. February or not, it was very humid.” She paused, telling herself she wouldn’t say the words that were crowding up her throat like bile, that she would swallow them back down. To say them would be needlessly brutal. Andrew’s talk of the world’s last gunslinger had been just more of the man’s endless prattling. But on top of everything else it was just a bit too much and it came out anyway, what she had no business saying. Her voice sounded as calm and as resolute as ever, she supposed, but she was not fooled: she knew a blurt when she heard one. “The bail bondsman came very

promptly, of course; he had been notified in advance. They held onto us as long as they could nevertheless, and I held on as long as I could, but I guess they won that one, because I ended up wetting myself.” She saw Andrew’s eyes wince away again and she wanted to stop and couldn’t stop. “It’s what they want to teach you, you see. Partly because it frightens you, I suppose, and a frightened person may not come down to their precious Southland and bother them again. But I think most of them—even the dumb ones and they are by all means not all dumb—know the change will come in the end no matter what they do, and so they take the chance to degrade you while they still can. To teach you you *can* be degraded. You can swear before God, Christ, and the whole company of Saints that you will not, will not, *will not* soil yourself, but if they hold onto you long enough of course you do. The lesson is that you’re just an animal in a cage, no more than that, no better than that. Just an animal in a cage. So I wet myself. I can still smell dried urine and that damned holding cell. They think we are descended from the monkeys, you know. And that’s exactly what I smell like to myself right now.

“A monkey.”

She saw Andrew’s eyes in the rear-view mirror and was sorry for the way his eyes looked. Sometimes your urine wasn’t the only thing you couldn’t hold.

“I’m sorry, Miz Holmes.”

“No,” she said, rubbing at her temples again. “I am the one who is sorry. It’s been a trying three days, Andrew.”

“I should think so,” he said in a shocked old-maidish voice that made her laugh in spite of herself. But most of her wasn’t laughing. She thought she had known what she was getting into, that she had fully anticipated how bad it could get. She had been wrong.

A trying three days. Well, that was one way to put it. Another might be that her three days in Oxford, Mississippi had been a short season in hell. But there were some things you couldn’t say. Some things you would die before saying . . . unless you were called upon to testify to them before the Throne of God the Father Almighty, where, she supposed, even the truths that caused the hellish thunderstorms in that strange gray jelly between your ears (the

scientists said that gray jelly was nerveless, and if *that* wasn't a hoot and a half she didn't know what was) must be admitted.

"I just want to get home and bathe, bathe, bathe, and sleep, sleep, sleep. Then I reckon I will be as right as rain."

"Why, sure! That's just what you're going to be!" Andrew wanted to apologize for something, and this was as close as he could come. And beyond this he didn't want to risk further conversation. So the two of them rode in unaccustomed silence to the gray Victorian block of apartments on the corner of Fifth and Central Park South, a very exclusive gray Victorian block of apartments, and she supposed that made her a blockbuster, and she *knew* there were people in those poshy-poshy flats who would not speak to her unless they absolutely had to, and she didn't really care. Besides, she was above them, and they *knew* she was above them. It had occurred to her on more than one occasion that it must have galled some of them mightily, knowing there was a nigger living in the penthouse apartment of this fine staid old building where once the only black hands allowed had been clad in white gloves or perhaps the thin black leather ones of a chauffeur. She hoped it *did* gall them mightily, and scolded herself for being mean, for being *unchristian*, but she *did* wish it, she hadn't been able to stop the piss pouring into the crotch of her fine silk imported underwear and she didn't seem to be able to stop this other flood of piss, either. It was mean, it was unchristian, and almost as bad—no, *worse*, at least as far as the Movement was concerned, it was counterproductive. They were going to win the rights they needed to win, and probably this year: Johnson, mindful of the legacy which had been left him by the slain President (and perhaps hoping to put another nail in the coffin of Barry Goldwater), would do more than oversee the passage of the Civil Rights Act; if necessary he would *ram* it into law. So it was important to minimize the scarring and the hurt. There was more work to be done. Hate would not help do that work. Hate would, in fact, hinder it.

But sometimes you went on hating just the same.

Oxford Town had taught her that, too.

Detta Walker had absolutely no interest in the Movement and much more modest digs. She lived in the loft of a peeling Greenwich Village apartment building. Odetta didn't know about the loft and Detta didn't know about the penthouse and the only one left who suspected something was not quite right was Andrew Feeny, the chauffeur. He had begun working for Odetta's father when Odetta was fourteen and Detta Walker hardly existed at all.

Sometimes Odetta disappeared. These disappearances might be a matter of hours or of days. Last summer she had disappeared for three weeks and Andrew had been ready to call the police when Odetta called *him* one evening and asked him to bring the car around at ten the next day—she planned to do some shopping, she said.

It trembled on his lips to cry out *Miz Holmes! Where have you been?* But he had asked this before and had received only puzzled stares—*truly* puzzled stares, he was sure—in return. *Right here*, she would say. *Why, right here, Andrew—you've been driving me two or three places every day, haven't you? You aren't starting to go a little mushy in the head, are you?* Then she would laugh and if she was feeling especially good (as she often seemed to feel after her disappearances), she would pinch his cheek.

"Very good, Miz Holmes," he had said. "Ten it is."

That scary time she had been gone for three weeks, Andrew had put down the phone, closed his eyes, and said a quick prayer to the Blessed Virgin for Miz Holmes's safe return. Then he had rung Howard, the doorman at her building.

"What time did she come in?"

"Just about twenty minutes ago," Howard said.

"Who brought her?"

"Dunno. You know how it is. Different car every time. Sometimes they park around the block and I don't see 'em at all, don't even know she's back until I hear the buzzer and look out and see it's her." Howard paused, then added: "She's got one hell of a bruise on her cheek."

Howard had been right. It sure had been one hell of a bruise, and now it was getting better. Andrew didn't like to think what it might have looked like when it was fresh. Miz Holmes appeared promptly at ten the next morning, wearing a silk sundress with spaghetti-thin straps (this had been late July), and by then the bruise had started to yellow. She had made only a perfunctory effort to cover it with make-up, as if knowing that too much effort to cover it would only draw further attention to it.

"How did you get *that*, Miz Holmes?" he asked.

She laughed merrily. "You know me, Andrew—clumsy as ever. My hand slipped on the grab-handle while I was getting out of the tub yesterday—I was in a hurry to catch the national news. I fell and banged the side of my face." She gauged *his* face. "You're getting ready to start blithering about doctors and examinations, aren't you? Don't bother answering; after all these years I can read you like a book. I won't go, so you needn't bother asking. I'm just as fine as paint. Onward, Andrew! I intend to buy half of Saks, all of Gimbels, and eat everything at Four Seasons in between."

"Yes, Miz Holmes," he had said, and smiled. It was a forced smile, and forcing it was not easy. That bruise wasn't a *day* old; it was a week old, at least . . . and he knew better, anyway, didn't he? He had called her every night at seven o'clock for the last week, because if there was one time when you could catch Miz Holmes in her place, it was when the *Huntley-Brinkley Report* came on. A regular junkie for her news was Miz Holmes. He had done it every night, that was, except last night. Then he had gone over and wheedled the passkey from Howard. A conviction had been growing on him steadily that she had had just the sort of accident she had described . . . only instead of getting a bruise or a broken bone, she had died, died alone, and was lying up there dead right now. He had let himself in, heart thumping, feeling like a cat in a dark room criss-crossed with piano wires. Only there had been nothing to be nervous about. There was a butter-dish on the kitchen counter, and although the butter had been covered it had been out long enough to be growing a good crop of mould. He got there at ten minutes of seven and had left by five after. In the course of his quick examination of the apartment, he

had glanced into the bathroom. The tub had been dry, the towels neatly—even austerely—arrayed, the room's many grab-handles polished to a bright steel gleam that was unspotted with water.

He knew the accident she had described had not happened.

But Andrew had not believed she was lying, either. She had *believed* what she had told him.

He looked in the rear-view mirror again and saw her rubbing her temples lightly with the tips of her fingers. He didn't like it. He had seen her do that too many times before one of her disappearances.

3

Andrew left the motor running so she could have the benefit of the heater, then went around to the trunk. He looked at her two suitcases with another wince. They looked as if petulant men with small minds and large bodies had kicked them relentlessly back and forth, damaging the bags in a way they did not quite dare damage Miz Holmes herself—the way they might have damaged *him*, for instance, if he had been there. It wasn't just that she was a woman; she was a nigger, an uppity northern nigger messing where she had no business messing, and they probably figured a woman like that deserved just what she got. Thing was, she was also a *rich* nigger. Thing was, she was almost as well-known to the American public as Medgar Evers or Martin Luther King. Thing was, she'd gotten her rich nigger face on the cover of *Time* magazine and it was a little harder to get away with sticking someone like that in the 'toolies and then saying *What? No sir, boss, we sho dint see nobody looked like that down here, did we, boys?* Thing was, it was a little harder to work yourself up to hurting a woman who was the only heir to Holmes Dental Industries when there were twelve Holmes plants in the sunny South, one of them just one county over from Oxford Town, Oxford Town.

So they'd done to her suitcases what they didn't dare do to her.

He looked at these mute indications of her stay in Oxford Town with shame and fury and love, emotions as mute as the scars on the

luggage that had gone away looking smart and had come back looking dumb and thumped. He looked, temporarily unable to move, and his breath puffed out on the frosty air.

Howard was coming out to help, but Andrew paused a moment longer before grasping the handles of the cases. *Who are you, Miz Holmes? Who are you really? Where do you go sometimes, and what do you do that seems so bad that you have to make up a false history of the missing hours or days even to yourself?* And he thought something else in the moment before Howard arrived, something weirdly apt: *Where's the rest of you?*

You want to quit thinking like that. If anyone around here was going to do any thinking like that it would be Miz Holmes, but she doesn't and so you don't need to, either.

Andrew lifted the bags out of the trunk and handed them to Howard, who asked in a low voice: "Is she all right?"

"I think so," Andrew replied, also pitching his voice low. "Just tired is all. Tired all the way down to her roots."

Howard nodded, took the battered suitcases, and started back inside. He paused only long enough to tip his cap to Odetta Holmes—who was almost invisible behind the smoked glass windows—in a soft and respectful salute.

When he was gone, Andrew took out the collapsed stainless steel scaffolding at the bottom of the trunk and began to unfold it. It was a wheelchair.

Since August 19th, 1959, some five and a half years before, the part of Odetta Holmes from the knees down had been as missing as those blank hours and days.

4

Before the subway incident, Detta Walker had only been conscious a few times—these were like coral islands which look isolated to one above them but are, in fact, only nodes in the spine of a long archipelago which is mostly underwater. Odetta suspected Detta not at all, and Detta had no idea that there was such a person as

Odetta . . . but Detta at least had a clear understanding that *something* was wrong, that someone was fucking with her life. Odetta's imagination novelized all sorts of things which had happened when Detta was in charge of her body; Detta was not so clever. She *thought* she remembered things, *some* things, at least, but a lot of the time she didn't.

Detta was at least partially aware of the *blanks*.

She could remember the china plate. She could remember that. She could remember slipping it into the pocket of her dress, looking over her shoulder all the while to make sure the Blue Woman wasn't there, peeking. She had to make sure because the china plate belonged to the Blue Woman. The china plate was, Detta understood in some vague way, a *forspecial*. Detta took it for that why. Detta remembered taking it to a place she knew (although she didn't know how she knew) as The Drawers, a smoking trash-littered hole in the earth where she had once seen a burning baby with plastic skin. She remembered putting the plate carefully down on the gravelly ground and then starting to step on it and stopping, remembered taking off her plain cotton panties and putting them into the pocket where the plate had been, and then carefully slipping the first finger of her left hand carefully against the cut in her at the place where Old Stupid God had joined her and all other girlsandwomen imperfectly, but *something* about that place must be right, because she remembered the jolt, remembered wanting to press, remembered not pressing, remembered how delicious her vagina had been naked, without the cotton panties in the way of it and the world, and she had not pressed, not until her shoe pressed, her black patent leather shoe, not until her shoe pressed down on the plate, *then* she pressed on the cut with her finger the way she was pressing on the Blue Woman's *forspecial* china plate with her foot, she remembered the way the black patent leather shoe covered the delicate blue webbing on the edge of the plate, she remembered the *press*, yes, she remembered pressing in The Drawers, pressing with finger and foot, remembered the delicious promise of finger and cut, remembered that when the plate snapped with a bitter brittle snap a similar brittle pleasure had skewered upward from that cut into her

guts like an arrow, she remembered the cry which had broken from her lips, an unpleasant cawing like the sound of a crow scared up from a cornpatch, she could remember staring dully at the fragments of the plate and then taking the plain white cotton panties slowly out of her dress pocket and putting them on again, *step-ins*, so she had heard them called in some time unhoused in memory and drifting loose like turves on a floodtide, *step-ins*, good, because first you stepped out to do your business and then you stepped back in, first one shiny patent leather shoe and then the other, good, panties were good, she could remember drawing them up her legs so clearly, drawing them past her knees, a scab on the left one almost ready to fall off and leave clean pink new baby skin, yes, she could remember so clearly it might not have been a week ago or yesterday but only one single moment ago, she could remember how the waistband had reached the hem of her party dress, the clear contrast of white cotton against brown skin, like cream, yes, like that, cream from a pitcher caught suspended over coffee, the texture, the panties disappearing under the hem of the dress, except then the dress was burnt orange and the panties were not going up but down but they were still white but not cotton, they were nylon, cheap see-through nylon panties, cheap in more ways than one, and she remembered stepping out of them, she remembered how they glimmered on the floormat of the '46 Dodge DeSoto, yes, how white they were, how cheap they were, not anything dignified like underwear but cheap panties, the girl was cheap and it was good to be cheap, good to be on sale, to be on the block not even like a whore but like a good breedsow; she remembered no round china plate but the round white face of a boy, some surprised drunk fraternity boy, he was no china plate but his face was as *round* as the Blue Woman's china plate had been, and there was webbing on his cheeks, and this webbing looked as blue as the webbing on the Blue Woman's *forspecial* china plate had been, but that was only because the neon was red, the neon was garish, in the dark the neon from the roadhouse sign made the spreading blood from the places on his cheeks where she had clawed him *look* blue, and he had said *Why did you why did you why did you do*, and then he unrolled the

window so he could get his face outside to puke and she remembered hearing Dodie Stevens on the jukebox, singing about tan shoes with pink shoelaces and a big Panama with a purple hatband, she remembered the sound of his puking was like gravel in a cement mixer, and his penis, which moments before had been a livid exclamation point rising from the tufted tangle of his pubic hair, was collapsing into a weak white question mark; she remembered the hoarse gravel sounds of his vomiting stopped and then started again and she thought *Well I guess he ain't made enough to lay this foundation yet* and laughing and pressing her finger (which now came equipped with a long shaped nail) against her vagina which was bare but no longer bare because it was overgrown with its own coarse briared tangle, and there had been the same brittle breaking snap inside her, and it was still as much pain as it was pleasure (but better, far better, than nothing at all), and then he was grabbing blindly for her and saying in a hurt breaking tone *Oh you goddamned nigger cunt* and she went on laughing just the same, dodging him easily and snatching up her panties and opening the door on her side of the car, feeling the last blind thud of his fingers on the back of her blouse as she ran into a May night that was redolent of early honeysuckle, red-pink neon light stuttering off the gravel of some postwar parking lot, stuffing her panties, her cheap slick nylon panties not into the pocket of her dress but into a purse jumbled with a teenager's cheerful conglomeration of cosmetics, she was running, the light was stuttering, and then she was twenty-three and it was not panties but a rayon scarf, and she was casually slipping it into her purse as she walked along a counter in the Nice Notions section of Macy's—a scarf which sold at that time for \$1.99.

Cheap.

Cheap like the white nylon panties.

Cheap.

Like her.

The body she inhabited was that of a woman who had inherited millions, but that was not known and didn't matter—the scarf was white, the edging blue, and there was that same little breaking sense of pleasure as she sat in the back seat of the taxi, and, oblivious of

the driver, held the scarf in one hand, looking at it fixedly, while her other hand crept up under her tweed skirt and beneath the leg-band of her white panties, and that one long dark finger took care of the business that needed to be taken care of in a single merciless stroke.

So sometimes she wondered, in a distracted sort of way, where she was when she wasn't *here*, but mostly her needs were too sudden and pressing for any extended contemplation, and she simply fulfilled what needed to be fulfilled, did what needed to be done.

Roland would have understood.

5

Odetta could have taken a limo everywhere, even in 1959—although her father was still alive and she was not as fabulously rich as she would become when he died in 1962, the money held in trust for her had become hers on her twenty-fifth birthday, and she could do pretty much as she liked. But she cared very little for a phrase one of the conservative columnists had coined a year or two before—the phrase was “limousine liberal,” and she was young enough not to want to be seen as one even if she really was one. Not young enough (or stupid enough!) to believe that a few pairs of faded jeans and the khaki shirts she habitually wore in any real way changed her essential status, or riding the bus or the subway when she could have used the car (but she had been self-involved enough not to see Andrew's hurt and deep puzzlement; he liked her and thought it must be some sort of personal rejection), but young enough to still believe that gesture could sometimes overcome (or at least upset) truth.

On the night of August 19th, 1959, she paid for the gesture with half her legs . . . and half her mind.

6

Odetta had been first tugged, then pulled, and finally caught up in the swell which would eventually turn into a tidal wave. In 1957, when she became involved, the thing which eventually became known as the Movement had no name. She knew some of the background, knew the struggle for equality had gone on not since the Emancipation Proclamation but almost since the first boatload of slaves had been brought to America (to Georgia, in fact, the colony the British founded to get rid of their criminals and debtors), but for Odetta it always seemed to begin in the same place, with the same three words:

I'm not movin.

The place had been a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and the words had been spoken by a black woman named Rosa Lee Parks, and the place from which Rosa Lee Parks was not movin was from the front of the city bus to the back of the city bus, which was, of course, the Jim Crow part of the city bus. Much later, Odetta would sing "We Shall Not Be Moved" with the rest of them, and it always made her think of Rosa Lee Parks, and she never sang it without a sense of shame. It was so easy to sing *we* with your arms linked to the arms of a whole crowd; that was easy even for a woman with no legs. So easy to sing *we*, so easy to *be we*. There had been no *we* on that bus, that bus that must have stank of ancient leather and years of cigar and cigarette smoke, that bus with the curved ad cards saying things like LUCKY STRIKE L.S.M.F.T. and ATTEND THE CHURCH OF YOUR CHOICE FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE and DRINK OVALTINE! YOU'LL SEE WHAT WE MEAN! and CHESTERFIELD, TWENTY-ONE GREAT TOBACCOS MAKE TWENTY WONDERFUL SMOKES, no *we* under the disbelieving gazes of the motorman, the white passengers among whom she sat, the equally disbelieving stares of the blacks at the back.

No *we*.

No marching thousands.

Only Rosa Lee Parks starting a tidal wave with three words: *I'm not movin.*

Odetta would think *If I could do something like that—if I could be that brave—I think I could be happy for the rest of my life. But that sort of courage is not in me.*

She had read of the Parks incident, but with little interest at first. That came little by little. It was hard to say exactly when or how her imagination had been caught and fired by that at first almost soundless racequake which had begun to shake the south.

A year or so later a young man she was dating more or less regularly began taking her down to the Village, where some of the young (and mostly white) folk-singers who performed there had added some new and startling songs to their repertoire—suddenly, in addition to all those old wheezes about how John Henry had taken his hammer and outraced the new steam-hammer (killing himself in the process, lawd, lawd) and how Bar'bry Allen had cruelly rejected her lovesick young suitor (and ended up dying of shame, lawd, lawd), there were songs about how it felt to be down and out and ignored in the city, how it felt to be turned away from a job you could do because your skin was the wrong color, how it felt to be taken into a jail cell and whipped by Mr. Charlie because your skin was dark and you had dared, lawd, lawd, to sit in the white folks' section of the lunch-counter at an F. W. Woolworth's in Montgomery, Alabama.

Absurdly or not, it was only then that she had become curious about her own parents, and *their* parents, and *their* parents before them. She would never read *Roots*—she was in another world and time long before that book was written, perhaps even thought of, by Alex Haley, but it was at this absurdly late time in her life when it first dawned upon her that not so many generations back her progenitors had been taken in chains by white men. Surely the *fact* had occurred to her before, but only as a piece of information with no real temperature gradient, like an equation, never as something which bore intimately upon her own life.

Odetta totted up what she knew, and was appalled by the smallness of the sum. She knew her mother had been born in Odetta, Arkansas, the town for which she (the only child) had been named. She knew her father had been a small-town dentist who had invented and patented a capping process which had lain dormant and unremarked for ten years and which had then, suddenly, made him a moderately wealthy man. She knew that he had developed a number of other dental processes during the ten years before and

the four years after the influx of wealth, most of them either orthodontic or cosmetic in nature, and that, shortly after moving to New York with his wife and daughter (who had been born four years after the original patent had been secured), he had founded a company called Holmes Dental Industries, which was now to teeth what Squibb was to antibiotics.

But when she asked him what life had been like during all the years between—the years when she hadn't been there, and the years when she had, her father wouldn't tell her. He would say all sorts of things, but he wouldn't *tell* her anything. He closed that part of himself off to her. Once her ma, Alice—he called her ma or sometimes Allie if he'd had a few or was feeling good—said, "Tell her about the time those men shot at you when you drove the Ford through the covered bridge, Dan," and he gave Odetta's ma such a gray and forbidding look that her ma, always something of a sparrow, had shrunk back in her seat and said no more.

Odetta had tried her mother once or twice alone after that night, but to no avail. If she had tried before, she might have gotten something, but because he wouldn't speak, she wouldn't speak either—and to him, she realized, the past—those relatives, those red dirt roads, those stores, those dirt floor cabins with glassless windows ungraced by a single simple curtsey of a curtain, those incidents of hurt and harassment, those neighbor children who went dressed in smocks which had begun life as flour sacks—all of that was for him buried away like dead teeth beneath perfect blinding white caps. He would not speak, perhaps *could* not, had perhaps willingly afflicted himself with a selective amnesia; the capped teeth was their life in the Greymarl Apartments on Central Park South. All else was hidden beneath that impervious outer cover. His past was so well-protected that there had been no gap to slide through, no way past that perfect capped barrier and into the throat of revelation.

Detta knew things, but *Detta* didn't know Odetta and Odetta didn't know *Detta*, and so the teeth lay as smooth and closed as a redan gate there, also.

She had some of her mother's shyness in her as well as her father's unblinking (if unspoken) toughness, and the only time she

had dared pursue him further on the subject, to suggest that what he was denying her was a deserved trust fund never promised and apparently never to mature, had been one night in his library. He had shaken his *Wall Street Journal* carefully, closed it, folded it, and laid it aside on the deal table beside the standing lamp. He had removed his rimless steel spectacles and had laid them on top of the paper. Then he had looked at her, a thin black man, thin almost to the point of emaciation, tightly kinked gray hair now drawing rapidly away from the deepening hollows of his temples where tender clocksprings of veins pulsed steadily, and he had said only, *I don't talk about that part of my life, Odetta, or think about it. It would be pointless. The world has moved on since then.*

Roland would have understood.

7

When Roland opened the door with the words THE LADY OF THE SHADOWS written upon it, he saw things he did not understand at all—but he understood they didn't matter.

It was Eddie Dean's world, but beyond that it was only a confusion of lights, people and objects—more objects than he had ever seen in his life. Lady-things, from the look of them, and apparently for sale. Some under glass, some arranged in tempting piles and displays. None of it mattered any more than the movement as that world flowed past the edges of the doorway before them. The doorway was the Lady's eyes. He was looking through them just as he had looked through Eddie's eyes when Eddie had moved up the aisle of the sky-carriage.

Eddie, on the other hand, was thunderstruck. The revolver in his hand trembled and dropped a little. The gunslinger could have taken it from him easily but did not. He only stood quietly. It was a trick he had learned a long time ago.

Now the view through the doorway made one of those turns the gunslinger found so dizzying—but Eddie found this same abrupt swoop oddly comforting. Roland had never seen a movie. Eddie had

seen thousands, and what he was looking at was like one of those moving point-of-view shots they did in ones like *Halloween* and *The Shining*. He even knew what they called the gadget they did it with. Steadicam. That was it.

“*Star Wars*, too,” he muttered. “Death Star. That fuckin crack, remember?”

Roland looked at him and said nothing.

Hands—dark brown hands—entered what Roland saw as a doorway and what Eddie was already starting to think of as some sort of magic movie screen . . . a movie screen which, under the right circumstances, you might be able to walk into the way that guy had just walked *out* of the screen and into the real world in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. Bitchin movie.

Eddie hadn’t realized how bitchin until just now.

Except that movie hadn’t been made yet on the other side of the door he was looking through. It was New York, okay—somehow the very sound of the taxi-cab horns, as mute and faint as they were—proclaimed that—and it was some New York department store he had been in at one time or another, but it was . . . was . . .

“It’s older,” he muttered.

“Before your when?” the gunslinger asked.

Eddie looked at him and laughed shortly. “Yeah. If you want to put it that way, yeah.”

“Hello, Miss Walker,” a tentative voice said. The view in the doorway rose so suddenly that even Eddie was a bit dizzied and he saw a saleswoman who obviously knew the owner of the black hands—knew her and either didn’t like her or feared her. Or both. “Help you today?”

“This one.” The owner of the black hands held up a white scarf with a bright blue edge. “Don’t bother to wrap it up, babe, just stick it in a bag.”

“Cash or ch—”

“Cash, it’s always cash, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s fine, Miss Walker.”

“I’m so glad you approve, dear.”

There was a little grimace on the salesgirl's face—Eddie just caught it as she turned away. Maybe it was something as simple as being talked to that way by a woman the salesgirl considered an “uppity nigger” (again it was more his experience in movie theaters than any knowledge of history or even life on the streets as he had lived it that caused this thought, because this was like watching a movie either set or made in the '60s, something like that one with Sidney Steiger and Rod Poitier, *In the Heat of the Night*), but it could also be something even simpler: Roland's Lady of the Shadows was, black or white, one rude bitch.

And it didn't really matter, did it? None of it made a damned bit of difference. He cared about one thing and one thing only and that was getting the fuck *out*.

That was New York, he could almost *smell* New York.

And New York meant smack.

He could almost smell that, too.

Except there was a hitch, wasn't there?

One big motherfucker of a hitch.

8

Roland watched Eddie carefully, and although he could have killed him six times over at almost any time he wanted, he had elected to remain still and silent and let Eddie work the situation out for himself. Eddie was a lot of things, and a lot of them were not nice (as a fellow who had consciously let a child drop to his death, the gunslinger knew the difference between nice and not quite well), but one thing Eddie wasn't was stupid.

He was a smart kid.

He would figure it out.

So he did.

He looked back at Roland, smiled without showing his teeth, twirled the gunslinger's revolver once on his finger, clumsily, burlesquing a show-shooter's fancy coda, and then he held it out to Roland, butt first.

“This thing might as well be a piece of shit for all the good it can do me, isn’t that right?”

You can talk bright when you want to, Roland thought. *Why do you so often choose to talk stupid, Eddie? Is it because you think that’s the way they talked in the place where your brother went with his guns?*

“Isn’t that right?” Eddie repeated.

Roland nodded.

“If I *had* plugged you, what would have happened to that door?”

“I don’t know. I suppose the only way to find out would be to try it and see.”

“Well, what do you *think* would happen?”

“I think it would disappear.”

Eddie nodded. That was what he thought, too. Poof! Gone like magic! Now ya see it, my friends, now ya don’t. It was really no different than what would happen if the projectionist in a movie-theater were to draw a six-shooter and plug the projector, was it?

If you shot the projector, the movie stopped.

Eddie didn’t want the picture to stop.

Eddie wanted his money’s worth.

“You can go through by yourself,” Eddie said slowly.

“Yes.”

“Sort of.”

“Yes.”

“You wind up in her head. Like you wound up in mine.”

“Yes.”

“So you can hitchhike into my world, but that’s all.”

Roland said nothing. *Hitchhike* was one of the words Eddie sometimes used that he didn’t exactly understand . . . but he caught the drift.

“But you *could* go through in your body. Like at Balazar’s.” He was talking out loud but really talking to himself. “Except you’d need me for that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then take me with you.”

The gunslinger opened his mouth, but Eddie was already rushing on.

“Not now, I don’t mean now,” he said. “I know it would cause a riot or some goddam thing if we just . . . popped out over there.” He laughed rather wildly. “Like a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat, except without any hat, sure I did. We’ll wait until she’s alone, and—”

“No.”

“I’ll come back with you,” Eddie said. “I swear it, Roland. I mean, I know you got a job to do, and I know I’m a part of it. I know you saved my ass at Customs, but I think I saved yours at Balazar’s—now what do you think?”

“I think you did,” Roland said. He remembered the way Eddie had risen up from behind the desk, regardless of the risk, and felt an instant of doubt.

But only an instant.

“So? Peter pays Paul. One hand washes the other. All I want to do is go back for a few hours. Grab some take-out chicken, maybe a box of Dunkin Donuts.” Eddie nodded toward the doorway, where things had begun to move again. “So what do you say?”

“No,” the gunslinger said, but for a moment he was hardly thinking about Eddie. That movement up the aisle—the Lady, whoever she was, wasn’t moving the way an ordinary person moved—wasn’t moving, for instance, the way Eddie had moved when Roland looked through his eyes, or (now that he stopped to think of it, which he never had before, any more than he had ever stopped and really noticed the constant presence of his own nose in the lower range of his peripheral vision) the way he moved himself. When one walked, vision became a mild pendulum: left leg, right leg, left leg, right leg, the world rocking back and forth so mildly and gently that after awhile—shortly after you began to walk, he supposed—you simply ignored it. There was none of that pendulum movement in the Lady’s walk—she simple moved smoothly up the aisle, as if riding along tracks. Ironically, Eddie had had this same perception . . . only to Eddie it had looked like a Steadicam shot. He had found this perception comforting because it was familiar.

To Roland it was alien . . . but then Eddie was breaking in, his voice shrill.

“Well why not? Just why the fuck not?”

“Because you don’t want chicken,” the gunslinger said. “I know what you call the things you want, Eddie. You want to ‘fix.’ You want to ‘score.’ ”

“So what?” Eddie cried—almost shrieked. “So what if I do? I said I’d come back with you! You got my promise! I mean, you got my fuckin PROMISE! What else do you want? You want me to swear on my mother’s name? Okay, I swear on my mother’s name! You want me to swear on my brother Henry’s name? All right, I swear! I swear! I SWEAR!”

Enrico Balazar would have told him, but the gunslinger didn’t need the likes of Balazar to tell him this one fact of life: Never trust a junkie.

Roland nodded toward the door. “Until after the Tower, at least, that part of your life is done. After that I don’t care. After that you’re free to go to hell in your own way. Until then I need you.”

“Oh you fuckin shitass liar,” Eddie said softly. There was no audible emotion in his voice, but the gunslinger saw the glisten of tears in his eyes. Roland said nothing. “You know there ain’t gonna be no after, not for me, not for her, or whoever the Christ this third guy is. Probably not for you, either—you look as fuckin wasted as Henry did at his worst. If we don’t die on the way to your Tower we’ll sure as shit die when we get there *so why are you lying to me?*”

The gunslinger felt a dull species of shame but only repeated: “At least for now, that part of your life is done.”

“Yeah?” Eddie said. “Well, I got some news for you, Roland. I know what’s gonna happen to your *real* body when you go through there and inside of her. I know because I saw it before. I don’t need your guns. I got you by that fabled place where the short hairs grow, my friend. You can even turn her head the way you turned mine and watch what I do to the rest of you while you’re nothing but your goddam *ka*. I’d like to wait until nightfall, and drag you down by the water. Then you could watch the lobsters chow up on the rest of you. But you might be in too much of a hurry for that.”

Eddie paused. The graty breaking of the waves and the steady hollow conch of the wind both seemed very loud.

“So I think I’ll just use your knife to cut your throat.”

“And close that door forever?”

“You say that part of my life is done. You don’t just mean smack, either. You mean New York, America, my time, *everything*. If that’s how it is, I want this part done, too. The scenery sucks and the company stinks. There are times, Roland, when you make Jimmy Swaggart look almost sane.”

“There are great wonders ahead,” Roland said. “Great adventures. More than that, there is a quest to course upon, and a chance to redeem your honor. There’s something else, too. You could be a gunslinger. I needn’t be the last after all. It’s in you, Eddie. I see it. I *feel* it.”

Eddie laughed, although now the tears were coursing down his cheeks. “Oh, wonderful. *Wonderful!* Just what I need! My brother Henry. *He* was a gunslinger. In a place called Viet Nam, that was. It was great for him. You should have seen him when he was on a serious nod, Roland. He couldn’t find his way to the fuckin bathroom without help. If there wasn’t any help handy, he just sat there and watched *Big Time Wrestling* and did it in his fuckin pants. It’s great to be a gunslinger. I can see that. My brother was a dooper and you’re out of your fucking gourd.”

“Perhaps your brother was a man with no clear idea of honor.”

“Maybe not. We didn’t always get a real clear picture of what that was in the Projects. It was just a word you used after Your if you happened to get caught smoking reefer or lifting the spinners off some guy’s T-Bird and got ho’ed up in court for it.”

Eddie was crying harder now, but he was laughing, too.

“Your friends, now. This guy you talk about in your sleep, for instance, this dude Cuthbert—”

The gunslinger started in spite of himself. Not all his long years of training could stay that start.

“Did *they* get this stuff you’re talking about like a goddam Marine recruiting sergeant? Adventure, quests, honor?”

“They understood honor, yes,” Roland said slowly, thinking of all the vanished others.

“Did it get them any further than gunslinging got my brother?”

The gunslinger said nothing.

“I know you,” Eddie said. “I seen lots of guys like you. You’re just another kook singing ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ with a flag in one hand and a gun in the other. I don’t want no honor. I just want a chicken dinner and fix. In that order. So I’m telling you: go on through. You can. But the minute you’re gone, I’m gonna kill the rest of you.”

The gunslinger said nothing.

Eddie smiled crookedly and brushed the tears from his cheeks with the backs of his hands. “You want to know what we call this back home?”

“What?”

“A Mexican stand-off.”

For a moment they only looked at each other, and then Roland looked sharply into the doorway. They had both been partially aware—Roland rather more than Eddie—that there had been another of those swerves, this time to the left. Here was an array of sparkling jewelry. Some was under protective glass but because most wasn’t, the gunslinger supposed it was trumpery stuff . . . what Eddie would have called costume jewelry. The dark brown hands examined a few things in what seemed an only cursory manner, and then another salesgirl appeared. There had been some conversation which neither of them really noticed, and the Lady (some Lady, Eddie thought) asked to see something else. The salesgirl went away, and that was when Roland’s eyes swung sharply back.

The brown hands reappeared, only now they held a purse. It opened. And suddenly the hands were scooping things—seemingly, almost certainly, at random—into the purse.

“Well, you’re collecting quite a crew, Roland,” Eddie said, bitterly amused. “First you got your basic white junkie, and then you got your basic black shoplif—”

But Roland was already moving toward the doorway between the worlds, moving swiftly, not looking at Eddie at all.

“I mean it!” Eddie screamed. “You go through and I’ll cut your throat, I’ll cut your fucking thr—”

Before he could finish, the gunslinger was gone. All that was left of him was his limp, breathing body lying upon the beach.

For a moment Eddie only stood there, unable to believe that Roland had done it, had really gone ahead and done this idiotic thing in spite of his promise—his sincere fucking *guarantee*, as far as that went—of what the consequences would be.

He stood for a moment, eyes rolling like the eyes of a frightened horse at the onset of a thunderstorm . . . except of course there was no thunderstorm, except for the one in the head.

All right. All right, goddammit.

There might only be a moment. That was all the gunslinger might give him, and Eddie damned well knew it. He glanced at the door and saw the black hands freeze with a gold necklace half in and half out of a purse that already glittered like a pirate’s cache of treasure. Although he could not hear it, Eddie sensed that Roland was speaking to the owner of the black hands.

He pulled the knife from the gunslinger’s purse and then rolled over the limp, breathing body which lay before the doorway. The eyes were open but blank, rolled up to the whites.

“Watch, Roland!” Eddie screamed. That monotonous, idiotic, never-ending wind blew in his ears. Christ, it was enough to drive anyone bugshit. “Watch very closely! I want to complete your fucking education! I want to show you what happens when you fuck over the Dean brothers!”

He brought the knife down to the gunslinger’s throat.

CHAPTER 2

Ringling the Changes

1

August, 1959:

When the intern came outside half an hour later, he found Julio leaning against the ambulance which was still parked in the emergency bay of Sisters of Mercy Hospital on 23rd Street. The heel of one of Julio's pointy-toed boots was hooked over the front fender. He had changed to a pair of glaring pink pants and a blue shirt with his name written in gold stitches over the left pocket: his bowling league outfit. George checked his watch and saw that Julio's team—The Spics of Supremacy—would already be rolling.

"Thought you'd be gone," George Shavers said. He was an intern at Sisters of Mercy. "How're your guys gonna win without the Wonder Hook?"

"They got Miguel Basale to take my place. He ain't steady, but he gets hot sometimes. They'll be okay." Julio paused. "I was curious about how it came out." He was the driver, a Cubano with a sense of humor George wasn't even sure Julio knew he had. He looked around. Neither of the paramedics who rode with them were in sight.

"Where are they?" George asked.

"Who? The fuckin Bobbsey Twins? Where do you think they are? Chasin Minnesota poontang down in the Village. Any idea if she'll pull through?"

"Don't know."

He tried to sound sage and knowing about the unknown, but the fact was that first the resident on duty and then a pair of surgeons had taken the black woman away from him almost faster than you could say *hail Mary fulla grace* (which had actually been on his lips

to say—the black lady really hadn't looked as if she was going to last very long).

“She lost a hell of a lot of blood.”

“No shit.”

George was one of sixteen interns at Sisters of Mercy, and one of eight assigned to a new program called Emergency Ride. The theory was that an intern riding with a couple of paramedics could sometimes make the difference between life and death in an emergency situation. George knew that most drivers and paras thought that wet-behind-the-ears interns were as likely to kill red-blankets as save them, but George thought maybe it worked.

Sometimes.

Either way it made great PR for the hospital, and although the interns in the program liked to bitch about the extra eight hours (without pay) it entailed each week, George Shavers sort of thought most of them felt the way he did himself—proud, tough, able to take whatever they threw his way.

Then had come the night the T.W.A. Tri-Star crashed at Idlewild. Sixty-five people on board, sixty of them what Julio Estevez referred to as D.R.T.—Dead Right There—and three of the remaining five looking like the sort of thing you might scrape out of the bottom of a coal-furnace . . . except what you scraped out of the bottom of a coal furnace didn't moan and shriek and beg for someone to give them morphine or kill them, did they? *If you can take this*, he thought afterward, remembering the severed limbs lying amid the remains of aluminum flaps and seat-cushions and a ragged chunk of tail with the numbers 17 and a big red letter T and part of a W on it, remembering the eyeball he had seen resting on top of a charred Samsonite suitcase, remembering a child's teddybear with staring shoe-button eyes lying beside a small red sneaker with a child's foot still in it, *if you can take this, baby, you can take anything*. And he had been taking it just fine. He went right on taking it just fine all the way home. He went on taking it just fine through a late supper that consisted of a Swanson's turkey TV dinner. He went to sleep with no problem at all, which proved beyond a shadow of a *doubt* that he was taking it just fine. Then, in some dead dark hour of the morning

he had awakened from a hellish nightmare in which the thing resting on top of the charred Samsonite suitcase had not been a teddybear but *his mother's head*, and her eyes had opened, and they had been charred; they were the staring expressionless shoebutton eyes of the teddybear, and her mouth had opened, revealing the broken fangs which had been her dentures up until the T.W.A. Tri-Star was struck by lightning on its final approach, and she had whispered *You couldn't save me, George, we scrimped for you, we saved for you, we went without for you, your dad fixed up the scrape you got into with that girl and you STILL COULDN'T SAVE ME GOD DAMN YOU*, and he had awakened screaming, and he was vaguely aware of someone pounding on the wall, but by then he was already pelting into the bathroom, and he barely made it to the kneeling penitential position before the porcelain altar before dinner came up the express elevator. It came special delivery, hot and steaming and still smelling like processed turkey. He knelt there and looked into the bowl, at the chunks of half-digested turkey and the carrots which had lost none of their original fluorescent brightness, and this word flashed across his mind in large red letters:

ENOUGH

Correct.

It was:

ENOUGH.

He was going to get out of the sawbones business. He was going to get out because:

ENOUGH WAS ENOUGH.

He was going to get out because Popeye's motto was *That's all I can stands and I can't stand nummore*, and Popeye was as right as rain.

He had flushed the toilet and gone back to bed and fell asleep almost instantly and awoke to discover he still wanted to be a doctor, and that was a goddam good thing to know for sure, maybe worth the whole program, whether you called it Emergency Ride or Bucket of Blood or Name That Tune.

He *still* wanted to be a doctor.

He knew a lady who did needlework. He paid her ten dollars he couldn't afford to make him a small, old-fashioned-looking sampler. It said:

IF YOU CAN TAKE THIS, YOU CAN TAKE ANYTHING.

Yes. Correct.

The messy business in the subway happened four weeks later.

2

"That lady was some fuckin weird, you know it?" Julio said.

George breathed an interior sigh of relief. If Julio hadn't opened the subject, George supposed he wouldn't have had the sack. He was an intern, and someday he was going to be a full-fledged doc, he really believed that now, but Julio was a *vet*, and you didn't want to say something stupid in front of a *vet*. He would only laugh and say *Hell, I seen that shit a thousand times, kid. Get y'self a towel and wipe off whatever it is behind your ears, cause it's wet and drippin down the sides of your face.*

But apparently Julio *hadn't* seen it a thousand times, and that was good, because George *wanted* to talk about it.

"She was weird, all right. It was like she was two people."

He was amazed to see that now *Julio* was the one who looked relieved, and he was struck with sudden shame. Julio Estavez, who was going to do no more than pilot a limo with a couple of pulsing red lights on top for the rest of his life, had just shown more courage than he had been able to show.

"You got it, doc. Hunnert per cent." He pulled out a pack of Chesterfields and stuck one in the corner of his mouth.

"Those things are gonna kill you, my man," George said.

Julio nodded and offered the pack.

They smoked in silence for awhile. The paras were maybe chasing tail like Julio had said . . . or maybe they'd just had enough. *George* had been scared, all right, no joke about *that*. But he also knew *he* had been the one who saved the woman, not the paras, and he

knew Julio knew it too. Maybe that was really why Julio had waited. The old black woman had helped, and the white kid who had dialed the cops while everyone else (except the old black woman) had just stood around watching like it was some goddam movie or TV show or something, part of a *Peter Gunn* episode, maybe, but in the end it had all come down to George Shavers, one scared cat doing his duty the best way he could.

The woman had been waiting for the train Duke Ellington held in such high regard—that fabled A-train. Just been a pretty young black woman in jeans and a khaki shirt waiting for the fabled A-train so she could go uptown someplace.

Someone had pushed her.

George Shavers didn't have the slightest idea if the police had caught the slug who had done it—that wasn't his business. His business was the woman who had tumbled screaming into the tube of the tunnel in front of that fabled A-train. It had been a miracle that she had missed the third rail; the fabled third rail that would have done to her what the State of New York did to the bad guys up at Sing-Sing who got a free ride on that fabled A-train the cons called Old Sparky.

Oboy, the miracles of electricity.

She tried to crawl out of the way but there hadn't been quite enough time and that fabled A-train had come into the station screeching and squalling and puking up sparks because the motorman had seen her but it was too late, too late for him and too late for her. The steel wheels of that fabled A-train had cut the living legs off her from just above the knees down. And while everyone else (except for the white kid who had dialed the cops) had only stood there pulling their puds (or pushing their pudenda, George supposed), the elderly black woman had jumped down, dislocating one hip in the process (she would later be given a Medal of Bravery by the Mayor), and had used the doorag on her head to cinch a tourniquet around one of the young woman's squirting thighs. The young white guy was screaming for an ambulance on one side of the station and the old black chick was screaming for someone to give her a help, to give her a tie-off for God's sake, anything, anything at

all, and finally some elderly white business type had reluctantly surrendered his belt, and the elderly black chick looked up at him and spoke the words which became the headline of the New York *Daily News* the next day, the words which made her an authentic American apple-pie heroine: "Thank you, bro." Then she had noosed the belt around the young woman's left leg halfway between the young woman's crotch and where her left knee had been until that fabled A-train had come along.

George had heard someone say to someone else that the young black woman's last words before passing out had been "*WHO WAS THAT MAHFAH? I GONE HUNT HIM DOWN AND KILL HIS ASS!*"

There was no way to punch holes far enough up for the elderly black woman to notch the belt, so she simply held on like grim old death until Julio, George, and the paras arrived.

George remembered the yellow line, how his mother had told him he must never, never, *never* go past the yellow line while he was waiting for a train (fabled or otherwise), the stench of oil and electricity when he hopped down onto the cinders, remembered how hot it had been. The heat seemed to be baking off him, off the elderly black woman, off the young black woman, off the train, the tunnel, the unseen sky above and hell itself beneath. He remembered thinking incoherently *If they put a blood-pressure cuff on me now I'd go off the dial* and then he went cool and yelled for his bag, and when one of the paras tried to jump down with it he told the para to fuck off, and the para had looked startled, as if he was really seeing George Shavers for the first time, and he *had* fucked off.

George tied off as many veins and arteries as he could tie off, and when her heart started to be-bop he had shot her full of Digitalin. Whole blood arrived. Cops brought it. *Want to bring her up, doc?* one of them had asked and George had told him not yet, and he got out the needle and stuck the juice to her like she was a junkie in dire need of a fix.

Then he let them take her up.

Then they had taken her back.

On the way she had awakened.

Then the weirdness started.

George gave her a shot of Demerol when the paras loaded her into the ambulance—she had begun to stir and cry out weakly. He gave her a boost hefty enough for him to be confident she would remain quiet until they got to Sisters of Mercy. He was ninety per cent sure she *would* still be with them when they got there, and that was one for the good guys.

Her eyes began to flutter while they were still six blocks from the hospital, however. She uttered a thick moan.

“We can shoot her up again, doc,” one of the paras said.

George was hardly aware this was the first time a paramedic had deigned to call him anything other than George or, worse, Georgie. “Are you nuts? I’d just as soon not confuse D.O.A. and O.D. if it’s all the same to you.”

The paramedic drew back.

George looked back at the young black woman and saw the eyes returning his gaze were awake and aware.

“What has happened to me?” she asked.

George remembered the man who had told another man about what the woman had supposedly said (how she was going to hunt the motherfucker down and kill his ass, etc., etc.). That man had been white. George decided now it had been pure invention, inspired either by that odd human urge to make naturally dramatic situations even more dramatic, or just race prejudice. This was a cultured, intelligent woman.

“You’ve had an accident,” he said. “You were—”

Her eyes slipped shut and he thought she was going to sleep again. Good. Let someone else tell her she had lost her legs. Someone who made more than \$7,600 a year. He had shifted a little to the left, wanting to check her b.p. again, when she opened her eyes once more. When she did, George Shavers was looking at a different woman.

“Fuckah cut off mah laigs. I felt ’em go. Dis d’ambulance?”

“Y-Y-Yes,” George said. Suddenly he needed something to drink. Not necessarily alcohol. Just something wet. His voice was dry. This

was like watching Spencer Tracy in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, only for real.

“Dey get dat honkey mahfah?”

“No,” George said, thinking *The guy got it right, goddam, the guy did actually get it right.*

He was vaguely aware that the paramedics, who had been hovering (perhaps hoping he would do something wrong) were now backing off.

“Good. Honky fuzz jus be lettin him off anyway. I be gittin him. I be cuttin his cock off. Sumbitch! I tell you what I goan do t’dat sumbitch! I tell you one thing, you sumbitch honky! I goan tell you . . . tell . . .”

Her eyes fluttered again and George had thought *Yes, go to sleep, please go to sleep, I don’t get paid for this, I don’t understand this, they told us about shock but nobody mentioned schizophrenia as one of the—*

The eyes opened. The first woman was there.

“What sort of accident was it?” she asked. “I remember coming out of the I—”

“Eye?” he said stupidly.

She smiled a little. It was a painful smile. “The *Hungry I*. It’s a coffee house.”

“Oh. Yeah. Right.”

The other one, hurt or not, had made him feel dirty and a little ill. This one made him feel like a knight in an Arthurian tale, a knight who has successfully rescued the Lady Fair from the jaws of the dragon.

“I remember walking down the stairs to the platform, and after that —”

“Someone pushed you.” It sounded stupid, but what was wrong with that? It *was* stupid.

“Pushed me in front of the train?”

“Yes.”

“Have I lost my legs?”

George tried to swallow and couldn’t. There seemed to be nothing in his throat to grease the machinery.

“Not all of them,” he said inanely, and her eyes closed.

Let it be a faint, he thought then, please let it be a f—

They opened, blazing. One hand came up and slashed five slits through the air within an inch of his face—any closer and he would have been in the E.R. getting his cheek stitched up instead of smoking Chesties with Julio Estavez.

“YOU AIN’T NUTHIN BUT A BUNCHA HONKY SONSA BITCHES!” she screamed. Her face was monstrous, her eyes full of hell’s own light. It wasn’t even the face of a human being. *“GOAN KILL EVERY MAHFAHIN HONKY I SEE! GOAN GELD EM FUST! GOAN CUT OFF THEIR BALLS AND SPIT EM IN THEY FACES! GOAN—”*

It was crazy. She talked like a cartoon black woman, Butterfly McQueen gone Loony Tunes. She—or it—also seemed superhuman. This screaming, writhing thing could not have just undergone impromptu surgery by subway train half an hour ago. She bit. She clawed out at him again and again. Snot spat from her nose. Spit flew from her lips. Filth poured from her mouth.

“Shoot her up, doc!” one of the paras yelled. His face was pale. *“Fa crissakes shoot her up!”* The para reached toward the supply case. George shoved his hand aside.

“Fuck off, chickenshit.”

George looked back at his patient and saw the calm, cultured eyes of the other one looking at him.

“Will I live?” she asked in a conversational tea-room voice. He thought, *She is unaware of her lapses. Totally unaware.* And, after a moment: *So is the other one, for that matter.*

“I—” He gulped, rubbed at his galloping heart through his tunic, and then ordered himself to get control of this. He had saved her life. Her mental problems were not his concern.

“Are you all right?” she asked him, and the genuine concern in her voice made him smile a little—*her asking him.*

“Yes, ma’am.”

“To which question are you responding?”

For a moment he didn’t understand, then did. “Both,” he said, and took her hand. She squeezed it, and he looked into her shining lucent eyes and thought *A man could fall in love*, and that was when

her hand turned into a claw and she was telling him he was a honky mahfah, and she wadn't just goan *take* his balls, she was goan *chew* on those mahfahs.

He pulled away, looking to see if his hand was bleeding, thinking incoherently that if it was he would have to do something about it, because she was poison, the woman was poison, and being bitten by her would be about the same as being bitten by a copperhead or rattler. There was no blood. And when he looked again, it was the other woman—the first woman.

“Please,” she said. “I don’t want to die. Pl—” Then she went out for good, and that *was* good. For all of them.

4

“So whatchoo think?” Julio asked.

“About who’s gonna be in the Series?” George squashed the butt under the heel of his loafer. “White Sox. I got ’em in the pool.”

“Whatchoo think about that lady?”

“I think she might be schizophrenic,” George said slowly.

“Yeah, I *know* that. I mean, what’s gonna happen to her?”

“I don’t know.”

“She needs help, man. Who gonna give it?”

“Well, I already gave her one,” George said, but his face felt hot, as if he were blushing.

Julio looked at him. “If you already gave her all the help you can give her, you shoulda let her die, doc.”

George looked at Julio for a moment, but found he couldn’t stand what he saw in Julio’s eyes—not accusation but sadness.

So he walked away.

He had places to go.

5

The Time of the Drawing:

In the time since the accident it was, for the most part, still Odetta Holmes who was in control, but Detta Walker had come forward more and more, the thing Detta liked to do best was steal. It didn't matter that her booty was always little more than junk, no more than it mattered that she often threw it away later.

The *taking* was what mattered.

When the gunslinger entered her head in Macy's, Detta screamed in a combination of fury and horror and terror, her hands freezing on the junk jewelry she was scooping into her purse.

She screamed because when Roland came into her mind, when he *came forward*, she for a moment sensed the *other*, as if a door had been swung open inside of her head.

And she screamed because the invading raping presence was a honky.

She could not see but nonetheless *sensed* his whiteness.

People looked around. A floorwalker saw the screaming woman in the wheelchair with her purse open, saw one hand frozen in the act of stuffing costume jewelry into a purse that looked (even from a distance of thirty feet) worth three times the stuff she was stealing.

The floorwalker yelled, "*Hey Jimmy!*" and Jimmy Halvorsen, one of Macy's house detectives, looked around and saw what was happening. He started toward the black woman in the wheelchair on a dead run. He couldn't help running—he had been a city cop for eighteen years and it was built into his system—but he was already thinking it was gonna be a shit bust. Little kids, cripples, nuns; they were always a shit bust. Busting them was like kicking a drunk. They cried a little in front of the judge and then took a walk. It was hard to convince judges that cripples could also be slime.

But he ran just the same.

6

Roland was momentarily horrified by the snakepit of hate and revulsion in which he found himself . . . and then he heard the

woman screaming, saw the big man with the potato-sack belly running toward her/him, saw people looking, and took control.

Suddenly he was the woman with the dusky hands. He sensed some strange duality inside her, but couldn't think about it now.

He turned the chair and began to shove it forward. The aisle rolled past him/her. People dived away to either side. The purse was lost, spilling Detta's credentials and stolen treasure in a wide trail along the floor. The man with the heavy gut skidded on bogus gold chains and lipstick tubes and then fell on his ass.

7

Shit! Halvorsen thought furiously, and for a moment one hand clawed under his sport-coat where there was a .38 in a clamshell holster. Then sanity reasserted itself. This was no drug bust or armed robbery; this was a crippled black lady in a wheelchair. She was rolling it like it was some punk's drag-racer, but a crippled black lady was all she was just the same. What was he going to do, shoot her? That would be great, wouldn't it? And where was she going to go? There was nothing at the end of the aisle but two dressing rooms.

He picked himself up, massaging his aching ass, and began after her again, limping a little now.

The wheelchair flashed into one of the dressing rooms. The door slammed, just clearing the push-handles on the back.

Got you now, bitch, Jimmy thought. *And I'm going to give you one hell of a scare. I don't care if you got five orphan children and only a year to live. I'm not gonna hurt you, but oh babe I'm gonna shake your dice.*

He beat the floorwalker to the dressing room, slammed the door open with his left shoulder, and it was empty.

No black woman.

No wheelchair.

No nothing.

He looked at the floorwalker, starey-eyed.

“Other one!” the floorwalker yelled. “Other one!”

Before Jimmy could move, the floorwalker had busted open the door of the other dressing room. A woman in a linen skirt and a Playtex Living Bra screamed piercingly and crossed her arms over her chest. She was very white and very definitely not crippled.

“Pardon me,” the floorwalker said, feeling hot crimson flood his face.

“*Get out of here, you pervert!*” the woman in the linen skirt and the bra cried.

“Yes, ma’am,” the floorwalker said, and closed the door.

At Macy’s, the customer was always right.

He looked at Halvorsen.

Halvorsen looked back.

“What is this shit?” Halvorsen asked. “Did she go in there or not?”

“Yeah, she did.”

“So where is she?”

The floorwalker could only shake his head. “Let’s go back and pick up the mess.”

“*You* pick up the mess,” Jimmy Halvorsen said. “I feel like I just broke my ass in nine pieces.” He paused. “To tell you the truth, me fine bucko, I also feel extremely confused.”

8

The moment the gunslinger heard the dressing room door bang shut behind him, he rammed the wheelchair around in a half turn, looking for the doorway. If Eddie had done what he had promised, it would be gone.

But the door was open. Roland wheeled the Lady of Shadows through it.

CHAPTER 3

Odetta on the Other Side

1

Not long after, Roland would think: *Any other woman, crippled or otherwise, suddenly shoved all the way down the aisle of the mart in which she was doing business—monkeybusiness, you may call it if you like—by a stranger inside her head, shoved into a little room while some man behind her yelled for her to stop, then suddenly turned, shoved again where there was by rights no room in which to shove, then finding herself suddenly in an entirely different world . . . I think any other woman, under those circumstances, would have most certainly have asked, “Where am I?” before all else.*

Instead, Odetta Holmes asked almost pleasantly, “What exactly are you planning to do with that knife, young man?”

2

Roland looked up at Eddie, who was crouched with his knife held less than a quarter of an inch over the skin. Even with his uncanny speed, there was no way the gunslinger could move fast enough to evade the blade if Eddie decided to use it.

“Yes,” Roland said. “What *are* you planning to do with it?”

“I don’t know,” Eddie said, sounding completely disgusted with himself. “Cut bait, I guess. Sure doesn’t look like I came here to fish, does it?”

He threw the knife toward the Lady’s chair, but well to the right. It stuck, quivering, in the sand to its hilt.

Then the Lady turned her head and began, “I wonder if you could please explain where you’ve taken m—”

She stopped. She had said *I wonder if you* before her head had gotten around far enough to see there was no one behind her, but the gunslinger observed with some real interest that she went on speaking for a moment anyway, because the fact of her condition made certain things elementary truths of her life—if she had moved, for instance, someone must have moved her. But there was no one behind her.

No one at all.

She looked back at Eddie and the gunslinger, her dark eyes troubled, confused, and alarmed, and now she asked. “Where am I? Who pushed me? How can I be here? How can I be dressed, for that matter, when I was home watching the twelve o’clock news in my robe? Who am I? Where is this? Who are you?”

“*Who am I?*” she asked, the gunslinger thought. *The dam broke and there was a flood of questions; that was to be expected. But that one question—“Who am I?”—even now I don’t think she knows she asked it.*

Or when.

Because she had asked *before*.

Even before she had asked who *they* were, she had asked who *she* was.

3

Eddie looked from the lovely young/old face of the black woman in the wheelchair to Roland’s face.

“How come she doesn’t know?”

“I can’t say. Shock, I suppose.”

“Shock took her all the way back to her living room, before she left for Macy’s? You telling me the last thing she remembers is sitting in her bathrobe and listening to some blow-dried dude talk about how they found that gonzo down in the Florida Keys with Christa McAuliffe’s left hand mounted on his den wall next to his prize marlin?”

Roland didn’t answer.

More dazed than ever, the Lady said, “Who is Christa McAuliffe? Is she one of the missing Freedom Riders?”

Now it was Eddie’s turn not to answer. Freedom Riders? What the hell were *they*?

The gunslinger glanced at him and Eddie was able to read his eyes easily enough: Can’t you see she’s in shock?

I know what you mean, Roland old buddy, but it only washes up to a point. I felt a little shock myself when you came busting into my head like Walter Payton on crack, but it didn’t wipe out my memory banks.

Speaking of shock, he’d gotten another pretty good jolt when she came through. He had been kneeling over Roland’s inert body, the knife just above the vulnerable skin of the throat . . . but the truth was Eddie couldn’t have used the knife anyway—not then, anyway. He was staring into the doorway, hypnotized, as an aisle of Macy’s rushed forward—he was reminded again of *The Shining*, where you saw what the little boy was seeing as he rode his trike through the hallways of that haunted hotel. He remembered the little boy had seen this creepy pair of dead twins in one of those hallways. The end of this aisle was much more mundane: a white door. The words ONLY TWO GARMENTS AT ONE TIME, PLEASE were printed on it in discreet lettering. Yeah, it was Macy’s, all right. Macy’s for sure.

One black hand flew out and slammed the door open while the male voice (a cop voice if Eddie had ever heard one, and he had heard many in his time) behind yelled for her to quit it, that was no way out, she was only making things a helluva lot worse for herself, and Eddie caught a bare glimpse of the black woman in the wheelchair in the mirror to the left, and he remembered thinking *Jesus, he’s got her, all right, but she sure don’t look happy about it.*

Then the view pivoted *and Eddie was looking at himself.* The view rushed toward the viewer and he wanted to put up the hand holding the knife to shield his eyes because all at once the sensation of looking through two sets of eyes was too much, too crazy, it was going to *drive* him crazy if he didn’t shut it out, but it all happened too fast for him to have time.

The wheelchair came through the door. It was a tight fit; Eddie heard its hubs squeal on the sides. At the same moment he heard another sound: a thick *tearing* sound that made him think of some word (*placental*) that he couldn't quite think of because he didn't know he knew it.

Then the woman was rolling toward him on the hard-packed sand, and she no longer looked mad as hell—hardly looked like the woman Eddie had glimpsed in the mirror at all, for that matter, but he supposed *that* wasn't surprising; when you all at once went from a changing-room at Macy's to the seashore of a godforsaken world where some of the lobsters were the size of small Collie dogs, it left you feeling a little winded. That was a subject on which Eddie Dean felt he could personally give testimony.

She rolled about four feet before stopping, and only went that far because of the slope and the gritty pack of the sand. Her hands were no longer pumping the wheels as they must have been doing (*when you wake up with sore shoulders tomorrow you can blame them on Sir Roland, lady*, Eddie thought sourly). Instead they went to the arms of the chair and gripped them as she regarded the two men.

Behind her, the doorway had already disappeared. Disappeared? That was not quite right. It seemed to *fold in* on itself, like a piece of film run backward. This began to happen just as the store dick came slamming through the other, more mundane door—the one between the store and the dressing room. He was coming hard, expecting the shoplifter would have locked the door, and Eddie thought he was going to take one hell of a splat against the far wall, but Eddie was never going to see it happen or not happen. Before the shrinking space where the door between that world and this disappeared entirely, Eddie saw everything on that side freeze solid.

The movie had become a still photograph.

All that remained now were the dual tracks of the wheelchair, starting in sandy nowhere and running four feet to where it and its occupant now sat.

"Won't somebody please explain where I am and how I got here?" the woman in the wheelchair asked—almost pleaded.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing, Dorothy,” Eddie said. “You ain’t in Kansas anymore.”

The woman’s eyes brimmed with tears. Eddie could see her trying to hold them in but it was no good. She began to sob.

Furious (and disgusted with himself as well), Eddie turned on the gunslinger, who had staggered to his feet. Roland moved, but not toward the weeping Lady. Instead he went to pick up his knife.

“Tell her!” Eddie shouted. “You brought her, *so go on and tell her, man!*” And after a moment he added in a lower tone, “And then tell me how come she doesn’t remember herself.”

4

Roland did not respond. Not at once. He bent, pinched the hilt of the knife between the two remaining fingers of his right hand, transferred it carefully to his left, and slipped it into the scabbard at the side of one gunbelt. He was still trying to grapple with what he had sensed in the Lady’s mind. Unlike Eddie, she had fought him, fought him like a cat, from the moment he *came forward* until they rolled through the door. The fight had begun the moment she sensed him. There had been no lapse, because there had been no surprise. He had experienced it but didn’t in the least understand it. No surprise at the invading stranger in her mind, only the instant rage, terror, and the commencement of a battle to shake him free. She hadn’t come close to winning that battle—could not, he suspected—but that hadn’t kept her from trying like hell. He had felt a woman insane with fear and anger and hate.

He had sensed only darkness in her—this was a mind entombed in a cave-in.

Except—

Except that in the moment they burst through the doorway and separated, he had wished—wished *desperately*—that he could tarry a moment longer. One moment would have told so much. Because the woman before them now wasn’t the woman in whose mind he had been. Being in Eddie’s mind had been like being in a room with

jittery, sweating walls. Being in the Lady's had been like lying naked in the dark while venomous snakes crawled all over you.

Until the end.

She had changed at the end.

And there had been something else, something he believed was vitally important, but he either could not understand it or remember it. Something like *(a glance)* the doorway itself, only in her mind. Something about *(you broke the forspecial it was you)* some sudden burst of understanding. As at studies, when you finally saw—

“Oh, fuck you,” Eddie said disgustedly. “You’re nothing but a goddam machine.”

He strode past Roland, went to the woman, knelt beside her, and when she put her arms around him, panic-tight, like the arms of a drowning swimmer, he did not draw away but put his own arms around her and hugged her back.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I mean, it’s not great, but it’s okay.”

“*Where are we?*” she wept. “*I was sitting home watching TV so I could hear if my friends got out of Oxford alive and now I’m here and I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHERE HERE IS!*”

“Well, neither do I,” Eddie said, holding her tighter, beginning to rock her a little, “but I guess we’re in it together. I’m from where you’re from, little old New York City, and I’ve been through the same thing—well, a little different, but same principle—and you’re gonna be just fine.” As an afterthought he added: “As long as you like lobster.”

She hugged him and wept and Eddie held her and rocked her and Roland thought, *Eddie will be all right now. His brother is dead but he has someone else to take care of so Eddie will be all right now.*

But he felt a pang: a deep reproachful hurt in his heart. He was capable of shooting—with his left hand, anyway—of killing, of going on and on, slamming with brutal relentlessness through miles and years, even dimensions, it seemed, in search of the Tower. He was capable of survival, sometimes even of protection—he had saved the boy Jake from a slow death at the way station, and from sexual consumption by the Oracle at the foot of the mountains—but in the end, he had let Jake die. Nor had this been by accident; he had

committed a conscious act of damnation. He watched the two of them, watched Eddie hug her, assure her it was going to be all right. He could not have done that, and now the rue in his heart was joined by stealthy fear.

If you have given up your heart for the Tower, Roland, you have already lost. A heartless creature is a loveless creature, and a loveless creature is a beast. To be a beast is perhaps bearable, although the man who has become one will surely pay hell's own price in the end, but what if you should gain your object? What if you should, heartless, actually storm the Dark Tower and win it? If there is naught but darkness in your heart, what could you do except degenerate from beast to monster? To gain one's object as a beast would only be bitterly comic, like giving a magnifying glass to an elephant. But to gain one's object as a monster . . .

To pay hell is one thing. But do you want to own it?

He thought of Allie, and of the girl who had once waited for him at the window, thought of the tears he had shed over Cuthbert's lifeless corpse. Oh, then he had loved. Yes. Then.

I do *want to love!* he cried, but although Eddie was also crying a little now with the woman in the wheelchair, the gunslinger's eyes remained as dry as the desert he had crossed to reach this sunless sea.

5

He would answer Eddie's question later. He would do that because he thought Eddie would do well to be on guard. The reason she didn't remember was simple. She wasn't one woman but two.

And one of them was dangerous.

6

Eddie told her what he could, glossing over the shoot-out but being truthful about everything else.

When he was done, she remained perfectly silent for some time, her hands clasped together on her lap.

Little streamlets coursed down from the shallowing mountains, petering out some miles to the east. It was from these that Roland and Eddie had drawn their water as they hiked north. At first Eddie had gotten it because Roland was too weak. Later they had taken turns, always having to go a little further and search a little longer before finding a stream. They grew steadily more listless as the mountains slumped, but the water hadn't made them sick.

So far.

Roland had gone yesterday, and although that made today Eddie's turn, the gunslinger had gone again, shouldering the hide waterskins and walking off without a word. Eddie found this queerly discreet. He didn't want to be touched by the gesture—by anything about Roland, for that matter—and found he was, a little, just the same.

She listened attentively to Eddie, not speaking at all, her eyes fixed on his. At one moment Eddie would guess she was five years older than he, at another he would guess fifteen. There was one thing he didn't have to guess about: he was falling in love with her.

When he had finished, she sat for a moment without saying anything, now not looking at him but beyond him, looking at the waves which would, at nightfall, bring the lobsters and with their alien, lawyerly questions. He had been particularly careful to describe *them*. Better for her to be a little scared now than a lot scared when they came out to play. He supposed she wouldn't want to eat them, not after hearing what they had done to Roland's hand and foot, not after she got a good close look at them. But eventually hunger would win out over *did-a-chick* and *dum-a-chum*.

Her eyes were far and distant.

"Odetta?" he asked after perhaps five minutes had gone by. She had told him her name. Odetta Holmes. He thought it was a gorgeous name.

She looked back at him, startled out of her reverie. She smiled a little. She said one word.

"No."

He only looked at her, able to think of no suitable reply. He thought he had never understood until that moment how illimitable a simple negative could be.

"I don't understand," he said finally. "What are you no-ing?"

"All this." Odetta swept an arm (she had, he'd noticed, very strong arms—smooth but very strong), indicating the sea, the sky, the beach, the scruffy foothills where the gunslinger was now presumably searching for water (or maybe getting eaten alive by some new and interesting monster, something Eddie didn't really care to think about). Indicating, in short, this entire world.

"I understand how you feel. I had a pretty good case of the unrealities myself at first."

But *had* he? Looking back, it seemed he had simply accepted, perhaps because he was sick, shaking himself apart in his need for junk.

"You get over it."

"No," she said again. "I believe one of two things has happened, and no matter which one it is, I am still in Oxford, Mississippi. None of this is real."

She went on. If her voice had been louder (or perhaps if he had not been falling in love) it would almost have been a lecture. As it was, it sounded more like lyric than lecture.

Except, he had to keep reminding himself, bullshit's what it really is, and you have to convince her of that. For her sake.

"I may have sustained a head injury," she said. "They are notorious swingers of axe-handles and billy-clubs in Oxford Town."

Oxford Town.

That produced a faint chord of recognition far back in Eddie's mind. She said the words in a kind of rhythm that he for some reason associated with Henry . . . Henry and wet diapers. Why? What? Didn't matter now.

"You're trying to tell me you think this is all some sort of dream you're having while you're unconscious?"

"Or in a coma," she said. "And you needn't look at me as though you thought it was preposterous, because it isn't. Look here."

She parted her hair carefully on the left, and Eddie could see she wore it to one side not just because she liked the style. The old wound beneath the fall of her hair was scarred and ugly, not brown but a grayish-white.

“I guess you’ve had a lot of hard luck in your time,” he said.

She shrugged impatiently. “A lot of hard luck and a lot of soft living,” she said. “Maybe it all balances out. I only showed you because I was in a coma for three weeks when I was five. I dreamed a lot then. I can’t remember what the dreams were, but I remember my mamma said they knew I wasn’t going to die just as long as I kept talking and it seemed like I kept talking all the time, although she said they couldn’t make out one word in a dozen. I *do* remember that the dreams were very vivid.”

She paused, looking around.

“As vivid as this place seems to be. And *you*, Eddie.”

When she said his name his arms prickled. Oh, he had it, all right. Had it bad.

“And *him*.” She shivered. “*He* seems the most vivid of all.”

“We ought to. I mean, we *are* real, no matter what you think.”

She gave him a kind smile. It was utterly without belief.

“How did that happen?” he asked. “That thing on your head?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m just making the point that what has happened once might very well happen again.”

“No, but I’m curious.”

“I was struck by a brick. It was our first trip north. We came to the town of Elizabeth, New Jersey. We came in the Jim Crow car.”

“What’s that?”

She looked at him unbelievably, almost scornfully. “Where have you been living, Eddie? In a bomb-shelter?”

“I’m from a different time,” he said. “Could I ask how old you are, Odetta?”

“Old enough to vote and not old enough for Social Security.”

“Well, I guess that puts me in my place.”

“But gently, I hope,” she said, and smiled that radiant smile which made his arms prickle.

"I'm twenty-three," he said, "but I was born in 1964—the year you were living in when Roland took you."

"That's rubbish."

"No. I was living in 1987 when he took *me*."

"Well," she said after a moment. "That certainly adds a great deal to your argument for this as reality, Eddie."

"The Jim Crow car . . . was it where the black people had to stay?"

"The *Negros*," she said. "Calling a Negro a black is a trifle rude, don't you think?"

"You'll all be calling yourselves that by 1980 or so," Eddie said. "When I was a kid, calling a black kid a Negro was apt to get you in a fight. It was almost like calling him a nigger."

She looked at him uncertainly for a moment, then shook her head again.

"Tell me about the brick, then."

"My mother's youngest sister was going to be married," Odetta said. "Her name was Sophia, but my mother always called her Sister Blue because it was the color she always fancied. 'Or at least she fancied to fancy it,' was how my mother put it. So I always called her Aunt Blue, even before I met her. It was the most lovely wedding. There was a reception afterward. I remember all the presents."

She laughed.

"Presents always look so wonderful to a child, don't they, Eddie?"

He smiled. "Yeah, you got that right. You never forget presents. Not what you got, not what somebody else got, either."

"My father had begun to make money by then, but all I knew is that we were *getting ahead*. That's what my mother always called it and once, when I told her a little girl I played with had asked if my daddy was rich, my mother told me that was what I was supposed to say if any of my other chums ever asked me that question. That we were *getting ahead*."

"So they were able to give Aunt Blue a lovely china set, and I remember . . ."

Her voice faltered. One hand rose to her temple and rubbed absently, as if a headache were beginning there.

"Remember what, Odetta?"

"I remember my mother gave her a *forspecial*."

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I've got a headache. It's got my tongue tangled. I don't know why I'm bothering to tell you all this, anyway."

"Do you mind?"

"No. I don't mind. I *meant* to say mother gave her a special plate. It was white, with delicate blue tracework woven all around the rim." Odetta smiled a little. Eddie didn't think it was an entirely comfortable smile. Something about this memory disturbed her, and the way its immediacy seemed to have taken precedence over the extremely strange situation she had found herself in, a situation which should be claiming all or most of her attention, disturbed *him*.

"I can see that plate as clearly as I can see you now, Eddie. My mother gave it to Aunt Blue and she cried and cried over it. I think she'd seen a plate like that once when she and my mother were children, only of course their parents could never have afforded such a thing. There was none of them who got anything *forspecial* as kids. After the reception Aunt Blue and her husband left for the Great Smokies on their honeymoon. They went on the train." She looked at Eddie.

"In the Jim Crow car," he said.

"That's right! In the Crow car! In those days that's what Negroes rode in and where they ate. That's what we're trying to change in Oxford Town."

She looked at him, almost surely expecting him to insist she was *here*, but he was caught in the webwork of his own memory again: wet diapers and those words. Oxford Town. Only suddenly other words came, just a single line, but he could remember Henry singing it over and over until his mother asked if he couldn't please stop so she could hear Walter Cronkite.

Somebody better investigate soon. Those were the words. Sung over and over by Henry in a nasal monotone. He tried for more but couldn't get it, and was that any real surprise? He could have been no more than three at the time. *Somebody better investigate soon.* The words gave him a chill.

"Eddie, are you all right?"

“Yes. Why?”

“You shivered.”

He smiled. “Donald Duck must have walked over my grave.”

She laughed. “Anyway, at least I didn’t spoil the wedding. It happened when we were walking back to the railway station. We stayed the night with a friend of Aunt Blue’s, and in the morning my father called a taxi. The taxi came almost right away, but when the driver saw we were colored, he drove off like his head was on fire and his ass was catching. Aunt Blue’s friend had already gone ahead to the depot with our luggage—there was a lot of it, because we were going to spend a week in New York. I remember my father saying he couldn’t wait to see my face light up when the clock in Central Park struck the hour and all the animals danced.

“My father said we might as well walk to the station. My mother agreed just as fast as lickety-split, saying that was a fine idea, it wasn’t but a mile and it would be nice to stretch our legs after three days on one train just behind us and half a day on another one just ahead of us. My father said yes, and it was gorgeous weather besides, but I think I knew even at five that he was mad and she was embarrassed and both of them were afraid to call another taxi-cab because the same thing might happen again.

“So we went walking down the street. I was on the inside because my mother was afraid of me getting too close to the traffic. I remember wondering if my daddy meant my face would actually start to *glow* or something when I saw that clock in Central Park, and if that might not hurt, and that was when the brick came down on my head. Everything went dark for a while. Then the dreams started. Vivid dreams.”

She smiled.

“Like *this* dream, Eddie.”

“Did the brick fall, or did someone bomb you?”

“They never found anyone. The police (my mother told me this long after, when I was sixteen or so) found the place where they thought the brick had been, but there were other bricks missing and more were loose. It was just outside the window of a fourth-floor room in an apartment building that had been condemned. But of

course there were lots of people staying there just the same. Especially at night.”

“Sure,” Eddie said.

“No one saw anyone leaving the building, so it went down as an accident. My mother said she thought it *had* been, but I think she was lying. She didn’t even bother trying to tell me what my father thought. They were both still smarting over how the cab-driver had taken one look at us and driven off. It was that more than anything else that made them believe someone had been up there, just looking out, and saw us coming, and decided to drop a brick on the niggers.

“Will your lobster-creatures come out soon?”

“No,” Eddie said. “Not until dusk. So one of your ideas is that all of this is a coma-dream like the ones you had when you got bopped by the brick. Only this time you think it was a billy-club or something.”

“Yes.”

“What’s the other one?”

Odetta’s face and voice were calm enough, but her head was filled with an ugly skein of images which all added up to Oxford Town, Oxford Town. How did the song go? *Two men killed by the light of the moon, / Somebody better investigate soon.* Not quite right, but it was close. Close.

“I may have gone insane,” she said.

7

The first words which came into Eddie’s mind were *If you think you’ve gone insane, Odetta, you’re nuts.*

Brief consideration, however, made this seem an unprofitable line of argument to take.

Instead he remained silent for a time, sitting by her wheelchair, his knees drawn up, his hands holding his wrists.

“Were you really a heroin addict?”

“Am,” he said. “It’s like being an alcoholic, or ‘basing. It’s not a thing you ever get over. I used to hear that and go ‘Yeah, yeah, right,

right,' in my head, you know, but now I understand. I still want it, and I guess part of me will *always* want it, but the physical part has passed."

"What's 'basing?" she asked.

"Something that hasn't been invented yet in your when. It's something you do with cocaine, only it's like turning TNT into an A-bomb."

"You did it?"

"Christ, no. Heroin was my thing. I told you."

"You don't seem like an addict," she said.

Eddie actually was fairly spiffy . . . if, that was, one ignored the gamy smell arising from his body and clothes (he could rinse himself and did, could rinse his clothes and did, but lacking soap, he could not really wash either). His hair had been short when Roland stepped into his life (the better to sail through customs, my dear, and what a great big joke *that* had turned out to be), and was still a respectable length. He shaved every morning, using the keen edge of Roland's knife, gingerly at first, but with increasing confidence. He'd been too young for shaving to be part of his life when Henry left for 'Nam, and it hadn't been any big deal to Henry back then, either; he never grew a beard, but sometimes went three or four days before Mom nagged him into "mowing the stubble." When he came back, however, Henry was a maniac on the subject (as he was on a few others—foot-powder after showering; teeth to be brushed three or four times a day and followed by a chaser of mouthwash; clothes always hung up) and he turned Eddie into a fanatic as well. The stubble was mowed every morning and every evening. Now this habit was deep in his grain, like the others Henry had taught him. Including, of course, the one you took care of with a needle.



“Too clean-cut?” he asked her, grinning.

“Too white,” she said shortly, and then was quiet for a moment, looking sternly out at the sea. Eddie was quiet, too. If there was a comeback to something like that, he didn’t know what it was.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That was very unkind, very unfair, and very unlike me.”

“It’s all right.”

“It’s *not*. It’s like a white person saying something like ‘Jeez, I never would have guessed you were a nigger’ to someone with a very light skin.”

“You like to think of yourself as more fair-minded,” Eddie said.

“What we like to think of ourselves and what we really are rarely have much in common, I should think, but yes—I like to think of myself as more fair-minded. So please accept my apology, Eddie.”

“On one condition.”

“What’s that?” she was smiling a little again. That was good. He liked it when he was able to make her smile.

“Give *this* a fair chance. That’s the condition.”

“Give *what* a fair chance?” She sounded slightly amused. Eddie might have bristled at that tone in someone else’s voice, might have felt he was getting boned, but with her it was different. With her it was all right. He supposed with her just about anything would have been.

“That there’s a third alternative. That this really is happening. I mean . . .” Eddie cleared his throat. “I’m not very good at this philosophical shit, or, you know, metamorphosis or whatever the hell you call it—”

“Do you mean metaphysics?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I think so. But I know you can’t go around disbelieving what your senses tell you. Why, if your idea about this all being a dream is right—”

“I didn’t say a *dream*—”

“Whatever you said, that’s what it comes down to, isn’t it? A false reality?”

If there had been something faintly condescending in her voice a moment ago, it was gone now. “Philosophy and metaphysics may not be your bag, Eddie, but you must have been a hell of a debater in school.”

“I was never in debate. That was for gays and hags and wimps. Like chess club. What do you mean, my bag? What’s a bag?”

“Just something you like. What do *you* mean, gays? What are *gays*?”

He looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. “Homos. Fags. Never mind. We could swap slang all day. It’s not getting us anyplace. What I’m trying to say is that if it’s all a dream, it could be mine, not yours. *You* could be a figment of *my* imagination.”

Her smile faltered. “You . . . nobody bopped you.”

“Nobody bopped *you*, either.”

Now her smile was entirely gone. “No one that I *remember*,” she corrected with some sharpness.

“Me either!” he said. “You told me they’re rough in Oxford. Well, those Customs guys weren’t exactly cheery joy when they couldn’t find the dope they were after. One of them could have head-bopped me with the butt of his gun. I could be lying in a Bellevue ward right now, dreaming you and Roland while they write their reports, explaining how, while they were interrogating me, I became violent and had to be subdued.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Why? Because you’re this intelligent socially active black lady with no legs and I’m just a hype from Co-Op City?” He said it with a grin, meaning it as an amiable jape, but she flared at him.

“I wish you would stop calling me *black!*”

He sighed. “Okay, but it’s gonna take getting used to.”

“You should have been on the debate club anyway.”

“Fuck,” he said, and the turn of her eyes made him realize again that the difference between them was much wider than color; they were speaking to each other from separate islands. The water between was time. Never mind. The word had gotten her attention. “I don’t want to debate you. I want to wake you up to the fact that you *are* awake, that’s all.”

“I might be able to at least operate provisionally according to the dictates of your third alternative as long as this . . . this situation . . . continued to go on, except for one thing: There’s a fundamental difference between what happened to you and what happened to me. So fundamental, so large, that you haven’t seen it.”

“Then show it to me.”

“There is no discontinuity in your consciousness. There is a very large one in mine.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I mean you can account for all of your time,” Odetta said. “Your story follows from point to point: the airplane, the incursion by that . . . that . . . by *him*—”

She nodded toward the foothills with clear distaste.

“The stashing of the drugs, the officers who took you into custody, all the rest. It’s a fantastic story, it has no missing links.

“As for myself, I arrived back from Oxford, was met by Andrew, my driver, and brought back to my building. I bathed and I wanted sleep—I was getting a very bad headache, and sleep is the only medicine that’s any good for the really bad ones. But it was close on midnight, and I thought I would watch the news first. Some of us had been released, but a good many more were still in the jug when we left. I wanted to find out if their cases had been resolved.

“I dried off and put on my robe and went into the living room. I turned on the TV news. The newscaster started talking about a speech Krushchev had just made about the American advisors in Viet Nam. He said, ‘We have a film report from—’ and then he was gone and I was rolling down this beach. You say you saw me in some sort of magic doorway which is now gone, and that I was in Macy’s, and that I was stealing. All of this is preposterous enough, but even if it was so, I could find something better to steal than costume jewelry. I don’t wear jewelry.”

“You better look at your hands again, Odetta,” Eddie said quietly.

For a very long time she looked from the “diamond” on her left pinky, too large and vulgar to be anything but paste, to the large opal on the third finger of her right hand, which was too large and vulgar to be anything but real.

“None of this is happening,” she repeated firmly.

“You sound like a broken record!” He was genuinely angry for the first time. “Every time someone pokes a hole in your neat little story, you just retreat to that ‘none of this is happening’ shit. You have to wise up, ‘Detta.”

“*Don’t call me that! I hate that!*” she burst out so shrilly that Eddie recoiled.

“Sorry. Jesus! I didn’t know.”

“I went from night to day, from undressed to dressed, from my living room to this deserted beach. And what really happened was that some big-bellied redneck deputy hit me upside the head with a club *and that is all!*”

“But your memories don’t stop in Oxford,” he said softly.

“W-What?” Uncertain again. Or maybe seeing and not wanting to. Like with the rings.

“If you got whacked in Oxford, how come your memories don’t stop there?”

“There isn’t always a lot of logic to things like this.” She was rubbing her temples again. “And now, if it’s all the same to you, Eddie, I’d just as soon end the conversation. My headache is back. It’s quite bad.”

“I guess whether or not logic figures in all depends on what you want to believe. I saw you in Macy’s, Odetta. I saw you stealing. You say you don’t do things like that, but you also told me you don’t wear jewelry. You told me that even though you’d looked down at your hands several times while we were talking. Those rings were there then, *but it was as if you couldn’t see them until I called your attention to them and made you see them.*”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” she shouted. “My head hurts!”

“All right. But you know where you lost track of time, and it wasn’t in Oxford.”

“Leave me alone,” she said dully.

Eddie saw the gunslinger toiling his way back with two full waterskins, one tied around his waist and the other slung over his shoulders. He looked very tired.

“I wish I could help you,” Eddie said, “but to do that, I guess I’d have to be real.”

He stood by her for a moment, but her head was bowed, the tips of her fingers steadily massaging her temples.

Eddie went to meet Roland.

8

“Sit down.” Eddie took the bags. “You look all in.”

“I am. I’m getting sick again.”

Eddie looked at the gunslinger’s flushed cheeks and brow, his cracked lips, and nodded. “I hoped it wouldn’t happen, but I’m not that surprised, man. You didn’t bat for the cycle. Balazar didn’t have enough Keflex.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“If you don’t take a penicillin drug long enough, you don’t kill the infection. You just drive it underground. A few days go by and it comes back. We’ll need more, but at least there’s a door to go. In the meantime you’ll just have to take it easy.” But Eddie was thinking unhappily of Odetta’s missing legs and the longer and longer treks it took to find water. He wondered if Roland could have picked a worse time to have a relapse. He supposed it was possible; he just didn’t see how.

“I have to tell you something about Odetta.”

“That’s her name?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s very lovely,” the gunslinger said.

“Yeah. I thought so, too. What isn’t so lovely is the way she feels about this place. She doesn’t think she’s here.”

“I know. And she doesn’t like me much, does she?”

No, Eddie thought, *but that doesn’t keep her from thinking you’re one booger of a hallucination*. He didn’t say it, only nodded.

“The reasons are almost the same,” the gunslinger said. “She’s not the woman I brought through, you see. Not at all.”

Eddie stared, then suddenly nodded, excited. That blurred glimpse in the mirror . . . that snarling face . . . the man was right. Jesus Christ, of course he was! That hadn’t been Odetta at all.

Then he remembered the hands which had gone pawing carelessly through the scarves and had just as carelessly gone about the business of stuffing the junk jewelry into her big purse—almost, it had seemed, as if she *wanted* to be caught.

The rings had been there.

Same rings.

But that doesn’t necessarily mean the same hands, he thought wildly, but that would only hold for a second. He had studied her hands. They *were* the same, long-fingered and delicate.

“No,” the gunslinger continued. “She is not.” His blue eyes studied Eddie carefully.

“Her hands—”

“Listen,” the gunslinger said, “and listen carefully. Our lives may depend on it—mine because I’m getting sick again, and yours

because you have fallen in love with her.”

Eddie said nothing.

“She is two women in the *same body*. She was one woman when I entered her, and another when I returned here.”

Now Eddie *could* say nothing.

“There was something else, something strange, but either I didn’t understand it or I did and it’s slipped away. It seemed important.”

Roland looked past Eddie, looked to the beached wheelchair, standing alone at the end of its short track from nowhere. Then he looked back at Eddie.

“I understand very little of this, or how such a thing can be, but *you must be on your guard*. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.” Eddie’s lungs felt as if they had very little wind in them. He understood—or had, at least, a moviegoer’s understanding of the sort of thing the gunslinger was speaking of—but he didn’t have the breath to explain, not yet. He felt as if Roland had kicked all his breath out of him.

“Good. Because the woman I entered on the other side of the door was as deadly as those lobster-things that come out at night.”

CHAPTER 4

Detta on the Other Side

1

You must be on your guard, the gunslinger said, and Eddie had agreed, but the gunslinger knew Eddie didn't know what he was talking about; the whole back half of Eddie's mind, where survival is or isn't, didn't get the message.

The gunslinger saw this.

It was a good thing for Eddie he did.

2

In the middle of the night, Detta Walker's eyes sprang open. They were full of starlight and clear intelligence.

She remembered everything: how she had fought them, how they had tied her into her chair, how they had taunted her, calling her *niggerbitch, niggerbitch*.

She remembered monsters coming out of the waves, and she remembered how one of the men—the older—had killed one of them. The younger had built a fire and cooked it and then had offered her smoking monster-meat on a stick, grinning. She remembered spitting at his face, remembered his grin turning into an angry honky scowl. He had hit her upside the face, and told her *Well, that's all right, you'll come around, niggerbitch. Wait and see if you don't*. Then he and the Really Bad Man—had laughed and the Really Bad Man had brought out a haunch of beef which he spitted and slowly cooked over the fire on the beach of this alien place to which they had brought her.

The smell of the slowly roasting beef had been seductive, but she had made no sign. Even when the younger one had waved a chunk

of it near her face, chanting *Bite for it, niggerbitch, go on and bite for it*, she had sat like stone, holding herself in.

Then she had slept, and now she was awake, and the ropes they had tied her with were gone. She was no longer in her chair but lying on one blanket and under another, far above the high-tide line, where the lobster-things still wandered and questioned and snatched the odd unfortunate gull out of the air.

She looked to her left and saw nothing.

She looked to her right and saw two sleeping men wrapped in two piles of blankets. The younger one was closer, and the Really Bad Man had taken off his gunbelts and laid them by him.

The guns were still in them.

You made a bad mistake, mahfah, Detta thought, and rolled to her right. The gritty crunch and squeak of her body on the sand was inaudible under the wind, the waves, the questioning creatures. She crawled slowly along the sand (like one of the lobstrosities herself), her eyes glittering.

She reached the gunbelts and pulled one of the guns.

It was very heavy, the grip smooth and somehow independently deadly in her hand. The heaviness didn't bother her. She had strong arms, did Detta Walker.

She crawled a little further.

The younger man was no more than a snoring rock, but the Really Bad Man stirred a little in his sleep and she froze with a snarl tattooed on her face until he quieted again.

He be one sneaky sumbitch. You check, Detta. You check, be sho.

She found the worn chamber release, tried to shove it forward, got nothing, and pulled it instead. The chamber swung open.

Loaded! Fucker be loaded! You goan do this young cocka-de-walk first, and dat Really Bad Man be wakin up and you goan give him one big grin—smile honeychile so I kin see where you is—and den you goan clean his clock somethin righteous.

She swung the chamber back, started to pull the hammer . . . and then waited.

When the wind kicked up a gust, she pulled the hammer to full cock.

Detta pointed Roland's gun at Eddie's temple.

3

The gunslinger watched all this from one half-open eye. The fever was back, but not bad yet, not so bad that he must mistrust himself. So he waited, that one half-open eye the finger on the trigger of his body, the body which had always been his revolver when there was no revolver at hand.

She pulled the trigger.

Click.

Of course *click*.

When he and Eddie had come back with the waterskins from their palaver, Odetta Holmes had been deeply asleep in her wheelchair, slumped to one side. They had made her the best bed they could on the sand and carried her gently from her wheelchair to the spread blankets. Eddie had been sure she would awake, but Roland knew better.

He had killed, Eddie had built a fire, and they had eaten, saving a portion aside for Odetta in the morning.

Then they had talked, and Eddie had said something which burst upon Roland like a sudden flare of lightning. It was too bright and too brief to be total understanding, but he saw much, the way one may discern the lay of the land in a single lucky stroke of lightning.

He could have told Eddie then, but did not. He understood that he must be Eddie's Cort, and when one of Cort's pupils was left hurt and bleeding by some unexpected blow, Cort's response had always been the same: *A child doesn't understand a hammer until he's mashed his finger at a nail. Get up and stop whining, maggot! You have forgotten the face of your father!*

So Eddie had fallen asleep, even though Roland had told him he must be on his guard, and when Roland was sure they both slept (he had waited longer for the Lady, who could, he thought, be sly), he had reloaded his guns with spent casings, unstrapped them (that caused a pang), and put them by Eddie.

Then he waited.

One hour; two; three.

Halfway through the fourth hour, as his tired and feverish body tried to drowse, he sensed rather than saw the Lady come awake and came fully awake himself.

He watched her roll over. He watched her turn her hands into claws and pull herself along the sand to where his gunbelts lay. He watched her take one of them out, come closer to Eddie, and then pause, her head cocking, her nostrils swelling and contracting, doing more than smelling the air; *tasting* it.

Yes. This was the woman he had brought across.

When she glanced toward the gunslinger he did more than feign sleep, because she would have sensed sham; he *went* to sleep. When he sensed her gaze shift away he awoke and opened that single eye again. He saw her begin to raise the gun—she did this with less effort than Eddie had shown the first time Roland saw him do the same thing—and point it toward Eddie's head. Then she paused, her face filled with an inexpressible cunning.

In that moment she reminded him of Marten.

She fiddled with the cylinder, getting it wrong at first, then swinging it open. She looked at the heads of the shells. Roland tensed, waiting first to see if she would know the firing pins had already been struck, waiting next to see if she would turn the gun, look into the other end of the cylinder, and see there was only emptiness there instead of lead (he had thought of loading the guns with cartridges which had already misfired, but only briefly; Cort had taught them that every gun is ultimately ruled by Old Man Splitfoot, and a cartridge which misfires once may not do so a second time). If she did that, he would spring at once.

But she swung the cylinder back in, began to cock the hammer . . . and then paused again. Paused for the wind to mask the single low click.

He thought: *Here is another. God, she's evil, this one, and she's legless, but she's a gunslinger as surely as Eddie is one.*

He waited with her.

The wind gusted.

She pulled the hammer to full cock and placed it half an inch from Eddie's temple. With a grin that was a ghoul's grimace, she pulled the trigger.

Click.

He waited.

She pulled it again. And again. And again.

Click-Click-Click.

"MahFAH!" she screamed, and reversed the gun with liquid grace.

Roland coiled but did not leap. *A child doesn't understand a hammer until he's mashed his finger at a nail.*

If she kills him, she kills you.

Doesn't matter, the voice of Cort answered inexorably.

Eddie stirred. And his reflexes were not bad; he moved fast enough to avoid being driven unconscious or killed. Instead of coming down on the vulnerable temple, the heavy gun-butt cracked the side of his jaw.

"What . . . Jesus!"

"MAHFAH! HONKY MAHFAH!" Detta screamed, and Roland saw her raise the gun a second time. And even though she was legless and Eddie was rolling away, it was as much as he dared. If Eddie hadn't learned the lesson now, he never would. The next time the gunslinger told Eddie to be on his guard, Eddie *would* be, and besides—the bitch was quick. It would not be wise to depend further than this on either Eddie's quickness or the Lady's infirmity.

He uncoiled, flying over Eddie and knocking her backward, ending up on top of her.

"You want it, mahfah?" she screamed at him, simultaneously rolling her crotch against his groin and raising the arm which still held the gun above his head. *"You want it? I goan give you what you want, sho!"*

"Eddie!" he shouted again, not just yelling now but *commanding*. For a moment Eddie just went on squatting there, eyes wide, blood dripping from his jaw (it had already begun to swell), staring, eyes wide. *Move, can't you move?* he thought, *or is it that you don't want to?* His strength was fading now, and the next time she brought that heavy gun-butt down she was going to break his arm with it . . . that

was if he got his arm up in time. If he didn't, she was going to break his *head* with it.

Then Eddie moved. He caught the gun on the downswing and she shrieked, turning toward him, biting at him like a vampire, cursing him in a gutter *patois* so darkly southern that even Eddie couldn't understand it; to Roland it sounded as if the woman had suddenly begun to speak in a foreign language. But Eddie was able to yank the gun out of her hand and with the impending bludgeon gone, Roland was able to pin her.

She did not quit even then but continued to buck and heave and curse, sweat standing out all over her dark face.

Eddie stared, mouth opening and closing like the mouth of a fish. He touched tentatively at his jaw, winced, pulled his fingers back, examined them and the blood on them.

She was screaming that she would kill them both; they could try and rape her but she would kill them with her cunt, they would see, that was one bad son of a bitching cave with teeth around the entrance and if they wanted to try and explore it they would find out.

"What in the hell—" Eddie said stupidly.

"One of my gunbelts," the gunslinger panted harshly at him. "Get it. I'm going to roll her over on top of me and you're going to grab her arms and tie her hands behind her."

"*You ain't NEVAH!*" Detta shrieked, and sunfished her legless body with such sudden force that she almost bucked Roland off. He felt her trying to bring the remainder of her right thigh up again and again, wanting to drive it into his balls.

"I . . . I . . . she . . ."

"*Move, God curse your father's face!*" Roland roared, and at last Eddie moved.

4

They almost lost control of her twice during the tying and binding. But Eddie was at last able to slip-knot one of Roland's gunbelts around her wrists when Roland—using all his force—finally brought

them together behind her (all the time drawing back from her lunging bites like a mongoose from a snake; the bites he avoided but before Eddie had finished, the gunslinger was drenched with spittle) and then Eddie dragged her off, holding the short leash of the makeshift slip-knot to do it. He did not want to hurt this thrashing screaming cursing thing. It was uglier than the lobstrosities by far because of the greater intelligence which informed it, but he knew it could also be beautiful. He did not want to harm the other person the vessel held somewhere inside it (like a live dove deep inside one of the secret compartments in a magician's magic box).

Odetta Holmes was somewhere inside that screaming screeching thing.

5

Although his last mount—a mule—had died too long ago to remember, the gunslinger still had a piece of its tether-rope (which, in turn, had once been a fine gunslinger's lariat). They used this to bind her in her wheelchair, as she had imagined (or falsely remembered, and in the end they both came to the same thing, didn't they?) they had done already. Then they drew away from her.

If not for the crawling lobster-things, Eddie would have gone down to the water and washed his hands.

"I feel like I'm going to vomit," he said in a voice that jig-jagged up and down the scale like the voice of an adolescent boy.

"Why don't you go on and eat each other's COCKS?" the struggling thing in the chair screeched. *"Why don't you jus go on and do dat if you fraid of a black woman's cunny? You just go on! Sho! Suck on yo each one's candles! Do it while you got a chance, cause Detta Walker goan get outen dis chair and cut dem skinny ole white candles off and feed em to those walkin buzzsaws down there!"*

"She's the woman I was in. Do you believe me now?"

"I believed you *before*," Eddie said. "I *told* you that."

"You *believed* you believed. You believed on the top of your mind. Do you believe it all the way down now? All the way to the bottom?"

Eddie looked at the shrieking, convulsing thing in the chair and then looked away, white except for the slash on his jaw, which was still dripping a little. That side of his face was beginning to look a little like a balloon.

“Yes,” he said. “God, yes.”

“This woman is a monster.”

Eddie began to cry.

The gunslinger wanted to comfort him, could not commit such a sacrilege (he remembered Jake too well), and walked off into the dark with his new fever burning and aching inside him.

6

Much earlier on that night, while Odetta still slept, Eddie said he thought he might understand what was wrong with her. *Might*. The gunslinger asked what he meant.

“She could be a schizophrenic.”

Roland only shook his head. Eddie explained what he understood of schizophrenia, gleanings from such films as *The Three Faces of Eve* and various TV programs (mostly the soap operas he and Henry had often watched while stoned). Roland had nodded. Yes. The disease Eddie described sounded about right. A woman with two faces, one light and one dark. A face like the one the man in black had shown him on the fifth Tarot card.

“And they don’t know—these schizophrenes—that they have another?”

“No,” Eddie said. “But . . .” He trailed off, moodily watching the lobstrosities crawl and question, question and crawl.

“But what?”

“I’m no shrink,” Eddie said, “so I don’t really know—”

“*Shrink*? What is a *shrink*?”

Eddie tapped his temple. “A head-doctor. A doctor for your mind. They’re really called psychiatrists.”

Roland nodded. He liked *shrink* better. Because this Lady’s mind was too large. Twice as large as it needed to be.

“But I think schizos almost always know *something* is wrong with them,” Eddie said. “Because there are blanks. Maybe I’m wrong, but I always got the idea that they were usually two people who thought they had partial amnesia, because of the blank spaces in their memories when the other personality was in control. *She . . .* she says she remembers everything. She *really thinks* she remembers everything.”

“I thought you said she didn’t believe any of this was happening.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said, “but forget that for now. I’m trying to say that, no matter what she *believes*, what she *remembers* goes right from her living room where she was sitting in her bathrobe watching the midnight news to here, with no break at all. She doesn’t have any sense that some other person took over between then and when you grabbed her in Macy’s. Hell, that might have been the next day or even *weeks* later. I know it was still winter, because most of the shoppers in that store were wearing coats—”

The gunslinger nodded. Eddie’s perceptions were sharpening. That was good. He had missed the boots and scarves, the gloves sticking out of coat pockets, but it was still a start.

“—but otherwise it’s impossible to tell how long Odetta was that other woman because she doesn’t know. I think she’s in a situation she’s never been in before, and her way of protecting both sides is this story about getting cracked over the head.”

Roland nodded.

“And the rings. Seeing those really shook her up. She tried not to show it, but it showed, all right.”

Roland asked: “If these two women don’t know they exist in the same body, and if they don’t even suspect that something may be wrong, if each has her own separate chain of memories, partly real but partly made up to fit the times the other is there, what are we to do with her? How are we even to live with her?”

Eddie had shrugged. “Don’t ask me. It’s your problem. You’re the one who says you need her. Hell, you risked your neck to bring her here.” Eddie thought about this for a minute, remembered squatting over Roland’s body with Roland’s knife held just above the

gunslinger's throat, and laughed abruptly and without humor. *LITERALLY risked your neck, man*, he thought.

A silence fell between them. Odetta had by then been breathing quietly. As the gunslinger was about to reiterate his warning for Eddie to be on guard and announce (loud enough for the Lady to hear, if she was only shamming) that he was going to turn in, Eddie said the thing which lighted Roland's mind in a single sudden glare, the thing which made him understand at least part of what he needed so badly to know.

At the end, when they came through.

She had changed at the end.

And he had *seen* something, some *thing*—

"Tell you what," Eddie said, moodily stirring the remains of the fire with a split claw from this night's kill, "when you brought her through, I felt like *I* was a schizo."

"Why?"

Eddie thought, then shrugged. It was too hard to explain, or maybe he was just too tired. "It's not important."

"*Why?*"

Eddie looked at Roland, saw he was asking a serious question for a serious reason—or thought he was—and took a minute to think back. "It's really hard to describe, man. It was looking in that door. That's what freaked me out. When you see someone move in that door, it's like you're moving with them. You know what I'm talking about."

Roland nodded.

"Well, I watched it like it was a movie—never mind, it's not important—until the very end. Then you turned her toward *this* side of the doorway and for the first time *I was looking at myself*. It was like . . ." He groped and could find nothing. "I dunno. It should have been like looking in a mirror, I guess, but it wasn't, because . . . because it was like looking at another person. It was like being turned inside out. Like being in two places at the same time. Shit, *I* don't know."

But the gunslinger was thunderstruck. *That* was what he had sensed as they came through; *that* was what had happened to her,

no, not just *her, them*: for a moment Detta and Odetta had looked at each other, not the way one would look at her reflection in a mirror but as *separate people*; the mirror became a windowpane and for a moment Odetta had seen Detta and Detta had seen Odetta and had been equally horror-struck.

They each know, the gunslinger thought grimly. *They may not have known before, but they do now. They can try to hide it from themselves, but for a moment they saw, they knew, and that knowing must still be there.*

“Roland?”

“What?”

“Just wanted to make sure you hadn’t gone to sleep with your eyes open. Because for a minute you looked like you were, you know, long ago and far away.”

“If so, I’m back now,” the gunslinger said. “I’m going to turn in. Remember what I said, Eddie: be on your guard.”

“I’ll watch,” Eddie said, but Roland knew that, sick or not, he would have to be the one to do the watching tonight.

Everything else had followed from that.

7

Following the ruckus Eddie and Detta Walker eventually went to sleep again (she did not so much fall asleep as drop into an exhausted state of unconsciousness in her chair, lolling to one side against the restraining ropes).

The gunslinger, however, lay wakeful.

I will have to bring the two of them to battle, he thought, but he didn’t need one of Eddie’s “shrinks” to tell him that such a battle might be to the death. *If the bright one, Odetta, were to win that battle, all might yet be well. If the dark one were to win it, all would surely be lost with her.*

Yet he sensed that what really needed doing was not killing but *joining*. He had already recognized much that would be of value to him—*them*—in Detta Walker’s gutter toughness, and he wanted her

—but he wanted her under control. There was a long way to go. Detta thought he and Eddie were monsters of some species she called *Honk Mafahs*. That was only dangerous delusion, but there would be real monsters along the way—the lobstrosities were not the first, nor would they be the last. The fight-until-you-drop woman he had entered and who had come out of hiding again tonight might come in very handy in a fight against such monsters, if she could be tempered by Odetta Holmes’s calm humanity—especially now, with him short two fingers, almost out of bullets, and growing more fever.

But that is a step ahead. I think if I can make them acknowledge each other, that would bring them into confrontation. How may it be done?

He lay awake all that long night, thinking, and although he felt the fever in him grow, he found no answer to his question.

8

Eddie woke up shortly before daybreak, saw the gunslinger sitting near the ashes of last night’s fire with his blanket wrapped around him Indian-fashion, and joined him.

“How do you feel?” Eddie asked in a low voice. The Lady still slept in her crisscrossing of ropes, although she occasionally jerked and muttered and moaned.

“All right.”

Eddie gave him an appraising glance. “You don’t look all right.”

“Thank you, Eddie,” the gunslinger said dryly.

“You’re shivering.”

“It will pass.”

The Lady jerked and moaned again—this time a word that was almost understandable. It might have been *Oxford*.

“God, I hate to see her tied up like that,” Eddie murmured. “Like a goddam calf in a barn.”

“She’ll wake soon. Mayhap we can unloose her when she does.”

It was the closest either of them came to saying out loud that when the Lady in the chair opened her eyes, the calm, if slightly puzzled

gaze of Odetta Holmes might greet them.

Fifteen minutes later, as the first sunrays struck over the hills, those eyes did open—but what the men saw was not the calm gaze of Odetta Holmes but the mad glare of Detta Walker.

“How many times you done rape me while I was buzzed out?” she asked. “My cunt feel all slick an tallowy, like somebody done been at it with a couple them little bitty white candles you graymeat mahfahs call cocks.”

Roland sighed.

“Let’s get going,” he said, and gained his feet with a grimace.

“I ain’t goan nowhere wit *choo*, mahfah,” Detta spat.

“Oh yes you are,” Eddie said. “Dreadfully sorry, my dear.”

“Where you think I’m goan?”

“Well,” Eddie said, “what was behind Door Number One wasn’t so hot, and what was behind Door Number Two was even worse, so now, instead of quitting like sane people, we’re going to go right on ahead and check out Door Number Three. The way things have been going, I think it’s likely to be something like Godzilla or Ghidra the Three-Headed Monster, but I’m an optimist. I’m still hoping for the stainless steel cookware.”

“I ain’t goan.”

“You’re going, all right,” Eddie said, and walked behind her chair. She began struggling again, but the gunslinger had made these knots, and her struggles only drew them tighter. Soon enough she saw this and ceased. She was full of poison but far from stupid. But she looked back over her shoulder at Eddie with a grin which made him recoil a little. It seemed to him the most evil expression he had ever seen on a human face.

“Well, maybe I be goan on a little way,” she said, “but maybe not s’far’s you think, white boy. And sure-God not s’fast’s you think.”

“What do you mean?”

That leering, over-the-shoulder grin again.

“You find out, white boy.” Her eyes, mad but cogent, shifted briefly to the gunslinger. “You bofe be findin *dat* out.”

Eddie wrapped his hands around the bicycle grips at the ends of the push-handles on the back of her wheelchair and they began

north again, now leaving not only footprints but the twin tracks of the Lady's chair as they moved up the seemingly endless beach.

9

The day was a nightmare.

It was hard to calculate distance travelled when you were moving along a landscape which varied so little, but Eddie knew their progress had slowed to a crawl.

And he knew who was responsible.

Oh yeah.

You bofe be findin dat out, Detta had said, and they hadn't been on the move more than half an hour before the finding out began.

Pushing.

That was the first thing. Pushing the wheelchair up a beach of fine sand would have been as impossible as driving a car through deep unplowed snow. This beach, with its gritty, marly surface, made moving the chair possible but far from easy. It would roll along smoothly enough for awhile, crunching over shells and popping little pebbles to either side of its hard rubber tires . . . and then it would hit a dip where finer sand had drifted, and Eddie would have to shove, grunting, to get it and its solid unhelpful passenger through it. The sand sucked greedily at the wheels. You had to simultaneously push and throw your weight against the handles of the chair in a downward direction, or it and its bound occupant would tumble over face-first onto the beach.

Detta would cackle as he tried to move her without upending her. "You havin a good time back dere, honeychile?" she asked each time the chair ran into one of these dry bogs.

When the gunslinger moved over to help, Eddie motioned him away. "You'll get your chance," he said. "We'll switch off." *But I think my turns are going to be a hell of a lot longer than his*, a voice in his head spoke up. *The way he looks, he's going to have his hands full just keeping himself moving before much longer, let alone moving the woman in this chair. No sir, Eddie, I'm afraid this Bud's for you.*

It's God's revenge, you know it? All those years you spent as a junkie, and guess what? You're finally the pusher!

He uttered a short out-of-breath laugh.

"What's so funny, white boy?" Detta asked, and although Eddie thought she meant to sound sarcastic, it came out sounding just a tiny bit angry.

Ain't supposed to be any laughs in this for me, he thought. None at all. Not as far as she's concerned.

"You wouldn't understand, babe. Just let it lie."

"I be lettin *you* lie before this be all over," she said. "Be lettin you and yo bad-ass buddy there lie in pieces all ovah dis beach. Sho. Meantime you better save yo breaif to do yo pushin with. You already sound like you gettin a little sho't winded."

"Well, you talk for both of us, then," Eddie panted. "You *never* seem to run out of wind."

"I goan *break* wind, graymeat! Goan break it ovah yo dead face!"

"Promises, promises." Eddie shoved the chair out of the sand and onto relatively easier going—for awhile, at least. The sun was not yet fully up, but he had already worked up a sweat.

This is going to be an amusing and informative day, he thought. I can see that already.

Stopping.

That was the next thing.

They had struck a firm stretch of beach. Eddie pushed the chair along faster, thinking vaguely that if he could keep this bit of extra speed, he might be able to drive right through the next sandtrap he happened to strike on pure impetus.

All at once the chair stopped. Stopped dead. The crossbar on the back hit Eddie's chest with a thump. He grunted. Roland looked around, but not even the gunslinger's cat-quick reflexes could stop the Lady's chair from going over exactly as it had threatened to do in each of the sandtraps. It went and Detta went with it, tied and helpless but cackling wildly. She still was when Roland and Eddie finally managed to right the chair again. Some of the ropes had drawn so tight they must be cutting cruelly into her flesh, cutting off the circulation to her extremities; her forehead was slashed and

blood trickled into her eyebrows. She went on cackling just the same.

The men were both gasping, out of breath, by the time the chair was on its wheels again. The combined weight of it and the woman in it must have totaled two hundred and fifty pounds, most of it chair. It occurred to Eddie that if the gunslinger had snatched Detta from his own *when*, 1987, the chair might have weighed as much as sixty pounds less.

Detta giggled, snorted, blinked blood out of her eyes.

“Looky here, you boys done opsot me,” she said.

“Call your lawyer,” Eddie muttered. “Sue us.”

“An got yoselfs all tuckered out gittin me back on top agin. Must have taken you ten minutes, too.”

The gunslinger took a piece of his shirt—enough of it was gone now so the rest didn’t much matter—and reached forward with his left hand to mop the blood away from the cut on her forehead. She snapped at him, and from the savage click those teeth made when they came together, Eddie thought that, if Roland had been only one instant slower in drawing back, Detta Walker would have evened up the number of fingers on his hands for him again.

She cackled and stared at him with meanly merry eyes, but the gunslinger saw fear hidden far back in those eyes. She was afraid of him. Afraid because he was The Really Bad Man.

Why was he The Really Bad Man? Maybe because, on some deeper level, she sensed what he knew about her.

“Almos’ got you, graymeat,” she said. “Almos’ got you that time.” And cackled, witchlike.

“Hold her head,” the gunslinger said evenly. “She bites like a weasel.”

Eddie held it while the gunslinger carefully wiped the wound clean. It wasn’t wide and didn’t look deep, but the gunslinger took no chances; he walked slowly down to the water, soaked the piece of shirting in the salt water, and then came back.

She began to scream as he approached.

“Doan you be touchin me wid dat thing! Doan you be touchin me wid no water from where them poison things come from! Git it away!

Git it *away!*”

“Hold her head,” Roland said in the same even voice. She was whipping it from side to side. “I don’t want to take any chances.”

Eddie held it . . . and squeezed it when she tried to shake free. She saw he meant business and immediately became still, showing no more fear of the damp rag. It had been only sham, after all.

She smiled at Roland as he bathed the cut, carefully washing out the last clinging particles of grit.

“In fact, *you* look *mo* than jest tuckered out,” Detta observed. “You look *sick*, graymeat. I don’t think you ready fo no long trip. I don’t think you ready fo *nuthin* like dat.”

Eddie examined the chair’s rudimentary controls. It had an emergency hand-brake which locked both wheels. Detta had worked her right hand over there, had waited patiently until she thought Eddie was going fast enough, and then she had yanked the brake, purposely spilling herself over. Why? To slow them down, that was all. There was no reason to do such a thing, but a woman like Detta, Eddie thought, needed no reasons. A woman like Detta was perfectly willing to do such things out of sheer meanness.

Roland loosened her bonds a bit so the blood could flow more freely, then tied her hand firmly away from the brake.

“That be all right, Mister Man,” Detta said, offering him a bright smile filled with too many teeth. “That be all right jest the same. There be other ways to slow you boys down. All *sorts* of ways.”

“Let’s go,” the gunslinger said tonelessly.

“You all right, man?” Eddie asked. The gunslinger looked very pale.

“Yes. Let’s go.”

They started up the beach again.

The gunslinger insisted on pushing for an hour, and Eddie gave way to him reluctantly. Roland got her through the first sandtrap, but Eddie had to pitch in and help get the wheelchair out of the second.

The gunslinger was gasping for air, sweat standing out on his forehead in large beads.

Eddie let him go on a little further, and Roland was quite adept at weaving his way around the places where the sand was loose enough to bog the wheels, but the chair finally became mired again and Eddie could bear only a few moments of watching Roland struggle to push it free, gasping, chest heaving, while the witch (for so Eddie had come to think of her) howled with laughter and actually threw her body backwards in the chair to make the task that much more difficult—and then he shouldered the gunslinger aside and heaved the chair out of the sand with one angry lurching lunge. The chair tottered and now he saw/sensed her shifting *forward* as much as the ropes would allow, doing this with a weird prescience at the exactly proper moment, trying to topple herself again.

Roland threw his weight on the back of the chair next to Eddie's and it settled back.

Detta looked around and gave them a wink of such obscene conspiracy that Eddie felt his arms crawl up in gooseflesh.

"You almost opsot me *agin*, boys," she said. "You want to look out for me, now. I ain't nuthin but a old crippled lady, so you want to have a care for me now."

She laughed . . . laughed fit to split.

Although Eddie cared for the woman that was the other part of her—was near to loving her just on the basis of the brief time he had seen her and spoken with her—he felt his hands itch to close around her windpipe and choke that laugh, choke it until she could never laugh again.

She peered around again, saw what he was thinking as if it had been printed on him in red ink, and laughed all the harder. Her eyes dared him. *Go on, graymeat. Go on. You want to do it? Go on and do it.*

In other words, don't just tip the chair; tip the woman, Eddie thought. Tip her over for good. That's what she wants. For Detta, being killed by a white man may be the only real goal she has in life.

"Come on," he said, and began pushing again. "We are gonna tour the seacoast, sweet thang, like it or not."

“Fuck you,” she spat.

“Cram it, babe,” Eddie responded pleasantly.

The gunslinger walked beside him, head down.

11

They came to a considerable outcropping of rocks when the sun said it was about eleven and here they stopped for nearly an hour, taking the shade as the sun climbed toward the roofpeak of the day. Eddie and the gunslinger ate leftovers from the previous night’s kill. Eddie offered a portion to Detta, who again refused, telling him she knew what they wanted to do, and if they wanted to do it, they best to do it with their bare hands and stop trying to poison her. That, she said, was the coward’s way.

Eddie’s right, the gunslinger mused. This woman has made her own chain of memories. She knows everything that happened to her last night, even though she was really fast asleep.

She believed they had brought her pieces of meat which smelled of death and putrescence, had taunted her with it while they themselves ate salted beef and drank some sort of beer from flasks. She believed they had, every now and then, held pieces of their own untainted supper out to her, drawing it away at the last moment when she snatched at it with her teeth—and laughing while they did it, of course. In the world (or at least in the mind) of Detta Walker, *Honk Mahfahs* only did two things to brown women: raped them or laughed at them. Or both at the same time.

It was almost funny. Eddie Dean had last seen beef during his ride in the sky-carriage, and Roland had seen none since the last of his jerky was eaten, Gods alone knew how long ago. As far as beer . . . he cast his mind back.

Tull.

There had been beer in Tull. Beer and beef.

God, it would be good to have a beer. His throat ached and it would be so good to have a beer to cool that ache. Better even than the *astin* from Eddie’s world.

They drew off a distance from her.

“Ain’t I good nough cump’ny for white boys like you?” she cawed after them. “Or did you jes maybe want to have a pull on each other one’s little bitty white candle?”

She threw her head back and screamed laughter that frightened the gulls up, crying, from the rocks where they had been met in convention a quarter of a mile away.

The gunslinger sat with his hands dangling between his knees, thinking. Finally he raised his head and told Eddie, “I can only understand about one word in every ten she says.”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Eddie replied. “I’m getting at least two in every three. Doesn’t matter. Most of it comes back to *honky mahfah*.”

Roland nodded. “Do many of the dark-skinned people talk that way where you come from? Her *other* didn’t.”

Eddie shook his head and laughed. “No. And I’ll tell you something sort of funny—at least / think it’s sort of funny, but maybe that’s just because there isn’t all that much to laugh at out here. It’s not real. It’s not real and she doesn’t even know it.”

Roland looked at him and said nothing.

“Remember when you washed off her forehead, how she pretended she was scared of the water?”

“Yes.”

“You knew she was pretending?”

“Not at first, but quite soon.”

Eddie nodded. “That was an act, and she *knew* it was an act. But she’s a pretty good actress and she fooled both of us for a few seconds. The way she’s talking is an act, too. But it’s not as good. It’s so stupid, so goddam *hokey!*”

“You believe she pretends well only when she knows she’s doing it?”

“Yes. She sounds like a cross between the darkies in this book called *Mandingo* I read once and Butterfly McQueen in *Gone with the Wind*. I know you don’t know those names, but what I mean is she talks like a cliché. Do you know that word?”

“It means what is always said or believed by people who think only a little or not at all.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t have said it half so good.”

“Ain’t you boys done jerkin on dem candles a yours yet?” Detta’s voice was growing hoarse and cracked. “Or maybe it’s just you can’t fine em. Dat it?”

“Come on.” The gunslinger got slowly to his feet. He swayed for a moment, saw Eddie looking at him, and smiled. “I’ll be all right.”

“For how long?”

“As long as I have to be,” the gunslinger answered, and the serenity in his voice chilled Eddie’s heart.

12

That night the gunslinger used his last sure live cartridge to make their kill. He would start systematically testing the ones he believed to be duds tomorrow night, but he believed it was pretty much as Eddie had said: They were down to beating the damned things to death.

It was like the other nights: the fire, the cooking, the shelling, the eating—eating which was now slow and unenthusiastic. *We’re just gassing up*, Eddie thought. They offered food to Detta, who screamed and laughed and cursed and asked how long they was goan take her for a fool, and then she began throwing her body wildly from one side to the other, never minding how her bonds grew steadily tighter, only trying to upset the chair to one side or the other so they would have to pick her up again before they could eat.

Just before she could manage the trick, Eddie grabbed her and Roland braced the wheels on either sides with rocks.

“I’ll loosen the ropes a bit if you’ll be still,” Roland told her.

“Suck shit out my ass, mahfah!”

“I don’t understand if that means yes or no.”

She looked at him, eyes narrowed, suspecting some buried barb of satire in that calm voice (Eddie also wondered, but couldn’t tell if there was or not), and after a moment she said sulkily, “I be still. Too damn hungry to kick up much dickens. You boys goan give me some real food or you jes goan starve me to death? Dat yo plan? You too

chickenshit to choke me and I ain't *nev'* goan eat no poison, so dat must be you plan. Starve me out. Well, we see, sho. We goan see. Sho we are."

She offered them her bone-chilling sickle of a grin again.

Not long after she fell asleep.

Eddie touched the side of Roland's face. Roland glanced at him but did not pull away from the touch.

"I'm all right."

"Yeah, you're Jim-dandy. Well, I tell you what, Jim, we didn't get along very far today."

"I know." There was also the matter of having used the last live shell, but that was knowledge Eddie could do without, at least tonight. Eddie wasn't sick, but he was exhausted. Too exhausted for more bad news.

No, he's not sick, not yet, but if he goes too long without rest, gets tired enough, he'll get sick.

In a way, Eddie already was; both of them were. Cold-sores had developed at the corners of Eddie's mouth, and there were scaly patches on his skin. The gunslinger could feel his teeth loosening up in their sockets, and the flesh between his toes had begun to crack open and bleed, as had that between his remaining fingers. They were eating, but they were eating the same thing, day in and day out. They could go on that way for a time, but in the end they would die as surely as if they had starved.

What we have is Shipmate's Disease on dry land, Roland thought. Simple as that. How funny. We need fruit. We need greens.

Eddie nodded toward the Lady. "She's going to go right on making it tough."

"Unless the other one inside her comes back."

"That would be nice, but we can't count on it," Eddie said. He took a piece of blackened claw and began to scrawl aimless patterns in the dirt. "Any idea how far the next door might be?"

Roland shook his head.

"I only ask because if the distance between Number Two and Number Three is the same as the distance between Number One and Number Two, we could be in deep shit."

“We’re in deep shit right now.”

“Neck deep,” Eddie agreed moodily. “I just keep wondering how long I can tread water.”

Roland clapped him on the shoulder, a gesture of affection so rare it made Eddie blink.

“There’s one thing that Lady doesn’t know,” he said.

“Oh? What’s that?”

“We *Honk Mahfahs* can tread water a long time.”

Eddie laughed at that, laughed hard, smothering his laughter against his arm so he wouldn’t wake Detta up. He’d had enough of her for one day, please and thank you.

The gunslinger looked at him, smiling. “I’m going to turn in,” he said. “Be—”

“—on my guard. Yeah. I will.”

13

Screaming was next.

Eddie fell asleep the moment his head touched the bunched bundle of his shirt, and it seemed only five minutes later when Detta began screaming.

He was awake at once, ready for anything, some King Lobster arisen from the deep to take revenge for its slain children or a horror down from the hills. It *seemed* he was awake at once, anyway, but the gunslinger was already on his feet, a gun in his left hand.

When she saw they were both awake, Detta promptly quit screaming.

“Jes thought I’d see if you boys on yo toes,” she said. “Might be woofs. Looks likely enough country for ’em. Wanted to make sho if I saw me a woof creepin up, I could get you on yo feet in time.” But there was no fear in her eyes; they glinted with mean amusement.

“Christ,” Eddie said groggily. The moon was up but barely risen; they had been asleep less than two hours.

The gunslinger holstered his gun.

“Don’t do it again,” he said to the Lady in the wheelchair.

“What *you* goan do if *I* do? Rape me?”

“If we were going to rape you, you would be one well-raped woman by now,” the gunslinger said evenly. “Don’t do it again.”

He lay down again, pulling his blanket over him.

Christ, dear Christ, Eddie thought, *what a mess this is, what a fucking . . .* and that was as far as the thought went before trailing off into exhausted sleep again and then she was splintering the air with fresh shrieks, shrieking like a firebell, and Eddie was up again, his body flaming with adrenaline, hands clenched, and then she was laughing, her voice hoarse and raspy.

Eddie glanced up and saw the moon had advanced less than ten degrees since she had awakened them the first time.

She means to keep on doing it, he thought wearily. *She means to stay awake and watch us, and when she’s sure we’re getting down into deep sleep, that place where you recharge, she’s going to open her mouth and start bellowing again. She’ll do it and do it and do it until she doesn’t have any voice left to bellow with.*

Her laughter stopped abruptly. Roland was advancing on her, a dark shape in the moonlight.

“You jes stay away from me, graymeat,” Detta said, but there was a quiver of nerves in her voice. “You ain’t goan do nothing to me.”

Roland stood before her and for a moment Eddie was sure, completely sure, that the gunslinger had reached the end of his patience and would simply swat her like a fly. Instead, astoundingly, he dropped to one knee before her like a suitor about to propose marriage.

“Listen,” he said, and Eddie could scarcely credit the silky quality of Roland’s voice. He could see much the same deep surprise on Detta’s face, only there fear was joined to it. “Listen to me, Odetta.”



“Who you callin O-Decca? Dat ain my name.”

“Shut up, bitch,” the gunslinger said in a growl, and then, reverting to that same silken voice: “If you hear me, and if you can control her at all—”

“Why you talkin at me dat way? Why you talkin like you was talkin to somebody else? You quit dat honky jive! You jes quit it now, you hear me?”

“—keep her shut up. I can gag her, but I don’t want to do that. A hard gag is a dangerous business. People choke.”

“YOU QUIT IT YOU HONKY BULLSHIT VOODOO MAHFAH!”

“Odetta.” His voice was a whisper, like the onset of rain.

She fell silent, staring at him with huge eyes. Eddie had never in his life seen such hate and fear combined in human eyes.

“I don’t think this bitch would care if she *did* die on a hard gag. She wants to die, but maybe even more, she wants *you* to die. But you *haven’t* died, not so far, and I don’t think Decca is brand-new in your

life. She feels too at home in you, so maybe you can hear what I'm saying, and maybe you can keep some control over her even if you can't come out yet.

"Don't let her wake us up a third time, Odetta.

"I don't want to gag her.

"But if I have to, I will."

He got up, left without looking back, rolled himself into his blanket again, and promptly fell asleep.

She was still staring at him, eyes wide, nostrils flaring.

"Honky voodoo bullshit," she whispered.

Eddie lay down, but this time it was a long time before sleep came to claim him, in spite of his deep tiredness. He would come to the brink, anticipate her screams, and snap back.

Three hours or so later, with the moon now going the other way, he finally dropped off.

Detta did no more screaming that night, either because Roland had frightened her, or because she wanted to conserve her voice for future alarms and excursions, or—possibly, just possibly—because Odetta had heard and had exercised the control the gunslinger had asked of her.

Eddie slept at last but awoke sodden and unrefreshed. He looked toward the chair, hoping against hope that it would be Odetta, please God let it be Odetta this morning—

"Mawnin, whitebread," Detta said, and grinned her sharklike grin at him. "Thought you was goan sleep till noon. You cain't be doin nuthin like *dat*, kin you? We got to bus us some miles here, ain't dat d'fac of d'matter? Sho! An I think *you* the one goan have to do most of de bustin, cause dat other fella, one with de voodoo eyes, he lookin mo peaky all de time, I declare he do! Yes! I doan think he goan be eatin *anythin* much longer, not even dat fancy smoked meat you whitebread boys keep fo when you done joikin on each other one's little bitty white candles. So let's go, whitebread! Detta doan want to be d'one keepin you."

Her lids and her voice both dropped a little; her eyes peeked at him slyly from their corners.

"Not f'um startin out, leastways."

*Dis goan be a day you 'member, whitebread, those sly eyes promised. Dis goan be a day you 'member for a long, long time.
Sho.*

14

They made three miles that day, maybe a shade under. Detta's chair upset twice. Once she did it herself, working her fingers slowly and unobtrusively over to that handbrake again and yanking it. The second time Eddie did with no help at all, shoving too hard in one of those goddamned sand traps. That was near the end of the day, and he simply panicked, thinking he just *wasn't* going to be able to get her out this time, just *wasn't*. So he gave that one last titanic heave with his quivering arms, and of course it had been much too hard, and over she had gone, like Humpty-Dumpty falling off his wall, and he and Roland had to labor to get her upright again. They finished the job just in time. The rope under her breasts was now pulled taut across her windpipe. The gunslinger's efficient running slipknot was choking her to death. Her face had gone a funny blue color, she was on the verge of losing consciousness, but still she went on wheezing her nasty laughter.

Let her be, why don't you? Eddie nearly said as Roland bent quickly forward to loosen the knot. *Let her choke! I don't know if she wants to do herself like you said, but I know she wants to do US . . . so let her go!*

Then he remembered Odetta (although their encounter had been so brief and seemed so long ago that memory was growing dim) and moved forward to help.

The gunslinger pushed him impatiently away with one hand. "Only room for one."

When the rope was loosened and the Lady gasping harshly for breath (which she expelled in gusts of her angry laughter), he turned and looked at Eddie critically. "I think we ought to stop for the night."

"A little further." He was almost pleading. "I can go a little further."

“Sho! He be one strong buck He be good fo choppin one mo row cotton and he *still* have enough lef’ to give yo little bitty white candle one *fine* suckin-on t’night.”

She still wouldn’t eat, and her face was becoming all stark lines and angles. Her eyes glittered in deepening sockets.

Roland gave her no notice at all, only studied Eddie closely. At last he nodded. “A little way. Not far, but a little way.”

Twenty minutes later Eddie called it quits himself. His arms felt like Jell-O.

They sat in the shadows of the rocks, listening to the gulls, watching the tide come in, waiting for the sun to go down and the lobstrosities to come out and begin their cumbersome cross-examinations.

Roland told Eddie in a voice too low for Detta to hear that he thought they were out of live shells. Eddie’s mouth tightened down a little but that was all. Roland was pleased.

“So you’ll have to brain one of them yourself,” Roland said. “I’m too weak to handle a rock big enough to do the job . . . and still be sure.”

Eddie was now the one to do the studying.

He had no liking for what he saw.

The gunslinger waved his scrutiny away.

“Never mind,” he said. “Never mind, Eddie. What is, *is*.”

“*Ka*,” Eddie said.

The gunslinger nodded and smiled faintly. “*Ka*.”

“Kaka,” Eddie said, and they looked at each other, and both laughed. Roland looked startled and perhaps even a little afraid of the rusty sound emerging from his mouth. His laughter did not last long. When it had stopped he looked distant and melancholy.

“Dat laffin mean you fine’ly managed to joik each other off?” Detta cried over at them in her hoarse, failing voice. “When you goan get down to de pokin? Dat’s what I want to see! Dat pokin!”

Eddie made the kill.

Detta refused to eat, as before. Eddie ate half a piece so she could see, then offered her the other half.

“Nossuh!” she said, eyes sparking at him. “No *SUH!* You done put de poison in t’other end. One you trine to give me.”

Without saying anything, Eddie took the rest of the piece, put it in his mouth, chewed, swallowed.

“Doan mean a thing,” Detta said sulkily. “Leave me alone, graymeat.”

Eddie wouldn’t.

He brought her another piece.

“*You* tear it in half. Give me whichever you want. I’ll eat it, then you eat the rest.”

“Ain’t fallin fo none o yo honky tricks, Mist’ Chahlie. Git away f’um me is what I said, and git away f’um me is what I meant.”

16

She did not scream in the night . . . but she was still there the next morning.

17

That day they made only two miles, although Detta made no effort to upset her chair; Eddie thought she might be growing too weak for acts of attempted sabotage. Or perhaps she had seen there was really no need for them. Three fatal factors were drawing inexorably together: Eddie’s weariness, the terrain, which after endless days of endless days of sameness, was finally beginning to change, and Roland’s deteriorating condition.

There were fewer sandtraps, but that was cold comfort. The ground was becoming grainier, more and more like cheap and unprofitable soil and less and less like sand (in places bunches of weeds grew, looking almost ashamed to be there), and there were so many large rocks now jutting from this odd combination of sand

and soil that Eddie found himself detouring around them as he had previously tried to detour the Lady's chair around the sandtraps. And soon enough, he saw, there would be no beach left at all. The hills, brown and cheerless things, were drawing steadily closer. Eddie could see the ravines which curled between them, looking like chops made by an awkward giant wielding a blunt cleaver. That night, before falling asleep, he heard what sounded like a very large cat squalling far up in one of them.

The beach had seemed endless, but he was coming to realize it had an end after all. Somewhere up ahead, those hills were simply going to squeeze it out of existence. The eroded hills would march down to the sea and then into it, where they might become first a cape or peninsula of sorts, and then a series of archipelagoes.

That worried him, but Roland's condition worried him more.

This time the gunslinger seemed not so much to be burning as *fading*, losing himself, becoming transparent.

The red lines had appeared again, marching relentlessly up the underside of his right arm toward the elbow.

For the last two days Eddie had looked constantly ahead, squinting into the distance, hoping to see the door, the door, the magic door. For the last two days he had waited for Odetta to reappear.

Neither had appeared.

Before falling asleep that night two terrible thoughts came to him, like some joke with a double punchline:

What if there was no door?

What if Odetta Holmes was dead?

18

"Rise and shine, mahfah!" Detta screeched him out of unconsciousness. "I think it jes be you and me now, honeychile. Think yo frien done finally passed on. I think yo frien be pokin the devil down in hell."

Eddie looked at the rolled huddled shape of Roland and for one terrible moment he thought the bitch was right. Then the gunslinger stirred, moaned furrily, and pawed himself into a sitting position.

“Well looky yere!” Detta had screamed so much that now there were moments when her voice disappeared almost entirely, becoming no more than a weird whisper, like winter wind under a door. “I thought you was dead, Mister Man!”

Roland was getting slowly to his feet. He still looked to Eddie like a man using the rungs of an invisible ladder to make it. Eddie felt an angry sort of pity, and this was a familiar emotion, oddly nostalgic. After a moment he understood. It was like when he and Henry used to watch the fights on TV, and one fighter would hurt the other, hurt him terribly, again and again, and the crowd would be screaming for blood, and *Henry* would be screaming for blood, but Eddie only sat there, feeling that angry pity, that dumb disgust; he’d sat there sending thought-waves at the referee: *Stop it, man, are you fucking blind? He’s dying out there! DYING! Stop the fucking fight!*

There was no way to stop this one.

Roland looked at her from his haunted feverish eyes. “A lot of people have thought that, Detta.” He looked at Eddie. “You ready?”

“Yeah, I guess so. *Are you?*”

“Yes.”

“*Can you?*”

“Yes.”

They went on.

Around ten o’clock Detta began rubbing her temples with her fingers.

“Stop,” she said. “I feel sick. Feel like I goan throw up.”

“Probably that big meal you ate last night,” Eddie said, and went on pushing. “You should have skipped dessert. I told you that chocolate layer cake was heavy.”

“I goan throw up! I—”

“Stop, Eddie!” the gunslinger said.

Eddie stopped.

The woman in the chair suddenly twisted galvanically, as if an electric shock had run through her. Her eyes popped wide open, glaring at nothing.

"I BROKE YO PLATE YOU STINKIN OLE BLUE LADY!" she screamed. *"I BROKE IT AND I'M FUCKIN GLAD I D—"*

She suddenly slumped forward in her chair. If not for the ropes, she would have fallen out of it.

Christ, she's dead, she's had a stroke and she's dead, Eddie thought. He started around the chair, remembered how sly and tricky she could be, and stopped as suddenly as he had started. He looked at Roland. Roland looked back at him evenly, his eyes giving away not a thing.

Then she moaned. Her eyes opened.

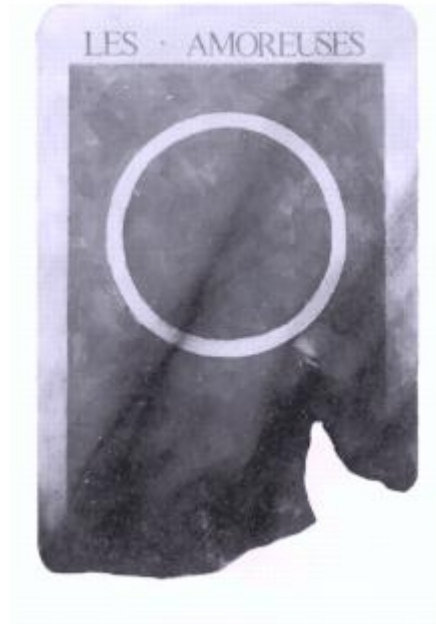
Her eyes.

Odetta's eyes.

"Dear God, I've fainted again, haven't I?" she said. "I'm sorry you had to tie me in. My stupid legs! I think I could sit up a little if you—"

That was when Roland's own legs slowly came unhinged and he swooned some thirty miles south of the place where the Western Sea's beach came to an end.

RESHUFFLE



reshuffle

1

To Eddie Dean, he and the Lady no longer seemed to be trudging or even walking up what remained of the beach. They seemed to be *flying*.

Odetta Holmes still neither liked nor trusted Roland; that was clear. But she recognized how desperate his condition had become, and responded to that. Now, instead of pushing a dead clump of steel and rubber to which a human body just happened to be attached, Eddie felt almost as if he were pushing a glider.

Go with her. Before, I was watching out for you and that was important. Now I'll only slow you down.

He came to realize how right the gunslinger was almost at once. Eddie pushed the chair; Odetta pumped it.

One of the gunslinger's revolvers was stuck in the waistband of Eddie's pants.

Do you remember when I told you to be on your guard and you weren't?

Yes.

I'm telling you again: Be on your guard. Every moment. If her other comes back, don't wait even a second. Brain her.

What if I kill her?

Then it's the end. But if she kills you, that's the end, too. And if she comes back she'll try. She'll try.

Eddie hadn't wanted to leave him. It wasn't just that cat-scream in the night (although he kept thinking about it); it was simply that Roland had become his only touchstone in this world. He and Odetta didn't belong here.

Still, he realized that the gunslinger had been right.

"Do you want to rest?" he asked Odetta. "There's more food. A little."

"Not yet," she answered, although her voice sounded tired. "Soon."

"All right, but at least stop pumping. You're weak. Your . . . your stomach, you know."

"All right." She turned, her face gleaming with sweat, and favored him with a smile that both weakened and strengthened him. He could have died for such a smile . . . and thought he would, if circumstances demanded.

He hoped to Christ circumstances wouldn't, but it surely wasn't out of the question. Time had become something so crucial it screamed.

She put her hands in her lap and he went on pushing. The tracks the chair left behind were now dimmer; the beach had become steadily firmer, but it was also littered with rubble that could cause an accident. You wouldn't have to help one happen at the speed they were going. A really bad accident might hurt Odetta and that would be bad; such an accident could also wreck the chair, and that would be bad for them and probably worse for the gunslinger, who would

almost surely die alone. And if Roland died, they would be trapped in this world forever.

With Roland too sick and weak to walk, Eddie had been forced to face one simple fact: there were three people here, and two of them were cripples.

So what hope, what chance was there?

The chair.

The chair was the hope, the whole hope, and nothing *but* the hope.

So help them God.

2

The gunslinger had regained consciousness shortly after Eddie dragged him into the shade of a rock outcropping. His face, where it was not ashy, was a hectic red. His chest rose and fell rapidly. His right arm was a network of twisting red lines.

“Feed her,” he croaked at Eddie.

“You—”

“Never mind *me*. I’ll be all right. Feed her. She’ll eat now, I think. And you’ll need her strength.”

“Roland, what if she’s just *pretending* to be—”

The gunslinger gestured impatiently.

“She’s not pretending to be anything, except alone in her body. I know it and you do, too. It’s in her face. Feed her, for the sake of your father, and while she eats, come back to me. Every minute counts now. Every *second*.”

Eddie got up, and the gunslinger pulled him back with his left hand. Sick or not, his strength was still there.

“And say nothing about the *other*. Whatever she tells you, however she explains, *don’t contradict her*.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just know it’s wrong. Now do as I say and don’t waste any more time!”

Odetta had been sitting in her chair, looking out at the sea with an expression of mild and bemused amazement. When Eddie offered her the chunks of lobster left over from the previous night, she smiled ruefully. "I would if I could," she said, "but you know what happens."

Eddie, who had no idea what she was talking about, could only shrug and say, "It wouldn't hurt to try again, Odetta. You need to eat, you know. We've got to go as fast as we can."

She laughed a little and touched his hand. He felt something like an electric charge jump from her to him. And it was her; Odetta. He knew it as well as Roland did.

"I love you, Eddie. You have tried so hard. Been so patient. So has *he*—" She nodded toward the place where the gunslinger lay propped against the rocks, watching. "—but he is a hard man to love."

"Yeah. Don't I know it."

"I'll try one more time.

"For you."

She smiled and he felt all the world move for her, because of her, and he thought *Please God, I have never had much, so please don't take her away from me again. Please.*

She took the chunks of lobster-meat, wrinkled her nose in a rueful comic expression, and looked up at him.

"Must I?"

"Just give it a shot," he said.

"I never ate scallops again," she said.

"Pardon?"

"I thought I told you."

"You might have," he said, and gave a little nervous laugh. What the gunslinger had said about not letting her know about the *other* loomed very large inside his mind just then.

"We had them for dinner one night when I was ten or eleven. I hated the way they tasted, like little rubber balls, and later I vomited them up. I never ate them again. But . . ." She sighed. "As you say, I'll 'give it a shot.' "

She put a piece in her mouth like a child taking a spoonful of medicine she knows will taste nasty. She chewed slowly at first, then more rapidly. She swallowed. Took another piece. Chewed, swallowed. Another. Now she was nearly *wolfing* it.

“Whoa, slow down!” Eddie said.

“It must be another *kind!* That’s it, of *course* it is!” She looked at Eddie shingly. “We’ve moved further up the beach and the species has changed! I’m no longer allergic, it seems! It doesn’t taste *nasty*, like it did before . . . and I *did* try to keep it down, didn’t I?” She looked at him nakedly. “I tried *very* hard.”

“Yeah.” To himself he sounded like a radio broadcasting a very distant signal. *She thinks she’s been eating every day and then up-chucking everything. She thinks that’s why she’s so weak. Christ Almighty.* “Yeah, you tried like hell.”

“It tastes—” These words were hard to pick up because her mouth was full. “It tastes so *good!*” She laughed. The sound was delicate and lovely. “It’s going to stay down! I’m going to take nourishment! I know it! I *feel* it!”

“Just don’t overdo it,” he cautioned, and gave her one of the water-skins. “You’re not used to it. All that—” He swallowed and there was an audible (audible to him, at least) click in his throat. “All that throwing up.”

“Yes. Yes.”

“I need to talk to Roland for a few minutes.”

“All right.”

But before he could go she grasped his hand again.

“Thank you, Eddie. Thank you for being so patient. And thank *him.*” She paused gravely. “Thank him, and don’t tell him that he scares me.”

“I won’t,” Eddie had said, and went back to the gunslinger.

3

Even when she wasn’t pushing, Odetta was a help. She navigated with the prescience of a woman who has spent a long time weaving

a wheelchair through a world that would not acknowledge handicapped people such as she for years to come.

“Left,” she’d call, and Eddie would gee to the left, gliding past a rock snarling out of the pasty grit like a decayed fang. On his own, he might have seen it . . . or maybe not.

“Right,” she called, and Eddie hawed right, barely missing one of the increasingly rare sandtraps.

They finally stopped and Eddie lay down, breathing hard.

“Sleep,” Odetta said. “An hour. I’ll wake you.”

Eddie looked at her.

“I’m not lying. I observed your friend’s condition, Eddie—”

“He’s not exactly my friend, you kn—”

“—and I know how important time is. I won’t let you sleep longer than an hour out of a misguided sense of mercy. I can tell the sun quite well. You won’t do that man any good by wearing yourself out, will you?”

“No,” he said, thinking: *But you don’t understand. If I sleep and Detta Walker comes back—*

“Sleep, Eddie,” she said, and since Eddie was too weary (and too much in love) to do other than trust her, he did. He slept and she woke him when she said she would and she was still Odetta, and they went on, and now she was pumping again, helping. They raced up the diminishing beach toward the door Eddie kept frantically looking for and kept not seeing.

4

When he left Odetta eating her first meal in days and went back to the gunslinger, Roland seemed a little better.

“Hunker down,” he said to Eddie.

Eddie hunkered.

“Leave me the skin that’s half full. All I need. Take her to the door.”

“What if I don’t—”

“Find it? You’ll find it. The first two were there; this one will be, too. If you get there before sundown tonight, wait for dark and then kill

double. You'll need to leave her food and make sure she's sheltered as well as she can be. If you don't reach it tonight, kill triple. Here."

He handed over one of his guns.

Eddie took it with respect, surprised as before by how heavy it was.

"I thought the shells were all losers."

"Probably are. But I've loaded with the ones I believe were wetted least—three from the buckle side of the left belt, three from the buckle side of the right. One may fire. Two, if you're lucky. Don't try them on the crawlies." His eyes considered Eddie briefly. "There may be other things out there."

"You heard it too, didn't you?"

"If you mean something yowling in the hills, yes. If you mean the Bigger-Man, as your eyes say, no. I heard a wildcat in the brakes, that's all, maybe with a voice four times the size of its body. It may be nothing you can't drive off with a stick. But there's her to think about. If her *other* comes back, you may have to—"

"I won't kill her, if that's what you're thinking!"

"You may have to wing her. You understand?"

Eddie gave a reluctant nod. Goddam shells probably wouldn't fire anyway, so there was no sense getting his panties in a bunch about it.

"When you get to the door, leave her. Shelter her as well as you can, and come back to me with the chair."

"And the gun?"

The gunslinger's eyes blazed so brightly that Eddie snapped his head back, as if Roland had thrust a flaming torch in his face. "Gods, yes! Leave her with a loaded gun, when her *other* might come back at any time? Are you insane?"

"The shells—"

"*Fuck* the shells!" the gunslinger cried, and a freak drop in the wind allowed the words to carry. Odetta turned her head, looked at them for a long moment, then looked back toward the sea. "Leave it with her not!"

Eddie kept his voice low in case the wind should drop again. "What if something comes down from the brakes while I'm on my

way back here? Some kind of cat four times bigger than its voice, instead of the other way around? Something you can't drive off with a stick?"

"Give her a pile of stones," the gunslinger said.

"*Stones!* Jesus wept! Man, you are such a fucking shit!"

"I am *thinking*," the gunslinger said. "Something you seem unable to do. I gave you the gun so you could protect her from the sort of danger you're talking about for half of the trip you must make. Would it please you if I took the gun back? Then perhaps you could *die* for her. Would *that* please you? Very romantic . . . except then, instead of just her, all three of us would go down."

"Very logical. You're still a fucking shit, however."

"Go or stay. Stop calling me names."

"You forgot something," Eddie said furiously.

"What was that?"

"You forgot to tell me to grow up. That's what Henry always used to say. 'Oh grow up, kid.' "

The gunslinger had smiled, a weary, oddly beautiful smile. "I think you *have* grown up. Will you go or stay?"

"I'll go," Eddie said. "What are you going to eat? She scarfed the left-overs."

"The fucking shit will find a way. The fucking shit has been finding one for years."

Eddie looked away. "I . . . I guess I'm sorry I called you that, Roland. It's been—" He laughed suddenly, shrilly. "It's been a very trying day."

Roland smiled again. "Yes," he said. "It has."

5

They made the best time of the entire trek that day, but there was still no door in sight when the sun began to spill its gold track across the ocean. Although she told him she was perfectly capable of going on for another half an hour, he called a halt and helped her out of the chair. He carried her to an even patch of ground that looked fairly

smooth, got the cushions from the back of the chair and the seat, and eased them under her.

“Lord, it feels so good to stretch out,” she sighed. “But . . .” Her brow clouded. “I keep thinking of that man back there, Roland, all by himself, and I can’t really enjoy it. Eddie, who is he? *What* is he?” And, almost as an afterthought: “And why does he *shout* so much?”

“Just his nature, I guess,” Eddie said, and abruptly went off to gather rocks. Roland hardly ever shouted. He guessed some of it was this morning—*FUCK the shells!*—but that the rest of it was false memory: the time she *thought* she had been Odetta.

He killed triple, as the gunslinger had instructed, and was so intent on the last that he skipped back from a fourth which had been closing in on his right with only an instant to spare. He saw the way its claws clicked on the empty place which had been occupied by his foot and leg a moment before, and thought of the gunslinger’s missing fingers.

He cooked over a dry wood fire—the encroaching hills and increasing vegetation made the search for good fuel quicker and easier, that was one thing—while the last of the daylight faded from the western sky.

“Look, Eddie!” she cried, pointing up.

He looked, and saw a single star gleaming on the breast of the night.

“Isn’t it *beautiful?*”

“Yes,” he said, and suddenly, for no reason, his eyes filled with tears. Just where had he been all of his goddamned life? Where had he been, what had he been doing, who had been with him while he did it, and why did he suddenly feel so grimy and abysmally beshitted?

Her lifted face was terrible in its beauty, irrefutable in this light, but the beauty was unknown to its possessor, who only looked at the star with wide wondering eyes, and laughed softly.

“Star light, star bright,” she said, and stopped. She looked at him. “Do you know it, Eddie?”

“Yeah.” Eddie kept his head down. His voice sounded clear enough, but if he looked up she would see he was weeping.

“Then help me. But you have to look.”

“Okay.”

He wiped the tears into the palm of one hand and looked up at the star with her.

“Star light—” she looked at him and he joined her. “Star *bright—*”

Her hand reached out, groping, and he clasped it, one the delicious brown of light chocolate, the other the delicious white of a dove’s breast.

“First star I see tonight,” they spoke solemnly in unison, boy and girl for this now, not man and woman as they would be later, when the dark was full and she called to ask him if he was asleep and he said no and she asked if he would hold her because she was cold; “Wish I may, wish I might—”

They looked at each other, and he saw that tears were streaming down her cheeks. His own came again, and he let them fall in her sight. This was not a shame but an inexpressible relief.

They smiled at each other.

“Have the wish I wish tonight,” Eddie said, and thought: *Please, always you.*

“Have the wish I wish tonight,” she echoed, and thought *If I must die in this odd place, please let it not be too hard and let this good young man be with me.*

“I’m sorry I cried,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I don’t usually, but it’s been—”

“A very trying day,” he finished for her.

“Yes. And you need to eat, Eddie.”

“You do, too.”

“I just hope it doesn’t make me sick again.”

He smiled at her.

“I don’t think it will.”

6

Later, with strange galaxies turning in slow gavotte overhead, neither thought the act of love had ever been so sweet, so full.

They were off with the dawn, racing, and by nine Eddie was wishing he had asked Roland what he should do if they came to the place where the hills cut off the beach and there was still no door in sight. It seemed a question of some importance, because the end of the beach was coming, no doubt about that. The hills marched ever closer, running in a diagonal line toward the water.

The beach itself was no longer a beach at all, not really; the soil was now firm and quite smooth. Something—run-off, he supposed, or flooding at some rainy season (there had been none since he had been in this world, not a drop; the sky had clouded over a few times, but then the clouds had blown away again)—had worn most of the jutting rocks away.

At nine-thirty, Odetta cried: "Stop, Eddie! Stop!"

He stopped so abruptly that she had to grab the arms of the chair to keep from tumbling out. He was around to her in a flash.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." He saw he had mistaken excitement for distress. She pointed. "Up there! Do you see something?"

He shaded his eyes and saw nothing. He squinted. For just a moment he thought . . . no, it was surely just heat-shimmer rising from the packed ground.

"I don't think so," he said, and smiled. "Except maybe your wish."

"I think I do!" She turned her excited, smiling face to him. "Standing all by itself! Near where the beach ends."

He looked again, squinting so hard this time that his eyes watered. He thought again for just a moment that he saw something. *You did*, he thought, and smiled. *You saw her wish*.

"Maybe," he said, not because he believed it but because she did.

"Let's go!"

Eddie went behind the chair again, taking a moment to massage his lower back where a steady ache had settled. She looked around.

"What are you *waiting* for?"

"You really think you've got it spotted, don't you?"

"Yes!"

“Well then, let’s go!”

Eddie started pushing again.

8

Half an hour later he saw it, too. *Jesus*, he thought, *her eyes are as good as Roland’s. Maybe better.*

Neither wanted to stop for lunch, but they needed to eat. They made a quick meal and then pushed on again. The tide was coming in and Eddie looked to the right—west—with rising unease. They were still well above the tangled line of kelp and seaweed that marked high water, but he thought that by the time they reached the door they would be in an uncomfortably tight angle bounded by the sea on one side and the slanting hills on the other. He could see those hills very clearly now. There was nothing pleasant about the view. They were rocky, studded with low trees that curled their roots into the ground like arthritic knuckles, keeping a grim grip, and thorny-looking bushes. They weren’t really steep, but too steep for the wheelchair. He might be able to carry her up a way, might, in fact, be forced to, but he didn’t fancy leaving her there.

For the first time he was hearing insects. The sound was a little like crickets, but higher pitched than that, and with no swing of rhythm—just a steady monotonous *riiiiiiii* sound like power-lines. For the first time he was seeing birds other than gulls. Some were biggies that circled inland on stiff wings. Hawks, he thought. He saw them fold their wings from time to time and plummet like stones. Hunting. Hunting what? Well, small animals. That was all right.

Yet he kept thinking of that yowl he’d heard in the night.

By mid-afternoon they could see the third door clearly. Like the other two, it was an impossibility which nonetheless stood as stark as a post.

“Amazing,” he heard her say softly. “How utterly amazing.”

It was exactly where he had begun to surmise it would be, in the angle that marked the end of any easy northward progress. It stood just above the high tide line and less than nine yards from the place

where the hills suddenly leaped out of the ground like a giant hand coated with gray-green brush instead of hair.

The tide came full as the sun swooned toward the water; and at what might have been four o'clock—Odetta said so, and since she had said she was good at telling the sun (and because she was his beloved), Eddie believed her—they reached the door.

9

They simply looked at it, Odetta in her chair with her hands in her lap, Eddie on the sea-side. In one way they looked at it as they had looked at the evening star the previous night—which is to say, as children look at things—but in another they looked differently. When they wished on the star they had been children of joy. Now they were solemn, wondering, like children looking at the stark embodiment of a thing which only belonged in a fairy tale.

Two words were written on this door.

“What does it mean?” Odetta asked finally.

“I don't know,” Eddie said, but those words had brought a hopeless chill; he felt an eclipse stealing across his heart.

“Don't you?” she asked, looking at him more closely.

“No. I . . .” He swallowed. “No.”

She looked at him a moment longer. “Push me behind it, please. I'd like to see that. I know you want to get back to him, but would you do that for me?”

He would.

They started around, on the high side of the door.

“Wait!” she cried. “Did you see it?”

“What?”

“Go back! Look! Watch!”

This time he watched the door instead of what might be ahead to trip them up. As they went above it he saw it narrow in perspective, saw its hinges, hinges which seemed to be buried in nothing at all, saw its thickness . . .

Then it was gone.

The thickness of the door was gone.

His view of the water should have been interrupted by three, perhaps even four inches of solid wood (the door looked extraordinarily stout), but there was no such interruption.

The door was gone.

Its shadow was there, but the door was gone.

He rolled the chair back two feet, so he was just south of the place where the door stood, and the thickness was there.

“You see it?” he asked in a ragged voice.

“Yes! It’s there again!”

He rolled the chair forward a foot. The door was still there. Another six inches. Still there. Another *two* inches. Still there. Another inch . . . and it was gone. Solid gone.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “Jesus Christ.”

“Would it open for you?” she asked. “Or me?”

He stepped forward slowly and grasped the knob of the door with those two words upon it.

He tried clockwise; he tried anti-clockwise.

The knob moved not an iota.

“All right.” Her voice was calm, resigned. “It’s for him, then. I think we both knew it. Go for him, Eddie. Now.”

“First I’ve got to see to you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“No you won’t. You’re too close to the high-tide line. If I leave you here, the lobsters are going to come out when it gets dark and you’re going to be din—”

Up in the hills, a cat’s coughing growl suddenly cut across what he was saying like a knife cutting thin cord. It was a good distance away, but closer than the other had been.

Her eyes flicked to the gunslinger’s revolver shoved into the waistband of his pants for just a moment, then back to his face. He felt a dull heat in his cheeks.

“He told you not to give it to me, didn’t he?” she said softly. “He doesn’t want me to have it. For some reason he doesn’t want me to have it.”

“The shells got wet,” he said awkwardly. “They probably wouldn’t fire, anyway.”

“I understand. Take me a little way up the slope, Eddie, can you? I know how tired your back must be, Andrew calls it Wheelchair Crouch, but if you take me up a little way, I’ll be safe from the lobsters. I doubt if anything else comes very close to where they are.”

Eddie thought, *When the tide’s in, she’s probably right . . . but what about when it starts to go out again?*

“Give me something to eat and some stones,” she said, and her unknowing echo of the gunslinger made Eddie flush again. His cheeks and forehead felt like the sides of a brick oven.

She looked at him, smiled faintly, and shook her head as if he had spoken out loud. “We’re not going to argue about this. I saw how it is with him. His time is very, very short. There is no time for discussion. Take me up a little way, give me food and some stones, then take the chair and go.”

10

He got her fixed as quickly as he could, then pulled the gunslinger’s revolver and held it out to her butt-first. But she shook her head.

“He’ll be angry with both of us. Angry with you for giving, angrier at me for taking.”

“Crap!” Eddie yelled. “What gave you that idea?”

“I know,” she said, and her voice was impervious.

“Well, suppose that’s true. Just suppose. *I’ll* be angry with you if you *don’t* take it.”

“Put it back. I don’t like guns. I don’t know how to use them. If something came at me in the dark the first thing I’d do is wet my pants. The second thing I’d do is point it the wrong way and shoot myself.” She paused, looking at Eddie solemnly. “There’s something else, and you might as well know it. I don’t want to touch anything that belongs to him. Not *anything*. For me, I think his things might have what my Ma used to call a hoodoo. I like to think of myself as a

modern woman . . . but I don't want any hoodoo on me when you're gone and the dark lands on top of me."

He looked from the gun to Odetta, and his eyes still questioned.

"Put it *back*," she said, stern as a schoolteacher. Eddie burst out laughing and obeyed.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Because when you said that you sounded like Miss Hathaway. She was my third-grade teacher."

She smiled a little, her luminous eyes never leaving his. She sang softly, sweetly: "*Heavenly shades of night are falling . . . it's twilight time . . .*" She trailed off and they both looked west, but the star they had wished on the previous evening had not yet appeared, although their shadows had drawn long.

"Is there anything else, Odetta?" He felt an urge to delay and delay. He thought it would pass once he was actually headed back, but now the urge to seize any excuse to remain, seemed very strong.

"A kiss. I could do with that, if you don't mind."

He kissed her long and when their lips no longer touched, she caught his wrist and stared at him intently. "I never made love with a white man before last night," she said. "I don't know if that's important to you or not. I don't even know if it's important to *me*. But I thought you should know."

He considered.

"Not to me," he said. "In the dark, I think we were both gray. I love you, Odetta."

She put a hand over his.

"You're a sweet young man and perhaps I love you, too, although it's too early for either of us—"

At that moment, as if given a cue, a wildcat growled in what the gunslinger had called the brakes. It still sounded four or five miles away, but that was still four or five miles closer than the last time they heard it, and it sounded *big*.

They turned their heads toward the sound. Eddie felt hackles trying to stand up on his neck. They couldn't quite make it. *Sorry*,

hackles, he thought stupidly. *I guess my hair's just a little too long now.*

The growl rose to a tortured scream that sounded like a cry of some being suffering a horrid death (it might actually have signalled no more than a successful mating). It held for a moment, almost unbearable, and then it wound down, sliding through lower and lower registers until it was gone or buried beneath the ceaseless cry of the wind. They waited for it to come again, but the cry was not repeated. As far as Eddie was concerned, that didn't matter. He pulled the revolver out of his waistband again and held it out to her.

"Take it and don't argue. If you *should* need to use it, it won't do shit—that's how stuff like this always works—but take it anyway."

"Do you want an argument?"

"Oh, you can argue. You can argue all you want."

After a considering look into Eddie's almost-hazel eyes, she smiled a little wearily. "I won't argue, I guess." She took the gun. "Please be as quick as you can."

"I will." He kissed her again, hurriedly this time, and almost told her to be careful . . . but seriously, folks, how careful could she be, with the situation what it was?

He picked his way back down the slope through the deepening shadows (the lobstrosities weren't out yet, but they would be putting in their nightly appearance soon), and looked at the words written upon the door again. The same chill rose in his flesh. They were apt, those words. God, they were so apt. Then he looked back up the slope. For a moment he couldn't see her, and then he saw something move. The lighter brown of one palm. She was waving.

He waved back, then turned the wheelchair and began to run with it tipped up in front of him so the smaller, more delicate front wheels would be off the ground. He ran south, back the way he had come. For the first half-hour or so his shadow ran with him, the improbable shadow of a scrawny giant tacked to the soles of his sneakers and stretching long yards to the east. Then the sun went down, his shadow was gone, and the lobstrosities began to tumble out of the waves.

It was ten minutes or so after he heard the first of their buzzing cries when he looked up and saw the evening star glowing calmly against the dark blue velvet of the sky.

Heavenly shades of night are falling . . . it's twilight time . . .

Let her be safe. His legs were already aching, his breath too hot and heavy in his lungs, and there was still a third trip to make, this time with the gunslinger as his passenger, and although he guessed Roland must outweigh Odetta by a full hundred pounds and knew he should conserve his strength, Eddie kept running anyway. *Let her be safe, that's my wish, let my beloved be safe.*

And, like an ill omen, a wildcat screeched somewhere in the tortured ravines that cut through the hills . . . only this wildcat sounded as big as a lion roaring in an African jungle.

Eddie ran faster, pushing the untenanted gantry of the wheelchair before him. Soon the wind began to make a thin, ghastly whine through the freely turning spokes of the raised front wheels.

11

The gunslinger heard a reedy wailing sound approaching him, tensed for a moment, then heard panting breath and relaxed. It was Eddie. Even without opening his eyes he knew that.

When the wailing sound faded and the running footsteps slowed, Roland opened his eyes. Eddie stood panting before him with sweat running down the sides of his face. His shirt was plastered against his chest in a single dark blotch. Any last vestiges of the college-boy look Jack Andolini had insisted upon were gone. His hair hung over his forehead. He had split his pants at the crotch. The bluish-purple crescents under his eyes completed the picture. Eddie Dean was a mess.

"I made it," he said. "I'm here." He looked around, then back at the gunslinger, as if he could not believe it. "Jesus Christ, I'm really *here*."

"You gave her the gun."

Eddie thought the gunslinger looked bad—as bad as he'd looked before the first abbreviated round of Keflex, maybe a trifle worse. Fever-heat seemed to be coming off him in waves, and he knew he should have felt sorry for him, but for the moment all he could seem to feel was mad as hell.

"I bust my ass getting back here in record time and all you can say is 'You gave her the gun.' Thanks, man. I mean, I expected some expression of gratitude, but this is just over-fucking-*whelming*."

"I think I said the only thing that matters."

"Well, now that you mention it, I did," Eddie said, putting his hands on his hips and staring truculently down at the gunslinger. "Now you have your choice. You can get in this chair or I can fold it and try to jam it up your ass. Which do you prefer, mawster?"

"Neither." Roland was smiling a little, the smile of a man who doesn't *want* to smile but can't help it. "First you're going to take some sleep, Eddie. We'll see what we'll see when the time for seeing comes, but for now you need sleep. You're done in."

"I want to get back to her."

"I do, too. But if you don't rest, you're going to fall down in the traces. Simple as that. Bad for you, worse for me, and worst of all for *her*."

Eddie stood for a moment, undecided.

"You made good time," the gunslinger conceded. He squinted at the sun. "It's four, maybe a quarter-past. You sleep five, maybe seven hours, and it'll be full dark—"

"Four. Four hours."

"All right. Until after dark; I think that's the important thing. Then you eat. Then we move."

"You eat, too."

That faint smile again. "I'll try." He looked at Eddie calmly. "Your life is in my hands now; I suppose you know that."

"Yes."

"I kidnapped you."

"Yes."

"Do you want to kill me? If you do, do it now rather than subject any of us to . . ." His breath whistled out softly. Eddie heard his chest

rattling and cared very little for the sound. “. . . to any further discomfort,” he finished.

“I don’t want to kill you.”

“Then—” he was interrupted by a sudden harsh burst of coughing “—lie down,” he finished.

Eddie did. Sleep did not drift upon him as it sometimes did but seized him with the rough hands of a lover who is awkward in her eagerness. He heard (or perhaps this was only a dream) Roland saying, *But you shouldn’t have given her the gun*, and then he was simply in the dark for an unknown time and then Roland was shaking him awake and when he finally sat up all there seemed to be in his body was pain: pain and weight. His muscles had turned into rusty winches and pullies in a deserted building. His first effort to get to his feet didn’t work. He thumped heavily back to the sand. He managed it on the second try, but he felt as if it might take him twenty minutes just to perform such a simple act as turning around. And it would hurt to do it.

Roland’s eyes were on him, questioning. “Are you ready?”

Eddie nodded. “Yes. Are *you*?”

“Yes.”

“*Can* you?”

“Yes.”

So they ate . . . and then Eddie began his third and last trip along this cursed stretch of beach.

12

They rolled a good stretch that night, but Eddie was still dully disappointed when the gunslinger called a halt. He offered no disagreement because he was simply too weary to go on without rest, but he had hoped to get further. The weight. That was the big problem. Compared to Odetta, pushing Roland was like pushing a load of iron bars. Eddie slept four more hours before dawn, woke with the sun coming over the eroding hills which were all that remained of the mountains, and listened to the gunslinger coughing.

It was a weak cough, full of rales, the cough of an old man who may be coming down with pneumonia.

Their eyes met. Roland's coughing spasm turned into a laugh.

"I'm not done yet, Eddie, no matter how I sound. Are you?"

Eddie thought of Odetta's eyes and shook his head.

"Not done, but I could use a cheeseburger and a Bud."

"Bud?" the gunslinger said doubtfully, thinking of apple trees and the spring flowers in the Royal Court Gardens.

"Never mind. Hop in, my man. No four on the floor, no T-top, but we're going to roll some miles just the same."

And they did, but when sunset came on the second day following his leave-taking of Odetta, they were still only drawing near the place of the third door. Eddie lay down, meaning to crash for another four hours, but the screaming cry of one of those cats jerked him out of sleep after only two hours, his heart thumping. God, the thing sounded fucking *huge*.

He saw the gunslinger up on one elbow, his eyes gleaming in the dark.

"You ready?" Eddie asked. He got slowly to his feet, grinning with pain.

"Are *you*?" Roland asked again, very softly.

Eddie twisted his back, producing a series of pops like a string of tiny firecrackers. "Yeah. But I could really get behind that cheeseburger."

"I thought chicken was what you wanted."

Eddie groaned. "Cut me a break, man."

The third door was in plain view by the time the sun cleared the hills. Two hours later, they reached it.

All together again, Eddie thought, ready to drop to the sand.

But that was apparently not so. There was no sign of Odetta Holmes. No sign at all.



13

“Odetta!” Eddie screamed, and now his voice was broken and hoarse as the voice of Odetta’s *other* had been.

There wasn’t even an echo in return, something he might at least have mistaken for Odetta’s voice. These low, eroded hills would not bounce sound. There was only the crash of the waves, much louder in this tight arrowhead of land, the rhythmic, hollow boom of surf crashing to the end of some tunnel it had dug in the friable rock, and the steady keening of the wind.

“Odetta!”

This time he screamed so loudly his voice broke and for a moment something sharp, like a jag of fishbone, tore at his vocal cords. His eyes scanned the hills frantically, looking for the lighter patch of brown that would be her palm, looking for movement as she stood

up . . . looking (God forgive him) for bright splashes of blood on roan-colored rock.

He found himself wondering what he would do if he saw that last, or found the revolver, now with deep toothmarks driven into the smooth sandalwood of the grips. The sight of something like that might drive him into hysteria, might even run him crazy, but he looked for it—or something—just the same.

His eyes saw nothing; his ears brought not the faintest returning cry.

The gunslinger, meanwhile, had been studying the third door. He had expected a single word, the word the man in black had used as he turned the sixth Tarot card at the dusty Golgotha where they had held palaver. *Death*, Walter had said, *but not for you, gunslinger*.

There was not one word writ upon this door but two . . . and neither of them was DEATH. He read it again, lips moving soundlessly:

THE PUSHER

Yet it means death, Roland thought, and knew it was so.

What made him look around was the sound of Eddie's voice moving away. Eddie had begun to climb the first slope, still calling Odetta's name.

For a moment Roland considered just letting him go.

He might find her, might even find her alive, not too badly hurt, and still herself. He supposed the two of them might even make a life of sorts for themselves here, that Eddie's love for Odetta and hers for him might somehow smother the nightshade who called herself Detta Walker. Yes, between the two of them he supposed it was possible that Detta might simply be squeezed to death. He was a romantic in his own harsh way . . . yet he was also realist enough to know that sometimes love actually *did* conquer all. As for himself? Even if he was able to get the drugs from Eddie's world which had almost cured him before, would they be able to cure him this time, or even make a start? He was now very sick, and he found himself wondering if perhaps things hadn't gone too far. His arms and legs

ached, his head thudded, his chest was heavy and full of snot. When he coughed there was a painful grating in his left side, as if ribs were broken there. His left ear flamed. Perhaps, he thought, the time had come to end it; to just cry off.

At this, everything in him rose up in protest.

“*Eddie!*” he cried, and there was no cough now. His voice was deep and powerful.

Eddie turned, one foot on raw dirt, the other braced on a jutting spar of rock.

“Go on,” he said, and made a curious little sweeping gesture with his hand, a gesture that said he wanted to be rid of the gunslinger so he could be about his *real* business, the *important* business, the business of finding Odetta and rescuing her if rescue were necessary. “It’s all right. Go on through and get the stuff you need. We’ll both be here when you get back.”

“I doubt that.”

“I have to find her.” Eddie looked at Roland and his gaze was very young and completely naked. “I mean, I really *have* to.”

“I understand your love and your need,” the gunslinger said, “but I want you to come with me this time, Eddie.”

Eddie stared at him for a long time, as if trying to credit what he was hearing.

“Come with you,” he said at last, bemused. “Come *with* you! Holy God, now I think I really have heard everything. Deedle-deedle-dumpkin *everything*. Last time you were so determined I was gonna stay behind you were willing to take a chance on me cutting your throat. This time you want to take a chance on something ripping *hers* right out.”

“That may have already happened,” Roland said, although he knew it hadn’t. The Lady might be hurt, but he knew she wasn’t dead.

Unfortunately, Eddie did, too. A week or ten days without his drug had sharpened his mind remarkably. He pointed at the door. “You know she’s not. If she was, that goddam thing would be gone. Unless you were lying when you said it wasn’t any good without all three of us.”

Eddie tried to turn back to the slope, but Roland's eyes held him nailed.

"All right," the gunslinger said. His voice was almost as soft as it had been when he spoke past the hateful face and screaming voice of Detta to the woman trapped somewhere behind it. "She's alive. That being so, why does she not answer your calls?"

"Well . . . one of those cats-things may have carried her away." But Eddie's voice was weak.

"A cat would have killed her, eaten what it wanted, and left the rest. At most, it might have dragged her body into the shade so it could come back tonight and eat meat the sun perhaps hadn't yet spoiled. But if that was the case, the door would be gone. Cats aren't like some insects, who paralyze their prey and carry them off to eat later, and you know it."

"That isn't necessarily true," Eddie said. For a moment he heard Odetta saying *You should have been on the debate team, Eddie* and pushed the thought aside. "Could be a cat came for her and she tried to shoot it but the first couple of shells in your gun were misfires. Hell, maybe even the first four or five. The cat gets to her, mauls her, and just before it can kill her . . . *BANG!*" Eddie smacked a fist against his palm, seeing all this so vividly that he might have witnessed it. "The bullet kills the cat, or maybe just wounds it, or maybe just scares it off. What about that?"

Mildly, Roland said: "We would have heard a gunshot."

For a moment Eddie could only stand, mute, able to think of no counter-argument. Of course they would have heard it. The first time they had heard one of the cats yowling, it had to have been fifteen, maybe twenty miles away. A pistol-shot—

He looked at Roland with sudden cunning. "Maybe *you* did," he said. "Maybe *you* heard a gunshot while I was asleep."

"It would have woken you."

"Not as tired as I am, man. I fall asleep, it's like—"

"Like being dead," the gunslinger said in that same mild voice. "I know the feeling."

"Then you understand—"

“But it’s not *being* dead. Last night you were out just like that, but when one of those cats screeched, you were awake and on your feet in seconds. Because of your concern for her. There was no gunshot, Eddie, and you know it. You would have heard it. Because of your concern for her.”

“So maybe she brained it with a rock!” Eddie shouted. “How the hell do I know when I’m standing here arguing with you instead of checking out the possibilities? I mean, she could be lying up there someplace hurt, man! Hurt or bleeding to death! How’d you like it if I *did* come through that door with you and she died while we were on the other side? How’d you like to look around once and see that doorway there, then look around twice and see it gone, just like it never was, because *she* was gone? Then you’d be trapped in *my* world instead of the other way around!” He stood panting and glaring at the gunslinger, his hands balled into fists.

Roland felt a tired exasperation. Someone—it might have been Cort but he rather thought it had been his father—had had a saying: *Might as well try to drink the ocean with a spoon as argue with a lover*. If any proof of the saying were needed, there it stood above him, in a posture that was all defiance and defense. *Go on*, the set of Eddie Dean’s body said. *Go on, I can answer any question you throw at me*.

“Might not have been a cat that found her,” he said now. “This may be your world, but I don’t think you’ve ever been to this part of it any more than I’ve ever been to Borneo. You don’t know what might be running around up in those hills, do you? Could be an ape grabbed her, or something like that.”

“Something grabbed her, all right,” the gunslinger said.

“Well thank God getting sick hasn’t driven all the sense out of your m—”

“And we both know what it was. Detta Walker. That’s what grabbed her. Detta Walker.”

Eddie opened his mouth, but for some little time—only seconds, but enough of them so both acknowledged the truth—the gunslinger’s inexorable face bore all his arguments to silence.

“It doesn’t *have* to be that way.”

“Come a little closer. If we’re going to talk, let’s talk. Every time I have to shout at you over the waves, it rips another piece of my throat out. That’s how it feels, anyway.”

“What big eyes you have, grandma,” Eddie said, not moving.

“What in hell’s name are you talking about?”

“A fairy tale.” Eddie did descend a short way back down the slope—four yards, no more. “And fairy tales are what you’re *thinking* about if you believe you can coax me close enough to that wheelchair.”

“Close enough for *what*? I don’t understand,” Roland said, although he understood perfectly.

Nearly a hundred and fifty yards above them and perhaps a full quarter of a mile to the east, dark eyes—eyes as full of intelligence as they were lacking in human mercy—watched this tableau intently. It was impossible to tell what they were saying; the wind, the waves, and the hollow crash of the surf digging its underground channel saw to that, but Detta didn’t need to hear what they were *saying* to know what they were *talking* about. She didn’t need a telescope to see that the Really Bad Man was now also the Really Sick Man, and maybe the Really Bad Man was willing to spend a few days or even a few weeks torturing a legless Negro woman—way things looked around here, entertainment was mighty hard to come by—but she thought the Really Sick Man only wanted one thing, and that was to get his whitebread ass out of here. Just use that magic doorway to haul the fucker out. But before, he hadn’t been hauling no ass. Before, he hadn’t been hauling nothing. Before, the Really Bad Man hadn’t been nowhere but inside *her own head*. She still didn’t like to think of how that had been, how it had felt, how easily he had overridden all her clawing efforts to push him out, *away*, to take control of herself again. That had been awful. Terrible. And what made it worse was her lack of understanding. What, exactly, was the real source of her terror? That it wasn’t the invasion itself was frightening enough. She knew she might understand if she examined herself more closely, but she didn’t want to do that. Such examination might lead her to a

place like the one sailors had feared in the ancient days, a place which was no more or less than the edge of the world, a place the cartographers had marked with the legend HERE THERE BE SARPENTS. The hideous thing about the Really Bad Man's invasion had been the sense of *familiarity* that came with it, as if this amazing thing had happened before—not once, but many times. But, frightened or not, she had denied panic. She had observed even as she fought, and she remembered looking into that door when the gunslinger used her hands to pivot the wheelchair toward it. She remembered seeing the body of the Really Bad Man lying on the sand with Eddie crouched above it, a knife in his hand.

Would that Eddie had plunged that knife into the Really Bad Man's throat! Better than a pig-slaughtering! Better by a country mile!

He hadn't, but she had seen the Really Bad Man's body. It had been breathing, but *body* was the right word just the same; it had only been a worthless *thing*, like a cast-off towsack which some idiot had stuffed full of weeds or cornshucks.

Detta's mind might have been as ugly as a rat's ass, but it was even quicker and sharper than Eddie's. *Really Bad Man there used to be full of piss an vinegar. Not no mo. He know I'm up here and doan want to do nothin but git away befo I come down an kill his ass. His little buddy, though—he still be pretty strong, and he ain't had his fill of hurting on me just yet. Want to come up here and hunt me down no matter how that Really Bad Man be. Sho. He be thinkin, One black bitch widdout laigs no match fo a big ole swingin dick like me. I doan wan t'run. I want to be huntin that black quiff down. I give her a poke or two, den we kin go like you want. That what he be thinkin, and that be all right. That be jes fine, graymeat. You think you can take Detta Walker, you jes come on up here in these Drawers and give her a try. You goan find out when you fuckin with me, you fuckin wit the best, honeybunch! You goan find out—*

But she was jerked from the rat-run of her thoughts by a sound that came to her clearly in spite of the surf and wind: the heavy crack of a pistol-shot.

“I think you understand better than you let on,” Eddie said. “A whole *hell* of a lot better. You’d like for me to get in grabbing distance, that’s what I think.” He jerked his head toward the door without taking his eyes from Roland’s face. Unaware that not far away someone was thinking exactly the same thing, he added: “I know you’re sick, all right, but it could be you’re pretending to be a lot weaker than you really are. Could be you’re laying back in the tall grass just a little bit.”

“Could be I am,” Roland said, unsmiling, and added: “But I’m not.”
He was, though . . . a little.

“A few more steps wouldn’t hurt, though, would it? I’m not going to be able to shout much longer.” The last syllable turned into a frog’s croak as if to prove his point. “And I need to make you think about what you’re doing—planning to do. If I can’t persuade you to come with me, maybe I can at least put you on your guard . . . again.”

“For your precious Tower,” Eddie sneered, but he did come skidding halfway down the slope of ground he had climbed, his tattered tennies kicking up listless clouds of maroon dust.

“For my precious Tower and *your* precious health,” the gunslinger said. “Not to mention your precious *life*.”

He slipped the remaining revolver from the left holster and looked at it with an expression both sad and strange.

“If you think you can scare me with that—”

“I don’t. You know I can’t shoot you, Eddie. But I think you do need an object lesson in how things have changed. How much things have changed.”

Roland lifted the gun, its muzzle pointing not toward Eddie but toward the empty surging ocean, and thumbed the hammer. Eddie steeled himself against the gun’s heavy crack.

No such thing. Only a dull click.

Roland thumbed the hammer back again. The cylinder rotated. He squeezed the trigger, and again there was nothing but a dull click.

“Never mind,” Eddie said. “Where I come from, the Defense Department would have hired you after the first misfire. You might as

well qui—”

But the heavy KA-BLAM of the revolver cut off the word's end as neatly as Roland had cut small branches from trees as a target-shooting exercise when he had been a student. Eddie jumped. The gunshot momentarily silenced the constant *riiiii* of the insects in the hills. They only began to tune up again slowly, cautiously, after Roland had put the gun in his lap.

“What in hell does that prove?”

“I suppose that all depends on what you'll listen to and what you refuse to hear,” Roland said a trifle sharply. “It's *supposed* to prove that not all the shells are duds. Furthermore, it suggests—*strongly* suggests—that some, maybe even *all*, of the shells in the gun you gave Odetta may be live.”

“Bullshit!” Eddie paused. “Why?”

“Because I loaded the gun I just fired with shells from the *backs* of my gunbelts—with shells that took the worst wetting, in other words. I did it just to pass the time while you were gone. Not that it takes much time to load a gun, even shy a pair of fingers, you understand!” Roland laughed a little, and the laugh turned into a cough he muzzled with an abridged fist. When the cough had subsided he went on: “But after you've tried to fire wets, you have to break the machine and clean the machine. *Break the machine, clean the machine, you maggots*—it was the first thing Cort, our teacher, drummed into us. I didn't know how long it would take me to break down my gun, clean it, and put it back together with only a hand and a half, but I thought that if I intended to go on living—and I do, Eddie, I do—I'd better find out. Find out and then learn to do it faster, don't you think so? Come a little closer, Eddie! Come a little closer for your father's sake!”

“All the better to see you with, my child,” Eddie said, but did take a couple of steps closer to Roland. *Only* a couple.

“When the first slug I pulled the trigger on fired, I almost filled my pants,” the gunslinger said. He laughed again. Shocked, Eddie realized the gunslinger had reached the edge of delirium. “The first slug, but believe me when I say it was the *last* thing I had expected.”

Eddie tried to decide if the gunslinger was lying, lying about the gun, and lying about his condition as well. Cat was sick, yeah. But was he really this sick? Eddie didn't know. If Roland was acting, he was doing a great job; as for guns, Eddie had no way of telling because he had no experience with them. He had shot a pistol maybe three times in his life before suddenly finding himself in a firefight at Balazar's place. *Henry* might have known, but Henry was dead—a thought which had a way of constantly surprising Eddie into grief.

"None of the others fired," the gunslinger said, "so I cleaned the machine, re-loaded, and fired around the chamber again. This time I used shells a little further toward the belt buckles. Ones which would have taken even less of a wetting. The loads we used to kill our food, the dry loads, were the ones closest to the buckles."

He paused to cough dryly into his hand, then went on.

"Second time around I hit two live rounds. I broke my gun down again, cleaned it again, then loaded a third time. You just watched me drop the trigger on the first three chambers of that third loading." He smiled faintly. "You know, after the first two clicks I thought it would be my damned luck to have filled the cylinder with nothing but wets. That wouldn't have been very convincing, would it? Can you come a little closer, Eddie?"

"Not very convincing at all," Eddie said, "and I think I'm just as close to you as I'm going to come, thanks. What lesson am I supposed to take from all this, Roland?"

Roland looked at him as one might look at an imbecile. "I didn't send you out here to die, you know. I didn't send *either* of you out here to die. Great gods, Eddie, where are your brains? She's packing *live iron!*" His eyes regarded Eddie closely. "She's someplace up in those hills. Maybe you think you can track her, but you're not going to have any luck if the ground is as stony as it looks from here. She's lying up there, Eddie, not Odetta but Detta, lying up there with live iron in her hand. If I leave you and you go after her, she'll blow your guts out of your asshole."

Another spasm of coughing set in.

Eddie stared at the coughing man in the wheelchair and the waves pounded and the wind blew its steady idiot's note.

At last he heard his voice say, "You could have held back one shell you *knew* was live. I wouldn't put it past you." And with that said he knew it to be true: he wouldn't put that or anything else past Roland.

His Tower.

His goddamned Tower.

And the slyness of putting the saved shell in the *third* cylinder! It provided just the right touch of reality, didn't it? Made it hard not to believe.

"We've got a saying in my world," Eddie said. " 'That guy could sell Frigidaires to the Eskimos.' That's the saying."

"What does it mean?"

"It means go pound sand."

The gunslinger looked at him for a long time and then nodded. "You mean to stay. All right. As Detta she's safer from . . . from whatever wildlife there may be around here . . . than she would have been as Odetta, and you'd be safer away from her—at least for the time being—but I can see how it is. I don't like it, but I've no time to argue with a fool."

"Does that mean," Eddie asked politely, "that no one ever tried to argue with you about this Dark Tower you're so set on getting to?"

Roland smiled tiredly. "A great many did, as a matter of fact. I suppose that's why I recognize you'll not be moved. One fool knows another. At any rate, I'm too weak to catch you, you're obviously too wary to let me coax you close enough to grab you, and time's grown too short to argue. All I can do is go and hope for the best. I'm going to tell you one last time before I do go, and hear me, Eddie: *Be on your guard.*"

Then Roland did something that made Eddie ashamed of all his doubts (although no less solidly set in his own decision): he flicked open the cylinder of the revolver with a practiced flick of his wrist, dumped all the loads, and replaced them with fresh loads from the loops closest to the buckles. He snapped the cylinder back into place with another flick of his wrist.

“No time to clean the machine now,” he said, “But ’twont matter, I reckon. Now catch, and catch clean—don’t dirty the machine any more than it is already. There aren’t many machines left in my world that work anymore.”

He threw the gun across the space between them. In his anxiety, Eddie almost *did* drop it. Then he had it safely tucked into his waistband.

The gunslinger got out of the wheelchair, almost fell when it slid backward under his pushing hands, then tottered to the door. He grasped its knob; in *his* hand it turned easily. Eddie could not see the scene the door opened upon, but he heard the muffled sound of traffic.

Roland looked back at Eddie, his blue bullshooter’s eyes gleaming out of a face which was ghastly pale.

16

Detta watched all of this from her hiding place with hungrily gleaming eyes.

17

“Remember, Eddie,” he said in a hoarse voice, and then stepped forward. His body collapsed at the edge of the doorway, as if it had struck a stone wall instead of empty space.

Eddie felt an almost insatiable urge to go to the doorway, to look through and see *where*—and to what *when*—it led. Instead he turned and scanned the hills again, his hand on the gun-butt.

I’m going to tell you one last time.

Suddenly, scanning the empty brown hills, Eddie was scared.

Be on your guard.

Nothing up there was moving.

Nothing he could see, at least.

He sensed her all the same.

Not Odetta; the gunslinger was right about that.

It was *Detta* he sensed.

He swallowed and heard a click in his throat.

On your guard.

Yes. But never in his life had he felt such a deadly need for sleep. It would take him soon enough; if he didn't give in willingly, sleep would rape him.

And while he slept, *Detta* would come.

Detta.

Eddie fought the weariness, looked at the unmoving hills with eyes which felt swollen and heavy, and wondered how long it might be before Roland came back with the third—The Pusher, whoever he or she was.

"*Odetta?*" he called without much hope.

Only silence answered, and for Eddie the time of waiting began.

THE

PUSHER



CHAPTER 1

Bitter Medicine

1

When the gunslinger entered Eddie, Eddie had experienced a moment of nausea and he had had a sense of being *watched* (this Roland hadn't felt; Eddie had told him later). He'd had, in other words, some vague sense of the gunslinger's presence. With Detta, Roland had been forced to *come forward* immediately, like it or not. She hadn't just sensed him; in a queer way it seemed that she had been *waiting* for him—him or another, more frequent, visitor. Either way, she had been totally aware of his presence from the first moment he had been in her.

Jack Mort didn't feel a thing.

He was too intent on the boy.

He had been watching the boy for the last two weeks.

Today he was going to push him.

2

Even with the back to the eyes from which the gunslinger now looked, Roland recognized the boy. It was the boy he had met at the way station in the desert, the boy he had rescued from the Oracle in the Mountains, the boy whose life he had sacrificed when the choice between saving him or finally catching up with the man in black finally came; the boy who had said *Go then—there are other worlds than these* before plunging into the abyss. And sure enough, the boy had been right.

The boy was Jake.

He was holding a plain brown paper bag in one hand and a blue canvas bag by its drawstring top in the other. From the angles poking

against the sides of the canvas, the gunslinger thought it must contain books.

Traffic flooded the street the boy was waiting to cross—a street in the same city from which he had taken the Prisoner and the Lady, he realized, but for the moment none of that mattered. Nothing mattered but what was going to happen or not happen in the next few seconds.

Jake had not been brought into the gunslinger's world through any magic door; he had come through a cruder, more understandable portal: he had been born into Roland's world by dying in his own.

He had been murdered.

More specifically, he had been *pushed*.

Pushed into the street; run over by a car while on his way to school, his lunch-sack in one hand and his books in the other.

Pushed by the man in black.

He's going to do it! He's going to do it right now! That's to be my punishment for murdering him in my world—to see him murdered in this one before I can stop it!

But the rejection of brutish destiny had been the gunslinger's work all his life—it had been his *ka*, if you pleased—and so he *came forward* without even thinking, acting with reflexes so deep they had nearly become instincts.

And as he did a thought both horrible and ironic flashed into his mind: *What if the body he had entered was itself that of the man in black? What if, as he rushed forward to save the boy, he saw his own hands reach out and push? What if this sense of control was only an illusion, and Walter's final gleeful joke that Roland himself should murder the boy?*

3

For one single moment Jack Mort lost the thin strong arrow of his concentration. On the edge of leaping forward and shoving the kid into the traffic, he felt something which his mind mistranslated just as the body may refer pain from one part of itself to another.

When the gunslinger *came forward*, Jack thought some sort of bug had landed on the back of his neck. Not a wasp or a bee, nothing that actually *stung*, but something that bit and itched. Mosquito, maybe. It was on this that he blamed his lapse in concentration at the crucial moment. He slapped at it and returned to the boy.

He thought all this happened in a bare wink; actually, seven seconds passed. He sensed neither the gunslinger's swift advance nor his equally swift retreat, and none of the people around him (going-to-work people, most from the subway station on the next block, their faces still puffy with sleep, their half-dreaming eyes turned inward) noticed Jack's eyes turn from their usual deep blue to a lighter blue behind the prim gold-rimmed glasses he wore. No one noticed those eyes darken to their normal cobalt color either, but when it happened and he refocused on the boy, he saw with frustrated fury as sharp as a thorn that his chance was gone. The light had changed.

He watched the boy crossing with the rest of the sheep, and then Jack himself turned back the way he had come and began shoving himself upstream against the tidal flow of pedestrians.

"Hey, mister! Watch ou—"

Some curd-faced teenaged girl he barely saw. Jack shoved her aside, hard, not looking back at her caw of anger as her own armload of schoolbooks went flying. He went walking on down Fifth Avenue and away from Forty-Third, where he had meant for the boy to die today. His head was bent, his lips pressed together so tightly he seemed to have no mouth at all but only the scar of a long-healed wound above his chin. Once clear of the bottleneck at the corner, he did not slow down but strode even more rapidly along, crossing Forty-Second, Forty-First, Fortieth. Somewhere in the middle of the next block he passed the building where the boy lived. He gave it barely a glance, although he had followed the boy from it every school-morning for the last three weeks, followed him from the building to the corner three and a half blocks further up Fifth, the corner he thought of simply as the Pushing Place.

The girl he bumped was screaming after him, but Jack Mort didn't notice. An amateur lepidopterist would have taken no more notice of

a common butterfly.

Jack was, in his way, much like an amateur lepidopterist.

By profession, he was a successful C.P.A.

Pushing was only his hobby.

4

The gunslinger returned to the back of the man's mind and fainted there. If there was relief, it was simply that this man was not the man in black, was not Walter.

All the rest was utter horror . . . and utter realization.

Divorced of his body, his mind—his *ka*—was as healthy and acute as ever, but the sudden *knowing* struck him like a chisel-blow to the temple.

The knowing didn't come when he *went forward* but when he was sure the boy was safe and slipped back again. He saw the connection between this man and Odetta, too fantastic and yet too hideously apt to be coincidental, and understood what the *real* drawing of the three might be, and *who* they might be.

The third was not this man, this Pusher; the third named by Walter had been Death.

Death . . . but not for you. That was what Walter, clever as Satan even at the end, had said. A lawyer's answer . . . so close to the truth that the truth was able to hide in its shadow. Death was not for him; death was *become* him.

The Prisoner, the Lady.

Death was the third.

He was suddenly filled with the certainty that he himself was the third.

5

Roland *came forward* as nothing but a projectile, a brainless missile programmed to launch the body he was in at the man in black the instant he saw him.

Thoughts of what might happen if he stopped the man in black from murdering Jake did not come until later—the possible paradox, the fistula in time and dimension which might cancel out everything that had happened after he had arrived at the way station . . . for surely if he saved Jake in this world, there would have been no Jake for him to meet there, and everything which had happened thereafter would change.

What changes? Impossible even to speculate on them. That one might have been the end of his quest never entered the gunslinger's mind. And surely such after-the-fact speculations were moot; if he had seen the man in black, no consequence, paradox, or ordained course of destiny could have stopped him from simply lowering the head of this body he inhabited and pounding it straight through Walter's chest. Roland would have been as helpless to do otherwise as a gun is helpless to refuse the finger that squeezes the trigger and flings the bullet on its flight.

If it sent all to hell, the hell with it.

He scanned the people clustered on the corner quickly, seeing each face (he scanned the women as closely as the men, making sure there wasn't one only *pretending* to be a woman).

Walter wasn't there.

Gradually he relaxed, as a finger curled around a trigger may relax at the last instant. No; Walter was nowhere around the boy, and the gunslinger somehow felt sure that this wasn't the right *when*. Not quite. That *when* was close—two weeks away, a week, maybe even a single day—but it was not quite yet.

So he *went back*.

On the way he *saw* . . .

6

. . . and fell senseless with shock: this man into whose mind the third door opened, had once sat waiting just inside the window of a deserted tenement room in a building full of abandoned rooms—abandoned, that was, except for the winos and crazies who often

spent their nights here. You knew about the winos because you could smell their desperate sweat and angry piss. You knew about the crazies because you could smell the stink of their deranged thoughts. The only furniture in this room was two chairs. Jack Mort was using both: one to sit in, one as a prop to keep the door opening on the hallway closed. He expected no sudden interruptions, but it was best not to take chances. He was close enough to the window to look out, but far enough behind the slanted shadow-line to be safe from any casual viewer.

He had a crumbly red brick in his hand.

He had pried it from just outside the window, where a good many were loose. It was old, eroded at the corners, but heavy. Chunks of ancient mortar clung to it like barnacles.

The man meant to drop the brick on someone.

He didn't care who; when it came to murder, Jack Mort was an equal-opportunity employer.

After a bit, a family of three came along the sidewalk below: man, woman, little girl. The girl had been walking on the inside, presumably to keep her safely away from the traffic. There was quite a lot of it this close to the railway station but Jack Mort didn't care about the auto traffic. What he cared about was the lack of buildings directly opposite him; these had already been demolished, leaving a jumbled wasteland of splintered board, broken brick, glinting glass.

He would only lean out for a few seconds, and he was wearing sunglasses over his eyes and an out-of-season knit cap over his blonde hair. It was like the chair under the doorknob. Even when you were safe from expected risks, there was no harm in reducing those unexpected ones which remained.

He was also wearing a sweatshirt much too big for him—one that came almost down to mid-thigh. This bag of a garment would help confuse the actual size and shape of his body (he was quite thin) should he be observed. It served another purpose as well: whenever he “depth-charged” someone (for that was how he always thought of it: as “depth-charging”), he came in his pants. The baggy sweatshirt also covered the wet spot which invariably formed on his jeans.

Now they were closer.

Don't jump the gun, wait, just wait . . .

He shivered at the edge of the window, brought the brick forward, drew it back to his stomach, brought it forward again, withdrew it again (but this time only halfway), and then leaned out, totally cool now. He always was at the penultimate moment.

He dropped the brick and watched it fall.

It went down, swapping one end for the other. Jack saw the clinging barnacles of mortar clearly in the sun. At these moments as at no others everything was clear, everything stood out with exact and geometrically perfect substance; here was a thing which he had pushed into reality, as a sculptor swings a hammer against a chisel to change stone and create some new substance from the brute *caldera*; here was the world's most remarkable thing: logic which was also ecstasy.

Sometimes he missed or struck aslant, as the sculptor may carve badly or in vain, but this was a perfect shot. The brick struck the girl in the bright gingham dress squarely on the head. He saw blood—it was brighter than the brick but would eventually dry to the same maroon color—splash up. He heard the start of the mother's scream. Then he was moving.

Jack crossed the room and threw the chair which had been under the knob into a far corner (he'd kicked the other—the one he'd sat in while waiting—aside as he crossed the room). He yanked up the sweatshirt and pulled a bandanna from his back pocket. He used it to turn the knob.

No fingerprints allowed.

Only Don't Bees left fingerprints.

He stuffed the bandanna into his back pocket again even as the door was swinging open. As he walked down the hall, he assumed a faintly drunken gait. He didn't look around.

Looking around was also only for Don't Bees.

Do Bees knew that trying to see if someone was noticing you was a sure way to accomplish just that. Looking around was the sort of thing a witness *might* remember after an accident. Then some smartass cop *might* decide it was a *suspicious* accident, and there would be an investigation. All because of one nervous glance

around. Jack didn't believe anyone could connect him with the crime even if someone decided the "accident" was suspicious and there was an investigation, but . . .

Take only acceptable risks. Minimize those which remain.

In other words, always prop a chair under the doorknob.

So he walked down the powdery corridor where patches of lathing showed through the plastered walls, he walked with his head down, mumbling to himself like the vags you saw on the street. He could still hear the woman—the mother of the little girl, he supposed—screaming, but that sound was coming from the front of the building; it was faint and unimportant. *All* of the things which happened *after*—the cries, the confusion, the wails of the wounded (if the wounded were still capable of wailing), were not things which mattered to Jack. What mattered was the thing which pushed change into the ordinary course of things and sculpted new lines in the flow of lives . . . and, perhaps, the destinies not only of those struck, but of a widening circle around them, like ripples from a stone tossed into a still pond.

Who was to say that he had not sculpted the cosmos today, or might not at some future time?

God, no wonder he creamed his jeans!

He met no one as he went down the two flights of stairs but he kept up the act, swaying a little as he went but never reeling. A swayer would not be remembered. An ostentatious reeler might be. He muttered but didn't actually say anything a person might understand. Not acting at all would be better than hamming it up.

He let himself out the broken rear door into an alley filled with refuse and broken bottles which twinkled galaxies of sun-stars.

He had planned his escape in advance as he planned everything in advance (take only acceptable risks, minimize those which remain, be a Do Bee in all things); such planning was why he had been marked by his colleagues as a man who would go far (and he *did* intend to go far, but one of the places he did not intend to go was to jail, or the electric chair).

A few people were running along the street into which the alley debouched, but they were on their way to see what the screaming

was about, and none of them looked at Jack Mort, who had removed the out-of-season knit cap but not the sunglasses (which, on such a bright morning, did not seem out of place).

He turned into another alley.

Came out on another street.

Now he sauntered down an alley not so filthy as the first two—almost, in fact, a lane. This fed into another street, and a block up there was a bus stop. Less than a minute after he got there a bus arrived, which was also part of the schedule. Jack entered when the doors accorded open and dropped his fifteen cents into the slot of the coin receptacle. The driver did not so much as glance at him. That was good, but even if he had, he would have seen nothing but a nondescript man in jeans, a man who might be out of work—the sweatshirt he was wearing looked like something out of a Salvation Army grab-bag.

Be ready, be prepared, be a Do Bee.

Jack Mort's secret for success both at work and at play.

Nine blocks away there was a parking lot. Jack got off the bus, entered the lot, unlocked his car (an unremarkable mid-fifties Chevrolet which was still in fine shape), and drove back to New York City.

He was free and clear.

7

The gunslinger saw all of this in a mere moment. Before his shocked mind could shut out the other images by simply shutting down, he saw more. Not all, but enough. Enough.

8

He saw Mort cutting a piece from page four of *The New York Daily Mirror* with an Exacto knife, being fussily sure to stay exactly upon the lines of the column. NEGRO GIRL COMATOSE FOLLOWING TRAGIC ACCIDENT, the headline read. He saw Mort apply glue to the back of the clipping

with the brush attached to the cover of his paste-pot. Saw Mort position it at the center of a blank page of a scrapbook, which, from the bumpy, swelled look of the foregoing pages, contained many other clippings. He saw the opening lines of the piece: "Five-year-old Odetta Holmes, who came to Elizabethtown, N.J., to celebrate a joyous occasion, is now the victim of a cruel freak accident. Following the wedding of an aunt two days ago, the girl and her family were walking toward the railway station when a brick tumbled . . ."

But that wasn't the only time he'd had dealings with her, was it? No. Gods, no.

In the years between that morning and the night when Odetta had lost her legs, Jack Mort had dropped a great many things and pushed a great many people.

Then there had been Odetta again.

The first time he had pushed something *on* her.

The second time he had pushed her *in front* of something.

What sort of man is this that I am supposed to use? What sort of man—

But then he thought of Jake, thought of the push which had sent Jake into this world, and he thought he heard the laughter of the man in black, and that finished him.

Roland fainted.

9

When he came to, he was looking at neat rows of figures marching down a sheet of green paper. The paper had been ruled both ways, so that each single figure looked like a prisoner in a cell.

He thought: *Something else.*

Not just Walter's laughter. Something—a plan?

No, Gods, no—nothing as complex or hopeful as that.

But an idea, at least. A tickle.

How long have I been out? he thought with sudden alarm. *It was maybe nine o' the clock when I came through the door, maybe a little*

earlier. How long—?

He came forward.

Jack Mort—who was now only a human doll controlled by the gunslinger—looked up a little and saw the hands of the expensive quartz clock on his desk stood at quarter past one.

Gods, as late as that? As late as that? But Eddie . . . he was so tired, he can never have stayed awake for so long—

The gunslinger turned Jack's head. The door was still there, but what he saw through it was far worse than he would have imagined.

Standing to one side of the door were two shadows, one that of the wheelchair, the other that of a human being . . . but the human being was incomplete, supporting itself on its arms because its lower legs had been snatched away with the same quick brutality as Roland's fingers and toe.

The shadow moved.

Roland whipped Jack Mort's head away at once, moving with the whiplash speed of a striking snake.

She mustn't look in. Not until I am ready. Until then, she sees nothing but the back of this man's head.

Detta Walker would not see Jack Mort in any case, because the person who looked through the open door saw only what the host saw. She could only see Mort's face if he looked into a mirror (although that might lead to its own awful consequences of paradox and repetition), but even then it would mean nothing to either Lady; for that matter, the Lady's face would not mean anything to Jack Mort. Although they had twice been on terms of deadly intimacy, they had never seen each other.

What the gunslinger didn't want was for the Lady to see the *Lady*.

Not yet, at least.

The spark of intuition grew closer to a plan.

But it was late over there—the light had suggested to him that it must be three in the afternoon, perhaps even four.

How long until sunset brought the lobstrosities, and the end of Eddie's life?

Three hours?

Two?

He could go back and try to save Eddie . . . but that was exactly what Detta wanted. She had laid a trap, just as villagers who fear a deadly wolf may stake out a sacrificial lamb to draw it into bowshot. He would go back into his diseased body . . . but not for long. The reason he had seen only her shadow was because she was lying beside the door with one of his revolvers curled in her fist. The moment his Roland-body moved, she would shoot it and end his life.

His ending, because she feared him, would at least be merciful.

Eddie's would be a screaming horror.

He seemed to hear Detta Walker's nasty, giggling voice: *You want to go at me, graymeat? Sho you want to go at me! You ain't afraid of no lil ole cripple black woman, are you?*

"Only one way," Jack's mouth muttered. "Only one."

The door of the office opened, and a bald man with lenses over his eyes looked in.

"How are you doing on that Dorfman account?" the bald man asked.

"I feel ill. I think it was my lunch. I think I might leave."

The bald man looked worried. "It's probably a bug. I heard there's a nasty one going around."

"Probably."

"Well . . . as long as you get the Dorfman stuff finished by five tomorrow afternoon . . ."

"Yes."

"Because you know what a dong he can be—"

"Yes."

The bald man, now looking a little uneasy, nodded. "Yes, go home. You don't seem like your usual self at all."

"I'm not."

The bald man went out the door in a hurry.

He sensed me, the gunslinger thought. That was part of it. Part, but not all. They're afraid of him. They don't know why, but they're afraid of him. And they're right to be afraid.

Jack Mort's body got up, found the briefcase the man had been carrying when the gunslinger entered him, and swept all the papers on the surface of the desk into it.

He felt an urge to sneak a look back at the door and resisted it. He would not look again until he was ready to risk everything and come back.

In the meantime, time was short and there were things which had to be done.

CHAPTER 2

The Honeypot

1

Detta laid up in a deeply shadowed cleft formed by rocks which leaned together like old men who had been turned to stone while sharing some weird secret. She watched Eddie range up and down the rubble-strewn slopes of the hills, yelling himself hoarse. The duck-fuzz on his cheeks was finally becoming a beard, and you might have taken him for a grown man except for the three or four times he passed close to her (once he had come close enough for her to have snaked a hand out and grabbed his ankle). When he got close you saw he wasn't nothing but a kid still, and one who was dog tired to boot.

Odetta would have felt pity; Detta felt only the still, coiled readiness of the natural predator.

When she first crawled in here she had felt things crackling under her hands like old autumn leaves in a woods holler. As her eyes adjusted she saw they weren't leaves but the tiny bones of small animals. Some predator, long gone if these ancient yellow bones told the truth, had once denned here, something like a weasel or a ferret. It had perhaps gone out at night, following its nose further up into The Drawers to where the trees and undergrowth were thicker—following its nose to prey. It had killed, eaten, and brought the remains back here to snack on the following day as it laid up, waiting for night to bring the time of hunting on again.

Now there was a bigger predator here, and at first Detta thought she'd do pretty much what the previous tenant had done: wait until Eddie fell asleep, as he was almost certain to do, then kill him and drag his body up here. Then, with both guns in her possession, she could drag herself back down by the doorway and wait for the Really

Bad Man to come back. Her first thought had been to kill the Really Bad Man's body as soon as she had taken care of Eddie, but that was no good, was it? If the Really Bad Man had no body to come back to, there would be no way Detta could get out of here and back to her own world.

Could she make that Really Bad Man take her back?

Maybe not.

But maybe so.

If he knew Eddie was still alive, maybe so.

And that led to a much better idea.

2

She was deeply sly. She would have laughed harshly at anyone daring to suggest it, but she was also deeply insecure. Because of the latter, she attributed the former to anyone she met whose intellect seemed to approach her own. This was how she felt about the gunslinger. She had heard a shot, and when she looked she'd seen smoke drifting from the muzzle of his remaining gun. He had reloaded and tossed this gun to Eddie just before going through the door.

She knew what it was supposed to mean to Eddie: all the shells weren't wet after all; the gun would protect him. She *also* knew what it was supposed to mean to her (for of course the Really Bad Man had known she was watching; even if she had been sleeping when the two of them started chinning, the shot would have awakened her): *Stay away from him. He's packing iron.*

But devils could be subtle.

If that little show had been put on for her benefit, might not that Really Bad Man have had another purpose in mind as well, one *neither* she nor Eddie was supposed to see? Might that Really Bad Man not have been thinking *If she sees this one fires good shells, why, she'll think the one she took from Eddie does, too.*

But suppose he had guessed that Eddie would doze off? Wouldn't he know she would be waiting for just that, waiting to filch the gun

and creep slowly away up the slopes to safety? Yes, that Really Bad Man might have foreseen all that. He was smart for a honky. Smart enough, anyway, to see that Detta was bound to get the best of that little white boy.

So just maybe that Really Bad Man had purposely loaded this gun with bad shells. He had fooled her once; why not again? This time she had been careful to check that the chambers were loaded with more than empty casings, and yes, they *appeared* to be real bullets, but that didn't mean they were. He didn't even have to take the chance that *one* of them might be dry enough to fire, now did he? He could have fixed them somehow. After all, guns were the Really Bad Man's business. Why would he do that? Why, to trick her into showing herself, of course! Then Eddie could cover her with the gun that really *did* work, and he would not make the same mistake twice, tired or not. He would, in fact, be especially careful not to make the same mistake twice because he *was* tired.

Nice try, honky, Detta thought in her shadowy den, this tight but somehow comforting dark place whose floor was carpeted with the softened and decaying bones of small animals. *Nice try, but I ain't goin fo dat shit.*

She didn't need to shoot Eddie, after all; she only needed to wait.

3

Her one fear was that the gunslinger would return before Eddie fell asleep, but he was still gone. The limp body at the base of the door did not stir. Maybe he was having some trouble getting the medicine he needed—some other kind of trouble, for all she knew. Men like him seemed to find trouble easy as a bitch in heat finds a randy hound.

Two hours passed while Eddie hunted for the woman he called "Odetta" (oh how she hated the sound of that name), ranging up and down the low hills and yelling until he had no voice left to yell with.

At last Eddie did what she had been waiting for: he went back down to the little angle of beach and sat by the wheelchair, looking

around disconsolately. He touched one of the chair's wheels, and the touch was almost a caress. Then his hand dropped away and he fetched him a deep sigh.

This sight brought a steely ache to Detta's throat; pain bolted across her head from one side to the other like summer lightning and she seemed to hear a voice calling . . . calling or demanding.

No you don't, she thought, having no idea who she was thinking about or speaking to. *No you don't, not this time, not now. Not now, maybe not ever again.* That bolt of pain ripped through her head again and she curled her hands into fists. Her face made its own fist, twisting itself into a sneer of concentration—an expression remarkable and arresting in its mixture of ugliness and almost beatific determination.

That bolt of pain did not come again. Neither did the voice which sometimes seemed to speak through such pains.

She waited.

Eddie propped his chin on his fists, propping his head up. Soon it began to droop anyway, the fists sliding up his cheeks. Detta waited, black eyes gleaming.

Eddie's head jerked up. He struggled to his feet, walked down to the water, and splashed his face with it.

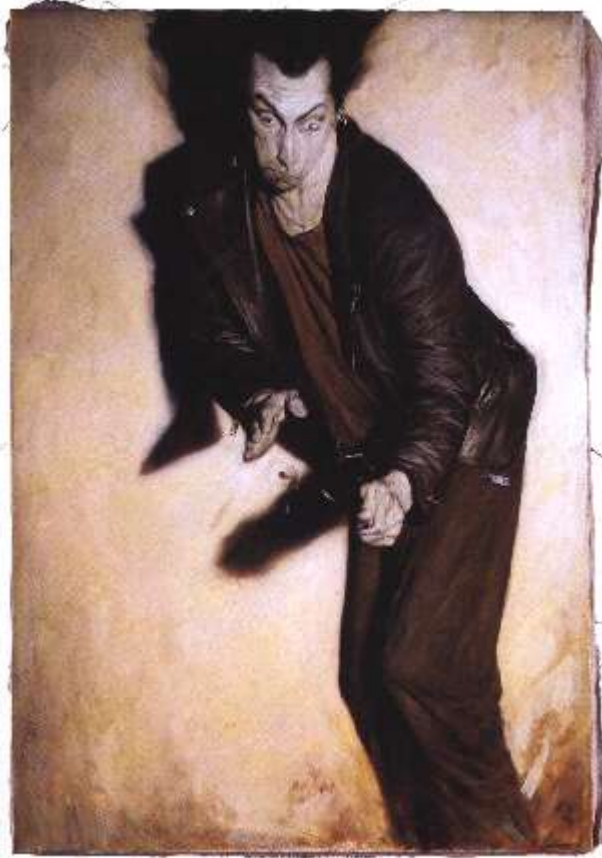
Dat's right, white boy. Crine shame there ain't any No-Doz in this worl or you be takin dat too, ain't dat right?

Eddie sat down *in* the wheelchair this time, but evidently found that just a little *too* comfortable. So, after a long look through the open door (*what you seein in dere, white boy? Detta give a twenty-dollar bill to know dat*), he plopped his ass down on the sand again.

Propped his head with his hands again.

Soon his head began to slip down again.

This time there was no stopping it. His chin lay on his chest, and even over the surf she could hear him snoring. Pretty soon he fell over on his side and curled up.



She was surprised, disgusted, and frightened to feel a sudden stab of pity for the white boy down there. He looked like nothing so much as a little squirt who had tried to stay up until midnight on New Year's Eve and lost the race. Then she remembered the way he and the Really Bad Man had tried to get her to eat poison food and teased her with their own, always snatching away at the last second . . . at least until they got scared she might die.

If they were scared you might die, why'd they try to get you to eat poison in the first place?

The question scared her the way that momentary feeling of pity had scared her. She wasn't used to questioning herself, and furthermore, the questioning voice in her mind didn't seem like her voice at all.

Wadn't meanin to kill me wid dat poison food. Jes wanted to make me sick. Set there and laugh while I puked an moaned, I speck.

She waited twenty minutes and then started down toward the beach, pulling herself with her hands and strong arms, weaving like a snake, eyes never leaving Eddie. She would have preferred to have waited another hour, even another half; it would be better to have the little mahfah ten miles asleep instead of one or two. But waiting was a luxury she simply could not afford. That Really Bad Man might come back anytime.

As she drew near the place where Eddie lay (he was still snoring, sounded like a buzzsaw in a sawmill about to go tits up), she picked up a chunk of rock that was satisfyingly smooth on one side and satisfyingly jagged on the other.

She closed her palm over the smooth side and continued her snake-crawl to where he lay, the flat sheen of murder in her eyes.

4

What Detta planned to do was brutally simple: smash Eddie with the jagged side of the rock until he was as dead as the rock itself. Then she'd take the gun and wait for Roland to come back.

When his body sat up, she would give him a choice: take her back to her world or refuse and be killed. *You goan be quits wid me either way, toots, she would say, and wit yo boyfrien dead, ain't nothin more you can do like you said you wanted to.*

If the gun the Really Bad Man had given Eddie didn't work—it was possible; she had never met a man she hated and feared as much as Roland, and she put no depth of slyness past him—she would do him just the same. She would do him with the rock or with her bare hands. He was sick and shy two fingers to boot. She could take him.

But as she approached Eddie, a disquieting thought came to her. It was another question, and again it seemed to be another voice that asked it.

What if he knows? What if he knows what you did the second you kill Eddie?

He ain't goan know nuthin. He be too busy gittin his medicine. Gittin hisself laid, too, for all I know.

The alien voice did not respond, but the seed of doubt had been planted. She had heard them talking when they thought she was asleep. The Really Bad Man needed to do something. She didn't know what it was. Had something to do with a tower was all Detta knew. Could be the Really Bad Man thought this tower was full of gold or jewels or something like that. He said he needed her and Eddie and some other one to get there, and Detta guessed maybe he did. Why else would these doors be here?

If it was magic and she killed Eddie, he *might* know. If she killed his way to the tower, she thought she might be killing the only thing graymeat mahfah was living for. And if he knew he had nothing to live for, mahfah might do anything, because the mahfah wouldn't give a bug-turd for nothin no more.

The idea of what might happen if the Really Bad Man came back like that made Detta shiver.

But if she couldn't kill Eddie, what was she going to do? She could take the gun while Eddie was asleep, but when the Really Bad Man came back, could she handle both of them?

She just didn't know.

Her eyes touched on the wheelchair, started to move away, then moved back again, fast. There was a deep pocket in the leather backrest. Poking out of this was a curl of the rope they had used to tie her into the chair.

Looking at it, she understood how she could do everything.

Detta changed course and began to crawl toward the gunslinger's inert body. She meant to take what she needed from the knapsack he called his "purse," then get the rope, fast as she could . . . but for a moment she was held frozen by the door.

Like Eddie, she interpreted what she was seeing in terms of the movies . . . only this looked more like some TV crime show. The setting was a drug-store. She was seeing a druggist who looked scared silly, and Detta didn't blame him. There was a gun pointing straight into the druggist's face. The druggist was saying something, but his voice was distant, distorted, as if heard through sound-baffles. She couldn't tell what it was. She couldn't see who was

holding the gun, either, but then, she didn't really need to see the stick-up man, did she? She knew who it was, sho.

It was the Really Bad Man.

Might not look like him over there, might look like some tubby little sack of shit, might even look like a brother, but inside it be him, sho. Didn't take him long to find another gun, did it? I bet it never does. You get movin, Detta Walker.

She opened Roland's purse, and the faint, nostalgic aroma of tobacco long hoarded but now long gone drifted out. In one way it was very much like a lady's purse, filled with what looked like so much random rickrack at first glance . . . but a closer look showed you the travelling gear of a man prepared for almost any contingency.

She had an idea the Really Bad Man had been on the road to his Tower a good long time. If that was so, just the amount of stuff still left in here, poor as some of it was, was cause for amazement.

You get movin, Detta Walker.

She got what she needed and worked her silent, snakelike way back to the wheelchair. When she got there she propped herself on one arm and pulled the rope out of the pocket like a fisherwoman reeling in line. She glanced over at Eddie every now and then just to make sure he was asleep.

He never stirred until Detta threw the noose around his neck and pulled it taut.

5

He was dragged backward, at first thinking he was still asleep and this was some horrible nightmare of being buried alive or perhaps smothered.

Then he felt the pain of the noose sinking into his throat, felt warm spit running down his chin as he gagged. This was no dream. He clawed at the rope and tried for his feet.

She yanked him hard with her strong arms. Eddie fell on his back with a thud. His face was turning purple.

“Quit on it!” Detta hissed from behind him. “I ain’t goan kill you if you quit on it, but if you don’t, I’m goan choke you dead.”

Eddie lowered his hands and tried to be still. The running slipknot Odetta had tossed over his neck loosened enough for him to draw a thin, burning breath. All you could say for it was that it was better than not breathing at all.

When the panicked beating of his heart had slowed a little, he tried to look around. The noose immediately drew tight again.

“Nev’ mind. You jes go on an take in dat ocean view, graymeat. Dat’s all you want to be lookin at right now.”

He looked back at the ocean and the knot loosened enough to allow him those miserly burning breaths again. His left hand crept surreptitiously down to the waistband of his pants (but she saw the movement, and although he didn’t know it, she was grinning). There was nothing there. She had taken the gun.

She crept up on you while you were asleep, Eddie. It was the gunslinger’s voice, of course. *It doesn’t do any good to say I told you so now, but . . . I told you so. This is what romance gets you—a noose around your neck and a crazy woman with two guns somewhere behind you.*

But if she was going to kill me, she already would have done it. She would have done it while I was asleep.

And what is it you think she’s going to do, Eddie? Hand you an all-expenses-paid trip for two to Disney World?

“Listen,” he said. “Odetta—”

The word was barely out of his mouth before the noose pulled savagely tight again.

“You doan want to be callin me dat. Nex time you be callin me dat be de las time you be callin anyone *anythin*. My name’s *Detta Walker*, and if you want to keep drawin breaf into yo lungs, you little piece of whitewashed shit, you better member it!”

Eddie made choking, gagging noises and clawed at the noose. Big black spots of nothing began to explode in front of his eyes like evil flowers.

At last the choking band around his throat eased again.

“Got dat, honky?”

“Yes,” he said, but it was only a hoarse choke of sound.

“Den say it. Say my name.”

“Detta.”

“Say my *whole* name!” Dangerous hysteria wavered in her voice, and at that moment Eddie was glad he couldn’t see her.

“Detta Walker.”

“Good.” The noose eased a little more. “Now you lissen to me, whitebread, and you do it good, if you want to live til sundown. You don’t want to be trine to be cute, like I seen you jus trine t’snake down an git dat gun I took off’n you while you was asleep. You don’t want to cause Detta, she got the sight. See what you goan try befo you try it. Sho.

“You don’t want to try nuthin cute cause I ain’t got no legs, either. I have learned to do a lot of things since I lost em, and now I got *both* o dat honky mahfah’s guns, and dat ought to go for somethin. You think so?”

“Yeah,” Eddie croaked. “I’m not feeling cute.”

“Well, good. Dat’s *real* good.” She cackled. “I been one busy bitch while you been sleepin. Got dis bidness all figured out. Here’s what I want you to do, whitebread: put yo hands behin you and feel aroun until you find a loop jus like d’one I got roun yo neck. There be three of em. I been braidin while you been sleepin, lazybones!” She cackled again. “When you feel dat loop, you goan put yo wrists right one against t’other an slip em through it.

“*Den* you goan feel my hand pullin that runnin knot tight, and when you feel *dat*, you goan say ‘Dis my chance to toin it aroun on disyere nigger bitch. Right here, while she ain’t got her good hold on dat jerk-rope.’ But—” Here Detta’s voice became muffled as well as a Southern darkie caricature. “—you better take a look aroun befo you go doin anythin *rash*.”

Eddie did. Detta looked more witchlike than ever, a dirty, matted thing that would have struck fear into hearts much stouter than his own. The dress she had been wearing in Macy’s when the gunslinger snatched her was now filthy and torn. She’d used the knife she had taken from the gunslinger’s purse—the one he and Roland had used to cut the masking tape away—to slash her dress

in two other places, creating makeshift holsters just above the swell of her hips. The worn butts of the gunslinger's revolvers protruded from them.

Her voice was muffled because the end of the rope was clenched in her teeth. A freshly cut end protruded from one side of her grin; the rest of the line, the part which led to the noose around his neck, protruded from the other side. There was something so predatory and barbaric about this image—the rope caught in the grin—that he was frozen, staring at her with a horror that only made her grin widen.

"You try to be cute while I be takin care of yo hans," she said in her muffled voice, "I goan joik yo win'pipe shut wif my *teef*, graymeat. And *dat* time I not be lettin up agin. You understan?"

He didn't trust himself to speak. He only nodded.

"Good. Maybe you be livin a little bit longer after all."

"If I don't," Eddie croaked, "you're never going to have the pleasure of shoplifting in Macy's again, Detta. Because he'll know, and then it'll be everybody out of the pool."

"Hush up," Detta said . . . almost crooned. "You jes hush up. Leave the thinkin to the folks dat kin do it. All *you* got to do is be feelin aroun fo dat next loop."

6

I been braidin while you been sleepin, she had said, and with disgust and mounting alarm, Eddie discovered she meant exactly what she said. The rope had become a series of three running slip-knots. The first she had noosed around his neck as he slept. The second secured his hands behind his back. Then she pushed him roughly over on his side and told him to bring his feet up until his heels touched his butt. He saw where this was leading and balked. She pulled one of Roland's revolvers from the slit in her dress, cocked it, and pressed the muzzle against Eddie's temple.

"You do it or *I* do it, graymeat," she said in that crooning voice. "Only if *I* do it, you goan be dead when I do. I jes kick some san' over

de brains dat squoit out d'other side yo haid, cover de hole wit yo hair. He think you be sleepin!" She cackled again.

Eddie brought his feet up, and she quickly secured the third running slip-knot around his ankles.

"There. Trussed up just as neat as a calf at a ro-day-o."

That described it as well as anything, Eddie thought. If he tried to bring his feet down from a position which was already growing uncomfortable, he would tighten the slipknot holding his ankles even more. That would tighten the length of rope between his ankles and his wrists, which would in turn tighten *that* slipknot, and the rope between his wrists and the noose she'd put around his neck, and . . .

She was dragging him, somehow dragging him down the beach.

"Hey! What—"

He tried to pull back and felt everything tighten—including his ability to draw breath. He let himself go as limp as possible (and keep those feet up, don't forget that, asshole, because if you lower your feet enough you're going to strangle) and let her drag him along the rough ground. A jag of rock peeled skin away from his cheek, and he felt warm blood begin to flow. She was panting harshly. The sound of the waves and the boom of surf ramming into the rock tunnel were louder.

Drown me? Sweet Christ, is that what she means to do?

No, of course not. He thought he knew what she meant to do even before his face plowed through the twisted kelp which marked the high-tide line, dead salt-stinking stuff as cold as the fingers of drowned sailors.

He remembered Henry saying once, *Sometimes they'd shoot one of our guys. An American, I mean—they knew an ARVN was no good, because wasn't any of us that'd go after a gook in the bush. Not unless he was some fresh fish just over from the States. They'd guthole him, leave him screaming, then pick off the guys that tried to save him. They'd keep doing that until the guy died. You know what they called a guy like that, Eddie?*

Eddie had shaken his head, cold with the vision of it.

They called him a honey-pot, Henry had said. Something sweet. Something to draw flies. Or maybe even a bear.

That's what Detta was doing: using him as a honeypot.

She left him some seven feet below the high-tide line, left him without a word, left him facing the ocean. It was not the tide coming in to drown him that the gunslinger, looking through the door, was supposed to see, because the tide was on the ebb and wouldn't get up this far again for another six hours. And long before then . . .

Eddie rolled his eyes up a little and saw the sun striking a long gold track across the ocean. What was it? Four o'clock? About that. Sunset would come around seven.

It would be dark long before he had to worry about the tide.

And when dark came, the lobstrosities would come rolling out of the waves; they would crawl their questioning way up the beach to where he lay helplessly trussed, and then they would tear him apart.

7

That time stretched out interminably for Eddie Dean. The idea of time itself became a joke. Even his horror of what was going to happen to him when it got dark faded as his legs began to throb with a discomfort which worked its way up the scale of feeling to pain and finally to shrieking agony. He would relax his muscles, all the knots would pull tight, and when he was on the verge of strangling he would manage somehow to pull his ankles up again, releasing the pressure, allowing some breath to return. He was no longer sure he could make it to dark. There might come a time when he would simply be unable to bring his legs back up.

CHAPTER 3

Roland Takes His Medicine

1

Now Jack Mort knew the gunslinger was here. If he had been another person—an Eddie Dean or an Odetta Walker, for instance—Roland would have held palaver with the man, if only to ease his natural panic and confusion at suddenly finding one's self shoved rudely into the passenger seat of the body one's brain had driven one's whole life.

But because Mort was a monster—worse than Detta Walker ever had been or could be—he made no effort to explain or speak at all. He could hear the man's clamorings—*Who are you? What's happening to me?*—but disregarded them. The gunslinger concentrated on his short list of necessities, using the man's mind with no compunction at all. The clamorings became screams of terror. The gunslinger went right on disregarding them.

The only way he could remain in the worm-pit which was this man's mind was to regard him as no more than a combination atlas and encyclopedia. Mort had all the information Roland needed. The plan he made was rough, but rough was often better than smooth. When it came to planning, there were no creatures in the universe more different than Roland and Jack Mort.

When you planned rough, you allowed room for improvisation. And improvisation at short notice had always been one of Roland's strong points.

2

A fat man with lenses over his eyes, like the bald man who had poked his head into Mort's office five minutes earlier (it seemed that

in Eddie's world many people wore these, which his Mortcyclopedia identified as "glasses"), got into the elevator with him. He looked at the briefcase in the hand of the man who he believed to be Jack Mort and then at Mort himself.

"Going to see Dorfman, Jack?"

The gunslinger said nothing.

"If you think you can talk him out of sub-leasing, I can tell you it's a waste of time," the fat man said, then blinked as his colleague took a quick step backward. The doors of the little box closed and suddenly they were falling.

He clawed at Mort's mind, ignoring the screams, and found this was all right. The fall was controlled.

"If I spoke out of turn, I'm sorry," the fat man said. The gunslinger thought: *This one is afraid, too.* "You've handled the jerk better than anyone else in the firm, that's what I think."

The gunslinger said nothing. He waited only to be out of this falling coffin.

"I say so, too," the fat man continued eagerly. "Why, just yesterday I was at lunch with—"

Jack Mort's head turned, and behind Jack Mort's gold-rimmed glasses, eyes that seemed a somehow different shade of blue than Jack's eyes had ever been before stared at the fat man. "Shut up," the gunslinger said tonelessly.

Color fell from the fat man's face and he took two quick steps backward. His flabby buttocks smacked the fake wood panels at the back of the little moving coffin, which suddenly stopped. The doors opened and the gunslinger, wearing Jack Mort's body like a tight-fitting set of clothes, stepped out with no look back. The fat man held his finger on the `DOOR OPEN` button of the elevator and waited inside until Mort was out of sight. *Always did have a screw loose,* the fat man thought, *but this could be serious. This could be a breakdown.*

The fat man found that the idea of Jack Mort tucked safely away in a sanitarium somewhere was very comforting.

The gunslinger wouldn't have been surprised.

Somewhere between the echoing room which his Mortcyclopedia identified as a *lobby*, to wit, a place of entry and exit from the offices which filled this sky-tower, and the bright sunshine of street (his Mortcyclopedia identified this street as both *6th Avenue* and *Avenue of the Americas*), the screaming of Roland's host stopped. Mort had not died of fright; the gunslinger felt with a deep instinct which was the same as knowing that if Mort died, their *kas* would be expelled forever, into that void of possibility which lay beyond all physical worlds. Not dead—fainted. Fainted at the overload of terror and strangeness, as Roland himself had done upon entering the man's mind and discovering its secrets and the crossing of destinies too great to be coincidence.

He was glad Mort had fainted. As long as the man's unconsciousness hadn't affected Roland's access to the man's knowledge and memories—and it hadn't—he was glad to have him out of the way.

The yellow cars were public conveyances called *Tack-Sees* or *Cabs* or *Hax*. The tribes which drove them, the Mortcyclopedia told him, were two: *Spix* and *Mockies*. To make one stop, you held your hand up like a pupil in a classroom.

Roland did this, and after several *Tack-Sees* which were obviously empty save for their drivers had gone by him, he saw that these had signs which read *Off-Duty*. Since these were Great Letters, the gunslinger didn't need Mort's help. He waited, then put his hand up again. This time the *Tack-See* pulled over. The gunslinger got into the back seat. He smelled old smoke, old sweat, old perfume. It smelled like a coach in his own world.

"Where to, my friend?" the driver asked—Roland had no idea if he was of the *Spix* or *Mockies* tribe, and had no intention of asking. It might be impolite in this world.

"I'm not sure," Roland said.

"This ain't no encounter group, my friend. Time is money."

Tell him to put his flag down, the Mortcyclopedia told him.

"Put your flag down," Roland said.

“That ain’t rolling nothing but time,” the driver replied.

Tell him you’ll tip him five bux, the Mortcypedia advised.

“I’ll tip you five bucks,” Roland said.

“Let’s see it,” the cabbie replied. “Money talks, bullshit walks.”

Ask him if he wants his money or if he wants to go fuck himself, the Mortcypedia advised instantly.

“Do you want the money, or do you want to go fuck yourself?” Roland asked in a cold, dead voice.

The cabbie’s eyes glanced apprehensively into the rearview mirror for just a moment, and he said no more.

Roland consulted Jack Mort’s accumulated store of knowledge more fully this time. The cabbie glanced up again, quickly, during the fifteen seconds his fare spent simply sitting there with his head slightly lowered and his left hand spread across his brow, as if he had an Excedrin Headache. The cabbie had decided to tell the guy to get out or he’d yell for a cop when the fare looked up and said mildly, “I’d like you to take me to Seventh Avenue and Forty-Ninth street. For this trip I will pay you ten dollars over the fare on your taxi meter, no matter what your tribe.”

A *weirdo*, the driver (a WASP from Vermont trying to break into showbiz) thought, *but maybe a rich weirdo*. He dropped the cab into gear. “We’re there, buddy,” he said, and pulling into traffic he added mentally, *And the sooner the better*.

4

Improvise. That was the word.

The gunslinger saw the blue-and-white parked down the block when he got out, and read *Police* as *Posse* without checking Mort’s store of knowledge. Two gunslingers inside, drinking something—coffee, maybe—from white paper glasses. Gunslingers, yes—but they looked fat and lax.

He reached into Jack Mort’s wallet (except it was much too small to be a *real* wallet; a *real* wallet was almost as big as a purse and could carry all of a man’s things, if he wasn’t travelling too heavy)

and gave the driver a bill with the number 20 on it. The cabbie drove away fast. It was easily the biggest tip he'd make that day, but the guy was so freaky he felt he had earned every cent of it.

The gunslinger looked at the sign over the shop.

CLEMENTS GUNS AND SPORTING GOODS, it said. AMMO, FISHING TACKLE, OFFICIAL FACSIMILES.

He didn't understand all of the words, but one look in the window was all it took for him to see Mort had brought him to the right place. There were wristbands on display, badges of rank . . . and guns. Rifles, mostly, but pistols as well. They were chained, but that didn't matter.

He would know what he needed when—*if*—he saw it.

Roland consulted Jack Mort's mind—a mind exactly sly enough to suit his purposes—for more than a minute.

5

One of the cops in the blue-and-white elbowed the other. "Now that," he said, "is a *serious* comparison shopper."

His partner laughed. "Oh *God*," he said in an effeminate voice as the man in the business suit and gold-rimmed glasses finished his study of the merchandise on display and went inside. "I think he jutht dethided on the *lavender* handcuffths."

The first cop choked on a mouthful of lukewarm coffee and sprayed it back into the styrofoam cup in a gust of laughter.

6

A clerk came over almost at once and asked if he could be of help.

"I wonder," the man in the conservative blue suit replied, "if you have a paper . . ." He paused, appeared to think deeply, and then looked up. "A *chart*, I mean, which shows pictures of revolver ammunition."

"You mean a caliber chart?" the clerk asked.

The customer paused, then said, “Yes. My brother has a revolver. I have fired it, but it’s been a good many years. I think I will know the bullets if I see them.”

“Well, you may think so,” the clerk replied, “but it can be hard to tell. Was it a .22? A .38? Or maybe—”

“If you have a chart, I’ll know,” Roland said.

“Just a sec.” The clerk looked at the man in the blue suit doubtfully for a moment, then shrugged. Fuck, the customer was always right, even when he was wrong . . . if he had the dough to pay, that was. Money talked, bullshit walked. “I got a *Shooter’s Bible*. Maybe that’s what you ought to look at.”

“Yes.” He smiled. *Shooter’s Bible*. It was a noble name for a book.

The man rummaged under the counter and brought out a well-thumbed volume as thick as any book the gunslinger had ever seen in his life—and yet this man seemed to handle it as if it were no more valuable than a handful of stones.

He opened it on the counter and turned it around. “Take a look. Although if it’s been years, you’re shootin’ in the dark.” He looked surprised, then smiled. “Pardon my pun.”

Roland didn’t hear. He was bent over the book, studying pictures which seemed almost as real as the things they represented, marvellous pictures the Mortcyclopedia identified as *Fottergraffs*.

He turned the pages slowly. No . . . no . . . no . . .

He had almost lost hope when he saw it. He looked up at the clerk with such blazing excitement that the clerk felt a little afraid.

“There!” he said. “There! *Right there!*”

The photograph he was tapping was one of a Winchester .45 pistol shell. It was not exactly the same as his own shells, because it hadn’t been hand-thrown or hand-loaded, but he could see without even consulting the figures (which would have meant almost nothing to him anyway) that it would chamber and fire from his guns.

“Well, all right, I guess you found it,” the clerk said, “but don’t cream your jeans, fella. I mean, they’re just *bullets*.”

“You have them?”

“Sure. How many boxes do you want?”

“How many in a box?”

“Fifty.” The clerk began to look at the gunslinger with real suspicion. If the guy was planning to buy shells, he must know he’d have to show a Permit to Carry photo-I.D. No P.C., no ammo, not for handguns; it was the law in the borough of Manhattan. And if this dude had a handgun permit, how come he didn’t know how many shells came in a standard box of ammo?

“Fifty!” Now the guy was staring at him with slack-jawed surprise. He was off the wall, all right.

The clerk edged a bit to his left, a bit nearer the cash register . . . and, not so coincidentally, a bit nearer to his own gun, a .357 Mag which he kept fully loaded in a spring clip under the counter.

“*Fifty!*” the gunslinger repeated. He had expected five, ten, perhaps as many as a dozen, but this . . . this . . .

How much money do you have? he asked the Mortcyclopedia. The Mortcyclopedia didn’t know, not exactly, but thought there was at least sixty bux in his wallet.

“And how much does a box cost?” It would be more than sixty dollars, he supposed, but the man might be persuaded to sell him *part* of a box, or—

“Seventeen-fifty,” the clerk said. “But, mister—”

Jack Mort was an accountant, and this time there was no waiting; translation and answer came simultaneously.

“Three,” the gunslinger said. “Three boxes.” He tapped the *Fotergraff* of the shells with one finger. One hundred and fifty rounds! Ye gods! What a mad storehouse of riches this world was!

The clerk wasn’t moving.

“You don’t have that many,” the gunslinger said. He felt no real surprise. It had been too good to be true. A dream.

“Oh, I got Winchester .45s. I got .45s up the kazoo.” The clerk took another step to the left, a step closer to the cash register and the gun. If the guy was a nut, something the clerk expected to find out for sure any second now, he was soon going to be a nut with an extremely large hole in his midsection. “I got .45 ammo up the old ying-yang. What I want to know, mister, is if *you* got the card.”

“Card?”

“A handgun permit with a photo. I can’t sell you handgun ammo unless you can show me one. If you want to buy ammo without a P.C., you’re gonna hafta go up to Westchester.”

The gunslinger stared at the man blankly. This was all gabble to him. He understood none of it. His Mortcyclopedia had some vague notion of what the man meant, but Mort’s ideas were too vague to be trusted in this case. Mort had never owned a gun in his life. He did his nasty work in other ways.

The man sidled another step to the left without taking his eyes from his customer’s face and the gunslinger thought: *He’s got a gun. He expects me to make trouble . . . or maybe he wants me to make trouble. Wants an excuse to shoot me.*

Improvise.

He remembered the gunslingers sitting in their blue and white carriage down the street. Gunslingers, yes, peacekeepers, men charged with keeping the world from moving on. But these had looked—at least on a passing glance—to be nearly as soft and unobservant as everyone else in this world of lotus-eaters; just two men in uniforms and caps, slouched down in the seats of their carriage, drinking coffee. He might have misjudged. He hoped for all their sakes—that he had not.

“Oh! I understand,” the gunslinger said, and drew an apologetic smile on Jack Mort’s face. “I’m sorry. I guess I haven’t kept track of how much the world has moved on—changed—since I last owned a gun.”

“No harm done,” the clerk said, relaxing minutely. Maybe the guy was all right. Or maybe he was pulling a gag.

“I wonder if I could look at that cleaning kit?” Roland pointed to a shelf behind the clerk.

“Sure.” The clerk turned to get it, and when he did, the gunslinger removed the wallet from Mort’s inside jacket pocket. He did this with the flickering speed of a fast draw. The clerk’s back was to him for less than four seconds, but when he turned back to Mort, the wallet was on the floor.

“It’s a beaut,” the clerk said, smiling, having decided the guy was okay after all. Hell, he knew how lousy you felt when you made a

horse's ass of yourself. He had done it in the Marines enough times. "And you don't need a goddam permit to buy a cleaning kit, either. Ain't freedom wonderful?"

"Yes," the gunslinger said seriously, and pretended to look closely at the cleaning kit, although a single glance was enough to show him that it was a shoddy thing in a shoddy box. While he looked, he carefully pushed Mort's wallet under the counter with his foot.

After a moment he pushed the kit back with a passable show of regret. "I'm afraid I'll have to pass."

"All right," the clerk said, losing interest abruptly. Since the guy wasn't crazy and was obviously a looker, not a buyer, their relationship was at an end. Bullshit walks. "Anything else?" His mouth asked while his eyes told blue-suit to get out.

"No, thank you." The gunslinger walked out with a look back. Mort's wallet was deep under the counter. Roland had set out his own honeypot.

7

Officers Carl Delevan and George O'Mearah had finished their coffee and were about to move on when the man in the blue suit came out of Clements'—which both cops believed to be a powderhorn (police slang for a legal gunshop which sometimes sells guns to independent stick-up men with proven credentials and which does business, sometimes in bulk, to the Mafia), and approached their squad car.

He leaned down and looked in the passenger side window at O'Mearah. O'Mearah expected the guy to sound like a fruit—probably as fruity as his routine about the lavender handcuffths had suggested, but a pouf all the same. Guns aside, Clements' did a lively trade in handcuffs. These were legal in Manhattan, and most of the people buying them weren't amateur Houdinis (the cops didn't like it, but when had what the cops thought on any given subject *ever* changed things?). The buyers were homos with a little taste for s &

m. But the man didn't sound like a fag at all. His voice was flat and expressionless, polite but somehow dead.

"The tradesman in there took my wallet," he said.

"*Who?*" O'Mearah straightened up fast. They had been itching to bust Justin Clements for a year and a half. If it could be done, maybe the two of them could finally swap these bluesuits for detectives' badges. Probably just a pipe-dream—this was too good to be true—but just the same . . .

"The tradesman. The—" A brief pause. "The clerk."

O'Mearah and Carl Delevan exchanged a glance.

"Black hair?" Delevan asked. "On the stocky side?"

Again there was the briefest pause. "Yes. His eyes were brown. Small scar under one of them."

There was something about the guy . . . O'Mearah couldn't put his finger on it then, but remembered later on, when there weren't so many other things to think about. The chief of which, of course, was the simple fact that the gold detective's badge didn't matter; it turned out that just holding onto the jobs they had would be a pure brassy-ass miracle.

But years later there was a brief moment of epiphany when O'Mearah took his two sons to the Museum of Science in Boston. They had a machine there—a computer—that played tic-tac-toe, and unless you put your X in the middle square on your first move, the machine fucked you over every time. But there was always a pause as it checked its memory for all possible gambits. He and his boys had been fascinated. But there was something spooky about it . . . and then he remembered Blue-Suit. He remembered because Blue-Suit had had that same fucking habit. Talking to him had been like talking to a robot.

Delevan had no such feeling, but nine years later, when he took his own son (then eighteen and about to start college) to the movies one night, Delevan would rise unexpectedly to his feet about thirty minutes into the feature and scream, "*It's him! That's HIM! That's the guy in the fucking blue suit! The guy who was at Cle—*"

Somebody would shout *Down in front!* but needn't have bothered; Delevan, seventy pounds overweight and a heavy smoker, would be

struck by a fatal heart attack before the complainer even got to the second word. The man in the blue suit who approached their cruiser that day and told them about his stolen wallet didn't look like the star of the movie, but the dead delivery of words had been the same; so had been the somehow relentless yet graceful way he moved.

The movie, of course, had been *The Terminator*.

8

The cops exchanged a glance. The man Blue-Suit was talking about wasn't Clements, but almost as good: "Fat Johnny" Holden, Clements' brother-in-law. But to have done something as totally dumb-ass as simply stealing a guy's wallet would be—

—*would be right up that gink's alley*, O'Mearah's mind finished, and he had to put a hand to his mouth to cover a momentary little grin.

"Maybe you better tell us exactly what happened," Delevan said. "You can start with your name."

Again, the man's response struck O'Mearah as a little wrong, a little off-beat. In this city, where it sometimes seemed that seventy per cent of the population believed *Go fuck yourself* was American for *Have a nice day*, he would have expected the guy to say something like, *Hey, that S.O.B. took my wallet! Are you going to get it back for me or are we going to stand out here playing Twenty Questions?*

But there was the nicely cut suit, the manicured fingernails. A guy maybe used to dealing with bureaucratic bullshit. In truth, George O'Mearah didn't care much. The thought of busting Fat Johnny Holden and using him as a lever on Arnold Clements made O'Mearah's mouth water. For one dizzy moment he even allowed himself to imagine using Holden to get Clements and Clements to get one of the really big guys—that wop Balazar, for instance, or maybe Ginelli. That wouldn't be too tacky. Not too tacky at *all*.

"My name is Jack Mort," the man said.

Delevan had taken a butt-warped pad from his back pocket. "Address?"

That slight pause. *Like the machine*, O'Mearah thought again. A moment of silence, then an almost audible click.

"409 Park Avenue South."

Delevan jotted it down.

"Social Security number?"

After another slight pause, Mort recited it.

"Want you to understand I gotta ask you these questions for identification purposes. If the guy *did* take your wallet, it's nice if I can say you told me certain stuff before I take it into my possession. You understand."

"Yes." Now there was the slightest hint of impatience in the man's voice. It made O'Mearah feel a little better about him somehow. "Just don't drag it out any more than you have to. Time passes, and—"

"Things have a way of happening, yeah, I dig."

"Things have a way of happening," the man in the blue suit agreed. "Yes."

"Do you have a photo in your wallet that's distinctive?"

A pause. Then: "A picture of my mother taken in front of the Empire State Building. On the back is written: 'It was a wonderful day and a wonderful view. Love, Mom.'"

Delevan jotted furiously, then snapped his notebook closed. "Okay. That should do it. Only other thing'll be to have you write your signature if we get the wallet back and compare it with the sigs on your driver's license, credit cards, stuff like that. Okay?"

Roland nodded, although part of him understood that, although he could draw on Jack Mort's memories and knowledge of this world as much as he needed, he hadn't a chance in hell of duplicating Mort's signature with Mort's consciousness absent, as it was now.

"Tell us what happened."

"I went in to buy shells for my brother. He has a .45 Winchester revolver. The man asked me if I had a Permit to Carry. I said of course. He asked to see it."

Pause.

“I took out my wallet. I showed him. Only when I turned my wallet around to do that showing, he must have seen there were quite a few—” slight pause “—twenties in there. I am a tax accountant. I have a client named Dorfman who just won a small tax refund after an extended—” pause “—litigation. The sum was only eight hundred dollars, but this man, Dorfman, is—” pause “—the biggest prick we handle.” Pause. “Pardon my pun.”

O’Mearah ran the man’s last few words back through his head and suddenly got it. The biggest prick we handle. Not bad. He laughed. Thoughts of robots and machines that played tic-tac-toe went out of his mind. The guy was real enough, just upset and trying to hide it by being cool.

“Anyway, Dorfman wanted cash. He *insisted* on cash.”

“You think Fat Johnny got a look at your client’s dough,” Delevan said. He and O’Mearah got out of the blue-and-white.

“Is that what you call the man in that shop?”

“Oh, we call him worse than that on occasion,” Delevan said. “What happened after you showed him your P.C., Mr. Mort?”

“He asked for a closer look. I gave him my wallet but he didn’t look at the picture. He dropped it on the floor. I asked him what he did that for. He said that was a stupid question. Then I told him to give me back my wallet. I was mad.”

“I bet you were.” Although, looking at the man’s dead face, Delevan thought you’d never guess this man could get mad.

“He laughed. I started to come around the counter and get it. That was when he pulled the gun.”

They had been walking toward the shop. Now they stopped. They looked excited rather than fearful. “*Gun?*” O’Mearah asked, wanting to be sure he had heard right.

“It was under the counter, by the cash register,” the man in the blue suit said. Roland remembered the moment when he had almost junked his original plan and gone for the man’s weapon. Now he told these gunslingers why he hadn’t. He wanted to use them, not get them killed. “I think it was in a docker’s clutch.”

“A *what?*” O’Mearah asked.

A longer pause this time. The man's forehead wrinkled. "I don't know exactly how to say it . . . a thing you put your gun into. No one can grab it but you unless they know how to push—"

"A spring-clip!" Delevan said. "Holy shit!" Another exchange of glances between the partners. Neither wanted to be the first to tell this guy that Fat Johnny had probably harvested the cash from his wallet already, shucked his buns out the back door, and tossed it over the wall of the alley behind the building . . . but a gun in a spring-clip . . . that was different. Robbery was a possibility, but all at once a concealed weapons charge looked like a sure thing. Maybe not as good, but a foot in the door.

"What then?" O'Mearah asked.

"Then he told me I didn't have a wallet. He said—" pause "—that I got my picket pocked—my pocket picked, I mean—on the street and I'd better remember it if I wanted to stay healthy. I remembered seeing a police car parked up the block and I thought you might still be there. So I left."

"Okay," Delevan said. "Me and my partner are going in first, and fast. Give us about a minute—a *full* minute—just in case there's some trouble. Then come in, but stand by the door. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's bust this motherfucker."

The two cops went in. Roland waited thirty seconds and then followed them.

9

"Fat Johnny" Holden was doing more than protesting. He was bellowing.

"Guy's crazy! Guy comes in here, doesn't even know what he wants, then, when he sees it in the *Shooter's Bible*, he don't know how many comes in a box, how much they cost, and what he says about me wantin' a closer look at his P.C. is the biggest pile of shit I ever heard, because he don't *have* no Permit to—" Fat Johnny broke

off. “There he is! There’s the creep! Right there! I see you, buddy! I see your face! Next time you see mine you’re gonna be fuckin sorry! I guarantee you that! I fuckin guarantee—”

“You don’t have this man’s wallet?” O’Mearah asked.

“You *know* I don’t have his wallet!”

“You mind if we take a look behind this display case?” Delevan countered. “Just to be sure?”

“Jesus-fuckin-jumped-up-Christ-on-a-pony! The case is *glass*! You see any wallets there?”

“No, not *there* . . . I meant *here*,” Delevan said, moving toward the register. His voice was a cat’s purr. At this point a chrome-steel reinforcing strip almost two feet wide ran down the shelves of the case. Delevan looked back at the man in the blue suit, who nodded.

“I want you guys out of here right now,” Fat Johnny said. He had lost some of his color. “You come back with a warrant, that’s different. But for now, I want you the fuck out. Still a free fuckin country, you kn—hey! *hey!* **HEY, QUIT THAT!**”

O’Mearah was peering over the counter.

“*That’s illegal!*” Fat Johnny was howling. “*That’s fuckin illegal, the Constitution . . . my fuckin lawyer . . . you get back on your side right now or—*”

“I just wanted a closer look at the merchandise,” O’Mearah said mildly, “on account of the glass in your display case is so fucking dirty. That’s why I looked over. Isn’t it, Carl?”

“True shit, buddy,” Delevan said solemnly.

“And look what *I* found.”

Roland heard a *click*, and suddenly the gunslinger in the blue uniform was holding an extremely large gun in his hand.

Fat Johnny, who had finally realized he was the only person in the room who would tell a story that differed from the fairy tale just told by the cop who had taken his Mag, turned sullen.

“I got a permit,” he said.

“To carry?” Delevan asked.

“Yeah.”

“To carry concealed?”

“Yeah.”

“This gun registered?” O’Mearah asked. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Well . . . I mighta forgot.”

“Might be it’s hot, and you forgot that, too.”

“Fuck you. I’m calling my lawyer.”

Fat Johnny started to turn away. Delevan grabbed him.

“Then there’s the question of whether or not you got a permit to conceal a deadly weapon in a spring-clip device,” he said in the same soft, purring voice. “That’s an interesting question, because so far as I know, the City of New York doesn’t *issue* a permit like that.”

The cops were looking at Fat Johnny; Fat Johnny was glaring back at them. So none of them noticed Roland turn the sign hanging in the door from OPEN to CLOSED.

“Maybe we could start to resolve this matter if we could find the gentleman’s wallet,” O’Mearah said. Satan himself could not have lied with such genial persuasiveness. “Maybe he just dropped it, you know.”

“I told you! I don’t know nothing about the guy’s wallet! Guy’s out of his mind!”

Roland bent down. “There it is,” he remarked. “I can just see it. He’s got his foot on it.”

This was a lie, but Delevan, whose hand was still on Fat Johnny’s shoulder, shoved the man back so rapidly that it was impossible to tell if the man’s foot *had* been there or not.

It had to be now. Roland glided silently toward the counter as the two gunslingers bent to peer under the counter. Because they were standing side by side, this brought their heads close together. O’Mearah still had the gun the clerk had kept under the counter in his right hand.

“Goddam, it’s there!” Delevan said excitedly. “I see it!”

Roland snapped a quick glance at the man they had called Fat Johnny, wanting to make sure he was not going to make a play. But he was only standing against the wall—*pushing* against it, actually, as if wishing he could push himself into it—with his hands hanging at his sides and his eyes great wounded O’s. He looked like a man wondering how come his horoscope hadn’t told him to beware this day.

No problem there.

“*Yeah!*” O’Mearah replied gleefully. The two men peered under the counter, hands on uniformed knees. Now O’Mearah left his knee and he reached out to snag the wallet. “I see it, t—”

Roland took one final step forward. He cupped Delevan’s right cheek in one hand, O’Mearah’s left cheek in the other, and all of a sudden a day Fat Johnny Holden believed *had* to have hit rock bottom got a *lot* worse. The spook in the blue suit brought the cops’ heads together hard enough to make a sound like rocks wrapped in felt colliding with each other.

The cops fell in a heap. The man in the gold-rimmed specs stood. He was pointing the .357 Mag at Fat Johnny. The muzzle looked big enough to hold a moon rocket.

“We’re not going to have any trouble, are we?” the spook asked in his dead voice.

“No sir,” Fat Johnny said at once, “not a bit.”

“Stand right there. If your ass loses contact with that wall, you are going to lose contact with life as you have always known it. You understand?”

“Yes sir,” Fat Johnny said, “I sure do.”

“Good.”

Roland pushed the two cops apart. They were both still alive. That was good. No matter how slow and unobservant they might be, they were gunslingers, men who had tried to help a stranger in trouble. He had no urge to kill his own.

But he had done it before, hadn’t he? Yes. Had not Alain himself, one of his sworn brothers, died under Roland’s and Cuthbert’s own smoking guns?

Without taking his eyes from the clerk, he felt under the counter with the toe of Jack Mort’s Gucci loafer. He felt the wallet. He kicked it. It came spinning out from underneath the counter on the clerk’s side. Fat Johnny jumped and shrieked like a goosey girl who spies a mouse. His ass actually *did* lose contact with the wall for a moment, but the gunslinger overlooked it. He had no intention of putting a bullet in this man. He would throw the gun at him and poleaxe him

with it before firing a shot. A gun as absurdly big as this would probably bring half the neighborhood.

“Pick it up,” the gunslinger said. “Slowly.”

Fat Johnny reached down, and as he grasped the wallet, he farted loudly and screamed. With faint amusement the gunslinger realized he had mistaken the sound of his own fart for a gunshot and his time of dying had come.

When Fat Johnny stood up, he was blushing furiously. There was a large wet patch on the front of his pants.

“Put the purse on the counter. Wallet, I mean.”

Fat Johnny did it.

“Now the shells. Winchester .45s. And I want to see your hands every second.”

“I have to reach into my pocket. For my keys.”

Roland nodded.

As Fat Johnny first unlocked and then slid open the case with the stacked cartons of bullets inside, Roland cogitated.

“Give me four boxes,” he said at last. He could not imagine needing so many shells, but the temptation to *have* them was not to be denied.

Fat Johnny put the boxes on the counter. Roland slid one of them open, still hardly able to believe it wasn't a joke or a sham. But they were bullets, all right, clean, shining, unmarked, never fired, never re-loaded. He held one up to the light for a moment, then put it back in the box.

“Now take out a pair of those wristbands.”

“Wristbands—?”

The gunslinger consulted the Mortcyclopedia. “Handcuffs.”

“Mister, I dunno what you want. The cash register's—”

“Do what I say. Now.”

Christ, this ain't never gonna end, Fat Johnny's mind moaned. He opened another section of the counter and brought out a pair of cuffs.

“Key?” Roland asked.

Fat Johnny put the key to the cuffs on the counter. It made a small click. One of the unconscious cops made an abrupt snoring sound

and Johnny uttered a wee screech.

“Turn around,” the gunslinger said.

“You ain’t gonna shoot me, are you? Say you ain’t!”

“Ain’t,” Roland said tonelessly. “As long as you turn around right now. If you don’t do that, I will.”

Fat Johnny turned around, beginning to blubber. Of course the guy said he wasn’t going to, but the smell of mob hit was getting too strong to ignore. He hadn’t even been skimming that much. His blubbers became choked wails.

“Please, mister, for my mother’s sake don’t shoot me. My mother’s old. She’s blind. She’s—”

“She’s cursed with a yellowgut son,” the gunslinger said dourly. “Wrists together.”

Mewling, wet pants sticking to his crotch, Fat Johnny put them together. In a trice the steel bracelets were locked in place. He had no idea how the spook had gotten over or around the counter so quickly. Nor did he *want* to know.

“Stand there and look at the wall until I tell you it’s all right to turn around. If you turn around before then, I’ll kill you.”

Hope lighted Fat Johnny’s mind. Maybe the guy didn’t mean to hit him after all. Maybe the guy wasn’t crazy, just insane.

“I won’t. Swear to God. Swear before all of His saints. Swear before all His angels. Swear before all His *arch*—”

“*I* swear if you don’t shut up I’ll put a slug through your neck,” the spook said.

Fat Johnny shut up. It seemed to him that he stood facing the wall for an eternity. In truth, it was about twenty seconds.

The gunslinger knelt, put the clerk’s gun on the floor, took a quick look to make sure the maggot was being good, then rolled the other two onto their backs. Both were good and out, but not dangerously hurt, Roland judged. They were both breathing regularly. A little blood trickled from the ear of the one called Delevan, but that was all.

He took another quick glance at the clerk, then unbuckled the gunslingers’ gunbelts and stripped them off. Then he took off Mort’s blue suitcoat and buckled the belts on himself. They were the wrong

guns, but it still felt good to be packing iron again. *Damned* good. Better than he would have believed.

Two guns. One for Eddie, and one for Odetta . . . when and if Odetta was ready for a gun. He put on Jack Mort's coat again, dropped two boxes of shells into the right pocket and two into the left. The coat, formerly impeccable, now bulged out of shape. He picked up the clerk's .357 Mag and put the shells in his pants pocket. Then he tossed the gun across the room. When it hit the floor Fat Johnny jumped, uttered another wee shriek, and squirted a little more warm water in his pants.

The gunslinger stood up and told Fat Johnny to turn around.

10

When Fat Johnny got another look at the geek in the blue suit and the gold-rimmed glasses, his mouth fell open. For a moment he felt an overwhelming certainty that the man who had come in here had become a ghost when Fat Johnny's back was turned. It seemed to Fat Johnny that through the man he could see a figure much more real, one of those legendary gunfighters they used to make movies and TV shows about when he was a kid: Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Butch Cassidy, one of those guys.

Then his vision cleared and he realized what the crazy nut had done: taken the cops' guns and strapped them around his waist. With the suit and tie the effect should have been ludicrous, but somehow it wasn't.

"The key to the wristbands is on the counter. When the possemen wake up they'll free you."

He took the wallet, opened it, and, incredibly, laid four twenty dollar bills on the glass before stuffing the wallet back into his pocket.

"For the ammunition," Roland said. "I've taken the bullets from your own gun. I intend to throw them away when I leave your store. I think that, with an unloaded gun and no wallet, they may find it difficult to charge you with a crime."

Fat Johnny gulped. For one of the few times in his life he was speechless.

“Now where is the nearest—” Pause. “—nearest drugstore?”

Fat Johnny suddenly understood—or thought he understood—everything. The guy was a junkball, of course. That was the answer. No wonder he was so weird. Probably hopped up to the eyeballs.

“There’s one around the corner. Half a block down Forty-Ninth.”

“If you’re lying, I’ll come back and put a bullet in your brain.”

“I’m not lying!” Fat Johnny cried. “I swear before God the Father! I swear before all the Saints! I swear on my mother’s—”

But then the door was swinging shut. Fat Johnny stood for a moment in utter silence, unable to believe the nut was gone.

Then he walked as rapidly as he could around the counter and to the door. He turned his back to it and fumbled around until he was able to grasp and turn the lock. He fumbled some more until he had managed to shoot the bolt as well.

Only then did he allow himself to slide slowly into a sitting position, gasping and moaning and swearing to God and all His saints and angels that he would go to St. Anthony’s this very afternoon, as soon as one of those pigs woke up and let him out of these cuffs, as a matter of fact. He was going to make confession, do an act of contrition, and take communion.

Fat Johnny Holden wanted to get right with God.

This had just been too fucking close.

11

The setting sun became an arc over the Western Sea. It narrowed to a single bright line which seared Eddie’s eyes. Looking at such a light for long could put a permanent burn on your retinas. This was just one of the many interesting facts you learned in school, facts that helped you get a fulfilling job like part-time bartender and an interesting hobby like the full-time search for street-skag and the bucks with which to buy it. Eddie didn’t stop looking. He didn’t think it was going to matter much longer if he got eye-burned or not.

He didn't beg the witch-woman behind him. First, it wouldn't help. Second, begging would degrade him. He had lived a degrading life; he discovered that he had no wish to degrade himself further in the last few minutes of it. Minutes were all he had left now. That's all there would be before that bright line disappeared and the time of the lobstrosities came.

He had ceased hoping that a miraculous change would bring Odetta back at the last moment, just as he ceased hoping that Detta would recognize that his death would almost certainly strand her in this world forever. He had believed until fifteen minutes ago that she was bluffing; now he knew better.

Well, it'll be better than strangling an inch at a time, he thought, but after seeing the loathsome lobster-things night after night, he really didn't believe that was true. He hoped he would be able to die without screaming. He didn't think this would be possible, but he intended to try.

"They be comin fo you, honky!" Detta screeched. "Be comin any minute now! Goan be the best dinner those daddies *evah* had!"

It wasn't just a bluff, Odetta wasn't coming back . . . and the gunslinger wasn't either. This last hurt the most, somehow. He had been sure he and the gunslinger had become—well, partners if not brothers—during their trek up the beach, and Roland would at least make an *effort* to stand by him.

But Roland wasn't coming.

Maybe it isn't that he doesn't want to come. Maybe he can't come. Maybe he's dead, killed by a security guard in a drug store—shit, that'd be a laugh, the world's last gunslinger killed by a Rent-A-Cop—or maybe run over by a taxi. Maybe he's dead and the door's gone. Maybe that's why she's not running a bluff. Maybe there's no bluff to run.

"Goan be any minute now!" Detta screamed, and then Eddie didn't have to worry about his retinas anymore, because that last bright slice of light disappeared, leaving only afterglow.

He stared at the waves, the bright afterimage slowly fading from his eyes, and waited for the first of the lobstrosities to come rolling and tumbling out of the waves.

Eddie tried to turn his head to avoid the first one, but he was too slow. It ripped off a swatch of his face with one claw, splattering his left eye to jelly and revealing the bright gleam of bone in the twilight as it asked its questions and the Really Bad Woman laughed . . .

Stop it, Roland commanded himself. Thinking such thoughts is worse than helpless; it is a distraction. And it need not be. There may still be time.

And there still was—then. As Roland strode down Forty-Ninth street in Jack Mort's body, arms swinging, bullshooter's eyes fixed firmly upon the sign which read DRUGS, oblivious to the stares he was getting and the way people swerved to avoid him, the sun was still up in Roland's world. Its lower rim would not touch the place where sea met sky for another fifteen minutes or so. If Eddie's time of agony was to come, it was still ahead.

The gunslinger did not know this for a fact, however; he only knew it was later over there than here and while the sun *should* still be up over there, the assumption that time in this world and his own ran at the same speed might be a deadly one . . . especially for Eddie, who would die the death of unimaginable horror that his mind nevertheless kept trying to imagine.

The urge to look back, to see, was almost insurmountable. Yet he dared not. *Must not.*

The voice of Cort interrupted the run of his thoughts sternly: *Control the things you can control, maggot. Let everything else take a flying fuck at you, and if you must go down, go down with your guns blazing.*

Yes.

But it was hard.

Very hard, sometimes.

He would have seen and understood why people were staring at him and then veering away if he had been a little less savagely fixed on finishing his work in this world as soon as he could and getting the hell out, but it would have changed nothing. He strode so rapidly toward the blue sign where, according to the Mortcyclopedia, he could

get the Keflex stuff his body needed, that Mort's suitcoat flapped out behind him in spite of the heavy lead weighting in each pocket. The gunbelts buckled across his hips were clearly revealed. He wore them not as their owners had, straight and neat, but as he wore his own, criss-cross, low-hung on his hips.

To the shoppers, boppers, and hawkers on Forty-Ninth, he looked much as he had looked to Fat Johnny: like a desperado.

Roland reached Katz's Drug Store and went in.



The gunslinger had known magicians, enchanters, and alchemists in his time. Some had been clever charlatans, some stupid fakes in whom only people more stupid than they were themselves could believe (but there had never been a shortage of fools in the world, so even the stupid fakes survived; in fact most actually thrived), and a

small few actually able to do those things of which men whisper—these few could call demons and the dead, could kill with a curse or heal with strange potions. One of these men had been a creature the gunslinger believed to be a demon himself, a creature that pretended to be a man and called itself Flagg. He had seen him only briefly, and that had been near the end, as chaos and the final crash approached his land. Hot on his heels had come two young men who looked desperate and yet grim, men named Dennis and Thomas. These three had crossed only a tiny part of what had been a confused and confusing time in the gunslinger's life, but he would never forget seeing Flagg change a man who had irritated him into a howling dog. He remembered that well enough. Then there had been the man in black.

And there had been Marten.

Marten who had seduced his mother while his father was away, Marten who had tried to author Roland's death but had instead authored his early manhood, Marten who, he suspected, he might meet again before he reached the Tower . . . or at it.

This is only to say that his experience of magic and magicians had led him to expect something quite different than what he did find in Katz's Drug Store.

He had anticipated a dim, candle-lit room full of bitter fumes, jars of unknown powders and liquids and philters, many covered with a thick layer of dust or spun about with a century's cobwebs. He had expected a man in a cowl, a man who might be dangerous. He saw people moving about inside through the transparent plate-glass windows, as casually as they would in any shop, and believed they must be an illusion.

They weren't.

So for a moment the gunslinger merely stood inside the door, first amazed, then ironically amused. Here he was in a world which struck him dumb with fresh wonders seemingly at every step, a world where carriages flew through the air and paper seemed as cheap as sand. And the newest wonder was simply that for these people, wonder had run out: here, in a place of miracles, he saw only dull faces and plodding bodies.

There were thousands of bottles, there were potions, there were philters, but the Mortcyclopedia identified most as quack remedies. Here was a salve that was supposed to restore fallen hair but would not; there a cream which promised to erase unsightly spots on the hands and arms but lied. Here were cures for things that needed no curing: things to make your bowels run or stop them up, to make your teeth white and your hair black, things to make your breath smell better as if you could not do that by chewing alder-bark. No magic here; only trivialities—although there *was* astin, and a few other remedies which sounded as if they might be useful. But for the most part, Roland was appalled by the place. In a place that promised alchemy but dealt more in perfume than potion, was it any wonder that wonder had run out?

But when he consulted the Mortcyclopedia again, he discovered that the truth of this place was not just in the things he was looking at. The potions that really worked were kept safely out of sight. One could only obtain these if you had a sorcerer's fiat. In this world, such sorcerers were called DOCKTORS, and they wrote their magic formulae on sheets of paper which the Mortcyclopedia called REXES. The gunslinger didn't know the word. He supposed he could have consulted further on the matter, but didn't bother. He knew what he needed, and a quick look into the Mortcyclopedia told him where in the store he could get it.

He strode down one of the aisles toward a high counter with the words PRESCRIPTIONS FILLED over it.

14

The Katz who had opened Katz's Pharmacy and Soda Fountain (Sundries and Notions for Misses and Misterys) on 49th Street in 1927 was long in his grave, and his only son looked ready for his own. Although he was only forty-six, he looked twenty years older. He was balding, yellow-skinned, and frail. He knew people said he looked like death on horseback, but none of them understood *why*.

Take this crotch on the phone now. Mrs. Rathbun. Ranting that she would sue him if he didn't fill her goddamned Valium prescription and *right now, RIGHT THIS VERY INSTANT.*

What do you think, lady, I'm gonna pour a stream of blue bombers through the phone? If he did, she would at least do him a favor and shut up. She would just tip the receiver up over her mouth and open wide.

The thought raised a ghostly grin which revealed his sallow dentures.

"You don't understand, Mrs. Rathbun," he interrupted after he had listened to a minute—a full minute, timed it with the sweep second-hand of his watch—of her raving. He would like, just once, to be able to say: *Stop shouting at me, you stupid crotch! Shout at your DOCTOR! He's the one who hooked you on that shit!* Right. Damn quacks gave it out like it was bubblegum, and when they decided to cut off the supply, who got hit with the shit? The sawbones? Oh, no! *He did!*

"What do you mean, I don't understand?" The voice in his ear was like an angry wasp buzzing in a jar. "I understand I do a lot of *business* at your tacky drugstore, I understand I've been a loyal *customer* all these years, I understand—"

"You'll have to speak to—" He glanced at the crotch's Rolodex card through his half-glasses again. "—Dr. Brumhall, Mrs. Rathbun. Your prescription has expired. It's a Federal crime to dispense Valium without a prescription." *And it ought to be one to perscribe it in the first place . . . unless you're going to give the patient you're perscribing it for your unlisted number with it, that is,* he thought.

"*It was an oversight!*" the woman screamed. Now there was a raw edge of panic in her voice. Eddie would have recognized that tone at once: it was the call of the wild Junk-Bird.

"Then call him and ask him to rectify it," Katz said. "He has my number." Yes. They all had his number. That was precisely the trouble. He looked like a dying man at forty-six because of the *fershlugginer* doctors.

And all I have to do to guarantee that the last thin edge of profit I am somehow holding onto in this place will melt away is tell a few of

these junkie bitches to go fuck themselves. That's all.

"I CAN'T CALL HIM!" she screamed. Her voice drilled painfully into his ear. *"HIM AND HIS FAG BOY-FRIEND ARE ON VACATION SOMEPLACE AND NO ONE WILL TELL ME WHERE!"*

Katz felt acid seeping into his stomach. He had two ulcers, one healed, the other currently bleeding, and women like this bitch were the reason why. He closed his eyes. Thus he did not see his assistant stare at the man in the blue suit and the gold-rimmed glasses approaching the prescription counter, nor did he see Ralph, the fat old security guard (Katz paid the man a pittance but still bitterly resented the expense; his *father* had never needed a security guard, but his *father*, God rot him, had lived in a time when New York had been a city instead of a toilet-bowl) suddenly come out of his usual dim daze and reach for the gun on his hip. He heard a woman scream, but thought it was because she had just discovered all the Revlon was on sale, he'd been *forced* to put the Revlon on sale because that *putz* Dollentz up the street was undercutting him.

He was thinking of nothing but Dollentz and this bitch on the phone as the gunslinger approached like fated doom, thinking of how wonderful the two of them would look naked save for a coating of honey and staked out over anthills in the burning desert sun. HIS and HERS anthills, wonderful. He was thinking this was the worst it could get, the absolute worst. His father had been so determined that his only son follow in his footsteps that he had refused to pay for anything but a degree in pharmacology, and so he had followed in his father's footsteps, and God rot his father, for this was surely the lowest moment in a life that had been full of low moments, a life which had made him old before his time.

This was the absolute nadir.

Or so he thought with his eyes closed.

"If you come by, Mrs. Rathbun, I could give you a dozen five milligram Valium. Would that be all right?"

"The man sees reason! Thank God, the man sees reason!" And she hung up. Just like that. Not a word of thanks. But when she saw the walking rectum that called itself a doctor again, she would just

about fall down and polish the tips of his Gucci loafers with her nose, she would give him a blowjob, she would—

“Mr. Katz,” his assistant said in a voice that sounded strangely winded. “I think we have a prob—”

There was another scream. It was followed by the crash of a gun, startling him so badly he thought for a moment his heart was simply going to utter one monstrous clap in his chest and then stop forever.

He opened his eyes and stared into the eyes of the gunslinger. Katz dropped his gaze and saw the pistol in the man’s fist. He looked left and saw Ralph the guard nursing one hand and staring at the thief with eyes that seemed to be bugging out of his face. Ralph’s own gun, the .38 which he had toted dutifully through eighteen years as a police officer (and which he had only fired from the line of the 23rd Precinct’s basement target range; he *said* he had drawn it twice in the line of duty . . . but who knew?), was now a wreck in the corner.

“I want Keflex,” the man with the bullshooter eyes said expressionlessly. “I want a lot. Now. And never mind the REX.”

For a moment Katz could only look at him, his mouth open, his heart struggling in his chest, his stomach a sickly boiling pot of acid.

Had he thought he had hit rock bottom?

Had he *really*?

15

“You don’t understand,” Katz managed at last. His voice sounded strange to himself, and there was really nothing very odd about *that*, since his mouth felt like a flannel shirt and his tongue like a strip of cotton batting. “There *is* no cocaine here. It is not a drug which is dispensed under any cir—”

“I did not say cocaine,” the man in the blue suit and the gold-rimmed glasses said. “I said *Keflex*.”

That’s what I thought you said, Katz almost told this crazy *momser*, and then decided that might provoke him. He had heard of drug stores getting held up for speed, for Bennies, for half a dozen

other things (including Mrs. Rathbun's precious Valium), but he thought this might be the first penicillin robbery in history.

The voice of his father (God rot the old bastard) told him to stop dithering and gawping and *do* something.

But he could think of nothing *to* do.

The man with the gun supplied him with something.

"Move," the man with the gun said. "I'm in a hurry."

"H-How much do you want?" Katz asked. His eyes flicked momentarily over the robber's shoulder, and he saw something he could hardly believe. Not in *this* city. But it looked like it was happening, anyway. Good luck? Katz actually has some *good* luck? *That* you could put in *The Guinness Book of World Records!*

"I don't know," the man with the gun said. "As much as you can put in a bag. A *big* bag." And with no warning at all, he whirled and the gun in his fist crashed again. A man bellowed. Plate glass blew onto the sidewalk and the street in a sparkle of shards and splinters. Several passing pedestrians were cut, but none seriously. Inside Katz's drugstore, women (and not a few men) screamed. The burglar alarm began its own hoarse bellow. The customers panicked and stampeded toward and out the door. The man with the gun turned back to Katz and his expression had not changed at all: his face wore the same look of frightening (but not inexhaustible) patience that it had worn from the first. "Do as I say rapidly. I'm in a hurry."

Katz gulped.

"Yes, sir," he said.

16

The gunslinger had seen and admired the curved mirror in the upper left corner of the shop while he was still halfway to the counter behind which they kept the *powerful* potions. The creation of such a curved mirror was beyond the ability of any craftsman in his own world as things were now, although there had been a time when such things—and many of the others he saw in Eddie and Odetta's world—might have been made. He had seen the remains of some in

the tunnel under the mountains, and he had seen them in other places as well . . . relics as ancient and mysterious as the *Druit* stones that sometimes stood in the places where demons came.

He also understood the mirror's purpose.

He had been a bit late seeing the guard's move—he was still discovering how disastrously the lenses Mort wore over his eyes restricted his peripheral vision—but he'd still time to turn and shoot the gun out of the guard's hand. It was a shot Roland thought as nothing more than routine, although he'd needed to hurry a little. The guard, however, had a different opinion. Ralph Lennox would swear to the end of his days that the guy had made an impossible shot . . . except, maybe, on those old kiddie Western shows like *Annie Oakley*.

Thanks to the mirror, which had obviously been placed where it was to detect thieves, Roland was quicker dealing with the other one.

He had seen the alchemist's eyes flick up and over his shoulder for a moment, and the gunslinger's own eyes had immediately gone to the mirror. In it he saw a man in a leather jacket moving up the center aisle behind him. There was a long knife in his hand and, no doubt, visions of glory in his head.

The gunslinger turned and fired a single shot, dropping the gun to his hip, aware that he might miss with the first shot because of his unfamiliarity with this weapon, but unwilling to injure any of the customers standing frozen behind the would-be hero. Better to have to shoot twice from the hip, firing slugs that would do the job while travelling on an upward angle that would protect the bystanders than to perhaps kill some lady whose only crime had been picking the wrong day to shop for perfume.

The gun had been well cared for. Its aim was true. Remembering the podgy, underexercised looks of the gunslingers he had taken these weapons from, it seemed that they cared better for the weapons they wore than for the weapons they *were*. It seemed a strange way to behave, but of course this was a strange world and Roland could not judge; had no *time* to judge, come to that.

The shot was a good one, chopping through the man's knife at the base of the blade, leaving him holding nothing but the hilt.

Roland stared evenly at the man in the leather coat, and something in his gaze must have made the would-be hero remember a pressing appointment elsewhere, for he whirled, dropped the remains of the knife, and joined the general exodus.

Roland turned back and gave the alchemist his orders. Any more fucking around and blood would flow. When the alchemist turned away, Roland tapped his bony shoulderblade with the barrel of the pistol. The man made a strangled "Yeeek!" sound and turned back at once.

"Not you. You stay here. Let your 'prentice do it."

"W-Who?"

"Him." The gunslinger gestured impatiently at the aide.

"What should I do, Mr. Katz?" The remains of the aide's teenage acne stood out brilliantly on his white face.

"Do what he says, you *putz!* Fill the order! Keflex!"

The aide went to one of the shelves behind the counter and picked up a bottle. "Turn it so I may see the words writ upon it," the gunslinger said.

The aide did. Roland *couldn't* read it; too many letters were not of his alphabet. He consulted the Mortcyclopedia. *Keflex*, it confirmed, and Roland realized even checking had been a stupid waste of time. *He* knew he couldn't read everything in this world, but these men didn't.

"How many pills in that bottle?"

"Well, they're capsules, actually," the aide said nervously. "If it's a cillin drug in pill form you're interested in—"

"Never mind all that. How many doses?"

"Oh. Uh—" The flustered aide looked at the bottle and almost dropped it. "Two hundred."

Roland felt much as he had when he discovered how much ammunition could be purchased in this world for a trivial sum. There had been nine sample bottles of Keflex in the secret compartment of Enrico Balazar's medicine cabinet, thirty-six doses in all, and he had felt well again. If he couldn't kill the infection with *two hundred* doses, it couldn't be killed.

“Give it to me,” the man in the blue suit said.

The aide handed it over.

The gunslinger pushed back the sleeve of his jacket, revealing Jack Mort’s Rolex. “I have no money, but this may serve as adequate compensation. I hope so, anyway.”

He turned, nodded toward the guard, who was still sitting on the floor by his overturned stool and staring at the gunslinger with wide eyes, and then walked out.

Simple as that.

For five seconds there was no sound in the drugstore but the bray of the alarm, which was loud enough to blank out even the babble of the people on the street.

“God in heaven, Mr. Katz, what do we do now?” the aide whispered.

Katz picked up the watch and hefted it.

Gold. Solid gold.

He couldn’t believe it.

He *had* to believe it.

Some madman walked in off the street, shot a gun out of his guard’s hand and a knife out of another’s, all in order to obtain the most unlikely drug he could think of.

Keflex.

Maybe sixty dollars’ worth of Keflex.

For which he had paid with a \$6500 Rolex watch.

“Do?” Katz asked. “*Do?* The first thing you do is put that wristwatch under the counter. You never saw it.” He looked at Ralph. “Neither did you.”

“No sir,” Ralph agreed immediately. “As long as I get my share when you sell it, I never saw that watch at all.”

“They’ll shoot him like a dog in the street,” Katz said with unmistakable satisfaction.

“*Keflex!* And the guy didn’t even seem to have the *sniffles*,” the aide said wonderingly.

CHAPTER 4

The Drawing

1

As the sun's bottom arc first touched the Western Sea in Roland's world, striking bright golden fire across the water to where Eddie lay trussed like a turkey, Officers O'Mearah and Delevan were coming groggily back to consciousness in the world from which Eddie had been taken.

"Let me out of these cuffs, would ya?" Fat Johnny asked in a humble voice.

"Where is he?" O'Mearah asked thickly, and groped for his holster. Gone. Holster, belt, bullets, gun. *Gun.*

Oh, shit.

He began thinking of the questions that might be asked by the shits in the Department of Internal Affairs, guys who had learned all they knew about the streets from Jack Webb on *Dragnet*, and the monetary value of his lost gun suddenly became about as important to him as the population of Ireland or the principal mineral deposits of Peru. He looked at Carl and saw Carl had also been stripped of his weapon.

Oh dear Jesus, bring on the clowns, O'Mearah thought miserably, and when Fat Johnny asked again if O'Mearah would use the key on the counter to unlock the handcuffs, O'Mearah said, "I ought to . . ." He paused, because he'd been about to say *I ought to shoot you in the guts instead*, but he couldn't very well shoot Fat Johnny, could he? The guns here were chained down, and the geek in the gold-rimmed glasses, the geek who had seemed so much like a solid citizen, had taken his and Carl's as easily as O'Mearah himself might take a popgun from a kid.

Instead of finishing, he got the key and unlocked the cuffs. He spotted the .357 Magnum which Roland had kicked into the corner and picked it up. It wouldn't fit in his holster, so he stuffed it in his belt.

"Hey, that's mine!" Fat Johnny bleated.

"Yeah? You want it back?" O'Mearah had to speak slowly. His head really ached. At that moment all he wanted to do was find Mr. Gold-Rimmed Specs and nail him to a handy wall. With dull nails. "I hear they like fat guys like you up in Attica, Johnny. They got a saying: 'The bigger the cushion, the better the pushin.' You *sure* you want it back?"

Fat Johnny turned away without a word, but not before O'Mearah had seen the tears welling in his eyes and the wet patch on his pants. He felt no pity.

"Where is he?" Carl Delevan asked in a furry, buzzing voice.

"He left," Fat Johnny said dully. "That's all I know. He left. I thought he was gonna kill me."

Delevan was getting slowly to his feet. He felt tacky wetness on the side of his face and looked at his fingers. Blood. Fuck. He groped for his gun and kept groping, groping and hoping, long after his fingers had assured him his gun and holster were gone. O'Mearah merely had a headache; Delevan felt as if someone had used the inside of his head as a nuclear weapons testing site.

"Guy took my gun," he said to O'Mearah. His voice was so slurry the words were almost impossible to make out.

"Join the club."

"He still here?" Delevan took a step toward O'Mearah, tilted to the left as if he were on the deck of a ship in a heavy sea, and then managed to right himself.

"No."

"How long?" Delevan looked at Fat Johnny, who didn't answer, perhaps because Fat Johnny, whose back was turned, thought Delevan was still talking to his partner. Delevan, not a man noted for even temper and restrained behavior under the best of circumstances, roared at the man, even though it made his head feel

like it was going to crack into a thousand pieces: *"I asked you a question, you fat shit! How long has that motherfucker been gone?"*

"Five minutes, maybe," Fat Johnny said dully. "Took his shells and your guns." He paused. "Paid for the shells. I couldn't believe it."

Five minutes, Delevan thought. The guy had come in a cab. Sitting in their cruiser and drinking coffee, they had seen him get out of it. It was getting close to rush-hour. Cabs were hard to get at this time of day. *Maybe—*

"Come on," he said to George O'Mearah. "We still got a chance to collar him. We'll want a gun from this slut here—"

O'Mearah displayed the Magnum. At first Delevan saw two of them, then the image slowly came together.

"Good." Delevan was coming around, not all at once but getting there, like a prize-fighter who has taken a damned hard one on the chin. "You keep it. I'll use the shotgun under the dash." He started for the door, and this time he did more than reel; he staggered and had to claw the wall to keep his feet.

"You gonna be all right?" O'Mearah asked.

"If we catch him," Delevan said.

They left. Fat Johnny was not as glad about their departure as he had been about that of the spook in the blue suit, but almost. Almost.

2

Delevan and O'Mearah didn't even have to discuss which direction the perp might have taken when he left the gunshop. All they had to do was listen to the radio dispatcher.

"Code 19," she said over and over again. *Robbery in progress, shots fired.* "Code 19, Code 19. Location is 395 West 49th, Katz's Drugs, perpetrator tall, sandy-haired, blue suit—"

Shots fired, Delevan thought, his head aching worse than ever. *I wonder if they were fired with George's gun or mine? Or both? If that shitbag killed someone, we're fucked. Unless we get him.*

"Blast off," he said curtly to O'Mearah, who didn't need to be told twice. He understood the situation as well as Delevan did. He flipped

on the lights and the siren and screamed out into traffic. It was knotting up already, rush-hour starting, and so O'Mearah ran the cruiser with two wheels in the gutter and two on the sidewalk, scattering pedestrians like quail. He clipped the rear fender of a produce truck sliding onto Forty-Ninth. Ahead he could see twinkling glass on the sidewalk. They could both hear the strident bray of the alarm. Pedestrians were sheltering in doorways and behind piles of garbage, but residents of the overhead apartments were staring out eagerly, as if this was a particularly good TV show, or a movie you didn't have to pay to see.

The block was devoid of automobile traffic; cabs and commuters alike had scatted.

"I just hope he's still there," Delevan said, and used a key to unlock the short steel bars across the stock and barrel of the pump shotgun under the dashboard. He pulled it out of its clips. "I just hope that rotten-crotch son of a bitch is still there."

What neither understood was that, when you were dealing with the gunslinger, it was usually better to leave bad enough alone.

3

When Roland stepped out of Katz's Drugs, the big bottle of Keflex had joined the cartons of ammo in Jack Mort's coat pockets. He had Carl Delevan's service .38 in his right hand. It felt so damned good to hold a gun in a whole right hand.

He heard the siren and saw the car roaring down the street. *Them*, he thought. He began to raise the gun and then remembered: they were gunslingers. Gunslingers doing their duty. He turned and went back into the alchemist's shop.

"*Hold it, motherfucker!*" Delevan screamed. Roland's eyes flew to the convex mirror in time to see one of the gunslingers—the one whose ear had bled—leaning out of the window with a scatter-rifle. As his partner pulled their carriage to a screaming halt that made its rubber wheels smoke on the pavement he jacked a shell into its chamber.

Roland hit the floor.

4

Katz didn't need any mirror to see what was about to happen. First the crazy man, now the crazy cops. *Oy vay.*

"Drop!" he screamed to his assistant and to Ralph, the security guard, and then fell to his knees behind the counter without waiting to see if they were doing the same or not.

Then, a split-second before Delevan triggered the shotgun, his assistant dropped on top of him like an eager tackle sacking the quarterback in a football game, driving Katz's head against the floor and breaking his jaw in two places.

Through the sudden pain which went roaring through his head, he heard the shotgun's blast, heard the remaining glass in the windows shatter—along with bottles of aftershave, cologne, perfume, mouthwash, cough syrup, God knew what else. A thousand conflicting smells rose, creating one hell-stench, and before he passed out, Katz again called upon God to rot his father for chaining this curse of a drug store to his ankle in the first place.

5

Roland saw bottles and boxes fly back in a hurricane of shot. A glass case containing time-pieces disintegrated. Most of the watches inside also disintegrated. The pieces flew backwards in a sparkling cloud.

They can't know if there are still innocent people in here or not, he thought. *They can't know and yet they used a scatter-rifle just the same!*

It was unforgivable. He felt anger and suppressed it. They were gunslingers. Better to believe their brains had been addled by the head-knocking they'd taken than to believe they'd done such a thing knowingly, without a care for whom they might hurt or kill.

They would expect him to either run or shoot.

Instead, he crept forward, keeping low. He lacerated both hands and knees on shards of broken glass. The pain brought Jack Mort back to consciousness. He was glad Mort was back. He would need him. As for Mort's hands and knees, he didn't care. He could stand the pain easily, and the wounds were being inflicted on the body of a monster who deserved no better.

He reached the area just under what remained of the plate-glass window. He was to the right of the door. He crouched there, body coiled. He holstered the gun which had been in his right hand.

He would not need it.

6

"What are you doing, Carl?" O'Mearah screamed. In his head he suddenly saw a *Daily News* headline: COP KILLS 4 IN WEST SIDE DRUG STORE SNAFU.

Delevan ignored him and pumped a fresh shell into the shotgun. "Let's go get this shit."

7

It happened exactly as the gunslinger had hoped it would.

Furious at being effortlessly fooled and disarmed by a man who probably looked to them no more dangerous than any of the other lambs on the streets of this seemingly endless city, still groggy from the head-knocking, they rushed in with the idiot who had fired the scatter-rifle in the lead. They ran slightly bent-over, like soldiers charging an enemy position, but that was the only concession they made to the idea that their adversary might still be inside. In their minds, he was already out the back and fleeing down an alley.

So they came crunching over the sidewalk glass, and when the gunslinger with the scatter-rifle pulled open the glassless door and charged in, the gunslinger rose, his hands laced together in a single fist, and brought it down on the nape of Officer Carl Delevan's neck.

While testifying before the investigating committee, Delevan would claim he remembered nothing at all after kneeling down in Clements' and seeing the perp's wallet under the counter. The committee members thought such amnesia was, under the circumstances, pretty damned convenient, and Delevan was lucky to get off with a sixty-day suspension without pay. Roland, however, would have believed, and, under different circumstances (if the fool hadn't discharged a scatter-rifle into a store which might have been full of innocent people, for instance), even sympathized. When you got your skull busted twice in half an hour, a few scrambled brains were to be expected.

As Delevan went down, suddenly as boneless as a sack of oats, Roland took the scatter-rifle from his relaxing hands.

"Hold it!" O'Mearah screamed, his voice a mixture of anger and dismay. He was starting to raise Fat Johnny's Magnum, but it was as Roland had suspected: the gunslingers of this world were pitifully slow. He could have shot O'Mearah three times, but there was no need. He simply swung the scatter-gun in a strong, climbing arc. There was a flat smack as the stock connected with O'Mearah's left cheek, the sound of a baseball bat connecting with a real steamer of a pitch. All at once O'Mearah's entire face from the cheek on down moved two inches to the right. It would take three operations and four steel pegs to put him together again. He stood there for a moment, unbelieving, and then his eyes rolled up the whites. His knees unhinged and he collapsed.

Roland stood in the doorway, oblivious to the approaching sirens. He broke the scatter-rifle, then worked the pump action, ejecting all the fat red cartridges onto Delevan's body. That done, he dropped the gun itself onto Delevan.

"You're a dangerous fool who should be sent west," he told the unconscious man. "You have forgotten the face of your father."

He stepped over the body and walked to the gunslingers' carriage, which was still idling. He climbed in the door on the far side and slid behind the driving wheel.

Can you drive this carriage? he asked the screaming, gibbering thing that was Jack Mort.

He got no coherent answer; Mort just went on screaming. The gunslinger recognized this as hysteria, but one which was not entirely genuine. Jack Mort was having hysterics on purpose, as a way of avoiding any conversation with this weird kidnapper.

Listen, the gunslinger told him. *I only have time to say this—and everything else—once. My time has grown very short. If you don't answer my question, I am going to put your right thumb into your right eye. I'll jam it in as far as it will go, and then I'll pull your eyeball right out of your head and wipe it on the seat of this carriage like a booger. I can get along with one eye just fine. And, after all, it isn't as if it were mine.*

He could no more have lied to Mort than Mort could have lied to him; the nature of their relationship was cold and reluctant on both their parts, yet it was much more intimate than the most passionate act of sexual intercourse would have been. This was, after all, not a joining of bodies but the ultimate meeting of minds.

He meant exactly what he said.

And Mort knew it.

The hysterics stopped abruptly. *I can drive it*, Mort said. It was the first sensible communication Roland had gotten from Mort since he had arrived inside the man's head.

Then do it.

Where do you want me to go?

Do you know a place called "The Village"?

Yes.

Go there.

Where in the Village?

For now, just drive.

We'll be able to go faster if I use the siren.

Fine. Turn it on. Those flashing lights, too.

For the first time since he had seized control of him, Roland pulled back a little and allowed Mort to take over. When Mort's head turned

to inspect the dashboard of Delevan's and O'Mearah's blue-and-white, Roland watched it turn but did not initiate the action. But if he had been a physical being instead of only his own disembodied *ka*, he would have been standing on the balls of his feet, ready to leap forward and take control again at the slightest sign of mutiny.

There was none, though. This man had killed and maimed God knew how many innocent people, but he had no intention of losing one of his own precious eyes. He flicked switches, pulled a lever, and suddenly they were in motion. The siren whined and the gunslinger saw red pulses of light kicking off the front of the carriage.

Drive fast, the gunslinger commanded grimly.

9

In spite of lights and siren and Jack Mort beating steadily on the horn, it took them twenty minutes to reach Greenwich Village in rush-hour traffic. In the gunslinger's world Eddie Dean's hopes were crumbling like dykes in a downpour. Soon they would collapse altogether.

The sea had eaten half the sun.

Well, Jack Mort said, *we're here*. He was telling the truth (there was no way he could lie) although to Roland everything here looked just as it had everywhere else: a choke of buildings, people, and carriages. The carriages choked not only the streets but the air itself—with their endless clamor and their noxious fumes. It came, he supposed, from whatever fuel it was they burned. It was a wonder these people could live at all, or the women give birth to children that were not monsters, like the Slow Mutants under the mountains.

Now where do we go? Mort was asking.

This would be the hard part. The gunslinger got ready—as ready as he could, at any rate.

Turn off the siren and the lights. Stop by the sidewalk.

Mort pulled the cruiser up beside a fire hydrant.

There are underground railways in this city, the gunslinger said. *I want you to take me to a station where these trains stop to let*

passengers on and off.

Which one? Mort asked. The thought was tinged with the mental color of panic. Mort could hide nothing from Roland, and Roland nothing from Mort—not, at least, for very long.

Some years ago—I don't know how many—you pushed a young woman in front of a train in one of those underground stations. That's the one I want you to take me to.

There ensued a short, violent struggle. The gunslinger won, but it was a surprisingly hard go. In his way, Jack Mort was as divided as Odetta. He was not a schizophrenic as she was; he knew well enough what he did from time to time. But he kept his secret self—the part of him that was The Pusher—as carefully locked away as an embezzler might lock away his secret skim.

Take me there, you bastard, the gunslinger repeated. He slowly raised the thumb toward Mort's right eye again. It was less than half an inch away and still moving when he gave in.

Mort's right hand moved the lever by the wheel again and they rolled toward the Christopher Street station where that fabled A-train had cut off the legs of a woman named Odetta Holmes some three years before.

10

“Well looky there,” foot patrolman Andrew Staunton said to *his* partner, Norris Weaver, as Delevan's and O'Mearah's blue-and-white came to a stop halfway down the block. There were no parking spaces, and the driver made no effort to find one. He simply double-parked and let the clog of traffic behind him inch its laborious way through the loophole remaining, like a trickle of blood trying to serve a heart hopelessly clogged with cholesterol.

Weaver checked the numbers on the side by the right front headlight. 744. Yes, that was the number they'd gotten from dispatch, all right.

The flashers were on and everything looked kosher—until the door opened and the driver stepped out. He was wearing a blue suit, all

right, but not the kind that came with gold buttons and silver badge. His shoes weren't police issue either, unless Staunton and Weaver had missed a memo notifying officers that duty footwear would henceforth come from Gucci. That didn't seem likely. What seemed likely was that this was the creep who had hijacked the cops uptown. He got out oblivious to the honkings and cries of protest from the drivers trying to get by him.

"Goddam," Andy Staunton breathed.

Approach with extreme caution, the dispatcher had said. *This man is armed and extremely dangerous*. Dispatchers usually sounded like the most bored human beings on earth—for all Andy Staunton knew, they were—and so the almost awed emphasis this one put on the word *extremely* had stuck to his consciousness like a burr.

He drew his weapon for the first time in his four years on the force, and glanced at Weaver. Weaver had also drawn. The two of them were standing outside a deli about thirty feet from the IRT stairway. They had known each other long enough to be attuned to each other in a way only cops and professional soldiers can be. Without a word between them they stepped back into the doorway of the delicatessen, weapons pointing upward.

"Subway?" Weaver asked.

"Yeah." Andy took one quick glance at the entrance. Rush hour was in high gear now, and the subway stairs were clogged with people heading for their trains. "We've got to take him right now, before he can get close to the crowd."

"Let's do it."

They stepped out of the doorway in perfect tandem, gunslingers Roland would have recognized at once as adversaries much more dangerous than the first two. They were younger, for one thing; and although he didn't know it, some unknown dispatcher had labelled him *extremely* dangerous, and to Andy Staunton and Norris Weaver, that made him the equivalent of a rogue tiger. *If he doesn't stop the second I tell him to, he's dead*, Andy thought.

"*Hold it!*" he screamed, dropping into a crouch with his gun held out before him in both hands. Beside him, Weaver had done the same.

“Police! Get your hands on your he—”

That was as far as he got before the guy ran for the IRT stairway. He moved with a sudden speed that was uncanny. Nevertheless, Andy Staunton was wired, all his dials turned up to the max. He swivelled on his heels, feeling a cloak of emotionless coldness drop over him—Roland would have known this, too. He had felt it many times in similar situations.

Andy led the running figure slightly, then squeezed the trigger of his .38. He saw the man in the blue suit spin around, trying to keep his feet. Then he fell to the pavement as commuters who, only seconds ago, had been concentrating on nothing but surviving another trip home on the subway, screamed and scattered like quail. They had discovered there was more to survive than the uptown train this afternoon.

“Holy fuck, partner,” Norris Wheaton breathed, “you blew him away.”

“I know,” Andy said. His voice didn’t falter. The gunslinger would have admired it. “Let’s go see who he was.”

11

I’m dead! Jack Mort was screaming. *I’m dead, you’ve gotten me killed, I’m dead, I’m—*

No, the gunslinger responded. Through slitted eyes he saw the cops approaching, guns still out. Younger and faster than the ones who had been parked near the gun-shop. Faster. And at least one of them was a hell of a shot. Mort—and Roland along with him—*should* have been dead, dying, or seriously wounded. Andy Staunton had shot to kill, and his bullet had drilled through the left lapel of Mort’s suitcoat. It had likewise punched through the pocket of Mort’s Arrow shirt—but that was as far as it went. The life of both men, the one inside and the one outside, were saved by Mort’s lighter.

Mort didn’t smoke, but his boss—whose job Mort had confidently expected to have himself by this time next year—did. Accordingly, Mort had bought a two hundred dollar silver lighter at Dunhill’s. He

did not light *every* cigarette Mr. Framingham stuck in his gob when the two of them were together—that would have made him look too much like an ass-kisser. Just once in awhile . . . and usually when someone even higher up was present, someone who could appreciate a) Jack Mort’s quiet courtesy, and b) Jack Mort’s good taste.

Do Bees covered all the bases.

This time covering the bases saved his life and Roland’s. Staunton’s bullet smashed the silver lighter instead of Mort’s heart (which was generic; Mort’s passion for brand names—*good* brand names—stopped mercifully at the skin).

He was hurt just the same, of course. When you were hit by a heavy-caliber slug, there was no such thing as a free ride. The lighter was driven against his chest hard enough to create a hollow. It flattened and then smashed apart, digging shallow grooves in Mort’s skin; one sliver of shrapnel sliced Mort’s left nipple almost in two. The hot slug also ignited the lighter’s fluid-soaking batting. Nevertheless, the gunslinger lay still as they approached. The one who had not shot him was telling people to stay back, just stay back, goddammit.

I’m on fire! Mort shrieked. *I’m on fire, put it out! Put it out! PUT IT OWWWWWWW—*

The gunslinger lay still, listening to the grit of the gunslingers’ shoes on the pavement, ignoring Mort’s shrieks, *trying* to ignore the coal suddenly glowing against his chest and the smell of frying flesh.

A foot slid beneath his ribcage, and when it lifted, the gunslinger allowed himself to roll boneless onto his back. Jack Mort’s eyes were open. His face was slack. In spite of the shattered, burning remains of the lighter, there was no sign of the man screaming inside.

“God,” someone muttered, “did you shoot him with a tracer, man?”

Smoke was rising from the hole in the lapel of Mort’s coat in a neat little stream. It was escaping around the edge of the lapel in more untidy blotches. The cops could smell burning flesh as the wadding in the smashed lighter, soaked with Ronson lighter fluid, really began to blaze.

Andy Staunton, who had performed faultlessly thus far, now made his only mistake, one for which Cort would have sent him home with a fat ear in spite of his earlier admirable performance, telling him one mistake was all it took to get a man killed most of the time. Staunton had been able to shoot the guy—a thing no cop really knows if he can do until he's faced with a situation where he must find out—but the idea that his bullet had somehow *set the guy on fire* filled him with unreasoning horror. So he bent forward to put it out without thinking, and the gunslinger's feet smashed into his belly before he had time to do more than register the blaze of awareness in eyes he would have sworn were dead.

Staunton went flailing back into his partner. His pistol flew from his hand. Wheaton held onto his own, but by the time he had gotten clear of Staunton, he heard a shot and his gun was magically gone. The hand it had been in felt numb, as if it had been struck with a very large hammer.

The guy in the blue suit got up, looked at them for a moment and said, "You're good. Better than the others. So let me advise you. Don't follow. This is almost over. I don't want to have to kill you."

Then he whirled and ran for the subway stairs.

12

The stairs were choked with people who had reversed their downward course when the yelling and shooting started, obsessed with that morbid and somehow unique New Yorkers' curiosity to see how bad, how many, how much blood spilled on the dirty concrete. Yet somehow they still found a way to shrink back from the man in the blue suit who came plunging down the stairs. It wasn't much wonder. He was holding a gun, and another was strapped around his waist.

Also, he appeared to be on fire.

13

Roland ignored Mort's increasing shrieks of pain as his shirt, undershirt, and jacket began to burn more briskly, as the silver of the lighter began to melt and run down his midsection to his belly in burning tracks.

He could smell dirty moving air, could hear the roar of an oncoming train.

This was almost the time; the moment had almost come around, the moment when he would draw the three or lose it all. For the second time he seemed to feel worlds tremble and reel about his head.

He reached the platform level and tossed the .38 aside. He unbuckled Jack Mort's pants and pushed them casually down, revealing a pair of white underdrawers like a whore's panties. He had no time to reflect on this oddity. If he did not move fast, he could stop worrying about burning alive; the bullets he had purchased would get hot enough to go off and this body would simply explode.

The gunslinger stuffed the boxes of bullets into the underdrawers, took out the bottle of Keflex, and did the same with it. Now the underdrawers bulged grotesquely. He stripped off the flaming suit-jacket, but made no effort to take off the flaming shirt.

He could hear the train roaring toward the platform, could see its light. He had no way of knowing it was a train which kept the same route as the one which had run over Odetta, but all the same he *did* know. In matters of the Tower, fate became a thing as merciful as the lighter which had saved his life and as painful as the fire the miracle had ignited. Like the wheels of the oncoming train, it followed a course both logical and crushingly brutal, a course against which only steel and sweetness could stand.

He hoicked up Mort's pants and began to run again, barely aware of the people scattering out of his way. As more air fed the fire, first his shirt collar and then his hair began to burn. The heavy boxes in Mort's underdrawers slammed against his balls again and again, mashing them; excruciating pain rose into his gut. He jumped the turnstile, a man who was becoming a meteor. *Put me out!* Mort screamed. *Put me out before I burn up!*

You ought to burn, the gunslinger thought grimly. *What's going to happen to you is more merciful than you deserve.*

What do you mean? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

The gunslinger didn't answer; in fact turned him off entirely as he pelted toward the edge of the platform. He felt one of the boxes of shells trying to slip out of Mort's ridiculous panties and held it with one hand.

He sent out every bit of his mental force toward the Lady. He had no idea if such a telepathic command could be heard, or if the hearer could be compelled to obey, but he sent it just the same, a swift, sharp arrow of thought:

THE DOOR! LOOK THROUGH THE DOOR! NOW! NOW!

Train-thunder filled the world. A woman screamed "*Oh my God he's going to jump!*" A hand slapped at his shoulder trying to pull him back. Then Roland pushed the body of Jack Mort past the yellow warning line and dove over the edge of the platform. He fell into the path of the oncoming train with his hands cupping his crotch, holding the luggage he would bring back . . . if, that was, he was fast enough to get out of Mort at just the right instant. As he fell he called her—*them*—again:

ODETTA HOLMES! DETTA WALKER! LOOK NOW!

As he called, as the train bore down upon him, its wheels turning with merciless silver speed, the gunslinger finally turned his head and looked back through the door.

And directly into her face.

Faces!

Both of them, I see both of them at the same time—

NOO—! Mort shrieked, and in the last split second before the train ran him down, cutting him in two not above the knees but at the waist, Roland lunged at the door . . . and through it.

Jack Mort died alone.

The boxes of ammunition and the bottle of pills appeared beside Roland's physical body. His hands clenched spasmodically at them, then relaxed. The gunslinger forced himself up, aware that he was wearing his sick, throbbing body again, aware that Eddie Dean was screaming, aware that Odetta was shrieking in two voices. He looked

—only for a moment—and saw exactly what he had heard: not one woman but two. Both were legless, both dark-skinned, both women of great beauty. Nonetheless, one of them was a hag, her interior ugliness not hidden by her outer beauty but enhanced by it.

Roland stared at these twins who were not really twins at all but negative and positive images of the same woman. He stared with a feverish, hypnotic intensity.

Then Eddie screamed again and the gunslinger saw the lobster-tongues tumbling out of the waves and strutting toward the place where Detta had left him, trussed and helpless.

The sun was down. Darkness had come.

14

Detta saw herself in the doorway, saw herself through her eyes, saw herself through the *gunslinger's* eyes, and her sense of dislocation was as sudden as Eddie's, but much more violent.

She was here.

She was *there*, in the gunslinger's eyes.

She heard the oncoming train.

Odetta! she screamed, suddenly understanding everything: what she was and when it had happened.

Detta! she screamed, suddenly understanding everything: what she was and who had done it.

A brief sensation of being turned inside out . . . and then a much more agonizing one.

She was being torn apart.

15

Roland shambled down the short slope to the place where Eddie lay. He moved like a man who has lost his bones. One of the lobster-things clawed at Eddie's face. Eddie screamed. The gunslinger booted it away. He bent rustily and grabbed Eddie's arms. He began

to drag him backwards, but it was too late, his strength was too little, they were going to get Eddie, hell, both of them—

Eddie screamed again as one of the lobstrosities asked him *did-a-chick?* and then tore a swatch of his pants and a chunk of meat to go along with it. Eddie tried another scream, but nothing came out but a choked gargle. He was strangling in Detta's knots.

The things were all around them, closing in, claws clicking eagerly. The gunslinger threw the last of his strength into a final yank . . . and tumbled backwards. He heard them coming, them with their hellish questions and clicking claws. Maybe it wasn't so bad, he thought. He had staked everything, and that was all he had lost.

The thunder of his own guns filled him with stupid wonder.

16

The two women lay face to face, bodies raised like snakes about to strike, fingers with identical prints locked around throats marked with identical lines.

The woman was trying to kill her but the woman was not real, no more than the girl had been real; she was a dream created by a falling brick . . . but now the dream was real, the dream was clawing her throat and trying to kill her as the gunslinger tried to save his friend. The dream-made-real was screeching obscenities and raining hot spittle into her face. "I took the blue plate because that woman landed me in the hospital and besides I didn't get no forspecial plate an I bust it cause it needed bustin an when I saw a white boy I could bust why I bust him too I hurt the white boys because they needed hurtin I stole from the stores that only sell things that are forspecial to whitefolks while the brothers and sisters go hungry in Harlem and the rats eat their babies, I'm the one, you bitch, I'm the one, I . . . I . . . !!"

Kill her, Odetta thought, and knew she could not.

She could no more kill the hag and survive than the hag could kill *her* and walk away. They could choke each other to death while Eddie and the

(Roland)/(Really Bad Man)

one who had called them were eaten alive down there by the edge of the water. That would finish all of them. Or she could

(love)/(hate)

let go.

Odetta let go of Detta's throat, ignored the fierce hands throttling her, crushing her windpipe. Instead of using her own hands to choke, she used them to embrace the other.

"No, you bitch!" Detta screamed, but that scream was infinitely complex, both hateful and grateful. *"No, you leave me lone, you jes leave me—"*

Odetta had no voice with which to reply. As Roland kicked the first attacking lobster away and as the second moved in to lunch on a chunk of Eddie's arm, she could only whisper in the witch-woman's ear: *"I love you."*

For a moment the hands tightened into a killing noose . . . and then loosened.

Were gone.

She was being turned inside out again . . . and then, suddenly, blessedly, she was *whole*. For the first time since a man named Jack Mort had dropped a brick on the head of a child who was only there to be hit because a white taxi driver had taken one look and driven away (and had not her father, in his pride, refused to try again for fear of a second refusal), she was *whole*. She was Odetta Holmes, but the other—?

Hurry up, bitch! Detta yelled . . . but it was still her own voice; she and Detta had merged. She had been one; she had been two; now the gunslinger had drawn a third from her. *Hurry up or they gonna be dinner!*

She looked at the shells. There was no time to use them; by the time she had his guns reloaded it would be over. She could only hope.

But is there anything else? she asked herself, and drew.

And suddenly her brown hands were full of thunder.

Eddie saw one of the lobstrosities loom over his face, its rugose eyes dead yet hideously sparkling with hideous life. Its claws descended toward his face.

Dod-a—, it began, and then it was smashed backward in chunks and splatters.

Roland saw one skitter toward his flailing left hand and thought *There goes the other hand . . .* and then the lobstrosity was a splatter of shell and green guts flying into the dark air.

He twisted around and saw a woman whose beauty was heart-stopping, whose fury was heart-freezing. “*COME ON, MAHFAHS!*” she screamed. “*YOU JUST COME ON! YOU JUST COME FOR EM! I’M GONNA BLOW YO EYES RIGHT BACK THROUGH YO FUCKIN ASSHOLES!*”

She blasted a third one that was crawling rapidly between Eddie’s spraddled legs, meaning to eat on him and neuter him at the same time. It flew like a tiddly-wink.

Roland had suspected they had some rudimentary intelligence; now he saw the proof.

The others were retreating.

The hammer of one revolver fell on a dud, and then she blew one of the retreating monsters into gobbets.

The others ran back toward the water even faster. It seemed they had lost their appetite.

Meanwhile, Eddie was strangling.

Roland fumbled at the rope digging a deep furrow into his neck. He could see Eddie’s face melting slowly from purple to black. Eddie’s strugglings were weakening.

Then his hands were pushed away by stronger ones.

“I’ll take care of it.” There was a knife in her hand . . . *his* knife.

Take care of what? he thought as his consciousness faded. *What is it you’ll take care of, now that we’re both at your mercy?*

“Who are you?” he husked, as darkness deeper than night began to take him down.

“I am three women,” he heard her say, and it was as if she were speaking to him from the top of a deep well into which he was falling. “I who was; I who had no right to be but was; I am the woman who you have saved.

“I thank you, gunslinger.”

She kissed him, he knew that, but for a long time after, Roland knew only darkness.



FINAL SHUFFLE



final shuffle

1

For the first time in what seemed like a thousand years, the gunslinger was not thinking about the Dark Tower. He thought only about the deer which had come down to the pool in the woodland clearing.

He sighted over the fallen log with his left hand.

Meat, he thought, and fired as saliva squirted warmly into his mouth.

Missed, he thought in the millisecond following the shot. *It's gone. All my skill . . . gone.*

The deer fell dead at the edge of the pool.

Soon the Tower would fill him again, but now he only blessed what gods there were that his aim was still true, and thought of meat, and meat, and meat. He re-holstered the gun—the only one he wore now—and climbed over the log behind which he had patiently lain as late afternoon drew down to dusk, waiting for something big enough to eat to come to the pool.

I am getting well, he thought with some amazement as he drew his knife. *I am really getting well.*

He didn't see the woman standing behind him, watching with assessing brown eyes.

2

They had eaten nothing but lobster-meat and had drunk nothing but brackish stream water for six days following the confrontation at the end of the beach. Roland remembered very little of that time; he had been raving, delirious. He sometimes called Eddie Alain, sometimes Cuthbert, and always he called the woman Susan.

His fever had abated little by little, and they began the laborious trek into the hills. Eddie pushed the woman in the chair some of the time, and sometimes Roland rode in it while Eddie carried her piggyback, her arms locked loosely around his neck. Most of the time the way made it impossible for either to ride, and that made the going slow. Roland knew how exhausted Eddie was. The woman knew, too, but Eddie never complained.

They had food; during the days when Roland lay between life and death, smoking with fever, reeling and railing of times long past and people long dead, Eddie and the woman killed again and again and again. Bye and bye the lobstrosities began staying away from their part of the beach, but by then they had plenty of meat, and when they at last got into an area where weeds and slutgrass grew, all three of them ate compulsively of it. They were starved for greens, any greens. And, little by little, the sores on their skins began to fade. Some of the grass was bitter, some sweet, but they ate no matter what the taste . . . except once.

The gunslinger had wakened from a tired doze and seen the woman yanking at a handful of grass he recognized all too well.

"No! Not that!" he croaked. "Never that! Mark it, and remember it! Never that!"

She looked at him for a long moment and put it aside without asking for an explanation.

The gunslinger lay back, cold with the closeness of it. Some of the other grasses might kill them, but what the woman had pulled would

damn her. It had been devil-weed.

The Keflex had brought on explosions in his bowels, and he knew Eddie had been worried about that, but eating the grasses had controlled it.

Eventually they had reached real woods, and the sound of the Western Sea diminished to a dull drone they heard only when the wind was right.

And now . . . *meat*.

3

The gunslinger reached the deer and tried to gut it with the knife held between the third and fourth fingers of his right hand. No good. His fingers weren't strong enough. He switched the knife to his stupid hand, and managed a clumsy cut from the deer's groin to its chest. The knife let out the steaming blood before it could congeal in the meat and spoil it . . . but it was still a bad cut. A puking child could have done better.

You are going to learn to be smart, he told his left hand, and prepared to cut again, deeper.

Two brown hands closed over his one and took the knife.

Roland looked around.

"I'll do it," Susannah said.

"Have you ever?"

"No, but you'll tell me how."

"All right."

"Meat," she said, and smiled at him.

"Yes," he said, and smiled back. "Meat."

"What's happening?" Eddie called. "I heard a shot."

"Thanksgiving in the making!" she called back. "Come help!"

Later they ate like two kings and a queen, and as the gunslinger drowsed toward sleep, looking up at the stars, feeling the clean coolness in this upland air, he thought that this was the closest he had come to contentment in too many years to count.

He slept. And dreamed.

It was the Tower. The Dark Tower.

It stood on the horizon of a vast plain the color of blood in the violent setting of a dying sun. He couldn't see the stairs which spiraled up and up and up within its brick shell, but he could see the windows which spiraled up along that staircase's way, and saw the ghosts of all the people he had ever known pass through them. Up and up they marched, and an arid wind brought him the sound of voices calling his name.

Roland . . . come . . . Roland . . . come . . . come . . . come . . .

"I come," he whispered, and awoke sitting bolt upright, sweating and shivering as if the fever still held his flesh.

"Roland?"

Eddie.

"Yes."

"Bad dream?"

"Bad. Good. *Dark.*"

"The Tower?"

"Yes."

They looked toward Susannah, but she slept on, undisturbed. Once there had been a woman named Odetta Susannah Holmes; later, there had been another named Detta Susannah Walker. Now there was a third: Susannah Dean.

Roland loved her because she would fight and never give in; he feared for her because he knew he would sacrifice her—Eddie as well—without a question or a look back.

For the Tower.

The God-Damned Tower.

"Time for a pill," Eddie said.

"I don't want them anymore."

"Take it and shut up."

Roland swallowed it with cold stream-water from one of the skins, then burped. He didn't mind. It was a *meaty* burp.

Eddie asked, "Do you know where we're going?"

"To the Tower."

“Well, yeah,” Eddie said, “but that’s like me being some ignoramus from Texas without a road-map saying he’s going to Achin’ Asshole, Alaska. Where is it? Which direction?”

“Bring me my purse.”

Eddie did. Susannah stirred and Eddie paused, his face red planes and black shadows in the dying embers of the campfire. When she rested easy again, he came back to Roland.

Roland rummaged in the purse, heavy now with shells from that other world. It was short enough work to find what he wanted in what remained of his life.

The jawbone.

The jawbone of the man in black.

“We’ll stay here awhile,” he said, “and I’ll get well.”

“You’ll know when you are?”

Roland smiled a little. The shakes were abating, the sweat drying in the cool night breeze. But still, in his mind, he saw those figures, those knights and friends and lovers and enemies of old, circling up and up, seen briefly in those windows and then gone; he saw the shadow of the Tower in which they were pent struck black and long across a plain of blood and death and merciless trial.

“I won’t,” he said, and nodded at Susannah. “But *she* will.”

“And then?”

Roland held up the jawbone of Walter. “This once spoke.”

He looked at Eddie.

“It will speak again.”

“It’s dangerous.” Eddie’s voice was flat.

“Yes.”

“Not just to you.”

“No.”

“I love her, man.”

“Yes.”

“If you hurt her—”

“I’ll do what I need to,” the gunslinger said.

“And we don’t matter? Is that it?”

“I love you both.” The gunslinger looked at Eddie, and Eddie saw that Roland’s cheeks glistened red in what remained of the

campfire's embered dying glow. He was weeping.

"That doesn't answer the question. You'll go on, won't you?"

"Yes."

"To the very end."

"Yes. To the very end."

"No matter what." Eddie looked at him with love and hate and all the aching dearness of one man's dying hopeless helpless reach for another man's mind and will and need.

The wind made the trees moan.

"You sound like Henry, man." Eddie had begun to cry himself. He didn't want to. He hated to cry. "He had a tower, too, only it wasn't dark. Remember me telling you about Henry's tower? We were brothers, and I guess we were gunslingers. We had this White Tower, and he asked me to go after it with him the only way he could ask, so I saddled up, because he was my brother, you dig it? We got there, too. Found the White Tower. But it was poison. It killed him. It would have killed me. You saw me. You saved more than my life. You saved my fuckin' *soul*."

Eddie held Roland and kissed his cheek. Tasted his tears.

"So what? Saddle up again? Go on and meet the man again?"

The gunslinger said not a word.

"I mean, we haven't seen many people, but I know they're up ahead, and whenever there's a Tower involved, there's a man. You wait for the man because you gotta meet the man, and in the end money talks and bullshit walks, or maybe here it's bullets instead of bucks that do the talking. So is that it? Saddle up? Go to meet the man? Because if it's just a replay of the same old shitstorm, you two should have left me for the lobsters." Eddie looked at him with dark-ringed eyes. "I been dirty, man. If I found out anything, it's that I don't want to die dirty."

"It's not the same."

"No? You gonna tell me you're not hooked?"

Roland said nothing.

"Who's gonna come through some magic door and save *you*, man? Do you know? *I* do. No one. You drew all you could draw. Only

thing you can draw from now on is a fucking gun, because that's all you got left. Just like Balazar."

Roland said nothing.

"You want to know the only thing my brother ever had to teach me?" His voice was hitching and thick with tears.

"Yes," the gunslinger said. He leaned forward, his eyes intent upon Eddie's eyes.

"He taught me if you kill what you love, you're damned."

"I am damned already," Roland said calmly. "But perhaps even the damned may be saved."

"Are you going to get all of us killed?"

Roland said nothing.

Eddie seized the rags of Roland's shirt. "*Are you going to get her killed?*"

"We all die in time," the gunslinger said. "It's not just the world that moves on." He looked squarely at Eddie, his faded blue eyes almost the color of slate in this light. "*But we will be magnificent.*" He paused. "There's more than a world to win, Eddie. I would not risk you and her—I would not have allowed the boy to die—if that was all there was."

"What are you talking about?"

"Everything there is," the gunslinger said calmly. "We are going to go, Eddie. We are going to fight. We are going to be hurt. *And in the end we will stand.*"

Now it was Eddie who said nothing. He could think of nothing to say.

Roland gently grasped Eddie's arm. "Even the damned love," he said.

5

Eddie eventually slept beside Susannah, the third Roland had drawn to make a new three, but Roland sat awake and listened to voices in the night while the wind dried the tears on his cheeks.

Damnation?

Salvation?

The Tower.

He would come to the Dark Tower and there he would sing their names; there he would sing their names; there he would sing all their names.

The sun stained the east a dusky rose, and at last Roland, no longer the last gunslinger but one of the last three, slept and dreamed his angry dreams through which there ran only that one soothing blue thread:

There I will sing all their names!

AFTERWORD

This completes the second of six or seven books which make up a long tale called *The Dark Tower*. The third, *The Waste Lands*, details half of the quest of Roland, Eddie, and Susannah to reach the Tower; the fourth, *Wizard and Glass*, tells of an enchantment and a seduction but mostly of those things which befell Roland before his readers first met him upon the trail of the man in black.

My surprise at the acceptance of the first volume of this work, which is not at all like the stories for which I am best known, is exceeded only by my gratitude to those who have read it and liked it. This work seems to be my own Tower, you know; these people haunt me, Roland most of all. Do I really know what that Tower is, and what awaits Roland there (should he reach it, and you must prepare yourself for the very real possibility that he will not be the one to do so)? Yes . . . and no. All I know is that the tale has called to me again and again over a period of seventeen years. This longer second volume still leaves many questions unanswered and the story's climax far in the future, but I feel that it is a much more complete volume than the first.

And the Tower is closer.

—STEPHEN KING

December 1st, 1986

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Stephen King



THE WASTE LANDS

THE DARK TOWER III

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

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In 1978, Stephen King introduced the world to the last gunslinger, Roland of Gilead. Nothing has been the same since. More than twenty years later, the quest for the Dark Tower continues to take readers on a wildly epic ride. Through parallel worlds and across time, Roland must brave desolate wastelands and endless deserts, drifting into the unimaginable and the familiar. A classic tale of colossal scope—crossing over terrain from *The Stand*, *The Eyes of the Dragon*, *Insomnia*, *The Talisman*, *Black House*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *Salem's Lot*, and other familiar King haunts—the adventure takes hold with the turn of each page.

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THE DARK TOWER III

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This third volume of the tale
is gratefully dedicated to my son
OWEN PHILIP KING:
Khef, Ka, and Ka-tet.

INTRODUCTION

ON BEING NINETEEN (AND A FEW OTHER THINGS)

I

Hobbits were big when I was nineteen (a number of some import in the stories you are about to read).

There were probably half a dozen Merrys and Pippins slogging through the mud at Max Yasgur's farm during the Great Woodstock Music Festival, twice as many Frodos, and hippie Gandalfs without number. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was madly popular in those days, and while I never made it to Woodstock (say sorry), I suppose I was at least a halfling-hippie. Enough of one, at any rate, to have read the books and fallen in love with them. The *Dark Tower* books, like most long fantasy tales written by men and women of my generation (*The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, by Stephen Donaldson, and *The Sword of Shannara*, by Terry Brooks, are just two of many), were born out of Tolkien's.

But although I read the books in 1966 and 1967, I held off writing. I responded (and with rather touching wholeheartedness) to the sweep of Tolkien's imagination—to the ambition of his story—but I wanted to write my own kind of story, and had I started then, I would have written his. That, as the late Tricky Dick Nixon was fond of saying, would have been wrong. Thanks to Mr. Tolkien, the twentieth century had all the elves and wizards it needed.

In 1967, I didn't have any idea what my kind of story might be, but that didn't matter; I felt positive I'd know it when it passed me on the street. I was nineteen and arrogant. Certainly arrogant enough to feel I could wait a little while on my muse and my masterpiece (as I

was sure it would be). At nineteen, it seems to me, one has a right to be arrogant; time has usually not begun its stealthy and rotten subtractions. It takes away your hair and your jump-shot, according to a popular country song, but in truth it takes away a lot more than that. I didn't know it in 1966 and '67, and if I had, I wouldn't have cared. I could imagine—barely—being forty, but fifty? No. *Sixty?* Never! *Sixty* was out of the question. And at nineteen, that's just the way to be. Nineteen is the age where you say *Look out, world, I'm smokin' TNT and I'm drinkin' dynamite, so if you know what's good for ya, get out of my way—here comes Stevie.*

Nineteen's a selfish age and finds one's cares tightly circumscribed. I had a lot of reach, and I cared about that. I had a lot of ambition, and I cared about that. I had a typewriter that I carried from one shit-hole apartment to the next, always with a deck of smokes in my pocket and a smile on my face. The compromises of middle age were distant, the insults of old age over the horizon. Like the protagonist in that Bob Seger song they now use to sell the trucks, I felt endlessly powerful and endlessly optimistic; my pockets were empty, but my head was full of things I wanted to say and my heart was full of stories I wanted to tell. Sounds corny now; felt wonderful then. Felt very cool. More than anything else I wanted to get inside my readers' defenses, wanted to rip them and ravish them and change them forever with nothing but story. And I felt I could do those things. I felt I had been *made* to do those things.

How conceited does that sound? A lot or a little? Either way, I don't apologize. I was nineteen. There was not so much as a strand of gray in my beard. I had three pairs of jeans, one pair of boots, the idea that the world was my oyster, and nothing that happened in the next twenty years proved me wrong. Then, around the age of thirty-nine, my troubles set in: drink, drugs, a road accident that changed the way I walked (among other things). I've written about them at length and need not write about them here. Besides, it's the same for you, right? The world eventually sends out a mean-ass Patrol Boy to slow your progress and show you who's boss. You reading this have undoubtedly met yours (or will); I met mine, and I'm sure he'll be back. He's got my address. He's a mean guy, a Bad Lieutenant, the

sworn enemy of goofery, fuckery, pride, ambition, loud music, and all things nineteen.

But I still think that's a pretty fine age. Maybe the best age. You can rock and roll all night, but when the music dies out and the beer wears off, you're able to think. And dream big dreams. The mean Patrol Boy cuts you down to size eventually, and if you start out small, why, there's almost nothing left but the cuffs of your pants when he's done with you. "Got another one!" he shouts, and strides on with his citation book in his hand. So a little arrogance (or even a lot) isn't such a bad thing, although your mother undoubtedly told you different. Mine did. *Pride goeth before a fall, Stephen*, she said . . . and then I found out—right around the age that is 19×2 —that eventually you fall down, anyway. Or get pushed into the ditch. At nineteen they can card you in the bars and tell you to get the fuck out, put your sorry act (and sorrier ass) back on the street, but they can't card you when you sit down to paint a picture, write a poem, or tell a story, by God, and if you reading this happen to be very young, don't let your elders and supposed betters tell you any different. Sure, you've never been to Paris. No, you never ran with the bulls at Pamplona. Yes, you're a pissant who had no hair in your armpits until three years ago—but so what? If you don't start out too big for your britches, how are you gonna fill'em when you grow up? Let it rip regardless of what anybody tells you, that's my idea; sit down and *smoke* that baby.

II

I think novelists come in two types, and that includes the sort of fledgling novelist I was by 1970. Those who are bound for the more literary or "serious" side of the job examine every possible subject in the light of this question: *What would writing this sort of story mean to me?* Those whose destiny (or ka, if you like) is to include the writing of popular novels are apt to ask a very different one: *What would writing this sort of story mean to others?* The "serious" novelist

is looking for answers and keys to the self; the “popular” novelist is looking for an audience. Both kinds of writer are equally selfish. I’ve known a good many, and will set my watch and warrant upon it.

Anyway, I believe that even at the age of nineteen, I recognized the story of Frodo and his efforts to rid himself of the One Great Ring as one belonging to the second group. They were the adventures of an essentially British band of pilgrims set against a backdrop of vaguely Norse mythology. I liked the idea of the quest—*loved* it, in fact—but I had no interest in either Tolkien’s sturdy peasant characters (that’s not to say I didn’t like them, because I did) or his bosky Scandinavian settings. If I tried going in that direction, I’d get it all wrong.

So I waited. By 1970 I was twenty-two, the first strands of gray had showed up in my beard (I think smoking two and a half packs of Pall Malls a day probably had something to do with that), but even at twenty-two, one can afford to wait. At twenty-two, time is still on one’s side, although even then that bad old Patrol Boy’s in the neighborhood and asking questions.

Then, in an almost completely empty movie theater (the Bijou, in Bangor, Maine, if it matters), I saw a film directed by Sergio Leone. It was called *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and before the film was even half over, I realized that what I wanted to write was a novel that contained Tolkien’s sense of quest and magic but set against Leone’s almost absurdly majestic Western backdrop. If you’ve only seen this gonzo Western on your television screen, you don’t understand what I’m talking about—cry your pardon, but it’s true. On a movie screen, projected through the correct Panavision lenses, *TG, TB, & TU* is an epic to rival *Ben-Hur*. Clint Eastwood appears roughly eighteen feet tall, with each wiry jut of stubble on his cheeks looking roughly the size of a young redwood tree. The grooves bracketing Lee Van Cleef’s mouth are as deep as canyons, and there could be a thinny (see *Wizard and Glass*) at the bottom of each one. The desert settings appear to stretch at least out as far as the orbit of the planet Neptune. And the barrel of each gun looks to be roughly as large as the Holland Tunnel.

What I wanted even more than the setting was that feeling of epic, apocalyptic *size*. The fact that Leone knew jack shit about American geography (according to one of the characters, Chicago is somewhere in the vicinity of Phoenix, Arizona) added to the film's sense of magnificent dislocation. And in my enthusiasm—the sort only a young person can muster, I think—I wanted to write not just a *long* book, but *the longest popular novel in history*. I did not succeed in doing that, but I feel I had a decent rip; *The Dark Tower*, volumes one through seven, really comprise a single tale, and the first four volumes run to just over two thousand pages in paperback. The final three volumes run another twenty-five hundred in manuscript. I'm not trying to imply here that length has anything whatsoever to do with quality; I'm just saying that I wanted to write an epic, and in some ways, I succeeded. If you were to ask me *why* I wanted to do that, I couldn't tell you. Maybe it's a part of growing up American: build the tallest, dig the deepest, write the longest. And that head-scratching puzzlement when the question of motivation comes up? Seems to me that that is also part of being an American. In the end we are reduced to saying *It seemed like a good idea at the time*.

III

Another thing about being nineteen, do it please ya: it is the age, I think, where a lot of us somehow get stuck (mentally and emotionally, if not physically). The years slide by and one day you find yourself looking into the mirror with real puzzlement. *Why are those lines on my face?* you wonder. *Where did that stupid potbelly come from? Hell, I'm only nineteen!* This is hardly an original concept, but that in no way subtracts from one's amazement.

Time puts gray in your beard, time takes away your jump-shot, and all the while you're thinking—silly you—that it's still on your side. The logical side of you knows better, but your heart refuses to believe it. If you're lucky, the Patrol Boy who cited you for going too fast and having too much fun also gives you a dose of smelling salts. That

was more or less what happened to me near the end of the twentieth century. It came in the form of a Plymouth van that knocked me into the ditch beside a road in my hometown.

About three years after that accident I did a book signing for *From a Buick 8* at a Borders store in Dearborn, Michigan. When one guy got to the head of the line, he said he was really, really glad that I was still alive. (I get this a lot, and it beats the *shit* out of “Why the hell didn’t you die?”)

“I was with this good friend of mine when we heard you got popped,” he said. “Man, we just started shaking our heads and saying ‘There goes the Tower, it’s tilting, it’s falling, ahhh, shit, he’ll never finish it now.’ ”

A version of the same idea had occurred to me—the troubling idea that, having built the Dark Tower in the collective imagination of a million readers, I might have a responsibility to make it safe for as long as people wanted to read about it. That might be for only five years; for all I know, it might be five hundred. Fantasy stories, the bad as well as the good (even now, someone out there is probably reading *Varney the Vampire* or *The Monk*), seem to have long shelf lives. Roland’s way of protecting the tower is to try to remove the threat to the Beams that hold the Tower up. I would have to do it, I realized after my accident, by finishing the gunslinger’s story.

During the long pauses between the writing and publication of the first four *Dark Tower* tales, I received hundreds of “pack your bags, we’re going on a guilt trip” letters. In 1998 (when I was laboring under the mistaken impression that I was still basically nineteen, in other words), I got one from an “82-yr-old Gramma, don’t mean to Bother You w/ My Troubles BUT!! very Sick These Days.” The Gramma told me she probably had only a year to live (“14 Mo’s at Outside, Cancer all thru Me”), and while she didn’t expect me to finish Roland’s tale in that time just for her, she wanted to know if I couldn’t please (*please*) just tell her how it came out. The line that wrenched my heart (although not quite enough to start writing again) was her promise to “not tell a Single Soul.” A year later—probably after the accident that landed me in the hospital—one of my assistants, Marsha DiFilippo, got a letter from a fellow on death row

in either Texas or Florida, wanting to know essentially the same thing: how does it come out? (He promised to take the secret to the grave with him, which gave me the creeps.)

I would have given both of these folks what they wanted—a summary of Roland’s further adventures—if I could have done, but alas, I couldn’t. I had no idea of how things were going to turn out with the gunslinger and his friends. To know, I have to write. I once had an outline, but I lost it along the way. (It probably wasn’t worth a tin shit, anyway.) All I had was a few notes (“*Chussit, chissit, chassit, something-something-basket*” reads one lying on the desk as I write this). Eventually, starting in July of 2001, I began to write again. I knew by then I was no longer nineteen, nor exempt from any of the ills to which the flesh is heir. I knew I was going to be sixty, maybe even seventy. And I wanted to finish my story before the bad Patrol Boy came for the last time. I had no urge to be filed away with *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

The result—for better or worse—lies before you, Constant Reader, whether you reading this are starting with Volume One or are preparing for Volume Five. Like it or hate it, the story of Roland is now done. I hope you enjoy it.

As for me, I had the time of my life.

Stephen King
January 25, 2003

19
REDEMPTION

ARGUMENT

The Waste Lands is the third volume of a longer tale inspired by and to some degree dependent upon Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

The first volume, *The Gunslinger*, tells how Roland, the last gunslinger in a world which has "moved on," pursues and finally catches the man in black, a sorcerer named Walter who falsely claimed the friendship of Roland's father in the days when the unity of Mid-World still held. Catching this half-human spell-caster is not Roland's ultimate goal but only another landmark along the road to the powerful and mysterious Dark Tower, which stands at the nexus of time.

Who, exactly, is Roland? What was his world like before it moved on? What is the Tower and why does he pursue it? We have only fragmentary answers. Roland is clearly a kind of knight, one of those charged with holding (or possibly redeeming) a world Roland remembers as being "filled with love and light." Just how closely Roland's memory resembles the way that world actually was is very much open to question, however.

We *do* know that he was forced to an early trial of manhood after discovering that his mother had become the mistress of Marten, a much greater sorcerer than Walter; we know that Marten orchestrated Roland's discovery of his mother's affair, expecting Roland to fail his test of manhood and to be "sent West" into the wastes; we know that Roland laid Marten's plans at naught by passing the test.

We also know that the gunslinger's world is related to our own in some strange but fundamental way, and that passage between the worlds is sometimes possible.

At a way station on a long-deserted coach-road running through the desert, Roland meets a boy named Jake who died in our world, a boy who was, in fact, pushed from a mid-Manhattan street corner

and into the path of an oncoming car. Jake Chambers died with the man in black—Walter—peering down at him, and awoke in Roland’s world.

Before they reach the man in black, Jake dies again . . . this time because the gunslinger, faced with the second most agonizing choice of his life, elects to sacrifice this symbolic son. Given a choice between the Tower and the child, Roland chooses the Tower. Jake’s last words to the gunslinger before plunging into the abyss are: “Go, then—there are other worlds than these.”

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs in a dusty golgotha of decaying bones. The man in black tells Roland’s future with a deck of Tarot cards. Three *very* strange cards—The Prisoner, The Lady of the Shadows, and Death (“but not for you, gunslinger”)—are called especially to Roland’s attention.

The second volume, *The Drawing of the Three*, begins on the edge of the Western Sea not long after Roland’s confrontation with Walter has ended. An exhausted gunslinger awakes in the middle of the night to discover that the incoming tide has brought a horde of crawling, carnivorous creatures—“lobstrosities”—with it. Before he can escape their limited range, Roland has been seriously wounded by these creatures, losing the first two fingers of his right hand to them. He is also poisoned by the venom of the lobstrosities, and as the gunslinger resumes his journey north along the edge of the Western Sea, he is sickening . . . perhaps dying.

He encounters three doors standing freely upon the beach. Each door opens—for Roland and Roland alone—upon our world; upon the city where Jake lived, in fact. Roland visits New York at three points along our time continuum, both in an effort to save his own life and to draw the three who must accompany him on his road to the Tower.

Eddie Dean is *The Prisoner*, a heroin addict from the New York of the late 1980s. Roland steps through the door on the beach of his world and into Eddie Dean’s mind as Eddie, serving a man named Enrico Balazar as a cocaine mule, lands at JFK airport. In the course of their harrowing adventures together, Roland is able to obtain a limited quantity of penicillin and to bring Eddie Dean back to his own

world. Eddie, a junkie who discovers he has been kidnapped to a world where there is no junk (or Popeye's fried chicken, for that matter), is less than overjoyed to be there.

The second door leads Roland to *The Lady of the Shadows*—actually *two* women in one body. This time Roland finds himself in the New York of the early 1960s and face to face with a young wheelchair-bound civil-rights activist named Odetta Holmes. The woman hidden inside Odetta is the crafty and hate-filled Detta Walker. When this double woman is pulled into Roland's world, the results are volatile for Eddie and the rapidly sickening gunslinger. Odetta believes that what's happening to her is either a dream or a delusion; Detta, a much more brutally direct intellect, simply dedicates herself to the task of killing Roland and Eddie whom she sees as torturing white devils.

Jack Mort, a serial killer hiding behind the third door (the New York of the mid-1970s), is *Death*. Mort has twice caused great changes in the life of Odetta Holmes/Detta Walker, although neither of them knows it. Mort, whose *modus operandi* is to either push his victims or drop something on them from above, has done both to Odetta during the course of his mad (but oh so careful) career. When Odetta was a child, he dropped a brick on her head, sending the little girl into a coma and also occasioning the birth of Detta Walker, Odetta's hidden sister. Years later, in 1959, Mort encounters Odetta again and pushes her into the path of an oncoming subway train in Greenwich Village. Odetta survives Mort again, but at a price: the oncoming train severed both legs at the knee. Only the presence of a heroic young doctor (and, perhaps, the ugly but indomitable spirit of Detta Walker) saves her life . . . or so it would seem. To Roland's eye, these interrelationships suggest a power greater than mere coincidence; he believes the titantic forces which surround the Dark Tower have begun to gather once again.

Roland learns that Mort may stand at the heart of another mystery as well, one which is also a potentially mind-destroying paradox. For the victim Mort is stalking at the time the gunslinger steps into his life is none other than Jake, the boy Roland met at the way station and lost under the mountains. Roland has never had any cause to doubt

Jake's story of how he died in our world, or any cause to question who Jake's murderer was—Walter, of course. Jake saw him dressed as a priest as the crowd gathered around the spot where he lay dying, and Roland has never doubted the description.

Nor does he doubt it now; Walter was there, oh yes, no doubt about that. *But suppose it was Jack Mort, not Walter, who pushed Jake into the path of the oncoming Cadillac?* Is such a thing possible? Roland can't say, not for sure, but if that *is* the case, where is Jake now? Dead? Alive? Caught somewhere in time? And if Jake Chambers is still alive and well in his own world of Manhattan in the mid-1970s, how is it that Roland still remembers him?

Despite this confusing and possibly dangerous development, the test of the doors—and the drawing of the three—ends in success for Roland. Eddie Dean accepts his place in Roland's world because he has fallen in love with The Lady of the Shadows. Detta Walker and Odetta Holmes, the other two of Roland's three, are driven together into one personality combining elements of both Detta and Odetta when the gunslinger is finally able to force the two personalities to acknowledge each other. This hybrid is able to accept and return Eddie's love. Odetta Susannah Holmes and Detta Susannah Walker thus become a new woman, a *third* woman: Susannah Dean.

Jack Mort dies beneath the wheels of the same subway—that fabled A-train—which took Odetta's legs fifteen or sixteen years before. No great loss there.

And for the first time in untold years, Roland of Gilead is no longer alone in his quest for the Dark Tower. Cuthbert and Alain, his lost companions of yore, have been replaced by Eddie and Susannah . . . but the gunslinger has a way of being bad medicine for his friends. Very bad medicine, indeed.

The Waste Lands takes up the story of these three pilgrims on the face of Mid-World some months after the confrontation by the final door on the beach. They have moved some fair way inland. The period of rest is ending, and a period of learning has begun. Susannah is learning to shoot . . . Eddie is learning to carve . . . and the gunslinger is learning how it feels to lose one's mind, a piece at a time.

(One further note: My New York readers will know that I have taken certain geographical liberties with the city. For these I hope I may be forgiven.)

*A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow in the morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

—T. S. ELIOT
“The Waste Land”

*If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk
Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents
Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents
In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to balk
All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk
Pushing their life out, with a brute's intents.*

—ROBERT BROWNING
“Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”

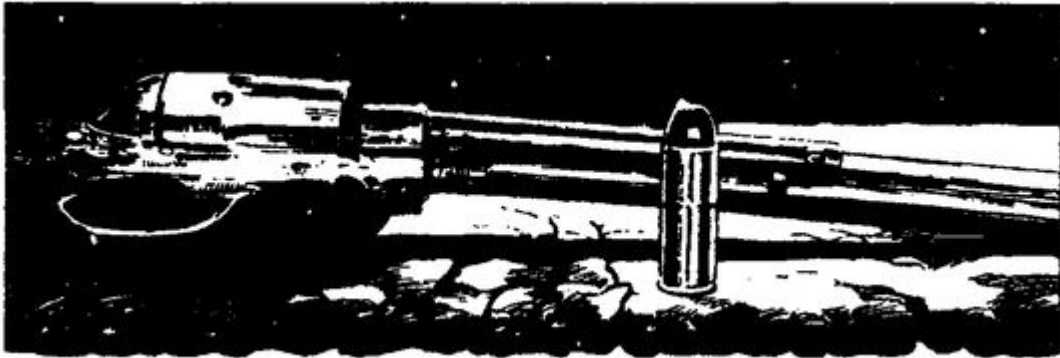
*“What river is it?” enquired Millicent idly.
“It's only a stream. Well, perhaps a little more than
that. It's called the Waste.”
“Is it really?”
“Yes,” said Winifred, “it is. ”*

—ROBERT AICKMAN
“Hand in Glove”

BOOK ONE JAKE

FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DUST

BEAR AND BONE



1

IT WAS HER THIRD time with live ammunition . . . and her first time on the draw from the holster Roland had rigged for her.

They had plenty of live rounds; Roland had brought back better than three hundred from the world where Eddie and Susannah Dean had lived their lives up until the time of their drawing. But having ammunition in plenty did not mean it could be wasted; quite the contrary, in fact. The gods frowned upon wastrels. Roland had been raised, first by his father and then by Cort, his greatest teacher, to believe this, and so he still believed. Those gods might not punish at once, but sooner or later the penance would have to be paid . . . and the longer the wait, the greater the weight.

At first there had been no need for live ammunition, anyway. Roland had been shooting for more years than the beautiful brown-skinned woman in the wheelchair would believe. He had corrected

her at first simply by watching her aim and dry-fire at the targets he had set up. She learned fast. Both she and Eddie learned fast.

As he had suspected, both were born gunslingers.

Today Roland and Susannah had come to a clearing less than a mile from the camp in the woods which had been home to them for almost two months now. The days had passed with their own sweet similarity. The gunslinger's body healed itself while Eddie and Susannah learned the things the gunslinger had to teach them: how to shoot, to hunt, to gut and clean what they had killed; how to first stretch, then tan and cure the hides of those kills; how to use as much as it was possible to use so that no part of the animal was wasted; how to find north by Old Star or south by Old Mother; how to listen to the forest in which they now found themselves, sixty miles or more northeast of the Western Sea. Today Eddie had stayed behind, and the gunslinger was not put out of countenance by this. The lessons which are remembered the longest, Roland knew, are always the ones that are self-taught.

But what had always been the most important lesson was still most important: how to shoot and how to hit what you shot at every time. How to kill.

The edges of this clearing had been formed by dark, sweet-smelling fir trees that curved around it in a ragged semicircle. To the south, the ground broke off and dropped three hundred feet in a series of crumbling shale ledges and fractured cliffs, like a giant's set of stairs. A clear stream ran out of the woods and across the center of the clearing, first bubbling through a deep channel in the spongy earth and friable stone, then pouring across the splintery rock floor which sloped down to the place where the land dropped away.

The water descended the steps in a series of waterfalls and made any number of pretty, wavering rainbows. Beyond the edge of the drop-off was a magnificent deep valley, choked with more firs and a few great old elm trees which refused to be crowded out. These latter towered green and lush, trees which might have been old when the land from which Roland had come was yet young; he could see no sign that the valley had ever burned, although he supposed it must have drawn lightning at some time or other. Nor would lightning

have been the only danger. There had been people in this forest in some distant time; Roland had come across their leavings on several occasions over the past weeks. They were primitive artifacts, for the most part, but they included shards of pottery which could only have been cast in fire. And fire was evil stuff that delighted in escaping the hands which created it.

Above this picturebook scene arched a blameless blue sky in which a few crows circled some miles off, crying in their old, rusty voices. They seemed restless, as if a storm were on the way, but Roland had sniffed the air and there was no rain in it.

A boulder stood to the left of the stream. Roland had set up six chips of stone on top of it. Each one was heavily flecked with mica, and they glittered like lenses in the warm afternoon light.

“Last chance,” the gunslinger said. “If that holster’s uncomfortable—even the slightest bit—tell me now. We didn’t come here to waste ammunition.”

She cocked a sardonic eye at him, and for a moment he could see Detta Walker in there. It was like hazy sunlight winking off a bar of steel. “What would you do if it was uncomfortable and I didn’t tell you? If I missed all six of those itty bitty things? Whop me upside the head like that old teacher of yours used to do?”

The gunslinger smiled. He had done more smiling these last five weeks than he had done in the five years which had come before them. “I can’t do that, and you know it. We were children, for one thing— children who hadn’t been through our rites of manhood yet. You may slap a child to correct him, or her, but—”

“In my world, whoppin the kiddies is also frowned on by the better class of people,” Susannah said dryly.

Roland shrugged. It was hard for him to imagine that sort of world—did not the Great Book say “Spare not the birch so you spoil not the child”?—but he didn’t believe Susannah was lying. “Your world has not moved on,” he said. “Many things are different there. Did I not see for myself that it is so?”

“I guess you did.”

“In any case, you and Eddie are not children. It would be wrong for me to treat you as if you were. And if tests were needed, you both

passed them.”

Although he did not say so, he was thinking of how it had ended on the beach, when she had blown three of the lumbering lobstrosities to hell before they could peel him and Eddie to the bone. He saw her answering smile and thought she might be remembering the same thing.

“So what you goan do if I shoot fo’ shit?”

“I’ll look at you. I think that’s all I’ll need to do.”

She thought this over, then nodded. “Might be.”

She tested the gunbelt again. It was slung across her bosom almost like a shoulder-holster (an arrangement Roland thought of as a docker’s clutch) and looked simple enough, but it had taken many weeks of trial and error—and a great deal of tailoring—to get it just right. The belt and the revolver which cocked its eroded sandalwood grip out of the ancient oiled holster had once been the gunslinger’s; the holster had hung on his right hip. He had spent much of the last five weeks coming to realize it was never going to hang there again. Thanks to the lobstrosities, he was strictly a lefthanded gun now.

“So how is it?” he asked again.

This time she laughed up at him. “Roland, this ole gunbelt’s as com’fable as it’s ever gonna be. Now do you want me to shoot or are we just going to sit and listen to crowmusic from over yonder?”

He felt tension worming sharp little fingers under his skin now, and he supposed Cort had felt much the same at times like this under his gruff, bluff exterior. He wanted her to be good . . . *needed* her to be good. But to show how badly he wanted and needed—that could lead to disaster.

“Tell me your lesson again, Susannah.”

She sighed in mock exasperation . . . but as she spoke her smile faded and her dark, beautiful face became solemn. And from her lips he heard the old catechism again, made new in her mouth. He had never expected to hear these words from a woman. How natural they sounded . . . yet how strange and dangerous, as well.

“I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

“I aim with my eye.

“ I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

“ I shoot with my mind.

“ I do not kill with my gun—’ ”

She broke off and pointed at the mica-shiny stones on the boulder.

“I’m not going to kill anything anyhow—they’re just itty bitty *rocks*.”

Her expression—a little haughty, a little naughty—suggested that she expected Roland to be exasperated with her, perhaps even angry. Roland, however, had been where she was now; he had not forgotten that apprentice gunslingers were fractious and high-spirited, nervy and apt to bite exactly at the wrong moment ... and he had discovered an unexpected capacity in himself. He could teach. More, he *liked* to teach, and he found himself wondering, from time to time, if that had been true of Cort, as well. He guessed that it had been.

Now more crows began to call raucously, these from the forest behind them. Some part of Roland’s mind registered the fact that the new cries were agitated rather than merely quarrelsome; these birds sounded as if they had been scared up and away from whatever they had been feeding on. He had more important things to think about than whatever it was that had scared a bunch of crows, however, so he simply filed the information away and refocused his concentration on Susannah. To do otherwise with a ’prentice was to ask for a second, less playful bite. And who would be to blame for that? Who but the teacher? For was he not training her to bite? Training *both* of them to bite? Wasn’t that what a gunslinger was, when you stripped off the few stern lines of ritual and stilled the few iron grace-notes of catechism? Wasn’t he (or she) only a human hawk, trained to bite on command?

“No,” he said. “They’re not rocks.”

She raised her eyebrows a little and began to smile again. Now that she saw he wasn’t going to explode at her as he sometimes did when she was slow or fractious (or at least not *yet*), her eyes again took on the mocking sun-on-steel glint he associated with Detta Walker. “They ain’t?” The teasing in her voice was still good-natured,

but he thought it would turn mean if he let it. She was tense, keyed up, her claws already halfway out of their sheaths.

“No, they *ain't*,” he said, returning her mockery. His own smile began to return, but it was hard and humorless. “Susannah, do you remember the *honk mahfahs*?”

Her smile began to fade.

“The *honk mahfahs* in Oxford Town?”

Her smile was gone.

“Do you remember what the *honk mahfahs* did to you and your friends?”

“That wasn’t *me*,” she said. “That was another woman.” Her eyes had taken on a dull, sullen cast. He hated that look, but he also liked it just fine. It was the *right* look, the one that said the kindling was burning well and soon the bigger logs would start to catch.

“Yes. It was. Like it or not, it was Odetta Susannah Holmes, daughter of Sarah Walker Holmes. Not you as you *are*, but you as you *were*. Remember the fire-hoses, Susannah? Remember the gold teeth, how you saw them when they used the hoses on you and your friends in Oxford? How you saw them twinkle when they laughed?”

She had told them these things, and many others, over many long nights as the campfire burned low. The gunslinger hadn’t understood everything, but he had listened carefully, just the same. And remembered. Pain was a tool, after all. Sometimes it was the best tool.

“What’s wrong with you, Roland? Why you want to go recallin that trash in my mind?”

Now the sullen eyes glinted at him dangerously; they reminded him of Alain’s eyes when good-natured Alain was finally roused.

“Yonder stones are those men,” Roland said softly. “The men who locked you in a cell and left you to foul yourself. The men with the clubs and the dogs. The men who called you a nigger cunt.”

He pointed at them, moving his finger from left to right.

“There’s the one who pinched your breast and laughed. There’s the one who said he better check and see if you had something stuffed up your ass. There’s the one who called you a chimpanzee in

a five-hundred-dollar dress. That's the one that kept running his billyclub over the spokes of your wheelchair until you thought the sound would send you mad. There's the one who called your friend Leon *pinko-fag*. And the one on the end, Susannah, is Jack Mort.

"There. Those stones. *Those men.*"

She was breathing rapidly-now, her bosom rising and falling in swift little jerks beneath the gunslinger's gunbelt with its heavy freight of bullets. Her eyes had left him; they were looking at the mica-flecked chips of stone. Behind them and at some distance, a tree splintered and fell over. More crows called in the sky. Deep in the game which was no longer a game, neither of them noticed.

"Oh yeah?" she breathed. "That so?"

"It is. Now say your lesson, Susannah Dean, and be true."

This time the words fell from her lips like small chunks of ice. Her right hand trembled lightly on the arm of her wheelchair like an idling engine.

" 'I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

" 'I aim with my eye.' "

"Good."

" 'I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

" 'I shoot with my mind.' "

"So it has ever been, Susannah Dean."

" 'I do not kill with my gun; she who kills with her gun has forgotten the face of her father.

" 'I kill with my heart.' "

"*Then KILL them, for your father's sake!*" Roland shouted. "*KILL THEM ALL!*"

Her right hand was a blur between the arm of the chair and the butt of Roland's sixgun. It was out in a second, her left hand descending, fanning at the hammer in flutters almost as swift and delicate as the wing of a hummingbird. Six flat cracks pealed off across the valley, and five of the six chips of stone set atop the boulder blinked out of existence.

For a moment neither of them spoke—did not even breathe, it seemed—as the echoes rolled back and forth, dimming. Even the crows were silent, at least for the time being.

The gunslinger broke the silence with four toneless yet oddly emphatic words: “It is very well.”

Susannah looked at the gun in her hand as if she had never seen it before. A tendril of smoke rose from the barrel, perfectly straight in the windless silence. Then, slowly, she returned it to the holster below her bosom.

“Good, but not perfect,” she said at last. “I missed one.”

“Did you?” He walked over to the boulder and picked up the remaining chip of stone. He glanced at it, then tossed it to her.

She caught it with her left; her right stayed near the holstered gun, he saw with approval. She shot better and more naturally than Eddie, but had not learned this particular lesson as swiftly as Eddie had done. If she had been with them during the shootout at Balazar’s nightclub, she might have. Now, Roland saw, she was at last learning that, too. She looked at the stone and saw the notch, barely a sixteenth of an inch deep, in its upper corner.

“You only clipped it,” Roland said, returning to her, “but in a shooting scrape, sometimes that’s all you need. If you clip a fellow, throw his aim off ...” He paused. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“You don’t know, do you? You really don’t?”

“No. Your mind is often closed to me, Susannah.”

There was no defensiveness in his voice, and Susannah shook her head in exasperation. The rapid turn-and-turn-about dance of her personality sometimes unnerved him; his seeming inability to say anything other than exactly what was on his mind never failed to do the same to her. He was the most *literal* man she had ever met.

“All right,” she said, “I’ll *tell* you why I’m looking at you that way, Roland. Because what you did was a mean trick. You said you wouldn’t slap me, *couldn’t* slap me, even if I cut up rough . . . but either you lied or you’re very stupid, and I *know* you ain’t stupid. People don’t always slap with their hands, as every man and woman

of my race could testify. We have a little rhyme where I come from: 'Sticks and stones will break my bones—' "

" '—yet taunts shall never wound me,' " Roland finished.

"Well, that's not exactly the way we say it, but I guess it's close enough. It's bullshit no matter how you say it. They don't call what you did a tongue-lashing for nothing. Your words *hurt* me, Roland—are you gonna stand there and say you didn't know they would?"

She sat in her chair, looking up at him with bright, stern curiosity, and Roland thought—not for the first time—that the *honk mahfahs* of Susannah's land must have been either very brave or very stupid to cross her, wheelchair or no wheelchair. And, having walked among them, he didn't think bravery was the answer.

"I did not think or care about your hurt," he said patiently. "I saw you show your teeth and knew you meant to bite, so I put a stick in your jaws. And it worked . . . didn't it?"

Her expression was now one of hurt astonishment. "You *bastard!*"

Instead of replying, he took the gun from her holster, fumbled the cylinder open with the remaining two fingers on his right hand, and began to reload the chambers with his left hand.

"Of all the high-handed, arrogant—"

"You *needed* to bite," he said in that same patient tone. "Had you not, you would have shot all wrong—with your hand and your gun instead of your eye and mind and heart. Was that a trick? Was it arrogant? I think not. I think, Susannah, that *you* were the one with arrogance in her heart. I think *you* were the one with a mind to get up to tricks. That doesn't distress me. Quite the opposite. A gunslinger without teeth is no gunslinger."

"Damn it, I'm *not* a gunslinger!"

He ignored that; he could afford to. If she was no gunslinger, then he was a billy-bumbler. "If we were playing a game, I might have behaved differently. But this is no game. It . . ."

His good hand went to his forehead for a moment and paused there, fingers tented just above the left temple. The tips of the fingers, she saw, were trembling minutely.

"Roland, what's ailing you?" she asked quietly.

The hand lowered slowly. He rolled the cylinder back into place and replaced the revolver in the holster she wore. “Nothing.”

“Yes there is. I’ve seen it. Eddie has, too. It started almost as soon as we left the beach. It’s something wrong, and it’s getting worse.”

“There is nothing wrong,” he repeated.

She put her hands out and took his. Her anger was gone, at least for the time being. She looked earnestly up into his eyes. “Eddie and I . . . this isn’t our world, Roland. Without you, we’d die here. We’d have your guns, and we can shoot them, you’ve taught us to do that well enough, but we’d die just the same. We . . . we depend on you. So tell me what’s wrong. Let me try to help. Let *us* try to help.”

He had never been a man who understood himself deeply or cared to; the concept of self-consciousness (let alone self-analysis) was alien to him. His way was to act—to quickly consult his own interior, utterly mysterious workings, and then act. Of them all, he had been the most perfectly made, a man whose deeply romantic core was encased in a brutally simple box which consisted of instinct and pragmatism. He took one of those quick looks inside now and decided to tell her everything. There was something wrong with him, oh yes. Yes indeed. Something wrong with his mind, something as simple as his nature and as strange as the weird, wandering life into which that nature had impelled him.

He opened his mouth to say *I’ll tell you what’s wrong, Susannah, and I’ll do it in just three words. I’m going insane.* But before he could begin, another tree fell in the forest—it went with a huge, grinding crash. This treefall was closer, and this time they were not deeply engaged in a test of wills masquerading as a lesson. Both heard it, both heard the agitated cawing of the crows which followed it, and both registered the fact that the tree had fallen close to their camp.

Susannah had looked in the direction of the sound but now her eyes, wide and dismayed, returned to the gunslinger’s face. “Eddie!” she said.

A cry rose from the deep green fastness of the woods in back of them—a vast cry of rage. Another tree went, and then another. They fell in what sounded like a hail of mortar-fire. *Dry wood*, the gunslinger thought. *Dead trees.*

“Eddie!” This time she screamed it. “Whatever it is, *it’s near Eddie!*” Her hands flew to the wheels of her chair and began the laborious job of turning it around.

“No time for that.” Roland seized her under her arms and pulled her free. He had carried her before when the going was too rough for her wheelchair—both men had—but she was still amazed by his uncanny, ruthless speed. At one moment she was in her wheelchair, an item which had been purchased in New York City’s finest medical supply house in the fall of 1962. At the next she was balanced precariously on Roland’s shoulders like a cheerleader, her muscular thighs gripping the sides of his neck, his palms over his head and pressing into the small of her back. He began to run with her, his sprung boots slapping the needle-strewn earth between the ruts left by her wheelchair.

“Odetta!” he cried, reverting in this moment of stress to the name by which he had first known her. “Don’t lose the gun! For your father’s sake!”

He was sprinting between the trees now. Shadow-lace and bright chains of sun-dapple ran across them in moving mosaics as Roland lengthened his stride. They were going downhill now. Susannah raised her left hand to ward off a branch that wanted to slap her from the gunslinger’s shoulders. At the same moment she dropped her right hand to the butt of his ancient revolver, cradling it.

A mile, she thought. How long to run a mile? How long with him going flat-out like this? Not long, if he can keep his feet on these slippery needles . . . but maybe too long. Let him be all right, Lord—let my Eddie be all right.

As if in answer, she heard the unseen beast loose its cry again. That vast voice was like thunder. Like doom.

HE WAS THE LARGEST creature in the forest which had once been known as the Great West Woods, and he was the oldest. Many of the huge old elms which Roland had noticed in the valley below had been little more than twigs sprouting from the ground when the bear came out of the dim unknown reaches of Out-World like a brutal, wandering king.

Once, the Old People had lived in the West Woods (it was their leavings which Roland had found from time to time during the last weeks), and they had gone in fear of the colossal, undying bear. They had tried to kill him when they first discovered they were not alone in the new territory to which they had come, but although their arrows enraged him, they did no serious damage. And he was not confused about the source of his torment, as were the other beasts of the forest—even the predatory bushcats which denned and littered in the sandhills to the west. No; he knew where the arrows came from, this bear. *Knew*. And for every arrow which found its mark in the flesh below his shaggy pelt, he took three, four, perhaps as many as half a dozen of the Old People. Children if he could get them; women if he could not. Their warriors he disdained, and this was the final humiliation.

Eventually, as his real nature became clear to them, their efforts to kill him ceased. He was, of course, a demon incarnate—or the shadow of a god. They called him Mir, which to these people meant “the world beneath the world.” He stood seventy feet high, and after eighteen or more centuries of undisputed rule in the West Woods, he was dying. Perhaps the instrument of his death had at first been a microscopic organism in something he had eaten or drunk; perhaps it was old age; more likely a combination of both. The cause didn’t matter; the ultimate result—a rapidly multiplying colony of parasites foraging within his fabulous brain—did. After years of calculating, brutal sanity, Mir had run mad.

The bear had known men were in his woods again; he ruled the forest and although it was vast, nothing of importance which happened there escaped his attention for long. He had drawn away from the newcomers, not because he was afraid but because he had no business with them, nor they with him. Then the parasites had

begun their work, and as his madness increased he became sure that it was the Old People again, that the trap-setters and forest-burners had returned and would soon set about their old, stupid mischief once more. Only as he lay in his final den some thirty miles from the place of the newcomers, sicker with each day's dawning than he had been at sunset the night before, had he come to believe that the Old People had finally found some mischief which worked: poison.

He came this time not to take revenge for some petty wound but to stamp them out entirely before their poison could finish having its way with him . . . and as he travelled, all thought ceased. What was left was red rage, the rusty buzz of the thing on top of his head—the turning thing between his ears which had once done its work in smooth silence—and an eerily enhanced sense of smell which led him unerringly toward the camp of the three pilgrims.

The bear, whose real name was not Mir but something else entirely, made his way through the forest like a moving building, a shaggy tower with reddish-brown eyes. Those eyes glowed with fever and madness. His huge head, now wearing a garland of broken branches and fir-needles, swung ceaselessly from side to side. Every now and then he would sneeze in a muffled explosion of sound—*AH-CHOW!*—and clouds of squirming white parasites would be discharged from his dripping nostrils. His paws, armed with curved talons three feet in length, tore at the trees. He walked upright, sinking deep tracks in the soft black soil under the trees. He reeked of fresh balsam and old, sour shit.

The thing on top of his head whirred and squealed, squealed and whirred.

The course of the bear remained almost constant: a straight line which would lead him to the camp of those who had dared return to his forest, who had dared fill his head with dark green agony. Old People or New People, they would die. When he came to a dead tree, he sometimes left the straight path long enough to push it down. The dry, explosive roar of its fall pleased him; when the tree had finally collapsed its rotten length on the forest floor or come to

rest against one of its mates, the bear would push on through slanting bars of sunlight turned misty with floating motes of sawdust.

3

TWO DAYS BEFORE, EDDIE Dean had begun carving again—the first time he'd tried to carve anything since the age of twelve. He remembered that he had enjoyed doing it, and he believed he must have been good at it, as well. He couldn't remember that part, not for sure, but there was at least one clear indication that it was so: Henry, his older brother, had hated to see him doing it.

Oh lookit the sissy, Henry would say. Whatcha makin today, sissy? A dollhouse? A pisspot for your itty-bitty teeny peenie? Ohhh . . . ain't that CUTE?

Henry would never come right out and tell Eddie not to do something; would never just walk up to him and say, *Would you mind quitting that, bro? See, it's pretty good, and when you do something that's pretty good, it makes me nervous. Because, you see, I'm the one that's supposed to be pretty good at stuff around here. Me. Henry Dean. So what I think I'll do, brother o' mine, is just sort of rag on you about certain things. I won't come right out and say "Don't do that, it's makin me nervous," because that might make me sound, you know, a little fucked up in the head. But I can rag on you, because that's part of what big brothers do, right? All part of the image. I'll rag on you and tease you and make fun of you until you just . . . fucking ... QUIT IT! Okay?*

Well, it *wasn't* okay, not really, but in the Dean household, things usually went the way Henry wanted them to go. And until very recently, that had seemed right—not okay but *right*. There was a small but crucial difference there, if you could but dig it. There were two reasons why it seemed right. One was an on-top reason; the other was an underneath reason.

The on-top reason was because Henry had to Watch Out for Eddie when Mrs. Dean was at work. He had to Watch Out all the time, because once there had been a Dean *sister*, if you could but dig it. She would have been four years older than Eddie and four years younger than Henry if she had lived, but that was the thing, you see, because she *hadn't* lived. She had been run over by a drunk driver when Eddie was two. She had been watching a game of hopscotch on the sidewalk when it happened.

As a kid, Eddie had sometimes thought of his sister while listening to Mel Allen doing the play-by-play on The Yankee Baseball Network. Someone would really pound one and Mel would bellow, "*Holy cow, he got all of that one! SEEYA LATER!*" Well, the drunk had gotten all of Gloria Dean, holy cow, seeya later. Gloria was now in that great upper deck in the sky, and it had not happened because she was unlucky or because the State of New York had decided not to jerk the jerk's license after his third OUI or even because God had bent down to pick up a peanut; it had happened (as Mrs. Dean frequently told her sons) because there had been no one around to Watch Out for Gloria.

Henry's job was to make sure nothing like that ever happened to Eddie. That was his job and he did it, but it wasn't easy. Henry and Mrs. Dean agreed on that, if nothing else. Both of them frequently reminded Eddie of just how much Henry had sacrificed to keep Eddie safe from drunk drivers and muggers and junkies and possibly even malevolent aliens who might be cruising around in the general vicinity of the upper deck, aliens who might decide to come down from their UFOs on nuclear-powered jet-skis at any time in order to kidnap little kids like Eddie Dean. So it was wrong to make Henry more nervous than this terrible responsibility had already made him. If Eddie was doing something that *did* make Henry more nervous, Eddie ought to cease doing that thing immediately. It was a way of paying Henry back for all the time Henry had spent Watching Out for Eddie. When you thought about it that way, you saw that doing things better than Henry could do them was very unfair.

Then there was the underneath reason. That reason (the world beneath the world, one might say) was more powerful, because it

could never be stated: Eddie could not allow himself to be better than Henry at much of anything, because Henry was, for the most part, good for nothing . . . except Watching Out for Eddie, of course.

Henry taught Eddie how to play basketball in the playground near the apartment building where they lived—this was in a cement suburb where the towers of Manhattan stood against the horizon like a dream and the welfare check was king. Eddie was eight years younger than Henry and much smaller, but he was also much faster. He had a natural feel for the game; once he got on the cracked, hilly cement of the court with the ball in his hands, the moves seemed to sizzle in his nerve-endings. He was faster, but that was no big deal. The big deal was this: he was *better* than Henry. If he hadn't known it from the results of the pick-up games in which they sometimes played, he would have known it from Henry's thunderous looks and the hard punches to the upper arm Henry often dealt out on their way home afterwards. These punches were supposedly Henry's little jokes—"Two for flinching!" Henry would cry cheerily, and then *whap-whap!* into Eddie's bicep with one knuckle extended—but they didn't feel like jokes. They felt like warnings. They felt like Henry's way of saying *You better not fake me out and make me look stupid when you drive for the basket, bro; you better remember that I'm Watching Out for You.*

The same was true with reading . . . baseball . . . Ring-a-Levio . . . math . . . even jump-rope, which was a girl's game. That he was better at these things, or *could* be better, was a secret that had to be kept at all costs. Because Eddie was the younger brother. Because Henry was Watching Out for him. But the most important part of the underneath reason was also the simplest: these things had to be kept secret because Henry was Eddie's big brother, and Eddie adored him.

Two DAYS AGO, WHILE Susannah was skinning out a rabbit and Roland was starting supper, Eddie had been in the forest just south of camp. He had seen a funny spur of wood jutting out of a fresh stump. A weird feeling—he supposed it was the one people called *déjà vu*—swept over him, and he found himself staring fixedly at the spur, which looked like a badly shaped doorknob. He was distantly aware that his mouth had gone dry.

After several seconds, he realized he was *looking* at the spur sticking out of the stump but *thinking* about the courtyard behind the building where he and Henry had lived—thinking about the feel of the warm cement under his ass and the whopping smells of garbage from the dumpster around the corner in the alley. In this memory he had a chunk of wood in his left hand and a paring knife from the drawer by the sink in his right. The chunk of wood jutting from the stump had called up the memory of that brief period when he had fallen violently in love with wood-carving. It was just that the memory was buried so deep he hadn't realized, at first, what it was.

What he had loved most about carving was the seeing part, which happened even before you began. Sometimes you saw a car or a truck. Sometimes a dog or cat. Once, he remembered, it had been the face of an idol—one of the spooky Easter Island monoliths he had seen in an issue of *National Geographic* at school. That had turned out to be a good one. The game was to find out how much of that thing you could get out of the wood without breaking it. You could never get it all, but if you were very careful, you could sometimes get quite a lot.

There was something inside the boss on the side of the stump. He thought he might be able to release quite a lot of it with Roland's knife—it was the sharpest, handiest tool he had ever used.

Something inside the wood, waiting patiently for someone—someone like him!—to come along and let it out. To set it free.

Oh lookit the sissy! Whatcha makin today, sissy? A dollhouse? A pisspot for your itty-bitty teeny peenie? A slingshot, so you can pretend to hunt rabbits, just like the big boys? A w w w w . . . ain't that CUTE?

He felt a burst of shame, a sense of wrongness; that strong sense of secrets that must be kept at any cost, and then he remembered—again—that Henry Dean, who had in his later years become the great sage and eminent junkie, was dead. This realization had still not lost its power to surprise; it kept hitting him in different ways, sometimes with sorrow, sometimes with guilt, sometimes with anger. On this day, two days before the great bear came charging out of the green corridors of the woods, it had hit him in the most surprising way of all. He had felt relief, and a soaring joy.

He was free.

Eddie had borrowed Roland's knife. He used it to cut carefully around the jutting boss of wood, then brought it back and sat beneath a tree with it, turning it this way and that. He was not looking *at* it; he was looking *into* it.

Susannah had finished with her rabbit. The meat went into the pot over the fire; the skin she stretched between two sticks, tying it with hanks of rawhide from Roland's purse. Later on, after the evening meal, Eddie would begin scraping it clean. She used her hands and arms, slipping effortlessly over to where Eddie was sitting with his back propped against the tall old pine. At the campfire, Roland was crumbling some arcane—and no doubt delicious—woods-herb into the pot. "What's doing, Eddie?"

Eddie had found himself restraining an absurd urge to hide the boss of wood behind his back. "Nothing," he said. "Thought I might, you know, carve something." He paused, then added: "I'm not very good, though." He sounded as if he might be trying to reassure her of this fact.

She had looked at him, puzzled. For a moment she seemed on the verge of saying something, then simply shrugged and left him alone. She had no idea why Eddie seemed ashamed to be passing a little time in whittling—her father had done it all the time—but if it was something that needed to be talked about, she supposed Eddie would get to it in his own time.

He knew the guilty feelings were stupid and pointless, but he also knew he felt more comfortable doing this work when Roland and Susannah were out of camp. Old habits, it seemed, sometimes died

hard. Beating heroin was child's play compared to beating your childhood.

When they *were* away, hunting or shooting or keeping Roland's peculiar form of school, Eddie found himself able to turn to his piece of wood with surprising skill and increasing pleasure. The shape was in there, all right; he had been right about that. It was a simple one, and Roland's knife was setting it free with an eerie ease. Eddie thought he was going to get almost all of it, and that meant the slingshot might actually turn out to be a practical weapon. Not much compared to Roland's big revolvers, maybe, but something he had made himself, just the same. *His*. And this idea pleased him very much.

When the first crows rose in the air, cawing affrightedly, he did not hear. He was already thinking—hoping—that he might see a tree with a bow trapped in it before too long.

5

HE HEARD THE BEAR approaching before Roland and Susannah did, but not much before—he was lost in that high daze of concentration which accompanies the creative impulse at its sweetest and most powerful. He had suppressed these impulses for most of his life, and now this one held him wholly in its grip. Eddie was a willing prisoner.

He was pulled from his daze not by the sound of falling trees but by the rapid thunder of a .45 from the south. He looked up, smiling, and brushed hair from his forehead with a sawdusty hand. In that moment, sitting with his back against a tall pine in the clearing which had become home, his face crisscrossed with opposing beams of green-gold forest light, he looked handsome indeed—a young man with unruly dark hair which constantly tried to spill across his high forehead, a young man with a strong, mobile mouth and hazel eyes.

For a moment his eyes shifted to Roland's other gun, hanging by its belt from a nearby branch, and he found himself wondering how long it had been since Roland had gone anywhere without at least one of his fabulous weapons hanging by his side. That question led to two others.

How old *was* he, this man who had plucked Eddie and Susannah from their world and their *whens*? And, more important, what was wrong with him?

Susannah had promised to broach that subject . . . if she shot well and didn't get Roland's back hair up, that was. Eddie didn't think Roland would tell her—not at first—but it was time to let old long tall and ugly know that *they* knew *something* was wrong.

"There'll be water if God wills it," Eddie said. He turned back to his carving with a little smile playing on his lips. They had both begun to pick up Roland's little sayings . . . and he theirs. It was almost as if they were halves of the same—

Then a tree fell close by in the forest, and Eddie was on his feet in a second, the half-carved slingshot in one hand, Roland's knife in the other. He stared across the clearing in the direction of the sound, heart thumping, all his senses finally alert. Something was coming. Now he could hear it, trampling its heedless way through the underbrush, and he marvelled bitterly that this realization had come so late. Far back in his mind, a small voice told him this was what he got. This was what he got for doing something better than Henry, for making Henry nervous.

Another tree fell with a ratcheting, coughing crash. Looking down a ragged aisle between the tall firs, Eddie saw a cloud of sawdust rise in the still air. The creature responsible for that cloud suddenly bellowed—a raging, gut-freezing sound.

It was one huge motherfucker, whatever it was.

He dropped the chunk of wood, then flipped Roland's knife at a tree fifteen feet to his left. It somersaulted twice in the air and then stuck halfway to the hilt in the wood, quivering. He grabbed Roland's .45 from the place where it hung and cocked it.

Stand or run?

But he discovered he no longer had the luxury of that question. The thing was *fast* as well as huge, and it was now too late to run. A gigantic shape began to disclose itself in that aisle of trees north of the clearing, a shape which towered above all but the tallest trees. It was lumbering directly toward him, and as its eyes fixed upon Eddie Dean, it gave voice to another of those cries.

“Oh man, I’m *fucked*,” Eddie whispered as another tree bent, cracked like a mortar, then crashed to the forest floor in a cloud of dust and dead needles. Now it was lumbering straight toward the clearing where he stood, a bear the size of King Kong. Its footfalls made the ground shake.

What will you do, Eddie? Roland suddenly asked. *Think! It’s the only advantage you have over yon beast. What will you do?*

He didn’t think he could kill it. Maybe with a bazooka, but probably not with the gunslinger’s .45. He could run, but had an idea that the oncoming beast might be pretty fast when it wanted to be. He guessed the chances of ending up as jam between the great bear’s toes might be as high as fifty-fifty.

So which one was it going to be? Stand here and start shooting or run like his hair was on fire and his ass was catching?

It occurred to him that there was a third choice. He could climb.

He turned toward the tree against which he had been leaning. It was a huge, hoary pine, easily the tallest tree in this part of the woods. The first branch spread out over the forest floor in a feathery green fan about eight feet up. Eddie dropped the revolver’s hammer and then jammed the gun into the waistband of his pants. He leaped for the branch, grabbed it, and did a frantic chin-up. Behind him, the bear gave voice to another bellow as it burst into the clearing.

The bear would have had him just the same, would have left Eddie Dean’s guts hanging in gaudy strings from the lowest branches of the pine, if another of those sneezing fits had not come on it at that moment. It kicked the ashy remains of the campfire into a black cloud and then stood almost doubled over, huge front paws on its huge thighs, looking for a moment like an old man in a fur coat, an old man with a cold. It sneezed again and again—*AH-CHOW! AH-CHOW! AH-CHOW!*—and clouds of parasites blew out of its muzzle.

Hot urine flowed in a stream between its legs and hissed out the campfire's scattered embers.

Eddie did not waste the few crucial extra moments he had been given. He went up the tree like a monkey on a stick, pausing only once to make sure the gunslinger's revolver was still seated firmly in the waistband of his pants. He was in terror, already half convinced that he was going to die (what else could he expect, now that Henry wasn't around to Watch Out for him?), but a crazy laughter raved through his head just the same. *Been treed*, he thought. *How bout that, sports fans? Been treed by Bearzilla.*

The creature raised its head again, the thing turning between its ears catching winks and flashes of sunlight as it did so, then charged Eddie's tree. It reached high with one paw and slashed forward, meaning to knock Eddie loose like a pinecone. The paw tore through the branch he was standing on just as he lunged upward to the next. That paw tore through one of his shoes as well, pulling it from his foot and sending it flying in two ragged pieces.

That's okay, Eddie thought. *You can have em both, Br'er Bear, if you want. Goddam things were worn out, anyway.*

The bear roared and lashed at the tree, cutting deep wounds in its ancient bark, wounds which bled clear, resinous sap. Eddie kept on yanking himself up. The branches were thinning now, and when he risked a glance down he stared directly into the bear's muddy eyes. Below its cocked head, the clearing had become a target with the scattered smudge of campfire as its bullseye.

"Missed me, you hairy motherf—" Eddie began, and then the bear, its head still cocked back to look at him, sneezed. Eddie was immediately drenched in hot snot that was filled with thousands of small white worms. They wriggled frantically on his shirt, his forearms, his throat and face.

Eddie screamed in mingled surprise and revulsion. He began to brush at his eyes and mouth, lost his balance, and just managed to hook an arm around the branch beside him in time. He held on and raked at his skin, wiping off as much of the wormy phlegm as he could. The bear roared and hit the tree again. The pine rocked like a mast in a gale . . . but the fresh claw-marks which appeared were at

least seven feet below the branch on which Eddie's feet were planted.

The worms were dying, he realized—must have begun dying as soon as they left the infected swamps inside the monster's body. It made him feel a little better, and he began to climb again. He stopped twelve feet further up, daring to go no higher. The trunk of the pine, easily eight feet in diameter at its base, was now no more than eighteen inches through the middle. He had distributed his weight on two branches, but he could feel both of them bending springily beneath him. He had a crow's nest view of the forest and foothills to the west now, spread out below him in an undulating carpet. Under other circumstances, it would have been a view to relish.

Top of the world, Ma, he thought. He looked down into the bear's upturned face again, and for a moment all coherent thought was driven from his mind by simple amazement.

There was something growing out of the bear's skull, and to Eddie it looked like a small radar-dish.

The gadget turned jerkily, kicking up flashes of sun as it did, and Eddie could hear it screaming thinly. He had owned a few old cars in his time—the kind that sat in the used-car lots with the words HANDYMAN'S SPECIAL soaped on the windshields—and he thought the sound coming from that gadget was the sound of bearings which will freeze up if they are not replaced soon.

The bear uttered a long, purring growl. Yellowish foam, thick with worms, squeezed between its paws in curdled gobbets. If he had never looked into the face of utter lunacy (and he supposed he had, having been eyeball to eyeball with that world-class bitch Detta Walker on more than one occasion), Eddie was looking into it now . . . but that face was, thankfully, a good thirty feet below him, and at their highest reach those killing talons were fifteen feet under the soles of his feet. And, unlike the trees upon which the bear had vented its spleen as it approached the clearing, this one was not dead.

"Mexican standoff, honey," Eddie panted. He wiped sweat from his forehead with one sap-sticky hand and flicked the mess down into

the bugbear's face.

Then the creature the Old People had called Mir embraced the tree with its great forepaws and began to shake it. Eddie grabbed the trunk and held on for dear life, eyes squeezed into grim slits, as the pine began to sway back and forth like a pendulum.

6

ROLAND HALTED AT THE EDGE of the clearing. Susannah, perched on his shoulders, stared unbelievably across the open space. The creature stood at the base of the tree where Eddie had been when the two of them left the clearing forty-five minutes ago. She could see only chunks and sections of its body through the screen of branches and dark green needles. Roland's other gunbelt lay beside one of the monster's feet. The holster, she saw, was empty.

"My God," she murmured.

The bear screamed like a distraught woman and began shaking the tree. The branches lashed as if in a high wind. Her eyes skated upward and she saw a dark form near the top. Eddie was hugging the trunk as the tree rocked and rolled. As she watched, one of his hands slipped and flailed wildly for purchase.

"What do we do?" she screamed down at Roland. *"It's goan shake him loose! What do we do?"*

Roland tried to think about it, but that queer sensation had returned again—it was always with him now, but stress seemed to make it worse. He felt like two men existing inside one skull. Each man had his own set of memories, and when they began to argue, each insisting that *his* memories were the true ones, the gunslinger felt as if he were being ripped in two. He made a desperate effort to reconcile these two halves and succeeded . . . at least for the moment.

“It’s one of the Twelve!” he shouted. “One of the Guardians! *Must* be! But I thought they were—”

The bear bellowed up at Eddie again. Now it began to slap at the tree like a punchy fighter. Branches snapped and fell around its feet in a tangle.

“*What?*” Susannah screamed. “*What’s the rest?*”

Roland closed his eyes. Inside his head, a voice shouted, *The boy’s name was Jake!* Another voice shouted back, *There WAS no boy! There WAS no boy, and you know it!*

Get away, both of you! he snarled, and then called out aloud: “Shoot it! Shoot it in the ass, Susannah! It’ll turn and charge! When it does, look for something on its head! It—”

The bear squalled again. It gave up slapping the tree and went back to shaking it. Ominous popping, grinding sounds were now coming from the upper part of the trunk.

When he could be heard again, Roland shouted: “I think it looks like a hat! A little steel hat! Shoot it, Susannah! And don’t miss!”

Terror suddenly filled her—terror and another emotion, one she would never have expected: crushing loneliness.

“*No! I’ll miss! You do it, Roland!*” She began to fumble his revolver out of the belt she wore, meaning to give it to him.

“Can’t!” Roland shouted. “The angle’s bad! *You* have to do it, Susannah! This is the real test, and you’d better pass it!”

“*Roland—*”

“*It means to snap the top of the tree off!*” he roared at her. “*Can’t you see that?*”

She looked at the revolver in her hand. Looked across the clearing, at the gigantic bear obscured in the clouds and sprays of green needles. Looked at Eddie, swaying back and forth like a metronome. Eddie probably had Roland’s other gun, but Susannah could see no way he could use it without being shaken from his perch like an over-ripe plum. Also, he might not shoot at the right thing.

She raised the revolver. Her stomach was thick with dread. “Hold me still, Roland,” she said. “If you don’t—”

“Don’t worry about me!”

She fired twice, squeezing the shots as Roland had taught her. The heavy reports cut across the sound of the bear shaking the tree like the cracks of a bullwhip. She saw both bullets strike home in the left cheek of the bear's rump, less than two inches apart.

It shrieked in surprise, pain, and outrage. One of its huge front paws came out of the dense screen of branches and needles and slapped at the hurt place. The hand came away dripping scarlet and rose back out of sight. Susannah could imagine it up there, examining its bloody palm. Then there was a rushing, rustling, snapping sound as the bear turned, bending down at the same time, dropping to all fours in order to achieve maximum speed. For the first time she saw its face, and her heart quailed. Its muzzle was lathered with foam; its huge eyes glared like lamps. Its shaggy head swung to the left . . . back to the right . . . and centered upon Roland, who stood with his legs apart and Susannah Dean balanced on his shoulders.

With a shattering roar, the bear charged.

7

SAY YOUR LESSON, Susannah Dean, and be true.

The bear came at them in a rumbling lope; it was like watching a runaway factory machine over which someone had thrown a huge, moth-eaten rug.

It looks like a hat! A little steel hat!

She saw it ... but it didn't look like a hat to her. It looked like a radar-dish—a much smaller version of the kind she had seen in MovieTone newsreel stories about how the DEW-line was keeping everyone safe from a Russian sneak attack. It was bigger than the pebbles she had shot off the boulder earlier, but the distance was greater. Sun and shadow ran across it in deceiving dapples.

I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

I can't do it!

I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father.

I'll miss! I know I'll miss!

I do not kill with my gun; she who kills with her gun—

“Shoot it!” Roland roared. “Susannah, *shoot it!*”

With the trigger as yet unpulled, she saw the bullet go home, guided from muzzle to target by nothing more or less than her heart's fierce desire that it should fly true. All fear fell away. What was left was a feeling of deep coldness and she had time to think: *This is what he feels. My God—how does he stand it?*

“I kill with my heart, motherfucker,” she said, and the gunslinger's revolver roared in her hand.

8

THE SILVERY THING SPUN on a steel rod planted in the bear's skull. Susannah's bullet struck it dead center and the radar-dish blew into a hundred glittering fragments. The pole itself was suddenly engulfed in a burst of crackling blue fire which reached out in a net and seemed to grasp the sides of the bear's face for a moment.

It rose on its rear legs with a whistling howl of agony, its front paws boxing aimlessly at the air. It turned in a wide, staggering circle and began to flap its arms, as if it had decided to fly away. It tried to roar again but what came out instead was a weird warbling sound like an air-raid siren.

“It is very well.” Roland sounded exhausted. “A good shot, fair and true.”

“Should I shoot it again?” she asked uncertainly. The bear was still blundering around in its mad circle but now its body had begun to tilt sideways and inwards. It struck a small tree, rebounded, almost fell over, and then began to circle again.

“No need,” Roland said. She felt his hands grip her waist and lift her. A moment later she was sitting on the ground with her thighs folded beneath her. Eddie was slowly and shakily descending the pine, but she didn’t see him. She could not take her eyes from the bear.

She had seen the whales at the Seaquarium near Mystic, Connecticut, and believed they had been bigger than this—much bigger, probably—but this was certainly the largest land creature she had ever seen. And it was clearly dying. Its roars had become liquid bubbling sounds, and although its eyes were open, it seemed blind. It flailed aimlessly about the camp, knocking over a rack of curing hides, stamping flat the little shelter she shared with Eddie, caroming off trees. She could see the steel post rising from its head. Tendrils of smoke were rising around it, as if her shot had ignited its brains.

Eddie reached the lowest branch of the tree which had saved his life and sat shakily astride it. “Holy Mary Mother of God,” he said. “I’m looking right at it and I still don’t beli—”

The bear wheeled back toward him. Eddie leaped nimbly from the tree and streaked toward Susannah and Roland. The bear took no notice, it marched drunkenly to the pine which had been Eddie’s refuge, tried to grasp it, failed, and sank to its knees. Now they could hear other sounds coming from inside it, sounds that made Eddie think of some huge truck engine stripping its gears.

A spasm convulsed it, bowed its back. Its front claws rose and gored madly at its own face. Worm-infested blood flew and splattered. Then it fell over, making the ground tremble with its fall, and lay still. After all its strange centuries, the bear the Old People had called Mir—the world beneath the world—was dead.

9

EDDIE PICKED SUSANNAH UP, held her with his sticky hands locked together at the small of her back, and kissed her deeply. He

reeked of sweat and pine-tar. She touched his cheeks, his neck; she ran her hands through his wet hair. She felt an insane urge to touch him everywhere until she was absolutely sure of his reality.

“It almost had me,” he said. “It was like being on some crazy carnival ride. What a shot! Jesus, Suze—what a shot!”

“I hope I never have to do anything like that again,” she said . . . but a small voice at the center of her demurred. That voice suggested that she could not *wait* to do something like that again. And it was cold, that voice. Cold.

“What was—” he began, turning toward Roland, but Roland was no longer standing there. He was walking slowly toward the bear, which now lay on the ground with its shaggy knees up. From within it came a series of muffled gasps and gurgles as its strange guts continued to slowly run down.

Roland saw his knife planted deep in a tree near the scarred veteran that had saved Eddie’s life. He pulled it free and wiped it clean on the soft deerskin shirt which had replaced the tatters he had been wearing when the three of them had left the beach. He stood by the bear, looking down at it with an expression of pity and wonder.

Hello, stranger, he thought. Hello, old friend. I never believed in you, not really. I believe Alain did, and I know that Cuthbert did—Cuthbert believed in everything—but I was the hardheaded one. I thought you were only a tale for children . . . another wind which blew around in my old nurse’s hollow head before finally escaping her jabbering mouth. But you were here all along, another refugee of the old times, like the pump at the way station and the old machines under the mountains. Are the Slow Mutants who worshipped those broken remnants the final descendents of the people who once lived in this forest and finally fled your wrath? I don’t know, will never know . . . but it feels right. Yes. And then I came with my friends—my deadly new friends, who are becoming so much like my deadly old friends. We came, weaving our magic circle around its and around everything we touch, strand by poisonous strand, and now here you lie, at our feet. The world has moved on again, and this time, old friend, it’s you who have been left behind.

The monster's body still radiated a deep, sick heat. Parasites were leaving its mouth and tattered nostrils in hordes, but they died almost at once. Waxy-white piles of them were growing on either side of the bear's head.

Eddie approached slowly. He had shifted Susannah over to one hip, carrying her as a mother might carry a baby. "What was it, Roland? Do you know?"

"He called it a Guardian, I think," Susannah said.

"Yes." Roland's voice was slow with amazement. "I thought they were all gone, *must* all be gone . . . if they ever existed outside of the old wives' tales in the first place."

"Whatever it was, it was one crazy mother," Eddie said.

Roland smiled a little. "If you'd lived two or three thousand years, you'd be one crazy mother, too."

"Two or three thousand . . . Christ!"

Susannah said, "Is it a bear? Really? And what's that?" She was pointing at what appeared to be a square metal tag set high on one of the bear's thick rear legs. It was almost overgrown with tough tangles of hair, but the afternoon sun had pricked out a single starpoint of light on its stainless steel surface, revealing it.

Eddie knelt and reached hesitantly toward the tag, aware that strange muffled clicks and clacks were still coming from deep inside the fallen giant. He looked at Roland.

"Go ahead," the gunslinger told him. "It's finished."

Eddie pushed a clump of hair aside and leaned closer. Words had been stamped into the metal. They were quite badly eroded, but he found that with a little effort he could read them.

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.

Granite City

Northeast Corridor

Design 4 GUARDIAN

Serial # AA 24123 CX 755431297 L 14

Type/Species BEAR
SHARDIK

NR SUBNUCLEAR CELLS MUST NOT BE
REPLACED **NR**

“Holy Jesus, this thing is a *robot*,” Eddie said softly.

“It can’t be,” Susannah said. “When I shot it, it *bled*.”

“Maybe so, but your ordinary, garden-variety bear doesn’t have a radar-dish growing out of its head. And, so far as I know, your ordinary, garden-variety bear doesn’t live to be two or three th—” He broke off suddenly, looking at Roland. When he spoke again, his voice was revolted. “Roland, what are you doing?”

Roland did not reply; did not *need* to reply. What he was doing—gouging out one of the bear’s eyes with his knife—was perfectly obvious. The surgery was quick, neat, and precise. When it was completed he balanced an oozing brown ball of jelly on the blade of his knife for a moment and then flicked it aside. A few more worms made their way out of the staring hole, tried to squirm their way down the bear’s muzzle, and died.

The gunslinger leaned over the eyesocket of Shardik, the great Guardian bear, and peered inside. “Come and look, both of you,” he said. “I’ll show you a wonder of the latter days.”

“Put me down, Eddie,” Susannah said.

He did so, and she moved swiftly on her hands and upper thighs to where the gunslinger was hunkered down over the bear’s wide, slack face. Eddie joined them, looking between their shoulders. The three of them gazed in rapt silence for nearly a full minute; the only noise came from the crows which still circled and scolded in the sky.

Blood oozed from the socket in a few thick, dying trickles. Yet it was not *just* blood, Eddie saw. There was also a clear fluid which gave off an identifiable scent—bananas. And, embedded in the delicate crisscross of tendons which shaped the socket, he saw a webwork of what looked like strings. Beyond them, at the back of then socket, was a red spark, blinking on and off. It illuminated a tiny

square board marked with silvery squiggles of what could only be solder.

“It isn’t a bear, it’s a fucking Sony Walkman,” he muttered.

Susannah looked around at him. “What?”

“Nothing.” Eddie glanced at Roland. “Do you think it’s safe to reach in?”

Roland shrugged. “I think so. If there was a demon in this creature, it’s fled.”

Eddie reached in with his little finger, nerves set to draw back if he felt even a tickle of electricity. He touched the cooling meat inside the eyesocket, which was nearly the size of a baseball, and then one of those strings. Except it wasn’t a string; it was a gossamer-thin strand of steel. He withdrew his finger and saw the tiny red spark blink once more before going out forever.

“Shardik,” Eddie murmured. “I *know* that name, but I can’t place it. Does it mean anything to you, Suze?”

She shook her head.

“The thing is . . .” Eddie laughed helplessly. “I associate it with rabbits. Isn’t that nuts?”

Roland stood up. His knees popped like gunshots. “We’ll have to move camp,” he said. “The ground here is spoiled. The other clearing, the one where we go to shoot, will—”

He took two trembling steps and then collapsed to his knees, palms pressed to the sides of his sagging head.

10

EDDIE AND SUSANNAH EXCHANGED a single frightened glance and then Eddie leaped to Roland’s side. “What is it? Roland, what’s wrong?”

“There *was* a boy,” the gunslinger said in a distant, muttering voice. And then, in the very next breath, “There *wasn’t* a boy.”

“Roland?” Susannah asked. She came to him, slipped an arm around his shoulders, felt him trembling. “Roland, what is it?”

“The boy,” Roland said, looking at her with floating, dazed eyes. “It’s the boy. *Always* the boy.”

“*What* boy?” Eddie yelled frantically. “*What* boy?”

“Go then,” Roland said, “there are other worlds than these.” And fainted.

11

THAT NIGHT THE THREE of them sat around a huge bonfire Eddie and Susannah had built in the clearing Eddie called “the shooting gallery.” It would have been a bad place to camp in the wintertime, open to the valley as it was, but for now it was fine. Eddie guessed that here in Roland’s world it was still late summer.

The black vault of the sky arched overhead, speckled by what seemed to be whole galaxies. Almost straight ahead to the south, across the river of darkness that was the valley, Eddie could see Old Mother rising above the distant, unseen horizon. He glanced at Roland, who sat huddled by the fire with three skins wrapped around his shoulders despite the warmth of the night and the heat of the fire. There was an untouched plate of food by his side and a bone cradled in his hands. Eddie glanced back at the sky and thought of a story the gunslinger had told him and Susannah on one of the long days they had spent moving away from the beach, through the foothills, and finally into these deep woods where they had found a temporary refuge.

Before time began, Roland said, Old Star and Old Mother had been young and passionate newlyweds. Then one day there had been a terrible argument. Old Mother (who in those long-ago days had been known by her real name, which was Lydia) had caught Old Star (whose real name was Apon) hanging about a beautiful young woman named Cassiopeia. They’d had a real bang-up fight, those

two, a hair-pulling, eye-gouging, crockery-throwing fight. One of those thrown bits of crockery had become the earth; a smaller shard the moon; a coal from their kitchen stove had become the sun. In the end, the gods had stepped in so Apon and Lydia might not, in their anger, destroy the universe before it was fairly begun. Cassiopeia, the saucy jade who caused the trouble in the first place (“Yeah, right—it’s always the woman,” Susannah had said at this point), had been banished to a rocking-chair made of stars forever and ever. Yet not even this had solved the-problem. Lydia had been willing to try again, but Apon was stiffnecked and full of pride (“Yeah, always blame the man,” Eddie had grunted at this point). So they had parted, and now they look at each other in mingled hatred and longing from across the star-strewn wreckage of their divorce. Apon and Lydia are three billion years gone, the gunslinger told them; they have become Old Star and Old Mother, the north and south, each pining for the other but both now too proud to beg for reconciliation . . . and Cassiopeia sits off to the side in her chair, rocking and laughing at them both.

Eddie was startled by a soft touch on his arm. It was Susannah. “Come on,” she said. “We’ve got to make him talk.”

Eddie carried her to the campfire and put her down carefully on Roland’s right side. He sat on Roland’s left. Roland looked first at Susannah, then at Eddie.

“How close you both sit to me,” he remarked. “Like lovers ... or warders in a gaol.”

“It’s time for you to do some talking.” Susannah’s voice was low, clear, and musical. “If we’re your companions, Roland—and it seems like we are, like it or not—it’s time you started *treating* us as companions. Tell us what’s wrong . . .”

“ . . . and what we can do about it,” Eddie finished.

Roland sighed deeply. “I don’t know how to begin,” he said. “It’s been so long since I’ve had companions . . . or a tale to tell . . .”

“Start with the bear,” Eddie said.

Susannah leaned forward and touched the jawbone Roland held in his hands. It frightened her, but she touched it anyway. “And finish with this.”

“Yes.” Roland lifted the bone to eye-level and looked at it for a moment before dropping it back into his lap. “We’ll have to speak of this, won’t we? It’s the center of the thing.”

But the bear came first.

12

“THIS IS THE STORY I was told when I was a child,” Roland said. “When everything was new, the Great Old Ones—they weren’t gods, but people who had almost the knowledge of gods-created Twelve Guardians to stand watch at the twelve portals which lead in and out of the world. Sometimes I heard that these portals were natural things, like the constellations we see in the sky or the bottomless crack in the earth we called Dragon’s Grave, because of the great burst of steam they gave off every thirty or forty days. But other people—one I remember in particular, the head cook in my father’s castle, a man named Hax—said they were not natural, that they had been created by the Great Old Ones themselves, in the days before they hanged themselves with pride like a noose and disappeared from the earth. Hax used to say that the creation of the Twelve Guardians was the last act of the Great Old Ones, their attempt to atone for the great wrongs they had done to each other, and to the earth itself.”

“Portals,” Eddie mused. “*Doors*, you mean. We’re back to those again. Do these doors that lead in and out of the world open on the world Suze and I came from? Like the ones we found along the beach?”

“I don’t know,” Roland said. “For every thing I do know, there are a hundred things I don’t. You—both of you—will have to reconcile yourselves to that fact. The world has moved on, we say. When it did, it went like a great receding wave, leaving only wreckage behind ... wreckage that sometimes looks like a map.”

“Well, make a *guess!*” Eddie exclaimed, and the raw eagerness in his voice told the gunslinger that Eddie had not given up the idea of returning to his own world—and Susannah’s—even now Not entirely.

“Leave him be, Eddie,” Susannah said. “The man don’t guess.”

“Not true—sometimes the man *does*,” Roland said, surprising them both. “When guessing’s the only thing left, sometimes he does. The answer is no. I don’t think—I don’t *guess*—that these portals are much like the doors on the beach. I don’t *guess* they go to a *where* or *when* that we would recognize. I think the doors on the beach—the ones that led into the world you both came from—were like the pivot at the center of a child’s teeterboard. Do you know what that is?”

“Seesaw?” Susannah asked, and tipped her hand back and forth to demonstrate.

“Yes!” Roland agreed, looking pleased. “Just so. On one end of this sawsee—”

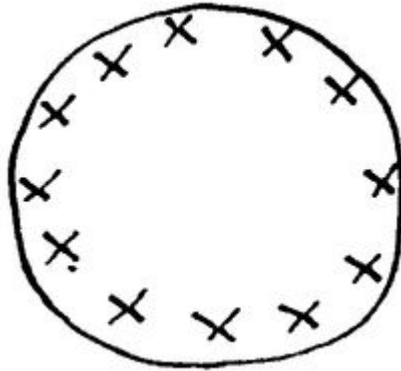
“Seesaw,” Eddie said, smiling a little.

“Yes. On one end, my *ka*. On the other, that of the man in black—Walter. The doors were the center, creations of the tension between two opposing destinies. These other portals are things far greater than Walter, or me, or the little fellowship we three have made.”

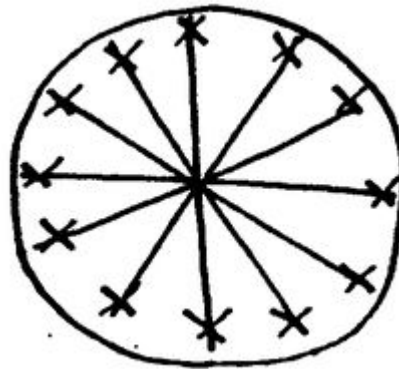
“Are you saying,” Susannah asked hesitantly, “that the portals where these Guardians stand watch are *outside ka*? Beyond *ka*?”

“I’m saying that I believe so.” He offered his own brief smile, a thin sickle in the firelight. “That I *guess* so.”

He was silent a moment, then he picked up a stick of his own. He brushed away the carpet of pine needles and used the stick to draw in the dirt beneath:



“Here is the world as I was told it existed when I was a child. The Xs are the portals standing in a ring at its eternal edge. If one drew six lines, connecting these portals in pairs—so—”



He looked up. “Do you see where the lines cross in the center?”
Eddie felt gooseflesh crawl up his back and down his arms. His mouth was suddenly dry. “Is that it, Roland? Is that—?”

Roland nodded. His long, lined face was grave. “At this nexus lies the Great Portal, the so-called Thirteenth Gate which rules not just this world but all worlds.”

He tapped the center of the circle.

“Here is the Dark Tower for which I’ve searched my whole life.”

THE GUNSLINGER RESUMED: “At each of the twelve lesser portals the Great Old Ones set a Guardian. In my childhood I could have named them all in the rimes my nursemaid-and Hax the cook-taught to me ... but my childhood was long ago. There was the Bear, of course, and the Fish ... the Lion ... the Bat. And the Turtle—he was an important one ...”

The gunslinger looked up into the starry sky, his brow creased in deep thought. Then an amazingly sunny smile broke across his features and he recited:

*“See the TURTLE of enormous girth!
On his shell he holds the earth.
His thought is slow but always kind;
He holds us all within-his mind.
On his back all vows are made;
He sees the truth but mayn’t aid.
He loves the land and loves the sea,
And even loves a child like me.”*

Roland uttered a small, bemused laugh. “Hax taught that to me, singing it as he stirred the frosting for some cake and gave me little nips of the sweet from the edge of his spoon. Amazing what we remember, isn’t it? Anyway, as I grew older, I came to believe that the Guardians didn’t really exist—that they were symbols rather than substance. It seems that I was wrong.”

“I called it a robot,” Eddie said, “but that’s not what it really was. Susannah’s right—the only thing robots bleed when you shoot them is Quaker State 10-40. I think it was what people of my world call a cyborg, Roland—a creature that’s part machine and part flesh and blood. There was a movie I saw ... we told you about movies, didn’t we?”

Smiling a little, Roland nodded.

“Well, this movie was called *Robocop*, and the guy in it wasn’t a lot different from the bear Susannah killed. How did you know where

she should shoot it?”

“That I remembered from the old tales as Hax told them,” he said. “If it had been up to my nursemaid, Eddie, you’d be in the belly of the bear now. Do they sometimes tell puzzled children in your world to put on their thinking caps?”

“Yes,” Susannah said. “They sure do.”

“It’s said here, as well, and the saying comes from the story of the Guardians. Each supposedly carried an extra brain on the outside of its head. In a hat.” He looked at them with his dreadfully haunted eyes and smiled again. “It didn’t look much like a hat, did it?”

“No,” Eddie said, “but the story was close enough to save our bacon.”

“I think now that I’ve been looking for one of the Guardians ever since I began my quest,” Roland said. “When we find the portal this Shardik guarded—and that should only be a matter of following its backtrail—we will finally have a course to follow. We must set the portal to our backs and then simply move straight ahead. At the center of the circle ... the Tower.”

Eddie opened his mouth to say, *All right, let’s talk about this Tower. Finally, once and for all, let’s talk about it—what it is, what it means, and, most important of all, what happens to us when we get there.* But no sound came out, and after a moment he closed his mouth again. This wasn’t the time—not now, with Roland in such obvious pain. Not now, with only the spark of their campfire to keep the night at bay.

“So now we come to the other part,” Roland said heavily. “I have finally found my course—after all the long years I have found my course—but at the same time I seem to be losing my sanity. I can feel it crumbling away beneath my feet, like a steep embankment which has been loosened by rain. This is my punishment for letting a boy who never existed fall to his death. And that is also *ka*.”

“Who is this boy, Roland?” Susannah asked.

Roland glanced at Eddie. “Do you know?”

Eddie shook his head.

“But I spoke of him,” Roland said. “In fact, I *raved* of him, when the infection was at its worst and I was near dying.” The gunslinger’s

voice suddenly rose half an octave, and his imitation of Eddie's voice was so good that Susannah felt a coil of superstitious fright. "If you don't shut up about that goddam kid, Roland, I'll gag you with your own shirt! I'm sick of hearing about him! Do you remember saying that, Eddie?"

Eddie thought it over carefully. Roland had spoken of a thousand things as the two of them made their tortuous way up the beach from the door marked THE PRISONER to the one marked THE LADY OF THE SHADOWS, and he had mentioned what seemed like a thousand names in his fever-heated monologues—Alain, Cort, Jamie de Curry, Cuthbert (this one more often than all the others), Hax, Martin (or perhaps it was Marten, like the animal), Walter, Susan, even a guy with the unlikely name of Zoltan. Eddie had gotten very tired of hearing about these people he had never met (and didn't care to meet), but of course Eddie had had a few problems of his own at that time, heroin withdrawal and cosmic jet-lag being only two of them. And, if he was to be fair, he guessed Roland had gotten as tired of Eddie's own Fractured Fairy Tales—the ones about how he and Henry had grown up together and turned into junkies together—as Eddie had of Roland's.

But he couldn't remember ever telling Roland he would gag him with his own shirt if he didn't stop talking about some kid.

"Nothing comes to you?" Roland asked. "Nothing at all?"

*Was there something? Some far-off tickle, like the feeling of *déjà vu* he'd gotten when he saw the slingshot hiding inside the chunk of wood jutting out of the stump? Eddie tried to find that tickle, but it was gone. He decided it had never been there in the first place; he only *wanted* it to be there, because Roland was hurting so badly.*

"No," he said. "Sorry, man."

"But I *did* tell you." Roland's tone was calm, but urgency ran and pulsed beneath it like a scarlet thread. "The boy's name was Jake. I sacrificed him—killed him—in order that I might finally catch up with Walter and make him talk. I killed him under the mountains."

On this point Eddie could be more positive. "Well, maybe that's what happened, but it's not what you *said* happened. You said you went under the mountains alone, on some kind of crazy handcar.

You talked about *that* a lot while we were coming up the beach, Roland. About how scary it was to be alone.”

“I remember. But I also remember telling you about the boy, and how he fell from the trestle into the chasm. And it’s the distance between those two memories that is pulling my mind apart.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Susannah said worriedly.

“I think,” Roland said, “that I’m just beginning to.”

He threw more wood on the fire, sending thick sheaves of red sparks spiralling up into the dark sky, and then settled back between them. “I’ll tell you a story that’s true,” he said, “and then I’ll tell you a story that isn’t true . . . but *should* be.

“I bought a mule in Pricetown, and when I finally got to Tull, the last town before the desert, it was still fresh . . .”

14

SO THE GUNSLINGER EMBARKED on the most recent part of his long tale. Eddie had heard isolated fragments of the story, but he listened in utter fascination, as did Susannah, for whom it was completely new. He told them about the bar with the endless game of Watch Me going on in the corner, the piano player named Sheb, the woman named Allie with the scar on her forehead . . . and about Nort, the weed-eater who had died and then been brought back to some sort of tenebrous life by the man in black. He told them about Sylvia Pittston, that avatar of religious insanity, and about the final apocalyptic slaughter, in which he, Roland the Gunslinger, had killed every man, woman, and child in town.

“Holy crispy crap!” Eddie said in a low, shaky voice. “Now I know why you were so low on shells, Roland.”

“Be quiet!” Susannah snapped. “Let him finish!”

Roland went on, telling his story as stolidly as he had crossed the desert after passing the hut of the last Dweller, a young man whose wild, strawberry-colored hair had reached almost to his waist. He told

them about how his mule had finally died. He even told them about how the Dweller's pet bird, Zoltan, had eaten the mule's eyes.

He told them about the long desert days and the short desert nights which had come next, and how he had followed the cool remains of Walter's campfires, and how he had come at last, reeling and dying of dehydration, to the way station.

"It was empty. It had been empty, I think, since the days when yonder great bear was still a newly made thing. I stayed a night and pushed on. That's what happened . . . but now I'll tell you another story."

"The one that isn't true but should be?" Susannah asked.

Roland nodded. "In this made-up story—this fable—a gunslinger named Roland met a boy named Jake at the way station. This boy was from your world, from your city of New York, and from a *when* someplace between Eddie's 1987 and Odetta Holmes's 1963."

Eddie was leaning forward eagerly. "Is there a door in this story, Roland? A door marked THE BOY, or something like that?"

Roland shook his head. "The boy's doorway was death. He was on his way to school when a man—a man I believed to be Walter—pushed him into the street, where he was run over by a car. He heard this man say something like 'Get out of the way, let me through, I'm a priest.' Jake saw this man—just for an instant—and then he was in *my* world."

The gunslinger paused, looking into the fire.

"Now I want to leave this story of the boy who was never there and go back to what really happened for a minute. All right?"

Eddie and Susannah exchanged a puzzled glance and then Eddie made an "after you, my dear Alphonse" gesture with his hand.

"As I have said, the way station was deserted. There was, however, a pump that still worked. It was at the back of the stable where the coach-horses were kept. I followed my ears to it, but I would have found it even if it had been completely silent. I *smelled* the water, you see. After enough time in the desert, when you are on the edge of dying from thirst, you can really do that. I drank and then slept. When I woke, I drank again. I wanted to push on at once—the need to do that was like a fever. The medicine you brought me from

your world—the *astin*—is wonderful stuff, Eddie, but there are fevers beyond the power of any medicine to cure, and this was one of them. I knew my body needed rest, but it still took every ounce of my willpower to stay there even one night. In the morning I felt rested, and so I refilled my waterskins and pushed on. *I took nothing from that place but water.* That's the most important part of what really happened."

Susannah spoke in her most reasonable, pleasant, and Odetta Holmes-like voice. "All right, that's what really happened. You refilled your waterskins and went on. Now tell us the rest of what *didn't* happen, Roland"

The gunslinger put the jawbone in his lap for a moment, curled his hands into fists, and rubbed his eyes with them—a curiously childlike gesture. Then he grasped the jawbone again, as if for courage, and went on.

"I hypnotized the boy who wasn't there," he said. "I did it with one of my shells. It's a trick I've known for years, and I learned it from a very unlikely source—Marten, my father's court magician. The boy was a good subject. While he was tranced, he told me the circumstances of his death, as I've told them to you. When I'd gotten as much of his story as I felt I could without upsetting or actually hurting him, I gave him a command that he should not remember anything about his dying when he woke up again."

"Who'd want to?" Eddie muttered.

Roland nodded. "Who, indeed? The boy passed from his trance directly into a natural sleep. I also slept. When we woke, I told the boy that I meant to catch the man in black. He knew who I meant; Walter had also stopped at the way station. Jake was afraid and hid from him. I'm sure Walter knew he was there, but it suited his purpose to pretend he didn't. He left the boy behind like a set trap.

"I asked him if there was anything to eat there. It seemed to me there must be. He looked healthy enough, and the desert climate is wonderful when it comes to preserving things. He had a little dried meat, and he said there was a cellar. He hadn't explored that, because he was afraid." The gunslinger looked at them grimly. "He

was right to be afraid. I found food ... and I also found a Speaking Demon.”

Eddie looked down at the jawbone with widening eyes. Orange firelight danced on its ancient curves and hoodoo teeth. “Speaking Demon? Do you mean *that* thing?”

“No,” he said. “Yes. Both. Listen and you shall understand.”

He told them about the inhuman groans he’d heard coming from the earth beyond the cellar; how he had seen sand running from between two of the old blocks which made up the cellar walls. He told them of approaching the hole that was appearing there as Jake screamed for him to come up.

He had commanded the demon to speak . . . and so the demon had, in the voice of Allie, the woman with the scar on her forehead, the woman who had kept the bar in Tull. *Go slow past the Drawers, gunslinger. While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket.*

“The Drawers?” Susannah asked, startled.

“Yes.” Roland looked at her closely. “That means something to you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes . . . and no.”

She spoke with great hesitation. Some of it, Roland divined, was simple reluctance to speak of things which were painful to her. He thought most of it, however, was a desire not to confuse issues which were already confused by saying more than she actually knew. He admired that. He admired *her*.

“Say what you can be sure of,” he said. “No more than that.”

“All right. The Drawers was a place Detta Walker knew about. A place Detta *thought* about. It’s a slang term, one she picked up from listening to the grownups when they sat out on the porch and drank beer and talked about the old days. It means a place that’s spoiled, or useless, or both. There was something in the Drawers—in the *idea* of the Drawers—that called to Detta. Don’t ask me what; I might have known once, but I don’t anymore. And don’t want to.

“Detta stole my Aunt Blue’s china plate—the one my folks gave her for a wedding present—and took it to the Drawers—*her* Drawers

—to break it. That place was a gravel-pit filled with trash. A dumping-ground. Later on, she sometimes picked up boys at roadhouses.”

Susannah dropped her head for a moment, her lips pressed tightly together. Then she looked up again and went on.

“*White* boys. And when they took her back to their cars in the parking lot, she cock-teased them and then ran off. Those parking lots . . . they were the Drawers, too. It was a dangerous game, but she was young enough, quick enough, and mean enough to play it to the hilt and enjoy it. Later, in New York, she’d go on shoplifting expeditions . . . you know about that. Both of you. Always to the fancy stores—Macy’s, Gimbel’s, Bloomingdale’s—and steal trinkets. And when she made up her mind to go on one of those sprees, she’d think: *I’m goan to the Drawers today. Goan steal me some shit fum de white folks. Goan steal me sumpin forspecial and den break dat sumbitch.*”

She paused, lips trembling, looking into the fire. When she looked around again, Roland and Eddie saw tears standing in her eyes.

“I’m crying, but don’t let that fool you. I remember doing those things, and I remember *enjoying* them. I guess I’m crying because I know I’d do it all again, if the circumstances were right.”

Roland seemed to have regained some of his old serenity, his weird equilibrium. “We have a proverb in my country, Susannah: ‘The wise thief always prospers.’ ”

“I don’t see nothing wise about stealing a bunch of paste jewelry,” she said sharply.

“Were you ever caught?”

“No—”

He spread his hands as if to say, *There you have it.*

“So for Detta Walker, the Drawers were bad places?” Eddie asked. “Is that right? Because it doesn’t exactly *feel* right.”

“Bad and good at the same time. They were *powerful* places, places where she . . . she *reinvented* herself, I suppose you could say . . . but they were *lost* places, too. And this is all off the subject of Roland’s ghost-boy, isn’t it?”

“Maybe not,” Roland said. “We had Drawers as well, you see, in my world. It was slang for us, too, and the meanings are very

similar.”

“What did it mean to you and your friends?” Eddie asked.

“That varied slightly from place to place and situation to situation. It might mean a trash-midden. It might mean a whorehouse or a place where men came to gamble or chew devil-weed. But the most common meaning that I know is also the simplest.”

He looked at them both.

“The Drawers are places of desolation,” he said. “The Drawers are the waste lands.”

15

THIS TIME SUSANNAH THREW more wood on the fire. In the south, Old Mother blazed on brilliantly, not flickering. She knew from her school studies what that meant: it was a planet, not a star. *Venus?* she wondered. *Or is the solar system of which this world is a part as different as everything else?*

Again that feeling of unreality—the feeling that all this must surely be a dream—washed over her.

“Go on,” she said. “What happened after the voice warned you about the Drawers and the little boy?”

“I punched my hand into the hole the sand had come from, as I was taught to do if such a thing ever happened to me. What I plucked forth was a jawbone . . . but not this one. The jawbone I took from the wall of the way station was much larger; from one of the Great Old Ones, I have almost no doubt.” “What happened to it?” Susannah asked quietly.

“One night I gave it to the boy,” Roland said. The fire painted his cheeks with hot orange highlights and dancing shadows. “As a protection—a kind of talisman. Later I felt it had served its purpose and threw it away.”

“So whose jawbone you got there, Roland?” Eddie asked.

Roland held it up, looked at it long and thoughtfully, and let it drop back. “Later, after Jake . . . after he died . . . I caught up with the men I had been chasing.”

“With Walter,” Susannah said.

“Yes. We held palaver, he and I ... *long* palaver. I fell asleep at some point, and when I woke up, Walter was dead. A hundred years dead at least, and probably more. There was nothing left of him but bones, which was fitting enough, since we were in a place of bones.”

“Yeah, it must have been a pretty long palaver, all right,” Eddie said dryly.

Susannah frowned slightly at this, but Roland only nodded. “Long and long,” he said, looking into the fire.

“You came to in the morning and reached the Western Sea that very evening,” Eddie said. “That night the lobstrosities came, right?”

Roland nodded again. “Yes. But before I left the place where Walter and I had spoken . . . or dreamed . . . or whatever it was we did . . . I took this from the skull of his skeleton.” He lifted the bone and the orange light again skated off the teeth.

Walter’s jawbone, Eddie thought, and felt a little chill work through him: *The jawbone of the man in black. Remember this, Eddie my boy, the next time you get to thinking Roland’s maybe just another one of the guys. He’s been carrying it around with him all this time like some kind of a . . . a cannibal’s trophy. Jee-sus.*

“I remember what I thought when I took it,” Roland said. “I remember very well; it is the only memory I have of that time which hasn’t doubled on me. I thought, ‘It was bad luck to throw away what I found when I found the boy. This will replace it.’ Only then I heard Walter’s laughter—his mean, tittery laughter. I heard his voice, too.”

“What did he say?” Susannah asked.

“‘Too late, gunslinger,’ ” Roland said. “That’s what he said. ‘Too late—your luck will be bad from now until the end of eternity—that is your *ka*.’ ”

“ALL RIGHT,” EDDIE SAID at last. “I understand the basic paradox. Your memory is divided—”

“*Not divided. Doubled.*”

“All right; it’s almost the same thing, isn’t it?” Eddie grasped a twig and made his own little drawing in the sand:



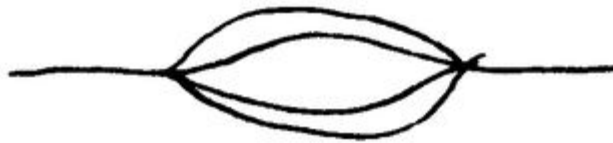
He tapped the line on the left. “This is your memory of the time before you got to the way station—a single track.”

“Yes.”

He tapped the line on the right. “And after you came out on the far side of the mountains in the place of bones . . . the place where Walter was waiting for you. *Also* a single track.”

“Yes.”

Now Eddie first indicated the middle area and then drew a rough circle around it.



“That’s what you’ve got to do, Roland—close this double track off. Build a stockade around it in your mind and then forget it. Because it doesn’t *mean* anything, it doesn’t *change* anything, it’s *gone*, it’s *done*—”

“But it isn’t.” Roland held up the bone. “If my memories of the boy Jake are false—and I know they are—*how can I have this?* I took it to replace the one I threw away . . . but the one I threw away came from the cellar of the way station, and along the track I know is true, *I never went down cellar!* I never spoke with the demon! I moved on alone, with fresh water and *nothing else!*”

“Roland, listen to me,” Eddie said earnestly. “If that jawbone you’re holding was the one from the way station, that would be one thing. But isn’t it possible that if you hallucinated that whole thing—the way station, the kid, the Speaking Demon—then maybe you took Walter’s jawbone because—”

“It was no hallucination,” Roland said. He looked at them both with his faded blue bombardier’s eyes and then did something neither expected . . . something Eddie would have sworn Roland did not know he meant to do himself.

He threw the jawbone into the fire.

17

FOR A MOMENT IT only lay there, a white relic bent in a ghostly half-grin. Then it suddenly blazed red, washing the clearing with dazzling scarlet light. Eddie and Susannah cried out and threw their hands up to shield their eyes from that burning shape.

The bone began to change. Not to melt, but to *change*. The teeth which leaned out of it like gravestones began to draw together in clumps. The mild curve of the upper arc straightened, then snubbed down at the tip.

Eddie’s hands fell into his lap and he stared at the bone which was no longer a bone with gape-jawed wonder. It was now the color of burning steel. The teeth had become three inverted V’s, the middle one larger than those on the ends. And suddenly Eddie saw what it wanted to become, just as he had seen the slingshot in the wood of the stump.

He thought it was a key.

You must remember the shape, he thought feverishly. *You must, you must.*

His eyes traced it desperately—three V’s, the one in the center larger and deeper than the two on the end. Three notches . . . and

the one closest the end had a squiggle, the shallow shape of a lower-case s . . .

Then the shape in the flames changed again. The bone which had become something like a key drew inward, concentrating itself into bright, overlapping petals and folds as dark and velvety as a moonless summer midnight. For a moment Eddie saw a rose—a triumphant rose that might have bloomed in the dawn of this world's first day, a thing of depthless, timeless beauty. His eye saw, and his heart was opened. It was as if all love and life had suddenly risen from Roland's dead artifact; it was there in the fire, burning out in triumph and some wonderful, inchoate defiance, declaring that despair was a mirage and death a dream.

The rose! he thought incoherently. *First the key, then the rose! Behold! Behold the opening of the way to the Tower!*

There was a thick cough from the fire. A fan of sparks twisted outwards. Susannah screamed and rolled away, beating at the orange flecks on her dress as the flames gushed upward toward the starry sky. Eddie didn't move. He sat transfixed in his vision, held in a cradle of wonder which was both gorgeous and terrible, unmindful of the sparks which danced across his skin. Then the flames sank back.

The bone was gone.

The key was gone.

The rose was gone.

Remember, he thought. *Remember the rose . . . and remember the Shape of the key.*

Susannah was sobbing with shock and terror, but he ignored her for the moment and found the stick with which he and Roland had both drawn. And in the dirt he made this shape with a shaking hand:



“WHY DID YOU DO it?” Susannah asked at last. “Why, for God’s sake—and what was it?”

Fifteen minutes had gone by. The fire had been allowed to burn low; the scattered embers had either been stamped out or had gone out on their own. Eddie sat with his arms about his wife: Susannah sat before him, with her back against his chest. Roland was off to one side, knees hugged to his chest, looking moodily into the orange-red coals. So far as Eddie could tell, neither of them had seen the bone change. They had both seen it glowing superhot, and Roland had seen it explode (or had it imploded? to Eddie that seemed closer to what he had seen), but that was all. Or so he believed; Roland, however, sometimes kept his own counsel, and when he decided to play his cards close to the vest, he played them very close indeed, Eddie knew that from bitter experience. He thought of telling them what he had seen—or *thought* he had seen—and decided to play his own cards tight and close-up, at least for the time being.

Of the jawbone itself there was no sign—not even a splinter.

“I did it because a voice spoke in my mind and told me I must,” Roland said. “It was the voice of my father; of *all* my fathers. When one hears such a voice, not to obey—and at once—is unthinkable. So I was taught. As to what it was, I can’t say ... not now, at least. I only know that the bone has spoken its final word. I have carried it all this way to hear it.”

Or to see it, Eddie thought, and again: *Remember. Remember the rose. And remember the shape of the key.*

“It almost flash-fried us!” She sounded both tired and exasperated.

Roland shook his head. “I think it was more like the sort of firework the barons used to sometimes shoot into the sky at their year-end parties. Bright and startling, but not dangerous.”

Eddie had an idea. “The doubling in your mind, Roland—is it gone? Did it leave when the bone exploded, or whatever it did?”

He was almost convinced that it had; in the movies he'd seen, such rough shock-therapy almost always worked. But Roland shook his head.

Susannah shifted in Eddie's arms. "You said you were beginning to understand."

Roland nodded. "I think so, yes. If I'm right, I fear for Jake. Wherever he is, *whenever* he is, I fear for him."

"What do you mean?" Eddie asked.

Roland got up, went to his roll of hides, and began to spread them out. "Enough stories and excitement for one night. It's time to sleep. In the morning we'll follow the bear's backtrail and see if we can find the portal he was set to guard. I'll tell you what I know and what I believe has happened—what I believe is happening still—along the way."

With that he wrapped himself in an old blanket and a new deerskin, rolled away from the fire, and would say no more.

Eddie and Susannah lay down together. When they were sure the gunslinger must be asleep, they made love. Roland heard them going about it as he lay wakeful and heard their quiet after-love talk. Most of it was about him. He lay quietly, open eyes looking into the darkness long after their talk had ceased and their breathing had evened out into a single easy note.

It was, he thought, fine to be young and in love. Even in the graveyard which this world had become, it was fine.

Enjoy it while you can, he thought, because there is more death ahead. We have come to a stream of blood. That it will lead us to a river of the same stuff, I have no doubt. And, further along, to an ocean. In this world the graves yawn and none of the dead rest easy.

As dawn began to come up in the east, he closed his eyes. Slept briefly. And dreamed of Jake.

EDDIE ALSO DREAMED—DREAMED he was back in New York, walking along Second Avenue with a book in his hand.

In this dream it was spring. The air was warm, the city was blooming, and homesickness sobbed within him like a muscle with a fishhook caught deep within it. *Enjoy this dream, and make it go on as long as you can*, he thought. *Savor it ... because this is as close to New York as you're going to get. You can't go home, Eddie. That part's done.*

He looked down at the book and was utterly unsurprised to find it was *You Can't Go Home Again*, by Thomas Wolfe. Stamped into the dark red cover were three shapes; key, rose, and door. He stopped for a moment, flipped the book open, and read the first line. *The man in black fled across the desert*, Wolfe had written, *and the gunslinger followed.*

Eddie closed it and walked on. It was about nine in the morning, he judged, maybe nine-thirty, and traffic on Second Avenue was light. Taxis honked and wove their way from lane to lane with spring sunshine twinkling off their windshields and bright yellow paintjobs. A bum on the corner of Second and Fifty-second asked him for a handout and Eddie tossed the book with the red cover into his lap. He observed (also without surprise) that the bum was Enrico Balazar. He was sitting cross-legged in front of a magic shop. HOUSE OF CARDS, the sign in the window read, and the display inside showed a tower which had been built of Tarot cards. Standing on top was a model of King Kong. There was a tiny radar-dish growing out of the great ape's head.

Eddie walked on, lazing his way downtown, the street-signs floating past him. He knew where he was going as soon as he saw it: a small shop on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth.

Yeah, he thought. A feeling of great relief swept through him. *This is the place. The very place.* The window was full of hanging meats and cheeses. TOM AND GERRY'S ARTISTIC DELI, the sign read. PARTY PLATTERS OUR SPECIALTY!

As he stood looking in, someone else he knew came around the corner. It was Jack Andolini, wearing a three-piece suit the color of

vanilla ice cream and carrying a black cane in his left hand. Half of his face was gone, lopped off by the claws of the lobstrosities.

Go on in, Eddie, Jack said as he passed. *After all, there are other worlds than these and that fuckin train rolls through all of them.*

I can't, Eddie replied. *The door is locked.* He didn't know how he knew this, but he did; knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Dad-a-chum, dud-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key, Jack said, not looking back. Eddie looked down and saw he did have a key; a primitive-looking thing with three notches like inverted V's.

That little s-shape at the end of the last notch is the secret, he thought. He stepped under the awning of Tom and Gerry's Artistic Deli and inserted the key in the lock. It turned easily. He opened the door and stepped through into a huge open field. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the traffic on Second Avenue hurrying by, and then the door slammed shut and fell over. There was nothing behind it. Nothing at all. He turned back to survey his new surroundings, and what he saw filled him with terror at first. The field was a deep scarlet, as if some titanic battle had been fought here and the ground had been drenched with so much blood that it could not all be absorbed.

Then he realized that it was not blood he was looking at, but roses.

That feeling of mingled joy and triumph surged through him again, swelling his heart until he felt it might burst within him. He raised his clenched fists high over his head in a gesture of victory . . . and then froze that way.

The field stretched on for miles, climbing a gentle slope of land, and standing at the horizon was the Dark Tower. It was a pillar of dumb stone rising so high into the sky that he could barely discern its tip. Its base, surrounded by red, shouting roses, was formidable, titanic with weight and size, yet the Tower became oddly graceful as it rose and tapered. The stone of which it had been made was not black, as he had imagined it would be, but soot-colored. Narrow, slitted windows marched about it in a rising spiral; below the windows ran an almost endless flight of stone stairs, circling up and up. The Tower was a dark gray exclamation point planted in the

earth and rising above the field of blood-red roses. The sky arched above it was blue, but filled with puffy white clouds like sailing ships. They flowed above and around the top of the Dark Tower in an endless stream.

How gorgeous it is! Eddie marvelled. *How gorgeous and strange!* But his feeling of joy and triumph had departed; he was left with a sense of deep malaise and impending doom. He looked about him and realized with sudden horror that he was standing in the shadow of the Tower. No, not just *standing* in it; buried alive in it.

He cried out but his cry was lost in the golden blast of some tremendous horn. It came from the top of the Tower, and seemed to fill the world. As that note of warning held and drew out over the field where he stood, blackness welled from the windows which girdled the Tower. It overspilled them and spread across the sky in flaggy streams which came together and formed a growing blotch of darkness. It did not look like a cloud; it looked like a tumor hanging over the earth. The sky was blotted out. And, he saw, it was not a cloud or a tumor but a *shape*, some tenebrous, cyclopean *shape* racing toward the place where he stood. It would do no good to run from that beast coalescing in the sky above the field of roses; it would catch him, clutch him, and bear him away. Into the Dark Tower it would bear him, and the world of light would see him no more.

Rents formed in the darkness and terrible inhuman eyes, each easily the size of the bear Shardik which lay dead in the forest, peered down at him. They were red—red as roses, red as blood.

Jack Andolini's dead voice hammered in his ears: *A thousand worlds, Eddie—ten thousand!—and that train rolls through every one. If you can get it started. And if you do get it started, your troubles are only beginning, because this device is a real bastard to shut down.*

Jack's voice had become mechanical, chanting. *A real bastard to shut down, Eddie boy, you better believe it, this bastard is—*

—SHUTTING DOWN! SHUTDOWN WILL BE COMPLETE IN ONE HOUR AND SIX MINUTES!

In his dream, Eddie threw his hands up to shield his eyes . . .

. . . AND WOKE, SITTING BOLT upright beside the dead campfire. He was looking at the world from between his own spread fingers. And still that voice rolled on and on, the voice of some heartless SWAT Squad commander bellowing through a bullhorn.

“THERE IS NO DANGER! REPEAT, THERE IS NO DANGER! FIVE SUBNUCLEAR CELLS ARE DORMANT, TWO SUBNUCLEAR CELLS ARE NOW IN SHUTDOWN PHASE, ONE SUBNUCLEAR CELL IS OPERATING AT TWO PER CENT CAPACITY. THESE CELLS ARE OF NO VALUE! REPEAT, THESE CELLS ARE OF NO VALUE! REPORT LOCATION TO NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LIMITED! CALL 1-900-44! THE CODE WORD FOR THIS DEVICE IS ‘SHARDIK.’ REWARD IS OFFERED! REPEAT, REWARD IS OFFERED!”

The voice fell silent. Eddie saw Roland standing at the edge of the clearing, holding Susannah in the crook of one arm. They were staring toward the sound of the voice, and as the recorded announcement began again, Eddie was finally able to shake off the chill remnants of his nightmare. He got up and joined Roland and Susannah, wondering how many centuries it had been since that announcement, programmed to broadcast only in the event of a total system breakdown, had been recorded.

“THIS DEVICE IS SHUTTING DOWN! SHUTDOWN WILL BE COMPLETE IN ONE HOUR AND FIVE MINUTES! THERE IS NO DANGER! REPEAT—”

Eddie touched Susannah’s arm and she looked around. “How long has this been going on?”

“About fifteen minutes. You were dead to the w—” She broke off. “Eddie, you look terrible! Are you sick?”

“No. I just had a bad dream.”

Roland was studying him in a way that made Eddie feel uncomfortable. “Sometimes there’s truth in dreams, Eddie. What was yours?”

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't remember."

"You know, I doubt that."

Eddie shrugged and favored Roland with a thin smile. "Doubt away, then—be my guest. And how are you this morning, Roland?"

"The same," Roland said. His faded blue eyes still conned Eddie's face.

"Stop it," Susannah said. Her voice was brisk, but Eddie caught an undertone of nervousness. "Both of you. I got better things to do than watch you two dance around and kick each other's shins like a couple of little kids playin' Two for Flinching. Specially this morning, with that dead bear trying to yell down the whole world."

The gunslinger nodded, but kept his eyes on Eddie. "All right . . . but are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me, Eddie?"

He thought about it then—really thought about telling. What he had seen in the fire, what he had seen in his dream. He decided against it. Perhaps it was only the memory of the rose in the fire, and the roses which had blanketed that dream-field in such fabulous profusion. He knew he could not tell these things as his eyes had seen them and his heart had felt them; he could only cheapen them. And, at least for the time being, he wanted to ponder these things alone.

But remember, he told himself again . . . except the voice in his mind didn't sound much like his own. It seemed deeper, older—the voice of a stranger. *Remember the rose . . . and the shape of the key.*

"I will," he murmured.

"You will what?" Roland asked.

"Tell," Eddie said. "If anything comes up that seems, you know, really important, I'll tell you. Both of you. Right now there isn't. So if we're going somewhere, Shane, old buddy, let's saddle up."

"Shane? Who is this Shane?"

"I'll tell you that some other time, too. Meantime, let's go."

They packed the gear they had brought with them from the old campsite and headed back, Susannah riding in her wheelchair again. Eddie had an idea she wouldn't be riding in it for long.

ONCE, BEFORE EDDIE HAD become too interested in the subject of heroin to be interested in much else, he and a couple of friends had driven over to New Jersey to see a couple of speed-metal groups—Anthrax and Megadeth—in concert at the Meadowlands. He believed that Anthrax had been slightly louder than the repeating announcement coming from the fallen bear, but he wasn't a hundred per cent sure. Roland stopped them while they were still half a mile from the clearing in the woods and tore six small scraps of cloth from his old shirt. They stuffed them in their ears and then went on. Even the cloth didn't do much to deaden the steady blast of sound.

“THIS DEVICE IS SHUTTING DOWN!” the bear blared as they stepped into the clearing again. It lay as it had lain, at the foot of the tree Eddie had climbed, a fallen Colossus with its legs apart and its knees in the air, like a furry female giant who had died trying to give birth. *“SHUTDOWN WILL BE COMPLETE IN FORTY-SEVEN MINUTES! THERE IS NO DANGER—”*

Yes, there is, Eddie thought, picking up the scattered hides which had not been shredded in either the bear's attack or its flailing death-throes. *Plenty* of danger. To my fucking ears. He picked up Roland's gunbelt and silently handed it over. The chunk of wood he had been working on lay nearby; he grabbed it and tucked it into the pocket in the back of Susannah's wheelchair as the gunslinger slowly buckled the wide leather belt around his waist and cinched the rawhide tiedown.

“—IN SHUTDOWN PHASE, ONE SUBNUCLEAR CELL OPERATING AT ONE PER CENT CAPACITY. THESE CELLS—”

Susannah followed Eddie, holding in her lap a carryall bag she had sewn herself. As Eddie handed her the hides, she stuffed them into the bag. When all of them were stored away, Roland tapped Eddie on the arm and handed him a shoulderpack. What it contained mostly was deermeat, heavily salted from a natural lick Roland had found about three miles up the little creek. The gunslinger had already donned a similar pack. His purse—restocked and once again

bulging with all sorts of odds and ends—hung from his other shoulder.

A strange, home-made harness with a seat of stitched deerskin dangled from a nearby branch. Roland plucked it off, studied it for a moment, and then draped it over his back and knotted the straps below his chest. Susannah made a sour face at this, and Roland saw it. He did not try to speak—this close to the bear, he couldn't have made himself heard even by shouting at the top of his voice—but he shrugged sympathetically and spread his hands: *You know we'll need it.*

She shrugged back. *I know . . . but that doesn't mean I like it.*

The gunslinger pointed across the clearing. A pair of leaning, splintered spruce trees marked the place where Shardik, who had once been known as Mir in these parts, had entered the clearing.

Eddie leaned toward Susannah, made a circle with his thumb and forefinger, then raised his eyebrows interrogatively. *Okay?*

She nodded, then pressed the heels of her palms against her ears. *Okay—but let's get out of here before I go deaf.*

The three of them moved across the clearing, Eddie pushing Susannah, who held the bag of hides in her lap. The pocket in the back of her wheelchair was stuffed with other items; the piece of wood with the slingshot still mostly hidden inside it was only one of them.

From behind them the bear continued to roar out its final communication to the world, telling them shutdown would be complete in forty minutes. Eddie couldn't wait. The broken spruces leaned in toward each other, forming a rude gate, and Eddie thought: *This is where the quest for Roland's Dark Tower really begins, at least for us.*

He thought of his dream again—the spiraling windows issuing their unfurling flags of darkness, flags which spread over the field of roses like a stain—and as they passed beneath the leaning trees, a deep shudder gripped him.

THEY WERE ABLE TO use the wheelchair longer than Roland had expected. The firs of this forest were very old, and their spreading branches had created a deep carpet of needles which discouraged most undergrowth. Susannah's arms were strong—stronger than Eddie's, although Roland did not think that would be true much longer—and she wheeled herself along easily over the level, shady forest floor. When they came to one of the trees the bear had pushed over, Roland lifted her out of the chair and Eddie boosted it over the obstacle.

From behind them, only a little deadened by distance, the bear told them, at the top of its mechanical voice, that the capacity of its last operating nuclear subcell was now negligible.

"I hope you keep that damn harness lying empty over your shoulders all day!" Susannah shouted at the gunslinger.

Roland agreed, but less than fifteen minutes later the land began to slope downward and this old section of the forest began to be invaded with smaller, younger trees: birch, alder, and a few stunted maples scrabbling grimly in the soil for purchase. The carpet of needles thinned and the wheels of Susannah's chair began to catch in the low, tough bushes which grew in the alleys between the trees. Their thin branches boinged and rattled in the stainless steel spokes. Eddie threw his weight against the handles and they were able to go on for another quarter of a mile that way. Then the slope began to grow more steep, and the ground underfoot became mushy.

"Time for a pig-back, lady," Roland said.

"Let's try the chair a little longer, what do you say? Going might get easier—"

Roland shook his head. "If you try that hill, you'll . . . what did you call it, Eddie? . . . do a dugout?"

Eddie shook his head, grinning. "It's called doing a doughnut, Roland. A term from my misspent sidewalk-surfing days."

"Whatever you call it, it means landing on your head. Come on, Susannah. Up you come."

"I hate being a cripple," Susannah said crossly, but allowed Eddie to hoist her out of the chair and worked with him to seat herself firmly in the harness Roland wore on his back. Once she was in place, she touched the butt of Roland's pistol. "Y'all want this baby?" she asked Eddie.

He shook his head. "You're faster. And you know it, too."

She grunted and adjusted the belt, settling the gun-butt so it was easily accessible to her right hand. "I'm slowing you boys down and I know that . . . but if we ever make it to some good old two-lane blacktop, I'll leave the both of you kneelin in the blocks."

"I don't doubt it," Roland said . . . and then cocked his head. The woods had fallen silent.

"Br'er Bear has finally given up," Susannah said. "Praise God."

"I thought it still had seven minutes to go," Eddie said.

Roland adjusted the straps of the harness. "Its clock must have started running a little slow during the last five or six hundred years."

"You really think it was that old, Roland?"

Roland nodded. "At least. And now it's passed . . . the last of the Twelve Guardians, for all we know."

"Yeah, ask me if I give a shit," Eddie replied, and Susannah laughed.

"Are you comfortable?" Roland asked her.

"No. My butt hurts already, but go on. Just try not to drop me."

Roland nodded and started down the slope. Eddie followed, pushing the empty chair and trying not to bang it too badly on the rocks which had begun to jut out of the ground like big white knuckles. Now that the bear had finally shut up, he thought the forest seemed much too quiet—it almost made him feel like a character in one of those hokey old jungle movies about cannibals and giant apes.

THE BEAR'S BACKTRAIL WAS easy to find but tougher to follow. Five miles or so out of the clearing, it led them through a low, boggy area that was not quite a swamp. By the time the ground began to rise and firm up a little again, Roland's faded jeans were soaked to the knees and he was breathing in long, steady rasps. Still, he was in slightly better shape than Eddie, who had found wrestling Susannah's wheelchair through the muck and standing water hard going.

"Time to rest and eat something," Roland said.

"Oh boy, gimme eats," Eddie puffed. He helped Susannah out of the harness and set her down on the bole of a fallen tree with claw-marks slashed into its trunk in long diagonal grooves. Then he half-sat, half-collapsed next to her.

"You got my wheelchair pretty muddy, white boy," Susannah said. "It's all goan be in my repote."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Next carwash we come to, I'll push you through myself. I'll even Turtle-wax the goddamn thing. Okay?"

She smiled. "You got a date, handsome."

Eddie had one of Roland's waterskins cinched around his waist. He tapped it. "Okay?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Not too much now; a little more for all of us before we set out again. That way no one takes a cramp."

"Roland, Eagle Scout of Oz," Eddie said, and giggled as he unslung the waterskin.

"What is this Oz?"

"A make-believe place in a movie," Susannah said.

"Oz was a lot more than that. My brother Henry used to read me the stories once in a while. I'll tell you one some night, Roland."

"That would be fine," the gunslinger replied seriously. "I am hungry to know more of your world."

"Oz isn't our world, though. Like Susannah said, it's a make-believe place—"

Roland handed them chunks of meat which had been wrapped in broad leaves of some sort. "The quickest way to learn about a new place is to know what it dreams of. I would hear of this Oz."

“Okay, that’s a date, too. Suze can tell you the one about Dorothy and Toto and the Tin Woodman, and I’ll tell you all the rest.” He bit into his piece of meat and rolled his eyes approvingly. It had taken the flavor of the leaves in which it had been rolled, and was delicious. Eddie wolfed his ration, stomach gurgling busily all the while. Now that he was getting his breath back, he felt good—great, in fact. His body was growing a solid sheath of muscle, and every part of it felt at peace with every other part.

Don’t worry, he thought. Everything will be arguing again by tonight. I think he’s gonna push on until I’m ready to drop in my tracks.

Susannah ate more delicately, chasing every second or third bite with a little sip of water, turning the meat in her hands, eating from the outside in. “Finish what you started last night,” she invited Roland. “You said you thought you understood these conflicting memories of yours.”

Roland nodded. “Yes. I think both memories are true. One is a little truer than the other, but that does not *negate* the truth of that other.”

“Makes no sense to me,” Eddie said. “Either this boy Jake was at the way station or he wasn’t, Roland.”

“It is a paradox—something that is and isn’t at the same time. Until it’s resolved, I will continue divided. That’s bad enough, but the basic split is widening. I can feel that happening. It is . . . unspeakable.”

“What do you think caused it?” Susannah asked.

“I told you the boy was pushed in front of a car. *Pushed*. Now, who do we know who liked to push people in front of things?”

Understanding dawned in her face. “Jack Mort. Do you mean he was the one who pushed this boy into the street?”

“Yes.”

“But you said the man in black did it,” Eddie objected. “Your buddy Walter. You said that the boy *saw* him—a man who looked like a priest. Didn’t the kid even hear him say he was? ‘Let me through, I’m a priest,’ something like that?”

“Oh, Walter was there. They were *both* there, and they both pushed Jake.”

“Somebody bring the Thorazine and the straitjacket,” Eddie called. “Roland just went over the high side.”

Roland paid no attention to this; he was coming to understand that Eddie’s jokes and clowning were his way of dealing with stress. Cuthbert had not been much different . . . as Susannah was, in her way, not so different from Alain. “What exasperates me about all of this,” he said, “is that I should have *known*. I was *in* Jack Mort, after all, and I had access to his thoughts, just as I had access to yours, Eddie, and yours, Susannah. I *saw* Jake while was in Mort. I saw him through Mort’s eyes, *and I knew Mort planned to push him*. Not only that; I *stopped* him from doing it. All I had to do was enter his body. Not that he knew that was what it was; he was concentrating so hard on what he planned to do that he actually thought I was a fly landing on his neck.”

Eddie began to understand. “If Jake wasn’t pushed into the street, he never died. And if he never died, he never came into this world. And if he never came into this world, you never met him at the way station. Right?”

“Right. The thought even crossed my mind that if Jack Mort meant to kill the boy, I would have to stand aside and let him do it. To avoid creating the very paradox that is tearing me apart. But I couldn’t do that. I . . . I . . .”

“You couldn’t kill this kid twice, could you?” Eddie asked softly. “Every time I just about make up my mind that you’re as mechanical as that bear, you surprise me with something that actually seems human. Goddam”

“Quit it, Eddie,” Susannah said.

Eddie took a look at the gunslinger’s slightly lowered face and grimaced. “Sorry, Roland. My mother used to say that my mouth had a bad habit of running away with my mind.”

“It’s all right. I had a friend who was the same way”

“Cuthbert?”

Roland nodded. He looked at his diminished right hand for a long moment, then clenched it into a painful fist, sighed, and looked up at them again. Somewhere, deeper in the forest, a lark sang sweetly.

“Here is what I believe. If I had not entered Jack Mort when I did, he *still* wouldn’t have pushed Jake that day. Not then. Why not? *Ka-tet*. Simply that. For the first time since the last of the friends with whom I set forth on this quest died, I have found myself once again at the center of *ka-tet*.”

“Quartet?” Eddie asked doubtfully.

The gunslinger shook his head. “*Ka*—the word you think of as ‘destiny,’ Eddie, although the actual meaning is much more complex and hard to define, as is almost always the case with words of the High Speech. And *tet*, which means a group of people with the same interests and goals. We three are a *tet*, for instance. *Ka-tet* is the place where many lives are joined by fate.”

“Like in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*,” Susannah murmured.

“What’s that?” Roland asked.

“A story about some people who die together when the bridge they’re crossing collapses. It’s famous in our world.”

Roland nodded his understanding. “In this case, *ka-tet* bound Jake, Walter, Jack Mort, and me. There was no trap, as I first suspected when I realized who Jack Mort meant to be his next victim, because *ka-tet* cannot be changed or bent to the will of any one person. But *ka-tet* can be *seen*, *known*, and *understood*. Walter saw, and Walter knew.” The gunslinger struck his thigh with his fist and exclaimed bitterly, “How he must have been laughing inside when I finally caught up to him!”

“Let’s go back to what would have happened if you hadn’t messed up Jack Mort’s plans on the day he was following Jake,” Eddie said. “You’re saying that if *you* hadn’t stopped Mort, someone or something else would have. Is that right?”

“Yes—because it wasn’t the *right* day for Jake to die. It was *close* to the right day, but not *the* right day. I felt that, too. Perhaps, just before he did it, Mort would have seen someone watching him. Or a perfect stranger would have intervened. Or—”

“Or a cop,” Susannah said. “He might have seen a cop in the wrong place and at the wrong time.”

“Yes. The exact reason—the agent of *ka-tet*—doesn’t matter. I know from firsthand experience that Mort was as wily as an old fox. If

he sensed any slightest thing wrong, he would have called it off and waited for another day.

“I know something else, as well. He hunted in disguise. On the day he dropped the brick on Detta Holmes’s head, he was wearing a knitted cap and an old sweater several sizes too big for him. He wanted to look like a wine-bibber, because he pushed the brick from a building where a large number of sots kept their dens. You see?”

They nodded.

“On the day, years later, when he pushed you in front of the train, Susannah, he was dressed as a construction worker. He was wearing a big yellow helmet he thought of as a ‘hardhat’ and a fake moustache. On the day when he actually *would* have pushed Jake into traffic, causing his death, *he would have been dressed as a priest.*”

“Jesus,” Susannah nearly whispered. “The man who pushed him in New York was Jack Mort, and the man he saw at the way station was this fella you were chasing—Walter.”

“Yes.”

“And the little boy thought they were the same man because they were both wearing the same kind of black robe?”

Roland nodded. “There was even a physical resemblance between Walter and Jack Mort. Not as if they were brothers, I don’t mean that, but both were tall men with dark hair and very pale complexions. And given the fact that Jake was dying when he got his only good look at Mort and was in a strange place and scared almost witless when he got his only good look at Walter, I think his mistake was both understandable and forgivable. If there’s a horse’s ass in this picture, it’s me, for not realizing the truth sooner.”

“Would Mort have known he was being used?” Eddie asked. Thinking back to his own experiences and wild thoughts when Roland had invaded his mind, he didn’t see how Mort could not know . . . but Roland was shaking his head.

“Walter would have been extremely subtle. Mort would have thought the priest disguise his own idea . . . or so I believe. He would not have recognized the voice of an intruder—of Walter—whispering

deep within his mind, telling him what to do.” “Jack Mort,” Eddie marvelled. “It was Jack Mort all the time.”

“Yes . . . with assistance from Walter. And so I ended up saving Jake’s life after all. When I made Mort jump from the subway platform in front of the train, I changed everything.”

Susannah asked, “If this Walter was able to enter our world—through his own private door, maybe—whenever he wanted, couldn’t he have used someone else to push your little boy? If he could suggest to Mort that he dress up like a priest, then he could make somebody else do it . . . What, Eddie? Why are you shaking your head?”

“Because I don’t think Walter would want that to happen. What Walter wanted is what *is* happening . . . for Roland to be losing his mind, bit by bit. Isn’t that right?”

The gunslinger nodded.

“Walter couldn’t have done it that way even if he *had* wanted to,” Eddie added, “because he was dead long before Roland found the doors on the beach. When Roland went through that last one and into Jack Mort’s head, ole Walt’s messin-around days were done.”

Susannah thought about this, then nodded her head. “I see . . . / *think*. This time-travel business is some confusing shit, isn’t it?”

Roland began to pick up his goods and strap them back into place. “Time we were moving on.”

Eddie stood up and shrugged into his pack. “You can take comfort from one thing, at least,” he told Roland. “You—or this *ka-tet* business—were able to save the kid after all.”

Roland had been knotting the harness-strings at his chest. Now he looked up, and the blazing clarity of his eyes made Eddie flinch backward. “Have I?” he asked harshly. “Have I really? I’m going insane an inch at a time, trying to live with two versions of the same reality. I had hoped at first that one or the other would begin to fade away, but that’s not happening. In fact, the exact opposite is happening: those two realities are growing louder and louder in my head, clamoring at each other like opposing factions which must soon go to war. So tell me this, Eddie: How do you suppose *Jake*

feels? *How do you suppose it feels to know you are dead in one world and alive in another?*"

The lark sang again, but none of them noticed. Eddie stared into the faded blue eyes blazing out of Roland's pale face and could not think of a thing to say.

24

THEY CAMPED ABOUT FIFTEEN miles due east of the dead bear that night, slept the sleep of the completely exhausted (even Roland slept the night through, although his dreams were nightmare carnival-rides), and were up the next morning at sunrise. Eddie kindled a small fire without speaking, and glanced at Susannah as a pistol-shot rang out in the woods nearby.

"Breakfast," she said.

Roland returned three minutes later with a hide slung over one shoulder. On it lay the freshly gutted corpse of a rabbit. Susannah cooked it. They ate and moved on.

Eddie kept trying to imagine what it would be like to have a memory of your own death. On that one he kept coming up short.

25

SHORTLY AFTER NOON THEY entered an area where most of the trees had been pulled over and the bushes mashed flat—it looked as though a cyclone had touched down here many years before, creating a wide and dismal alley of destruction.

"We're close to the place we want to find," Roland said. "He pulled down everything to clear the sightlines. Our friend the bear wanted no surprises. He was big, but not complacent."

"Has it left *us* any surprises?" Eddie asked.

“He may have done so.” Roland smiled a little and touched Eddie on the shoulder. “But there’s this—they’ll be *old* surprises.”

Their progress through this zone of destruction was slow. Most of the fallen trees were very old—many had almost rejoined the soil from which they had sprung—but they still made enough of a tangle to create a formidable obstacle course. It would have been difficult enough if all three of them had been able-bodied; with Susannah strapped to the gunslinger’s back in her harness, it became an exercise in aggravation and endurance.

The flattened trees and jumbles of underbrush served to obscure the bear’s backtrail, and that also worked to slow their speed. Until midday they had followed claw-marks as clear as trail-blazes on the trees. Here, however, near its starting point, the bear’s rage had not been full-blown, and these handy signs of its passage disappeared. Roland moved slowly, looking for droppings in the bushes and tufts of hair on the tree-trunks over which the bear had climbed. It took all afternoon to cross three miles of this decayed jumble.

Eddie had just decided they were going to lose the light and would have to camp in these creepy surroundings when they came to a thin skirt of alders. Beyond it, he could hear a stream babbling noisily over a bed of stones. Behind them, the setting sun was radiating spokes of sullen red light across the jumbled ground they had just crossed, turning the fallen trees into crisscrossing black shapes like Chinese ideograms.

Roland called a halt and eased Susannah down. He stretched his back, twisting it this way and that with his hands on his hips.

“That it for the night?” Eddie asked.

Roland shook his head. “Give Eddie your gun, Susannah.”

She did as he said, looking at him questioningly.

“Come on, Eddie. The place we want is on the other side of those trees. We’ll have a look. We might do a little work, as well.”

“What makes you think—”

“Open your ears.”

Eddie listened and realized he heard machinery. He further realized that he had been hearing it for some time now. “I don’t want to leave Susannah.”

“We’re not going far and she has a good loud voice. Besides, if there’s danger, it’s ahead—we’ll be between it and her.”

Eddie looked down at Susannah.

“Go on—just make sure you’re back soon.” She looked back the way they had come with thoughtful eyes. “I don’t know if there’s ha’ants here or not, but it *fee/s* like there are.”

“We’ll be back before dark,” Roland promised. He started toward the screen of alders, and after a moment, Eddie followed him.

26

FIFTEEN YARDS INTO THE trees, Eddie realized that they were following a path, one the bear had probably made for itself over the years. The alders bent above them in a tunnel. The sounds were louder now, and he began to sort them out. One was a low, deep, humming noise. He could feel it in his feet—a faint vibration, as if some large piece of machinery was running in the earth. Above it, closer and more urgent, were crisscrossing sounds like bright scratches—squeals, squeaks, chitterings.

Roland placed his mouth against Eddie’s ear and said, “I think there’s little danger if we’re quiet.”

They moved on another five yards and then Roland stopped again. He drew his gun and used the barrel to brush aside a branch which hung heavy with sunset-tinted leaves. Eddie looked through this small opening and into the clearing where the bear had lived for so long—the base of operations from which he had set forth on his many expeditions of pillage and terror.

There was no undergrowth here; the ground had been beaten bald long since. A stream emerged from the base of a rock wall about fifty feet high and ran through the arrowhead-shaped clearing. On their side of the stream, backed up against the wall, was a metal box about nine feet high. Its roof was curved, and it reminded Eddie of a subway entrance. The front was painted in diagonal yellow and black

stripes. The earth which floored the clearing was not black, like the topsoil in the forest, but a strange powdery gray. It was littered with bones, and after a moment Eddie realized that what he had taken for gray soil was more bones, bones so old they were crumbling back to dust.

Things were moving in the dirt—the things making the squealing, chittering noises. Four . . . no, five of them. Small metal devices, the largest about the size of a Collie pup. They were robots, Eddie realized, or something *like* robots. They were similar to each other and to the bear they had undoubtedly served in one way only—atop each of them, a tiny radar-dish turned rapidly.

More thinking caps, Eddie thought. *My God, what kind of world is this, anyway?*

The largest of these devices looked a little like the Tonka tractor Eddie had gotten for his sixth or seventh birthday; its treads churned up tiny gray clouds of bone-dust as it rolled along. Another looked like a stainless steel rat. A third appeared to be a snake constructed of jointed steel segments—it writhed and humped its way along. They formed a rough circle on the far side of the stream, going around and around on a deep course they had carved in the ground. Looking at them made Eddie think of cartoons he had seen in the stacks of old *Saturday Evening Post* magazines his mother had for some reason saved and stored in the front hall of their apartment. In the cartoons, worried, cigarette-smoking men paced ruts in the carpet while they awaited for their wives to give birth.

As his eyes grew used to the simple geography of the clearing, Eddie saw that there were a great many more than five of these assorted freaks. There were at least a dozen others that he could see and probably more hidden behind the bony remains of the bear's old kills. The difference was that the others weren't moving. The members of the bear's mechanical retinue had died, one by one, over the long years until just this little group of five were left . . . and they did not sound very healthy, with their squeaks and squalls and rusty chitterings. The snake in particular had a hesitant, crippled look as it followed the mechanical rat around and around the circle. Every now and then the device which followed the snake—a steel block

that walked on stubby mechanical legs—would catch up with it and give the snake a nudge, as if telling it to hurry the fuck up.

Eddie wondered what their job had been. Surely not protection; the bear had been built to protect itself, and Eddie guessed that if old Shardik had come upon the three of them while still in its prime, it would have chewed them up and spat them out in short order. Perhaps these little robots had been its maintenance crew, or scouts, or messengers. He guessed that they could be dangerous, but only in their own defense . . . or their master's. They did not seem warlike.

There was, in fact, something pitiful about them. Most of the crew was now defunct, their master was gone, and Eddie believed they knew it somehow. It was not menace they projected but a strange, inhuman sadness. Old and almost worn out, they paced and rolled and wriggled their anxious way around the worry-track they had dug in this godforsaken clearing, and it almost seemed to Eddie that he could read the confused run of their thoughts; *Oh dear, oh dear, what now? What is our purpose, now that He is gone? And who will take care of us, now that He is gone? Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear . . .*

Eddie felt a tug on the back of his leg and came very close to screaming in fear and surprise. He wheeled, cocking Roland's gun, and saw Susannah looking up at him with wide eyes. Eddie let out a long breath and dropped the hammer carefully back to its resting position. He knelt, put his hands on Susannah's shoulders, kissed her cheek, then whispered in her ear: "I came really close to putting a bullet in your silly head—what are you doing here?"

"Wanted to see," she whispered back, looking not even slightly abashed. Her eyes shifted to Roland as he also hunkered beside her. "Besides, it was spooky back there by myself."

She had sustained a number of small scratches crawling after them through the brush, but Roland had to admit to himself that she could be as quiet as a ghost when she wanted to be; he hadn't heard a thing. He took a rag (the last remnant of his old shirt) from his back pocket and wiped the little trickles of blood from her arms. He examined his work for a moment and then dabbed at a small nick on her forehead as well. "Have your look, then," he said. His voice was hardly more than the movement of his lips. "I guess you earned it."

He used one hand to open a sightline at her level in the hock and greenberry bushes, then waited while she stared raptly into the clearing. At last she pulled back and Roland allowed the bushes to close again.

"I feel sorry for them," she whispered. "Isn't that crazy?"

"Not at all," Roland whispered back. "They are creatures of great sadness, I think, in their own strange way. Eddie is going to put them out of their misery."

Eddie began to shake his head at once.

"Yes, you are . . . unless you want to hunker here in what you call 'the toolies' all night. Go for the hats. The little twirling things."

"What if I *miss*?" Eddie whispered at him furiously.

Roland shrugged.

Eddie stood up and reluctantly cocked the gunslinger's revolver again. He looked through the bushes at the circling servomechanisms, going around and around in their lonely, useless orbit. *It'll be like shooting puppies*, he thought glumly. Then he saw one of them—it was the thing that looked like a walking box—extrude an ugly-looking pincer device from its middle and clamp it for a moment on the snake. The snake made a surprised buzzing sound and leaped ahead. The walking box withdrew its pincer.

Well . . . maybe not exactly like shooting puppies, Eddie decided. He glanced at Roland again. Roland looked back expressionlessly, arms folded across his chest.

You pick some goddam strange times to keep school, buddy.

Eddie thought of Susannah, first shooting the bear in the ass, then blowing its sensor device to smithereens as it bore down on her and Roland, and felt a little ashamed of himself. And there was more: part of him wanted to go for it, just as part of him had *wanted* to go up against Balazar and his crew of plug-uglies in The Leaning Tower. The compulsion was probably sick, but that didn't change its basic attraction: *Let's see who walks away . . . let's just see.*

Yeah, that was pretty sick, all right.

Pretend it's just a shooting gallery, and you want to win your honey a stuffed dog, he thought. Or a *stuffed bear*. He drew a bead on the

walking box and then looked around impatiently when Roland touched his shoulder.

“Say your lesson, Eddie. And be true.”

Eddie hissed impatiently through his teeth, angry at the distraction, but Roland’s eyes didn’t flinch and so he drew a deep breath and tried to clear everything from his mind: the squeaks and squalls of equipment that had been running too long, the aches and pains in his body, the knowledge that Susannah was here, propped up on the heels of her hands, watching, the *further* knowledge that she was closest to the ground, and if he missed one of the gadgets out there, she would be the handiest target if it decided to retaliate.

“‘I do not shoot with my hand; he who shoots with his hand has forgotten the face of his father.’ ”

That was a joke, he thought; he wouldn’t know his old man if he passed him on the street. But he could feel the words doing their work, clearing his mind and settling his nerves. He didn’t know if he was the stuff of which gunslingers were made—the idea seemed fabulously unlikely to him, even though he knew he had managed to hold up his end pretty well during the shootout at Balazar’s nightclub—but he *did* know that part of him liked the coldness that fell over him when he spoke the words of the old, old catechism the gunslinger had taught them; the coldness and the way things seemed to stand forth with their own breathless clarity. There was another part of him which understood that this was just another deadly drug, not much different from the heroin which had killed Henry and almost killed him, but that did not alter the thin, tight pleasure of the moment. It drummed in him like taut cables vibrating in a high wind.

“ ‘I do not aim with my hand; he who aims with his hand has forgotten the face of his father.

“ ‘I aim with my eye.

“ ‘I do not kill with my gun; he who kills with his gun has forgotten the face of his father.’ ”

Then, without knowing he meant to do it, he stepped out of the trees and spoke to the trundling robots on the far side of the clearing:

“ ‘I kill with my heart.’ ”

They stopped their endless circling. One of them let out a high buzz that might have been alarm or a warning. The radar-dishes, each no bigger than half a Hershey bar, turned toward the sound of his voice.

Eddie began to fire.

The sensors exploded like clay pigeons, one after the other. Pity was gone from Eddie's heart; there was only that coldness, and the knowledge that he would not stop, could not stop, until the job was done.

Thunder filled the twilit clearing and bounced back from the splintery rock wall at its wide end. The steel snake did two cartwheels and lay twitching in the dust. The biggest mechanism—the one that had reminded Eddie of his childhood Tonka tractor—tried to flee. Eddie blew its radar-dish to kingdom come as it made a herky-jerky run at the side of the rut. It fell on its squarish nose with thin blue flames squirting out of the steel sockets which held its glass eyes.

The only sensor he missed was the one on the stainless steel rat; that shot caromed off its metal back with a high mosquito whine. It surged out of the rut, made a half-circle around the box-shaped thing which had been following the snake, and charged across the clearing at surprising speed. It was making an angry clittering sound, and as it closed the distance, Eddie could see it had a mouth lined with long, sharp points. They did not look like teeth; they looked like sewing-machine needles, blurring up and down. No, he guessed these things were really not much like puppies, after all.

"Take it, Roland!" he shouted desperately, but when he snatched a quick look around he saw that Roland was still standing with his arms crossed on his chest, his expression serene and distant. He might have been thinking of chess problems or old love-letters.

The dish on the rat's back suddenly locked down. It changed direction slightly and buzzed straight toward Susannah Dean.

One bullet left, Eddie thought. *If I miss, it'll take her face off.*

Instead of shooting, he stepped forward and kicked the rat as hard as he could. He had replaced his shoes with a pair of deerskin moccasins, and he felt the jolt all the way up to his knee. The rat

gave a rusty, ratcheting squeal, tumbled over and over in the dirt, and came to rest on its back. Eddie could see what looked like a dozen stubby mechanical legs pistoning up and down. Each was tipped with a sharp steel claw. These claws twirled around and around on gimbals the size of pencil-erasers.

A steel rod poked out of the robot's midsection and flipped the gadget upright again. Eddie brought Roland's revolver down, ignoring a momentary impulse to steady it with his free hand. That might be the way cops in his own world were taught to shoot, but it wasn't the way it was done here. *When you forget the gun is there, when it feels like you're shooting with your finger*, Roland had told them, *then you'll be somewhere near home*.

Eddie pulled the trigger. The tiny radar-dish, which had begun to turn again in an effort to find the enemies, disappeared in a blue flash. The rat made a choked noise—*Cloop!*—and fell dead on its side.

Eddie turned with his heart jackhammering in his chest. He couldn't remember being this furious since he realized that Roland meant to keep him in his world until his goddamned Tower was won or lost . . . probably until they were all worm-chow, in other words.

He levelled the empty gun at Roland's heart and spoke in a thick voice he hardly recognized as his own. "If there was a round left in this, you could stop worrying about your fucking Tower right now."

"Stop it, Eddie!" Susannah said sharply.

He looked at her. "It was going for *you*, Susannah, and it meant to turn you into ground chuck."

"But it didn't get me. *You* got *it*, Eddie. You got it. "

"No thanks to him." Eddie made as if to re-holster the gun and then realized, to his further disgust, that he had nothing to put it in. Susannah was wearing the holster. "Him and his lessons. Him and his goddam *lessons*." He turned to Roland. "I tell you, for two cents —"

Roland's mildly interested expression suddenly changed. His eyes shifted to a point over Eddie's left shoulder. "*DOWN!*" he shouted.

Eddie didn't ask questions. His rage and confusion were wiped from his mind immediately. He dropped, and as he did, he saw the

gunslinger's left hand blur down to his side. *My God*, he thought, still falling, he *CAN'T be that fast*, no one *can be that fast*, *I'm not bad but Susannah makes me look slow and he makes Susannah look like a turtle trying to walk uphill on a piece of glass—*

Something passed just over his head, something that squealed at him in mechanical rage and pulled out a tuft of his hair. Then the gunslinger was shooting from the hip, three fast shots like thunder-cracks, and the squealing stopped. A creature which looked to Eddie like a large mechanical bat thudded to earth between the place where Eddie now lay and the one where Susannah knelt beside Roland. One of its jointed, rust-speckled wings thumped the ground once, weakly, as if angry at the missed chance, and then became still.

Roland crossed to Eddie, walking easy in his old sprung boots. He extended a hand. Eddie took it and let Roland help him to his feet. The wind had been knocked out of him and he found he couldn't talk. *Probably just as well . . . seems like every time I open my mouth I stick my goddam foot into it.*

"Eddie! You all right?" Susannah was crossing the clearing to where he stood with his head bent and his hands planted on his upper thighs, trying to breathe.

"Yeah." The word came out in a croak. He straightened up with an effort. "Just got a little haircut."

"It was in a tree," Roland said mildly. "I didn't see it myself, at first. The light gets tricky this time of day." He paused and then went on in that same mild voice: "She was never in any danger, Eddie."

Eddie nodded his head. Roland, he now realized, could almost have eaten a hamburger and drunk a milkshake before beginning his draw. He was that fast.

"All right. Let's just say I disapprove of your teaching techniques, okay? I'm not going to apologize, though, so if you're waiting for one, you can stop now."

Roland bent, picked Susannah up, and began to brush her off. He did this with a kind of impartial affection, like a mother brushing off her toddler after she has taken one of her necessary tumbles in the dust of the back yard. "Your apology is not expected or necessary,"

he said. "Susannah and I had a conversation similar to this one two days ago. Didn't we, Susannah?"

She nodded. "Roland's of the opinion that apprentice gunslingers who won't bite the hand that feeds them from time to time need a good kick in the slats."

Eddie looked around at the wreckage and slowly began to beat the bone-dust out of his pants and shirt. "What if I told you I don't want to *be* a gunslinger, Roland old buddy?"

"I'd say that what you want doesn't much matter." Roland was looking at the metal kiosk which stood against the rock wall, and seemed to have lost interest in the conversation. Eddie had seen this before. When the conversation turned to questions of should-be, could-be, or oughtta-be, Roland almost always lost interest.

"*Ka?*" Eddie asked, with a trace of his old bitterness.

"That's right. *Ka.*" Roland walked over to the kiosk and passed a hand along the yellow and black stripes which ran down its front. "We have found one of the twelve portals which ring the edge of the world . . . one of the six paths to the Dark Tower.

"And that is also *ka.*"

27

EDDIE WENT BACK FOR Susannah's wheelchair. No one had to ask him to do this; he wanted some time alone, to get himself back under control. Now that the shooting was over, every muscle in his body seemed to have picked up its own little thrumming tremor. He did not want either of them to see him this way—not because they might misread it as fear, but because one or both might know it for what it really was: excitement overload. He had liked it. Even when you added in the bat which had almost scalped him, he had liked it.

That's bullshit, buddy. And you know it.

The trouble was, he *didn't* know it. He had come face to face with something Susannah had found out for herself after shooting the

bear: he could *talk* about how he didn't want to be a gunslinger, how he didn't want to be tramping around this crazy world where the three of them seemed to be the only human life, that what he really wanted more than anything else was to be standing on the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street, popping his fingers, munching a chili-dog, and listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival blast out of his Walkman earphones as he watched the girls go by, those ultimately sexy New York girls with their pouty go-to-hell mouths and their long legs in short skirts. He could talk about those things until he was blue in the face, but his heart knew other things. It knew that he had *enjoyed* blowing the electronic menagerie back to glory, at least while the game was on and Roland's gun was his own private hand-held thunderstorm. He had *enjoyed* kicking the robot rat, even though it had hurt his foot and even though he had been scared shitless. In some weird way, that part—the being scared part—actually seemed to add to the enjoyment.

All that was bad enough, but his heart knew something even worse: that if a door leading back to New York appeared in front of him right now, he might not walk through it. Not, at least, until he had seen the Dark Tower for himself. He was beginning to believe that Roland's illness was a communicable disease.

As he wrestled Susannah's chair through the tangle of junk-alders, cursing the branches that whipped at his face and tried to poke his eyes out, Eddie found himself able to admit at least some of these things, and the admission cooled his blood a little. *I want to see if it looks the way it did in my dream, he thought. To see something like that . . . that would be really fantastic.*

And another voice spoke up inside. *I'll bet his other friends—the ones with the names that sound like they came straight from the Round Table in King Arthur's court—I'll bet they felt the same way, Eddie. And they're all dead. Every one of them.*

He recognized that voice, like it or not. It belonged to Henry, and that made it a hard voice not to hear.

ROLAND, WITH SUSANNAH BALANCED on his right hip, was standing in front of the metal box that looked like a subway entrance closed for the night. Eddie left the wheelchair at the edge of the clearing and walked over. As he did, the steady humming noise and the vibration under his feet became louder. The machinery making the noise, he realized, was either inside the box or under it. It seemed that he heard it not with his ears but somewhere deep inside his head, and in the hollows of his gut.

“So this is one of the twelve portals. Where does it go, Roland? Disney World?”

Roland shook his head. “I don’t know where it goes. Maybe nowhere . . . or everywhere. There’s a lot about my world I don’t know—surely you both have realized that. And there are things I used to know which have changed.”

“Because the world has moved on?”

“Yes.” Roland glanced at him. “Here, that is not a figure of speech. The world really is moving on, and it goes ever faster. At the same time, things are wearing out . . . falling apart . . .” He kicked the mechanical corpse of the walking box to illustrate his point.

Eddie thought of the rough diagram of the portals which Roland had drawn in the dirt. “/s this the edge of the world?” he asked, almost timidly. “I mean, it doesn’t look much different than anyplace else.” He laughed a little. “If there’s a drop-off, I don’t see it.”

Roland shook his head. “It’s not that kind of edge. It’s the place where one of the Beams starts. Or so I was taught.”

“Beams?” Susannah asked. “What Beams?”

“The Great Old Ones didn’t make the world, but they did *re-make* it. Some tale-tellers say the Beams saved it; others say they are the seeds of the world’s destruction. The Great Old Ones created the Beams. They are lines of some sort . . . lines which *bind* . . . and *hold* . . .”

“Are you talking about magnetism?” Susannah asked cautiously.

His whole face lit up, transforming its harsh planes and furrows into something new and amazing, and for a moment Eddie knew how Roland would look if he actually *did* reach his Tower.

“Yes! Not *just* magnetism, but that is a part of it . . . and gravity . . . and the proper alignment of space, size, and dimension. The Beams are the forces which bind these things together.”

“Welcome to physics in the nuthouse,” Eddie said in a low voice.

Susannah ignored this. “And the Dark Tower? Is it some kind of generator? A central power-source for these Beams?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you *do* know that this is point A,” Eddie said. “If we walked long enough in a straight line, we’d come to another portal—call it point C—on the other edge of the world. But before we did, we’d come to point B. The center-point. The Dark Tower.”

The gunslinger nodded.

“How long a trip is it? Do you know?”

“No. But I know it’s very far, and that the distance grows with every day that passes.”

Eddie had bent to examine the walking box. Now he straightened up and stared at Roland. “That can’t be.” He sounded like a man trying to explain to a small child that there really isn’t a boogeyman living in his closet, that there *can’t* be because there isn’t any such thing as the boogeyman, not really. “Worlds don’t *grow*, Roland.”

“Don’t they? When I was a boy, Eddie, there were maps. I remember one in particular. It was called The Greater Kingdoms of the Western Earth. It showed my land, which was called by the name Gilead. It showed the Downland Baronies, which were overrun by riot and civil war in the year after I won my guns, and the hills, and the desert, and the mountains, and the Western Sea. It was a long distance from Gilead to the Western Sea—a thousand miles or more—*but it had taken me over twenty years to cross that distance.*”

“That’s impossible,” Susannah said quickly, fearfully. “Even if you *walked* the whole distance it couldn’t take twenty years.”

“Well, you have to allow for stops to write post-cards and drink beer,” Eddie said, but they both ignored him.

“I didn’t walk but rode most of the distance on horseback,” Roland said. “I was—slowed up, shall we say?—every now and then, but for most of that time I was moving. Moving away from John Farson, who led the revolt which toppled the world I grew up in and who wanted my head on a pole in his courtyard—he had good reason to want that, I suppose, since I and my compatriots were responsible for the deaths of a great many of his followers—and because I stole something he held very dear.”

“What, Roland?” Eddie asked curiously.

Roland shook his head. “That’s a story for another day . . . or maybe never. For now, think not of that but of this: I’ve come *many* thousands of miles. Because the world is growing.”

“A thing like that just can’t happen,” Eddie reiterated, but he was badly shaken, all the same. “There’d be earthquakes . . . floods . . . tidal waves . . . I don’t know what all . . .”

“*Look!*” Roland said furiously. “Just look around you! What do you see? A world that is slowing down like a child’s top even as it speeds up and moves on in some other way none of us understand. Look at your kills, Eddie! Look at your kills, for your father’s sake!”

He took two strides toward the stream, picked up the steel snake, examined it briefly, and tossed it to Eddie, who caught it with his left hand. The snake broke in two pieces as he did so.

“You see? It’s exhausted. *All* the creatures we found here were exhausted. If we hadn’t come, they would have died before long, anyway. Just as the bear would have died.”

“The bear had some sort of disease,” Susannah said.

The gunslinger nodded. “Parasites which attacked the natural parts of its body. But why did they never attack it before?”

Susannah did not reply.

Eddie was examining the snake. Unlike the bear, it appeared to be a totally artificial construction, a thing of metal, circuits, and yards (or maybe miles) of gossamer-thin wire. Yet he could see flecks of rust, not just on the surface of the half-snake he still held, but in its guts as well. And there was a patch of wetness where either oil had leaked out or water had seeped in. This moisture had rotted away

some of the wires, and a greenish stuff that looked like moss had grown over several of the thumbnail-sized circuit boards.

Eddie turned the snake over. A steel plate proclaimed it to be the work of North Central Positronics, Ltd. There was a serial number, but no name. *Probably too unimportant to name, he thought. Just a sophisticated mechanical Roto-Rooter designed to give old Br'er Bear an enema every once in a while, keep him regular, or something equally disgusting.*

He dropped the snake and wiped his hands on his pants.

Roland had picked up the tractor-gadget. He yanked at one of the treads. It came off easily, showering a cloud of rust down between his boots. He tossed it aside.

“Everything in the world is either coming to rest or falling to pieces,” he said flatly. “At the same time, the forces which interlock and give the world its coherence—in time and size as well as in space—are weakening. We knew that even as children, but we had no idea what the time of the end would be like. How could we? Yet now I am living in those times, and I don’t believe they affect my world alone. They affect yours, Eddie and Susannah; they may affect a billion others. The Beams are breaking down. I don’t know if that’s a cause or only another symptom, but I know it’s true. Come! Draw close! Listen!”

As Eddie approached the metal box with its alternating diagonal slashes of yellow and black, a strong and unpleasant memory seized him—for the first time in years he found himself thinking of a crumbling Victorian wreck in Dutch Hill, about a mile away from the neighborhood he and Henry had grown up in. This wreck, which was known as The Mansion to the neighborhood kids, occupied a plot of weedy, untended lawn on Rhinehold Street. Eddie guessed that practically all the kids in the borough had heard spooky stories about The Mansion. The house stood slumped beneath its steep roofs, seeming to glare at passersby from the deep shadows thrown by its eaves. The windows were gone, of course—kids can throw rocks through windows without getting too close to a place—but it had not beenspray-painted, and it had not become a make-out spot or a shooting gallery. Oddest of all was the simple fact of its continued

existence: no one had set it on fire to collect the insurance or just to see it burn. The kids said it was haunted, of course, and as Eddie stood on the sidewalk with Henry one day, looking at it (they had made the pilgrimage specifically to see this object of fabulous rumor, although Henry had told their mother they were only going for Hoodsie Rockets at Dahlberg's with some of his friends), it had seemed that it really *might* be haunted. Hadn't he felt some strong and unfriendly force seeping from that old Victorian's shadowy windows, windows that seemed to look at him with the fixed stare of a dangerous lunatic? Hadn't he felt some subtle wind stirring the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck? Hadn't he had the clear intuition that if he stepped inside that place, the door would slam and lock behind him and the walls would begin to close in, grinding the bones of dead mice to powder, wanting to crush *his* bones the same way?

Haunting. Haunted.

He felt that same old sense of mystery and danger now, as he approached the metal box. Gooseflesh began to ripple up his legs and down his arms; the hair on the back of his neck bushed out and became rough, overlapping hackles. He felt that same subtle wind blowing past him, although the leaves on the trees which ringed the clearing were perfectly still.

Yet he walked toward the door anyway (for that was what it was, of course, another door, although this one was locked and always would be against the likes of him), not stopping until his ear was pressed against it.

It was as if he had dropped a tab of really strong acid half an hour ago and it was just beginning to come on heavy. Strange colors flowed across the darkness behind his eyeballs. He seemed to hear voices murmuring up to him from long hallways like stone throats, halls which were lit with guttering electric torches. Once these flambeaux of the modern age had thrown a bright glare across everything, but now they were only sullen cores of blue light. He sensed emptiness . . . desertion . . . desolation . . . death.

The machinery rumbled on and on, but wasn't there a rough undertone to the sound? A kind of desperate thudding beneath the

hum, like the arrhythmia of a diseased heart? A feeling that the machinery producing this sound, although far more sophisticated even than that within the bear had been, was somehow falling out of tune with itself?

“All is silent in the halls of the dead,” Eddie heard himself whisper in a falling, fainting voice. “All is forgotten in the stone halls of the dead. Behold the stairways which stand in darkness; behold the rooms of ruin. These are the halls of the dead where the spiders spin and the great circuits fall quiet, one by one.”

Roland pulled him roughly back, and Eddie looked at him with dazed eyes.

“That’s enough,” Roland said.

“Whatever they put in there isn’t doing so well, is it?” Eddie heard himself ask. His trembling voice seemed to come from far away. He could still feel the power coming out of that box. It called to him.

“No. Nothing in my world is doing so well these days.”

“If you boys are planning to camp here for the night, you’ll have to do without the pleasure of my company,” Susannah said. Her face was a white blur in the ashy aftermath of twilight. “I’m going over yonder. I don’t like the way that thing makes me feel.”

“We’ll *all* camp over yonder,” Roland said. “Let’s go.”

“What a good idea,” Eddie said. As they moved away from the box, the sound of the machinery began to dim. Eddie felt its hold on him weakening, although it still called to him, invited him to explore the half-lit hallways, the standing stairways, the rooms of ruin where the spiders spun and the control panels were going dark, one by one.

29

IN HIS DREAM THAT night, Eddie again went walking down Second Avenue toward Tom and Gerry’s Artistic Deli on the corner of Second

and Forty-sixth. He passed a record store and the Rolling Stones boomed from the speakers:

*“I see a red door and I want to paint it black,
No colours anymore, I want them to turn black,
I see the girls walk by dressed in their summer clothes,
I have to turn my head until my darkness goes . . .”*

He walked on, passing a store called Reflections of You between Forty-ninth and Forty-eighth. He saw himself in one of the mirrors hanging in the display window. He thought he looked better than he had in years—hair a little too long, but otherwise tanned and fit. The clothes, though . . . uh-uh, man. Square-bear shit all the way. Blue blazer, white shirt, dark red tie, gray dress pants . . . he had never owned a yuppie-from-hell outfit like that in his life.

Someone was shaking him.

Eddie tried to burrow deeper into the dream. He didn't want to wake up now. Not before he got to the deli and used his key to go through the door and into the field of roses. He wanted to see it all again—the endless blanket of red, the overarching blue sky where those great white cloud-ships sailed, and the Dark Tower. He was afraid of the darkness which lived within that eldritch column, waiting to eat anyone who got too close, but he wanted to see it again just the same. *Needed* to see it.

The hand, however, would not stop shaking. The dream began to darken, and the smells of car exhaust along Second Avenue became the smell of wood-smoke—thin now, because the fire was almost out.

It was Susannah. She looked scared. Eddie sat up and put an arm around her. They had camped on the far side of the alder grove, within earshot of the stream babbling through the bone-littered clearing. On the other side of the glowing embers which had been their campfire, Roland lay asleep. His sleep was not easy. He had cast aside his single blanket and lay with his knees drawn up almost to his chest. With his boots off, his feet looked white and narrow and defenseless. The great toe of the right foot was gone, victim of the lobster-thing which had also snatched away part of his right hand.

He was moaning some slurred phrase over and over again. After a few repetitions, Eddie realized it was the phrase he had spoken before keeling over in the clearing where Susannah had shot the bear: *Go, then—there are other worlds than these*. He would fall silent for a moment, then call out the boy's name: "Jake! Where are you? *Jake!*"

The desolation and despair in his voice filled Eddie with horror. His arms stole around Susannah and he pulled her tight against him. He could feel her shivering, although the night was warm.

The gunslinger rolled over. Starlight fell into his open eyes.

"*Jake, where are you?*" he called to the night. "*Come back!*"

"Oh Jesus—he's off again. What should we do, Suze?"

"I don't know. I just knew I couldn't listen to it anymore by myself. He sounds so far away. So far away from everything."

"Go, then," the gunslinger murmured, rolling back onto his side and drawing his knees up once more, "there are other worlds than these." He was silent for a moment. Then his chest hitched and he loosed the boy's name in a long, bloodcurdling cry. In the woods behind them, some large bird flew away in a dry whirr of wings toward some less exciting part of the world.

"Do you have any ideas?" Susannah asked. Her eyes were wide and wet with tears. "Maybe we should wake him up?"

"I don't know." Eddie saw the gunslinger's revolver, the one he wore on his left hip. It had been placed, in its holster, on a neatly folded square of hide within easy reach of the place where Roland lay. "I don't think I dare," he added at last.

"It's driving him crazy."

Eddie nodded.

"What do we do about it? Eddie, *what do we do?*"

Eddie didn't know. An antibiotic had stopped the infection caused by the bite of the lobster-thing; now Roland was burning with infection again, but Eddie didn't think there was an antibiotic in the world that would cure what was wrong with him this time.

"I don't know. Lie down with me, Suze."

Eddie threw a hide over both of them, and after a while her trembling quieted.

“If he goes insane, he may hurt us,” she said.

“Don’t I know it.” This unpleasant idea had occurred to him in terms of the bear—its red, hate-filled eyes (and had there not been bewilderment as well, lurking deep in those red depths?) and its deadly slashing claws. Eddie’s eyes moved to the revolver, lying so close to the gunslinger’s good left hand, and he remembered again how fast Roland had been when he’d seen the mechanical bat swooping down toward them. So fast his hand had seemed to disappear. If the gunslinger went mad, and if he and Susannah became the focus of that madness, they would have no chance. No chance at all.

He pressed his face into the warm hollow of Susannah’s neck and closed his eyes.

Not long after, Roland ceased his babbling. Eddie raised his head and looked over. The gunslinger appeared to be sleeping naturally again. Eddie looked at Susannah and saw that she had also gone to sleep. He lay down beside her, gently kissed the swell of her breast, and closed his own eyes.

Not you, buddy; you’re gonna be awake a long, long time.

But they had been on the move for two days and Eddie was bone-tired. He drifted off . . . drifted down.

Back to the dream, he thought as he went. I want to go back to Second Avenue . . . back to Tom and Gerry’s. That’s what I want.

The dream did not return that night, however.

30

THEY ATE A QUICK breakfast as the sun came up, repacked and redistributed the gear, and then returned to the wedge-shaped clearing. It didn’t look quite so spooky in the clear light of morning, but all three of them were still at pains to keep well away from the metal box with its warning slashes of black and yellow. If Roland had any recollection of the bad dreams which had haunted him in the

night, he gave no sign. He had gone about the morning chores as he always did, in thoughtful, stolid silence.

“How do you plan to keep to a straight-line course from here?” Susannah asked the gunslinger.

“If the legends are right, that should be no problem. Do you remember when you asked about magnetism?”

She nodded.

He rummaged deep into his purse and at last emerged with a small square of old, supple leather. Threaded through it was a long silver needle.

“A compass!” Eddie said. “You really *are* an Eagle Scout!”

Roland shook his head. “Not a compass. I know what they are, of course, but these days I keep my directions by the sun and stars, and even now they serve me quite well.”

“*Even now?*” Susannah asked, a trifle uneasily. He nodded. “The directions of the world are also in drift.”

“*Christ,*” Eddie said. He tried to imagine a world where true north was slipping slyly off to the east or west and gave up almost at once. It made him feel a little ill, the way looking down from the top of a high building had always made him feel a little ill.

“This is just a needle, but it *is* steel and it should serve our purpose as well as a compass. The Beam is our course now, and the needle will show it.” He rummaged in his purse again and came out with a poorly made pottery cup. A crack ran down one side. Roland had mended this artifact, which he had found at the old campsite, with pine-gum. Now he went to the stream, dipped the cup into it, and brought it back to where Susannah sat in her wheelchair. He put the cup down carefully on the wheelchair’s arm, and when the surface of the water inside was calm, he dropped the needle in. It sank to the bottom and rested there.

“Wow!” Eddie said. “Great! I’d fall at your feet in wonder, Roland, but I don’t want to spoil the crease in my pants.”

“I’m not finished. Hold the cup steady, Susannah.”

She did, and Roland pushed her slowly across the clearing. When she was about twelve feet in front of the door, he turned the chair carefully so she was facing away from it.

“Eddie!” she cried. “Look at this!”

He bent over the pottery cup, marginally aware that water was already oozing through Roland’s makeshift seal. The needle was rising slowly to the surface. It reached it and bobbed there as serenely as a cork would have done. Its direction lay in a straight line from the portal behind them and into the old, tangled forest ahead. “Holy shit—a floating needle. Now I really *have* seen everything.”

“Hold the cup, Susannah.”

She held it steady as Roland pushed the wheelchair further into the clearing, at right angles to the box. The needle lost its steady point, bobbed randomly for a moment, then sank to the bottom of the cup again. When Roland pulled the chair backward to its former spot, it rose once more and pointed the way.

“If we had iron filings and a sheet of paper,” the gunslinger said, “we could scatter the filings on the paper’s surface and watch them draw together into a line which would point that same course.”

“Will that happen even when we leave the Portal?” Eddie asked.

Roland nodded. “Nor is that all. We can actually see the Beam.”

Susannah looked over her shoulder. Her elbow bumped the cup a little as she did. The needle swung aimlessly as the water inside sloshed . . . and then settled firmly back in its original direction.

“Not that way,” Roland said. “Look down, both of you—Eddie at your feet, Susannah into your lap.”

They did as he asked.

“When I tell you to look up, look straight ahead, in the direction the needle points. Don’t look at any one thing; let your eye see whatever it will. Now—look up!”

They did. For a moment Eddie saw nothing but the woods. He tried to make his eyes relax . . . and suddenly it was there, the way the shape of the slingshot had been there, inside the knob of wood, and he knew why Roland had told them not to look at any one thing. The effect of the Beam was everywhere along its course, but it was subtle. The needles of the pines and spruces pointed that way. The greenberry bushes grew slightly slanted, and the slant lay in the direction of the Beam. Not all the trees the bear had pushed down to clear its sightlines had fallen along that camouflaged path—which

ran southeast, if Eddie had his directions right—but most had, as if the force coming out of the box had *pushed* them that way as they tottered. The clearest evidence was in the way the shadows lay on the ground. With the sun coming up in the east they all pointed west, of course, but as Eddie looked southeast, he saw a rough herringbone pattern that existed only along the line which the needle in the cup had pointed out.

“I might see *something*,” Susannah said doubtfully, “but—”

“Look at the shadows! The *shadows*, Suze!”

Eddie saw her eyes widen as it all fell into place for her. “My God! It’s there! *Right there!* It’s like when someone has a natural part in their hair!”

Now that Eddie had seen it, he could not unsee it; a dim aisle driving through the untidy tangle which surrounded the clearing, a straight-edge course that was the way of the Beam. He was suddenly aware of how huge the force flowing around him (and probably right through him, like X-rays) must be, and had to control an urge to step away, either to the right or left. “Say, Roland, this won’t make me sterile, will it?”

Roland shrugged, smiling faintly.

“It’s like a riverbed,” Susannah marvelled. “A riverbed so overgrown you can barely see it . . . but it’s still there. The pattern of shadows will never change as long as we stay inside the path of the Beam, will it?”

“No,” Roland said. “They’ll change direction as the sun moves across the sky, of course, but we’ll always be able to see the course of the Beam. You must remember that it has been flowing along this same path for thousands—perhaps *tens* of thousands—of years. Look up, you two, into the sky!”

They did, and saw that the thin cirrus clouds had also picked up that herringbone pattern along the course of the Beam . . . and those clouds within the alley of its power were flowing faster than those to either side. They were being pushed southeast. Being pushed in the direction of the Dark Tower.

“You see? Even the clouds must obey.”

A small flock of birds coursed toward them. As they reached the path of the Beam, they were all deflected toward the southeast for a moment. Although Eddie clearly saw this happen, his eyes could hardly credit it. When the birds had crossed the narrow corridor of the Beam's influence, they resumed their former course.

"Well," Eddie said, "I suppose we ought to get going. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and all that shit."

"Wait a minute." Susannah was looking at Roland. "It *isn't* just a thousand miles, is it? Not anymore. How far *are* we talking about, Roland? Five thousand miles? Ten?"

"I can't say. It will be very far."

"Well, how in the hell we ever goan get there, with you two pushing me in this goddam wheelchair? We'll be lucky to make three miles a day through yonder Drawers, and you know it."

"The way has been opened," Roland said patiently, "and that's enough for now. The time may come, Susannah Dean, when we travel faster than you would like."

"Oh yeah?" She looked at him truculently, and both men could see Detta Walker dancing a dangerous hornpipe in her eyes again. "You got a race-car lined up? If you do, it might be nice if we had a damn road to run it on!"

"The land and the way we travel on it will change. It always does."

Susannah flapped a hand at the gunslinger; *go on with you*, it said. "You sound like my old mamma, sayin God will provide."

"Hasn't He?" Roland asked gravely.

She looked at him for a moment in silent surprise, then threw her head back and laughed at the sky. "Well, I guess that depends on how you look at it. All I can say is that if this is providin, Roland, I'd hate to see what'd happen if He decided to let us go hungry."

"Come on, let's do it," Eddie said. "I want to get out of this place. I don't like it." And that was true, but that wasn't all. He also felt a deep eagerness to set his feet upon that concealed path, that highway in hiding. Every step was a step closer to the field of roses and the Tower which dominated it. He realized—not without some wonder—that he meant to see that Tower . . . or die trying.

Congratulations, Roland, he thought. You've done it. I'm one of the converted. Someone say hallelujah.

"There's one other thing before we go." Roland bent and untied the rawhide lace around his left thigh. Then he slowly began to unbuckle his gunbelt.

"What's this jive?" Eddie asked.

Roland pulled the gunbelt free and held it out to him. "You know why I'm doing this," he said calmly.

"Put it back on, man!" Eddie felt a terrible stew of conflicting emotions roiling inside him; could feel his fingers trembling even inside his clenched fists. "What do you think you're *doing*?"

"Losing my mind an inch at a time. Until the wound inside me closes—if it ever does—I am not fit to wear this. And you know it."

"Take it, Eddie," Susannah said quietly.

"If you hadn't been wearing this goddamn thing last night, when that bat came at me, I'd be gone from the nose up this morning!"

The gunslinger replied by continuing to hold his remaining gun out to Eddie. The posture of his body said he was prepared to stand that way all day, if that was what it took.

"All right!" Eddie cried. "Goddammit, all *right!*"

He snatched the gunbelt from Roland's hand and buckled it about his own waist in a series of rough gestures. He should have been relieved, he supposed—hadn't he looked at this gun, lying so close to Roland's hand in the middle of the night, and thought about what might happen if Roland really *did* go over the high side? Hadn't he and Susannah both thought about it? But there was no relief. Only fear and guilt and a strange, aching sadness far too deep for tears.

He looked so strange without his guns.

So wrong.

"Okay? Now that the numb-fuck apprentices have the guns and the master's unarmed, can we please go? If something big comes out of the bush at us, Roland, you can always throw your knife at it."

"Oh, that," he murmured. "I almost forgot." He took the knife from his purse and held it out, hilt first, to Eddie.

"This is *ridiculous!*" Eddie shouted.

"Life is ridiculous."

“Yeah, put it on a postcard and send it to the fucking *Reader’s Digest*.” Eddie jammed the knife into his belt and then looked defiantly at Roland. “*Now can we go?*”

“There is one more thing,” Roland said.

“Weeping, creeping *Jesus!*”

The smile touched Roland’s mouth again. “Just joking,” he said.

Eddie’s mouth dropped open. Beside him, Susannah began to laugh again. The sound rose, as musical as bells, in the morning stillness.

31

IT TOOK THEM MOST of the morning to clear the zone of destruction with which the great bear had protected itself, but the going was a little easier along the path of the Beam, and once they had put the deadfalls and tangles of underbrush behind them, deep forest took over again and they were able to move at better speed. The brook which had emerged from the rock wall in the clearing ran busily along to their right. It had been joined by several smaller streamlets, and its sound was deeper now. There were more animals here—they heard them moving through the woods, going about their daily round—and twice they saw small groups of deer. One of them, a buck with a noble rack of antlers on its upraised and questioning head, looked to be at least three hundred pounds. The brook bent away from their path as they began to climb again. And, as the afternoon began to slant down toward evening, Eddie saw something.

“Could we stop here? Rest a minute?”

“What is it?” Susannah asked.

“Yes,” Roland said. “We can stop.”

Suddenly Eddie felt Henry’s presence again, like a weight settling on his shoulders. *Oh lookit the sissy. Does the sissy see something*

in the twee? Does the sissy want to carve something? Does he? Ohhhh, ain't that CUTE?

"We don't *have* to stop. I mean, no big deal. I just—"

"—saw something," Roland finished for him. "Whatever it is, stop running your everlasting mouth and get it."

"It's really nothing." Eddie felt warm blood mount into his face. He tried to look away from the ash tree which had caught his eye.

"But it is. It's something you need, and that's a long way from nothing. If *you* need it, Eddie, *we* need it. What we don't need is a man who can't let go of the useless baggage of his memories."

The warm blood turned hot. Eddie stood with his flaming face pointed at his moccasins for a moment longer, feeling as if Roland had looked directly into his confused heart with his faded blue bombardier's eyes.

"Eddie?" Susannah asked curiously. "What is it, dear?"

Her voice gave him the courage he needed. He walked to the slim, straight ash, pulling Roland's knife from his belt.

"Maybe nothing," he muttered, and then forced himself to add: "Maybe a lot. If I don't fuck it up, maybe quite a lot."

"The ash is a noble tree, and full of power," Roland remarked from behind him, but Eddie barely heard. Henry's sneering, hectoring voice was gone; his shame was gone with it. He thought only of the one branch that had caught his eye. It thickened and bulged slightly as it ran into the trunk. It was this oddly shaped thickness that Eddie wanted.

He thought the shape of the key was buried within it—the key he had seen briefly in the fire before the burning remains of the jawbone had changed again and the rose had appeared. Three inverted V's, the center V both deeper and wider than the other two. And the little s-shape at the end. That was the secret.

A breath of his dream recurred: *Dad-a-chum, dud-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key.*

Maybe, he thought. But this time I'll have to get all of it. I think that this time ninety per cent just won't do.

Working with great care, he cut the branch from the tree and then trimmed the narrow end. He was left with a fat chunk of ash about

nine inches long. It felt heavy and vital in his hand, very much alive and willing enough to give up its secret shape . . . to a man skillful enough to tease it out, that was.

Was he that man? And did it matter?

Eddie Dean thought the answer to both questions was yes.

The gunslinger's good left hand closed over Eddie's right hand. "I think you know a secret."

"Maybe I do."

"Can you tell?"

He shook his head. "Better not to, I think. Not yet."

Roland thought this over, then nodded. "All right. I want to ask you one question, and then we'll drop the subject. Have you perhaps seen some way into the heart of my . . . my problem?"

Eddie thought: *And that's as close as he'll ever come to showing the desperation that's eating him alive.*

"I don't know. Right now I can't tell for sure. But I hope so, man. I really, really do."

Roland nodded again and released Eddie's hand. "I thank you. We still have two hours of good daylight—why don't we make use of them?"

"Fine by me."

They moved on. Roland pushed Susannah and Eddie walked ahead of them, holding the chunk of wood with the key buried in it. It seemed to throb with its own warmth, secret and powerful.

32

THAT NIGHT, AFTER SUPPER was eaten, Eddie took the gunslinger's knife from his belt and began to carve. The knife was amazingly sharp, and seemed never to lose its edge. Eddie worked slowly and carefully in the firelight, turning the chunk of ash this way and that in his hands, watching the curls of fine-grained wood rise ahead of his long, sure strokes.

Susannah lay down, laced her hands behind her head, and looked up at the stars wheeling slowly across the black sky.

At the edge of the campsite, Roland stood beyond the glow of the fire and listened as the voices of madness rose once more in his aching, confused mind.

There was a boy.

There was no boy.

Was.

Wasn't.

Was—

He closed his eyes, cupped his aching forehead in one cold hand, and wondered how long it would be until he simply snapped like an overwound bowstring.

Oh Jake, he thought. Where are you? Where are you?

And above the three of them, Old Star and Old Mother rose into their appointed places and stared at each other across the starry ruins of their ancient broken marriage.

II

KEY AND ROSE



FOR THREE WEEKS JOHN “Jake” Chambers fought bravely against the madness rising inside him. During that time he felt like the last man aboard a foundering ocean liner, working the bilge-pumps for dear life, trying to keep the ship afloat until the storm ended, the skies cleared, and help could arrive . . . help from somewhere. Help from *anywhere*. On May 31st, 1977, four days before school ended for the summer, he finally faced up to the fact that no help was going to come. It was time to give up; time to let the storm carry him away. The straw that broke the camel’s back was his Final Essay in English Comp.

John Chambers, who was Jake to the three or four boys who were almost his friends (if his father had known this little factoid, he undoubtedly would have hit the roof), was finishing his first year at The Piper School. Although he was eleven and in the sixth grade, he was small for his age, and people meeting him for the first time often thought he was much younger. In fact, he had sometimes been mistaken for a girl until a year or so ago, when he had made such a fuss about having his hair cut short that his mother had finally relented and allowed it. With his father, of course, there had been no problem about the haircut. His father had just grinned his hard, stainless steel grin and said, *The kid wants to look like a Marine, Laurie. Good for him.*

To his father, he was never Jake and rarely John. To his father, he was usually just “the kid.”

The Piper School, his father had explained to him the summer before (the Bicentennial Summer, that had been—all bunting and flags and New York Harbor filled with Tall Ships), was, quite simply, The Best Damned School In The Country For A Boy Your Age. The fact that Jake had been accepted there had nothing to do with money, Elmer Chambers explained . . . almost *insisted*. He had been savagely proud of this fact, although, even at ten, Jake had suspected it might not be a *true* fact, that it might really be a bunch of bullshit his father had turned *into* a fact so he could casually drop it into the conversation at lunch or over cocktails: *My kid? Oh, he’s going to Piper. Best Damned School In The Country For A Boy His*

Age. Money won't buy you into that school, you know; for Piper, it's brains or nothing.

Jake was perfectly aware that in the fierce furnace of Elmer Chambers's mind, the gross carbon of wish and opinion was often blasted into the hard diamonds which he called facts . . . or, in more informal circumstances, "factoids." His favorite phrase, spoken often and with reverence, was *The fact is*, and he used it every chance he got.

The fact is, money doesn't get anyone into The Piper School, his father had told him during that Bicentennial Summer, the summer of blue skies and bunting and Tall Ships, a summer which seemed golden in Jake's memory because he had not yet begun to lose his mind and all he had to worry about was whether or not he could cut the mustard at The Piper School, which sounded like a nest for newly hatched geniuses. The only thing that gets you into a place like Piper is what *you've got* up here. Elmer Chambers had reached over his desk and tapped the center of his son's forehead with a hard, nicotine-stained finger. *Get me, kid?*

Jake had nodded. It wasn't necessary to talk to his father, because his father treated everyone—including his wife—the way he treated his underlings at the TV network where he was in charge of programming and an acknowledged master of The Kill. All you had to do was listen, nod in the right places, and after a while he let you go.

Good, his father said, lighting one of the eighty Camel cigarettes he smoked each and every day. *We understand each other, then. You're going to have to work your buttsky off, but you can cut it. They never would have sent us this if you couldn't.* He picked up the letter of acceptance from The Piper School and rattled it. There was a kind of savage triumph in the gesture, as if the letter was an animal he had killed in the jungle, an animal he would now skin and eat. *So work hard. Make your grades. Make your mother and me proud of you. If you end the year with an A average in your courses, there's a trip to Disney World in it for you. That's something to shoot for, right, kiddo?*

Jake had made his grades—A's in everything (until the last three weeks, that was). He had, presumably, made his mother and father proud of him, although they were around so little that it was hard to tell. Usually there was *nobody* around when he came home from school except for Greta Shaw—the housekeeper—and so he ended up showing his A papers to her. After that, they migrated to a dark corner of his room. Sometimes Jake looked through them and wondered if they meant anything. He *wanted* them to, but he had serious doubts.

Jake didn't think he would be going to Disney World this summer, A average or no A average.

He thought the nuthouse was a much better possibility.

As he walked in through the double doors of The Piper School at 8:45 on the morning of May 31st, a terrible vision came to him. He saw his father in his office at 70 Rockefeller Plaza, leaning over his desk with a Camel jutting from the corner of his mouth, talking to one of his underlings as blue smoke wreathed his head. All of New York was spread out behind and below his father, its thump and hustle silenced by two layers of Thermopane glass.

The fact is, money doesn't get anyone into Sunnyvale Sanitarium, his father was telling the underling in a tone of grim satisfaction. He reached out and tapped the underling's forehead. The only thing that gets you into a place like that is when something big-time goes wrong up here in the attic. That's what happened to the kid. But he's working his goddam buttsky off. Makes the best fucking baskets in the place, they tell me. And when they let him out—if they ever do—there's a trip in it for him. A trip to—

“—the way station,” Jake muttered, then touched his forehead with a hand that wanted to tremble. The voices were coming back. The yelling, conflicting voices which were driving him mad.

You're dead, Jake. You were run over by a car and you're dead.

Don't be stupid! Look—see that poster? REMEMBER THE CLASS ONE PICNIC, it says. Do you think they have Class Picnics in the afterlife?

I don't know. But I know you were run over by a car.

No!

Yes. It happened on May 9th, at 8:25 A.M. You died less than a minute later.

No! No! No!

“John?”

He looked around, badly startled. Mr. Bisette, his French teacher, was standing there, looking a little concerned. Behind him, the rest of the student body was streaming into the Common Room for the morning assembly. There was very little skylarking, and no yelling at all. Presumably these other students, like Jake himself, had been told by their parents how lucky they were to be attending Piper, where money didn't matter (although tuition was \$22,000 a year), only your brains. Presumably many of them had been promised trips this summer if their grades were good enough. Presumably the parents of the lucky trip-winners would even go along in some cases. Presumably—

“John, are you okay?” Mr. Bisette asked.

“Sure,” Jake said. “Fine. I overslept a little this morning. Not awake yet, I guess.”

Mr. Bisette's face relaxed and he smiled. “Happens to the best of us.”

Not to my dad. The master of The Kill never oversleeps.

“Are you ready for your French final?” Mr. Bisette asked. “*Voulez-vous faire l'examen cet après-midi?*”

“I think so,” Jake said. In truth he didn't know if he was ready for the exam or not. He couldn't even remember if he had *studied* for the French final or not. These days nothing seemed to matter much except for the voices in his head.

“I want to tell you again how much I enjoyed having you this year, John. I wanted to tell your folks, too, but they missed Parents' Night —”

“They're pretty busy,” Jake said.

Mr. Bisette nodded. “Well, I have enjoyed you. I just wanted to say so . . . and that I'm looking forward to having you back for French II next year.”

“Thanks,” Jake said, and wondered what Mr. Bisette would say if he added, *But I don't think I'll be taking French II next year, unless I*

can get a correspondence course delivered to my postal box at good old Sunnyvale.

Joanne Franks, the school secretary, appeared in the doorway of the Common Room with her small silver-plated bell in her hand. At The Piper School, *all* bells were rung by hand. Jake supposed that if you were a parent, that was one of its charms. Memories of the Little Red Schoolhouse and all that. He hated it himself. The sound of that bell seemed to go right through his head—

I can't hold on much longer, he thought despairingly. I'm sorry, but I'm losing it. I'm really, really losing it.

Mr. Bissette had caught sight of Ms. Franks. He turned away, then turned back again. “Is everything all right, John? You’ve seemed preoccupied these last few weeks. Troubled. Is something on your mind?”

Jake was almost undone by the kindness in Mr. Bissette’s voice, but then he imagined how Mr. Bissette would look if he said: *Yes. Something is on my mind. One hell of a nasty little factoid. I died, you see, and I went into another world. And then I died again. You’re going to say that stuff like that doesn’t happen, and of course you’re right, and part of my mind knows you’re right, but most of my mind knows that you’re wrong. It did happen. I did die.*

If he said something like that, Mr. Bissette would be on the phone to Elmer Chambers at once, and Jake thought that Sunnyvale Sanitarium would probably look like a rest-cure after all the stuff his father would have to say on the subject of kids who started having crazy notions just before Finals Week. Kids who did things that couldn’t be discussed over lunch or cocktails. Kids Who Let Down The Side.

Jake forced himself to smile at Mr. Bissette. “I’m a little worried about exams, that’s all.”

Mr. Bissette winked. “You’ll do fine.”

Ms. Franks began to ring the Assembly Bell. Each peal stabbed into Jake’s ears and then seemed to flash across his brain like a small rocket.

“Come on,” Mr. Bissette said. “We’ll be late. Can’t be late on the first day of Finals Week, can we?”

They went in past Ms. Franks and her clashing bell. Mr. Bissette headed toward the row of seats called Faculty Choir. There were lots of cute names like that at Piper School; the auditorium was the Common Room, lunch-hour was Outs, seventh- and eighth-graders were Upper Boys and Girls, and, of course, the folding chairs over by the piano (which Ms. Franks would soon begin to pound as mercilessly as she rang her silver bell) was Faculty Choir. All part of the tradition, Jake supposed. If you were a parent who knew your kid had Outs in the Common Room at noon instead of just slopping up Tuna Surprise in the caff, you relaxed into the assurance that everything was A-OK in the education department.

He slipped into a seat at the rear of the room and let the morning's announcements wash over him. The terror ran endlessly on in his mind, making him feel like a rat trapped on an exercise wheel. And when he tried to look ahead to some better, brighter time, he could see only darkness.

The ship was his sanity, and it was sinking.

Mr. Harley, the headmaster, approached the podium and imparted a brief exordium about the importance of Finals Week, and how the grades they received would constitute another step upon The Great Road of Life. He told them that the school was depending on them, *he* was depending on them, and their parents were depending on them. He did not tell them that the entire free world was depending on them, but he strongly implied that this might be so. He finished by telling them that bells would be suspended during Finals Week (the first and only piece of good news Jake had received that morning).

Ms. Franks, who had assumed her seat at the piano, struck an invocatory chord. The student body, seventy boys and fifty girls, each turned out in a neat and sober way that bespoke their parents' taste and financial stability, rose as one and began to sing the school song. Jake mouthed the words and thought about the place where he had awakened after dying. At first he had believed himself to be in hell . . . and when the man in the black hooded robe came along, he had been sure of it.

Then, of course, the other man had come along. A man Jake had almost come to love.

But he let me fall. He killed me.

He could feel prickly sweat breaking out on the back of his neck and between his shoulderblades.

*“So we hail the halls of Piper,
Hold its banner high;
Hail to thee, our alma mater,
Piper, do or die!”*

God, *what a shitty song*, Jake thought, and it suddenly occurred to him that his father would love it.

2

PERIOD ONE WAS ENGLISH Comp, the only class where there was no final. Their assignment had been to write a Final Essay at home. This was to be a typed document between fifteen hundred and four thousand words long. The subject Ms. Avery had assigned was *My Understanding of Truth*. The Final Essay would count as twenty-five per cent of their final grade for the semester.

Jake came in and took his seat in the third row. There were only eleven pupils in all. Jake remembered Orientation Day last September, when Mr. Harley had told them that Piper had The Highest Teacher To Student Ratio Of Any Fine Private Middle School In The East. He had popped his fist repeatedly on the lectern at the front of the Common Room to emphasize this point. Jake hadn't been terribly impressed, but he had passed the information along to his father. He thought his father *would* be impressed, and he had not been wrong.

He unzipped his bookbag and carefully removed the blue folder which contained his Final Essay. He laid it on his desk, meaning to give it a final look-over, when his eye was caught by the door at the left side of the room. It led, he knew, to the cloakroom, and it was closed today because it was seventy degrees in New York and no one had a coat which needed storage. Nothing back there except a

lot of brass coat hooks in a line on the wall and a long rubber mat on the floor for boots. A few boxes of school supplies—chalk, blue-books and such—were stored in the far corner.

No big deal.

All the same, Jake rose from his seat, leaving the folder unopened on the desk, and walked across to the door. He could hear his classmates murmuring quietly together, and the rattle of pages as they checked their own Final Essays for that crucial misplaced modifier or fuzzy phrase, but these sounds seemed far away.

It was the door which held his attention.

In the last ten days or so, as the voices in his head grew louder and louder, Jake had become more and more fascinated with doors—all kinds of doors. He must have opened the one between his bedroom and the upstairs hallway five hundred times in just the last week, and the one between his bedroom and the bathroom a thousand. Each time he did it, he felt a tight ball of hope and anticipation in his chest, as if the answer to all of his problems lay somewhere behind this door or that one and he would surely find it ... eventually. But each time it was only the hall, or the bathroom, or the front walk, or whatever.

Last Thursday he had come home from school, thrown himself on his bed, and had fallen asleep—sleep, it seemed, was the only refuge which remained to him. Except when he'd awakened forty-five minutes later, he had been standing in the bathroom doorway, peering dazedly in at nothing more exciting than the toilet and the basin. Luckily, no one had seen him.

Now, as he approached the cloakroom door, he felt that same dazzling burst of hope, a certainty that the door would not open on a shadowy closet containing only the persistent smells of winter—flannel, rubber, and wet wool—but on some other world where he could be *whole* again. Hot, dazzling light would fall across the classroom floor in a widening triangle, and he would see birds circling in a faded blue sky the color of

(his eyes)

old jeans. A desert wind would blow his hair back and dry the nervous sweat on his brow.

He would step through this door and be healed.

Jake turned the knob and opened the door. Inside was only darkness and a row of gleaming brass hooks. One long-forgotten mitten lay near the stacked piles of blue-books in the corner.

His heart sank, and suddenly Jake felt like simply creeping into that dark room with its bitter smells of winter and chalkdust. He could move the mitten and sit in the corner under the coat hooks. He could sit on the rubber mat where you were supposed to put your boots in the wintertime. He could sit there, put his thumb in his mouth, pull his knees tight against his chest, close his eyes, and . . . and . . .

And just give up.

This idea—the *relief* of this idea—was incredibly attractive. It would be an end to the terror and confusion and dislocation. That last was somehow the worst; that persistent feeling that his whole life had turned into a funhouse mirror-maze.

Yet there was deep steel in Jake Chambers as surely as there was deep steel in Eddie and Susannah. Now it flashed out its dour blue lighthouse gleam in the darkness. There would be no giving up. Whatever was loose inside him might tear his sanity away from him in the end, but he would give it no quarter in the meantime. Be damned if he would.

Never! he thought fiercely. *Never! Nev—*

“When you’ve finished your inventory of the school-supplies in the cloakroom, John, perhaps you’d care to join us,” Ms. Avery said from behind him in her dry, cultured voice.

There was a small gust of giggles as Jake turned away from the cloakroom. Ms. Avery was standing behind her desk with her long fingers tented lightly on the blotter, looking at him out of her calm, intelligent face. She was wearing her blue suit today, and her hair was pulled back in its usual bun. Nathaniel Hawthorne looked over her shoulder, frowning at Jake from his place on the wall.

“Sorry,” Jake muttered, and closed the door. He was immediately seized by a strong impulse to open it again, to double-check, to see if *this* time that other world, with its hot sun and desert vistas, was there.

Instead he walked back to his seat. Petra Jesserling looked at him with merry, dancing eyes. “Take *me* in there with you next time,” she whispered. “Then you’ll have something to look at.”

Jake smiled in a distracted way and slipped into his seat.

“Thank you, John,” Ms. Avery said in her endlessly calm voice. “Now, before you pass in your Final Essays—which I am sure will all be very fine, very neat, very *specific*—I should like to pass out the English Department’s Short List of recommended summer reading. I will have a word to say about several of these excellent books—”

As she spoke she gave a small stack of mimeographed sheets to David Surrey. David began to hand them out, and Jake opened his folder to take a final look at what he had written on the topic *My Understanding of Truth*. He was genuinely interested in this, because he could no more remember writing his Final Essay, than he could remember studying for his French final.

He looked at the title page with puzzlement and growing unease. MY UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH, *By John Chambers*, was neatly typed and centered on the sheet, and that was all right, but he had for some reason pasted two photographs below it. One was of a door—he thought it might be the one at Number 10, Downing Street, in London—and the other was of an Amtrak train. They were color shots, undoubtedly culled from some magazine.

Why did I do that? And when did I do it?

He turned the page and stared down at the first page of his Final Essay, unable to believe or understand what he was seeing. Then, as understanding began to trickle through his shock, he felt an escalating sense of horror. It had finally happened; he had finally lost enough of his mind so that other people would be able to *tell*.

MY UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH By John Chambers

“I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

—T. S. “BUTCH” ELIOT

“My first thought was, he lied in every word.”

—ROBERT “SUNDANCE” BROWNING

The gunslinger is the truth.

Roland is the truth.

The Prisoner is the truth.

The Lady of Shadows is the truth.

The Prisoner and the Lady are married. That is the truth.

The way station is the truth.

The Speaking Demon is the truth.

We went under the mountains and that is the truth.

There were monsters under the mountain. That is the truth.

One of them had an Amoco gas pump between his legs and was pretending it was his penis. That is the truth.

Roland let me die. That is the truth.

I still love him.

That is the truth.

“And it is so very important that you *all* read *The Lord of the Flies*,” Ms. Avery was saying in her clear but somehow pale voice. “And when you do, you must ask yourselves certain questions. A good novel is often like a series of riddles within riddles, and this is a very good novel—one of the best written in the second half of the twentieth century. So ask yourselves first what the symbolic significance of the conch shell might be. Second—”

Far away. Far, far away. Jake turned to the second page of his Final Essay with a trembling hand, leaving a dark smear of sweat on

the first page.

When is a door not a door? When it's a jar, and that is the truth.

Blaine is the truth.

Blaine is the truth.

What has four wheels and flies? A garbage truck, and that is the truth.

Blaine is the truth.

You have to watch Blaine all the time, Blaine is a pain, and that is the truth.

I'm pretty sure that Blaine is dangerous, and that is the truth.

What is black and white and red all over? A blushing zebra, and that is the truth.

Blaine is the truth.

I want to go back and that is the truth.

I have to go back and that is the truth.

I'll go crazy if I don't go back and that is the truth.

I can't go home again unless I find a stone a rose a door and that is the truth.

Choo-choo, and that is the truth.

Choo-choo. Choo-choo.

Choo-choo. Choo-choo. Choo-choo.

Choo-choo. Choo-choo. Choo-choo. Choo-choo.

I am afraid. That is the truth.

Choo-choo.

Jake looked, up slowly. His heart was beating so hard that he saw a bright light like the afterimage of a flashbulb dancing in front of his eyes, a light that pulsed in and out with each titanic thud of his heart.

He saw Ms. Avery handing his Final Essay to his mother and father. Mr. Bissette was standing beside Ms. Avery, looking grave. He heard Ms. Avery say in her clear, pale voice: *Your son is seriously ill. If you need proof, just look at this Final Essay.*

John hasn't been himself for the last three weeks or so, Mr. Bissette added. He seems frightened some of the time and dazed all

of the time . . . not quite there, if you see what I mean. Je pense que John est fou . . . comprenez-vous?

Ms. Avery again: *Do you perhaps keep certain mood-altering prescription drugs in the house where John might have access to them?*

Jake didn't know about mood-altering drugs, but he knew his father kept several grams of cocaine in the bottom drawer of his study desk. His father would undoubtedly think he had been into it.

"Now let me say a word about *Catch-22*," Ms. Avery said from the front of the room. "This is a very *challenging* book for sixth- and seventh-grade students, but you will nonetheless find it entirely enchanting, if you open your minds to its *special charm*. You may think of this novel, if you like, as a comedy of the surreal."

I don't need to read something like that, Jake thought. I'm living something like that, and it's no comedy.

He turned over to the last page of his Final Essay. There were no words on it. Instead he had pasted another picture to the paper. It was a photograph of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He had used a crayon to scribble it black. The dark, waxy lines looped and swooped in lunatic coils.

He could remember doing none of this.

Absolutely *none* of it.

Now he heard his father saying to Mr. Bisette: *Fou. Yes, he's definitely fou. A kid who'd fuck up his chance at a school like Piper HAS to be fou, wouldn't you say? Well. . . I can handle this. Handling things is my job. Sunnyvale's the answer. He needs to spend some time in Sunnyvale, making baskets and getting his shit back together. Don't you worry about our kid, folks; he can run . . . but he can't hide.*

Would they actually send him away to the nuthatch if it started to seem that his elevator no longer went all the way to the top floor? Jake thought the answer to that was a big you bet. No way his father was going to put up with a loony around the house. The name of the place they put him in might not be Sunnyvale, but there would be bars on the windows and there would be young men in white coats and crepe-soled shoes prowling the halls. The young men would

have big muscles and watchful eyes and access to hypodermic needles full of artificial sleep.

They'll tell everybody I went away, Jake thought. The arguing voices in his head were temporarily stilled by a rising tide of panic. They'll say I'm spending the year with my aunt and uncle in Modesto . . . or in Sweden as an exchange student . . . or repairing satellites in outer space. My mother won't like it . . . she'll cry . . . but she'll go along. She has her boyfriends, and besides, she always goes along with what he decides. She . . . they . . . me . . .

He felt a shriek welling up his throat and pressed his lips tightly together to hold it in. He looked down again at the wild black scribbles snarled across the photograph of the Leaning Tower and thought: *I have to get out of here. I have to get out right now.*

He raised his hand.

"Yes, John, what is it?" Ms. Avery was looking at him with the expression of mild exasperation she reserved for students who interrupted her in mid-lecture.

"I'd like to step out for a moment, if I may," Jake said.

This was another example of Piper-speak. Piper students did not ever have to "take a leak" or "tap a kidney" or, God forbid, "drop a load." The unspoken assumption was that Piper students were too perfect to create waste byproducts in their tastefully silent glides through life. Once in a while someone requested permission to "step out for a moment," and that was all.

Ms. Avery sighed. "Must you, John?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"All right. Return as soon as possible."

"Yes, Ms. Avery."

He closed the folder as he got up, took hold of it, then reluctantly let go again. No good. Ms. Avery would wonder why he was taking his Final Essay to the toilet with him. He should have removed the damning pages from the folder and stuffed them in his pocket before asking for permission to step out. Too late now.

Jake walked down the aisle toward the door, leaving his folder on the desk and his bookbag lying beneath it.

“Hope everything comes out all right, Chambers,” David Surrey whispered, and snickered into his hand.

“Still your restless lips, David,” Ms. Avery said, clearly exasperated now, and the whole class laughed.

Jake reached the door leading to the hall, and as he grasped the knob, that feeling of hope and surety rose in him again: *This is it—really it. I’ll open the door and the desert sun will shine in. I’ll feel that dry wind on my face. I’ll step through and never see this classroom again.*

He opened the door and it was only the hallway on the other side, but he was right about one thing just the same: he never saw Ms. Avery’s classroom again.

4

HE WALKED SLOWLY DOWN the dim, wood-panelled corridor, sweating lightly. He walked past classroom doors he would have felt compelled to open if not for the clear glass windows set in each one. He looked into Mr. Bissette’s French II class and Mr. Knopf’s Introduction to Geometry class. In both rooms the pupils sat with pencils in hand and heads bowed over open blue-books. He looked into Mr. Harley’s Spoken Arts class and saw Stan Dorfman—one of those acquaintances who were not quite friends—beginning his Final Speech. Stan looked scared to death, but Jake could have told Stan he didn’t have the slightest idea what fear—*real* fear—was all about.

I died.

No. I didn’t.

Did too.

Did not.

Did.

Didn’t.

He came to a door marked GIRLS. He pushed it open, expecting to see a bright desert sky and a blue haze of mountains on the

horizon. Instead he saw Belinda Stevens standing at one of the sinks, looking into the mirror above the basin and squeezing a pimple on her forehead.

“Jesus Christ, do you mind?” she asked.

“Sorry. Wrong door. I thought it was the desert.”

“*What?*”

But he had already let the door go and it was swinging shut on its pneumatic elbow. He passed the drinking fountain and opened the door marked BOYS. *This* was it, he knew it, was sure of it, this was the door which would take him back—

Three urinals gleamed spotlessly under the fluorescent lights. A tap dripped solemnly into a sink. That was all.

Jake let the door close. He walked on down the hall, his heels making firm little clicks on the tiles. He glanced into the office before passing it and saw only Ms. Franks. She was talking on the telephone, swinging back and forth in her swivel chair and playing with a lock of her hair. The silver-plated bell stood on the desk beside her. Jake waited until she swivelled away from the door and then hurried past. Thirty seconds later he was emerging into the bright sunshine of a morning in late May. .

I've gone truant, he thought. Even his distraction did not keep him from being amazed at this unexpected development. *When I don't come back from the bathroom in five minutes or so, Ms. Avery will send somebody to check . . . and then they'll know. They'll all know that I've left school, gone truant.*

He thought of the folder lying on his desk.

They'll read it and they'll think I'm crazy. Fou. Sure they will. Of course. Because I am.

Then another voice spoke. It was, he thought, the voice of the man with the bombardier's eyes, the man who wore the two big guns slung low on his hips. The voice was cold . . . but not without comfort.

No, Jake, Roland said. You're not crazy. You're lost and scared, but you're not crazy and need fear neither your shadow in the morning striding behind you nor your shadow at evening rising to meet you. You have to find your way back home, that's all.

“But where do I go?” Jake whispered. He stood on the sidewalk of Fifty-sixth Street between Park and Madison, watching the traffic bolt past. A city bus snored by, laying a thin trail of acrid blue diesel smoke. “Where do I go? Where’s the fucking *door*?”

But the voice of the gunslinger had fallen silent.

Jake turned left, in the direction of the East River, and began to walk blindly forward. He had no idea where he was going—no idea at all. He could only hope his feet would carry him to the right place ... as they had carried him to the wrong one not long ago.

5

IT HAD HAPPENED THREE weeks earlier.

One could not say *It all began three weeks earlier*, because that gave the impression that there had been some sort of progression, and that wasn’t right. There had been a progression to the *voices*, to the violence with which each insisted on its own particular version of reality, but the rest of it had happened all at once.

He left home at eight o’clock to walk to school—he always walked when the weather was good, and the weather this May had been absolutely fine. His father had left for the Network, his mother was still in bed, and Mrs. Greta Shaw was in the kitchen, drinking coffee and reading her *New York Post*.

“Goodbye, Greta,” he said. “I’m going to school now.”

She raised a hand to him without looking up from the paper. “Have a good day, Johnny.”

All according to routine. Just another day in the life.

And so it had been for the next fifteen hundred seconds. Then everything had changed forever.

He idled along, bookbag in one hand, lunch sack in the other, looking in the windows. Seven hundred and twenty seconds from the end of his life as he had always known it, he paused to look in the window of Brendio’s, where mannequins dressed in fur coats and

Edwardian suits stood in stiff poses of conversation. He was thinking only of going bowling that afternoon after school. His average was 158, great for a kid who was only eleven. His ambition was to some day be a bowler on the pro tour (and if his father had known *this* little factoid, he *also* would have hit the roof).

Closing in now—closing in on the moment when his sanity would be suddenly eclipsed.

He crossed Thirty-ninth and there were four hundred seconds left. Had to wait for the WALK light at Forty-first and there were two hundred and seventy. Paused to look in the novelty shop on the corner of Fifth and Forty-second and there were a hundred and ninety. And now, with just over three minutes left in his ordinary life, Jake Chambers walked beneath the unseen umbrella of that force which Roland called *ka-tet*.

An odd, uneasy feeling began to creep over him. At first he thought it was a feeling of being watched, and then he realized it wasn't that at all . . . or not *precisely* that. He felt that he had been here before; that he was reliving a dream he had mostly forgotten. He waited for the feeling to pass, but it didn't. It grew stronger, and now began to mix with a sensation he reluctantly recognized as terror.

Up ahead, on the near corner of Fifth and Forty-third, a black man in a Panama hat was setting up a pretzel-and-soda cart.

He's the one that yells "Oh my God, he's kilt!" Jake thought.

Approaching the far corner was a fat lady with a Bloomingdale's bag in her hand.

She'll drop the bag. Drop the bag and put her hands to her mouth and scream. The bag will split open. There's a doll inside the bag. It's wrapped in a red towel. I'll see this from the street. From where I'll be lying in the street with my blood soaking into my pants and spreading around me in a pool.

Behind the fat woman was a tall man in a gray nailhead worsted suit. He was carrying a briefcase.

He's the one who vomits on his shoes. He's the one who drops his briefcase and throws up on his shoes. What's happening to me?

Yet his feet carried him numbly forward toward the intersection, where people were crossing in a brisk, steady stream. Somewhere behind him, closing in, was a killer priest. He *knew* this, just as he knew that the priest's hands would in a moment be outstretched to push . . . but he could not look around. It was like being locked in a nightmare where things simply had to take their course.

Fifty-three seconds left now. Ahead of him, the pretzel vendor was opening a hatch in the side of his cart.

He's going to take out a bottle of Yoo-Hoo, Jake thought. Not a can but a bottle. He'll shake it up and drink it all at once.

The pretzel vendor brought out a bottle of Yoo-Hoo, shook it vigorously, and spun off the cap.

Forty seconds left.

Now the light will change.

White WALK went out. Red DONT WALK began to flash rapidly on and off. And somewhere, less than half a block away, a big blue Cadillac was now rolling toward the intersection of Fifth and Forty-third. Jake *knew* this, just as he knew the driver was a fat man wearing a hat almost the exact same blue shade as his car.

I'm going to die!

He wanted to scream this aloud to the people walking heedlessly all around him, but his jaws were locked shut. His feet swept him serenely onward toward the intersection. The DONT WALK sign stopped flashing and shone out its solid red warning. The pretzel vendor tossed his empty Yoo-Hoo bottle into the wire trash basket on the corner. The fat lady stood on the corner across the street from Jake, holding her shopping bag by the handles. The man in the nailhead suit was directly behind her. Now there were eighteen seconds left.

Time for the toy truck to go by, Jake thought.

Ahead of him a van with a picture of a happy jumping-jack and the words TOOKER'S WHOLESALE TOYS printed on the side swept through the intersection, jolting up and down in the potholes. Behind him, Jake knew, the man in the black robe was beginning to move faster, closing the gap, now reaching out with his long hands. Yet he

could not look around, as you couldn't look around in dreams when something awful was gaining on you.

Run! And if you can't run, sit down and grab hold of a No Parking sign! Don't just let it happen!

But he was powerless to stop it from happening. Ahead, on the edge of the curb, was a young woman in a white sweater and a black skirt. To her left was a young Chicano guy with a boombox. A Donna Summer disco tune was just ending. The next song, Jake knew, would be "Dr. Love," by Kiss.

They're going to move apart—

Even as the thought came, the woman moved a step to her right. The Chicano guy moved a step to his left, creating a gap between them. Jake's traitor feet swept him into the gap. Nine seconds now.

Down the street, bright May sunshine twinkled on a Cadillac hood ornament. It was, Jake knew, a 1976 Sedan de Ville. Six seconds. The Caddy was speeding up. The light was getting ready to change and the man driving the de Ville, the fat man in the blue hat with the feather stuck jauntily in the brim, meant to scat through the intersection before it could. Three seconds. Behind Jake, the man in black was lunging forward. On the young man's boombox, "Love to Love You, Baby" ended and "Dr. Love" began.

Two.

The Cadillac changed to the lane nearest Jake's side of the street and charged down on the intersection, its killer grille snarling.

One.

Jake's breath stopped in his throat.

None.

"Uh!" Jake cried as the hands struck him firmly in the back, pushing him, pushing him into the street, pushing him out of his life—

Except there *were* no hands.

He reeled forward nevertheless, hands flailing at the air, his mouth a dark O of dismay. The Chicano guy with the boombox reached out, grabbed Jake's arm, and hauled him backward. "Look out, little hero," he said. "That traffic turn you into bratwurst."

The Cadillac floated by. Jake caught a glimpse of the fat man in the blue hat peering out through the windshield, and then it was

gone.

That was when it happened; that was when he split down the middle and became two boys. One lay dying in the street. The other stood here on the corner, watching in dumb, stricken amazement as DONT WALK turned to WALK again and people began to cross around him just as if nothing had happened . . . as, indeed, nothing had.

I'm alive! half of his mind rejoiced, screaming with relief.

Dead! the other half screamed back. *Dead in the street! They're all gathering around me, and the man in black who pushed me is saying "I am a priest. Let me through."*

Waves of faintness rushed through him and turned his thoughts to billowing parachute silk. He saw the fat lady approaching, and as she passed, Jake looked into her bag. He saw the bright blue eyes of a doll peeping above the edge of a red towel, just as he had known he would. Then she was gone. The pretzel vendor was not yelling *Oh my God, he's kilt!*; he was continuing to set up for the day's business while he whistled the Donna Summer tune that had been playing on the Chicano guy's radio.

Jake turned around, looking wildly for the priest who was not a priest. He wasn't there.

Jake moaned.

Snap out of it! What's wrong with you?

He didn't know. He only knew he was supposed to be lying in the street right now, getting ready to die while the fat woman screamed and the guy in the nailhead worsted suit threw up and the man in black pushed through the gathering crowd.

And in part of his mind, that did seem to be happening.

The faintness began to return. Jake suddenly dropped his lunch sack to the pavement and slapped himself across the face as hard as he could. A woman on her way to work gave him a queer look. Jake ignored her. He left his lunch lying on the sidewalk and plunged into the intersection, also ignoring the red DONT WALK light, which had begun to stutter on and off again. It didn't matter now. Death had approached . . . and then passed by without a second glance. It

hadn't been meant to happen that way, and on the deepest level of his existence he knew that, but it had.

Maybe now he would live forever.

The thought made him feel like screaming all over again.

6

HIS HEAD HAD CLEARED a little by the time he got to school, and his mind had gone to work trying to convince him that nothing was wrong, really nothing at all. Maybe something a little weird *had* happened, some sort of psychic flash, a momentary peek into one possible future, but so what? No big deal, right? The idea was actually sort of cool—the kind of thing they were always printing in the weird supermarket newspapers Greta Shaw liked to read when she was sure Jake's mother wasn't around—papers like the *National Enquirer* and *Inside View*. Except, of course, in those papers the psychic flash was always a kind of tactical nuclear strike—a woman who dreamed of a plane crash and changed her reservations, or a guy who dreamed his brother was being held prisoner in a Chinese fortune cookie factory and it turned out to be true. When your psychic flash consisted of knowing that a Kiss song was going to play next on the radio, that a fat lady had a doll wrapped in a red towel in her Bloomingdale's bag, and that a pretzel vendor was going to drink a bottle of Yoo-Hoo instead of a can, how big a deal could it be?

Forget it, he advised himself. It's over.

A great idea, except by period three he knew it *wasn't* over; it was just beginning. He sat in Pre-Algebra, watching Mr. Knopf solving simple equations on the board, and realized with dawning horror that a whole new set of memories was surfacing in his mind. It was like watching strange objects float slowly- toward the surface of a muddy lake.

I'm in a place I don't know, he thought. I mean, I will know it—or would have known it if the Cadillac had hit me. It's the way station—but the part of me that's there doesn't know that yet. That part only knows it's in the desert someplace, and there are no people. I've been crying, because I'm scared. I'm scared that this might be hell.

By three o'clock, when he arrived at Mid-Town Lanes, he knew he had found the pump in the stables and had gotten a drink of water. The water was very cold and tasted strongly of minerals. Soon he would go inside and find a small supply of dried beef in a room which had once been a kitchen. He knew this as clearly and surely as he'd known the pretzel vendor would select a bottle of Yoo-Hoo, and that the doll peeking out of the Bloomingdale's bag had blue eyes.

It was like being able to remember forward in time.

He bowled only two strings—the first a 96, the second an 87. Timmy looked at his sheet when he turned it in at the counter and shook his head. “You're having an off-day today, champ,” he said.

“You don't know the half of it,” Jake said.

Timmy took a closer look. “You okay? You look really pale.”

“I think I might be coming down with a bug.” This didn't feel like a lie, either. He was sure as hell coming down with *something*.

“Go home and go to bed,” Timmy advised. “Drink lots of clear liquids—gin, vodka, stuff like that.”

Jake smiled dutifully. “Maybe I will.”

He walked slowly home. All of New York was spread out around him, New York at its most seductive—a late-afternoon street serenade with a musician on every corner, all the trees in bloom, and everyone apparently in a good mood. Jake saw all this, but he also saw *behind* it: saw himself cowering in the shadows of the kitchen as the man in black drank like a grinning dog from the stable pump, saw himself sobbing with relief as he—or it—moved on without discovering him, saw himself falling deeply asleep as the sun went down and the stars began to come out like chips of ice in the harsh purple desert sky.

He let himself into the duplex apartment with his key and walked into the kitchen to get something to eat. He wasn't hungry, but it was habit. He was headed for the refrigerator when his eye happened on

the pantry door and he stopped. He realized suddenly that the way station—and all the rest of that strange other world where he now belonged—was behind that door. All he had to do was push through it and rejoin the Jake that already existed there. The queer doubling in his mind would end; the voices, endlessly arguing the question of whether or not he had been dead since 8:25 that morning, would fall silent.

Jake pushed open the pantry door with both hands, his face already breaking into a sunny, relieved smile . . . and then froze as Mrs. Shaw, who was standing on a step-stool at the back of the pantry, screamed. The can of tomato paste she had been holding dropped out of her hand and fell to the floor. She tottered on the stool and Jake rushed forward to steady her before she could join the tomato paste.

“Moses in the bullrushes!” she gasped, fluttering a hand rapidly against the front of her housedress. “You scared the bejabbers out of me, Johnny!”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He really was, but he was also bitterly disappointed. It had only been the pantry, after all. He had been so *sure*—

“What are you doing, creeping around here, anyway? This is your bowling day! I didn’t expect you for at least another hour! I haven’t even made your snack yet, so don’t be expecting it.”

“That’s okay. I’m not very hungry, anyway.” He bent down and picked up the can she had dropped.

“Wouldn’t know it from the way you came bustin in here,” she grumbled.

“I thought I heard a mouse or something. I guess it was just you.”

“I guess it was.” She descended the step-stool and took the can from him. “You look like you’re comin down with the flu or something, Johnny.” She pressed her hand against his forehead. “You don’t feel hot, but that doesn’t always mean much.”

“I think I’m just tired,” Jake said, and thought: *If only that was all it was.* “Maybe I’ll just have a soda and watch TV for a while.”

She grunted. “You got any papers you want to show me? If you do, make it fast. I’m behind on supper.”

“Nothing today,” he said. He left the pantry, got a soda, then went into the living room. He turned on *Hollywood Squares* and watched vacantly as the voices argued and the new memories of that dusty other world continued to surface.

7

His MOTHER AND FATHER didn't notice anything was wrong with him—his father didn't even get in until 9:30—and that was fine by Jake. He went to bed at ten and lay awake in the darkness, listening to the city outside his window: brakes, horns, wailing sirens.

You died.

I didn't, though. I'm right here, safe in my own bed.

That doesn't matter. You died, and you know it.

The hell of it was, he knew both things.

I don't know which voice is true, but I know I can't go on like this.

So just quit it, both of you. Stop arguing and leave me alone. Okay? Please?

But they wouldn't. *Couldn't*, apparently. And it came to Jake that he ought to get up—*right now*—and open the door to the bathroom. The other world would be there. The way station would be there and the rest of *him* would be there, too, huddled under an ancient blanket in the stable, trying to sleep and wondering what in hell had happened.

I can tell him, Jake thought excitedly. He threw back the covers, suddenly knowing that the door beside his bookcase no longer led into the bathroom but to a world that smelled of heat and purple sage and fear in a handful of dust, a world that now lay under the shadowing wing of night. *I can tell him, but I won't have to . . . because I'll be IN him . . . I'll BE him!*

He raced across his darkened room, almost laughing with relief, and shoved open the door. And—

And it was his bathroom. Just his bathroom, with the framed Marvin Gaye poster on the wall and the shapes of the venetian blinds lying on the tiled floor in bars of light and shadow.

He stood there for a long time, trying to swallow his disappointment. It wouldn't go. And it was bitter.

Bitter.

8

THE THREE WEEKS BETWEEN then and now stretched like a grim, blighted terrain in Jake's memory—a nightmare wasteland where there had been no peace, no rest, no respite from pain. He had watched, like a helpless prisoner watching the sack of a city he had once ruled, as his mind buckled under the steadily increasing pressure of the phantom voices and memories. He had hoped the memories would stop when he reached the point in them where the man named Roland had allowed him to drop into the chasm under the mountains, but they didn't. Instead they simply recycled and began to play themselves over again, like a tape set to repeat and repeat until it either breaks or someone comes along and shuts it off.

His perceptions of his more-or-less real life as a boy in New York City grew increasingly spotty as this terrible schism grew deeper. He could remember going to school, and to the movies on the weekend, and out to Sunday brunch with his parents a week ago (or had it been two?), but he remembered these things the way a man who has suffered malaria may remember the deepest, darkest phase of his illness: people became shadows, voices seemed to echo and overlap each other, and even such a simple act as eating a sandwich or obtaining a Coke from the machine in the gymnasium became a struggle. Jake had pushed through those days in a fugue of yelling voices and doubled memories. His obsession with doors—all kinds of doors—deepened; his hope that the gunslinger's world might lie

behind one of them never quite died. Nor was that so strange, since it was the only hope he had.

But as of today the game was over. He'd never had a chance of winning anyway, not really. He had given up. He had gone truant. Jake walked blindly east along the gridwork of streets, head down, with no idea of where he was going or what he would do when he got there.

9

AFTER WALKING FOR A while, he began to come out of this unhappy daze and take some notice of his surroundings. He was standing on the corner of Lexington Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street with no memory at all of how he had come to be there. He noticed for the first time that it was an absolutely gorgeous morning. May 9th, the day this madness had started, had been pretty, but today was ten times better—that day, perhaps, when spring looks around herself and sees summer standing nearby, strong and handsome and with a cocky grin on his tanned face. The sun shone brightly off the glass walls of the midtown buildings; the shadow of each pedestrian was black and crisp. The sky overhead was a clear and blameless blue, dotted here and there with plump foul-weather clouds.

Down the street, two businessmen in expensive, well-cut suits were standing at a board wall which had been erected around a construction site. They were laughing and passing something back and forth. Jake walked in their direction, curious, and as he drew closer he saw that the two businessmen were playing tic-tac-toe on the wall, using an expensive Mark Cross pen to draw the grids and make the X's and O's. Jake thought this was a complete gas. As he approached, one of them made an O in the upper right-hand corner of the grid and then slashed a diagonal line through the middle.

“Skunked again!” his friend said. Then this man, who looked like a high-powered executive or lawyer or big-time stockbroker, took the Mark Cross pen and drew another grid.

The first businessman, the winner, glanced to his left and saw Jake. He smiled. “Some day, huh, kid?”

“It sure is,” Jake said, delighted to find he meant every word.

“Too nice for school, huh?”

This time Jake actually laughed. Piper School, where you had Outs instead of lunch and where you sometimes stepped out but never had to take a crap, suddenly seemed far away and not at all important. “You know it.”

“You want a game? Billy here couldn’t beat me at this when we were in the fifth grade, and he still can’t.”

“Leave the kid alone,” the second businessman said, holding out the Mark Cross pen. “This time you’re history.” He winked at Jake, and Jake amazed himself by winking back. He walked on, leaving the men to their game. The sense that something totally wonderful was going to happen—had perhaps already *begun* to happen—continued to grow, and his feet no longer seemed to be quite touching the pavement.

The WALK light on the corner came on, and he began to cross Lexington Avenue. He stopped in the middle of the street so suddenly that a messenger-boy on a ten-speed bike almost ran him down. It was a beautiful spring day—agreed. But that wasn’t why he felt so good, so suddenly aware of everything that was going on around him, so sure that some great thing was about to occur.

The voices had stopped.

They weren’t gone for good—he somehow knew this—but for the time being they had *stopped*. Why?

Jake suddenly thought of two men arguing in a room. They sit facing each other over a table, jawing at each other with increasing bitterness. After a while they begin to lean toward each other, thrusting their faces pugnaciously forward, bathing each other with a fine mist of outraged spittle. Soon they will come to blows. But before that can happen, they hear a steady thumping noise—the sound of a

bass drum—and then a jaunty flourish of brass. The two men stop arguing and look at each other, puzzled.

What's that? one asks.

Dunno, the other replies. *Sounds like a parade.*

They rush to the window and it is a parade—a uniformed band marching in lock-step with the sun blazing off their horns, pretty majorettes twirling batons and strutting their long, tanned legs, convertibles decked with flowers and filled with waving celebrities.

The two men stare out the window, their quarrel forgotten. They will undoubtedly return to it, but for the time being they stand together like the best of friends, shoulder to shoulder, watching as the parade goes by—

10

A HORN BLARED, STARTLING Jake out of this story, which was as vivid as a powerful dream. He realized he was still standing in the middle of Lexington, and the light had changed. He looked around wildly, expecting to see the blue Cadillac bearing down on him, but the guy who had tooted his horn was sitting behind the wheel of a yellow Mustang convertible and grinning at him. It was as if everyone in New York had gotten a whiff of happy-gas today.

Jake waved at the guy and sprinted to the other side of the street. The guy in the Mustang twirled a finger around his ear to indicate that Jake was crazy, then waved back and drove on.

For a moment Jake simply stood on the far corner, face turned up to the May sunshine, smiling, digging the day. He supposed prisoners condemned to die in the electric chair must feel this way when they learn they have been granted a temporary reprieve.

The voices were still.

The question was, what was the parade which had temporarily diverted their attention? Was it just the uncommon beauty of this spring morning?

Jake didn't think that was all. He didn't think so because that sensation of *knowing* was creeping over him and through him again, the one which had taken possession of him three weeks ago, as he approached the corner of Fifth and Forty-sixth. But on May 9th, it had been a feeling of impending doom. Today it was a feeling of radiance, a sense of goodness and anticipation. It was as if . . . as if .

White. This was the word that came to him, and it clanged in his mind with clear and unquestionable rightness.

"It's the White!" he exclaimed aloud. "The coming of the White!"

He walked on down Fifty-fourth Street, and as he reached the corner of Second and Fifty-fourth, he once more passed under the umbrella of *ka-tet*.

11

HE TURNED RIGHT, THEN stopped, turned, and retraced his steps to the corner. He needed to walk down Second Avenue now, yes, that was unquestionably correct, but this was the wrong side again. When the light changed, he hurried across the street and turned right again. That feeling, that sense of

(Whiteness)

rightness, grew steadily stronger. He felt half-mad with joy and relief. He was going to be okay. This time there was no mistake. He felt sure that he would soon begin to see people he recognized, as he had recognized the fat lady and the pretzel vendor, and they would be doing things he remembered in advance.

Instead, he came to the bookstore.

12

THE MANHATTAN RESTAURANT OF THE MIND, the sign painted in the window read. Jake went to the door. There was a chalkboard hung there; it looked like the kind you saw on the wall in diners and lunchrooms.

TODAY'S SPECIALS

From Florida! Fresh-Broiled John D. MacDonald
Hardcovers 3 for \$2.50
Paperbacks 9 for \$5.00

From Mississippi! Pan-Fried William Faulkner
Hardcovers Market Price
Vintage Library Paperbacks 75¢ each

From California! Hard-Boiled Raymond Chandler
Hardcovers Market Price
Paperbacks 7 for \$5.00

FEED YOUR NEED TO READ

Jake went in, aware that he had, for the first time in three weeks, opened a door without hoping madly to find another world on the other side. A bell jingled overhead. The mild, spicy smell of old books hit him, and the smell was somehow like coming home.

The restaurant motif continued inside. Although the walls were lined with shelves of books, a fountain-style counter bisected the room. On Jake's side of the counter were a number of small tables with wire-backed Malt Shoppe chairs. Each table had been arranged to display the day's specials: Travis McGee novels by John D. MacDonald, Philip Marlowe novels by Raymond Chandler, Snopes novels by William Faulkner. A small sign on the Faulkner table said: *Some rare 1st eds available—pls ask*. Another sign, this one on the counter, read simply: BROWSE! A couple of customers were doing just that. They sat at the counter, drinking coffee and reading. Jake thought this was without a doubt the best bookstore he'd ever been in.

The question was, why was he here? Was it luck, or was it part of that soft, insistent feeling that he was following a trail—a kind of force-beam—that had been left for him to find?

He glanced at the display on a small table to his left and knew the answer.

13

IT WAS A DISPLAY of children's books. There wasn't much room on the table, so there were only about a dozen of them—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Hobbit*, *Tom Sawyer*, things like that. Jake had been attracted by a story-book obviously meant for very young children. On the bright green cover was an anthropomorphic locomotive puffing its way up a hill. Its cowcatcher (which was bright pink) wore a happy grin and its headlight was a cheerful eye which seemed to invite Jake Chambers to come inside and read all about it. *Charlie the Choo-Choo*, the title proclaimed, Story and Pictures by Beryl Evans. Jake's mind flashed back to his Final Essay, with the picture of the Amtrak train on the title-page and the words *choo-choo* written over and over again inside.

He grabbed the book and clutched it tightly, as if it might fly away if he relaxed his grip. And as he looked down at the cover, Jake found that he did not trust the smile on Charlie the Choo-Choo's face. *You look happy, but I think that's just the mask you wear, he thought. I don't think you're happy at all. And I don't think Charlie's your real name, either.*

These were crazy thoughts to be having, undoubtedly crazy, but they did not feel crazy. They felt sane. They felt *true*.

Standing next to the place where *Charlie the Choo-Choo* had been was a tattered paperback. The cover was quite badly torn and had been mended with Scotch tape now yellow with age. The picture showed a puzzled-looking boy and girl with a forest of question-marks over their heads. The title of this book was *Riddle-De-Dum! Brain-Twisters and Puzzles for Everyone!* No author was credited.

Jake tucked *Charlie the Choo-Choo* under his arm and picked up the riddle book. He opened it at random and saw this:

When is a door not a door?

"When it's a jar," Jake muttered. He could feel sweat popping out on his forehead . . . his arms . . . all over his body.

"When it's a jar!"

"Find something, son?" a mild voice inquired.

Jake turned around and saw a fat guy in an open-throated white shirt standing at the end of the counter. His hands were stuffed in the pockets of his old gabardine slacks. A pair of half-glasses were pushed up on the bright dome of his bald head.

"Yes," Jake said feverishly. "These two. Are they for sale?"

"Everything you see is for sale," the fat guy said. "The building itself would be for sale, if I owned it. Alas, I only lease." He held out his hand for the books and for a moment Jake balked. Then, reluctantly, he handed them over. Part of him expected the fat guy to flee with them, and if he did—if he gave the slightest indication of trying it—Jake meant to tackle him, rip the books out of his hands, and boogie. He *needed* those books.

"Okay, let's see what you got," the fat man said. "By the way, I'm Tower. Calvin Tower." He stuck out his hand.

Jake's eyes widened, and he took an involuntary step backward. "What?"

The fat guy looked at him with some interest. "Calvin Tower. Which word is profanity in your language, O Hyperborean Wanderer?"

"Huh?"

"I just mean you look like someone goosed you, kid."

"Oh. Sorry." He clasped Mr. Tower's large, soft hand, hoping the man wouldn't pursue it. The name *had* given him a jump, but he didn't know why. "I'm Jake Chambers."

Calvin Tower shook his hand. "Good handle, pard. Sounds like the footloose hero in a Western novel—the guy who blows into Black Fork, Arizona, cleans up the town, and then travels on. Something by Wayne D. Overholser, maybe. Except you don't look footloose, Jake. You look like you decided the day was a little too nice to spend in school."

"Oh . . . no. We finished up last Friday."

Tower grinned. "Uh-huh. I bet. And you've gotta have these two items, huh? It's sort of funny, what people have to have. Now you—I would have pegged you as a Robert Howard kind of kid from the jump, looking for a good deal on one of those nice old Donald M. Grant editions—the ones with the Roy Krenkel paintings. Dripping swords, mighty thews, and Conan the Barbarian hacking his way through the Stygian hordes. "

"That sounds pretty good, actually. These are for . . . uh, for my little brother. It's his birthday next week."

Calvin Tower used his thumb to flip his glasses down onto his nose and had a closer look at Jake. "Really? You look like an only child to me. An only child if I ever saw one, enjoying a day of French leave as Mistress May trembles in her green gown just outside the bosky dell of June."

"Come again?"

"Never mind. Spring always puts me in a William Cowper-ish mood. People are weird but interesting, Tex—am I right?"

"I guess so," Jake said cautiously. He couldn't decide if he liked this odd man or not.

One of the counter-browsers spun on his stool. He was holding a cup of coffee in one hand and a battered paperback copy of *The Plague* in the other. “Quit pulling the kid’s chain and sell him the books, Cal,” he said. “We’ve still got time to finish this game of chess before the end of the world, if you hurry up.”

“Hurry is antithetical to my nature,” Cal said, but he opened *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and peered at the price pencilled on the flyleaf. “A fairly common book, but this copy’s in unusually fine condition. Little kids usually rack the hell out of the ones they like. I should get twelve dollars for it—”

“Goddam thief,” the man who was reading *The Plague* said, and the other browser laughed. Calvin Tower paid no notice.

“—but I can’t bear to dock you that much on a day like this. Seven bucks and it’s yours. Plus tax, of course. The riddle book you can have for free. Consider it my gift to a boy wise enough to saddle up and light out for the territories on the last real day of spring.”

Jake dug out his wallet and opened it anxiously, afraid he had left the house with only three or four dollars. He was in luck, however. He had a five and three ones. He held the money out to Tower, who folded the bills casually into one pocket and made change out of the other.

“Don’t hurry off, Jake. Now that you’re here, come on over to the counter and have a cup of coffee. Your eyes will widen with amazement as I cut Aaron Deepneau’s spavined old Kiev Defense to ribbons.”

“Don’t you wish,” said the man who was reading *The Plague*—Aaron Deepneau, presumably.

“I’d like to, but I can’t. I . . . there’s someplace I have to be.”

“Okay. As long as it’s not back to school.”

Jake grinned. “No—not school. That way lies madness.”

Tower laughed out loud and flipped his glasses up to the top of his head again. “Not bad! Not bad at all! Maybe the younger generation isn’t going to hell after all, Aaron—what do you think?”

“Oh, they’re going to hell, all right,” Aaron said. “This boy’s just an exception to the rule. Maybe.”

“Don’t mind that cynical old fart,” Calvin Tower said. “Motor on, O Hyperborean Wanderer. I wish I were ten or eleven again, with a beautiful day like this ahead of me.”

“Thanks for the books,” Jake said.

“No problem. That’s what we’re here for. Come on back sometime.”

“I’d like to.”

“Well, you know where we are.”

Yes, Jake thought. *Now if I only knew where I am.*

14

HE STOPPED JUST OUTSIDE the bookstore and flipped open the riddle book again, this time to page one, where there was a short uncredited introduction.

“Riddles are perhaps the oldest of all the games people still play today,” it began. “The gods and goddesses of Greek myth teased each other with riddles, and they were employed as teaching tools in ancient Rome. The Bible contains several good riddles. One of the most famous of these was told by Samson on the day he was married to Delilah:

*‘Out of the eater came forth meat,
and out of the strong came forth sweetness!’*

“He asked this riddle of several young men who attended his wedding, confident that they wouldn’t be able to guess the answer. The young men, however, got Delilah aside and she whispered the answer to them. Samson was furious, and had the young men put to death for cheating—in the old days, you see, riddles were taken much more seriously than they are today!

“By the way, the answer to Samson’s riddle—and all the other riddles in this book—can be found in the section at the back. We only ask that you give each puzzler a fair chance before you peek!”

Jake turned to the back of the book, somehow knowing what he would find even before he got there. Beyond the page marked ANSWERS there was nothing but a few torn fragments and the back cover. The section had been ripped out.

He stood there for a moment, thinking. Then, on an impulse that didn't really feel like an impulse at all, Jake walked back inside The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind.

Calvin Tower looked up from the chessboard. "Change your mind about that cup of coffee, O Hyperborean Wanderer?"

"No. I wanted to ask you if you know the answer to a riddle."

"Fire away," Tower invited, and moved a pawn.

"Samson told it. The strong guy in the Bible? It goes like this—"

" 'Out of the eater came forth meat,' " said Aaron Deepneau, swinging around again to look at Jake, " 'and out of the strong came forth sweetness.' That the one?"

"Yeah, it is," Jake said. "How'd you know—"

"Oh, I've been around the block a time or two. Listen to this." He threw his head back and sang in a full, melodious voice:

*" 'Samson and a lion got in attack,
And Samson climbed up on the lion's back.
Well, you've read about lion killin men with their paws,
But Samson put his hands round the lion's jaws!
He rode that lion 'til the beast fell dead,
And the bees made honey in the lion's head.' "*

Aaron winked and then laughed at Jake's surprised expression. "That answer your question, friend?"

Jake's eyes were wide. "Wow! Good song! Where'd you hear it?"

"Oh, Aaron knows them all," Tower said. "He was hanging around Bleecker Street back before Bob Dylan knew how to blow more than open G on his Hohner. At least, if you believe *him*."

"It's an old spiritual," Aaron said to Jake, and then to Tower: "By the way, you're in check, fatso."

"Not for long," Tower said. He moved his bishop. Aaron promptly bagged it. Tower muttered something under his breath. To Jake it sounded suspiciously like *fuckwad*.

“So the answer is a lion,” Jake said.

Aaron shook his head. “Only *half* the answer. Samson’s Riddle is a *double*, my friend. The other half of the answer is honey. Get it?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Okay, now try this one.” Aaron closed his eyes for a moment and then recited,

*“What can run but never walks,
Has a mouth but never talks,
Has a bed but never sleeps,
Has a head but never weeps?”*

“Smartass,” Tower growled at Aaron.

Jake thought it over, then shook his head. He could have worried it longer—he found this business of riddles both fascinating and charming—but he had a strong feeling that he ought to be moving on from here, that he had other business on Second Avenue this morning.

“I give up.”

“No, you don’t,” Aaron said. “That’s what you do with *modern* riddles. But a *real* riddle isn’t just a joke, kiddo—it’s a puzzle. Turn it over in your head. If you still can’t get it, make it an excuse to come back another day. If you need another excuse, fatso here *does* make a pretty good cup of joe.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “Thanks. I will.”

But as he left, a certainty stole over him: he would never enter The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind again.

15

JAKE WALKED SLOWLY DOWN Second Avenue, holding his new purchases in his left hand. At first he tried to think about the riddle—what *did* have a bed but never slept?—but little by little the question was driven from his mind by an increasing sense of anticipation. His senses seemed more acute than ever before in his life; he saw

billions of coruscating sparks in the pavement, smelled a thousand mixed aromas in every breath he took, and seemed to hear other sounds, secret sounds, within each of the sounds he heard. He wondered if this was the way dogs felt before thunderstorms or earthquakes, and felt almost sure that it was. Yet the sensation that the impending event was not bad but good, that it would balance out the terrible thing which had happened to him three weeks ago, continued to grow.

And now, as he drew close to the place where the course would be set, that knowing-in-advance fell upon him once again.

A bum is going to ask me for a handout, and I'll give him the change Mr. Tower gave me. And there's a record store. The door's open to let in the fresh air and I'll hear a Stones song playing when I pass. And I'm going to see my own reflection in a bunch of mirrors.

Traffic on Second Avenue was still light. Taxis honked and wove their way amid the slower-moving cars and trucks. Spring sunshine twinkled off their windshields and bright yellow hides. While he was waiting for a light to change, Jake saw the bum on the far corner of Second and Fifty-second. He was sitting against the brick wall of a small restaurant, and as Jake approached him, he saw that the name of the restaurant was Chew Chew Mama's.

Choo-choo, Jake thought. And that's the truth.

"God-da-quarder?" the bum asked tiredly, and Jake dropped his change from the bookstore into the bum's lap without even looking around. Now he could hear the Rolling Stones, right on schedule:

*"I see a red door and I want to paint it black,
No colours anymore, I want them to turn black . . ."*

As he passed, he saw—also without surprise—that the name of the store was Tower of Power Records.

Towers were selling cheap today, it seemed.

Jake walked on, the street-signs floating past in a kind of dream-daze. Between Forty-ninth and Forty-eighth he passed a store called Reflections of You. He turned his head and caught sight of a dozen Jakes in the mirrors, as he had known he would—a dozen boys who were small for their age, a dozen boys dressed in neat school

clothes: blue blazers, white shirts, dark red ties, gray dress pants. Piper School didn't have an official uniform, but this was as close to the unofficial one as you could get.

Piper seemed long ago and far away now.

Suddenly Jake realized where he was going. This knowledge rose in his mind like sweet, refreshing water from an underground spring. It's a delicatessen, he thought. *That's what it looks like, anyway. It's really something else—a doorway to another world. The world. His world. The right world.*

He began to run, looking ahead eagerly. The light at Forty-seventh was against him but he ignored it, leaping from the curb and racing nimbly between the broad white lines of the crosswalk with just a perfunctory glance to the left. A plumbing van stopped short with a squeal of tires as Jake flashed in front of it.

"Hey! Whaddaya-whaddaya?" the driver yelled, but Jake ignored him.

Only one more block.

He began to sprint all-out now. His tie fluttered behind his left shoulder; his hair had blown back from his forehead; his school loafers hammered the sidewalk. He ignored the stares—some amused, some merely curious—of the passersby as he had ignored the van driver's outraged shout.

Up here—up here on the corner. Next to the stationery store.

Here came a UPS man in dark brown fatigues, pushing a dolly loaded with packages. Jake hurdled it like a long-jumper, arms up. The tail of his white shirt pulled free of his pants and flapped beneath his blazer like the hem of a slip. He came down and almost collided with a baby-carriage being pushed by a young Puerto Rican woman. Jake hooked around the pram like a halfback who has spotted a hole in the line and is bound for glory. "Where's the fire, handsome?" the young woman asked, but Jake ignored her, too. He dashed past The Paper Patch, with its window-display of pens and notebooks and desk calculators.

The door! he thought ecstatically. I'm going to see it! And am I going to stop? No, way, José! I'm going to go straight through it, and if it's locked, I'll flatten it right in front of m—

Then he saw what was at the corner of Second and Forty-sixth and stopped after all—skidded to a halt, in fact, on the heels of his loafers. He stood there in the middle of the sidewalk, hands clenched, his breath rasping harshly in and out of his lungs, his hair falling back onto his forehead in sweaty clumps.

“No,” he almost whimpered. “No!” But his near-frantic negation did not change what he saw, which was nothing at all. There was nothing to see but a short board fence and a littered, weedy lot beyond it.

The building which had stood there had been demolished.

16

JAKE STOOD OUTSIDE THE fence without moving for almost two minutes, surveying the vacant lot with dull eyes. One corner of his mouth twitched randomly. He could feel his hope, his *absolute certainty*, draining out of him. The feeling which was replacing it was the deepest, bitterest despair he had ever known.

Just another false alarm, he thought when the shock had abated enough so he could think anything at all. *Another false alarm, blind alley, dry well. Now the voices will start up again, and when they do, I think I'm going to start screaming. And that's okay. Because I'm tired of toughing this thing out. I'm tired of going crazy. If this is what going crazy is like, then I just want to hurry up and get there so somebody will take me to the hospital and give me something that'll knock me out. I give up. This is the end of the line—I'm through.*

But the voices did not come back—at least, not yet. And as he began to think about what he was seeing, he realized that the lot wasn't completely empty, after all. Standing in the middle of the trash-littered, weedy waste ground was a sign.

MILLS CONSTRUCTION AND SOMBRA REAL ESTATE
ASSOCIATES ARE CONTINUING TO REMAKE THE

FACE OF MANHATTAN!
COMING SOON TO THIS LOCATION: TURTLE BAY
LUXURY CONDOMINIUMS!
CALL 555-6712 FOR INFORMATION!
YOU WILL BE SO GLAD YOU DID!

Coming soon? Maybe . . . but Jake had his doubts. The letters on the sign were faded and it was sagging a little. At least one graffiti artist, BANGO SKANK by name, had left his mark across the artist's drawing of the Turtle Bay Luxury Condominiums in bright blue spray-paint. Jake wondered if the project had been postponed or if it had maybe just gone belly-up. He remembered hearing his father talking on the telephone to his business advisor not two weeks ago, yelling at the man to stay away from any more condo investments. "I don't *care* how good the tax-picture looks!" he'd nearly screamed (this was, so far as Jake could tell, his father's normal tone of voice when discussing business matters—the coke in the desk drawer might have had something to do with that). "When they're offering a goddamn TV set just so you'll come down and look at a *blueprint*, something's wrong!"

The board fence surrounding the lot was chin-high to Jake. It had been plastered with handbills—Olivia Newton-John at Radio City, a group called G. Gordon Liddy and the Grots at a club in the East Village, a film called *War of the Zombies* which had come and gone earlier that spring. NO TRESPASSING signs had also been nailed up at intervals along the fence, but most of them had been papered over by ambitious bill-posters. A little way farther along, another graffito had been spray-painted on the fence—this one in what had once undoubtedly been a bright red but which had now faded to the dusky pink of late-summer roses. Jake whispered the words aloud, his eyes wide and fascinated:

"See the TURTLE of enormous girth!
On his shell he holds the earth

If you want to run and play,
Come along the BEAM today.”

Jake supposed the source of this strange little poem (if not its meaning) was clear enough. This part of Manhattan’s East Side was known, after all, as Turtle Bay. But that didn’t explain the gooseflesh which was now running up the center of his back in a rough stripe, or his clear sense that he had found another road-sign along some fabulous hidden highway.

Jake unbuttoned his shirt and stuck his two newly purchased books inside. Then he looked around, saw no one paying attention to him, and grabbed the top of the fence. He boosted himself up, swung a leg over, and dropped down on the other side. His left foot landed on a loose pile of bricks that promptly slid out from under him. His ankle buckled under his weight and bright pain lanced up his leg. He fell with a thud and cried out in mingled hurt and surprise as more bricks dug into his ribcage like thick, rude fists.

He simply lay where he was for a moment, waiting to get his breath back. He didn’t think he was badly hurt, but he’d twisted his ankle and it would probably swell. He’d be walking with a limp by the time he got home. He’d just have to grin and bear it, though; he sure didn’t have cab-fare.

You don’t really plan to go home, do you? They’ll eat you alive.

Well, maybe they would and maybe they wouldn’t. So far as he could see, he didn’t have much choice in the matter. And that was for later. Right now he was going to explore this lot which had drawn him as surely as a magnet draws steel shavings. That feeling of power was still all around him, he realized, and stronger than ever. He didn’t think this was just a vacant lot. Something was going on here, something big. He could feel it thrumming in the air, like loose volts escaping from the biggest power-plant in the world.

As he got up, Jake saw that he had actually fallen lucky. Close by was a nasty jumble of broken glass. If he’d fallen into that, he might have cut himself very badly.

That used to be the show window, Jake thought. When the deli was still here, you could stand on the sidewalk and look in at all the

meats and cheeses. They used to hang them on strings. He didn't know how he knew this, but he did—knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

He looked around thoughtfully and then walked a little farther into the lot. Near the middle, lying on the ground and half-buried in a lush growth of spring weeds, was another sign. Jake knelt beside it, pulled it upright, and brushed the dirt away. The letters were faded, but he could still make them out:

TOM AND GERRY'S ARTISTIC DELI PARTY PLATTERS
OUR SPECIALTY!

And below it, spray-painted in that same red-fading-to-pink, was this puzzling sentence: HE HOLDS US ALL WITHIN HIS MIND.

This is the place, Jake thought. *Oh yes.*

He let the sign fall back, stood up, and walked deeper into the lot, moving slowly, looking at everything. As he moved, that sensation of power grew. Everything he saw—the weeds, the broken glass, the clumps of bricks—seemed to stand forth with a kind of exclamatory force. Even the potato chip bags seemed beautiful, and the sun had turned a discarded beer-bottle into a cylinder of brown fire.

Jake was very aware of his own breathing, and of the sunlight falling upon everything like a weight of gold. He suddenly understood that he was standing on the edge of a great mystery, and he felt a shudder—half terror and half wonder—work through him.

It's all here. Everything. Everything is still here.

The weeds brushed at his pants; burdocks stuck to his socks. The breeze blew a Ring-Ding wrapper in front of him; the sun reflected off it and for a moment the wrapper was filled with a beautiful, terrible inner glow.

"Everything is still here," he repeated to himself, unaware that his face was filling with its own inner glow. "*Everything.*"

He was hearing a sound—had been hearing it ever since he entered the lot, in fact. It was a wonderful high humming, inexpressibly lonely and inexpressibly lovely. It might have been the sound of a high wind on a deserted plain, except it was *alive*. It was, he thought, the sound of a thousand voices singing some great open

chord. He looked down and realized there were *faces* in the tangled weeds and low bushes and heaps of bricks. *Faces*.

“What are you?” Jake whispered. “*Who* are you?” There was no answer, but he seemed to hear, beneath the choir, the sound of hoofbeats on the dusty earth, and gunfire, and angels calling hosannahs from the shadows. The faces in the wreckage seemed to turn as he passed. They seemed to follow his progress, but no evil intent did they bear. He could see Forty-sixth Street, and the edge of the U.N. Building on the other side of First Avenue, but the buildings did not matter—*New York* did not matter. It had become as pale as window-glass.

The humming grew. Now it was not a thousand voices but a million, an open funnel of voices rising from the deepest well of the universe. He caught names in that group voice, but could not have said what they were. One might have been Marten. One might have been Cuthbert. Another might have been Roland—Roland of Gilead.

There were names; there was a babble of conversation that might have been ten thousand entwined stories; but above all was that gorgeous, swelling hum, a vibration that wanted to fill his head with bright white light. It was, Jake realized with a joy so overwhelming that it threatened to burst him to pieces, the voice of *Yes*; the voice of *White*; the voice of *Always*. It was a great chorus of affirmation, and it sang in the empty lot. It sang for him.

Then, lying in a cluster of scrubby burdock plants, Jake saw the key . . . and beyond that, the rose.

17

HIS LEGS BETRAYED HIM and he fell to his knees. He was vaguely aware that he was weeping, even more vaguely aware that he had wet his pants a little. He crawled forward on his knees and reached toward the key lying in the snarl of burdocks. Its simple shape was one he seemed to have seen in his dreams:



He thought: *The little s-shape at the end—that's the secret.*

As he closed his hand around the key, the voices rose in a harmonic shout of triumph. Jake's own cry was lost in the voice of that choir. He saw the key flash white within his fingers, and felt a tremendous jolt of power run up his arm. It was as if he had grasped a live high-tension wire, but there was no pain.

He opened *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and put the key inside. Then his eyes fixed upon the rose again, and he realized that it was the *real* key—the key to everything. He crawled toward it, his face a flaming corona of light, his eyes blazing wells of blue fire.

The rose was growing from a clump of alien purple grass.

As Jake neared this clump of alien grass, the rose began to open before his eyes. It disclosed a dark scarlet furnace, petal upon secret petal, each burning with its own secret fury. He had never seen anything so intensely and utterly alive in his whole life.

And now, as he stretched one grimy hand out toward this wonder, the voices began to sing his own name . . . and deadly fear began to steal in toward the center of his heart. It was as cold as ice and as heavy as stone.

There was something wrong. He could feel a pulsing discord, like a deep and ugly scratch across some priceless work of art or a deadly fever smouldering beneath the chilly skin of an invalid's brow.

It was something like a worm. An invading worm. And a shape. One which lurks just beyond the next turn of the road.

Then the heart of the rose opened for him, exposing a yellow dazzle of light, and all thought was swept away on a wave of wonder. Jake thought for a moment that what he was seeing was only pollen which had been invested with the supernatural glow which lived at the heart of every object in this deserted clearing—he thought it even though he had never heard of pollen within a rose. He leaned closer and saw that the concentrated circle of blazing yellow was not pollen

at all. *It was a sun:* a vast forge burning at the center of this rose growing in the purple grass.

The fear returned, only now it had become outright terror. *It's right,* he thought, *everything here is right, but it could go wrong—has started going wrong already, I think. I'm being allowed to feel as much of that wrongness as I can bear . . . but what is it? And what can I do?*

It was something like a worm.

He could feel it beating like a sick and dirty heart, warring with the serene beauty of the rose, screaming harsh profanities against the choir of voices which had so soothed and lifted him.

He leaned closer to the rose and saw that its core was not just one sun but many . . . perhaps all suns contained within a ferocious yet fragile shell.

But it's wrong. It's all in danger.

Knowing it would almost surely mean his death to touch that glowing microcosm but helpless to stop himself, Jake reached forward. There was no curiosity or terror in this gesture; only a great, inarticulate need to protect the rose.

18

WHEN HE CAME BACK to himself, he was at first only aware that a great deal of time had passed and his head hurt like hell.

What happened? Was I mugged?

He rolled over and sat up. Another blast of pain went through his head. He raised a hand to his left temple, and his fingers came away sticky with blood. He looked down and saw a brick poking out of the weeds. Its rounded corner was too red.

If it had been sharp, I'd probably be dead or in a coma.

He looked at his wrist and was surprised to find he was still wearing his watch. It was a Seiko, not terribly expensive, but in this city you didn't snooze in vacant lots without losing your stuff.

Expensive or not, someone would be more than happy to relieve you of it. This time he had been lucky, it seemed.

It was quarter past four in the afternoon. He had been lying here, dead to the world, for at least five hours. His father probably had the cops out looking for him by now, but that didn't seem to matter much. It seemed to Jake that he had walked out of Piper School about a thousand years ago.

Jake walked half the distance to the fence between the vacant lot and the Second Avenue sidewalk, then stopped.

What exactly *had* happened to him?

Little by little, the memories came back. Hopping the fence. Slipping and twisting his ankle. He reached down, touched it, and winced. Yes—that much had happened, all right. Then what?

Something magical.

He groped for that something like an old man groping his way across a shadowy room. Everything had been full of its own light. *Everything*—even the empty wrappers and discarded beer-bottles. There had been voices—they had been singing and telling thousands of overlapping stories.

“And *faces*,” he muttered. This memory made him look around apprehensively. He saw no faces. The piles of bricks were just piles of bricks, and the tangles of weeds were just tangles of weeds. There were no faces, but—

—*but they were here. It wasn't your imagination.*

He believed that. He couldn't capture the essence of the memory, its quality of beauty and transcendence, but it seemed perfectly real. It was just that his memory of those moments before he had passed out seemed like photographs taken on the best day of your life. You can remember what that day was like—sort of, anyway—but the pictures are flat and almost powerless.

Jake looked around the desolate lot, now filling up with the violet shadows of late afternoon, and thought: *I want you back. God, I want you back the way you were.*

Then he saw the rose, growing in its clump of purple grass, very close to the place where he had fallen. His heart leaped into his throat. Jake blundered back toward it, unmindful of the beats of pain

each step sent up from his ankle. He dropped to his knees in front of it like a worshipper at an altar. He leaned forward, eyes wide.

It's just a rose. Just a rose after all. And the grass—

The grass wasn't purple after all, he saw. There were splatters of purple on the blades, yes, but the color beneath was a perfectly normal green. He looked a little further and saw splashes of blue on another clump of weeds. To his right, a straggling burdock bush bore traces of both red and yellow. And beyond the burdocks was a little pile of discarded paint-cans. Glidden Spread Satin, the labels said.

That's all it was. Just splatters of paint. Only with your head all messed up the way it was, you thought you were seeing—

That was bullshit.

He knew what he had seen then, and what he was seeing now. "Camouflage," he whispered. "It was all right here. *Everything* was. And . . . it still is."

Now that his head was clearing, he could again feel the steady, harmonic power that this place held. The choir was still here, its voice just as musical, although now dim and distant. He looked at a pile of bricks and old broken chunks of plaster and saw a barely discernible face hiding within it. It was the face of a woman with a scar on her forehead.

"Allie?" Jake murmured. "Isn't your name Allie?"

There was no answer. The face was gone. He was only looking at an unlovely pile of bricks and plaster again.

He looked back at the rose. It was, he saw, not the dark red that lives at the heart of a blazing furnace, but a dusty, mottled pink. It was very beautiful, but not perfect. Some of the petals had curled back; the outer edges of these were brown and dead. It wasn't the sort of cultivated flower he had seen in florists' shops; he supposed it was a wild rose.

"You're very beautiful," he said, and once more stretched his hand out to touch it.

Although there was no breeze, the rose nodded toward him. For just a moment the pads of his fingers touched its surface, smooth and velvety and marvellously alive, and all around him the voice of the choir seemed to swell.

“Are you sick, rose?”

There was no answer, of course. When his fingers left the faded pink bowl of the flower, it nodded back to its original position, growing out of the paint-splattered weeds in its quiet, forgotten splendor.

Do roses bloom at this time of year? Jake wondered. Wild ones? Why would a wild rose grow in a vacant lot, anyway? And if there's one, how come there aren't more?

He remained on his hands and knees a little longer, then realized he could stay here looking at the rose for the rest of the afternoon (or maybe the rest of his life) and not come any closer to solving its mystery. He had seen it plain for a moment, as he had seen everything else in this forgotten, trash-littered corner of the city; he had seen it with its mask off and its camouflage tossed aside. He wanted to see that again, but wanting would not make it so.

It was time to go home.

He saw the two books he'd bought at The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind lying nearby. As he picked them up, a bright silver object slipped from the pages of *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and fell into a scruffy patch of weeds. Jake bent, favoring his hurt ankle, and picked it up. As he did so, the choir seemed to sigh and swell, then fell back to its almost inaudible hum.

“So that part was real, too,” he murmured. He ran the ball of his thumb over the blunt protruding points of the key and into those primitive V-shaped notches. He sent it skating over the mild s-curves at the end of the third notch. Then he tucked it deep into the right front pocket of his pants and began to limp back toward the fence.

He had reached it and was preparing to scramble over the top when a terrible thought suddenly seized his mind.

The rose! What if somebody comes in here and picks it?

A little moan of horror escaped him. He turned back and after a moment his eyes picked it out, although it was deep in the shadow of a neighboring building now—a tiny pink shape in the dimness, vulnerable, beautiful, and alone.

I can't leave it—I have to guard it!

But a voice spoke up in his mind, a voice that was surely that of the man he had met at the way station in that strange other life. *No one will pick it. Nor will any vandal crush it beneath his heel because his dull eyes cannot abide the sight of its beauty. That is not the danger. It can protect itself from such things as those.*

A sense of deep relief swept through Jake.

Can I come here again and look at it? he asked the phantom voice. *When I'm low, or if the voices come back and start their argument again? Can I come back and look at it and have some peace?*

The voice did not answer, and after a few moments of listening, Jake decided it was gone. He tucked *Charlie the Choo-Choo and Riddle-De-Dum!* into the waistband of his pants—which, he saw, were streaked with dirt and dotted with clinging burdocks—and then grabbed the board fence. He boosted himself up, swung over the top, and dropped onto the sidewalk of Second Avenue again, being careful to land on his good foot.

Traffic on the Avenue—both pedestrian and vehicular—was much heavier now as people made their way home for the night. A few passersby looked at the dirty boy in the torn blazer and untucked, flapping shirt as he jumped awkwardly down from the fence, but not many. New Yorkers are used to the sight of people doing peculiar things.

He stood there a moment, feeling a sense of loss and realizing something else, as well—the arguing voices were still absent. That, at least, was something.

He glanced at the board fence; and the verse of spray-painted doggerel seemed to leap out at him, perhaps because the paint was the same color as the rose.

“See the TURTLE of enormous girth” Jake muttered. “On his shell he holds the earth.” He shivered. “What a day! Boy!”

He turned and began to limp slowly in the direction of home.

THE DOORMAN MUST HAVE buzzed up as soon as Jake entered the lobby, because his father was standing outside the elevator when it opened on the fifth floor. Elmer Chambers was wearing faded jeans and cowboy boots that improved his five-ten to a rootin, tootin six feet. His black, crewcut hair bolted up from his head; for as long as Jake could remember, his father had looked like a man who had just suffered some tremendous, galvanizing shock. As soon as Jake stepped out of the elevator, Chambers seized him by the arm.

“Look at you!” His father’s eyes flicked up and down, taking in Jake’s dirty face and hands, the blood drying on his cheek and temple, the dusty pants, the torn blazer, and the burdock that clung to his tie like some peculiar clip. “Get in here! Where the hell have you been? Your mother’s just about off her fucking gourd!”

Without giving Jake a chance to answer, he dragged him through the apartment door. Jake saw Greta Shaw standing in the archway between the dining room and the kitchen. She gave him a look of guarded sympathy, then disappeared before the eyes of “the mister” could chance upon her.

Jake’s mother was sitting in her rocker. She got to her feet when she saw Jake, but she did not leap to her feet; neither did she pelt across to the foyer so she could cover him with kisses and invective. As she came toward him, Jake assessed her eyes and guessed she’d had at least three Valium since noon. Maybe four. Both of his parents were firm believers in better living through chemistry.

“You’re *bleeding!* Where have you been?” She made this inquiry in her cultured Vassar voice, pronouncing *been* so it rhymed with seen. She might have been greeting an acquaintance who had been involved in a minor traffic accident.

“Out,” he said.

His father gave him a rough shake. Jake wasn’t prepared for it. He stumbled and came down on his bad ankle. The pain flared again, and he was suddenly furious. Jake didn’t think his father was pissed because he had disappeared from school, leaving only his mad composition behind; his father was pissed because Jake had had the temerity to fuck up his own precious schedule.

To this point in his life, Jake had been aware of only three feelings about his father: puzzlement, fear, and a species of weak, confused love. Now a fourth and fifth surfaced. One was anger; the other was disgust. Mixed in with these unpleasant feelings was that sense of homesickness. It was the largest thing inside him right now, weaving through everything else like smoke. He looked at his father's flushed cheeks and screaming haircut and wished he was back in the vacant lot, looking at the rose and listening to the choir. *This is not my place*, he thought. *Not anymore. I have work to do. If only I knew what it was.*

"Let go of me," he said.

"*What did you say to me?*" His father's blue eyes widened. They were very bloodshot tonight. Jake guessed he had been dipping heavily into his supply of magic powder, and that probably made this a bad time to cross him, but Jake realized he intended to cross him just the same. He would not be shaken like a mouse in the jaws of a sadistic tomcat. Not tonight. Maybe not ever again. He suddenly realized that a large part of his anger stemmed from one simple fact: he could not *talk* to them about what had happened—what was *still* happening. They had closed all the doors.

But I have a key, he thought, and touched its shape through the fabric of his pants. And the rest of that strange verse occurred to him: *If you want to run and play,/Come along the BEAM today.*

"I said let go of me," he repeated. "I've got a sprained ankle and you're hurting it."

"I'll hurt more than your ankle if you don't—" Sudden strength seemed to flow into Jake. He seized the hand clamped on his arm just below the shoulder and shoved it violently away. His father's mouth dropped open.

"I don't *work* for you," Jake said. "I'm your *son*, remember? If you forgot, check the picture on your desk."

His father's upper lip pulled back from his perfectly capped teeth in a snarl that was two parts surprise and one part fury. "Don't you talk to me like that, mister—where in the hell is your respect?"

"I don't know. Maybe I lost it on the way home."

“You spend the whole goddamn day absent without leave and then you stand there running your fat, disrespectful mouth—”

“Stop it! Stop it, both of you!” Jake’s mother cried. She sounded near tears in spite of the tranquilizers perking through her system.

Jake’s father reached for Jake’s arm again, then changed his mind. The surprising force with which his son had torn his hand away a moment ago might have had something to do with it. Or perhaps it was only the look in Jake’s eyes. “I want to know where you’ve been.”

“Out. I told you that. And that’s *all* I’m going to tell you.”

“Fuck that! Your headmaster called, your French teacher actually *came here*, and they both had *beaucoup* questions for you! So do I, and I want some *answers!*”

“Your clothes are dirty,” his mother observed, and then added timidly: “Were you mugged, Johnny? Did you play hookey and get mugged?”

“Of course he wasn’t mugged,” Elmer Chambers snarled. “Still wearing his watch, isn’t he?”

“But there’s blood on his head.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I just bumped it.”

“But—”

“I’m going to go to bed. I’m very, very tired. If you want to talk about this in the morning, okay. Maybe we’ll all be able to make some sense then. But for now, I don’t have a thing to say.”

His father took a step after him, reaching out.

“No, *Elmer!*” Jake’s mother almost screamed.

Chambers ignored her. He grabbed Jake by the back of the blazer. “Don’t you just walk away from me—” he began, and then Jake whirled, tearing the blazer out of his hand. The seam under the right arm, already strained, let go with a rough purring sound.

His father saw those blazing eyes and stepped away. The rage on his face was doused by something that looked like terror. That blaze was not metaphorical; Jake’s eyes actually seemed to be on fire. His mother gave voice to a strengthless little scream, clapped one hand to her mouth, took two large, stumbling steps backward, and dropped into her rocking chair with a small thud.

“Leave . . . me . . . alone,” Jake said.

“What’s *happened* to you?” his father asked, and now his tone was almost plaintive. “What in the *hell’s* happened to you? You bug out of school without a word to anyone on the first day of exams, you come back filthy from head to toe . . . and you act as if you’ve gone crazy.”

Well, there it was—you *act as if you’ve gone crazy*. What he’d been afraid of ever since the voices started three weeks ago. The Dread Accusation. Only now that it was out, Jake found it didn’t frighten him much at all, perhaps because he had finally put the issue to rest in his own mind. Yes, something had happened to him. Was still happening. But no—he had *not* gone crazy. At least, not yet.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning,” he repeated. He walked across the dining room, and this time his father didn’t try to stop him. He had almost reached the hall when his mother’s voice, worried, stopped him: “Johnny . . . *are* you all right?”

And what should he answer? Yes? No? Both of the above? Neither of the above? But the voices had stopped, and that was something. That was, in fact, quite a lot.

“Better,” he said at last. He went down to his room and closed the door firmly behind him. The sound of the door snicking firmly shut between him and all the rest of the round world filled him with tremendous relief.

20

HE STOOD BY THE door for a little while, listening. His mother’s voice was only a murmur, his father’s voice a little louder.

His mother said something about blood, and a doctor.

His father said the kid was fine; the only thing wrong with the kid was the junk coming out of his mouth, and he would fix that.

His mother said something about calming down.

His father said he *was* calm.

His mother said—

He said, she said, blah, blah, blah. Jake still loved them—he was pretty sure he did, anyway—but other stuff had happened now, and these things had made it necessary that still other things must occur.

Why? Because something was wrong with the rose. And maybe because he wanted to run and play . . . and see *his* eyes again, as blue as the sky above the way station had been.

Jake walked slowly over to his desk, removing his blazer as he went. It was pretty wasted—one sleeve torn almost completely off, the lining hanging like a limp sail. He slung it over the back of his chair, then sat down and put the books on his desk. He had been sleeping very badly over the last week and a half, but he thought tonight he would sleep well. He couldn't remember ever being so tired. When he woke up in the morning, perhaps he would know what to do.

There was a light knock at the door, and Jake turned warily in that direction.

"It's Mrs. Shaw, John. May I come in for a minute?"

He smiled. Mrs. Shaw—of course it was. His parents had drafted her as an intermediary. Or perhaps translator might be a better word.

You go see him, his mother would have said. He'll tell you what's wrong with him. I'm his mother and this man with the bloodshot eyes and the runny nose is his father and you're only the housekeeper, but he'll tell you what he wouldn't tell us. Because you see more of him than either of us, and maybe you speak his language.

She'll have a tray, Jake thought, and when he opened the door he was smiling.

Mrs. Shaw did indeed have a tray. There were two sandwiches on it, a wedge of apple pie, and a glass of chocolate milk. She was looking at Jake with mild anxiety, as if she thought he might lunge forward and try to bite her. Jake looked over her shoulder, but there was no sign of his parents. He imagined them sitting in the living room, listening anxiously.

"I thought you might like something to eat," Mrs. Shaw said.

"Yes, thanks." In fact, he was ravenously hungry; he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He stood aside and Mrs. Shaw came in (giving him

another apprehensive look as she passed) and put the tray on the desk.

“Oh, look at this,” she said, picking up *Charlie the Choo-Choo*. “I had this one when I was a little girl. Did you buy this today, Johnny?”

“Yes. Did my parents ask you to find out what I’d been up to?”

She nodded. No acting, no put-on. It was just a chore, like taking out the trash. *You can tell me if you want to*, her face said, *or you can keep still. I like you, Johnny, but it’s really nothing to me, one way or the other. I just work here, and it’s already an hour past my regular quitting time.*

He was not offended by what her face had to say; on the contrary, he was further calmed by it. Mrs. Shaw was another acquaintance who was not quite a friend . . . but he thought she might be a little closer to a friend than any of the kids at school were, and much closer than either his mother or father. Mrs. Shaw was honest, at least. She didn’t dance. It all went on the bill at the end of the month, and she *always* cut the crusts off the sandwiches.

Jake picked up a sandwich and took a large bite. Bologna and cheese, his favorite. That was another thing in Mrs. Shaw’s favor—she knew all his favorites. His mother was still under the impression that he liked corn on the cob and hated brussels sprouts.

“Please tell them I’m fine,” he said, “and tell my father I’m sorry that I was rude to him.”

He wasn’t, but all his father really wanted was that apology. Once Mrs. Shaw conveyed it to him, he would relax and begin to tell himself the old lie—he had done his fatherly duty and all was well, all was well, and all manner of things were well.

“I’ve been studying very hard for my exams,” he said, chewing as he talked, “and it all came down on me this morning, I guess. I sort of froze. It seemed like I had to get out or I’d suffocate.” He touched the dried crust of blood on his forehead. “As for this, please tell my mother it’s really nothing. I didn’t get mugged or anything; it was just a stupid accident. There was a UPS guy pushing a hand-truck, and I walked right into it. The cut’s no big deal. I’m not having double vision or anything, and even the headache’s gone now.”

She nodded. “I can see how it must have been—a high-powered school like that and all. You just got a little spooked. No shame in that, Johnny. But you really *haven’t* seemed like yourself this last couple of weeks. ”

“I think I’ll be okay now. I might have to re-do my Final Essay in English, but—”

“Oh!” Mrs. Shaw said. A startled look crossed her face. She put *Charlie the Choo-Choo* back down on Jake’s desk. “I almost forgot! Your French teacher left something for you. I’ll just get it.”

She left the room. Jake hoped he hadn’t worried Mr. Bisette, who was a pretty good guy, but he supposed he must have, since Bisette had actually made a personal appearance. Jake had an idea that personal appearances were pretty rare for Piper School teachers. He wondered what Mr. Bisette had left. His best guess was an invitation to talk with Mr. Hotchkiss, the school shrink. That would have scared him this morning, but not tonight.

Tonight only the rose seemed to matter.

He tore into his second sandwich. Mrs. Shaw had left the door open, and he could hear her talking with his parents. They both sounded a little more cooled out now. Jake drank his milk, then grabbed the plate with the apple pie on it. A few moments later Mrs. Shaw came back. She was carrying a very familiar blue folder.

Jake found that not all of his dread had left him after all. They would all know by now, of course, students and faculty alike, and it was too late to do anything about it, but that didn’t mean he liked all of them knowing he had flipped his lid. That they were talking about him.

A small envelope had been paper-clipped to the front of the folder. Jake pulled it free and looked up at Mrs. Shaw as he opened it. “How are my folks doing now?” he asked.

She allowed herself a brief smile. “Your father wanted me to ask why you didn’t just tell him you had Exam Fever. He said he had it himself once or twice when he was a boy.”

Jake was struck by this; his father had never been the sort of man to indulge in reminiscences which began, *You know, when I was a kid . . .* Jake tried to imagine his father as a boy with a bad case of

Exam Fever and found he couldn't quite do it—the best he could manage was the unpleasant image of a pugnacious dwarf in a Piper sweatshirt, a dwarf in custom-tooled cowboy boots, a dwarf with short black hair bolting up from his forehead.

The note was from Mr. Bissette.

Dear John,

Bonnie Avery told me that you left early. She's very concerned about you, and so am I, although we have both seen this sort of thing before, especially during Exam Week. Please come and see me first thing tomorrow, okay? Any problems you have can be worked out. If you're feeling pressured by exams—and I want to repeat that it happens all the time—a postponement can be arranged. Our first concern is your welfare. Call me this evening, if you like; you can reach me at 555-7661. I'll be up until midnight.

Remember that we all like you very much, and are on your side.

À votre santé

Len Bissette

Jake felt like crying. The concern was stated, and that was wonderful, but there were other things, unstated things, in the note that were even more wonderful—warmth, caring, and an effort (however misconceived) to understand and console.

Mr. Bissette had drawn a small arrow at the bottom of the note. Jake turned it over and read this:

By the way, Bonnie asked me to send this along—congratulations!!

Congratulations? What in the hell did that mean?

He flipped open the folder. A sheet of paper had been clipped to the first page of his Final Essay. It was headed FROM THE DESK

OF BONITA AVERY, and Jake read the spiky, fountain-penned lines with growing amazement.

John,

Leonard will undoubtedly voice the concern we all feel—he is awfully good at that—so let me confine myself to your Final Essay, which I read and graded during my free period. It is stunningly original, and superior to any student work I have read in the last few years. Your use of incremental repetition (“. . . and that is the truth”) is inspired, but of course incremental repetition is really just a trick. The real worth of the composition is in its symbolic quality, first stated by the images of the train and the door on the title page and carried through splendidly within. This reaches its logical conclusion with the picture of the “black tower,” which I take as your statement that conventional ambitions are not only false but dangerous.

I do not pretend to understand all the symbolism (e.g., “Lady of Shadows,” “gunslinger”) but it seems clear that you yourself are “The Prisoner” (of school, society, etc.) and that the educational system is “The Speaking Demon.” Is it possible that both “Roland” and “the gunslinger” are the same authority figure—your father, perhaps? I became so intrigued by this possibility that I looked up his name in your records. I note it is Elmer, but I further note that his middle initial is R.

I find this extremely provocative. Or is this name a double symbol, drawn both from your father and from Robert Browning’s poem “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”? This is not a question I would ask most students, but of course I know how omnivorously you read!

At any rate, I am extremely impressed. Younger students are often attracted to so-called “stream-of-consciousness” writing, but are rarely able to control it. You have done an outstanding job of merging s-of-c with symbolic language.

Bravo!

Drop by as soon as you're "back at it"—I want to discuss possible publication of this piece in the first issue of next year's student literary magazine.

B. Avery

P.S. If you left school today because you had sudden doubts about my ability to understand a Final Essay of such unexpected richness, I hope I have assuaged them.

Jake pulled the sheet off the clip, revealing the title page of his stunningly original and richly symbolic Final Essay. Written and circled there in the red ink of Ms. Avery's marking pen was the notation A + . Below this she had written *EXCELLENT JOB!!!*

Jake began to laugh.

The whole day—the long, scary, confusing, exhilarating, terrifying, mysterious day—was condensed in great, roaring sobs of laughter. He slumped in his chair, head thrown back, hands clutching his belly, tears streaming down his face. He laughed himself hoarse. He would almost stop and then some line from Ms. Avery's well-meaning critique would catch his eye and he would be off to the races again. He didn't see his father come to the door, look in at him with puzzled, wary eyes, and then leave again, shaking his head.

At last he *did* become aware that Mrs. Shaw was still sitting on his bed, looking at him with an expression of friendly detachment tinged with faint curiosity. He tried to speak, but the laughter peeled out again before he could.

I gotta stop, he thought. I gotta stop or it's gonna kill me. I'll have a stroke or a heart attack, or something.

Then he thought, *I wonder what she made of "choo-choo , choo-choo?,"* and he began to laugh wildly again.

At last the spasms began to taper off to giggles. He wiped his arm across his streaming eyes and said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Shaw—it's just that . . . well . . . I got an A-plus on my Final Essay. It was all very . . . very rich . . . and very sym . . . sym . . ."

But he couldn't finish. He doubled up with laughter again, holding his throbbing belly.

Mrs. Shaw got up, smiling. "That's very nice, John. I'm happy it's all turned out so well, and I'm sure your folks will be, too. I'm awfully late—I think I'll ask the doorman to call me a cab. Goodnight, and sleep well."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Shaw," Jake said, controlling himself with an effort. "And thanks."

As soon as she was gone, he began to laugh again.

21

DURING THE NEXT HALF hour he had separate visits from both parents. They had indeed calmed down, and the A + grade on Jake's Final Essay seemed to calm them further. Jake received them with his French text open on the desk before him, but he hadn't really looked at it, nor did he have any intention of looking at it. He was only waiting for them to be gone so he could study the two books he had bought earlier that day. He had an idea that the *real* Final Exams were still waiting just over the horizon, and he wanted desperately to pass.

His father poked his head into Jake's room around quarter of ten, about twenty minutes after Jake's mother had concluded her own short, vague visit. Elmer Chambers was holding a cigarette in one hand and a glass of Scotch in the other. He seemed not only calmer but almost zonked. Jake wondered briefly and indifferently if he had been hitting his mother's Valium supply.

"Are you okay, kid?"

"Yes." He was once again the small, neat boy who was always completely in control of himself. The eyes he turned to his father were not blazing but opaque.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry about before." His father was not a man who made many apologies, and he did it badly. Jake found himself feeling a little sorry for him.

"It's all right."

“Hard day,” his father said. He gestured with the empty glass. “Why don’t we just forget it happened?” He spoke as if this great and logical idea had just come to him.

“I already have.”

“Good.” His father sounded relieved. “Time for you to get some sleep, isn’t it? You’ll have some explaining to do and some tests to take tomorrow.”

“I guess so,” Jake said. “Is Mom okay?”

“Fine. Fine. I’m going in the study. Got a lot of paperwork tonight.”

“Dad?”

His father looked back at him warily.

“What’s your middle name?”

Something in his father’s face told Jake that he had looked at the Final Essay grade but hadn’t bothered to read either the paper itself or Ms. Avery’s critique.

“I don’t have one,” he said. “Just an initial, like Harry S Truman. Except mine’s an R. What brought that on?”

“Just curious,” Jake said.

He managed to hold onto his composure until his father was gone . . . but as soon as the door was closed, he ran to his bed and stuffed his face into his pillow to muffle another bout of wild laughter.

22

WHEN HE WAS SURE he was over the current fit (although an occasional snicker still rumbled up his throat like an aftershock) and his father would be safely locked away in his study with his cigarettes, his Scotch, his papers, and his little bottle of white powder, Jake went back to his desk, turned on the study lamp, and opened *Charlie the Choo-Choo*. He glanced briefly at the copyright page and saw it had originally been published in 1942; his copy was from the fourth printing. He looked at the back, but there was no information at all about Beryl Evans, the book’s author.

Jake turned back to the beginning, looked at the picture of a grinning, blonde-haired man sitting in the cab of a steam locomotive, considered the proud grin on the man's face, and then began to read.

Bob Brooks was an engineer for The Mid-World Railway Company, on the St. Louis to Topeka run. Engineer Bob was the best trainman The Mid-World Railway Company ever had, and Charlie was the best train!

Charlie was a 402 Big Boy Steam Locomotive, and Engineer Bob was the only man who had ever been allowed to sit in his peak-seat and pull the whistle. Everyone knew the WHOOO-OOOO of Charlie's whistle, and whenever they heard it echoing across the flat Kansas countryside, they said, "There goes Charlie and Engineer Bob, the fastest team between St. Louis and Topeka!"

Boys and girls ran into their yards to watch Charlie and Engineer Bob go by. Engineer Bob would smile and wave. The children would smile and wave back.

Engineer Bob had a special secret. He was the only one who knew. Charlie the Choo-Choo was really, really alive. One day while they were making the run between Topeka and St. Louis, Engineer Bob heard singing, very soft and low.

"Who is in the cab with me?" Engineer Bob said sternly.

"You need to see a shrink, Engineer Bob," Jake murmured, and turned the page. Here was a picture of Bob bending over to look beneath Charlie the Choo-Choo's automatic firebox. Jake wondered who was driving the train and watching out for cows (not to mention boys and girls) on the tracks while Bob was checking for stowaways, and guessed that Beryl Evans hadn't known a lot about trains.

"Don't worry," said a small, gruff voice. "It is only I."

"Who's I?" Engineer Bob asked. He spoke in his biggest, sternest voice, because he still thought someone was playing a joke on him.

"Charlie," said the small, gruff voice.

“Hardy har-har!” said Engineer Bob. “Trains can’t talk! I may not know much, but I know that! If you’re Charlie, I suppose you can blow your own whistle!”

“Of course,” said the small, gruff voice, and just then the whistle made its big noise, rolling out across the Missouri plains: WHOOO-OOOO!

“Goodness!” said Engineer Bob. “It really is you!”

“I told you,” said Charlie the Choo-Choo.

“How come I never knew you were alive before?” asked Engineer Bob. “Why didn’t you ever talk to me before?”

Then Charlie sang this song to Engineer Bob in his small, gruff voice.

*Don't ask me silly questions,
I won't play silly games.
I'm just a simple choo-choo train
And I'll always be the same.*

*I only want to race along
Beneath the bright blue sky,
And be a happy choo-choo train
Until the day I die.*

“Will you talk to me some more when we’re making our run?” asked Engineer Bob. “I’d like that.”

“I would, too,” said Charlie. “I love you, Engineer Bob.”

“I love you too, Charlie,” said Engineer Bob, and then he blew the whistle himself, just to show how happy he was.

WHOOO-OOO! It was the biggest and best Charlie had ever whistled, and everyone who heard it came out to see.

The picture which illustrated this last was similar to the one on the cover of the book. In the previous pictures (they were rough drawings which reminded Jake of the pictures in his favorite kindergarten book, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*), the locomotive had been just a locomotive—cheery, undoubtedly interesting to the '40s-era boys who had been this book’s intended

audience, but still only a piece of machinery. In this picture, however, it had clearly human features, and this gave Jake a deep chill despite Charlie's smile and the rather heavy-handed cuteness of the story.

He didn't trust that smile.

He turned to his Final Essay and scanned down the lines. *I'm pretty sure Blaine is dangerous, he read, and that is the truth.*

He closed the folder, tapped his fingers on it thoughtfully for a few moments, then returned to *Charlie the Choo-Choo*.

Engineer Bob and Charlie spent many happy days together and talked of many things. Engineer Bob lived alone, and Charlie was the first real friend he'd had since his wife died, long ago, in New York.

Then one day, when Charlie and Engineer Bob returned to the roundhouse in St. Louis, they found a new diesel locomotive in Charlie's berth. And what a diesel locomotive it was! 5,000 horsepower! Stainless steel couplers! Traction motors from the Utica Engine Works in Utica, New York! And sitting on top, behind the generator, were three bright yellow radiator cooling fans.

"What is this?" Engineer Bob asked in a worried voice, but Charlie only sang his song in his smallest, gruffest voice:

*Don't ask me silly questions,
I won't play silly games.
I'm just a simple choo-choo train
And I'll always be the same.*

*I only want to race along
Beneath the bright blue sky,
And be a happy choo-choo train
Until the day I die.*

Mr. Briggs, the Roundhouse Manager, came over.

"That is a beautiful diesel locomotive." said Engineer Bob, "but you will have to move it out of Charlie's berth, Mr. Briggs. Charlie needs

a lube job this very afternoon.”

“Charlie won’t be needing any more lube jobs, Engineer Bob,” said Mr. Briggs sadly. “This is his replacement—a brand-new Burlington Zephyr diesel loco. Once, Charlie was the best locomotive in the world, but now he is old and his boiler leaks. I am afraid the time has come for Charlie to retire.”

“Nonsense!” Engineer Bob was mad! “Charlie is still full of zip and zowie! I will telegraph the head office of The Mid-World Railway Company! I will telegraph the President, Mr. Raymond Martin, myself! I know him, because he once gave me a Good Service Award, and afterwards Charlie and I took his little daughter for a ride. I let her pull the lanyard, and Charlie whistled his loudest for her!”

“I am sorry, Bob,” said Mr. Briggs, “but it was Mr. Martin himself who ordered the new diesel loco.”

It was true. And so Charlie the Choo-Choo was shunted off to a siding in the furthest corner of Mid-World’s St. Louis yard to rust in the weeds. Now the HONNNK! HONNNK! of the Burlington Zephyr was heard on the St. Louis to Topeka run, and Charlie’s blew no more. A family of mice nested in the seat where Engineer Bob once sat so proudly, watching the countryside speed past; a family of swallows nested in his smoke-stack. Charlie was lonely and very sad. He missed the steel tracks and bright blue skies and wide open spaces. Sometimes, late at night, he thought of these things and cried dark, oily tears. This rusted his fine Stratham headlight, but he didn’t care, because now the Stratham headlight was old, and it was always dark.

Mr. Martin, the President of The Mid-World Railway Company, wrote and offered to put Engineer Bob in the peak-seat of the new Burlington Zephyr. “It is a fine loco, Engineer Bob,” said Mr. Martin, “chock-full of zip and zowie, and you should be the one to pilot it! Of all the Engineers who work for Mid-World, you are the best. And my daughter Susannah has never forgotten that you let her pull old Charlie’s whistle.”

But Engineer Bob said that if he couldn’t pilot Charlie, his days as a trainman were done. “I wouldn’t understand such a fine new diesel loco,” said Engineer Bob, “and it wouldn’t understand me.”

He was given a job cleaning the engines in the St. Louis yards, and Engineer Bob became Wiper Bob. Sometimes the other engineers who drove the fine new diesels would laugh at him. “Look at that old fool!” they said. “He cannot understand that the world has moved on!”

Sometimes, late at night, Engineer Bob would go to the far side of the rail yard, where Charlie the Choo-Choo stood on the rusty rails of the lonely siding which had become his home. Weeds had twined in his wheels; his headlight was rusty and dark. Engineer Bob always talked to Charlie, but Charlie replied less and less. Many nights he would not talk at all.

One night, a terrible idea came into Engineer Bob’s head. “Charlie, are you dying?” he asked, and in his smallest, gruffest voice, Charlie replied:

*Don't ask me silly questions,
I won't play silly games,
I'm just a simple choo-choo train.
And I'll always be the same.*

*Now that I can't race along
Beneath the bright blue sky
I guess that I'll just sit right here
Until I finally die.*

Jake looked at the picture accompanying this not-exactly-unexpected turn of events for a long time. Rough drawing it might be, but it was still definitely a three-handkerchief job. Charlie looked old, beaten, and forgotten. Engineer Bob looked like he had lost his last friend . . . which, according to the story, he had. Jake could imagine children all over America blatting their heads off at this point, and it occurred to him that there were a *lot* of stories for kids with stuff like this in them, stuff that threw acid all over your emotions. Hansel and Gretel being turned out into the forest, Bambi’s mother getting scragged by a hunter, the death of Old Yeller. It was easy to hurt little kids, easy to make them cry, and this seemed to bring out a

strangely sadistic streak in many story-tellers . . . including, it seemed, Beryl Evans.

But, Jake found, *he* was not saddened by Charlie's relegation to the weedy wastelands at the outer edge of the Mid-World trainyards in St. Louis. Quite the opposite. *Good*, he thought. *That's the place for him. That's the place, because he's dangerous. Let him rot there, and don't trust that tear in his eye—they say crocodiles cry, too.*

He read the rest rapidly. It had a happy ending, of course, although it was undoubtedly that moment of despair on the edge of the trainyards which children remembered long after the happy ending had slipped their minds.

Mr. Martin, the President of The Mid-World Railway Company, came to St. Louis to check on the operation. His plan was to ride the Burlington Zephyr to Topeka, where his daughter was giving her first piano recital, that very afternoon. Only the Zephyr wouldn't start. There was water in the diesel fuel, it seemed.

(Were you the one who watered the diesel, Engineer Bob? Jake wondered. I bet it was, you sly dog, you!)

All the other trains were out on their runs! What to do?

Someone tugged Mr. Martin's arm. It was Wiper Bob, only he no longer looked like an engine-wiper. He had taken off his oil-stained dungarees and put on a clean pair of overalls. On his head was his old pillowtick engineer's cap.

"Charlie's is right over there, on that siding," he said.

"Charlie will make the run to Topeka, Mr. Martin. Charlie will get you there in time for your daughter's piano recital."

"That old steamer?" scoffed Mr. Briggs. "Charlie would still be fifty miles out of Topeka at sundown!"

"Charlie can do it," Engineer Bob insisted. "Without a train to pull, I know he can! I have been cleaning his engine and his boiler in my spare time, you see."

"We'll give it a try," said Mr. Martin. "I would be sorry to miss Susannah's first recital!"

Charlie was all ready to go; Engineer Bob had filled his tender with fresh coal, and the firebox was so hot its sides

were red. He helped Mr. Martin up into the cab and backed Charlie off the rusty, forgotten siding and onto the main track for the first time in years. Then, as he engaged Forward First, he pulled on the lanyard and Charlie gave his old brave cry: *WHOOO-OOOOO!*

All over St. Louis the children heard that cry, and ran out into their yards to watch the rusty old steam loco pass. "Look!" they cried. "It's Charlie! Charlie the Choo-Choo is back! Hurrah!" They all waved, and as Charlie steamed out of town, gathering speed, he blew his own whistle, just as he had in the old days: *WHOOOO-OOOOOOO!*

Clickety-clack went Charlie's wheels!

Chuffa-chuffa went the smoke from Charlie's stack!

Brump-brump went the conveyor as it fed coal into the firebox!

Talk about zip! Talk about zowie! Golly gee, gosh, and wowie! Charlie had never gone so fast before! The countryside went whizzing by in a blur! They passed the cars on Route 41 as if they were standing still!

"Hoptedoodle!" cried Mr. Martin, waving his hat in the air. "This is some locomotive, Bob! I don't know why we ever retired it! How do you keep the coal-conveyor loaded at this speed?"

Engineer Bob only smiled, because he knew Charlie was *feeding himself*. And, beneath the *clickety-clack* and the *chuffa-chuffa* and the *brump-brump*, he could hear Charlie singing his old song in his low, gruff voice:

*Don't ask me silly questions,
I won't play silly games,
I'm just a simple choo-choo train
And I'll always be the same.*

*I only want to race along
Beneath the bright blue sky,*

*And be a happy choo-choo train
Until the day I die.*

Charlie got Mr. Martin to his daughter's piano recital on time (of course), and Susannah was just tickled pink to see her old friend Charlie again (of course), and they all went back to St. Louis together with Susannah yanking hell out of the train-whistle the whole way. Mr. Martin got Charlie and Engineer Bob a gig pulling kids around the brand-new Mid-World Amusement Park and Fun Fair in California, and

you will find them there to this day, pulling laughing children hither and thither in that world of lights and music and good, wholesome fun. Engineer Bob's hair is white, and Charlie doesn't talk as much as he once did, but both of them still have plenty of zip and zowie, and every now and then the children hear Charlie singing his old song in his soft, gruff voice.

THE END

"Don't ask me silly questions, I won't play silly games," Jake muttered, looking at the final picture. It showed Charlie the Choo-Choo pulling two bunting-decked passenger cars filled with happy children from the roller coaster to the Ferris wheel. Engineer Bob sat in the cab, pulling the whistle-cord and looking as happy as a pig in shit. Jake supposed Engineer Bob's smile was supposed to convey supreme happiness, but to him it looked like the grin of a lunatic. Charlie and Engineer Bob *both* looked like lunatics . . . and the more Jake looked at the kids, the more he thought that their expressions looked like grimaces of terror. *Let us off this train*, those faces seemed to say. *Please, just let us off this train alive.*

And be a happy choo-choo train until the day I die.

Jake closed the book and looked at it thoughtfully. Then he opened it again and began to leaf through the pages, circling certain words and phrases that seemed to call out to him.

The Mid-World Railway Company . . . Engineer Bob . . . a small, gruff voice . . . WHOO-OOOO . . . the first real friend he'd had since his wife died, long ago, in New York . . . Mr. Martin . . . the world has moved on . . . Susannah . . .

He put his pen down. *Why* did these words and phrases call to him? The one about New York seemed obvious enough, but what about the others? For that matter, why this *book*? That he had been meant to buy it was beyond question. If he hadn't had the money in his pocket, he felt sure he would have simply grabbed it and bolted from the store. But *why*? He felt like a compass needle. The needle knows nothing about magnetic north; it only knows it must point in a certain direction, like it or not.

The only thing Jake knew for sure was that he was very, very tired, and if he didn't crawl into bed soon, he was going to fall asleep at his desk. He took off his shirt, then gazed down at the front of *Charlie the Choo-Choo* again.

That smile. He just didn't trust that smile.
Not a bit.

23

SLEEP DIDN'T COME AS soon as Jake had hoped. The voices began to argue again about whether he was alive or dead, and they kept him awake. At last he sat up in bed with his eyes closed and his fisted hands planted against his temples.

Quit! he screamed at them. *Just quit! You were gone all day, be gone again!*

I would if he'd just admit I'm dead, one of the voices said sulkily.

I would if he'd just take a for God's sake look around and admit I'm clearly alive, the other snapped back.

He was going to scream right out loud. There was no way to hold it back; he could feel it coming up his throat like vomit. He opened his eyes, saw his pants lying over the seat of his desk chair, and an idea

occurred to him. He got out of bed, went to the chair, and felt in the right front pocket of the pants.

The silver key was still there, and the moment his fingers closed around it, the voices ceased.

Tell him, he thought, with no idea who the thought was for. *Tell him to grab the key. The key makes the voices go.*

He went back to bed and was asleep with the key clasped loosely in his hand three minutes after his head hit the pillow.

III

DOOR AND DEMON



EDDIE WAS ALMOST ASLEEP when a voice spoke clearly in his ear: *Tell him to grab the key. The key makes the voices go.*

He sat bolt upright, looking around wildly. Susannah was sound asleep beside him; that voice had not been hers.

Nor anyone else's, it seemed. They had been moving through the woods and along the path of the Beam for eight days now, and this evening they had camped in the deep cleft of a pocket valley. Close by on the left, a large stream roared brashly past, headed in the same direction as they were: southeast. To the right, firs rose up a steep slope of land. There were no intruders here; only Susannah asleep and Roland awake. He sat huddled beneath his blanket at the edge of the stream's cut, staring out into the darkness.

Tell him to grab the key. The key makes the voices go.

Eddie hesitated for only a moment. Roland's sanity was in the balance now, the balance was tipping the wrong way, and the worst part of it was this: no one knew it better than the man himself. At this point, Eddie was prepared to clutch at any straw.

He had been using a folded square of deerskin as a pillow. He reached beneath it and removed a bundle wrapped in a piece of hide. He walked over to Roland, and was disturbed to see that the gunslinger did not notice him until he was less than four steps from his unprotected back. There had been a time—and it was not so long ago—when Roland would have known Eddie was awake even before Eddie sat up. He would have heard the change in his breathing.

He was more alert than this back on the beach, when he was half-dead from the lobster-thing's bite, Eddie thought grimly.

Roland at last turned his head and glanced at him. His eyes were bright with pain and weariness, but Eddie recognized these things as no more than a surface glitter. Beneath it, he sensed a growing confusion that would almost surely become madness if it continued to develop unchecked. Pity tugged at Eddie's heart.

"Can't sleep?" Roland asked. His voice was slow, almost drugged.

"I almost was, and then I woke up," Eddie said. "Listen—"

"I think I'm getting ready to die." Roland looked at Eddie. The bright shine left his eyes, and now looking into them was like staring into a pair of deep, dark wells that seemed to have no bottom. Eddie shuddered, more because of that empty stare than because of what Roland had said. "And do you know what I hope lies in the clearing where the path ends, Eddie?"

"Roland—"

"Silence," Roland said. He exhaled a dusty sigh. "Just silence. That will be enough. An end to . . . this."

He planted his fists against his temples, and Eddie thought: *I've seen someone else do that, and not long ago. But who? Where?*

It was ridiculous of course; he had seen no one but Roland and Susannah for almost two months now. But it felt true, all the same.

"Roland, I've been making something," Eddie said.

Roland nodded. A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "I know. What is it? Are you finally ready to tell?"

"I think it might be part of this *ka-tet* thing."

The vacant look left Roland's eyes. He gazed at Eddie thoughtfully but said nothing.

"Look." Eddie began to unfold the piece of hide.

That won't do any good! Henry's voice suddenly brayed. It was so loud that Eddie actually flinched a little. *It's just a stupid piece of wood-carving! He'll take one look and laugh at it! He'll laugh at you! Oh, lookit this!* he'll say. *Did the sissy carve something?*

"Shut up," Eddie muttered.

The gunslinger raised his eyebrows.

"Not you."

Roland nodded, unsurprised. "Your brother comes to you often, doesn't he, Eddie?"

For a moment Eddie only stared at him, his carving still hidden in the hide square. Then he smiled. It was not a very pleasant smile.

"Not as often as he used to, Roland. Thank Christ for small favors."

"Yes," Roland said. "Too many voices weigh heavy on a man's heart . . . What is it, Eddie? Show me, please."

Eddie held up the chunk of ash. The key, almost complete, emerged from it like the head of a woman from the prow of a sailing ship . . . or the hilt of a sword from a chunk of stone. Eddie didn't know how close he had come to duplicating the key-shape he had seen in the fire (and never would, he supposed, unless he found the right lock in which to try it), but he thought it was close. Of one thing he was quite sure: it was the best carving he had ever done. By far.

"By the gods, Eddie, it's beautiful!" Roland said. The apathy was gone from his voice; he spoke in a tone of surprised reverence Eddie had never heard before. "Is it done? It's not, is it?"

"No—not quite." He ran his thumb into the third notch, and then over the s-shape at the end of the last notch. "There's a little more to do on this notch, and the curve at the end isn't right yet. I don't know how I know that, but I do."

"This is your secret." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. Now if only I knew what it meant."

Roland looked around. Eddie followed his gaze and saw Susannah. He found some relief in the fact that Roland had heard her first.

"What you boys doin up so late? Chewin the fat?" She saw the wooden key in Eddie's hand and nodded. "I wondered when you were going to get around to showing that off. It's good, you know. I don't know what it's for, but it's damned good."

"You don't have any idea what door it might open?" Roland asked Eddie. "That was not part of your *khef*?"

"No—but it might be good for something even though it isn't done." He held the key out to Roland. "I want you to keep it for me."

Roland didn't move to take it. He regarded Eddie closely. "Why?"

"Because . . . well . . . because I think someone told me you should."

"Who?"

Your boy, Eddie thought suddenly, and as soon as the thought came he knew it was true. *It was your goddamned boy*. But he didn't want to say so. He didn't want to mention the boy's name at all. It might just set Roland off again.

"I don't know. But I think you ought to give it a try."

Roland reached slowly for the key. As his fingers touched it, a bright glimmer seemed to flash down its barrel, but it was gone so quickly that Eddie could not be sure he had seen it. It might have been only starlight.

Roland's hand closed over the key growing out of the branch. For a moment his face showed nothing. Then his brow furrowed and his head cocked in a listening gesture.

"What is it?" Susannah asked. "Do you hear—"

"*Shhhh!*" The puzzlement on Roland's face was slowly being replaced with wonder. He looked from Eddie to Susannah and then back to Eddie. His eyes were filling with some great emotion, as a pitcher fills with water when it is dipped in a spring.

"Roland?" Eddie asked uneasily. "Are you all right?"

Roland whispered something. Eddie couldn't hear what it was.

Susannah looked scared. She glanced frantically at Eddie, as if to ask, *What did you do to him?*

Eddie took one of her hands in both of his own. "I think it's all right."

Roland's hand was clamped so tightly on the chunk of wood that Eddie was momentarily afraid he might snap it in two, but the wood was strong and Eddie had carved thick. The gunslinger's throat bulged; his Adam's apple rose and fell as he struggled with speech. And suddenly he yelled at the sky in a fair, strong voice:

"GONE! THE VOICES ARE GONE!"

He looked back at them, and Eddie saw something he had never expected to see in his life—not even if that life stretched over a thousand years.

Roland of Gilead was weeping.

2

THE GUNSLINGER SLEPT SOUNDLY and dreamlessly that night for the first time in months, and he slept with the not-quite finished

key clenched tightly in his hand.

3

IN ANOTHER WORLD, BUT beneath the shadow of the same *katet*, Jake Chambers was having the most vivid dream of his life.

He was walking through the tangled remains of an ancient forest—a dead zone of fallen trees and scruffy, aggravating bushes that bit his ankles and tried to steal his sneakers. He came to a thin belt of younger trees (alders, he thought, or perhaps beeches—he was a city boy, and the only thing he knew for sure about trees was that some had leaves and some had needles) and discovered a path through them. He made his way along this, moving a little faster. There was a clearing of some sort up ahead.

He stopped once before reaching it, when he spied some sort of stone marker to his right. He left the path to look at it. There were letters carved into it, but they were so eroded he couldn't make them out. At last he closed his eyes (he had never done this in a dream before) and let his fingers trace each letter, like a blind boy reading Braille. Each formed in the darkness behind his lids until they made a sentence which stood forth in an outline of blue light:

TRAVELLER, BEYOND LIES MID-WORLD.

Sleeping in his bed, Jake drew his knees up against his chest. The hand holding the key was under his pillow, and now his fingers tightened their grip on it.

Mid-World, he thought, *of course. St. Louis and Topeka and Oz and the World's Fair and Charlie the Choo-Choo.*

He opened his dreaming eyes and pressed on. The clearing behind the trees was paved with old cracked asphalt. A faded yellow circle had been painted in the middle. Jake realized it was a playground basketball court even before he saw the boy at the far end, standing at the foul line and shooting baskets with a dusty old Wilson ball. They popped in one after another, falling neatly through

the netless hole. The basket jutted out from something that looked like a subway kiosk which had been shut up for the night. Its closed door was painted in alternating diagonal stripes of yellow and black. From behind it—or perhaps from below it—Jake could hear the steady rumble of powerful machinery. The sound was somehow disturbing. Scary.

Don't step on the robots, the boy shooting the baskets said without turning around. I guess they're all dead, but I wouldn't take any chances, if I were you.

Jake looked around and saw a number of shattered mechanical devices lying around. One looked like a rat or mouse, another like a bat. A mechanical snake lay in two rusty pieces almost at his feet.

ARE you me? Jake asked, taking a step closer to the boy at the basket, but even before he turned around, Jake knew that wasn't the case. The boy was bigger than Jake, and at least thirteen. His hair was darker, and when he looked at Jake, he saw that the stranger's eyes were hazel. His own were blue.

What do you think? the strange boy asked, and bounce-passed the ball to Jake.

No, of course not, Jake said. He spoke apologetically. *It's just that I've been cut in two for the last three weeks or so.* He dipped and shot from mid-court. The ball arched high and dropped silently through the hoop. He was delighted . . . but he discovered he was also afraid of what this strange boy might have to tell him.

I know, the boy said. *It's been a bitch for you, hasn't it?* He was wearing faded madras shorts and a yellow T-shirt that said NEVER A DULL MOMENT IN MID-WORLD. He had tied a green bandanna around his forehead to keep his hair out of his eyes. *And things are going to get worse before they get better.*

What is this place? Jake asked. *And who are you?*

It's the Portal of the Bear . . . but it's also Brooklyn.

That didn't seem to make sense, and yet somehow it did. Jake told himself that things always seemed that way in dreams, but this didn't really *feel* like a dream.

As for me, I don't matter much, the boy said. He hooked the basketball over his shoulder. It rose, then dropped smoothly through

the hoop. *I'm supposed to guide you, that's all. I'll take you where you need to go, and I'll show you what you need to see, but you have to be careful because I won't know you. And strangers make Henry nervous. He can get mean when he's nervous, and he's bigger than you.*

Who's Henry? Jake asked.

Never mind. Just don't let him notice you. All you have to do is hang out . . . and follow us. Then, when we leave . . .

The boy looked at Jake. There was both pity and fear in his eyes. Jake suddenly realized that the boy was starting to *fade*—he could see the yellow and black slashes on the box right through the boy's yellow T-shirt.

How will I find you? Jake was suddenly terrified that the boy would melt away completely before he could say everything Jake needed to hear.

No problem, the boy said. His voice had taken on a queer, chiming echo. *Just take the subway to Co-Op City. You'll find me.*

No, I won't! Jake cried. *Co-Op City's huge! There must be a hundred thousand people living there!*

Now the boy was just a milky outline. Only his hazel eyes were still completely there, like the Cheshire cat's grin in *Alice*. They regarded Jake with compassion and anxiety. *No problem-o,* he said. *You found the key and the rose, didn't you? You'll find me the same way. This afternoon, Jake. Around three o'clock should be good. You'll have to be careful, and you'll have to be quick.* He paused, a ghostly boy with an old basketball lying near one transparent foot. *I have to go now . . . but it was good to meet you. You seem like a nice kid, and I'm not surprised he loves you. Remember, there's danger, though. Be careful . . . and be quick.*

Wait! Jake yelled, and ran across the basketball court toward the disappearing boy. One of his feet struck a shattered robot that looked like a child's toy tractor. He stumbled and fell to his knees, shredding his pants. He ignored the thin burn of pain. *Wait! You have to tell me what all this is about! You have to tell me why these things are happening to me!*

Because of the Beam, the boy who was now only a pair of floating eyes replied, and because of the Tower. In the end, all things, even the Beams, serve the Dark Tower. Did you think you would be any different?

Jake flailed and stumbled to his feet. *Will I find him? Will I find the gunslinger?*

I don't know, the boy answered. His voice now seemed to come from a million miles away. *I only know you must try. About that you have no choice.*

The boy was gone. The basketball court in the woods was empty. The only sound was that faint rumble of machinery, and Jake didn't like it. There was something wrong with that sound, and he thought that what was wrong with the machinery was affecting the rose, or vice-versa. It was all hooked together somehow.

He picked up the old, scuffed-up basketball and shot. It went neatly through the hoop . . . and disappeared.

A river, the strange boy's voice sighed. It was like a puff of breeze. It came from nowhere and everywhere. *The answer is a river.*

4

JAKE WOKE IN THE first milky light of dawn, looking up at the ceiling of his room. He was thinking of the guy in The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind—Aaron Deepneau, who'd been hanging around on Bleecker Street back when Bob Dylan only knew how to blow open G on his Hohner. Aaron Deepneau had given Jake a riddle.

*What can run but never walks,
Has a mouth but never talks,
Has a bed but never sleeps,
Has a head but never weeps?*

Now he knew the answer. A river ran; a river had a mouth; a river had a bed; a river had a head. The boy had told him the answer. The

boy in the dream.

And suddenly he thought of something else Deepneau had said: *That's only half the answer. Samson's riddle is a double, my friend.*

Jake glanced at his bedside clock and saw it was twenty past six. It was time to get moving if he wanted to be out of here before his parents woke up. There would be no school for him today; Jake thought that maybe, as far as he was concerned, school had been cancelled forever.

He threw back the bedclothes, swung his feet out onto the floor, and saw that there were scrapes on both knees. Fresh scrapes. He had bruised his left side yesterday when he slipped on the bricks and fell, and he had banged his head when he fainted near the rose, but nothing had happened to his knees.

"That happened in the dream," Jake whispered, and found he wasn't surprised at all. He began to dress swiftly.

5

IN THE BACK OF his closet, under a jumble of old laceless sneakers and a heap of *Spiderman* comic books, he found the packsack he had worn to grammar school. No one would be caught dead with a packsack at Piper—how too, too common, my deah—and as Jake grabbed it, he felt a wave of powerful nostalgia for those old days when life had seemed so simple.

He stuffed a clean shirt, a clean pair of jeans, some underwear and socks into it, then added *Riddle-De-Dum!* and *Charlie the Choo-Choo*. He had put the key on his desk before foraging in the closet for his old pack, and the voices came back at once, but they were distant and muted. Besides, he felt sure he could make them go away completely by holding the key again, and that eased his mind.

Okay, he thought, looking into the pack. Even with the books added, there was plenty of room left. *What else?*

For a moment he thought there was nothing else . . . and then he knew.

6

HIS FATHER'S STUDY SMELLED of cigarettes and ambition.

It was dominated by a huge teakwood desk. Across the room, set into a wall otherwise lined with books, were three Mitsubishi television monitors. Each was tuned to one of the rival networks, and at night, when his father was in here, each played out its progression of prime-time images with the sound off.

The curtains were drawn, and Jake had to turn on the desk lamp in order to see. He felt nervous just being in here, even wearing sneakers. If his father should wake up and come in (and it was possible; no matter how late he went to bed or how much he drank, Elmer Chambers was a light sleeper and an early riser), he would be angry. At the very least it would make a clean getaway much tougher. The sooner he was out of here, the better Jake would feel.

The desk was locked, but his father had never made any secret of where he kept the key. Jake slid his fingers under the blotter and hooked it out. He opened the third drawer, reached past the hanging files, and touched cold metal.

A board creaked in the hall and he froze. Several seconds passed. When the creak didn't come again, Jake pulled out the weapon his father kept for "home defense"—a .44 Ruger automatic. His father had shown this weapon to Jake with great pride on the day he had bought it—two years ago, that had been. He had been totally deaf to his wife's nervous demands that he put it away before someone got hurt.

Jake found the button on the side that released the clip. It fell out into his hand with a metallic *snak!* sound that seemed very loud in the quiet apartment. He glanced nervously toward the door again, then turned his attention to the clip. It was fully loaded. He started to

slide it back into the gun, and then took it out again. Keeping a loaded gun in a locked desk drawer was one thing; carrying one around New York City was quite another.

He stuffed the automatic down to the bottom of his pack, then felt behind the hanging files again. This time he brought out a box of shells, about half-full. He remembered his father had done some target shooting at the police range on First Avenue before losing interest.

The board creaked again. Jake wanted to get out of here.

He removed one of the shirts he'd packed, laid it on his father's desk, and rolled up the clip and the box of .44 slugs in it. Then he replaced it in the pack and used the buckles to snug down the flap. He was about to leave when his eye fixed on the little pile of stationery sitting beside his father's In/Out tray. The reflectorized Ray-Ban sunglasses his father liked to wear were folded on top of the stationery. He took a sheet of paper, and, after a moment's thought, the sunglasses as well. He slipped the shades into his breast pocket. Then he removed the slim gold pen from its stand, and wrote *Dear Dad and Mom* beneath the letterhead.

He stopped, frowning at the salutation. What went below it? What, exactly, did he have to say? That he loved them? It was true, but it wasn't enough—there were all sorts of other unpleasant truths stuck through that central one, like steel needles jabbed into a ball of yarn. That he would miss them? He didn't know if that was true or not, which was sort of horrible. That he hoped *they* would miss *him*?

He suddenly realized what the problem was. If he were planning to be gone just today, he would be able to write something. But he felt a near-certainty that it *wasn't* just today, or this week, or this month, or this summer. He had an idea that when he walked out of the apartment this time, it would be for good.

He almost crumpled the sheet of paper, then changed his mind. He wrote: *Please take care of yourselves. Love, J.* That was pretty limp, but at least it was something.

Fine. Now will you stop pressing your luck and get out of here?

He did.

The apartment was almost dead still. He tiptoed across the living room, hearing only the sounds of his parents' breathing: his mother's soft little snores, his father's more nasal respiration, where every indrawn breath ended in a slim high whistle. The refrigerator kicked on as he reached the entryway and he froze for a moment, his heart thumping hard in his chest. Then he was at the door. He unlocked it as quietly as he could, then stepped out and pulled it gently shut behind him.

A stone seemed to roll off his heart as the latch snicked, and a strong sense of anticipation seized him. He didn't know what lay ahead, and he had reason to believe it would be dangerous, but he was eleven years old—too young to deny the exotic delight which suddenly filled him. There was a highway ahead—a hidden highway leading deep into some unknown land. There were secrets which might disclose themselves to him if he was clever . . . and if he was lucky. He had left his home in the long light of dawn, and what lay ahead was some great adventure.

If I stand, if I can be true, I'll see the rose, he thought as he pushed the button for the elevator. I know it . . . and I'll see him, too.

This thought filled him with an eagerness so great it was almost ecstasy.

Three minutes later he stepped out from beneath the awning which shaded the entrance to the building where he had lived all his life. He paused for a moment, then turned left. This decision did not feel random, and it wasn't. He was moving southeast, along the path of the Beam, resuming his own interrupted quest for the Dark Tower.

7

Two DAYS AFTER EDDIE had given Roland his unfinished key, the three travellers—hot, sweaty, tired, and out of sorts—pushed through a particularly tenacious tangle of bushes and second-growth trees and discovered what first appeared to be two faint paths, running in

tandem beneath the interlacing branches of the old trees crowding close on either side. After a few moments of study, Eddie decided they weren't just paths but the remains of a long-abandoned road. Bushes and stunted trees grew like untidy quills along what had been its crown. The grassy indentations were wheelruts, and either of them was wide enough to accommodate Susannah's wheelchair.

"Hallelujah!" he cried. "Let's drink to it!"

Roland nodded and unslung the waterskin he wore around his waist. He first handed it up to Susannah, who was riding in her sling on his back. Eddie's key, now looped around Roland's neck on a piece of rawhide, shifted beneath his shirt with each movement. She took a swallow and passed the skin to Eddie. He drank and then began to unfold her chair. Eddie had come to hate this bulky, balky contraption; it was like an iron anchor, always holding them back. Except for a broken spoke or two, it was still in fine condition. Eddie had days when he thought the goddam thing would outlast all of them. Now, however, it might be useful . . . for a while, at least.

Eddie helped Susannah out of the harness and placed her in the chair. She put her hands against the small of her back, stretched, and grimaced with pleasure. Both Eddie and Roland heard the small crackle her spine made as it stretched.

Up ahead, a large creature that looked like a badger crossed with a raccoon ambled out of the woods. It looked at them with its large, gold-rimmed eyes, twitched its sharp, whiskery snout as if to say *Huh! Big deal!*, then strolled the rest of the way across the road and disappeared again. Before it did, Eddie noted its tail—long and closely coiled, it looked like a fur-covered bedspring.

"What was that, Roland?"

"A billy-bumbler."

"No good to eat?"

Roland shook his head. "Tough. Sour. I'd rather eat dog."

"Have you?" Susannah asked. "Eaten dog, I mean?"

Roland nodded, but did not elaborate. Eddie found himself thinking of a line from an old Paul Newman movie: *That's right, lady—eaten em and lived like one.*

Birds sang cheerily in the trees. A light breeze blew along the road. Eddie and Susannah turned their faces up to it gratefully, then looked at each other and smiled. Eddie was struck again by his gratitude for her—it was scary to have someone to love, but it was also very fine.

“Who made this road?” Eddie asked.

“People who have been gone a long time,” Roland said.

“The same ones who made the cups and dishes we found?” Susannah asked.

“No—not them. This used to be a coach-road, I imagine, and if it’s still here, after all these years of neglect, it must have been a great one indeed . . . perhaps *the* Great Road. If we dug down, I imagine we’d find the gravel undersurface, and maybe the drainage system, as well. As long as we’re here, let’s have a bite to eat.”

“Food!” Eddie cried. “Bring it on! Chicken Florentine! Polynesian shrimp! Veal lightly sautéed with mushrooms and—”

Susannah elbowed him. “Quit it, white boy.”

“I can’t help it if I’ve got a vivid imagination,” Eddie said cheerfully.

Roland slipped his purse off his shoulder, hunkered down, and began to put together a small noon meal of dried meat wrapped in olive-colored leaves. Eddie and Susannah had discovered that these leaves tasted a little like spinach, only much stronger.

Eddie wheeled Susannah over to him and Roland handed her three of what Eddie called “gunslinger burritos.” She began to eat.

When Eddie turned back, Roland was holding out three of the wrapped pieces of meat to him—and something else, as well. It was the chunk of ash with the key growing out of it. Roland had taken it off the rawhide string, which now lay in an open loop around his neck.

“Hey, you need that, don’t you?” Eddie asked.

“When I take it off, the voices return, but they’re very distant,” Roland said. “I can deal with them. Actually, I hear them even when I’m wearing it—like the voices of men who are speaking low over the next hill. I think that’s because the key is yet unfinished. You haven’t worked on it since you gave it to me.”

“Well . . . you were wearing it, and I didn’t want to . . .”

Roland said nothing, but his faded blue eyes regarded Eddie with their patient teacher's look.

"All right," Eddie said, "I'm afraid of fucking it up. Satisfied?"

"According to your brother, you fucked everything up . . . isn't that right?" Susannah asked.

"Susannah Dean, Girl Psychologist. You missed your calling, sweetheart."

Susannah wasn't offended by the sarcasm. She lifted the waterskin with her elbow, like a redneck tipping a jug, and drank deeply. "It's true, though, isn't it?"

Eddie, who realized he hadn't finished the slingshot, either—not yet, at least—shrugged.

"You have to finish it," Roland said mildly. "I think the time is coming when you'll have to put it to use."

Eddie started to speak, then closed his mouth. It sounded easy when you said it right out like that, but neither of them really understood the bottom line. The bottom line was this: seventy per cent or eighty or even ninety-eight and a half just wouldn't do. Not this time. And if he *did* screw up, he couldn't just toss the thing over his shoulder and walk away. For one thing, he hadn't seen another ash-tree since the day he had cut this particular piece of wood. But mostly the thing that was fucking him up was just this: it was all or nothing. If he messed up even a little, the key wouldn't turn when they needed it to turn. And he was increasingly nervous about that little squiggle at the end. It looked simple, but if the curves weren't exactly right . . .

It won't work the way it is now, though; that much you do know.

He sighed, looking at the key. Yes, that much he did know. He would have to try to finish it. His fear of failure would make it even harder than it maybe had to be, but he would have to swallow the fear and try anyway. Maybe he could even bring it off. God knew he had brought off a lot in the weeks since Roland had entered his mind on a Delta jet bound into JFK Airport. That he was still alive and sane was an accomplishment in itself.

Eddie handed the key back to Roland. "Wear it for now," he said. "I'll go back to work when we stop for the night."

“Promise?”

“Yeah.”

Roland nodded, took the key, and began to re-knot the rawhide string. He worked slowly, but Eddie did not fail to notice how dextrously the remaining fingers on his right hand moved. The man was nothing if not adaptable.

“Something *is* going to happen, isn’t it?” Susannah asked suddenly.

Eddie glanced up at her. “What makes you say so?”

“I sleep with you, Eddie, and I know you dream every night now. Sometimes you talk, too. They don’t seem like nightmares, exactly, but it’s pretty clear that *something* is going on inside your head.”

“Yes. Something is. I just don’t know what.”

“Dreams are powerful,” Roland remarked. “You don’t remember the ones you’re having at all?”

Eddie hesitated. “A little, but they’re confused. I’m a kid again, I know that much. It’s after school. Henry and I are shooting hoops at the old Markey Avenue playground, where the Juvenile Court Building is now. I want Henry to take me to see a place over in Dutch Hill. An old house. The kids used to call it The Mansion, and everyone said it was haunted. Maybe it even was. It was creepy, I know that much. *Real* creepy.”

Eddie shook his head, remembering.

“I thought of The Mansion for the first time in years when we were in the bear’s clearing, and I put my head close to that weird box. I dunno—maybe that’s why I’m having the dream.”

“But you don’t think so,” Susannah said.

“No. I think whatever’s happening is a lot more complicated than just remembering stuff.”

“Did you and your brother actually go to this place?” Roland asked.

“Yeah—I talked him into it.”

“And did something happen?”

“No. But it was scary. We stood there and looked at it for a little while, and Henry teased me—saying he was going to make me go in

and pick up a souvenir, stuff like that—but I knew he didn't really mean it. He was as scared of the place as I was."

"And that's it?" Susannah asked. "You just dream of going to this place? The Mansion?"

"There's a little more than that. Someone comes . . . and then just kind of hangs out. I notice him in the dream, but just a little . . . like out of the corner of my eye, you know? Only I know we're supposed to pretend we don't know each other."

"Was this someone really there that day?" Roland asked. He was watching Eddie intently. "Or is he only a player in this dream?"

"That was a long time ago. I couldn't have been more than thirteen. How could I remember a thing like that for sure?"

Roland said nothing.

"Okay," Eddie said at last. "Yeah. I think he was there that day. A kid who was either carrying a gym-bag or wearing a backpack, I can't remember which. And sunglasses that were too big for his face. The ones with the mirror lenses."

"Who was this person?" Roland asked.

Eddie was silent for a long time. He was holding the last of his *burritos à la Roland* in one hand, but he had lost his appetite. "I think it's the kid you met at the way station," he said at last. "I think your old friend Jake was hanging around, watching me and Henry on the afternoon we went over to Dutch Hill. I think he followed us. Because he hears the voices, just like you, Roland. And because he's sharing my dreams, and I'm sharing his. I think that what I remember is what's happening now, in Jake's when. The kid is trying to come back here. And if the key isn't done when he makes his move—or if it's done wrong—he's probably going to die."

Roland said, "Maybe he has a key of his own. Is that possible?"

"Yeah, I think it is," Eddie said, "but it isn't enough." He sighed and stuck the last burrito in his pocket for later. "*And I don't think he knows that.*"

THEY MOVED ALONG, ROLAND and Eddie trading off on Susannah's wheelchair. They picked the left-hand wheelrut. The chair bumped and pitched, and every now and then Eddie and Roland had to lift it over the cobbles which stuck out of the dirt here and there like old teeth. They were still making faster, easier time than they had in a week, however. The ground was rising, and when Eddie looked over his shoulder he could see the forest sloping away in what looked like a series of gentle steps. Far to the northwest, he could see a ribbon of water spilling over a fractured rock face. It was, he realized with wonder, the place they had dubbed "the shooting gallery." Now it was almost lost behind them in the haze of this dreaming summer afternoon.

"Whoa down, boy!" Susannah called sharply. Eddie faced forward again just in time to keep from pushing the wheelchair into Roland. The gunslinger had stopped and was peering into the tangled bushes at the left of the road.

"You keep that up, I'm gonna revoke your driver's license," Susannah said waspily.

Eddie ignored her. He was following Roland's gaze. "What is it?"

"One way to find out." He turned, hoisted Susannah from her chair, and planted her on his hip. "Let's all take a look."

"Put me down, big boy—I can make my way. Easier'n you boys, if you really want to know."

As Roland gently lowered her to the grassy wheelrut, Eddie peered into the woods. The late light threw overlapping crosses of shadow, but he thought he saw what had caught Roland's eye. It was a tall gray stone, almost completely hidden in a shag of vines and creepers.

Susannah slipped into the woods at the side of the road with eely sinuousness. Roland and Eddie followed.

"It's a marker, isn't it?" Susannah was propped on her hands studying the rectangular chunk of rock. It had once been straight, but now it leaned drunkenly to the right, like an old gravestone.

"Yes. Give me my knife, Eddie."

Eddie handed it over, then hunkered next to Susannah as the gunslinger cut away the vines. As they fell, he could see eroded

letters carved into the stone, and he knew what they said before Roland had uncovered even half of the inscription:

TRAVELLER, BEYOND LIES MID-WORLD.

9

“WHAT DOES IT MEAN?” Susannah asked at last. Her voice was soft and awestruck; her eyes ceaselessly measured the gray stone plinth.

“It means that we’re nearing the end of this first stage.” Roland’s face was solemn and thoughtful as he handed his knife back to Eddie. “I think that we’ll keep to this old coach-road now—or rather, it will keep to us. It has taken up the path of the Beam. The woods will end soon. I expect a great change.”

“What is Mid-World?” Eddie asked.

“One of the large kingdoms which dominated the earth in the times before these. A kingdom of hope and knowledge and light—the sort of things we were trying to hold on to in my land before the darkness overtook us, as well. Some day if there’s time, I’ll tell you all the old stories . . . the ones I know, at least. They form a large tapestry, one which is beautiful but very sad.

“According to the old tales, a great city once stood at the edge of Mid-World—perhaps as great as your city of New York. It will be in ruins now, if it still exists at all. But there may be people . . . or monsters . . . or both. We’ll have to be on our guard.”

He reached out his two-fingered right hand and touched the inscription. “Mid-World,” he said in a low, meditative voice. “Who would have thought . . .” He trailed off.

“Well, there’s no help for it, is there?” Eddie asked.

The gunslinger shook his head. “No help.”

“*Ka*,” Susannah said suddenly, and they both looked at her.

THERE WERE TWO HOURS of daylight left, and so they moved on. The road continued southeast, along the path of the Beam, and two other overgrown roads—smaller ones—joined the one they were following. Along one side of the second were the mossy, tumbled remains of what must have once been an immense rock wall. Nearby, a dozen fat billy-bumblers sat upon the ruins, watching the pilgrims with their odd gold-ringed eyes. To Eddie they looked like a jury with hanging on its mind.

The road continued to grow wider and more clearly defined. Twice they passed the shells of long-deserted buildings. The second one, Roland said, might have been a windmill. Susannah said it looked haunted. “I wouldn’t be surprised,” the gunslinger replied. His matter-of-fact tone chilled both of them.

When darkness forced a halt, the trees were thinning and the breeze which had chased around them all day became a light, warm wind. Ahead, the land continued to rise.

“We’ll come to the top of the ridge in a day or two,” Roland said. “Then we’ll see.”

“See what?” Susannah asked, but Roland only shrugged.

That night Eddie began to carve again, but with no real feeling of inspiration. The confidence and happiness he’d felt as the key first began to take shape had left him. His fingers felt clumsy and stupid. For the first time in months he thought longingly of how good it would be to have some heroin. Not a lot; he felt sure that a nickel bag and a rolled-up dollar bill would send him flying through this little carving project in no time flat.

“What are you smiling about, Eddie?” Roland asked. He was sitting on the other side of the campfire; the low, wind-driven flames danced capriciously between them.

“Was I smiling?”

“Yes.”

“I was just thinking about how stupid some people can be—you put them in a room with six doors, they’ll still walk into the walls. And

then have the nerve to bitch about it.”

“If you’re afraid of what might be on the other side of the doors, maybe bouncing off the walls seems safer,” Susannah said.

Eddie nodded. “Maybe so.”

He worked slowly, trying to see the shapes in the wood—that little s-shape in particular. He discovered it had become very dim.

Please, God, help me not to fuck this up, he thought, but he was terribly afraid that he had already begun to do just that. At last he gave up, returned the key (which he had barely changed at all) to the gunslinger, and curled up beneath one of the hides. Five minutes later, the dream about the boy and the old Markey Avenue playground had begun to unspool again.

11

JAKE STEPPED OUT OF his apartment building at about quarter of seven, which left him with over eight hours to kill. He considered taking the train out to Brooklyn right away, then decided it was a bad idea. A kid out of school was apt to attract more attention in the hinterlands than in the heart of a big city, and if he really had to *search* for the place and the boy he was supposed to meet there, he was cooked already.

No problem-o, the boy in the yellow T-shirt and green bandanna had said. *You found the key and the rose, didn’t you? You’ll find me the same way.*

Except Jake could no longer remember just how he *had* found the key and the rose. He could only remember the joy and the sense of surety which had filled his heart and head. He would just have to hope that would happen again. In the meantime, he’d keep moving. That was the best way to keep from being noticed in New York.

He walked most of the way to First Avenue, then headed back the way he had come, only sliding uptown little by little as he followed the pattern of the WALK lights (perhaps knowing, on some deep

level, that even they served the Beam). Around ten o'clock he found himself in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue. He was hot, tired, and depressed. He wanted a soda, but he thought he ought to hold on to what little money he had for as long as he could. He'd taken every cent out of the box he kept by his bed, but it only amounted to eight dollars, give or take a few cents.

A group of school-kids were lining up for a tour. Public school, Jake was almost sure—they were dressed as casually as he was. No blazers from Paul Stuart, no ties, no jumpers, no simple little skirts that cost a hundred and twenty-five bucks at places like Miss So Pretty or Tweenity. This crowd was Kmart all the way. On impulse, Jake stood at the end of the line and followed them into the museum.

The tour took an hour and fifteen minutes. Jake enjoyed it. The museum was quiet. Even better, it was air-conditioned. And the pictures were nice. He was particularly fascinated by a small group of Frederick Remington's Old West paintings and a large picture by Thomas Hart Benton that showed a steam locomotive charging across the great plains toward Chicago while beefy farmers in bib overalls and straw hats stood in their fields and watched. He wasn't noticed by either of the teachers with the group until the very end. Then a pretty black woman in a severe blue suit tapped him on the shoulder and asked who he was.

Jake hadn't seen her coming, and for a moment his mind froze. Without thinking about what he was doing, he reached into his pocket and closed his hand around the silver key. His mind cleared immediately, and he felt calm again.

"My group is upstairs," he said, smiling guiltily. "We're supposed to be looking at a bunch of modern art, but I like the stuff down here a lot better, because they're real pictures. So I sort of . . . you know . . ."

"Snuck away?" the teacher suggested. The corners of her lips twitched in a suppressed smile.

"Well, I'd rather think of it as French leave." These words simply popped out of his mouth.

The students now staring at Jake only looked puzzled, but this time the teacher actually laughed. “Either you don’t know or have forgotten,” she said, “but in the French Foreign Legion they used to shoot deserters. I suggest you rejoin your class at once, young man.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you. They’ll be almost done now, anyway.”

“What school is it?”

“Markey Academy,” Jake said. This also just popped out.

He went upstairs, listening to the disembodied echo of foot-falls and low voices in the great space of the rotunda and wondering why he had said that. He had never heard of a place called Markey Academy in his life.

12

HE WAITED AWHILE IN the upstairs lobby, then noticed a guard looking at him with growing curiosity and decided it wouldn’t be wise to wait any longer—he would just have to hope the class he had joined briefly was gone.

He looked at his wristwatch, put an expression on his face that he hoped looked like *Gosh! Look how late it’s getting!*, and trotted back downstairs. The class—and the pretty black teacher who had laughed at the idea of French leave—was gone, and Jake decided it might be a good idea to get gone himself. He would walk awhile longer—slowly, in deference to the heat—and catch a subway.

He stopped at a hot-dog stand on the corner of Broadway and Forty-second, trading in a little of his meager cash supply for a sweet sausage and a Nehi. He sat on the steps of a bank building to eat his lunch, and that turned out to be a bad mistake.

A cop came walking toward him, twirling his night-stick in a complex series of maneuvers. He seemed to be paying attention to nothing but this, but when he came abreast of Jake he abruptly shoved his stick back into his loop and turned to him.

“Say-hey, big guy,” he said. “No school today?”

Jake had been wolfing his sausage, but the last bite abruptly stuck in his throat. This was a lousy piece of luck . . . if luck was all it was. They were in Times Square, sleaze capital of America; there were pushers, junkies, whores, and chicken-chasers everywhere . . . but this cop was ignoring *them* in favor of *him*.

Jake swallowed with an effort, then said, “It’s finals week at my school. I only had one test today. Then I could leave.” He paused, not liking the bright, searching look in the cop’s eyes. “I had permission,” he concluded uneasily.

“Uh-huh. Can I see some ID?”

Jake’s heart sank. Had his mother and father already called the cops? He supposed that, after yesterday’s adventure, that was pretty likely. Under ordinary circumstances, the NYPD wouldn’t take much notice of another missing kid, especially one that had been gone only half a day, but his father was a big deal at the Network, and he prided himself on the number of strings he could pull. Jake doubted if this cop had his picture . . . but he might very well have his name.

“Well,” Jake said reluctantly, “I’ve got my student discount card from Mid-World Lanes, but that’s about all.”

“Mid-World Lanes? Never heard of it. Where’s that? Queens?”

“Mid-Town, I mean,” Jake thought. God, this was going north instead of south . . . and fast. “You know? On Thirty-third?”

“Uh-huh. That’ll do fine.” The cop held out his hand.

A black man with dreadlocks spilling over the shoulders of his canary-yellow suit glanced over. “Bussim, ossifer!” this apparition said cheerfully. “Bussiz lil whitebread ass! Do yo duty, now!”

“Shut up and get in the wind, Eli,” the cop said without looking around.

Eli laughed, exposing several gold teeth, and moved along.

“Why don’t you ask *him* for some ID?” Jake asked.

“Because right now I’m asking you. Snap it up, son.”

The cop either had his name or had sensed something wrong about him—which wasn’t so surprising, maybe, since he was the only white in the area who wasn’t obviously trolling. Either way, it

came to the same: sitting down here to eat his lunch had been dumb. But his feet had hurt, and he'd been hungry, dammit—*hungry*.

You're not going to stop me, Jake thought. I can't let you stop me. There's someone I'm supposed to meet this afternoon in Brooklyn . . . and I'm going to be there.

Instead of reaching for his wallet, he reached into his front pocket and brought out the key. He held it up to the policeman; the late-morning sunshine bounced little coins of reflected light onto the man's cheeks and forehead. His eyes widened.

"Heyy!" he breathed. "What you got there, kid?"

He reached for it, and Jake pulled the key back a little. The reflected circles of light danced hypnotically on the cop's face. "You don't need to take it," Jake said. "You can read my name without doing that, can't you?"

"Yes, sure."

The curiosity had left the cop's face. He looked only at the key. His gaze was wide and fixed, but not quite empty. Jake read both amazement and unexpected happiness in his look. *That's me, Jake thought, just spreading joy and goodwill wherever I go. The question is, what do I do now?*

A young woman (probably not a librarian, judging from the green silk hotpants and see-through blouse she was wearing) came wiggle-wobbling up the sidewalk on a pair of purple fuck-me shoes with three-inch heels. She glanced first at the cop, then at Jake to see what the cop was looking at. When she got a good look, she stopped cold. One of her hands drifted up and touched her throat. A man bumped into her and told her to watch where the damn-hell she was going. The young woman who was probably not a librarian took no notice whatever. Now Jake saw that four or five other people had stopped as well. All were staring at the key. They were gathering as people sometimes will around a very good three-card-monte dealer plying his trade on a streetcorner.

You're doing a great job of being inconspicuous, he thought. Oh yeah. He glanced over the cop's shoulder, and his eye caught a sign on the far side of the street. Denby's Discount Drug, it said.

“My name’s Tom Denby,” he told the cop. “It says so right here on my discount bowling card—right?”

“Right, right,” the cop breathed. He had lost all interest in Jake; he was only interested in the key. The little coins of reflected light bounced and spun on his face.

“And you’re not looking for anybody named Tom Denby, are you?”

“No,” the cop said. “Never heard of him.”

Now there were at least half a dozen people gathered around the cop, all of them staring with silent wonder at the silver key in Jake’s hand.

“So I can go, can’t I?”

“Huh? Oh! Oh, sure—go, for your father’s sake!”

“Thanks,” Jake said, but for a moment he wasn’t sure *how* to go. He was hemmed in by a silent crowd of zombies, and more were joining it all the time. They were only coming to see what the deal was, he realized, but the ones who saw the key just stopped dead and stared.

He got to his feet and backed slowly up the wide bank steps, holding the key out in front of him like a lion-tamer with a chair. When he got to the wide concrete plaza at the top, he stuffed it back into his pants pockets, turned, and fled.

He stopped just once on the far side of the plaza, and looked back. The small group of people around the place where he had been standing was coming slowly back to life. They looked around at each other with dazed expressions, then walked on. The cop glanced vacantly to his left, to his right, and then straight up at the sky, as if trying to remember how he had gotten here and what he had been meaning to do. Jake had seen enough. It was time to find a subway station and get his ass over to Brooklyn before anything else weird could happen.

AT QUARTER OF TWO that afternoon he walked slowly up the steps of the subway station and stood on the corner of Castle and Brooklyn Avenues, looking at the sandstone towers of Co-Op City. He waited for that feeling of sureness and direction—that feeling that was like being able to remember forward in time—to overtake him. It didn't come. *Nothing* came. He was just a kid standing on a hot Brooklyn street corner with his short shadow lying at his feet like a tired pet.

Well, I'm here . . . now what do I do?

Jake discovered he didn't have the slightest idea.

14

ROLAND'S SMALL BAND OF travellers reached the crest of the long, gentle hill they had been climbing and stood looking southeast. For a long time none of them spoke. Susannah opened her mouth twice, then closed it again. For the first time in her life as a woman, she was completely speechless.

Before them, an almost endless plain dozed in the long golden light of a summer's afternoon. The grass was lush, emerald green, and very high. Groves of trees with long, slender trunks and wide, spreading tops dotted the plain. Susannah had once seen similar trees, she thought, in a travelogue film about Australia.

The road they had been following swooped down the far side of the hill and then ran straight as a string into the southeast, a bright white lane cutting through the grass. To the west, some miles off, she could see a herd of large animals grazing peacefully. They looked like buffalo. To the east, the last of the forest made a curved peninsula into the grassland. This incursion was a dark, tangled shape that looked like a forearm with a cocked fist at the end.

That was the direction, she realized, in which all the creeks and streams they had encountered had been flowing. They were tributaries of the vast river that emerged from that jutting arm of

forest and flowed, placid and dreaming under the summer sun, toward the eastern edge of the world. It was wide, that river—perhaps two miles from bank to bank.

And she could see the city.

It lay dead ahead, a misty collection of spires and towers rising above the far edge of the horizon. Those airy ramparts might have been a hundred miles away, or two hundred, or four hundred. The air of this world seemed to be totally clear, and that made judging distances a fool's game. All she knew for sure was that the sight of those dim towers filled her with silent wonder . . . and a deep, aching homesickness for New York. She thought, *I believe I'd do most anything just to see the Manhattan skyline from the Triborough Bridge again.*

Then she had to smile, because that wasn't the truth. The truth was that she wouldn't trade Roland's world for anything. Its silent mystery and empty spaces were intoxicating. And her lover was here. In New York—the New York of her own time, at least—they would have been objects of scorn and anger, the butt of every idiot's crude, cruel jokes: a black woman of twenty-six and her whitebread lover who was three years younger and who had a tendency to talk like *dis* and *dat* when he got excited. Her whitebread lover who had been carrying a heavy monkey on his back only eight months before. Here, there was no one to jeer or laugh. Here, no one was pointing a finger. Here, there were only Roland, Eddie, and herself, the world's last three gunslingers.

She took Eddie's hand and felt it close over hers, warm and reassuring.

Roland pointed. "That must be the Send River," he said in a low voice. "I never thought to see it in my life . . . wasn't even sure it was real, like the Guardians."

"It's so lovely," Susannah murmured. She was unable to take her eyes from the vast landscape before her, dreaming richly in the cradle of summer. She found her eyes tracing the shadows of the trees, which trailed across the plain for what seemed miles as the sun sank toward the horizon. "It's the way our Great Plains must have looked before they were settled—even before the Indians

came.” She raised her free hand and pointed toward the place where the Great Road narrowed to a point. “There’s your city,” she said. “Isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“It looks okay,” Eddie said. “Is that possible, Roland? Could it still be pretty much intact. Did the old-timers build that well?”

“Anything is possible in these times,” Roland said, but he sounded doubtful. “You shouldn’t get your hopes up, though, Eddie.”

“Huh? No.” But Eddie’s hopes *were* up. That dimly sketched skyline had awakened homesickness in Susannah’s heart; in Eddie’s it kindled a sudden blaze of supposition. If the city was still there—and it clearly was—it might still be populated, and maybe not just by the subhuman things Roland had met under the mountains, either. The city-dwellers might be

(*Americans*, Eddie’s subconscious whispered)

intelligent and helpful; they might, in fact, spell the difference between success and failure for the quest of the pilgrims . . . or even between life and death. In Eddie’s mind a vision (partly cribbed from movies like *The Last Starfighter* and *The Dark Crystal*) gleamed brightly: a council of gnarled but dignified City Elders who would serve them a whopping meal drawn from the unspoiled stores of the city (or perhaps from special gardens cradled within environmental bubbles) and who would, as he and Roland and Susannah ate themselves silly, explain exactly what lay ahead and what it all meant. Their parting gift to the wayfarers would be an AAA-approved TourGuide map with the best route to the Dark Tower marked in red.

Eddie did not know the phrase *deus ex machina*, but he knew—had now grown up enough to know—that such wise and kindly folk lived mostly in comic books and B-movies. The idea was intoxicating, all the same: an enclave of civilization in this dangerous, mostly empty world; wise old elf-men who would tell them just what the fuck it was they were supposed to be doing. And the fabulous shapes of the city disclosed in that hazy skyline made the idea seem at least possible. Even if the city was totally deserted, the population wiped out by some long-ago plague or outbreak of chemical warfare, it might still serve them as a kind of giant toolbox—a huge Army-

Navy Surplus Store where they could outfit themselves for the hard passages Eddie was sure must lie ahead. Besides, he was a city boy, born and bred, and the sight of all those tall towers just naturally got him up.

“All *right!*” he said, almost laughing out loud in his excitement. “Hey-ho, let’s go! Bring on those wise fuckin elves!”

Susannah looked at him, puzzled but smiling. “What you ravin about, white boy?”

“Nothing. Never mind. I just want to get moving. What do you say, Roland? Want to—”

But something on Roland’s face or just beneath it—some lost, dreaming thing—caused him to fall silent and put one arm around Susannah’s shoulders, as if to protect her.

15

AFTER ONE BRIEF, DISMISSIVE glance at the city skyline, Roland’s gaze had been caught by something a good deal closer to their current position, something that filled him with disquiet and foreboding. He had seen such things before, and the last time he’d come across one, Jake had been with him. He remembered how they had finally come out of the desert, the trail of the man in black leading them through the foothills and toward the mountains. Hard going, it had been, but at least there had been water again. And grass.

One night he had awakened to find Jake gone. He had heard strangled, desperate cries coming from a willow-grove hard by a narrow trickle of stream. By the time he had fought his way through to the clearing at the center of the grove, the boy’s cries had ceased. Roland had found him standing in a place exactly like the one which lay below and ahead. A place of stones; a place of sacrifice; a place where an Oracle lived . . . and spoke when it was forced to . . . and killed whenever it could.

“Roland?” Eddie asked. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Do you see that?” Roland pointed. “It’s a speaking ring. The shapes you see are tall standing stones.” He found himself staring at Eddie, whom he had first met in the frightening but wonderful air-carriage of that strange other world where the gunslingers wore blue uniforms and there was an endless supply of sugar, paper, and wonderful drugs like *astin*. Some strange expression—some foreknowledge—was dawning on Eddie’s face. The bright hope which had lit his eyes as he surveyed the city whiffed out, leaving him with a look both gray and bleak. It was the expression of a man studying the gallows on which he will soon be hanged.

First Jake, and now Eddie, the gunslinger thought. The wheel which turns our lives is remorseless; always it comes around to the same place again.

“Oh shit,” Eddie said. His voice was dry and scared. “I think that’s the place where the kid is going to try and come through.”

The gunslinger nodded. “Very likely. They’re thin places, and they’re also *attractive* places. I followed him to such a place once before. The Oracle that kept there came very close to killing him.”

“How do you *know* this?” Susannah asked Eddie. “Was it a dream?”

He only shook his head. “I don’t know. But the minute Roland pointed that goddamn place out . . .” He broke off and looked at the gunslinger. “We have to get there, just as fast as we can.” Eddie sounded both frantic and fearful.

“Is it going to happen today?” Roland asked. “Tonight?”

Eddie shook his head again, and licked his lips. “I don’t know that, either. Not for sure. Tonight? I don’t think so. Time . . . it isn’t the same over here as it is where the kid is. It goes slower in his where and when. Maybe tomorrow.” He had been battling panic, but now it broke free. He turned and grabbed Roland’s shirt with his cold, sweating fingers. “But I’m supposed to finish the key, and I haven’t, and I’m supposed to do something else, and I don’t have a clue about what it is. And if the kid dies, it’ll be *my fault!*”

The gunslinger locked his own hands over Eddie’s and pulled them away from his shirt. “Get control of yourself.”

“Roland, don’t you understand—”

“I understand that whining and puling won’t solve your problem. I understand that you have forgotten the face of your father.”

“Quit that bullshit! I don’t care *dick* about my father!” Eddie shouted hysterically, and Roland hit him across the face. His hand made a sound like a breaking branch.

Eddie’s head rocked back; his eyes widened with shock. He stared at the gunslinger, then slowly raised his hand to touch the reddening handprint on his cheek. “You *bastard!*” he whispered. His hand dropped to the butt of the revolver he still wore on his left hip. Susannah tried to put her own hands over it; Eddie pushed them away.

And now I must teach again, Roland thought, only this time I teach for my own life, I think, as well as for his.

Somewhere in the distance a crow hailed its harsh cry into the stillness, and Roland thought for a moment of his hawk, David. Now *Eddie* was his hawk . . . and like David, he would not scruple to tear out his eye if he gave so much as a single inch.

Or his throat.

“Will you shoot me? Is that how you’d have it end, Eddie?”

“Man, I’m so fucking tired of your jive,” Eddie said. His eyes were blurred with tears and fury.

“You haven’t finished the key, but not because you are afraid to finish. You’re afraid of finding you *can’t* finish. You’re afraid to go down to where the stones stand, but not because you’re afraid of what may come once you enter the circle. You’re afraid of what may *not* come. You’re not afraid of the great world, Eddie, but of the small one inside yourself. You haven’t forgotten the face of your father. So do it. Shoot me if you dare. I’m tired of watching you blubber.”

“Stop it!” Susannah screamed at him. “Can’t you see he’ll do it? Can’t you see you’re *forcing* him to do it?”

Roland cut his eyes toward her. “I’m forcing him to *decide*.” He looked back at Eddie, and his deeply lined face was stern. “You have come from the shadow of the heroin and the shadow of your brother, my friend. Come from the shadow of yourself, if you dare. Come now. Come out or shoot me *and have done with it.*”

For a moment he thought Eddie was going to do just that, and it would all end right here, on this high ridge, beneath a cloudless summer sky with the spires of the city glimmering on the horizon like blue ghosts. Then Eddie's cheek began to twitch. The firm line of his lips softened and began to tremble. His hand fell from the sandalwood butt of Roland's gun. His chest hitched once . . . twice . . . three times. His mouth opened and all his despair and terror came out in one groaning cry as he blundered toward the gunslinger.

"I'm afraid, you numb fuck! Don't you understand that? Roland, I'm afraid!"

His feet tangled together. He fell forward. Roland caught him and held him close, smelling the sweat and dirt on his skin, smelling his tears and terror.

The gunslinger embraced him for a moment, then turned him toward Susannah. Eddie dropped to his knees beside her chair, his head hanging wearily. She put a hand on the back of his neck, pressing his head against her thigh, and said bitterly to Roland, "Sometimes I hate you, big white man."

Roland placed the heels of his hands against his forehead and pressed hard. "Sometimes I hate myself."

"Don't ever stop you, though, do it?"

Roland didn't reply. He looked at Eddie, who lay with his cheek pressed against Susannah's thigh and his eyes tightly shut. His face was a study in misery. Roland fought away the dragging weariness that made him want to leave the rest of this charming discussion for another day. If Eddie was right, there was no other day. Jake was almost ready to make his move. Eddie had been chosen to midwife the boy into this world. If he wasn't prepared to do that, Jake would die at the point of entry, as surely as an infant must strangle if the mother-root is tangled about its neck when the contractions begin.

"Stand up, Eddie."

For a moment he thought Eddie would simply go on crouching there and hiding his face against the woman's leg. If so, everything was lost . . . and that was *ka*, too. Then, slowly, Eddie got to his feet. He stood there with everything—hands, shoulders, head, hair—hanging, not good, but he was up, and that was a start.

“Look at me.”

Susannah stirred uneasily, but this time she said nothing.

Slowly, Eddie raised his head and brushed the hair out of his eyes with a trembling hand.

“This is for you. I was wrong to take it at all, no matter how deep my pain.” Roland curled his hand around the rawhide strip and yanked, snapping it. He held the key out to Eddie. Eddie reached for it like a man in a dream, but Roland did not immediately open his hand. “Will you try to do what needs to be done?”

“Yes.” His voice was almost inaudible.

“Do you have something to tell me?”

“I’m sorry I’m afraid.” There was something terrible in Eddie’s voice, something which hurt Roland’s heart and, he supposed, he knew what it was: here was the last of Eddie’s childhood, expiring painfully among the three of them. It could not be seen, but Roland could hear its weakening cries. He tried to make himself deaf to them.

Something else I’ve done in the name of the Tower. My score grows ever longer, and the day when it will all have to be totted up, like a long-time drunkard’s bill in an alehouse, draws ever nearer. How will I ever pay?

“I don’t want your apology, least of all for being afraid,” he said. “Without fear, what would we be? Mad dogs with foam on our muzzles and shit drying on our hocks.”

“What *do* you want, then?” Eddie cried. “You’ve taken everything else—everything I have to give! No, not even that, because in the end, I gave it to you! So *what else do you want from me?*”

Roland held the key which was their half of Jake Chambers’s salvation locked in his fist and said nothing. His eyes held Eddie’s, and the sun shone on the green expanse of plain and the blue-gray reach of the Send River, and somewhere in the distance the crow hailed again across the golden leagues of this fading summer afternoon.

After a while, understanding began to dawn in Eddie Dean’s eyes. Roland nodded.

“I have forgotten the face . . .” Eddie paused. Dipped his head. Swallowed. Looked up at the gunslinger once more. The thing which had been dying among them had moved on now—Roland knew it. That thing was gone. Just like that. Here, on this sunny wind-swept ridge at the edge of everything, it had gone forever. “I have forgotten the face of my father, gunslinger . . . and I cry your pardon.”

Roland opened his hand and returned the small burden of the key to him who *ka* had decreed must carry it. “Speak not so, gunslinger,” he said in the High Speech. “Your father sees you very well . . . loves you very well . . . and so do I.”

Eddie closed his own hand over the key and turned away with his tears still drying on his face. “Let’s go,” he said, and they began to move down the long hill toward the plain which stretched beyond.

16

JAKE WALKED SLOWLY ALONG Castle Avenue, past pizza shops and bars and bodegas where old women with suspicious faces poked the potatoes and squeezed the tomatoes. The straps of his pack had chafed the skin beneath his arms, and his feet hurt. He passed beneath a digital thermometer which announced it was eighty-five. It felt more like a hundred and five to Jake.

Up ahead, a police car turned onto the Avenue. Jake at once became extremely interested in a display of gardening supplies in the window of a hardware store. He watched the reflection of the blue-and-white pass in the window and didn’t move until it was gone.

Hey, Jake, old buddy—where, exactly, are you going?

He hadn’t the slightest idea. He felt positive that the boy he was looking for—the boy in the green bandanna and the yellow T-shirt that said NEVER A DULL MOMENT IN MID-WORLD—was somewhere close by, but so what? To Jake he was still nothing but a needle hiding in the haystack which was Brooklyn.

He passed an alley which had been decorated with a tangle of spray-painted graffiti. Mostly they were names—EL TIANTE 91, SPEEDY GONZALES, MOTORVAN MIKE—but a few mottos and words to the wise had been dropped in here and there, and Jake's eyes fixed on two of these.

A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE

had been written across the bricks in spray-paint which had weathered to the same dusky-pink shade of the rose which grew in the vacant lot where Tom and Gerry's Artistic Deli had once stood. Below it, in a blue so dark it was almost black, someone had spray-painted this oddity:

I CRY YOUR PARDON

What does that mean? Jake wondered. He didn't know—something from the Bible, maybe—but it held like the eye of a snake is reputed to hold a bird. At last he walked on, slowly and thoughtfully. It was almost two-thirty, and his shadow was beginning to grow longer.

Just ahead, he saw an old man walking down the street, keeping to the shade as much as possible and leaning on a gnarled cane. Behind the thick glasses he wore, his brown eyes swam like oversized eggs.

"I cry your pardon, sir," Jake said without thinking or even really hearing himself.

The old man turned to look at him, blinking in surprise and fear. "Liff me alone, boy," he said. He raised his walking-stick and brandished it clumsily in Jake's direction.

"Would you know if there's a place called Markey Academy anyplace around here, sir?" This was utter desperation, but it was the only thing he could think to ask.

The old man slowly lowered his stick—it was the *sir* that had done it. He looked at Jake with the slightly lunatic interest of the old and almost senile. "How come you not in school, boy?"

Jake smiled wearily. This one was getting very old. "Finals Week. I came down here to look up an old friend of mine who goes to

Markey Academy, that's all. Sorry to have bothered you."

He stepped around the old man (hoping he wouldn't decide to whop him one across the ass with his cane just for good luck) and was almost down to the corner when the old man yelled: "Boy! *Boyyyyy!*"

Jake turned around.

"There is no Markey Akidimy down here," the old man said. "Twenty-two years I'm living here, so I should know. *Markey Avenue*, yes, but no Markey Akidimy."

Jake's stomach cramped with sudden excitement. He took a step back toward the old man, who at once raised his cane into a defensive position again. Jake stopped at once, leaving a twenty-foot safety zone between them. "Where's *Markey Avenue*, sir? Can you tell me that?"

"Of *gorse*," the old man said. "Didn't I just say I'm livink here twenty-two years? Two blogs down. Turn left at the Majestic Theatre. But I'm tellink you now, there iss no Markey Akidimy."

"Thank you, sir! Thank you!"

Jake turned around and looked up *Castle Avenue*. Yes—he could see the unmistakable shape of a movie marquee jutting out over the sidewalk a couple of blocks up. He started to run toward it, then decided that might attract attention and slowed down to a fast walk.

The old man watched him go. "*Sir!*" he said to himself in a tone of mild amazement. "*Sir, yet!*"

He chuckled rustily and moved on.

17

ROLAND'S BAND STOPPED AT dusk. The gunslinger dug a shallow pit and lit a fire. They didn't need it for cooking purposes, but they needed it, nonetheless. *Eddie* needed it. If he was going to finish his carving, he would need light to work by.

The gunslinger looked around and saw Susannah, a dark silhouette against the fading aquamarine sky, but he didn't see Eddie.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Down the road apiece. You leave him alone now, Roland—you've done enough."

Roland nodded, bent over the firepit, and struck at a piece of flint with a worn steel bar. Soon the kindling he had gathered was blazing. He added small sticks, one by one, and waited for Eddie to return.

18

HALF A MILE BACK the way they had come, Eddie sat cross-legged in the middle of the Great Road with his unfinished key in one hand, watching the sky. He glanced down the road, saw the spark of the fire, and knew exactly what Roland was doing . . . and why. Then he turned his gaze to the sky again. He had never felt so lonely or so afraid.

The sky was *huge*—he could not remember ever seeing so much uninterrupted space, so much pure emptiness. It made him feel very small, and he supposed there was nothing at all wrong with that. In the scheme of things, he was very small.

The boy was close now. He thought he knew where Jake was and what he was about to do, and it filled him with silent wonder. Susannah had come from 1963. Eddie had come from 1987. Between them . . . Jake. Trying to come over. Trying to be born.

I met him, Eddie thought. I must have met him, and I think I remember . . . sort of. It was just before Henry went into the Army, right? He was taking courses at Brooklyn Vocational Institute, and he was heavily into black—black jeans, black motorcycle boots with steel caps, black T-shirts with the sleeves rolled up. Henry's James

Dean look. Smoking Area Chic. I used to think that, but I never said it out loud, because I didn't want him pissed at me.

He realized that what he had been waiting for had happened while he was thinking: Old Star had come out. In fifteen minutes, maybe less, it would be joined by a whole galaxy of alien jewelry, but for now it gleamed alone in the ungathered darkness.

Eddie slowly held up the key until Old Star gleamed within its wide central notch. And then he recited the old formula of his world, the one his mother had taught him as she knelt beside him at the bedroom window, both of them looking out at the evening star which rode the oncoming darkness above the rooftops and fire-escapes of Brooklyn: "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight; wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight."

Old Star glowed in the notch of the key, a diamond caught in ash.

"Help me find some guts," Eddie said. "That's my wish. Help me find the guts to try and finish this damned thing."

He sat there a moment longer, then got to his feet and walked slowly back to camp. He sat down as close to the fire as he could get, took the gunslinger's knife without a word to either him or Susannah, and began to work. Tiny, curling slivers of wood rolled up from the s-shape at the end of the key. Eddie worked fast, turning the key this way and that, occasionally closing his eyes and letting his thumb slip along the mild curves. He tried not to think about what might happen if the shape were to go wrong—that would freeze him for sure.

Roland and Susannah sat behind him, watching silently. At last Eddie put the knife aside. His face was running with sweat. "This kid of yours," he said. "This Jake. He must be a gutty brat."

"He was brave under the mountains," Roland said. "He was afraid, but never gave an inch."

"I wish I could be that way."

Roland shrugged. "At Balazar's you fought well even though they had taken your clothes. It's very hard for a man to fight naked, but you did it."

Eddie tried to remember the shootout in the nightclub, but it was just a blur in his mind—smoke, noise, and light shining through one

wall in confused, intersecting rays. He thought that wall had been torn apart by automatic-weapons fire, but couldn't remember for sure.

He held the key up so its notches were sharply outlined against the flames. He held it that way for a long time, looking mostly at the s-shape. It looked exactly as he remembered it from his dream and from the momentary vision he had seen in the fire . . . but it didn't feel exactly right. Almost, but not quite.

That's just Henry again. That's just all those years of never being quite good enough. You did it, buddy—it's just that the Henry inside doesn't want to admit it.

He dropped the key onto the square of hide and folded the edges carefully around it. "I'm done. I don't know if it's right or not, but I guess it's as right as I can make it." He felt oddly empty now that he no longer had the key to work on—purposeless and directionless.

"Do you want something to eat, Eddie?" Susannah asked quietly.

There's your purpose, he thought. There's your direction. Sitting right over there, with her hands folded in her lap. All the purpose and direction you'll ever—

But now something else rose in his mind—it came all at once. Not a dream . . . not a vision . . .

No, not either of those. It's a memory. It's happening again—you're remembering forward in time.

"I have to do something else first," he said, and got up.

On the far side of the fire, Roland had stacked some odd lots of scavenged wood. Eddie hunted through them and found a dry stick about two feet long and four inches or so through the middle. He took it, returning to his place by the fire, and picked up Roland's knife again. This time he worked faster because he was simply sharpening the stick, turning it into something that looked like a small tent-peg.

"Can we get moving before daybreak?" he asked the gunslinger. "I think we should get to that circle as soon as we can."

"Yes. Sooner, if we must. I don't want to move in the dark—a speaking ring is an unsafe place to be at night—but if we have to, we have to."

“From the look on your face, big boy, I doubt if those stone circles are very safe *any* time,” Susannah said.

Eddie put the knife aside again. The dirt Roland had taken out of the shallow hole he’d made for the campfire was piled up by Eddie’s right foot. Now he used the sharp end of the stick to carve a question-mark shape in the dirt. The shape was crisp and clear.

“Okay,” he said, brushing it away. “All done.”

“Have something to eat, then,” Susannah said.

Eddie tried, but he wasn’t very hungry. When he finally went to sleep, nestled against Susannah’s warmth, his rest was dreamless but very thin. Until the gunslinger shook him awake at four in the morning, he heard the wind racing endlessly over the plain below them, and it seemed to him that he went with it, flying high into the night, away from these cares, while Old Star and Old Mother rode serenely above him, painting his cheeks with frost.

19

“IT’S TIME,” ROLAND SAID.

Eddie sat up. Susannah sat up beside him, rubbing her palms over her face. As Eddie’s head cleared, his mind was filled with urgency.

“Yes. Let’s go, and fast. ”

“He’s getting close, isn’t he?”

“Very close.” Eddie got to his feet, grasped Susannah around the waist, and boosted her into her chair.

She was looking at him anxiously. “Do we still have enough time to get there?”

Eddie nodded. “Barely.”

Three minutes later they were headed down the Great Road again. It glimmered ahead of them like a ghost. And an hour after that, as the first light of dawn began to touch the sky in the east, a rhythmic sound began far ahead of them.

The sound of drums, Roland thought.

Machinery, Eddie thought. Some huge piece of machinery.

It's a heart, Susannah thought. Some huge, diseased, beating heart . . . and it's in that city, where we have to go.

Two hours later, the sound stopped as suddenly as it had begun. White, featureless clouds had begun to fill the sky above them, first veiling the early sun, then blotting it out. The circle of standing stones lay less than five miles ahead now, gleaming in the shadowless light like the teeth of a fallen monster.

20

SPAGHETTI WEEK AT THE MAJESTIC!

the battered, dispirited marquee jutting over the corner of Brooklyn and Markey Avenues proclaimed.

**2 SERGIO LEONE CLASSIX!
A FISTFUL OF \$\$ PLUS GOOD BAD & UGLY!
99¢ ALL SHOWS**

A gum-chewing cutie with rollers in her blonde hair sat in the box office listening to Led Zep on her transistor and reading one of the tabloids of which Mrs. Shaw was so fond. To her left, in the theater's remaining display case, there was a poster showing Clint Eastwood.

Jake knew he should get moving—three o'clock was almost here—but he paused a moment anyway, staring at the poster behind the dirty, cracked glass. Eastwood was wearing a Mexican serape. A cigar was clamped in his teeth. He had thrown one side of the serape back over his shoulder to free his gun. His eyes were a pale, faded blue. Bombardier's eyes.

It's not him, Jake thought, but it's almost him. It's the eyes, mostly . . . the eyes are almost the same.

"You let me drop," he said to the man in the old poster, the man who was not Roland. "You let me die. What happens this time?"

"Hey, kid," the blonde ticket-seller called, making Jake start. "You gonna come in or just stand there and talk to yourself?"

"Not me," Jake said. "I've already seen those two."

He got moving again, turning left on Markey Avenue.

Once again he waited for the feeling of *remembering forward* to seize him, but it didn't come. This was just a hot, sunny street lined with sandstone-colored apartment buildings that looked like prison cellblocks to Jake. A few young women were walking along, pushing baby-carriages in pairs and talking desultorily, but the street was otherwise deserted. It was unseasonably hot for May—too hot to stroll.

What am I looking for? What?

From behind him came a burst of raucous male laughter. It was followed by an outraged female shriek: "You give that *back!*"

Jake jumped, thinking the owner of the voice must mean him.

"Give it *back*, Henry! I'm not kidding!"

Jake turned and saw two boys, one at least eighteen and the other a lot younger . . . twelve or thirteen. At the sight of this second boy, Jake's heart did something that felt like a loop-the-loop in his chest. The kid was wearing green corduroys instead of madras shorts, but the yellow T-shirt was the same, and he had a battered old basketball under one arm. Although his back was to Jake, Jake knew he had found the boy from last night's dream.

21

THE GIRL WAS THE gum-chewing cutie from the ticket-booth. The older of the two boys—who looked almost old enough to be called a man—had her newspaper in his hands. She grabbed for it. The

newspaper-grabber—he was wearing denims and a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up—held it over his head and grinned.

“Jump for it, Maryanne! Jump, girl, jump!”

She stared at him with angry eyes, her cheeks flushed. “Give it to me!” she said. “Quit fooling around and give it back! *Bastard!*”

“Oooo wisten to *dat*, Eddie!” the old kid said. “Bad wang-gwidge! Naughty, naughty!” He waved the newspaper just out of the blonde ticket-seller’s grasp, grinning, and Jake suddenly understood. These two were walking home from school together—although they probably didn’t go to the same one, if he was right about the difference in their ages—and the bigger boy had gone over to the box office, pretending he had something interesting to tell the blonde. Then he had reached through the slot at the bottom and snatched her paper.

The big boy’s face was one that Jake had seen before; it was the face of a kid who would think it the height of hilarity to douse a cat’s tail with lighter fluid or feed a bread-ball with a fishhook planted in the middle to a hungry dog. The sort of kid who sat in the back of the room and snapped bra-straps and then said “Who me?” with a big, dumb look of surprise on his face when someone finally complained. There weren’t many kids like him at Piper, but there were a few. Jake supposed there were a few in every school. They dressed better at Piper, but the face was the same. He guessed that in the old days, people would have said it was the face of a boy who was born to be hung.

Maryanne jumped for her newspaper, which the old boy in the black pants had rolled into a tube. He pulled it out of her reach just before she could grab it, then whacked her on the head with it, the way you might whack a dog for piddling on the carpet. She was beginning to cry now—mostly from humiliation, Jake guessed. Her face was now so red it was almost glowing. “Keep it, then!” she yelled at him. “I know you can’t read, but you can look at the pictures, at least!”

She began to turn away.

“Give it back, why don’t you?” the younger boy—Jake’s boy—said softly.

The old boy held out the newspaper tube. The girl snatched it from him, and even from his place thirty feet farther down the street, Jake heard it rip. “You’re a turd, Henry Dean!” she cried. “A real *turd!*”

“Hey, what’s the big deal?” Henry sounded genuinely injured. “It was just a joke. Besides, it only ripped in one place—you can still read it, for Chrissake. Lighten up a little, why don’tcha?”

And that was right, too, Jake thought. Guys like this Henry always pushed even the most unfunny joke two steps too far . . . then looked wounded and misunderstood when someone yelled at them. And it was always *Wassa matter?* and it was *Can’tcha take a joke?* and it was *Why don’tcha lighten up a little?*

What are you doing with him, kid? Jake wondered. If you’re on my side, what are you doing with a jerk like that?

But as the younger kid turned around and they started to walk down the street again, Jake knew. The old boy’s features were heavier, and his complexion was badly pitted with acne, but otherwise the resemblance was striking. The two boys were brothers.

22

JAKE TURNED AWAY AND began to idle up the sidewalk ahead of the two boys. He reached into his breast pocket with a shaky hand, pulled out his father’s sunglasses, and managed to fumble them onto his face.

Voices swelled behind him, as if someone was gradually turning up the volume on a radio.

“You shouldn’t have ranked on her that bad, Henry. It was mean.”

“She loves it, Eddie.” Henry’s voice was complacent, worldly-wise “When you get a little older, you’ll understand.”

“She was *cryin.*”

“Prob’ly got the rag on,” Henry said in a philosophical tone.

They were very close now. Jake shrank against the side of the building. His head was down, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his jeans. He didn't know why it seemed so vitally important that he not be noticed, but it did. Henry didn't matter, one way or the other, but—

The younger one isn't supposed to remember me, he thought. I don't know why, exactly, but he's not.

They passed him without so much as a glance, the one Henry had called Eddie walking on the outside, dribbling the basketball along the gutter.

"You gotta admit she looked funny," Henry was saying. "Ole Be-Bop Maryanne, jumpin for her newspaper. Woof! Woof!"

Eddie looked up at his brother with an expression that wanted to be reproachful . . . and then he gave up and dissolved into laughter. Jake saw the unconditional love in that upturned face and guessed that Eddie would forgive a lot in his big brother before giving it up as a bad job.

"So are we going?" Eddie asked now. "You said we could. After school."

"I said *maybe*. I dunno if I wanna walk all the way over there. Mom'll be home by now, too. Maybe we just oughtta forget it. Go upstairs and watch some tube."

They were now ten feet ahead of Jake and pulling away.

"Ah, come on! You *said!*"

Beyond the building the two boys were currently passing was a chainlink fence with an open gate in it. Beyond it, Jake saw, was the playground of which he had dreamed last night . . . a version of it, anyway. It wasn't surrounded by trees, and there was no odd subway kiosk with diagonal slashes of yellow and black across the front, but the cracked concrete was the same. So were the faded yellow foul lines.

"Well . . . maybe. I dunno." Jake realized Henry was teasing again. Eddie didn't, though; he was too anxious about wherever it was he wanted to go. "Let's shoot some hoops while I think it over."

He stole the ball from his younger brother, dribbled clumsily onto the playground, and went for a lay-up that hit high on the backboard

and bounced back without even touching the rim of the hoop. Henry was good at stealing newspapers from teenage girls, Jake thought, but on the basketball court he sucked the big one.

Eddie walked in through the gate, unbuttoned his corduroy pants, and slipped them down. Beneath them were the faded madras shorts he had been wearing in Jake's dream.

"Oh, is he wearing his shortie panties?" Henry said. "Ain't they *cuuute*?" He waited until his brother balanced himself on one leg to pull off his cords, then flung the basketball at him. Eddie managed to bat it away, probably saving himself a bloody nose, but he lost his balance and fell clumsily to the concrete. He didn't cut himself, but he could have done so, Jake saw; a great deal of broken glass glittered in the sun along the chainlink.

"Come on, Henry, quit it," he said, but with no real reproach. Jake guessed Henry had been pulling shit like this on him so long that Eddie only noticed it when Henry pulled it on someone else—someone like the blonde ticket-seller.

"Tum on, Henwy, twit it."

Eddie got to his feet and trotted out onto the court. The ball had struck the chainlink fence and bounced back to Henry. Henry now tried to dribble past his younger brother. Eddie's hand went out, lightning-quick but oddly delicate, and stole the ball. He easily ducked under Henry's outstretched, flailing arm and went for the basket. Henry dogged him, frowning thunderously, but he might as well have been taking a nap. Eddie went up, knees bent, feet neatly cocked, and laid the ball in. Henry grabbed it and dribbled out to the stripe.

Shouldn't have done that, Eddie, Jake thought. He was standing just beyond the place where the fence ended, watching the two boys. This seemed safe enough, at least for the moment. He was wearing his dad's sunglasses, and the two boys were so involved in what they were doing that they wouldn't have noticed if President Carter had strolled up to watch. Jake doubted if Henry knew who President Carter was, anyway.

He expected Henry to foul his brother, perhaps heavily, as a payback for the steal, but he had underestimated Eddie's guile.

Henry offered a head-fake that wouldn't have fooled Jake's mother, but Eddie appeared to fall for it. Henry broke past him and drove for the basket, gaily travelling the ball most of the way. Jake was quite sure Eddie could have caught him easily and stolen the ball again, but instead of doing so, the kid hung back. Henry laid it up—clumsily—and the ball bounced off the rim again. Eddie grabbed it . . . and then let it squirt through his fingers. Henry snatched it, turned, and put it through the netless hoop.

"One-up," Henry panted. "Play to twelve?"

"Sure."

Jake had seen enough. It would be close, but in the end Henry would win. Eddie would see to it. It would do more than save him from getting lumped up; it would put Henry in a good mood, making him more agreeable to whatever it was Eddie wanted to do.

Hey Moose—I think your little brother has been playing you like a violin for a long time now, and you don't have the slightest idea, do you?

He drew back until the apartment building which stood at the north end of the court cut off his view of the Dean brothers, and their view of him. He leaned against the wall and listened to the thump of the ball on the court. Soon Henry was puffing like Charlie the Choo-Choo going up a steep hill. He would be a smoker, of course; guys like Henry were always smokers.

The game took almost ten minutes, and by the time Henry claimed victory, the street was filled up with other home-going kids. A few gave Jake curious glances as they passed by.

"Good game, Henry," Eddie said.

"Not bad," Henry panted. "You're still falling for the old head-fake."

Sure he is, Jake thought. I think he'll go on falling for it until he's gained about eighty pounds. Then you might get a surprise.

"I guess I am. Hey, Henry, can't we *please* go look at the place?"

"Yeah, why not? Let's do it."

"All *right!*" Eddie yelled. There was the smacking sound of flesh on flesh; probably Eddie giving his brother a high-five. "Boss!"

"You go on up to the apartment. Tell Mom we'll be in by four-thirty, quarter of five. But don't say anything about The Mansion. She'd

have a shit-fit. She thinks it's haunted, too."

"You want me to tell her we're going over Dewey's?"

Silence as Henry considered this. "Naw. She might call Mrs. Bunkowski. Tell her . . . tell her we're goin down to Dahlie's to get Hoodsie Rockets. She'll believe that. Ask her for a coupla bucks, too."

"She won't give me any money. Not two days before payday."

"Bullshit. You can get it out of her. Go on, now."

"Okay." But Jake didn't hear Eddie moving. "Henry?"

"*What?*" Impatiently.

"*Is* The Mansion haunted, do you think?"

Jake sidled a little closer to the playground. He didn't want to be noticed, but he strongly felt that he needed to hear this.

"Naw. There ain't no *real* haunted houses—just in the fuckin movies."

"Oh." There was unmistakable relief in Eddie's voice.

"But if there ever *was* one," Henry resumed (perhaps he didn't want his little brother feeling *too* relieved, Jake thought), "it'd be The Mansion. I heard that a couple of years ago, two kids from Norwood Street went in there to bump uglies and the cops found em with their throats cut and all the blood drained out of their bodies. But there wasn't any blood on em or around em. Get it? The blood was all *gone*."

"You shittin me?" Eddie breathed.

"Nope. But that wasn't the worst thing."

"What was?"

"Their hair was dead white," Henry said. The voice that drifted to Jake was solemn. He had an idea that Henry wasn't teasing this time, that this time he believed every word he was saying. (He also doubted that Henry had brains enough to make such a story up.)

"Both of em. And their eyes were wide open and staring, like they saw the most gross-awful thing in the world."

"Aw, gimme a break," Eddie said, but his voice was soft, awed.

"You still wanna go?"

"Sure. As long as we don't . . . you know, hafta get too close."

“Then go see Mom. And try to get a couple of bucks out of her. I need cigarettes. Take the fuckin ball up, too.”

Jake drifted backward and stepped into the nearest apartment building entryway just as Eddie came out through the playground gate.

To his horror, the boy in the yellow T-shirt turned in Jake’s direction. *Holy crow!* he thought, dismayed. *What if this is his building?*

It was. Jake just had time to turn around and begin to scan the names beside the rank of buzzers before Eddie Dean brushed past him, so close that Jake could smell the sweat he had worked up on the basketball court. He half-sensed, half-saw the curious glance the boy tossed in his direction. Then Eddie was in the lobby and headed for the elevators with his school-pants bundled under one arm and the scuffed basketball under the other.

Jake’s heart was thudding heavily in his chest. Shadowing people was a lot harder in real life than it was in the detective novels he sometimes read. He crossed the street and stood between two apartment buildings half a block up. From here he could see both the entrance to the Dean brothers’ building and the playground. The playground was filling up now, mostly with little kids. Henry leaned against the chainlink, smoking a cigarette and trying to look full of teenage angst. Every now and then he would stick out a foot as one of the little kids bolted toward him at an all-out run, and before Eddie returned, he had succeeded in tripping three of them. The last of these went sprawling full-length, smacking his face on the concrete, and ran wailing up the street with a bloody forehead. Henry flicked his cigarette butt after him and laughed cheerfully.

Just an all-around fun guy, Jake thought.

After that, the little kids wised up and began giving him a wide berth. Henry strolled out of the playground and down the street to the apartment building Eddie had entered five minutes before. As he reached it, the door opened and Eddie came out. He had changed into a pair of jeans and a fresh T-shirt; he had also tied a green bandanna, the same one he had been wearing in Jake’s dream, around his forehead. He was waving a couple of dollar bills

triumphantly. Henry snatched them, then asked Eddie something. Eddie nodded, and the two boys set off.

Keeping half a block between himself and them, Jake followed.

23

THEY STOOD IN THE high grass at the edge of the Great Road, looking at the speaking ring.

Stonehenge, Susannah thought, and shuddered. *That's what it looks like. Stonehenge.*

Although the thick grass which covered the plain grew around the bases of the tall gray monoliths, the circle they enclosed was bare earth, littered here and there with white things.

"What are those?" she asked in a low voice. "Chips of stone?"

"Look again," Roland said.

She did, and saw that they were bones. The bones of small animals, maybe. She hoped.

Eddie switched the sharpened stick to his left hand, dried the palm of his right against his shirt, and then switched it back again. He opened his mouth, but no sound came from his dry throat. He cleared it and tried again. "I think I'm supposed to go in and draw something in the dirt."

Roland nodded. "Now?"

"Soon." He looked into Roland's face. "There's something here, isn't there? Something we can't see."

"It's not here right now," Roland said. "At least, I don't *think* it is. But it will come. Our *khef*—our lifeforce—will draw it. And, of course, it will be jealous of its place. Give me my gun back, Eddie."

Eddie unbuckled the belt and handed it over. Then he turned back to the circle of twenty-foot-high stones. Something lived in there, all right. He could smell it, a stench that made him think of damp plaster and moldering sofas and ancient mattresses rotting beneath half-liquid coats of mildew. It was familiar, that smell.

The Mansion—I smelled it there. The day I talked Henry into taking me over to see The Mansion on Rhinehold Street, in Dutch Hill.

Roland buckled his gunbelt, then bent to knot the tiedown. He looked up at Susannah as he did it. “We may need Detta Walker,” he said. “Is she around?”

“That bitch always around.” Susannah wrinkled her nose.

“Good. One of us is going to have to protect Eddie while he does what he’s supposed to do. The other is going to be so much useless baggage. This is a demon’s place. Demons are not human, but they are male and female, just the same. Sex is both their weapon and their weakness. No matter what the sex of the demon may be, it will go for Eddie. To protect its place. To keep its place from being used by an outsider. Do you understand?”

Susannah nodded. Eddie appeared not to be listening. He had tucked the square of hide containing the key into his shirt and now he was staring into the speaking ring as if hypnotized.

“There’s no time to say this in a gentle or refined way,” Roland told her. “One of us will—”

“One of us gonna have to fuck it to keep it off Eddie,” Susannah interrupted. “This the sort of thing can’t *ever* turn down a free fuck. That’s what you’re gettin at, isn’t it?”

Roland nodded.

Her eyes gleamed. They were the eyes of Detta Walker now, both wise and unkind, shining with hard amusement, and her voice slid steadily deeper into the bogus Southern plantation drawl which was Detta’s trademark. “If it’s a girl demon, you git it. But if it’s a boy demon, it’s mine. That about it?”

Roland nodded.

“What about if it swings both ways? What about *that*, big boy?”

Roland’s lips twitched in the barest suggestion of a smile. “Then we’ll take it together. Just remember—”

Beside them, in a fainting, distant voice, Eddie murmured: “Not all is silent in the halls of the dead. Behold, the sleeper wakes.” He

turned his haunted, terrified eyes on Roland. “There’s a monster.”

“The demon—”

“No. A *monster*. Something between the doors—between the *worlds*. Something that waits. *And it’s opening its eyes.*”

Susannah cast a frightened glance at Roland.

“Stand, Eddie,” Roland said. “Be true.”

Eddie drew a deep breath. “I’ll stand until it knocks me down,” he said. “I have to go in now. It’s starting to happen.”

“We all goin in,” Susannah said. She arched her back and slipped out of her wheelchair. “Any demon want to fuck wit’ me he goan find out he’s fuckin wit’ the finest. I th’ow him a fuck he ain’t *never* goan f’git.”

As they passed between two of the tall stones and into the speaking circle, it began to rain.

24

As SOON AS JAKE saw the place, he understood two things: first, that he had seen it before, in dreams so terrible his conscious mind would not let him remember them; second, that it was a place of death and murder and madness. He was standing on the far corner of Rhinehold Street and Brooklyn Avenue, seventy yards from Henry and Eddie Dean, but even from where he was he could feel The Mansion ignoring them and reaching for him with its eager invisible hands. He thought there were talons at the ends of those hands. Sharp ones.

It wants me, and I can’t run away. It’s death to go in . . . but it’s madness not to. Because somewhere inside that place is a locked door. I have the key that will open it, and the only salvation I can hope for is on the other side.

He stared at The Mansion, a house that almost screamed abnormality, with a sinking heart. It stood in the center of its weedy, rioting yard like a tumor.

The Dean brothers had walked across nine blocks of Brooklyn, moving slowly under the hot afternoon sun, and had finally entered a section of town which had to be Dutch Hill, given the names on the shops and stores. Now they stood halfway down the block, in front of The Mansion. It looked as if it had been deserted for years, yet it had suffered remarkably little vandalism. And once, Jake thought, it really *had* been a mansion—the home, perhaps, of a wealthy merchant and his large family. In those long-gone days it must have been white, but now it was a dirty gray no-color. The windows had been knocked out and the peeling picket fence which surrounded it had been spray-painted, but the house itself was still intact.

It slumped in the hot light, a ramshackle slate-roofed revenant growing out of a hummocky trash-littered yard, somehow making Jake think of a dangerous dog which pretended to be asleep. Its steep roof overhung the front porch like a beetling brow. The boards of the porch were splintery and warped. Shutters which might once have been green leaned askew beside the glassless windows; ancient curtains still hung in some of these, dangling like strips of dead skin. To the left, an elderly trellis leaned away from the building, now held up not by nails but only by the nameless and somehow filthy clusters of vine which crawled over it. There was a sign on the lawn and another on the door. From where Jake stood, he could read neither of them.

The house was *alive*. He knew this, could feel its awareness reaching out from the boards and the slumping roof, could feel it pouring in rivers from the black sockets of its windows. The idea of approaching that terrible place filled him with dismay; the idea of actually going inside filled him with inarticulate horror. Yet he would have to. He could hear a low, slumbrous buzzing in his ears—the sound of a beehive on a hot summer day—and for a moment he was afraid he might faint. He closed his eyes . . . and *his* voice filled his head.

You must come, Jake. This is the path of the Beam, the way of the Tower, and the time of your Drawing. Be true; stand; come to me.

The fear didn't pass, but that terrible sense of impending panic did. He opened his eyes again and saw that he was not the only one who

had sensed the power and awakening sentience of the place. Eddie was trying to pull away from the fence. He turned toward Jake, who could see Eddie's eyes, wide and uneasy beneath his green headband. His big brother grabbed him and pushed him toward the rusty gate, but the gesture was too half-hearted to be much of a tease; however thick-headed he might be, Henry liked The Mansion no better than Eddie did.

They drew away a little and stood looking at the place for a while. Jake could not make out what they were saying to each other, but the tone of their voices was awed and uneasy. Jake suddenly remembered Eddie speaking in his dream: *Remember there's danger, though. Be careful . . . and be quick.*

Suddenly the real Eddie, the one across the street, raised his voice enough so that Jake could make out the words. "Can we go home now, Henry? Please? I don't like it." His tone was pleading.

"Fuckin little sissy," Henry said, but Jake thought he heard relief as well as indulgence in Henry's voice. "Come on."

They turned away from the ruined house crouching high-shouldered behind its sagging fence and approached the street. Jake backed up, then turned and looked into the window of the dispirited little hole-in-the-wall shop called Dutch Hill Used Appliances. He watched Henry and Eddie, dim and ghostly reflections superimposed on an ancient Hoover vacuum cleaner, cross Rhinehold Street.

"Are you *sure* it's not really haunted?" Eddie asked as they stepped onto the sidewalk on Jake's side.

"Well, I tell you what," Henry said. "Now that I been out here again, I'm really not so sure."

They passed directly behind Jake without looking at him. "Would you go in there?" Eddie asked.

"Not for a million dollars," Henry replied promptly.

They rounded the corner. Jake stepped away from the window and peeped after them. They were headed back the way they had come, close together on the sidewalk, Henry hulking along in his steel-toed shit-kickers, his shoulders already slumped like those of a much older man, Eddie walking beside him with neat, unconscious grace.

Their shadows, long and trailing out into the street now, mingled amicably together.

They're going home, Jake thought, and felt a wave of loneliness so strong that he felt it would crush him. *Going to eat supper and do homework and argue over which TV shows to watch and then go to bed. Henry may be a bullying shit, but they've got a life, those two, one that makes sense . . . and they're going back to it. I wonder if they have any idea of how lucky they are. Eddie might, I suppose.*

Jake turned, adjusted the straps of his pack, and crossed Rhinehold Street.

25

SUSANNAH SENSED MOVEMENT IN the empty grassland beyond the circle of standing stones: a sighing, whispering rush.

"Something comin'," she said tautly. "Comin fast."

"Be careful," Eddie said, "but keep it off me. You understand? Keep it off me."

"I hear you, Eddie. You just do your own thing."

Eddie nodded. He knelt in the center of the ring, holding the sharpened stick out in front of him as if assessing its point. Then he lowered it and drew a dark straight line in the dirt. "Roland, watch out for her..."

"I will if I can, Eddie."

". . . but keep it off me. Jake's coming. Crazy little mother's really coming."

Susannah could now see the grasses due north of the speaking ring parting in a long dark line, creating a furrow that lanced straight at the circle of stones.

"Get ready," Roland said. "It'll go for Eddie. One of us will have to ambush it."

Susannah reared up on her haunches like a snake coming out of a Hindu fakir's basket. Her hands, rolled into hard brown fists, were

held at the sides of her face. Her eyes blazed. "I'm ready," she said and then shouted: "*Come on, big boy! You come on right now! Run like it's yo birfday!*"

The rain began to fall harder as the demon which lived here re-entered its circle in a booming rush. Susannah had just time to sense thick and merciless masculinity—it came to her as an eyewatering smell of gin and juniper—and then it shot toward the center of the circle: She closed her eyes and reached for it, not with her arms or her mind but with all the female force which lived at the core of her: *Hey, big boy! Where you goan? D'pussy be ovah heah!*

It whirled. She felt its surprise . . . and then its raw hunger, as full and urgent as a pulsing artery. It leaped upon her like a rapist springing from the mouth of an alley.

Susannah howled and rocked backward, cords standing out on her neck. The dress she wore first flattened against her breasts and belly, and then began to tear itself to shreds. She could hear a pointless, directionless panting, as if the air itself had decided to rut with her.

"Suze!" Eddie shouted, and began to get to his feet.

"No!" she screamed back. "*Do it! I got this sumbitch right where . . . right where I want him! Go on, Eddie! Bring the kid! Bring—*" Coldness battered at the tender flesh between her legs. She grunted, fell backward . . . then supported herself with one hand and thrust defiantly forward and upward. "*Bring him through!*"

Eddie looked uncertainly at Roland, who nodded. Eddie glanced at Susannah again, his eyes full of dark pain and darker fear, and then deliberately turned his back on both of them and fell to his knees again. He reached forward with the sharpened stick which had become a makeshift pencil, ignoring the cold rain falling on his arms and the back of his neck. The stick began to move, making lines and angles, creating a shape Roland knew at once.

It was a door.

JAKE REACHED OUT, PUT his hands on the splintery gate, and pushed. It swung slowly open on screaming, rust-clotted hinges. Ahead of him was an uneven brick path. Beyond the path was the porch. Beyond the porch was the door. It had been boarded shut.

He walked slowly toward the house, heart telegraphing fast dots and dashes in his throat. Weeds had grown up between the buckled bricks. He could hear them rustling against his blue jeans. All his senses seemed to have been turned up two notches. *You're not really going in there, are you?* a panic-stricken voice in his head asked.

And the answer that occurred to him seemed both totally nuts and perfectly reasonable: *All things serve the Beam.*

The sign on the lawn read

ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING UNDER PENALTY OF
LAW!

The yellowing, rust-stained square of paper nailed to one of the boards crisscrossing the front door was more succinct:

BY ORDER OF NYC HOUSING AUTHORITY *THIS
PROPERTY CONDEMNED*

Jake paused at the foot of the steps, looking up at the door. He had heard voices in the vacant lot and now he could hear them again . . . but this was a choir of the damned, a babble of insane threats and equally insane promises. Yet he thought it was all one voice. The voice of the house; the voice of some monstrous doorkeeper, roused from its long unpeaceful sleep.

He thought briefly of his father's Ruger, even considered pulling it out of his pack, but what good would it do? Behind him, traffic passed back and forth on Rhinehold Street and a woman was yelling for her daughter to stop holding hands with that boy and bring in the wash, but here was another world, one ruled by some bleak being over whom guns could have no power.

Be true, Jake—stand.

"Okay," he said in a low, shaky voice. "Okay, I'll try. But you better not drop me again."

Slowly, he began to mount the porch steps.

27

THE BOARDS WHICH BARRED the door were old and rotten, the nails rusty. Jake grabbed hold of the top set at the point where they crossed each other and yanked. They came free with a squall that was the gate all over again. He tossed them over the porch rail and into an ancient flowerbed where only witch-grass and dogweed grew. He bent, grasped the lower crossing . . . and paused for a moment.

A hollow sound came through the door; the sound of some animal slobbering hungrily from deep inside a concrete pipe. Jake felt a sick sheen of sweat begin to break out on his cheeks and forehead. He was so frightened that he no longer felt precisely real; he seemed to have become a character in someone else's bad dream.

The evil choir, the evil presence, was behind this door. The sound of it seeped out like syrup.

He yanked at the lower boards. They came free easily.

Of course. It wants me to come in. It's hungry, and I'm supposed to be the main course.

A snatch of poetry occurred to him suddenly, something Ms. Avery had read to them. It was supposed to be about the plight of modern man, who was cut off from all his roots and traditions, but to Jake it suddenly seemed that the man who had written that poem must have seen this house: *I will show you something different from either/Your shadow in the morning striding behind you/Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;/I will show you . . .*

"I'll show you fear in a handful of dust," Jake muttered, and put his hand on the doorknob. And as he did, that clear sense of relief and surety flooded him again, the feeling that this was it, this time the door would open on that other world, he would see a sky untouched by smog and industrial smoke, and, on the far horizon, not the mountains but the hazy blue spires of some gorgeous unknown city.

He closed his fingers around the silver key in his pocket, hoping the door was locked so he could use it. It wasn't. The hinges screamed and flakes of rust sifted down from their slowly revolving cylinders as the door opened. The smell of decay struck Jake like a physical blow: wet wood, spongy plaster, rotting laths, ancient stuffing. Below these smells was another—the smell of some beast's lair. Ahead was a dank, shadowy hallway. To the left, a staircase pitched and yawed its crazy way into the upper shadows. Its collapsed bannister lay splintered on the hallway floor, but Jake was not foolish enough to think it *was just* splinters he was looking at. There were bones in that litter, as well—the bones of small animals. Some did not look precisely like animal bones, and these Jake would not look at overlong; he knew he would never summon the courage to go further if he did. He paused on the threshold, screwing himself up to take the first step. He heard a faint, muffled sound, very hard and very rapid, and realized it was his own teeth chattering in his head.

Why doesn't someone stop me? he thought wildly. Why doesn't somebody passing on the sidewalk shout "Hey, you! You're not supposed to be in there—can't-cha read?"

But he knew why. Pedestrians stuck mostly to the other side of this street, and those who came near this house did not linger.

Even if someone did happen to look, they wouldn't see me, because I'm not really here. For better or worse, I've already left my world behind. I've started to cross over. His world is somewhere ahead. This . . .

This was the hell between.

Jake stepped into the corridor, and although he screamed when the door swung shut behind him with the sound of a mausoleum door being slammed, he wasn't surprised.

Down deep, he wasn't surprised at all.

ONCE UPON A TIME there had been a young woman named Detta Walker who liked to frequent the honkytonks and roadhouses along Ridgeline Road outside of Nutley and on Route 88 down by the power-lines, outside of Amhigh. She had had legs in those days, and, as the song says, she knew how to use them. She would wear some tight cheap dress that looked like silk but wasn't and dance with the white boys while the band played all those ofay party tunes like "Double Shot of My Baby's Love" and "The Hippy-Hippy Shake." Eventually she would cut one of the honkeys out of the pack and let him lead her back to his car in the parking lot. There she would make out with him (one of the world's great soul-kissers was Detta Walker, and no slouch with the old fingernails, either) until he was just about insane . . . and then she'd shut him down. What happened next? Well, that was the question, wasn't it? That was the game. Some of them wept and begged—all right, but not great. Some of them raved and roared, which was better.

And although she had been slapped upside the head, punched in the eye, spat upon, and once kicked in the ass so hard she had gone sprawling in the gravel parking lot of The Red Windmill, she had never been raped. They had all gone home with the blue balls, every damned ofay one of them. Which meant, in Detta Walker's book, that she was the reigning champion, the undefeated queen. Of what? Of *them*. Of all those crewcut, button-down, tightass honkey motherfuckers.

Until now.

There was no way to withstand the demon who lived in the speaking ring. No doorhandles to grab, no car to tumble out of, no building to run back into, no cheek to slap, no face to claw, no balls to kick if the ofay sumbitch was slow getting the message.

The demon was on her . . . and then, in a flash, it—*he*—was in her.

She could feel it—*him*—pressing her backward, even though she could not see it—*him*. She could not see its—*his*—hands, but she could see their work as her dress tore violently open in several places. Then, suddenly, pain. It felt as though she were being ripped

open down there, and in her agony and surprise she screamed. Eddie looked around, his eyes narrowing.

“I’m all right!” she yelled. “Go on, Eddie, forget about me! I’m all right!”

But she wasn’t. For the first time since Detta had strode onto the sexual battlefield at the age of thirteen, she was losing. A horrid, engorged coldness plunged into her; it was like being fucked with an icicle.

Dimly, she saw Eddie turn away and begin drawing in the dirt again, his expression of warm concern fading back into the terrible, concentrated coldness she sometimes felt in him and saw on his face. Well, that was all right, wasn’t it? She had told him to go on, to forget her, to do what he needed to do in order to bring the boy over. This was her part of Jake’s drawing and she had no right to hate either of the men, who had not twisted her arm—or anything else—to make her do it, but as the coldness froze her and Eddie turned away from her, she hated them both; could, in fact, have torn their honkey balls off.

Then Roland was with her, his strong hands were on her shoulders and although he didn’t speak, she heard him: *Don’t fight. You can’t win if you fight—you can only die. Sex is its weapon, Susannah, but it’s also its weakness.*

Yes. It was *always* their weakness. The only difference was that this time she was going to have to give a little more—but maybe that was all right. Maybe in the end, she would be able to make this invisible honkey demon *pay* a little more.

She forced herself to relax her thighs. Immediately they spread apart, pushing long, curved fans in the dirt. She threw her head back into the rain which was now pelting down and sensed its face lolling just over hers, eager eyes drinking in every contorted grimace which passed over her face.

She reached up with one hand, as if to slap . . . and instead, slid it around the nape of her demon rapist’s neck. It was like cupping a palmful of solid smoke. And did she feel it twitch backward, surprised at her caress? She tilted her pelvis upward, using her grip on the invisible neck to create the leverage. At the same time she spread

her legs even wider, splitting what remained of her dress up the side-seams. God, it was huge!

“Come on,” she panted. “You ain’t gonna rape me. You *ain’t*. You want t’fuck me? *I fuck you*. I give you a fuckin like you ain’t *nevah* had! Fuck you to *death!*”

She felt the engorgement within her tremble; felt the demon try, at least momentarily, to draw back and regroup.

“Unh-unh, honey,” she croaked. She squeezed her thighs inward, pinning it. “De fun jus’ *startin*.” She began to flex her butt, humping at the invisible presence. She reached up with her free hand, interlaced all ten fingers, and allowed herself to fall backward with her hips cocked, her straining arms seeming to hold nothing. She tossed her sweat-damp hair out of her eyes; her lips split in a sharklike grin.

Let me go! a voice cried out in her mind. But at the same time she could feel the owner of the voice responding in spite of itself.

“No way, sugar. You wanted it . . . now you goan get it.” She thrust upward, holding on, concentrating fiercely on the freezing cold inside her. “I’m goan melt that icicle, sugar, and when it’s gone, what you goan do then?” Her lips rose and fell, rose and fell. She squeezed her thighs mercilessly together, closed her eyes, clawed more deeply into the unseen neck, and prayed that Eddie would be quick.

She didn’t know how long she could do this.

29

THE PROBLEM, JAKE THOUGHT, was simple: somewhere in this dank, terrible place was a locked door. The *right* door. All he had to do was find it. But it was hard, because he could feel the presence in the house gathering. The sound of those dissonant, gabbling voices was beginning to merge into one sound—a low, grating whisper.

And it was approaching.

A door stood open to the right. Beside it, thumb-tacked to the wall, was a faded daguerreotype which showed a hanged man dangling

like a piece of rotten fruit from a dead tree. Beyond it was a room that had once been a kitchen. The stove was gone, but an ancient icebox—the kind with the circular refrigeration drum on top—stood on the far side of the hilly, faded linoleum: Its door gaped open. Black, smelly stuff was caked inside and had trickled down to form a long-congealed puddle on the floor. The kitchen cabinets stood open. In one he saw what was probably the world's oldest can of Snow's Clam Fry-Ettes. Poking out of another was the head of a dead rat. Its eyes were white and seemingly in motion, and after a moment Jake realized that the empty sockets were filled with squirming maggots.

Something fell into his hair with a flabby thump. Jake screamed in surprise, reached for it, and grasped something that felt like a soft, bristle-covered rubber ball. He pulled it free and saw it was a spider, its bloated body the color of a fresh bruise. Its eyes regarded him with stupid malevolence. Jake threw it against the wall. It broke open and splattered there, legs twitching feebly.

Another one dropped onto his neck. Jake felt a sudden painful bite just below the place where his hair stopped. He ran backward into the hall, tripped over the fallen bannister, fell heavily, and felt the spider pop. Its innards—wet, feverish, and slippery—slid between his shoulder-blades like warm egg-yolk. Now he could see other spiders in the kitchen doorway. Some hung on almost invisible silken threads like obscene plumb-bobs; others simply dropped on the floor in a series of muddy plops and scuttered eagerly over to greet him.

Jake flailed to his feet, still screaming. He felt something in his mind, something that felt like a frayed rope, starting to give way. He supposed it was his sanity, and at that realization, Jake's considerable courage finally broke. He could bear this no longer, no matter what the stake. He bolted, meaning to flee if he still could, and realized too late that he had turned the wrong way and was running deeper into The Mansion instead of back toward the porch.

He lunged into a space too big to be a parlor or living room; it seemed to be a ballroom. Elves with strange, sly smiles on their faces capered on the wallpaper, peering at Jake from beneath peaked green caps. A mouldy couch was pushed against one wall.

In the center of the warped wooden floor was a splintered chandelier, its rusty chain lying in snarls among the spilled glass beads and dusty teardrop pendants. Jake skirted the wreck, snatching one terrified glance back over his shoulder. He saw no spiders; if not for the nastiness still trickling down his back, he might have believed he had imagined them.

He looked forward again and came to a sudden, skidding halt. Ahead, a pair of french doors stood half-open on their recessed tracks. Another hallway stretched beyond. At the end of this second corridor stood a closed door with a golden knob. Written across the door—or perhaps carved into it—were two words:

THE BOY

Below the doorknob was a filigreed silver plate and a keyhole.

I found it! Jake thought fiercely. I finally found it! That's it! That's the door!

From behind him a low groaning noise began, as if the house was beginning to tear itself apart. Jake turned and looked back across the ballroom. The wall on the far side of the room had begun to swell outward, pushing the ancient couch ahead of it. The old wallpaper shuddered; the elves began to ripple and dance. In places the paper simply snapped upward in long curls, like windowshades which have been released too suddenly. The plaster bulged forward in a pregnant curve. From beneath it, Jake could hear dry snapping sounds as the lathing broke, rearranging itself into some new, as-yet-hidden shape. And still the sound increased. Only it was no longer precisely a groan; now it sounded like a snarl.

He stared, hypnotized, unable to pull his eyes away.

The plaster didn't crack and then vomit outward in chunks; it seemed to have become plastic, and as the wall continued to bulge, making an irregular white bubble-shape from which scraps and draggles of wallpaper still hung, the surface began to mold itself into hills and curves and valleys. Suddenly Jake realized he was looking at a huge plastic face that was pushing itself out of the wall. It was like looking at someone who has walked headfirst into a wet sheet.

There was a loud snap as a chunk of broken lath tore free of the rippling wall. It became the jagged pupil of one eye. Below it, the wall writhed into a snarling mouth filled with jagged teeth. Jake could see fragments of wallpaper clinging to its lips and gums.

One plaster hand tore free of the wall, trailing an unravelling bracelet of rotted electrical wire. It grasped the sofa and threw it aside, leaving ghostly white fingermarks on its dark surface. More lathing burst free as the plaster fingers flexed. They created sharp, splintery claws. Now the face was all the way out of the wall and staring at Jake with its one wooden eye. Above it, in the center of its forehead, one wallpaper elf still danced. It looked like a weird tattoo. There was a wrenching sound as the thing began to slide forward. The hall doorway tore out and became a hunched shoulder. The thing's one free hand clawed across the floor, spraying glass droplets from the fallen chandelier.

Jake's paralysis broke. He turned, lunged through the french doors, and pelted down the second length of hallway with his pack bouncing and his right hand groping for the key in his pocket. His heart was a runaway factory machine in his chest. Behind him, the thing which was crawling out of The Mansion's woodwork bellowed at him, and although there were no words, Jake knew what it was saying; it was telling him to stand still, telling him that it was useless to run, telling him there was no escape. The whole house now seemed alive; the air resounded with splintering wood and squalling beams. The humming, insane voice of the doorkeeper was everywhere.

Jake's hand closed on the key. As he brought it out, one of the notches caught in the pocket. His fingers, wet with sweat, slipped. The key fell to the floor, bounced, dropped through a crack between two warped boards, and disappeared.

“HE’S IN TROUBLE!” SUSANNAH heard Eddie shout, but the sound of his voice was distant. She had plenty of trouble herself . . . but she thought she might be doing okay, just the same.

I’m goan melt that icicle, sugar, she had told the demon. I’m goan melt it, and when it’s gone, what you goan do then?

She hadn’t melted it, exactly, but she had *changed* it. The thing inside her was certainly giving her no pleasure, but at least the terrible pain had subsided and it was no longer cold. It was trapped, unable to disengage. Nor was she holding it in with her body, exactly. Roland had said sex was its weakness as well as its weapon, and he had been right, as usual. It had taken her, but *she* had also taken *it*, and now it was as if each of them had a finger stuck in one of those fiendish Chinese tubes, where yanking only sticks you tighter.

She hung onto one idea for dear life; *had* to, because all other conscious thought had vanished. She had to hold this sobbing, frightened, vicious thing in the snare of its own helpless lust. It wriggled and thrust and convulsed within her, screaming to be let go at the same time it used her body with greedy, helpless intensity, but she would not let it go free.

And what’s gonna happen when I finally do let go? she wondered desperately. What’s it gonna do to pay me back?

She didn’t know.

31

THE RAIN WAS FALLING in sheets, threatening to turn the circle within the stones into a sea of mud. “*Hold something over the door!*” Eddie shouted. “*Don’t let the rain wash it out!*”

Roland snatched a glance at Susannah and saw she was still struggling with the demon. Her eyes were half-shut, her mouth pulled down in a harsh grimace. He could not see or hear the demon, but he could sense its angry, frightened thrashings.

Eddie turned his streaming face toward him. “*Did you hear me?*” he shouted. “*Get something over the goddam door, and do it NOW!*”

Roland yanked one of their hides from his pack and held a corner in each hand. Then he stretched his arms out and leaned over Eddie, creating a makeshift tent. The tip of Eddie’s homemade pencil was caked with mud. He wiped it across his arm, leaving a smear the color of bitter chocolate, then wrapped his fist around the stick again and bent over his drawing. It was not exactly the same size as the door on Jake’s side of the barrier—the ratio was perhaps .75:1—but it would be big enough for Jake to come through . . . if the keys worked.

If he even has a key, isn’t that what you mean? he asked himself. Suppose he’s dropped it . . . or that house made him drop it?

He drew a plate under the circle which represented the doorknob, hesitated, and then squiggled the familiar shape of a keyhole within it:



He hesitated. There was one more thing, but what? It was hard to think of, because it felt as if there were a tornado roaring through his head, a tornado with random thoughts flipping around inside it instead of uprooted barns and privies and chicken-houses.

“Come on, sugah!” Susannah cried from behind him. “You weakenin on me! Wassa matta? I thought you was some kind of hot-shit studboy!”

Boy. That was it.

Carefully, he wrote THE BOY across the top panel of the door with the tip of his stick. At the instant he finished the Y, the drawing changed. The circle of rain-darkened earth he had drawn suddenly darkened even more . . . and pushed up from the ground, becoming a dark, gleaming knob. And instead of brown, wet earth within the shape of the keyhole, he could see dim light.

Behind him, Susannah shrieked at the demon again, urging it on, but now she sounded as if she were tiring. This had to end, and soon.

Eddie bent forward from the waist like a Muslim saluting Allah, and put his eye to the keyhole he had drawn. He looked through it into his own world, into that house which he and Henry had gone to see in May of 1977, unaware (except he, Eddie, had not been unaware; no, not totally unaware, even then) that a boy from another part of the city was following them.

He saw a hallway. Jake was down on his hands and knees, tugging frantically at a board. Something was coming for him. Eddie could see it, but at the same time he could not—it was as if part of his brain *refused* to see it, as if seeing would lead to comprehension and comprehension to madness.

“Hurry up, Jake!” he screamed into the keyhole. *“For Christ’s sake, move it!”*

Above the speaking ring, thunder ripped the sky like cannon-fire and the rain turned to hail.

32

FOR A MOMENT AFTER the key fell, Jake only stood where he was, staring down at the narrow crack between the boards.

Incredibly, he felt sleepy.

That shouldn’t have happened, he thought. It’s one thing too much. I can’t go on with this, not one minute, not one single second longer. I’m going to curl up against that door instead. I’m going to go to sleep, right away, all at once, and when it grabs me and pulls me toward its mouth, I’ll never wake up.

Then the thing coming out of the wall grunted, and when Jake looked up, his urge to give in vanished in a single stroke of terror. Now it was all the way out of the wall, a giant plaster head with one broken wooden eye and one reaching plaster hand. Chunks of

lathing stood out on its skull in random hackles, like a child's drawing of hair. It saw Jake and opened its mouth, revealing jagged wooden teeth. It grunted again. Plaster-dust drifted out of its yawning mouth like cigar smoke.

Jake fell to his knees and peered into the crack. The key was a small brave shimmer of silvery light down there in the dark, but the crack was far too narrow to admit his fingers. He seized one of the boards and yanked with all his might. The nails which held it groaned . . . but held.

There was a jangling crash. He looked down the hallway and saw the hand, which was bigger than his whole body, seize the fallen chandelier and throw it aside. The rusty chain which had once held it suspended rose like a bullwhip and then came down with a heavy crump. A dead lamp on a rusty chain rattled above Jake, dirty glass chattering against ancient brass.

The doorkeeper's head, attached only to its single hunched shoulder and reaching arm, slid forward above the floor. Behind it, the remains of the wall collapsed in a cloud of dust. A moment later the fragments humped up and became the creature's twisted, bony back.

The doorkeeper saw Jake looking and seemed to grin. As it did, splinters of wood poked out of its wrinkling cheeks. It dragged itself forward through the dust-hazed ballroom, mouth opening and closing. Its great hand groped amid the ruins, feeling for purchase, and ripped one of the french doors at the end of the hall from its track.

Jake screamed breathlessly and began to wrench at the board again. It wouldn't come, but the gunslinger's voice did:

"The other one, Jake! Try the other one!"

He let go of the board he had been yanking at and grabbed the one on the other side of the crack. As he did, another voice spoke. He heard this one not in his head but with his ears, and understood it was coming from the other side of the door—the door he had been looking for ever since the day he hadn't been run over in the street.

"Hurry up, Jake! For Christ's sake, hurry up!"

When he yanked this other board, it came free so easily that he almost tumbled over backward.

33

Two WOMEN WERE STANDING in the doorway of the used appliance shop across the street from The Mansion. The older was the proprietor; the younger had been her only customer when the sounds of crashing walls and breaking beams began. Now, without knowing they were doing it, they linked arms about each other's waists and stood that way, trembling like children who hear a noise in the dark.

Up the street, a trio of boys on their way to the Dutch Hill Little League field stood gaping at the house, their Red Ball Flyer wagon filled with baseball equipment forgotten behind them. A delivery driver nosed his van into the curb and got out to look. The patrons of Henry's Corner Market and the Dutch Hill Pub came straggling up the street, looking around wildly.

Now the ground began to tremble, and a fan of fine cracks started to spread across Rhinehold Street.

"Is it an earthquake?" the delivery van driver shouted at the women standing outside the appliance shop, but instead of waiting for an answer he jumped back behind the wheel of his van and drove away rapidly, swerving to the wrong side of the street to keep away from the ruined house which was the epicenter of this convulsion.

The entire house seemed to be bowing inward. Boards splintered, jumped off its face, and rained down into the yard. Dirty gray-black waterfalls of slate shingles poured down from the eaves. There was an earsplitting bang and a long, zigzagging crack shot down the center of The Mansion. The door disappeared into it and then the whole house began to swallow itself from the outside in.

The younger woman suddenly broke the older one's grip. "I'm getting out of here," she said, and began to run up the street without

looking back.

34

A HOT, STRANGE WIND began to sigh down the hallway, blowing Jake's sweaty hair back from his brow as his fingers closed over the silver key. He now understood on some instinctive level what this place was, and what was happening. The doorkeeper was not just *in* the house, it was the house: every board, every shingle, every windowsill, every eave. And now it was pushing forward, becoming some crazily jumbled representation of its true shape as it did. It meant to catch him before he could use the key. Beyond the giant white head and the crooked, hulking shoulder, he could see boards and shingles and wire and bits of glass—even the front door and the broken bannister—flying up the main hall and into the ballroom, joining the form which bulked there, creating more and more of the misshapen plaster-man that was even now groping toward him with its freakish hand.

Jake yanked his own hand out of the hole in the floor and saw it was covered with huge trundling beetles. He slapped it against the wall to knock them off, and cried out as the wall first opened and then tried to close around his wrist. He yanked his hand free just in time, whirled, and jammed the silver key into the hole in the plate.

The plaster-man roared again, but its voice was momentarily drowned out by a harmonic shout which Jake recognized: he had heard it in the vacant lot, but it had been quiet then, perhaps dreaming. Now it was an unequivocal cry of triumph. That sense of certainty—overwhelming, inarguable—filled him again, and this time he felt sure there would be no disappointment. He heard all the affirmation he needed in that voice. It was the voice of the rose.

The dim light in the hallway was blotted out as the plaster hand tore away the other french door and squeezed into the corridor. The

face socked itself into the opening above the hand, peering at Jake. The plaster fingers crawled toward him like the legs of a huge spider.

Jake turned the key and felt a sudden surge of power rush up his arm. He heard a heavy, muffled thump as the locked bolt inside withdrew. He seized the knob, turned it, and yanked the door open. It swung wide. Jake cried out in confused horror as he saw what lay behind.

The doorway was blocked with earth, from top to bottom and side to side. Roots poked out like bunches of wire. Worms, seeming as confused as Jake was himself, crawled hither and thither on the door-shaped pack of dirt. Some dived back into it; others only went on crawling about, as if wondering where the earth which had been below them a moment ago had gone. One dropped onto Jake's sneaker.

The keyhole shape remained for a moment, shedding a spot of misty white light on Jake's shirt. Beyond it—so close, so out of reach—he could hear rain and a muffled boom of thunder across an open sky. Then the keyhole shape was also blotted out, and gigantic plaster fingers curled around Jake's lower leg.

35

EDDIE DID NOT FEEL the sting of the hail as Roland dropped the hide, got to his feet, and ran to where Susannah lay.

The gunslinger grabbed her beneath the arms and dragged her—as gently and carefully as he could—across to where Eddie crouched. “Let it go when I tell you, Susannah!” Roland shouted. “Do you understand? *When I tell you!*”

Eddie saw and heard none of this. He heard only Jake, screaming faintly on the other side of the door.

The time had come to use the key.

He pulled it out of his shirt and slid it into the keyhole he had drawn. He tried to turn it. The key would not turn. Not so much as a

millimeter. Eddie lifted his face to the pelting hail, oblivious to the iceballs which struck his forehead and cheeks and lips, leaving welts and red blotches.

"NO!" he howled. *"OH GOD, PLEASE! NO!"*

But there was no answer from God; only another crash of thunder and a streak of lightning across a sky now filled with racing clouds.

36

JAKE LUNGED UPWARD, GRABBED the chain of the lamp which hung above him, and ripped free of the doorkeeper's clutching fingers. He swung backward, used the packed earth in the doorway to push off, and then swung forward again like Tarzan on a vine. He raised his legs and kicked out at the clutching fingers as he closed on them. Plaster exploded in chunks, revealing a crudely jointed skeleton of lathing beneath. The plaster-man roared, a sound of intermingled hunger and rage. Beneath that cry, Jake could hear the whole house collapsing, like the one in that story of Edgar Allan Poe.

He pendulumed back on the chain, struck the wall of packed earth which blocked the doorway, then swung forward again. The hand reached up for him and he kicked at it wildly, legs scissoring. He felt a stab of pain in his foot as those wooden fingers clutched. When he swung back again, he was minus a sneaker.

He tried for a higher grip on the chain, found it, and began to shinny up toward the ceiling. There was a muffled, creaking thud above him. Fine plaster dust had begun to sift down on his upturned, sweating face. The ceiling had begun to sag; the lamp-chain was pulling out of it a link at a time. There was a thick crunching sound from the end of the hallway as the plaster-man finally pushed its hungry face through the opening.

Jake swung helplessly back toward that face, screaming.

EDDIE'S TERROR AND PANIC suddenly fell away. The cloak of coldness dropped over him—a cloak Roland of Gilead had worn many times. It was the only armor the true gunslinger possessed . . . and all such a one needed. At the same moment, a voice spoke in his mind. He had been haunted by such voices over the last three months; his mother's voice, Roland's voice, and, of course, Henry's. But this one, he recognized with relief, was his own, and it was at last calm and rational and courageous.

You saw the shape of the key in the fire, you saw it again in the wood, and both times you saw it perfectly. Later on, you put a blindfold of fear over your eyes. Take it off. Take it off and look again. It may not be too late, even now.

He was faintly aware that the gunslinger was staring at him grimly; faintly aware that Susannah was shrieking at the demon in a fading but still defiant voice; faintly aware that, on the other side of the door, Jake was screaming in terror—or was it now agony?

Eddie ignored them all. He pulled the wooden key out of the keyhole he had drawn, out of the door which was now real, and looked at it fixedly, trying to recapture the innocent delight he had sometimes known as a child—the delight of seeing a coherent shape hidden in senselessness. And there it was, the place he'd gone wrong, so clearly visible he couldn't understand how he'd missed it in the first place. *I really must have been wearing a blindfold*, he thought. It was the s-shape at the end of the key, of course. The second curve was a bit too fat. Just a tiny bit.

"Knife," he said, and held out his hand like a surgeon in an operating room. Roland slapped it into his palm without a word.

Eddie gripped the top of the blade between the thumb and first finger of his right hand. He bent over the key, unmindful of the hail which pelted his unprotected neck, and the shape in the wood stood

out more clearly—stood out with its own lovely and undeniable reality.

He scraped.

Once.

Delicately.

A single sliver of ash, so thin it was almost transparent, curled up from the belly of the s-shape at the end of the key.

On the other side of the door, Jake Chambers shrieked again.

38

THE CHAIN LET GO with a rattling crash and Jake fell heavily, landing on his knees. The doorkeeper roared in triumph. The plaster hand seized Jake about his hips and began to drag him down the hall. He stuck his legs out in front of him and planted his feet, but it did no good. He felt splinters and rust-blunted nails digging into his skin as the hand tightened its grip and continued to drag him forward.

The face appeared to be stuck just inside the entrance to the hallway like a cork in a bottle. The pressure it had exerted to get in that far had squeezed the rudimentary features into a new shape, that of some monstrous, malformed troll. The mouth yawned open to receive him. Jake groped madly for the key, wanting to use it as some last-ditch talisman, but of course he had left it in the door.

“You son of a bitch!” he screamed, and threw himself backward with all his strength, bowing his back like an Olympic diver, unmindful of the broken boards which dug into him like a belt of nails. He felt his jeans slide down on his hips, and the grip of the hand slipped momentarily.

Jake lunged again. The hand clenched brutally, but Jake’s jeans slid down to his knees and his back slammed to the floor, with the pack to cushion the blow. The hand loosened, perhaps wanting to secure a firmer grip upon its prey. Jake was able to draw his knees

up a little, and when the hand tightened again, Jake drove his legs forward. The hand yanked backward at the same time, and what Jake had hoped for happened: his jeans (and his remaining sneaker) were peeled from his body, leaving him free again, at least for the moment. He saw the hand rotate on his wrist of boards and disintegrating plaster and jam his dungarees into his mouth. Then he was crawling back toward the blocked doorway on his hands and knees, oblivious of the glass fragments from the fallen lamp, wanting only to get his key again.

He had almost reached the door when the hand closed over his naked legs and began to pull him back once more.

39

THE SHAPE WAS THERE now, finally all there.

Eddie put the key back into the keyhole and applied pressure. For a moment there was resistance . . . and then it revolved beneath his hand. He heard the locking mechanism turn, heard the bar pull back, felt the key crack in two the moment it had served its purpose. He grasped the dark, polished knob with both hands and pulled. There was a sense of great weight wheeling on an unseen pivot. A feeling that his arm had been gifted with boundless strength. And a clear knowledge that two worlds had suddenly come in contact, and a way had been opened between them.

He felt a moment of dizziness and disorientation, and as he looked through the doorway he realized why: although he was looking down—vertically—he was seeing *horizontally*. It was like a strange optical illusion created with prisms and mirrors. Then he saw Jake being pulled backward down the glass- and plaster-littered hallway, elbows dragging, calves pinned together by a giant hand. And he saw the monstrous mouth which awaited him, fuming some white fog that might have been either smoke or dust.

“*Roland!*” Eddie shouted. “*Roland, it’s got h—*”

Then he was knocked aside.

40

SUSANNAH WAS AWARE OF being hauled up and whirled around. The world was a carousel blur: standing stones, gray sky, hailstone-littered ground . . . and a rectangular hole that looked like a trapdoor in the ground. Screams drifted up from it. Within her, the demon raved and struggled, wanting only to escape but helpless to do so until she allowed it.

“Now!” Roland was shouting. *“Let it go now, Susannah! For your father’s sake, let it go NOW!”*

And she did.

She had (with Detta’s help) constructed a trap for it in her mind, something like a net of woven rushes, and now she cut them. She felt the demon fly back from her at once, and there was an instant of terrible hollowness, terrible emptiness. These feelings were at once overshadowed by relief and a grim sense of nastiness and defilement.

As its invisible weight fell away, she glimpsed it—an inhuman shape like a manta-ray with huge, curling wings and something that looked like a cruel baling hook curving out and up from beneath. She saw/ sensed the thing flash above the open hole in the ground. Saw Eddie looking up with wide eyes. Saw Roland spread his arms wide to catch the demon.

The gunslinger staggered back, almost knocked off his feet by the unseen weight of the demon. Then he rocked forward again with an armload of nothing.

Clutching it, he jumped through the doorway and was gone.

41

SUDDEN WHITE LIGHT FLOODED the hallway of The Mansion; hailstones struck the walls and bounced up from the broken boards of the floor. Jake heard confused shouts, then saw the gunslinger come through. He seemed to *leap* through, as if he had come from above. His arms were held far out in front of him, the tips of the fingers locked.

Jake felt his feet slide into the doorkeeper's mouth.

"Roland!" he shrieked. *"Roland, help me!"*

The gunslinger's hands parted and his arms were immediately thrown wide. He staggered backward. Jake felt serrated teeth touch his skin, ready to tear flesh and grind bone, and then something huge rushed over his head like a gust of wind. A moment later the teeth were gone. The hand which had pinned his legs together relaxed. He heard an unearthly shriek of pain and surprise begin to issue from the doorkeeper's dusty throat, and then it was muffled, crammed back.

Roland grabbed Jake and hauled him to his feet.

"You came!" Jake shouted. "You really came!"

"I came, yes. By the grace of the gods and the courage of my friends, I came."

As the doorkeeper roared again, Jake burst into tears of relief and terror. Now the house sounded like a ship foundering in a heavy sea. Chunks of wood and plaster fell all around them. Roland swept Jake into his arms and ran for the door. The plaster hand, groping wildly, struck one of his booted feet and spun him into the wall, which again tried to bite. Roland pushed forward, turned, and drew his gun. He fired twice into the aimlessly thrashing hand, vaporizing one of the crude plaster fingers. Behind them, the face of the doorkeeper had gone from white to a dingy purplish-black, as if it were choking on something—something which had been fleeing so rapidly that it had entered the monster's mouth and jammed in its gullet before it realized what it was doing.

Roland turned again and ran through the doorway. Although there was now no visible barrier, he was stopped cold for a moment, as if an unseen meshwork had been drawn across the chair.

Then he felt Eddie's hands in his hair and he was yanked not forward but upward.

42

THEY EMERGED INTO WET air and slackening hail like babies being born. Eddie was the midwife, as the gunslinger had told him he must be. He was sprawled forward on his chest and belly, his arms out of sight in the doorway, his hands clutching fistfuls of Roland's hair.

"Suze! Help me!"

She wriggled forward, reached through; and groped a hand under Roland's chin. He came up to her with his head cocked backward and his lips parted in a snarl of pain and effort.

Eddie felt a tearing sensation and one of his hands came free holding a thick lock of the gunslinger's gray-streaked hair. "He's slipping!"

"This motherfucker . . . ain't . . . *nowhere!*" Susannah gasped, and gave a terrific wrench, as if she meant to snap Roland's neck.

Two small hands shot out of the doorway in the center of the circle and clutched one of the edges. Freed of Jake's weight, Roland got an elbow up, and a moment later he was boosting himself out. As he did it, Eddie grabbed Jake's wrists and hauled him up.

Jake rolled onto his back and lay there, panting.

Eddie turned to Susannah, took her in his arms, and began to rain kisses on her forehead, cheeks, and neck. He was laughing and crying at the same time. She clung to him, breathing hard . . . but there was a small, satisfied smile on her lips and one hand slipped over Eddie's wet hair in slow, contented strokes.

From below them came a cauldron of black sounds: squeals, grunts, thuds, crashes.

Roland crawled away from the hole with his head down. His hair stood up in a wild wad. Threads of blood trickled down his cheeks.

“Shut it!” he gasped at Eddie. “Shut it, for your father’s sake!”

Eddie got the door moving, and those vast, unseen hinges did the rest. The door fell with a gigantic, toneless bang, cutting off all sound from below. As Eddie watched, the lines that had marked its edges faded back to smudged marks in the dirt. The doorknob lost its dimension and was once more only a circle he’d drawn with a stick. Where the keyhole had been there was only a crude shape with a chunk of wood sticking out of it, like the hilt of a sword from a stone.

Susannah went to Jake and pulled him gently to a sitting position. “You all right, sugar?”

He looked at her dazedly. “Yes, I think so. Where is he? The gunslinger? There’s something I have to ask him.”

“I’m here, Jake,” Roland said. He got to his feet, drunk-walked over to Jake, and hunkered beside him. He touched the boy’s smooth cheek almost unbelievably.

“You won’t let me drop this time?”

“No,” Roland said. “Not this time, not ever again.” But in the deepest darkness of his heart, he thought of the Tower and wondered.

43

THE HAIL CHANGED TO a hard, driving rain, but Eddie could see gleams of blue sky behind the unravelling clouds in the north. The storm was going to end soon, but in the meantime, they were going to get drenched.

He found he didn’t mind. He could not remember when he had felt so calm, so at peace with himself, so utterly drained. This mad adventure wasn’t over yet—he suspected, in fact, that it had barely begun—but today they had won a big one.

“Suze?” He pushed her hair away from her face and looked into her dark eyes. “Are you okay? Did it hurt you?”

“Hurt me a little, but I’m okay. I think that bitch Detta Walker is still the undefeated Roadhouse Champeen, demon or no demon.”

“What’s that mean?”

She grinned impishly. “Not much, not anymore . . . thank God. How about you, Eddie? All right?”

Eddie listened for Henry’s voice and didn’t hear it. He had an idea that Henry’s voice might be gone for good. “Even better than that,” he said, and, laughing, folded her into his arms again. Over her shoulder he could see what was left of the door: only a few faint lines and angles. Soon the rain would wash those away, too.

44

“WHAT’S YOUR NAME?” JAKE asked the woman whose legs stopped just above the knee. He was suddenly aware that he had lost his pants in his struggle to escape the doorkeeper, and he pulled the tail of his shirt down over his underwear. There wasn’t very much left of her dress, either, as far as that went.

“Susannah Dean,” she said. “I already know your name.”

“Susannah,” Jake said thoughtfully. “I don’t suppose your father owns a railroad company, does he?”

She looked astonished for a moment, then threw her head back and laughed. “Why, no, sugar! He was a dentist who went and invented a few things and got rich. What makes you ask a thing like that?”

Jake didn’t answer. He had turned his attention to Eddie. The terror had already left his face, and his eyes had regained that cool, assessing look which Roland remembered so well from the way station.

“Hi, Jake,” Eddie said. “Good to see you, man.”

“Hi,” Jake said. “I met you earlier today, but you were a lot younger then.”

“I was a lot younger ten minutes ago. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Jake said. “Some scratches, that’s all.” He looked around. “You haven’t found the train yet.” This was not a question.

Eddie and Susannah exchanged puzzled looks, but Roland only shook his head. “No train.”

“Are your voices gone?”

Roland nodded. “All gone. Yours?”

“Gone. I’m all together again. We both are.”

They looked at the same instant, with the same impulse. As Roland swept Jake into his arms, the boy’s unnatural self-possession broke and he began to cry—it was the exhausted, relieved weeping of a child who has been lost long, suffered much, and is finally safe again. As Roland’s arms closed about his waist, Jake’s own arms slipped about the gunslinger’s neck and gripped like hoops of steel.

“I’ll never leave you again,” Roland said, and now his own tears came. “I swear to you on the names of all my fathers: *I’ll never leave you again.*”

Yet his heart, that silent, watchful, lifelong prisoner of *ka*, received the words of this promise not just with wonder but with doubt.

BOOK TWO LUD

A HEAP OF BROKEN IMAGES

IV

TOWN AND *KA-TET*



1

FOUR DAYS AFTER EDDIE had yanked him through the doorway between worlds, minus his original pair of pants and his sneakers but still in possession of his pack and his life, Jake awoke with something warm and wet nuzzling at his face.

If he had come around to such a sensation on any of the three previous mornings, he undoubtedly would have wakened his companions with his screams, for he had been feverish and his sleep had been haunted by nightmares of the plaster-man. In these dreams his pants did not slide free, the doorkeeper kept its grip, and it tucked him into its unspeakable mouth, where its teeth came down

like the bars guarding a castle keep. Jake awoke from these dreams shuddering and moaning helplessly.

The fever had been caused by the spider-bite on the back of his neck. When Roland examined it on the second day and found it worse instead of better, he had conferred briefly with Eddie and had then given Jake a pink pill. "You'll want to take four of these every day for at least a week," he said.

Jake had gazed at it doubtfully. "What is it?"

"*Cheflet*," Roland said, then looked disgustedly at Eddie. "You tell him. I *still* can't say it."

"Keflex. You can trust it, Jake; it came from a government-approved pharmacy in good old New York. Roland swallowed a bunch of it, and he's as healthy as a horse. Looks a little like one, too, as you can see."

Jake was astonished. "How did you get medicine in New York?"

"That's a long story," the gunslinger said. "You'll hear all of it in time, but for now just take the pill."

Jake did. The response was both quick and satisfying. The angry red swelling around the bite began to fade in twenty-four hours, and now the fever was gone as well.

The warm thing nuzzled again and Jake sat up with a jerk, his eyes flying open.

The creature which had been licking his cheek took two hasty steps backward. It was a billy-bumbler, but Jake didn't know that; he had never seen one before now. It was skinnier than the ones Roland's party had seen earlier, and its black- and gray-striped fur was matted and mangy. There was a clot of old dried blood on one flank. Its gold-ringed black eyes looked at Jake anxiously; its hindquarters switched hopefully back and forth. Jake relaxed. He supposed there were exceptions to the rule, but he had an idea that something wagging its tail—or trying to—was probably not too dangerous.

It was just past first light, probably around five-thirty in the morning. Jake could peg it no closer than that because his digital Seiko no longer worked . . . or rather, was working in an extremely eccentric way. When he had first glanced at it after coming through,

the Seiko claimed it was 98:71:65, a time which did not, so far as Jake knew, exist. A longer look showed him that the watch was now running backward. If it had been doing this at a steady rate, he supposed it might still have been of some use, but it wasn't. It would unwind its numbers at what seemed like the right speed for awhile (Jake verified this by saying the word "Mississippi" between each number), and then the readout would either stop entirely for ten or twenty seconds—making him think the watch had finally given up the ghost—or a bunch of numbers would blur by all at once.

He had mentioned this odd behavior to Roland and had shown him the watch, thinking it would amaze him, but Roland examined it closely for only a moment or two before nodding in a dismissive way and telling Jake it was an interesting clock, but as a rule no timepiece did very good work these days. So the Seiko was useless, but Jake still found himself loath to throw it away . . . because, he supposed, it was a piece of his old life, and there were only a few of those left.

Right now the Seiko claimed it was sixty-two minutes past forty on a Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday in both December and March.

The morning was extremely foggy; beyond a radius of fifty or sixty feet, the world simply disappeared. If this day was like the previous three, the sun would show up as a faint white circle in another two hours or so, and by nine-thirty the day would be clear and hot. Jake looked around and saw his travelling companions (he didn't quite dare call them friends, at least not yet) asleep beneath their hide blankets—Roland close by, Eddie and Susannah a larger hump on the far side of the dead campfire.

He once more turned his attention to the animal which had awakened him. It looked like a combination raccoon and woodchuck, with a dash of dachshund thrown in for good measure.

"How you doin, boy?" he asked softly.

"Oy!" the billy-bumbler replied at once, still looking at him anxiously. Its voice was low and deep, almost a bark; the voice of an English footballer with a bad cold in his throat.

Jake recoiled, surprised. The billy-bumbler, startled by the quick movement, took several further steps backward, seemed about to flee, and then held its ground. Its hindquarters wagged back and forth more strenuously than ever, and its gold-black eyes continued to regard Jake nervously. The whiskers on its snout trembled.

"This one remembers men," a voice remarked at Jake's shoulder. He looked around and saw Roland squatting just behind him with his forearms resting on his thighs and his long hands dangling between his knees. He was looking at the animal with a great deal more interest than he had shown in Jake's watch.

"What is it?" Jake asked softly. He did not want to startle it away; he was enchanted. "Its eyes are beautiful!"

"Billy-bumbler," Roland said.

"*Umber!*" the creature ejaculated, and retreated another step.

"It talks!"

"Not really. Bumpers just repeat what they hear—or used to. I haven't heard one do it in years. This fellow looks almost starved. Probably came to forage."

"He was licking my face. Can I feed it?"

"We'll never get rid of it if you do," Roland said, then smiled a little and snapped his fingers. "Hey! Billy!"

The creature mimicked the sound of the snapping fingers somehow; it sounded as if it were clucking its tongue against the roof of its mouth. "Ay!" it called in its hoarse voice. "Ay, lly!" Now its ragged hindquarters were positively *flagging* back and forth.

"Go ahead and give it a bite. I knew an old groom once who said a good bumper is good luck. This looks like a good one."

"Yes," Jake agreed. "It does."

"Once they were tame, and every barony had half a dozen roaming around the castle or manor-house. They weren't good for much except amusing the children and keeping the rat population down. They can be quite faithful—or were in the old days—although I never heard of one that would remain as loyal as a good dog. The wild ones are scavengers. Not dangerous, but a pain in the ass."

"Ass!" cried the bumper. Its anxious eyes continued to flick back and forth between Jake and the gunslinger.

Jake reached into his pack, slowly, afraid to startle the creature, and drew out the remains of a gunslinger burrito. He tossed it toward the billy-bumbler. The bumbler flinched back and then turned with a small, childlike cry, exposing its furry corkscrew tail. Jake felt sure it would run, but it stopped, looking doubtfully back over its shoulder.

“Come on,” Jake said. “Eat it, boy.”

“Oy,” the bumbler muttered, but it didn’t move.

“Give it time,” Roland said. “It’ll come, I think.”

The bumbler stretched forward, revealing a long and surprisingly graceful neck. Its slender black nose twitched as it sniffed the food. At last it trotted forward, and Jake noticed it was limping a little. The bumbler sniffed the burrito, then used one paw to separate the chunk of deermeat from the leaf. It carried out this operation with a delicacy that was oddly solemn. Once the meat was clear of the leaf, the bumbler wolfed it in a single bite, then looked up at Jake. “Oy!” it said, and when Jake laughed, it shrank away again.

“That’s a skinny one,” Eddie said sleepily from behind them. At the sound of his voice, the bumbler immediately turned and was gone into the mist.

“You scared it away!” Jake accused.

“Jeez, I’m sorry,” Eddie said. He ran a hand through his sleep-corkscrewed hair. “If I’d known it was one of your close personal friends, Jake, I would have dragged out the goddam coffee-cake.”

Roland clapped Jake briefly on the shoulder. “It’ll be back.”

“Are you sure?”

“If something doesn’t kill it, yes. We fed it, didn’t we?”

Before Jake could reply, the sound of the drums began again. This was the third morning they had heard them, and twice the sound had come to them as afternoon slipped down toward evening: a faint, toneless thudding from the direction of the city. The sound was clearer this morning, if no more comprehensible. Jake hated it. It was as if, somewhere out in that thick and featureless blanket of morning mist, the heart of some big animal was beating.

“You still don’t have any idea what that is, Roland?” Susannah asked. She had slipped on her shift, tied back her hair, and was now folding the blankets beneath which she and Eddie had slept.

“No. But I’m sure we’ll find out.”

“How reassuring,” Eddie said sourly.

Roland got to his feet. “Come on. Let’s not waste the day.”

2

THE FOG BEGAN TO unravel after they had been on the road for an hour or so. They took turns pushing Susannah’s chair, and it jolted unhappily along, for the road was now mined with large, rough cobblestones. By midmorning the day was fair, hot, and cloudless; the city skyline stood out clearly on the southeastern horizon. To Jake it didn’t look much different from the skyline of New York, although he thought these buildings might not be as high. If the place had fallen apart, as most things in Roland’s world apparently had, you certainly couldn’t tell it from here. Like Eddie, Jake had begun to entertain the unspoken hope that they might find help there . . . or at least a good hot meal.

To their left, thirty or forty miles away, they could see the broad sweep of the Send River. Birds circled above it in large flocks. Every now and then one would fold its wings and drop like a stone, probably on a fishing expedition. The road and the river were moving slowly toward one another, although the junction point could not yet be seen.

They could see more buildings ahead. Most looked like farms, and all appeared deserted. Some of them had fallen down, but these wrecks seemed to be the work of time rather than violence, furthering Eddie’s and Jake’s hopes of what they might find in the city—hopes each had kept strictly within himself, lest the others scoff. Small herds of shaggy beasts grazed their way across the plains. They kept well away from the road except to cross, and this they did quickly, at a gallop, like packs of small children afraid of traffic. They looked like bison to Jake . . . except he saw several

which had two heads. He mentioned this to the gunslinger and Roland nodded.

“Muties.”

“Like under the mountains?” Jake heard the fear in his own voice and knew the gunslinger must, also, but he was helpless to keep it out. He remembered that endless nightmare journey on the handcart very well.

“I think that here the mutant strains are being bred out. The things we found under the mountains were still getting worse.”

“What about up there?” Jake pointed toward the city. “Will there be mutants there, or—” He found it was as close as he could come to voicing his hope.

Roland shrugged. “I don’t know, Jake. I’d tell you if I did.”

They were passing an empty building—almost surely a farmhouse—that had been partially burnt. *But that could have been lightning*, Jake thought, and wondered which it was he was trying to do—explain to himself or fool himself.

Roland, perhaps reading his mind, put an arm around Jake’s shoulders. “No use even trying to guess, Jake,” he said. “Whatever happened here happened long ago.” He pointed. “That over there was probably a corral. Now it’s just a few sticks poking out of the grass.”

“The world has moved on, right?”

Roland nodded.

“What about the people? Did they go to the city, do you think?”

“Some may have,” Roland said. “Some are still around.”

“What?” Susannah jerked around to look at him, startled.

Roland nodded. “We’ve been watched the last couple of days. There aren’t a lot of folk denning in these old buildings, but there are some. There’ll be more as we get closer to civilization!” He paused. “Or what *used* to be civilization.”

“How do you know they’re there?” Jake asked.

“Smelled them. Seen a few gardens hidden behind banks of weeds grown purposely to hide the crops. And at least one working windmill way back in a grove of trees. Mostly, though, it’s just a

feeling . . . like shade on your face instead of sunshine. It'll come to you three in time, I imagine."

"Do you think they're dangerous?" Susannah asked. They were approaching a large, ramshackle building that might once have been a storage shed or an abandoned country market, and she eyed it uneasily, her hand dropping to the butt of the gun she wore on her chest.

"Will a strange dog bite?" the gunslinger countered.

"What's that mean?" Eddie asked. "I hate it when you start up with your Zen Buddhist shit, Roland."

"It means I don't know," Roland said. "Who is this man Zen Buddhist? Is he wise like me?"

Eddie looked at Roland for a long, long time before deciding the gunslinger was making one of his rare jokes. "Ah, get outta here," he said. He saw one corner of Roland's mouth twitch before he turned away. As Eddie started to push Susannah's chair again, something else caught his eye. "Hey, Jake!" he called. "I think you made a friend!"

Jake looked around, and a big grin overspread his face. Forty yards to the rear, the scrawny billy-bumbler was limping industriously after them, sniffing at the weeds which grew between the crumbling cobbles of the Great Road.

3

SOME HOURS LATER ROLAND called a halt and told them to be ready.

"For what?" Eddie asked.

Roland glanced at him. "Anything."

It was perhaps three o'clock in the afternoon. They were standing at a point where the Great Road crested a long, rolling drumlin which ran diagonally across the plain like a wrinkle in the world's biggest bedspread. Below and beyond, the road ran through the first real

town they had seen. It looked deserted, but Eddie had not forgotten the conversation that morning. Roland's question—*Will a strange dog bite?*—no longer seemed quite so Zenny.

"Jake?"

"What?"

Eddie nodded to the butt of the Ruger, which protruded from the waistband of Jake's blue jeans—the extra pair he had tucked into his pack before leaving home. "Do you want me to carry that?"

Jake glanced at Roland. The gunslinger only shrugged, as if to say *It's your choice*.

"Okay." Jake handed it over. He unshouldered his pack, rummaged through it, and brought out the loaded clip. He could remember reaching behind the hanging files in one of his father's desk drawers to get it, but all that seemed to have occurred a long, long time ago. These days, thinking about his life in New York and his career as a student at Piper was like looking into the wrong end of a telescope.

Eddie took the clip, examined it, rammed it home, checked the safety, then stuck the Ruger in his own belt.

"Listen closely and heed me well," Roland said. "If there *are* people, they'll likely be old and much more frightened of us than we are of them. The younger folk will be long gone. It's unlikely that those left will have firearms—in fact, ours may be the first guns many of them have ever seen, except maybe for a picture or two in the old books. Make no threatening gestures. And the childhood rule is a good one: speak only when spoken to."

"What about bows and arrows?" Susannah asked.

"Yes, they may have those. Spears and clubs, as well."

"Don't forget rocks," Eddie said bleakly, looking down at the cluster of wooden buildings. The place looked like a ghost-town, but who knew for sure? "And if they're hard up for rocks, there's always the cobbles from the road."

"Yes, there's always something," Roland agreed. "*But we'll start no trouble ourselves*—is that clear?"

They nodded.

"Maybe it would be easier to detour around," Susannah said.

Roland nodded, eyes never leaving the simple geography ahead. Another road crossed the Great Road at the center of the town, making the dilapidated buildings look like a target centered in the telescopic sight of a high-powered rifle. "It would, but we won't. Detouring's a bad habit that's easy to get into. It's always better to go straight on, unless there's a good visible reason not to. I see no reason not to here. And if there *are* people, well, that might be a good thing. We could do with a little palaver."

Susannah reflected that Roland seemed different now, and she didn't think it was simply because the voices in his mind had ceased. *This is the way he was when he still had wars to fight and men to lead and his old friends around him*, she thought. *How he was before the world moved on and he moved on with it, chasing that man Walter. This is how he was before the Big Empty turned him inward on himself and made him strange.*

"They might know what those drum sounds are," Jake suggested.

Roland nodded again. "*Anything* they know—particularly about the city—would come in handy, but there's no need to think ahead too much about people who may not even be there."

"Tell you what," Susannah said, "*I* wouldn't come out if I saw us. Four people, three of them armed? We probably look like a gang of those old-time outlaws in your stories, Roland—what do you call them?"

"Harriers." His left hand dropped to the sandalwood grip of his remaining revolver and he pulled it a little way out of the holster. "But no harrier ever born carried one of these, and if there are old-timers in yon village, they'll know it. Let's go."

Jake glanced behind them and saw the bumbler lying in the road with his muzzle between his short front paws, watching them closely. "Oy!" Jake called.

"Oy!" the bumbler echoed, and scrambled to its feet at once.

They started down the shallow knoll toward the town with Oy trotting along behind them.

4

Two BUILDINGS ON THE outskirts had been burned; the rest of the town appeared dusty but intact. They passed an abandoned livery stable on the left, a building that might have been a market on the right, and then they were in the town proper—such as it was. There were perhaps a dozen rickety buildings standing on either side of the road. Alleys ran between some of them. The other road, this one a dirt track mostly overgrown with plains grass, ran northeast to southwest.

Susannah looked at its northeast arm and thought: *Once there were barges on the river, and somewhere down that road there was a landing, and probably another shabby little town, mostly saloons and cribs, built up around it. That was the last point of trade before the barges went on down to the city. The wagons came through this place going to that place and then back again. How long ago was that?*

She didn't know—but a long time, from the look of this place.

Somewhere a rusty hinge squealed monotonously. Somewhere else one shutter clapped lonesomely to and fro in the plains wind.

There were hitching rails, most of them broken, in front of the buildings. Once there had been board sidewalks, but now most of the boards were gone and grass grew up through the holes where they had been. The signs on the buildings were faded, but some were still readable, written in a bastardized form of English which was, she supposed, what Roland called the low speech. FOOD AND GRAIN, one said, and she guessed that might mean feed and grain. On the false front next to it, below a crude drawing of a plains-buffalo lying in the grass, were the words REST EAT DRINK. Under the sign, batwing doors hung crookedly, moving a little in the wind.

“Is that a saloon?” She didn't know exactly why she was whispering, only that she couldn't have spoken in a normal tone of voice. It would have been like playing “Clinch Mountain Breakdown” on the banjo at a funeral.

“It was,” Roland said. He didn’t whisper, but his voice was low-pitched and thoughtful. Jake was walking close by his side, looking around nervously. Behind them, Oy had closed up his distance to ten yards. He trotted quickly, head swinging from side to side like a pendulum as he examined the buildings.

Now Susannah began to feel it: that sensation of being watched. It was exactly as Roland had said it would be, a feeling sunshine had been replaced by shade.

“There *are* people, aren’t there?” she whispered.

Roland nodded.

Standing on the northeast corner of the crossroads was a building with another sign she recognized: HOSTEL, it said, and COTTS. Except for a church with a tilted steeple up ahead, it was the tallest building in town—three stories. She glanced up in time to see a white blur, surely a face, draw away from one of the glassless windows. Suddenly she wanted to get out of here. Roland was setting a slow, deliberate pace, however, and she supposed she knew why. Hurrying might give the watchers the impression that they were scared . . . and that they could be taken. All the same—

At the crossroads the intersecting streets widened out, creating a town square which had been overrun by grass and weeds. In the center was an eroded stone marker. Above it, a metal box hung on a sagging length of rusty cable.

Roland, with Jake by his side, walked toward the marker. Eddie pushed Susannah’s chair after. Grass whispered in its spokes and the wind tickled a lock of hair against her cheek. Further along the street, the shutter banged and the hinge squealed. She shivered and brushed the hair away.

“I wish he’d hurry up,” Eddie said in a low voice. “This place gives me the creeps.”

Susannah nodded. She looked around the square and again she could almost see how it must have been on market-day—the sidewalks thronged with people, a few of them town ladies with their baskets over their arms, most of them waggoners and roughly-dressed bargemen (she did not know why she was so sure of the barges and bargemen, but she was); the wagons passing through

the town square, the ones on the unpaved road raising choking clouds of yellow dust as the drivers flogged their carhorses (*oxen they were oxen*) along. She could see those carts, dusty swatches of canvas tied down over bales of cloth on some and pyramids of tarred barrels on others; could see the oxen, double-yoked and straining patiently, flicking their ears at the flies buzzing around their huge heads; could hear voices, and laughter, and the piano in the saloon pounding out a lively tune like “Buffalo Gals” or “Darlin’ Katy.”

It’s as if I lived here in another life, she thought.

The gunslinger bent over the inscription on the marker. “Great Road,” he read. “Lud, one hundred and sixty wheels.”

“Wheels?” Jake asked.

“An old form of measurement.”

“Have you heard of Lud?” Eddie asked.

“Perhaps,” the gunslinger said. “When I was very small.”

“It rhymes with crud,” Eddie said. “Maybe not such a good sign.”

Jake was examining the east side of the stone. “River Road. It’s written funny, but that’s what it says.”

Eddie looked at the west side of the marker. “It says Jimtown, forty wheels. Isn’t that the birthplace of Wayne Newton, Roland?”

Roland looked at him blankly.

“Shet ma mouf,” Eddie said, and rolled his eyes.

On the southwest corner of the square was the town’s only stone building—a squat, dusty cube with rusty bars on the windows. Combination county jail and courthouse, Susannah thought. She had seen similar ones down south; add a few slant parking spaces in front and you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference. Something had been daubed across the facade of the building in fading yellow paint. She could read it, and although she couldn’t understand it, it made her more anxious than ever to get out of this town. PUBES DIE, it said.

“Roland!” When she had his attention, she pointed at the graffito. “What does that mean?”

He read it, then shook his head. “Don’t know.”

She looked around again. The square now seemed smaller, and the buildings seemed to be leaning over them. “Can we get out of

here?”

“Soon.” He bent down and pried a small chunk of cobble out of the roadbed. He bounced it thoughtfully in his left hand as he looked up at the metal box which hung over the marker. He cocked his arm and Susannah realized, an instant too late, what he meant to do.

“No, Roland!” she cried, then cringed back at the sound of her own horrified voice.

He took no notice of her but fired the stone upward. His aim was as true as ever, and it struck the box dead center with a hollow, metallic bang. There was a whir of clockwork from within, and a rusty green flag unfolded from a slot in the side. When it locked in place, a bell rang briskly. Written in large black letters on the side of the flag was the word GO.

“I’ll be damned,” Eddie said. “It’s a Keystone Kops traffic-light. If you hit it again, does it say STOP?”

“We have company,” Roland said quietly, and pointed toward the building Susannah thought of as the county courthouse. A man and a woman had emerged from it and were descending the stone steps. *You win the kewpie doll, Roland, Susannah thought. They’re older’n God, the both of em.*

The man was wearing bib overalls and a huge straw sombrero. The woman walked with one hand clamped on his naked sunburned shoulder. She wore homespun and a poke bonnet, and as they drew closer to the marker, Susannah saw she was blind, and that the accident which had taken her sight must have been exceedingly horrible. Where her eyes had been there were now only two shallow sockets filled with scar-tissue. She looked both terrified and confused.

“Be they harriers, Si?” she cried in a cracked, quavering voice. “You’ll have us killed yet, I’ll warrant!”

“Shut up, Mercy,” he replied. Like the woman, he spoke with a thick accent Susannah could barely understand. “They ain’t harriers, not these. There’s a Pube with em, I told you that—ain’t no harrier ever been travellin with a Pube.”

Blind or not, she tried to pull away from him. He cursed and caught her arm. “Quit it, Mercy! Quit it, I say! You’ll fall down and do y’self

evil, dammit!”

“We mean you no harm,” the gunslinger called. He used the High Speech, and at the sound of it the man’s eyes lit up with incredulity. The woman turned back, swinging her blind face in their direction.

“A gunslinger!” the man cried. His voice cracked and wavered with excitement. “ ’Fore God! I knew it were! I knew!”

He began to run across the square toward them, pulling the woman after. She stumbled along helplessly, and Susannah waited for the inevitable moment when she must fall. But the man fell first, going heavily to his knees, and she sprawled painfully beside him on the cobbles of the Great Road.

5

JAKE FELT SOMETHING FURRY against his ankle and looked down. Oy was crouched beside him, looking more anxious than ever. Jake reached down and cautiously stroked his head, as much to receive comfort as to give it. Its fur was silky, incredibly soft. For a moment he thought the bumbler was going to run, but it only looked up at him, licked his hand, and then looked back at the two new people. The man was trying to help the woman to her feet and not succeeding very well. Her head craned this way and that in avid confusion.

The man named Si had cut his palms on the cobblestones, but he took no notice. He gave up trying to help the woman, swept off his sombrero, and held it over his chest. To Jake the hat looked as big as a bushel basket. “We bid ye welcome, gunslinger!” he cried. “Welcome indeed! I thought all your kind had perished from the earth, so I did!”

“I thank you for your welcome,” Roland said in the High Speech. He put his hands gently on the blind woman’s upper arms. She cringed for a moment, then relaxed and allowed him to help her up. “Put on your hat, old-timer. The sun is hot.”

He did, then just stood there, looking at Roland with shining eyes. After a moment or two, Jake realized what that shine was. Si was crying.

“A gunslinger! I told you, Mercy! I seen the shooting-iron and *told* you!”

“No harriers?” she asked, as if unable to believe it. “Are you sure they ain’t harriers, Si?”

Roland turned to Eddie. “Make sure of the safety and then give her Jake’s gun.”

Eddie pulled the Ruger from his waistband, checked the safety, and then put it gingerly in the blind woman’s hands. She gasped, almost dropped it, then ran her hands over it wonderingly. She turned the empty sockets where her eyes had been up to the man. “A gun!” she whispered. “My sainted hat!”

“Ay, some kind,” the old man replied dismissively, taking it from her and giving it back to Eddie, “but the gunslinger’s got a *real* one, and there’s a woman got another. She’s got a brown skin, too, like my da’ said the people of Garlan had.”

Oy gave his shrill, whistling bark. Jake turned and saw more people coming up the street—five or six in all. Like Si and Mercy, they were all old, and one of them, a woman hobbling over a cane like a witch in a fairy-tale, looked positively ancient. As they neared, Jake realized that two of the men were identical twins. Long white hair spilled over the shoulders of their patched homespun shirts. Their skin was as white as fine linen, and their eyes were pink. *Albinos*, he thought.

The crone appeared to be their leader. She hobbled toward Roland’s party on her cane, staring at them with gimlet eyes as green as emeralds. Her toothless mouth was tucked deeply into itself. The hem of the old shawl she wore fluttered in the prairie breeze. Her eyes settled upon Roland.

“Hail, gunslinger! Well met!” She spoke the High Speech herself, and, like Eddie and Susannah, Jake understood the words perfectly, although he guessed they would have been gibberish to him in his own world. “Welcome to River Crossing!”

The gunslinger had removed his own hat, and now he bowed to her, tapping his throat three times, rapidly, with his diminished right hand. “Thankee-sai, Old Mother.”

She cackled freely at this and Eddie suddenly realized Roland had at the same time made a joke and paid a compliment. The thought which had already occurred to Susannah now came to him: *This is how he was. . . and this is what he did. Part of it, anyway.*

“Gunslinger ye may be, but below your clothes you’re but another foolish man,” she said, lapsing into low speech.

Roland bowed again. “Beauty has always made me foolish, Mother.”

This time she positively *cawed* laughter. Oy shrank against Jake’s leg. One of the albino twins rushed forward to catch the ancient as she rocked backward within her dusty cracked shoes. She caught her balance on her own, however, and made an imperious shooing gesture with one hand. The albino retreated. “Be ye on a quest, gunslinger?” Her green eyes gleamed shrewdly at him; the puckered pocket of her mouth worked in and out.

“Ay,” Roland said. “We go in search of the Dark Tower.”

The others only looked puzzled, but the old woman recoiled and forked the sign of the evil eye—not at them, Jake realized, but to the southeast, along the path of the Beam.

“I’m sorry to hear it!” she cried. “For no one who ever went in search of that black dog ever came back! So said my grandfather, and his grandfather before him! Not ary one!”

“*Ka*,” the gunslinger said patiently, as if this explained everything . . . and, Jake was coming to realize, to Roland it did.

“Ay,” she agreed, “black dog *ka*! Well-a-well; ye’ll do as ye’re called, and live along your path, and die when it comes to the clearing in the trees. Will ye break bread with us before you push on, gunslinger? You and your band of knights?”

Roland bowed again. “It has been long and long since we have broken bread in company other than our own, Old Mother. We cannot stay long, but yes—we’ll eat your food with thanks and pleasure.”

The old woman turned to the others. She spoke in a cracked and ringing voice—yet it was the words she spoke and not the tone in which they were spoken that sent chills racing down Jake’s back: “Behold ye, the return of the White! After evil ways and evil days, the White comes again! Be of good heart and hold up your heads, for ye have lived to see the wheel of ka begin to turn once more!”

6

THE OLD WOMAN, WHOSE name was Aunt Talitha, led them through the town square and to the church with the leaning spire—it was The Church of the Blood Everlasting, according to the faded board on the run-to-riot lawn. Written over the words, in green paint that had faded to a ghost, was another message: DEATH TO GRAYS.

She led them through the ruined church, hobbling rapidly along the center aisle past the splintered and overturned pews, down a short flight of stairs, and into a kitchen so different from the ruin above that Susannah blinked in surprise. Here everything was neat as a pin. The wooden floor was very old, but it had been faithfully oiled and glowed with its own serene inner light. The black cookstove took up one whole corner. It was immaculate, and the wood stacked in the brick alcove next to it looked both well-chosen and well-seasoned.

Their party had been joined by three more senior citizens, two women and a man who limped along on a crutch and a wooden leg. Two of the women went to the cupboards and began to make themselves busy; a third opened the belly of the stove and struck a long sulphur match to the wood already laid neatly within; a fourth opened another door and went down a short set of narrow steps into what looked like a cold-pantry. Aunt Talitha, meanwhile, led the rest of them into a spacious entry at the rear of the church building. She waved her cane at two trestle tables which had been stored there

under a clean but ragged dropcloth, and the two elderly albinos immediately went over and began to wrestle with one of them.

“Come on, Jake,” Eddie said. “Let’s lend a hand.”

“Nawp!” Aunt Talitha said briskly. “We may be old, but we don’t need comp’ny to lend a hand! Not yet, youngster!”

“Leave them be,” Roland said.

“Old fools’ll rupture themselves,” Eddie muttered, but he followed the others, leaving the old men to their chosen table.

Susannah gasped as Eddie lifted her from her chair and carried her through the back door. This wasn’t a lawn but a showplace, with beds of flowers blazing like torches in the soft green grass. She saw some she recognized—marigolds and zinnias and phlox—but many others were strange to her. As she watched, a horsefly landed on a bright blue petal . . . which at once folded over it and rolled up tight.

“Wow!” Eddie said, staring around. “Busch Gardens!”

Si said, “This is the one place we keep the way it was in the old days, before the world moved on. And we keep it hidden from those who ride through—Pubes, Grays, harriers. They’d burn it if they knew . . . and kill us for keeping such a place. They hate anything nice—all of em. It’s the one thing all those bastards have in common.”

The blind woman tugged his arm to shush him.

“No riders these days,” the old man with the wooden leg said. “Not for a long time now. They keep closer in to the city. Guess they find all they need to keep em well right there.”

The albino twins struggled out with the table. One of the old women followed them, urging them to hurry up and get the hell out of her way. She held a stoneware pitcher in each hand.

“Sit ye down, gunslinger!” Aunt Talitha cried, sweeping her hand at the grass. “Sit ye down, all!”

Susannah could smell a hundred conflicting perfumes. They made her feel dazed and unreal, as if this was a dream she was having. She could hardly believe this strange little pocket of Eden, carefully hidden behind the crumbling facade of the dead town.

Another woman came out with a tray of glasses. They were mismatched but spotless, twinkling in the sun like fine crystal. She

held the tray out first to Roland, then to Aunt Talitha, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake at the last. As each took a glass, the first woman poured a dark golden liquid into it.

Roland leaned over to Jake, who was sitting tailor-fashion near an oval bed of bright green flowers with Oy at his side. He murmured: "Drink only enough to be polite, Jake, or we'll be carrying you out of town—this is *graf*—strong apple-beer."

Jake nodded.

Talitha, held up her glass, and when Roland followed suit, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake did the same.

"What about the others?" Eddie whispered to Roland.

"They'll be served after the voluntary. Now be quiet."

"Will ye set us on with a word, gunslinger?" Aunt Talitha asked.

The gunslinger got to his feet, his glass upraised in his hand. He lowered his head, as if in thought. The few remaining residents of River Crossing watched him respectfully and, Jake thought, a little fearfully. At last he raised his head again. "Will you drink to the earth, and to the days which have passed upon it?" he asked. His voice was hoarse, trembling with emotion. "Will you drink to the fullness which was, and to friends who have passed on? Will you drink to good company, well met? Will these things set us on, Old Mother?"

She was weeping, Jake saw, but her face broke into a smile of radiant happiness all the same . . . and for a moment she was almost young. Jake looked at her with wonder and sudden, dawning happiness. For the first time since Eddie had hauled him through the door, he felt the shadow of the doorkeeper truly leave his heart.

"Ay, gunslinger!" she said. "Fair spoken! They'll set us on by the league, so they shall!" She tilted her glass up and drank it at a draught. When the glass was empty, Roland emptied his own. Eddie and Susannah also drank, although less deeply.

Jake tasted his own drink, and was surprised to find he liked it—the brew was not bitter, as he had expected, but both sweet and tart, like cider. He could feel the effects almost at once, however, and he put the glass carefully aside. Oy sniffed at it, then drew back, and dropped his muzzle on Jake's ankle.

Around them, the little company of old people—the last residents of River Crossing—were applauding. Most, like Aunt Talitha, were weeping openly. And now other glasses—not so fine but wholly serviceable—were passed around. The party began, and a fine party it was on that long summer’s afternoon beneath the wide prairie sky.

7

EDDIE THOUGHT THE MEAL he ate that day was the best he had had since the mythic birthday feasts of his childhood, when his mother had made it her business to serve everything he liked—meatloaf and roasted potatoes and corn on the cob and devil’s food cake with vanilla ice cream on the side.

The sheer variety of the edibles put before them—especially after the months they had spent eating nothing but lobster meat, deer meat, and the few bitter greens which Roland pronounced safe—undoubtedly had something to do with the pleasure he took in the food, but Eddie didn’t think that was the sole answer; he noticed that the kid was packing it away by the plateful (and feeding a chunk of something to the bumbler crouched at his feet every couple of minutes), and Jake hadn’t been here a week yet.

There were bowls of stew (chunks of buffalo meat floating in a rich brown gravy loaded with vegetables), platters of fresh biscuits, crocks of sweet white butter, and bowls of leaves that looked like spinach but weren’t . . . exactly. Eddie had never been crazy about greens, but at the first taste of these, some deprived part of him awoke and cried for them. He ate well of everything, but his need for the green stuff approached greed, and he saw Susannah was also helping herself to them again and again. Among the four of them, the travellers emptied three bowls of the leaves.

The dinner dishes were swept away by the old women and the albino twins. They returned with chunks of cake piled high on two thick white plates and a bowl of whipped cream. The cake gave off a

sweetly fragrant smell that made Eddie feel as if he had died and gone to heaven.

“Only buffaler cream,” Aunt Talitha said dismissively. “No more cows—last one croaked thirty year ago. Buffaler cream ain’t no prize-winner, but better’n nothin, by Daisy!”

The cake turned out to be loaded with blueberries. Eddie thought it beat by a country mile any cake he’d ever had. He finished three pieces, leaned back, and belched ringingly before he could clap a hand over his mouth. He looked around guiltily.

Mercy, the blind woman, cackled. “I heard that! Someone be thankin the cook, Auntie!”

“Ay,” Aunt Talitha said, laughing herself. “So he do.”

The two women who had served the food were returning yet again. One carried a steaming jug; the other had a number of thick ceramic cups balanced precariously on her tray.

Aunt Talitha was sitting at the head of the table with Roland by her right hand. Now he leaned over and murmured something in her ear. She listened, her smile fading a little, then nodded.

“Si, Bill, and Till,” she said. “You three stay. We are going to have us a little palaver with this gunslinger and his friends, on account of they mean to move along this very afternoon. The rest of you take your coffee in the kitchen and so cut down the babble. Mind you make your manners before you go!”

Bill and Till, the albino twins, remained sitting at the foot of the table. The others formed a line and moved slowly past the travellers. Each of them shook hands with Eddie and Susannah, then kissed Jake on the cheek. The boy accepted this with good grace, but Eddie could see he was both surprised and embarrassed.

When they reached Roland, they knelt before him and touched the sandalwood butt of the revolver which jutted from the holster he wore on his left hip. He put his hands on their shoulders and kissed their old brows. Mercy was the last; she flung her arms around Roland’s waist and baptized his cheek with a wet, ringing kiss.

“Gods bless and keep ye, gunslinger! If only I could see ye!”

“Mind your manners, Mercy!” Aunt Talitha said sharply, but Roland ignored her and bent over the blind woman.

He took her hands gently but firmly in his own, and raised them to his face. "See me with these, beauty," he said, and closed his eyes as her fingers, wrinkled and misshapen with arthritis, patted gently over his brow, his cheeks, his lips and chin.

"Ay, gunslinger!" she breathed, lifting the sightless sockets of her eyes to his faded blue ones. "I see you very well! 'Tis a good face, but full of sadness and care. I fear for you and yours."

"Yet we are well met, are we not?" he asked, and planted a gentle kiss on the smooth, worn skin of her forehead.

"Ay—so we are. So we are. Thank'ee for your kiss, gunslinger
From my heart I thank'ee."

"Go on, Mercy," Aunt Talitha said in a gentler voice. "Get your coffee."

Mercy rose to her feet. The old man with the crutch and peg leg guided her hand to the waistband of his pants. She seized it and, with a final salute to Roland and his band, allowed him to lead her away.

Eddie wiped at his eyes, which were wet. "Who blinded her?" he asked hoarsely.

"Harriers," Aunt Talitha said. "Did it with a branding-iron, they did. Said it was because she was looking at em pert. Twenty-five years ago, that was. Drink your coffee, now, all of you! It's nasty when it's hot, but it ain't nothin but roadmud once it's cold."

Eddie lifted the cup to his mouth and sipped experimentally. He wouldn't have gone so far as to call it roadmud, but it wasn't exactly Blue Mountain Blend, either.

Susannah tasted hers and looked amazed. "Why, this is chicory!"

Talitha glanced at her. "I know it not. Dockey is all I know, and dockey-coffee's all we've had since I had the woman's curse—and that curse was lifted from me long, long ago."

"How old *are* you, ma'am?" Jake asked suddenly.

Aunt Talitha looked at him, surprised, then cackled. "In truth, lad, I disremember. I recall sitting in this same place and having a party to celebrate my eighty, but there were over fifty people settin out on this lawn that day, and Mercy still had her eyes." Her own eyes dropped to the bumbler lying at Jake's feet. Oy didn't remove his muzzle from

Jake's ankle, but he raised his gold-ringed eyes to gaze at her. "A billy-bumbler, by Daisy! It's been long and long since I've seen a bumbler in company with people ... seems they have lost the memory of the days when they walked with men."

One of the albino twins bent down to pat Oy. Oy pulled away from him.

"Once they used to herd sheep," Bill (or perhaps it was Till) said to Jake. "Did ye know that, youngster?"

Jake shook his head.

"Do he talk?" the albino asked. "Some did, in the old days."

"Yes, he does." He looked down at the bumbler, who had returned his head to Jake's ankle as soon as the strange hand left his general area. "Say your name, Oy."

Oy only looked up at him.

"Oy!" Jake urged, but Oy was silent. Jake looked at Aunt Talitha and the twins, mildly chagrined. "Well, he does . . . but I guess he only does it when he wants to."

"That boy doesn't look as if he belongs here," Aunt Talitha said to Roland. "His clothes are strange . . . and his eyes are strange, as well."

"He hasn't been here long." Roland smiled at Jake, and Jake smiled uncertainly back. "In a month or two, no one will be able to see his strangeness."

"Ay? I wonder, so I do. And where does he come from?"

"Far from here," the gunslinger said: "Very far."

She nodded. "And when will he go back?"

"Never," Jake said. "This is my home now."

"Gods pity you, then," she said, "for the sun is going down on the world. It's going down forever."

At that Susannah stirred uneasily; one hand went to her belly, as if her stomach was upset.

"Suze?" Eddie asked. "You all right?"

She tried to smile, but it was a weak effort; her normal confidence and self-possession seemed to have temporarily deserted her. "Yes, of course. A goose walked over my grave, that's all."

Aunt Talitha gave her a long, assessing look that seemed to make Susannah uncomfortable . . . and then smiled. “ ‘A goose on my grave’—ha! I haven’t heard that one in donkey’s years.”

“My dad used to say it all the time.” Susannah smiled at Eddie—a stronger smile this time. “And anyway, whatever it was is gone now. I’m fine.”

“What do you know about the city, and the lands between here and there?” Roland asked, picking up his coffee cup and sipping. “Are there harriers? And who are these others? These Grays and Pubes?”

Aunt Talitha sighed deeply.

8

“YE’D HEAR MUCH, GUNSLINGER, and we know but little. One thing I do know is this: the city’s an evil place, especially for this youngster. Any youngster. Is there any way you can steer around it as you go your course?”

Roland looked up and observed the now familiar shape of the clouds as they flowed along the path of the Beam. In this wide plains sky, that shape, like a river in the sky, was impossible to miss.

“Perhaps,” he said at last, but his voice was oddly reluctant. “I suppose we could skirt around Lud to the southwest and pick up the Beam on the far side.”

“It’s the Beam ye follow,” she said. “Ay, I thought so.”

Eddie found his own. consideration of the city colored by the steadily strengthening hope that when and if they got there, they would find help-abandoned goodies which would aid them in their quest, or maybe even some people who could tell them a little more about the Dark Tower and what they were supposed to do when they got there. The ones called the Grays, for instance—they sounded like the sort of wise old elves he kept imagining.

The drums were creepy, true enough, reminding him of a hundred low-budget jungle epics (mostly watched on TV with Henry by his side and a bowl of popcorn between them) where the fabulous lost cities the explorers had come looking for were in ruins and the natives had degenerated into tribes of blood-thirsty cannibals, but Eddie found it impossible to believe something like that could have happened in a city that looked, at least from a distance, so much like New York. If there were not wise old elves or abandoned goodies, there would surely be books, at least; he had listened to Roland talk about how rare paper was here, but every city Eddie had ever been in was absolutely drowning in books. They might even find some working transportation; the equivalent of a Land Rover would be nice. That was probably just a silly dream, but when you had thousands of miles of unknown territory to cover, a few silly dreams were undoubtedly in order, if only to keep your spirits up. And weren't those things at least *possible*, damn it?

He opened his mouth to say some of these things, but Jake spoke before he could.

"I don't think we can go around," he said, then blushed a little when they all turned to look at him. Oy shifted at his feet.

"No?" Aunt Talitha said. "And why do ye think that, pray tell?"

"Do you know about trains?" Jake asked.

There was a long silence. Bill and Till exchanged an uneasy glance. Aunt Talitha only looked at Jake steadily. Jake did not drop his eyes.

"I heard of one," she said. "Mayhap even saw it. Over there." She pointed in the direction of the Send. "Long ago, when I was but a child and the world hadn't moved on . . . or at least not s'far's it has now. Is it Blaine ye speak of, boy?"

Jake's eyes flashed in surprise and recognition. "Yes! Blaine!" Roland was studying Jake closely.

"And how would ye know of Blaine the Mono?" Aunt Talitha asked.

"Mono?" Jake looked blank.

"Ay, so it was called. How would you know of that old lay?"

Jake looked helplessly at Roland, then back at Aunt Talitha. "I don't know *how* I know."

And that's the truth, Eddie thought suddenly, *but it's not all the truth. He knows more than he wants to tell here . . . and I think he's scared.*

"This is our business, I think," Roland said in a dry, brisk administrator's voice. "You must let us work it out for ourselves, Old Mother."

"Ay," she agreed quickly. "You'll keep your own counsel. Best that such-as us not know."

"What of the city?" Roland prompted. "What do you know of Lud?"

"Little now, but what we know, ye shall hear." And she poured herself another cup of coffee.

9

IT WAS THE TWINS, Bill and Till, who actually did most of the talking, one taking up the tale smoothly whenever the other left off. Every now and then Aunt Talitha would add something or correct something, and the twins would wait respectfully until they were sure she was done. Si didn't speak at all—merely sat with his untouched coffee in front of him, plucking at the pieces of straw which bristled up from the wide brim of his sombrero.

They knew little, indeed, Roland realized quickly, even about the history of their own town (nor did this surprise him; in these latter days, memories faded rapidly and all but the most recent past seemed not to exist), but what they did know was disturbing. Roland was not surprised by this, either.

In the days of their great-great-grandparents, River Crossing had been much the town Susannah had imagined: a trade-stop at the Great Road, modestly prosperous, a place where goods were sometimes sold but more often exchanged. It had been at least nominally part of River Barony, although even then such things as Baronies and Estates o' Land had been passing.

There had been buffalo-hunters in those days, although the trade had been dying out; the herds were small and badly mutated. The meat of these mutant beasts was not poison, but it had been rank and bitter. Yet River Crossing, located between a place they simply called The Landing and the village of Jimtown, had been a place of some note. It was on the Great Road and only six days travel from the city by land and three by barge. “Unless the river were low,” one of the twins said. “Then it took longer, and my gran’da said there was times when there was barges grounded all the way upriver to Tom’s Neck.”

The old people knew nothing of the city’s original residents, of course, or the technologies they had used to build the towers and turrets; these were the Great Old Ones, and their history had been lost in the furthest reaches of the past even when Aunt Talitha’s great-great-grandfather had been a boy.

“The buildings are still standing,” Eddie said. “I wonder if the machines the Great Golden Oldies used to build them still run.”

“Mayhap,” one of the twins said. “If so, young fella, there don’t be ary man or woman that lives there now who’d still know how to run em . . . or so I believe, so I do.”

“Nay,” his brother said argumentatively, “I doubt the old ways are entirely lost to the Grays ’n Pubes, even now.” He looked at Eddie. “Our da’ said there was once electric candles in the city. There are those who say they mought still burn.”

“Imagine that,” Eddie replied wonderingly, and Susannah pinched his leg, hard, under the table.

“Yes,” the other twin said. He spoke seriously, unaware of Eddie’s sarcasm. “You pushed a button and they came on—bright, heatless candles with ary wicks or reservoirs for oil. And I’ve heard it said that once, in the old days, Quick, the outlaw prince, actually flew up into the sky in a mechanical bird. But one of its wings broke and he died in a great fall, like Icarus.”

Susannah’s mouth dropped open. “You know the story of Icarus?”

“Ay, lady,” he said, clearly surprised she should find this strange. “He of the beeswax wings.”

“Children’s stories, both of them,” Aunt Talitha said with a sniff. “I know the story of the endless lights is true, for I saw them with my own eyes when I was but a green girl, and they may still glow from time to time, ay; there are those I trust who say they’ve seen them on clear nights, although it’s been long years since I have myself. But no man ever flew, not even the Great Old Ones.”

Nonetheless, there *were* strange machines in the city, built to do peculiar and sometimes dangerous things. Many of them might still run, but the elderly twins reckoned that none now in the city knew how to start them up, for they hadn’t been heard in years.

Maybe that could change, though, Eddie thought, his eyes gleaming. If, that is, an enterprising, travelminded young man with a little knowledge of strange machinery and endless lights came along. It could be just a matter of finding the ON switches. I mean, it really could be that simple. Or maybe they just blew a bunch of fuses—think of that, friends and neighbors! Just replace half a dozen 400-amp Busses and light the whole place up like a Reno Saturday night!

Susannah elbowed him and asked, in a low voice, what was so funny. Eddie shook his head and put a finger to his lips, earning an irritated look from the love of his life. The albinos, meanwhile, were continuing their story, handing its thread back and forth with the unconscious ease which probably nothing but lifetime twinship can provide.

Four or five generations ago, they said, the city had still been quite heavily populated and reasonably civilized, although the residents drove wagons and buck-boards along the wide boulevards the Great Old Ones had constructed for their fabulous horseless vehicles. The city-dwellers were artisans and what the twins called “manufactories,” and trade both on the river and over it had been brisk.

“Over it?” Roland asked.

“The bridge over the Send still stands,” Aunt Talitha said, “or did twenty year ago.”

“Ay, old Bill Muffin and his boy saw it not ten year ago,” Si agreed, making his first contribution to the conversation.

“What sort of bridge?” the gunslinger asked.

“A great thing of steel cables,” one of the twins said. “It stands in the sky like the web of some great spider.” He added shyly: “I should like to see it again before I die.”

“Probably fallen in by now,” Aunt Talitha said dismissively, “and good riddance. Devil’s work.” She turned to the twins. “Tell them what’s happened since, and why the city’s so dangerous now—apart from any haunts that may den there, that is, and I’ll warrant there’s a power of em. These folks want to get on, and the sun’s on the wester.”

10

THE REST OF THE story was but another version of a tale Roland of Gilead had heard many times and had, in some measure, lived through himself. It was fragmentary and incomplete, undoubtedly shot through with myth and misinformation, its linear progress distorted by the odd changes—both temporal and directional—which were now taking place in the world, and it could be summed up in a single compound sentence: *Once there was a world we knew, but that world has moved on.*

These old people of River Crossing knew of Gilead no more than Roland knew of the River Barony, and the name of John Farson, the man who had brought ruin and anarchy on Roland’s land, meant nothing to them, but all stories of the old world’s passing were similar . . . too similar, Roland thought, to be coincidence.

A great civil war—perhaps in Garian, perhaps in a more distant land called Porla—had erupted three, perhaps even four hundred years ago. Its ripples had spread slowly outward, pushing anarchy and dissension ahead of them. Few if any kingdoms had been able to stand against those slow waves, and anarchy had come to this part of the world as surely as night follows sunset. At one time, whole armies had been on the roads, sometimes in advance, sometimes in retreat, always confused and without long-term goals.

As time passed, they crumbled into smaller groups, and these degenerated into roving bands of harriers. Trade faltered, then broke down entirely. Travel went from a matter of inconvenience to one of danger. In the end, it became almost impossible. Communication with the city thinned steadily and had all but ceased a hundred and twenty years ago.

Like a hundred other towns Roland had ridden through—first with Cuthbert and the other gunslingers cast out of Gilead, then alone, in pursuit of the man in black—River Crossing had been cut off and thrown on its own resources.

At this point Si roused himself, and his voice captured the travellers at once. He spoke in the hoarse, cadenced tones of a lifelong teller of tales—one of those divine fools born to merge memory and mendacity into dreams as airily gorgeous as cobwebs strung with drops of dew.

“We last sent tribute to the Barony castle in the time of my great-gran’da,” he said. “Twenty-six men went with a wagon of hides—there was no hard coin anymore by then, o’ course, and ’twas the best they could do. It was a long and dangerous journey of almost eighty wheels, and six died on the way. Half fell to harriers bound for the war in the city; the other half died either of disease or devilgrass.

“When they finally arrived, they found the castle deserted but for the rooks and black-birds. The walls had been broken; weeds o’ergrew the Court o’ State. There had been a great slaughter on the fields to the west; it were white with bones and red with rusty armor, so my da’s gran’da said, and the voices of demons cried out like the east wind from the jawbones o’ those who’d fallen there. The village beyond the castle had been burned to the ground and a thousand or more skulls were posted along the walls of the keep. Our folk left their bounty o’ hides without the shattered barbican gate—for none would venture inside that place of ghosts and moaning voices—and began the homeward way again. Ten more fell on that journey, so that of the six-and-twenty who left only ten returned, my great-gran’da one of them . . . but he picked up a ring-worm on his neck and bosom that never left until the day he died. It were the radiation

sickness, or so they said. After that, gunslinger, none left the town. We were on our own.”

They grew used to the depredations of the harriers, Si continued in his cracked but melodious voice. Watches were posted; when bands of riders were seen approaching—almost always moving southeast along the Great Road and the path of the Beam, going to the war which raged endlessly in Lud—the townspeople hid in a large shelter they had dug beneath the church. Casual damages to the town were not repaired, lest they make those roving bands curious. Most were beyond curiosity; they only rode through at a gallop, bows or battle-axes slung over their shoulders, bound for the killing-zones.

“What war is it that you speak of?” Roland asked.

“Yes,” Eddie said, “and, what about that drumming sound?”

The twins again exchanged a quick, almost superstitious glance.

“We know not of the god-drums,” Si told them. “Ary word or watch. The war of the city, now . . .”

The war had originally been the harriers and outlaws against a loose confederation of artisans and “manufactories” who lived in the city. The residents had decided to fight instead of allowing the harriers to, loot them, burn their shops, and then turn the survivors out into the Big Empty, where they would almost certainly die. And for some years they had successfully defended Lud against the vicious but badly organized groups of raiders which tried to storm across the bridge or invade by boat and barge. “The city-folk used the old weapons,” one of the twins said, “and though their numbers were small, the harriers could not stand against such things with their bows and maces and battle-axes.”

“Do you mean the city-people used guns?” Eddie asked.

One of the albinos nodded. “Ay, guns, but not *just* guns. There were things that hurled the firebangs over a mile or more. Explosions like dynamite, only more powerful. The outlaws—who are now the Grays, as you must ken-could do nothing but lay siege beyond the river, and that was what they did.”

Lud became, in effect, the last fortress-refuge of the latter world. The brightest and most able travelled there from the surrounding countryside by ones and twos. When it came to intelligence tests,

sneaking through the tangled encampments and front lines of the besiegers was the newcomers' final exam. Most came unarmed across the no-man's-land of the bridge, and those who made it that far were let through. Some were found wanting and sent packing again, of course, but those who had a trade or a skill (or brains enough to learn one) were allowed to stay. Farming skills were particularly prized; according to the stories, every large park in Lud had been turned into a vegetable garden. With the countryside cut off, it was grow food in the city or starve amid the glass towers and metal alleys. The Great Old Ones were gone, their machines were a mystery, and the silent wonders which remained were inedible.

Little by little, the character of the war began to change. The balance of power had shifted to the besieging Grays—so called because they were, on average, much older than the city-dwellers. Those latter were also growing older, of course. They were still known as Pubes, but in most cases their puberty was long behind them. And they eventually either forgot how the old weapons worked or used them up.

“Probably both,” Roland grunted.

Some ninety years ago—within the lifetimes of Si and Aunt Talitha—a final band of outlaws had appeared, one so large that the outriders had gone galloping through River Crossing at dawn and the drogues did not pass until almost sundown. It was the last army these parts had ever seen, and it was led by a warrior prince named David Quick—the same fellow who supposedly later fell to his death from the sky. He had organized the raggle-taggle remnants of the outlaw bands which still hung about the city, killing anyone who showed opposition to his plans. Quick's army of Grays used neither boat nor bridge to attempt entry into the city, but instead built a pontoon bridge twelve miles below it and attacked on the flank.

“Since then the war has guttered like a chimney-fire,” Aunt Talitha finished. “We hear reports every now and then from someone who has managed to leave, ay, so we do. These come a little more often now, for the bridge, they say, is undefended and I think the fire is almost out. Within the city, the Pubes and Grays squabble over the remaining spoils, only I reckon that the descendents of the harriers

who followed Quick over the pontoon bridge are the real Pubes now, although they are still called Grays. The descendents of the original city-dwellers must now be almost as old as we are, although there are still some younkers who go to be among them, drawn by the old stories and the lure of the knowledge which may still remain there.

“These two sides still keep up their old enmity, gunslinger, and both would desire this young man you call Eddie. If the dark-skinned woman is fertile, they would not kill her even though her legs are short-ended; they would keep her to bear children, for children are fewer now, and although the old sicknesses are passing, some are still born strange.”

At this, Susannah stirred, seemed about to say something, then only drank the last of her coffee and settled back into her former listening position.

“But if they would desire the young man and woman, gunslinger, I think they would lust for the boy.”

Jake bent and began to stroke Oy’s fur again. Roland saw his face and knew what he was thinking: it was the passage under the mountains all over again, just another version of the Slow Mutants.

“You they’d just as soon kill,” Aunt Talitha said, “for you are a gunslinger, a man out of his own time and place, neither fish nor fowl, and no use to either side. But a boy can be taken, used, schooled to remember some things and to forget all the others. *They’ve* all forgotten whatever it was they had to fight about in the first place; the world has moved on since then. Now they just fight to the sound of them awful drumbeats, some few still young, most of them old enough for the rocking chair, like us here, all of them stupid grots who only live to kill and kill to live.” She paused. “Now that you’ve heard us old cullies to the end, are ye sure it would not be best to go around, and leave them to their business?”

Before Roland could reply, Jake spoke up in a clear, firm voice. “Tell what you know about Blaine the Mono,” he said. “Tell about Blaine and Engineer Bob.”

“ENGINEER *WHO?*” EDDIE ASKED, but Jake only went on looking at the old people.

“Track lies over yonder,” Si answered at last. He pointed toward the river. “One track only, set up high on a colyum of man-made stone, such as the Old Ones used to make their streets and walls.”

“A monorail!” Susannah exclaimed. “Blaine the Monorail!”

“Blaine is a pain,” Jake muttered.

Roland glanced at him but said nothing.

“Does this train run now?” Eddie asked Si.

Si shook his head slowly. His face was troubled and uneasy. “No, young sir—but in my lifetime and Auntie’s, it did. When we were green and the war of the city still went forrad briskly. We’d hear it before we saw it—a low humming noise, a sound like ye sometimes hear when a bad summer storm’s on the way—one that’s full of lightning.”

“Ay,” Aunt Talitha said. Her face was lost and dreaming.

“Then it’d come—Blaine the Mono, twinkling in the sun, with a nose like one of the bullets in your revolver, gunslinger. Maybe two wheels long. I know that sounds like it couldn’t be, and maybe it wasn’t (we were green, ye must remember, and that makes a difference), but I still think it wars, for when it came, it seemed to run along the whole horizon. Fast, low, and gone before you could even see it proper!

“Sometimes, on days when the weather were foul and the air low, it’d shriek like a harpy as it came out of the west. Sometimes it’d come in the night with a long white light spread out before it, and that shriek would wake all of us. It were like the trumpet they say will raise the dead from their graves at the end of the world, so it was.”

“Tell em about the bang, Si!” Bill or Till said in a voice which trembled with awe. “Tell em about the godless bang what always came after!”

“Ay, I was just getting to that,” Si answered with a touch of annoyance. “After it passed by, there would be quiet for a few

seconds . . . sometimes as long as a minute, maybe . . . and then there'd come an explosion that rattled the boards and knocked cups off the shelves and sometimes even broke the glass in the window-panes. But never did anyone see any flash nor fire. It was like an explosion in the world of spirits."

Eddie tapped Susannah on the shoulder, and when she turned to him he mouthed two words: *Sonic boom*. It was nuts—no train he had ever heard of travelled faster than the speed of sound—but it was also the only thing that made sense.

She nodded and turned back to Si.

"It's the only one of the machines the Great Old Ones made that I've ever seen running with my own eyes," he said in a soft voice, "and if it weren't the devil's work, there be no devil. The last time I saw it was the spring I married Mercy, and that must have been sixty year ago."

"Seventy," Aunt Talitha said with authority.

"And this train went into the city," Roland said. "From back the way we came . . . from the west . . . from the forest."

"Ay," a new voice said unexpectedly, "but there was another . . . one that went *out from* the city . . . and mayhap that one still runs."

12

THEY TURNED. MERCY STOOD by a bed of flowers between the back of the church and the table where they sat. She was walking slowly toward the sound of their voices, with her hands spread out before her.

Si got clumsily to his feet, hurried to her as best he could, and took her hand. She slipped an arm about his waist and they stood there looking like the world's oldest wedding couple.

"Auntie told you to take your coffee inside!" he said.

"Finished my coffee long ago," Mercy said. "It's a bitter brew and I hate it. Besides-I wanted to hear the palaver." She raised a trembling

finger and pointed it in Roland's direction. "I wanted to hear his voice. It's fair and light, so it is."

"I cry your pardon, Auntie," Si said, looking at the ancient woman a little fearfully. "She was never one to mind, and the years have made her no better."

Aunt Talitha glanced at Roland. He nodded, almost imperceptibly. "Let her come forward and join us," she said.

Si led her over to the table, scolding all the while. Mercy only looked over his shoulder with her sightless eyes, her mouth set in an intractable line.

When Si had gotten her seated, Aunt Talitha leaned forward on her forearms and said, "Now do you have something to say, old sister-sai, or were you just beating your gums?"

"I hear what I hear. My ears are as sharp as they ever were, Talitha—sharper!"

Roland's hand dropped to his belt for a moment. When he brought it back to the table, he was holding a cartridge in his fingers. He tossed it to Susannah, who caught it. "Do you, sai?" he asked.

"Well enough," she said, turning in his direction, "to know that you just threw something. To your woman, I think—the one with the brown skin. Something small. What was it, gunslinger? A biscuit?"

"Close enough," he said, smiling. "You hear as well as you say. Now tell us what you meant."

"There is another mono," she said, "unless 'tis the same one, running a different course. Either way, a different course was run by *some* mono . . . until seven or eight year ago, anyways. I used to hear it leaving the city and going out into the waste lands beyond."

"Dungheap!" one of the albino twins ejaculated. "*Nothing* goes to the waste lands! Nothing can live there!"

She turned her face to him. "Is a train alive, Till Tudbury?" she asked. "Does a machine fall sick with sores and puking?"

Well, Eddie thought of saying, *there was this bear . . .*

He thought it over a little more and decided it might be better to keep his silence.

"We would have heard it," the other twin was insisting hotly. "A noise like the one Si always tells of—"

“This one didn’t make no bang,” she admitted, “but I heard that other sound, that humming noise like the one you hear sometimes after lightning has struck somewhere close. When the wind was strong, blowing out from the city, I heard it.” She thrust out her chin and added: “I *did* hear the bang once, too. From far, far out. The night. Big Charlie Wind came and almost blew the steeple off the church. Must have been two hundred wheels from here. Maybe two hundred and fifty.”

“Bulldink!” the twin cried. “You been chewing the weed!”

“I’ll chew on *you*, Bill Tudbury, if you don’t shut up your honkin. You’ve no business sayin bulldink to a lady, either. Why—”

“Stop it, Mercy!” Si hissed, but Eddie was barely listening to this exchange of rural pleasantries. What the blind woman had said made sense to him. Of course there would be no sonic boom, not from a train which started its run in Lud; he couldn’t remember exactly what the speed of sound was, but he thought it was somewhere in the neighborhood of six hundred and fifty miles an hour. A train starting from a dead stop would take some time getting up to that speed, and by the time it reached it, it would be out of earshot . . . unless the listening conditions happened to be just right, as Mercy claimed they had been on the night when the Big Charlie Wind—whatever that was—had come.

And there were possibilities here. Blaine the Mono was no Land Rover, but maybe . . . maybe . . .

“You haven’t heard the sound of this other train for seven or eight years, sai?” Roland asked. “Are you sure it wasn’t much longer?”

“Couldn’t have been,” she said, “for the last time was the year old Bill Muffin took blood-sick. Poor Bill!”

“That’s almost ten year ago,” Aunt Talitha said, and her voice was queerly gentle.

“Why did you never say you heard such a thing?” Si asked. He looked at the gunslinger. “You can’t believe everything she says, lord—always longing to be in the middle of the stage is my Mercy.”

“Why, you old slumgullion!” she cried, and slapped his arm. “I didn’t say because I didn’t want to o’ertop the story you’re so proud of, but now that it matters what I heard, I’m bound to tell!”

“I believe you, sai,” Roland said, “but are you sure you haven’t heard the sounds of the mono since then?”

“Nay, not since then. I imagine it’s finally reached the end of its path.”

“I wonder,” Roland said. “Indeed, I wonder very much.” He looked down at the table, brooding, suddenly far away from all of them.

Choo-choo, Jake thought, and shivered.

13

HALF AN HOUR LATER they were in the town square again, Susannah in her wheelchair, Jake adjusting the straps of his pack while Oy sat at his heel, watching him attentively. Only the town elders had attended the dinner-party in the little Eden behind the Church of the Blood Everlasting, it seemed, because when they returned to the square, another dozen people were waiting. They glanced at Susannah and looked a bit longer at Jake (his youth apparently more interesting to them than her dark skin), but it was clearly Roland they had come to see; their wondering eyes were full of ancient awe.

He’s a living remnant of a past they only know from stories, Susannah thought. *They look at him the way religious people would look at one of the saints—Peter or Paul or Matthew-if he decided to drop by the Saturday night bean supper and tell them stories of how it was, traipsing around the Sea of Galilee with Jesus the Carpenter.*

The ritual which had ended the meal was now repeated, only this time everyone left in River Crossing participated. They shuffled forward in a line, shaking hands with Eddie and Susannah, kissing Jake on the cheek or forehead, then kneeling in front of Roland for his touch and his blessing. Mercy threw her arms about him and pressed her blind face against his stomach. Roland hugged her back and thanked her for her news.

“Will ye not stay the night with us, gunslinger? Sunset comes on apace, and it’s been long since you and yours spent the night beneath a roof, I’ll warrant.”

“It has been, but it’s best we go on. Thankee-sai.”

“Will ye come again if ye may, gunslinger”

“Yes,” Roland said, but Eddie did not need to look into his strange friend’s face to know the chances were small. “If we can.”

“Ay.” She hugged him a final time, then passed on with her hand resting on Si’s sunburned shoulder. “Fare ye well.”

Aunt Talitha came last. When she began to kneel, Roland caught her by the shoulders. “No, sai. You shall not do.” And before Eddie’s amazed eyes, Roland knelt before her in the dust of the town square. “Will you bless me, Old Mother? Will you bless all of us as we go our course?”

“Ay,” she said. There was no surprise in her voice, no tears in her eyes, but her voice throbbed with deep feeling, all the same. “I see your heart is true, gunslinger, and that you hold to the old ways of your kind; ay, you hold to them very well. I bless you and yours and will pray that no harm will come to you. Now take this, if you will.” She reached into the bodice of her faded dress and removed a silver cross at the end of a fine-link silver chain. She took it off.

Now it was Roland’s turn to be surprised. “Are you sure? I did not come to take what belongs to you and yours, Old Mother.”

“I’m sure as sure can be. I’ve worn this day and night for over a hundred years, gunslinger. Now you shall wear it, and lay it at the foot of the Dark Tower, and speak the name of Talitha Unwin at the far end of the earth.” She slipped the chain over his head. The cross dropped into the open neck of his deerskin shirt as if it belonged there. “Go now. We have broken bread, we have held palaver, we have your blessing, and you have ours. Go your course in safety. Stand and be true.” Her voice trembled and broke on the last word.

Roland rose to his feet, then bowed and tapped his throat three times. “Thankee-sai.”

She bowed back, but did not speak. Now there were tears coursing down her cheeks.

“Ready?” Roland asked.

Eddie nodded. He did not trust himself to speak.

“All right,” Roland said. “Let’s go.”

They walked down what remained of the town’s high street, Jake pushing Susannah’s wheelchair. As they passed the last building (TRADE & CHANGE, the faded sign read), he looked back. The old people were still gathered about the stone marker, a forlorn cluster of humanity in the middle of this wide, empty plain. Jake raised his hand. Up to this point he had managed to hold himself in, but when several of the old folks—Si, Bill, and Till among them—raised their own hands in return, Jake burst into tears himself.

Eddie put an arm around his shoulders. “Just keep walking, sport,” he said in an uneasy voice. “That’s the only way to do it.”

“They’re so old!” Jake sobbed. “How can we just leave them like this? It’s not right!”

“It’s *ka*,” Eddie said without thinking.

“Is it? Well *ka* suh-suh-sucks!”

“Yeah, hard,” Eddie agreed . . . but he kept walking. So did Jake, and he didn’t look back again. He was afraid they would still be there, standing at the center of their forgotten town, watching until Roland and his friends were out of view. And he would have been right.

14

THEY HAD MADE LESS than seven miles before the sky began to darken and sunset colored the western horizon blaze orange. There was a grove of Susannah’s eucalyptus trees nearby; Jake and Eddie foraged there for wood.

“I just don’t see why we didn’t stay,” Jake said. “The blind lady invited us, and we didn’t get very far, anyway. I’m still so full I’m practically waddling.”

Eddie smiled. “Me, too. And I can tell you something else: your good friend Edward Cantor Dean is looking forward to a long and

leisurely squat in this grove of trees first thing tomorrow morning. You wouldn't believe how tired I am of eating deermeat and crapping rabbit-turds. If you'd told me a year ago that a good dump would be the high point of my day, I would have laughed in your face."

"Is your middle name really Cantor?"

"Yes, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't spread it around."

"I won't. Why *didn't* we stay, Eddie?"

Eddie sighed. "Because we would have found out they needed firewood."

"Huh?"

"And after we got the firewood, we would've found they *also* needed fresh meat, because they served us the last of what they had. And we'd be real creeps not to replace what we ate, right? Especially when we're packing guns and the best they can probably do is a bunch of bows and arrows fifty or a hundred years old. So we would have gone hunting for them. By then it would be night again, and when we got up the next day, Susannah would be saying we ought to at least make a few repairs before we moved on-oh, not to the *front* of the town, that'd be dangerous, but maybe in the hotel or wherever it is they live. Only a few days, and what's a few days, right?"

Roland materialized out of the gloom. He moved as quietly as ever, but he looked tired and preoccupied. "I thought maybe you two fell into a quickpit," he said.

"Nope. I've just been telling Jake the facts as I see them."

"So what *would* have been wrong with that?" Jake asked. "This Dark Tower thingy has been wherever it is for a long time, right? It's not going anywhere, is it?"

"A few days, then a few more, then a few more." Eddie looked at the branch he had just picked up and threw it aside disgustedly. *I'm starting to sound just like him*, he thought. And yet he knew that he was only speaking the truth. "Maybe we'd see that their spring is getting silted up, and it wouldn't be polite to go until we'd dug it out for them. But why stop there when we could take another couple of weeks and build a jackleg waterwheel, right? They're old, and have no more foot." He glanced at Roland, and his voice was tinged with

reproach. “I tell you what—when I think of Bill and Till there stalking a herd of wild buffalo, I get the shivers.”

“They’ve been doing it a long time,” Roland said, “and I imagine they could show us a thing or two. They’ll manage. Meantime, let’s get that wood—it’s going to be a chilly night.”

But Jake wasn’t done with it yet. He was looking closely—almost sternly—at Eddie. “You’re saying we could never do enough for them, aren’t you?”

Eddie stuck out his lower lip and blew hair off his forehead. “Not exactly. I’m saying it would never be any easier to leave than it was today. Harder, maybe, but no easier.”

“It *still* doesn’t seem right.”

They reached the place that would become, once the fire was lit, just another campsite on the road to the Dark Tower. Susannah had eased herself out of her chair and was lying on her back with her hands behind her head, looking up at the stars. Now she sat up and began to arrange the wood in the way Roland had shown her months ago.

“Right is what all this is about,” Roland said. “But if you look too long at the small rights, Jake—the ones that lie close at hand— it’s easy to lose sight of the big ones that stand farther off. Things are out of joint—going wrong and getting worse. We see it all around us, but the answers are still ahead. While we were helping the twenty or thirty people left in River Crossing, twenty or thirty thousand more might be suffering or dying somewhere else. And if there is any place in the universe where these things can be set right, it’s at the Dark Tower.”

“Why? How?” Jake asked. “What *is* this Tower, anyway?”

Roland squatted beside the fire Susannah had built, produced his flint and steel, and began to flash sparks into the kindling. Soon small flames were growing amid the twigs and dried handfuls of grass. “I can’t answer those questions,” he said. “I wish I could.”

That, Eddie thought, was an exceedingly clever reply. Roland had said *I can’t answer* . . . but that wasn’t the same thing as *I don’t know*. Far from it.

SUPPER CONSISTED OF WATER and greens. They were all still recovering from the heavy meal they'd eaten in River Crossing; even Oy refused the scraps Jake offered him after the first one or two.

"How come you wouldn't talk back there?" Jake scolded the bumbler. "You made me look like an idiot!"

"Id-yit!" Oy said, and put his muzzle on Jake's ankle.

"He's talking better all the time," Roland remarked. "He's even starting to sound like you, Jake."

"Ake," Oy agreed, not lifting his muzzle. Jake was fascinated by the gold rings in Oy's eyes; in the flickering light of the fire, they seemed to revolve slowly.

"But he wouldn't talk to the old people."

"Bumblers are choosy about that sort of thing," Roland said.

"They're odd creatures. If I had to guess, I'd say this one was driven away by its own pack."

"Why do you think so?"

Roland pointed at Oy's flank. Jake had cleaned off the blood (Oy hadn't enjoyed this, but had stood for it) and the bite was healing, although the bumbler still limped a little. "I'd bet an eagle that's the bite of another bumbler."

"But why would his own pack—"

"Maybe they got tired of his chatter," Eddie said. He had lain down beside Susannah and put an arm about her shoulders.

"Maybe they did," Roland said, "especially if he was the only one of them who was still trying to talk. The others might have decided he was too bright-or too uppity-for their taste. Animals don't know as much about jealousy as people, but they're not ignorant of it, either."

The object of this discussion closed his eyes and appeared to go to sleep . . . but Jake noticed his ears began twitching when the talk resumed.

"How bright *are* they?" Jake asked.

Roland shrugged. "The old groom I told you about—the one who said a good bumbler is good tuck—swore he had one in his youth

that could add. He said it told sums either by scratching on the stable floor or pushing stones together with its muzzle.” He grinned. It lit his whole face, chasing away the gloomy shadows which had lain there ever since they left River Crossing. “Of course, grooms and fishermen are born to live. ”

A companionable silence fell among them, and Jake could feel drowsiness stealing over him. He thought he would sleep soon, and that was fine by him. Then the drums began, coming out of the southeast in rhythmic pulses, and he sat back up. They listened without speaking.

“That’s a rock and roll backbeat,” Eddie said suddenly. “I know it is. Take away the guitars and that’s what you’ve got left. In fact, it sounds quite a lot like Z.Z. Top.”

“Z.Z. *who?*” Susannah asked.

Eddie grinned. “They didn’t exist in your when,” he said. “I mean, they probably did, but in ’63 they would have been just a bunch of kids going to school down in Texas.” He listened. “I’ll be goddamned if that doesn’t sound just like the backbeat to something like ‘Sharp-Dressed Man’ or ‘Velcro Fly.’ ”

“ ‘Velcro Fly’?” Jake said. “That’s a stupid name for a song.”

“Pretty funny, though,” Eddie said. “You missed it by ten years or so, sport.”

“We’d better roll over,” Roland said. “Morning comes early.”

“I can’t sleep with that shit going on,” Eddie said. He hesitated, then said something which had been on his mind ever since the morning when they had pulled Jake, whitefaced and shrieking, through the doorway and into this world. “Don’t you think it’s about time we exchanged stories, Roland? We might find out we know more than we think.”

“Yes, it’s almost time for that. But not in the dark.” Roland rolled onto his side, pulled up a blanket, and appeared to go to sleep.

“Jesus,” Eddie said. “Just like that.” He blew a disgusted little whistle between his teeth.

“He’s right,” Susannah said. “Come on, Eddie—go to sleep.”

He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. “Yes, Mummy.”

Five minutes later he and Susannah were dead to the world, drums or no drums. Jake found that his own sleepiness had stolen away, however. He lay looking up at the strange stars and listening to that steady, rhythmic throbbing coming out of the darkness. Maybe it was the Pubes, boogying madly to a song called “Velcro Fly” while they worked themselves into a sacrificial killing frenzy.

He thought of Blaine the Mono, a train so fast that it travelled across the huge, haunted world trailing a sonic boom behind it, and that led him naturally enough to thoughts of Charlie the Choo-Choo, who had been retired to a forgotten siding when the new Burlington Zephyr arrived, rendering him obsolete. He thought of the expression on Charlie’s face, the one that was supposed to be cheery and pleasant but somehow wasn’t: He thought about The Mid-World Railway Company, and the empty lands between St. Louis and Topeka. He thought about how Charlie had been all ready to go when Mr. Martin needed him, and how Charlie could blow his own whistle and feed his own firebox. He wondered again if Engineer Bob had sabotaged the Burlington Zephyr in order to give his beloved Charlie a second chance.

At last—and as suddenly as it had begun—the rhythmic drumming stopped, and Jake drifted off to sleep.

16

HE DREAMED, BUT NOT of the plaster-man.

He dreamed instead that he was standing on a stretch of blacktop highway somewhere in the Big Empty of western Missouri. Oy was with him. Railroad warning signals—white X-shapes with red lights in their centers—flanked the road. The lights were flashing and bells were ringing.

Now a humming noise began to rise out of the southeast getting steadily louder. It sounded like lightning in a bottle.

Here it comes, he told Oy.

Ums! Oy agreed.

And suddenly a vast pink shape two wheels long was slicing across the plain toward them. It was low and bullet-shaped, and when Jake saw it, a terrible fear filled his heart. The two big windows flashing in the sun at the front of the train looked like eyes.

Don't ask it silly questions, Jake told Oy. It won't play silly games. It's just an awful choo-choo train, and its name is Blaine the Pain.

Suddenly Oy leaped onto the tracks and crouched there with his ears flattened back. His golden eyes were blazing. His teeth were bared in a desperate snarl.

No! Jake screamed. *No, Oy!*

But Oy paid no attention. The pink bullet was bearing down on the tiny, defiant shape of the billy-bumbler now, and that humming seemed to be crawling all over Jake's skin, making his nose bleed and shattering the fillings in his teeth.

He leaped for Oy, Blaine the Mono (or was it Charlie the Choo-Choo?) bore down on them, and he woke up suddenly, shivering, bathed in sweat. The night seemed to be pressing down upon him like a physical weight. He rolled over and felt frantically for Oy. For a terrible moment he thought the bumbler was gone, and then his fingers found the silky fur. Oy uttered a squeak and looked at him with sleepy curiosity.

"That's all right," Jake whispered in a dry voice. "There's no train. It was just a dream. Go back to sleep, boy."

"Oy," the bumbler agreed, and closed his eyes again.

Jake rolled over on his back and lay looking up at the stars. *Blaine is more than a pain, he thought. It's dangerous. Very dangerous.*

Yes, perhaps.

No perhaps about it! his mind insisted frantically.

All right, Blaine was a pain—given. But his Final Essay had had something else to say on the subject of Blaine, hadn't it?

Blaine is the truth. Blaine is the truth. Blaine is the truth.

"Oh Jeez, what a mess," Jake whispered. He closed his eyes and was asleep again in seconds. This time his sleep was dreamless.

AROUND NOON THE NEXT day they reached the top of another drumlin and saw the bridge for the first time. It crossed the Send at a point where the river narrowed, bent due south, and passed in front of the city.

“Holy Jesus,” Eddie said softly. “Does that look familiar to you, Suze?”

“Yes.”

“Jake?”

“Yes—it looks like the George Washington Bridge.”

“It sure does,” Eddie agreed.

“But what’s the GWB doing in Missouri?” Jake asked.

Eddie looked at him. “Say *what*, sport?”

Jake looked confused. “Mid-World, I mean. You know.”

Eddie was looking at him harder than ever. “How do you know this is Mid-World? You weren’t with us when we came to that marker.”

Jake stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked down at his moccasins. “Dreamed it,” he said briefly. “You don’t think I booked this trip with my dad’s travel-agent, do you?”

Roland touched Eddie’s shoulder. “Let it alone for now.” Eddie glanced briefly at Roland and nodded.

They stood looking at the bridge a little longer. They’d had time to get used to the city skyline, but this was something new. It dreamed in the distance, a faint shape sketched against the blue midmorning sky. Roland could make out four sets of impossibly tall metal towers—one set at each end of the bridge and two in the middle. Between them, gigantic cables swooped through the air in long arcs. Between these arcs, and the base of the bridge were many vertical lines—either more cables or metal beams, he could not tell which. But he also saw gaps, and realized after a long time that the bridge was no longer perfectly level.

“Yonder bridge is going to be in the river soon, I think,” Roland said.

“Well, maybe,” Eddie said reluctantly, “but it doesn’t really look that bad to me.”

Roland sighed. “Don’t hope for too much, Eddie.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Eddie heard the touchiness in his voice, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

“It means that I want you to believe your eyes, Eddie—that’s all. There was a saying when I was growing up: ‘Only a fool believes he’s dreaming before he wakes up.’ Do you understand?”

Eddie felt a sarcastic reply on his tongue and banished it after a brief struggle. It was just that Roland had a way—it was unintentional, he was sure, but that didn’t make it any easier to deal with—of making him feel like such a *kid*.

“I guess I do,” he said at last. “It means the same thing as my mother’s favorite saying.”

“And what was that?”

“Hope for the best and expect the worst,” Eddie said sourly.

Roland’s face lightened in a smile. “I think I like your mother’s saying better.”

“But it *is* still standing!” Eddie burst out. “I agree it’s not in such fantastic shape—probably nobody’s done a really thorough maintenance check on it for a thousand years or so—but it is still there. The whole city is! Is it so wrong to hope we might find some things that’ll help us there? Or some people that’ll feed us and talk to us, like the old folks back in River Crossing, instead of shooting at us? Is it so wrong to hope our luck might be turning?”

In the silence which followed, Eddie realized with embarrassment that he had been making a speech.

“No.” There was a kindness in Roland’s voice—that kindness which always surprised Eddie when it came. “It’s never wrong to hope.” He looked around at Eddie and the others like a man coming out of a deep dream. “We’re done travelling for today. It’s time we had our own palaver, I think, and it’s going to take awhile.”

The gunslinger left the road and walked into the high grass without looking back. After a moment, the other three followed.

UNTIL THEY MET THE old people in River Crossing, Susannah had seen Roland strictly in terms of television shows she rarely watched: *Cheyenne*, *The Riffeman*, and, of course, the archetype of them all, *Gunsmoke*. That was one she had sometimes listened to on the radio with her father before it came on TV (she thought of how foreign the idea of radio drama would be to Eddie and Jake and smiled—Roland’s was not the only world which had moved on). She could still remember what the narrator said at the beginning of every one of those radio playlets: “It makes a man watchful . . . and a little lonely.”

Until River Crossing, that had summed Roland up perfectly for her. He was not broad-shouldered, as Marshal Dillon had been, nor anywhere near as tall, and his face seemed to her more that of a tired poet than a wild-west lawman, but she had still seen him as an existential version of that make-believe Kansas peace officer, whose only mission in life (other than an occasional drink in The Longbranch with his friends Doc and Kitty) had been to Clean Up Dodge.

Now she understood that Roland had once been much more than a cop riding a Dalíesque range at the end of the world. He had been a diplomat; a mediator; perhaps even a teacher. Most of all, he had been a soldier of what these people called “the White,” by which she guessed they meant the civilizing forces that kept people from killing each other enough of the time to allow some sort of progress. In his time he had been more wandering knight-errant than bounty hunter. And in many ways, this still was his time; the people of River Crossing had certainly thought so. Why else would they have knelt in the dust to receive his blessing?

In light of this new perception, Susannah could see how cleverly the gunslinger had managed them since that awful morning in the speaking ring. Each time they had begun a line of conversation which would lead to the comparing of notes—and what could be more natural, given the cataclysmic and inexplicable “drawing” each

of them had experienced?—Roland had been there, stepping in quickly and turning the conversation into other channels so smoothly that none of them (even she, who had spent almost four years up to her neck in the civil-rights movement) had noticed what he was doing.

Susannah thought she understood why—he had done it in order to give Jake time to heal. But understanding his motives didn't change her own feelings—astonishment, amusement, chagrin—about how neatly he had handled them. She remembered something Andrew, her chauffeur, had said shortly before Roland had drawn her into this world. Something about President Kennedy being the last gunslinger of the western world. She had scoffed then, but now she thought she understood. There was a lot more JFK than Matt Dillon in Roland. She suspected that Roland possessed little of Kennedy's imagination, but when it came to romance . . . dedication . . . charisma . . .

And guile, she thought. Don't forget guile.

She surprised herself by suddenly bursting into laughter.

Roland had seated himself cross-legged. Now he turned toward her, raising his eyebrows. "Something funny?"

"Very. Tell me something—how many languages can you speak?"

The gunslinger thought it over. "Five," he said at last. "I used to speak the Sellian dialects fairly well, but I believe I've forgotten everything but the curses."

Susannah laughed again. It was a cheerful, delighted sound. "You a fox, Roland," she said. "Indeed you are."

Jake looked interested. "Say a swear in Strelleran," he said.

"*Sellian*," Roland corrected. He thought a minute, then said something very fast and greasy—to Eddie it sounded a little as if he was gargling with some very thick liquid. Week-old coffee, say. Roland grinned as he said it.

Jake grinned back. "What does it mean?"

Roland put an arm around the boy's shoulders for a moment. "That we have a lot of things to talk about."

“*WE ARE KA-TET*,” ROLAND began, “which means a group of people bound together by fate. The philosophers of my land said a *ka-tet* could only be broken by death or treachery. My great teacher, Cort, said that since death and treachery are also spokes on the wheel of *ka*, such a binding can never be broken. As the years pass and I see more, I come more and more to Cort’s way of looking at it.

“Each member of a *ka-tet* is like a piece in a puzzle. Taken by itself, each piece is a mystery, but when they are put together, they make a picture . . . or *part* of a picture. It may take a great many *ka-tets* to finish one picture. You mustn’t be surprised if you discover your lives have been touching in ways you haven’t seen until now. For one thing, each of you three is capable of knowing each other’s thoughts-”

“What?” Eddie cried.

“It’s true. You share your thoughts so naturally that you haven’t even been aware it’s happening, but it has been. It’s easier for me to see, no doubt, because I am not a full member of this *ka-tet*—possibly because I am not from your world—and so cannot take part completely in the thought-sharing ability. But I *can* send. Susannah . . . do you remember when we were in the circle?”

“Yes. You told me to let the demon go when you told me. But you didn’t say that out loud.”

“Eddie . . . do you remember when we were in the bear’s clearing, and the mechanical bat came at you?”

“Yes. You told me to get down.”

“He never opened his mouth, Eddie,” Susannah said.

“Yes, you did! You *yelled!* I *heard* you, man!”

“I yelled, all right, but I did it with my mind.” The gunslinger turned to Jake. “Do you remember? In the house?”

“When the board I was pulling on wouldn’t come up, you told me to pull on the other one. But if you can’t read my mind, Roland, how did you know what kind of trouble I was in?”

“I saw. I heard nothing, but I *saw*—just a little, as if through a dirty window.” His eyes surveyed them. “This closeness and sharing of minds is called *khef*, a word that means many other things in the original tongue of the Old World—water, birth, and life-force are only three of them. Be aware of it. For now, that’s all I want”

“Can you be aware of something you don’t believe in?” Eddie asked.

Roland smiled. “Just keep an open mind.”

“That I can do.”

“Roland?” It was Jake. “Do you think Oy might be part of our *ka-tet*?”

Susannah smiled. Roland didn’t. “I’m not prepared to even guess right now, but I’ll tell you this, Jake—I’ve been thinking about your furry friend a good deal. *Ka* does not rule all, and coincidences still happen . . . but the sudden appearance of a billy-bumbler that still remembers people doesn’t seem completely coincidental to me.”

He glanced around at them.

“I’ll begin. Eddie will speak next, taking up from the place where I leave off. Then Susannah. Jake, you’ll speak last. All right?”

They nodded.

“Fine,” Roland said. “We are *ka-tet*—one from many. Let the palaver begin.”

20

THE TALK WENT ON until sundown, stopping only long enough for them to eat a cold meal, and by the time it was over, Eddie felt as if he had gone twelve hard rounds with Sugar Ray Leonard. He no longer doubted that they had been “sharing *khef*,” as Roland put it; he and Jake actually seemed to have been living each other’s life in their dreams, as if they were two halves of the same whole.

Roland began with what had happened under the mountains, where Jake’s first life in this world had ended. He told of his own

palaver with the man in black, and Walter's veiled words about a Beast and someone he called the Ageless Stranger. He told of the strange, daunting dream which had come to him, a dream in which the whole universe had been swallowed in a beam of fantastic white light. And how, at the end of that dream, there had been a single blade of purple grass.

Eddie glanced sideways at Jake and was stunned by the knowledge—the *recognition*—in the boy's eyes.

21

ROLAND HAD BABBLED PARTS of this story to Eddie in his time of delirium, but it was entirely new to Susannah, and she listened with wide eyes. As Roland repeated the things Walter had told him, she caught glints of her own world, like reflections in a smashed mirror: automobiles, cancer, rockets to the moon, artificial insemination. She had no idea who the Beast might be, but she recognized the name of the Ageless Stranger as a variation upon the name of Merlin, the magician who had supposedly orchestrated the career of King Arthur. Curiouser and curiouser.

Roland told of how he had awakened to find Walter long years dead—time had somehow slipped forward, perhaps a hundred years, perhaps five hundred. Jake listened in fascinated silence as the gunslinger told of reaching the edge of the Western Sea, of how he had lost two of the fingers on his right hand, and how he had drawn Eddie and Susannah before encountering Jack Mort, the dark third.

The gunslinger motioned to Eddie, who took up the tale with the coming of the great bear.

“Shardik?” Jake interjected. “But that's the name of a *book*! A book in *our* world! It was written by the man who wrote that famous book about the rabbits—”

“Richard Adams!” Eddie shouted. “And the book about the bunnies was *Watership Down*! I *knew* I knew that name! But how can that be, Roland? How is it that the people in your world know about things in ours?”

“There are doors, aren’t there?” Roland responded. “Haven’t we seen four of them already? Do you think they never existed before, or never will again?”

“But—”

“All of us have seen the leavings of your world in mine, and when I was in your city of New York, I saw the marks of my world in yours. I saw *gunslingers*. Most were lax and slow, but they were gunslingers all the same, clearly members of their own ancient *ka-tet*.”

“Roland, they were just cops. You ran rings around them.”

“Not the last one. When Jack Mort and I were in the underground railway station, that one almost took me down. Except for blind luck—Mort’s flint-and-steel—he would have done. That one . . . I saw his eyes. He knew the face of his father. I believe he knew it very well. And then . . . do you remember the name of Balazar’s nightclub?”

“Sure,” Eddie said uneasily. “The Leaning Tower. But it could have been coincidence; you yourself said *ka* doesn’t rule everything.”

Roland nodded. “You really are like Cuthbert—I remember something he said when we were boys. We were planning a midnight lark in the cemetery, but Alain wouldn’t go. He said he was afraid of offending the shades of his fathers and mothers. Cuthbert laughed at him. He said he wouldn’t believe in ghosts until he caught one in his teeth.”

“Good for him!” Eddie exclaimed. “Bravo!”

Roland smiled. “I thought you’d like that. At any rate, let’s leave this ghost for now. Go on with your story.”

Eddie told of the vision which had come to him when Roland threw the jawbone into the fire—the vision of the key and the rose. He told of his dream, and how he had walked through the door of Tom and Gerry’s Artistic Deli and into the field of roses which was dominated by the tall, soot-colored Tower. He told of the blackness which had issued from its windows, forming a shape in the sky overhead, speaking directly to Jake now, because Jake was listening with

hungry concentration and growing wonder. He tried to convey some sense of the exaltation and terror which had permeated the dream, and saw from their eyes-Jake's most of all-that he was either doing a better job of that than he could have hoped for . . . or that they'd had dreams of their own.

He told of following Shardik's backtrail to the Portal of the Bear, and how, when he put his head against it, he'd found himself remembering the day he had talked his brother into taking him to Dutch Hill, so he could see The Mansion. He told about the cup and the needle, and how the pointing needle had become unnecessary once they realized they could see the Beam at work in everything it touched, even the birds in the sky.

Susannah took up the tale at this point. As she spoke, telling of how Eddie had begun to carve his own version of the key, Jake lay back, laced his hands together behind his head, and watched the clouds run slowly toward the city on their straight southeasterly course. The orderly shape they made showed the presence of the Beam as clearly as smoke leaving a chimney shows the direction of the wind.

She finished with the story of how they had finally hauled Jake into this world, closing the split track of his and Roland's memories as suddenly and as completely as Eddie had closed the door in the speaking ring. The only fact she left out was really not a fact at all-at least, not yet. She'd had no morning sickness, after all, and a single missed period meant nothing by itself. As Roland himself might have said, that was a tale best left for another day.

Yet as she finished, she found herself wishing she could forget what Aunt Talitha had said when Jake told her this was his home now: *Gods pity you, then, for the sun is going down on this world. It's going down forever.*

"And now it's your turn, Jake," Roland said.

Jake sat up and looked toward Lud, where the windows of the western towers reflected back the late afternoon light in golden sheets. "It's all crazy," he murmured, "but it almost makes sense. Like a dream when you wake up."

"Maybe we can help you make sense of it," Susannah said.

“Maybe you can. At least you can help me think about the train. I’m tired of trying to make sense of Blaine by myself.” He sighed. “You know what Roland went through, living two lives at the same time, so I can skip that part. I’m not sure I could ever explain how it felt, anyway, and I don’t want to. It was gross. I guess I better start with my Final Essay, because that’s when I finally stopped thinking that the whole thing might just go away.” He looked around at them somberly. “That was when I gave up.”

22

JAKE TALKED THE SUN down.

He told them everything he could remember, beginning with *My Understanding of Truth* and ending with the monstrous doorkeeper which had literally come out of the woodwork to attack him. The other three listened without a single interruption.

When he was finished, Roland turned to Eddie, his eyes bright with a mixture of emotions Eddie initially took for wonder. Then he realized he was looking at powerful excitement . . . and deep fear. His mouth went dry. Because if *Roland* was afraid—“Do you still doubt that our worlds overlap each other, Eddie?”

He shook his head. “Of course not. I walked down the same street, *and I did it in his clothes!* But . . . Jake, can I see that book? *Charlie the Choo-Choo?*”

Jake reached for his pack, but Roland stayed his hand. “Not yet,” he said. “Go back to the vacant lot, Jake: Tell that part once more. Try to remember everything.”

“Maybe you should hypnotize me,” Jake said hesitantly. “Like you did before, at the way station.”

Roland shook his head. “There’s no need. What happened to you in that lot was the most important thing ever to happen in your life, Jake. In all our lives. You can remember everything.”

So Jake went through it again. It was clear to all of them that his experience in the vacant lot where Tom and Gerry's once had stood was the secret heart of the *ka-tet* they shared. In Eddie's dream, the Artistic Deli had still been standing; in Jake's reality it had been torn down, but in both cases it was a place of enormous, talismanic power. Nor did Roland doubt that the vacant lot with its broken bricks and shattered glass was another version of what Susannah knew as the Drawers and the place he had seen at the end of his vision in the place of bones.

As he told this part of his story for the second time, speaking very slowly now, Jake found that what the gunslinger had said was true: he *could* remember everything. His recall improved until he almost seemed to be reliving the experience. He told them of the sign which said that a building called Turtle Bay Condominiums was slated to stand on the spot where Tom and Gerry's had once stood. He even remembered the little poem which had been spray-painted on the fence, and recited it for them:

“See the TURTLE of enormous girth!
On his shell he holds the earth.
If you want to run and play,
Come along the BEAM today.”

Susannah murmured, “His thought is slow but always kind; He holds us all within his mind . . . isn't that how it went, Roland?”

“What?” Jake asked. “How what went?”

“A poem I learned as a child,” Roland said. “It's another connection, one that really tells us something, although I'm not sure it's anything we need to know . . . still, one never knows when a little understanding may come in handy.”

“Twelve portals connected by six Beams,” Eddie said. “We started at the Bear. We're only going as far as the middle—to the Tower—but if we went all the way to the other end, we'd come to the Portal of the Turtle, wouldn't we?”

Roland nodded. “I'm sure we would.”

“Portal of the Turtle,” Jake said thoughtfully, rolling the words in his mouth, seeming to taste them. Then he finished by telling them

again about the gorgeous voice of the choir, his realization that there were faces and stories and histories everywhere, and his growing belief that he had stumbled on something very like the core of all existence. Last of all, he told them again about finding the key and seeing the rose. In the totality of his recall, Jake began to weep, although he seemed unaware of it.

“When it opened,” he said, “I saw the middle was the brightest yellow you ever saw in your life. At first I thought it was pollen and it only looked bright because *everything* in that lot looked bright. Even looking at the old candy-wrappers and beer-bottles was like looking at the greatest paintings you ever saw. Only then I realized it was a sun. I know it sounds crazy, but that’s what it was. Only it was more than one. It was—”

“It was *all* suns,” Roland murmured. “It was everything *real*.”

“Yes! And it was *right*—but it was *wrong*, too. I can’t explain *how* it was wrong, but it was. It was like two heartbeats, one inside of the other, and the one inside had a disease. Or an infection. And then I fainted.”

23

“You SAW THE SAME thing at the end of your dream, Roland, didn’t you?” Susannah asked. Her voice was soft with awe. “The blade of grass you saw near the end of it . . . you thought that blade was purple because it was splattered with paint.”

“You don’t understand,” Jake said. “It really *was* purple. When I was seeing it the way it really was, it was *purple*. Like no grass I ever saw before. The paint was just camouflage. The way the doorkeeper camouflaged itself to look like an old deserted house.”

The sun had reached the horizon. Roland asked Jake if he would now show them *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and then read it to them. Jake handed the book around. Both Eddie and Susannah looked at the cover for a long time.

"I had this book when I was a little kid," Eddie said at last. He spoke in the flat tones of utter surety. "Then we moved from Queens to Brooklyn—I wasn't even four years old—and I lost it. But I remember the picture on the cover. And I felt the same way you do, Jake. I didn't like it. I didn't trust it."

Susannah raised her eyes to look at Eddie. "I had it, too—how could I ever forget the little girl with my name . . . although of course it was my middle name back in those days. And I felt the same way about the train. I didn't like it and I didn't trust it." She tapped the front of the book with her finger before passing it on to Roland. "I thought that smile was a great big fake."

Roland gave it only a cursory glance before returning his eyes to Susannah. "Did you lose yours, too?"

"Yes."

"And I'll bet I know when," Eddie said.

Susannah nodded. "I'll bet you do. It was after that man dropped the brick on my head. I had it when we went north to my Aunt Blue's wedding. I had it on the train. I remember, because I kept asking my dad if Charlie the Choo-Choo was pulling us. I didn't want it to be Charlie, because we were supposed to go to Elizabeth, New Jersey, and I thought Charlie might take us anywhere. Didn't he end up pulling folks around a toy village or something like that, Jake?"

"An amusement park."

"Yes, of course it was. There's a picture of him hauling kids around that place at the end, isn't there? They're all smiling and laughing, except I always thought they looked like they were screaming to be let off."

"Yes!" Jake cried. "Yes, that's right! That's *just* right!"

"I thought Charlie might take us to *his* place—wherever he lived—instead of to my aunt's wedding, and never let us go home again."

"You can't go home again," Eddie muttered, and ran his hands nervously through his hair.

"All the time we were on that train I wouldn't let go of the book. I even remember thinking, 'If he tries to steal us, I'll rip out his pages until he quits.' But of course we arrived right where we were supposed to, and on time, too. Daddy even took me up front, so I

could see the engine. It was a diesel, not a steam engine, and I remember that made me happy. Then, after the wedding, that man Mort dropped the brick on me and I was in a coma for a long time. I never saw *Charlie the Choo-Choo* after that. Not until now.” She hesitated, then added: “This could be my copy, for all I know—or Eddie’s.”

“Yeah, and probably is,” Eddie said. His face was pale and solemn . . . and then he grinned like a kid. “ ‘See the TURTLE, ain’t he keen? All things serve the fuckin Beam.’ ”

Roland glanced west. “The sun’s going down. Read the story before we lose the light, Jake.”

Jake turned to the first page, showed them the picture of Engineer Bob in Charlie’s cab, and began: “‘Bob Brooks was an engineer for The Mid-World Railway Company, on the St. Louis to Topeka run . . .’ ”

24

“ ‘. . . AND EVERY Now AND then the children hear him singing his old song in his soft, gruff voice,’ ” Jake finished. He showed them the last picture—the happy children who might actually have been screaming—and then closed the book. The sun had gone down; the sky was purple.

“Well, it’s not a *perfect* fit,” Eddie said, “more like a dream where the water sometimes runs uphill—but it fits well enough to scare *me* silly. This is Mid-World—Charlie’s territory. Only his name over here isn’t Charlie at all. Over here it’s Blaine the Mono.”

Roland was looking at Jake. “What do you think?” he asked. “Should we go around the city? Stay away from this train?”

Jake thought it over, head down, hands working distractedly through Oy’s thick, silky fur. “I’d like to,” he said at last, “but if I’ve got this stuff about *ka* right, I don’t think we’re supposed to.”

Roland nodded. “If it’s *ka*, questions of what we’re supposed to or not supposed to do aren’t even in it; if we tried to go around, we’d find circumstances forcing us back. In such cases it’s better to give in to the inevitable promptly instead of putting it off. What do you think, Eddie?”

Eddie thought as long and as carefully as Jake had done. He didn’t want anything to do with a talking train that ran by itself, and whether you called it Charlie the Choo-Choo or Blaine the Mono, everything Jake had told them and read them suggested that it might be a very nasty piece of work. But they had a tremendous distance to cross, and somewhere, at the end of it, was the thing they had come to find. And with that thought, Eddie was amazed to discover he knew exactly what he thought, and what he wanted. He raised his head and for almost the first time since he had come to this world, he fixed Roland’s faded blue eyes firmly with his hazel ones.

“I want to stand in that field of roses, and I want to see the Tower that stands there. I don’t know what comes next. Mourners please omit flowers, probably, and for all of us. But I don’t care. I want to stand there. I guess I don’t care if Blaine’s the devil and the train runs through hell itself on the way to the Tower. I vote we go.”

Roland nodded and turned to Susannah.

“Well, I didn’t have any dreams about the Dark Tower,” she said, “so I can’t deal with the question on that level—the level of desire, I suppose you’d say. But I’ve come to believe in *ka*, and I’m not so numb that I can’t feel it when someone starts rapping on my head with his knuckles and saying, ‘That way, idiot.’ What about you, Roland? What do you think?”

“I think there’s been enough talk for one day, and it’s time to let it go until tomorrow.”

“What about *Riddle-De-Dum!*—” Jake asked, “do you want to look at that?”

“There’ll be time enough for that another day,” Roland said. “Let’s get some sleep.”

BUT THE GUNSLINGER LAY long awake, and when the rhythmic drumming began again, he got up and walked back to the road. He stood looking toward the bridge and the city. He was every inch the diplomat Susannah had suspected, and he had known the train was the next step on the road they must travel almost from the moment he had heard of it . . . but he'd felt it would be unwise to say so. Eddie in particular hated to feel pushed; when he sensed that was being done, he simply lowered his head, planted his feet, made his silly jokes, and balked like a mule. This time he wanted what Roland wanted, but he was still apt to say day if Roland said night, and night if Roland said day. It was safer to walk softly, and surer to ask instead of telling.

He turned to go back . . . and his hand dropped to his gun as he saw a dark shape standing on the edge of the road, looking at him. He didn't draw, but it was a near thing.

"I wondered if you'd be able to sleep after that little performance," Eddie said. "Guess the answer's no."

"I didn't hear you at all, Eddie. You're learning . . . only this time you almost got a bullet in the gut for your pains."

"You didn't hear me because you have a lot on your mind." Eddie joined him, and even by starlight, Roland saw he hadn't fooled Eddie a bit. His respect for Eddie continued to grow. It was Cuthbert Eddie reminded him of, but in many ways he had already surpassed Cuthbert.

If I underestimate him, Roland thought, I'm apt to come away with a bloody paw. And if let him down, or do something that looks to him like a double-cross, he'll probably try to kill me.

"What's on your mind, Eddie?"

"You. Us. I want you to know something. I guess until tonight I just assumed that you knew already. Now I'm not so sure."

"Tell me, then." He thought again: *How like Cuthbert he is!*

"We're with you because we have to be—that's your goddamned *ka*. But we're also with you because we want to be. I know that's true

of me and Susannah, and I'm pretty sure it's true of Jake, too. You've got a good brain, me old *khef*-mate, but I think you must keep it in a bomb-shelter, because it's bitchin hard to get through sometimes. I want to see it, Roland. Can you dig what I'm telling you? *I want to see the Tower.*" He looked closely into Roland's face, apparently did not see what he'd hoped to find there, and raised his hands in exasperation. "What I mean is I want you to let go of my ears."

"Let go of your ears?"

"Yeah. Because you don't have to drag me anymore. I'm coming of my own accord. *We're* coming of our own accord. If you died in your sleep tonight, we'd bury you and then go on. We probably wouldn't last long, but we'd die in the path of the Beam. *Now* do you understand?"

"Yes. Now I do."

"You say you understand me, and I think you do . . . but do you believe me, as well?"

Of course, he thought. Where else do you have to go, Eddie, in this world that's so strange to you? And what else could you do? You'd make a piss-poor farmer.

But that was mean and unfair, and he knew it. Denigrating free will by confusing it with *ka* was worse than blasphemy; it was tiresome and stupid. "Yes," he said. "I believe you. Upon my soul, I do."

"Then stop behaving like we're a bunch of sheep and you're the shepherd walking along behind us, waving a crook to make sure we don't trot our stupid selves off the road and into a quicksand bog. Open your mind to us. If we're going to die in the city or on that train, I want to die knowing I was more than a marker on your game-board."

Roland felt anger heat his cheeks, but he had never been much good at self-deception. He wasn't angry because Eddie was wrong but because Eddie had seen through him. Roland had watched him come steadily forward, leaving his prison further and further behind—and Susannah, too, for she had also been imprisoned—and yet his heart had never quite accepted the evidence of his senses. His heart apparently wanted to go on seeing them as different, lesser creatures.

Roland drew in deep air. “Gunslinger, I cry your pardon.”

Eddie nodded. “We’re running into a whole hurricane of trouble here . . . I feel it, and I’m scared to death. But it’s not *your* trouble, it’s *our* trouble. Okay?”

“Yes.”

“How bad do you think it can get in the city?”

“I don’t know. I only know that we have to try and protect Jake, because the old auntie said both sides would want him. Some of it depends on how long it takes us to find this train. A lot more depends on what happens when we find it. If we had two more in our party, I’d put Jake in a moving box with guns on every side of him. Since we don’t, we’ll move in column—me first, Jake pushing Susannah behind, and you on drogue.”

“How much trouble, Roland? Make a guess.”

“I can’t.”

“I think you can. You don’t know the city, but you know how the people in your world have been behaving since things started to fall apart. How much trouble?”

Roland turned toward the steady sound of the drumbeats and thought it over. “Maybe not too much. I’d guess the fighting men who are still there are old and demoralized. It may be that you have the straight of it, and some will even offer to help us on our way, as the River Crossing *ka-tet* did. Mayhap we won’t see them at all—they’ll see *us*, see we’re packing iron, and just put their heads down and let us go our way. If that fails, I’m hoping that they’ll scatter like rats if we gun a few.”

“And if they decide to make a fight of it?”

Roland smiled grimly. “Then, Eddie, we’ll *all* remember the faces of our fathers.”

Eddie’s eyes gleamed in the darkness, and Roland was once more reminded forcibly of Cuthbert—Cuthbert who had once said he would believe in ghosts when he could catch one in his teeth, Cuthbert with whom he had once scattered breadcrumbs beneath the hangman’s gibbet.

“Have I answered all your questions?”

“Nope—but I think you played straight with me this time.”

“Then goodnight, Eddie.”

“Goodnight.”

Eddie turned and walked away. Roland watched him go. Now that he was listening, he could hear him . . . but just barely. He started back himself, then turned toward the darkness where the city of Lud was.

He’s what the old woman called a Pube. She said both sides would want him.

You won’t let me drop this time?

No. Not this time, not ever again.

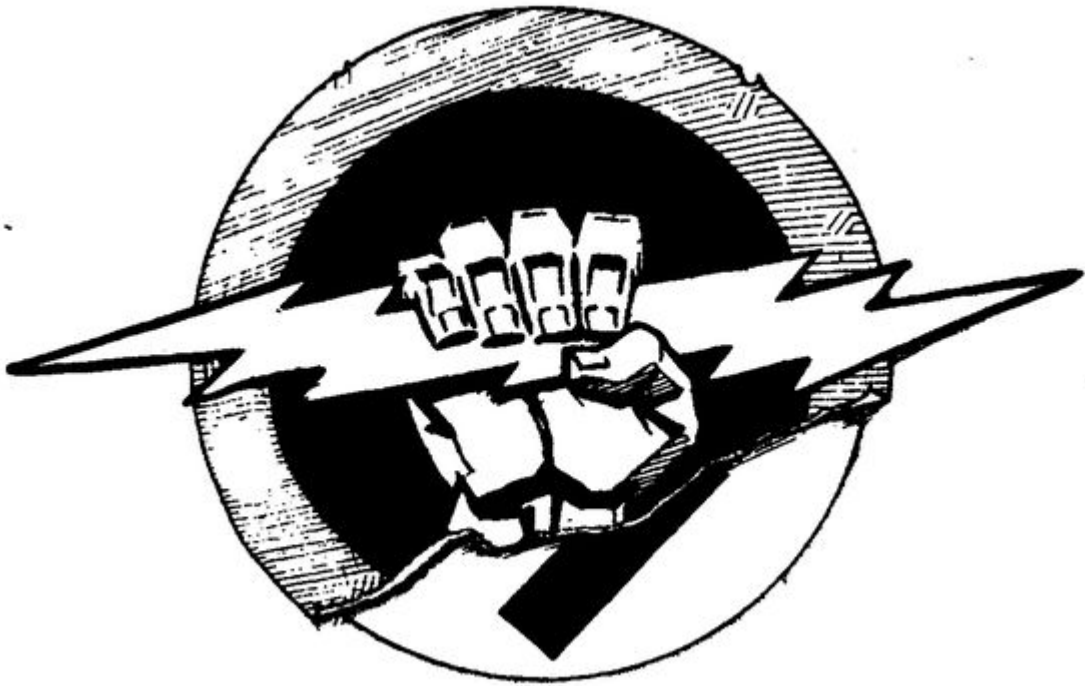
But he knew something none of the others did. Perhaps, after the talk he’d just had with Eddie, he should tell them . . . yet he thought he would keep the knowledge to himself a little while longer.

In the old tongue which had once been his world’s *lingua franca*, most words, like *khef* and *ka*, had many meanings. The word *char*, however—*char* as in Charlie the Choo-Choo—had only one.

Char meant death.

V

BRIDGE AND CITY



1

THEY CAME UPON THE downed airplane three days later.

Jake pointed it out first at midmorning—a flash of light about ten miles away, as if a mirror lay in the grass. As they drew closer, they saw a large dark object at the side of the Great Road.

“It looks like a dead bird,” Roland said. “A big one.”

“That’s no bird,” Eddie said. “That’s an airplane. I’m pretty sure the glare is sunlight bouncing off the canopy.”

An hour later they stood silently at the edge of the road, looking at the ancient wreck. Three plump crows stood on the tattered skin of the fuselage, staring insolently at the newcomers. Jake pried a cobble from the edge of the road and shied it at them. The crows lumbered into the air, cawing indignantly.

One wing had broken off in the crash and lay thirty yards away, a shadow like a diving board in the tall grass. The rest of the plane was pretty much intact. The canopy had cracked in a starburst pattern where the pilot's head had struck it. There was a large, rust-colored stain there.

Oy trotted over to where three rusty propeller blades rose from the grass, sniffed at them, then returned hastily to Jake.

The man in the cockpit was a dust-dry mummy wearing a padded leather vest and a helmet with a spike on top. His lips were gone, his teeth exposed in a final desperate grimace. Fingers which had once been as large as sausages but were now only skin-covered bones clutched the wheel. His skull was caved in where it had hit the canopy, and Roland guessed that the greenish-gray scales which coated the left side of his face were all that remained of his brains. The dead man's head was tilted back, as if he had been sure, even at the moment of his death, that he could regain the sky again. The plane's remaining wing still jutted from the encroaching grass. On it was a fading insignia which depicted a fist holding a thunderbolt.

"Looks like Aunt Talitha was wrong and the old albino man had the right of it, after all," Susannah said in an awed voice. "That must be David Quick, the outlaw prince. Look at the size of him, Roland—they must have had to grease him to get him into the cockpit!"

Roland nodded. The heat and the years had wasted the man in the mechanical bird to no more than a skeleton wrapped in dry hide, but he could still see how broad the shoulders had been, and the misshapen head was massive. "So fell Lord Perth," he said, "and the countryside did shake with that thunder."

Jake looked at him questioningly.

"It's from an old poem. Lord Perth was a giant who went forth to war with a thousand men, but he was still in his own country when a little boy threw a stone at him and hit him in the knee. He stumbled,

the weight of his armor bore him down, and he broke his neck in the fall.”

Jake said, “Like our story of David and Goliath.”

“There was no fire,” Eddie said. “I bet he just ran out of gas and tried a dead-stick landing on the road. He might have been an outlaw and a barbarian, but he had a yard of guts.”

Roland nodded, and looked at Jake. “You all right with this?”

“Yes. If the guy was still, you know, runny, I might not be.” Jake looked from the dead man in the airplane to the city. Lud was much closer and clearer now, and although they could see many broken windows in the towers, he, like Eddie, had not entirely given up hope of finding some sort of help there. “I bet things sort of fell apart in the city once he was gone.”

“I think you’d win that bet,” Roland said.

“You know something?” Jake was studying the plane again. “The people who built that city might have made their own airplanes, but I’m pretty sure this is one of ours. I did a school paper on air combat when I was in the fifth grade, and I think I recognize it. Roland, can I take a closer look?”

Roland nodded. “I’ll go with you.”

Together they walked over to the plane with the high grass swishing at their pants. “Look,” Jake said. “See the machine-gun under the wing? That’s an air-cooled German model, and this is a Focke-Wulf from just before World War II. I’m sure it is. So what’s it doing here?”

“Lots of planes disappear,” Eddie said. “Take the Bermuda Triangle, for instance. That’s a place over one of our oceans, Roland. It’s supposed to be jinxed. Maybe it’s a great big doorway between our worlds one that’s almost always open.” Eddie hunched his shoulders and essayed a bad Rod Serling imitation. “Fasten your seatbelts and prepare for turbulence: you’re flying into . . . the Roland Zone!”

Jake and Roland, who were now standing beneath the plane’s remaining wing, ignored him.

“Boost me up, Roland.”

Roland shook his head. "That wing looks solid, but it's not—this thing has been here a long time, Jake. You'd fall."

"Make a step, then."

Eddie said, "I'll do it, Roland."

Roland studied his diminished right hand for a moment, shrugged, then laced his hands together. "This'll do. He's light."

Jake shook off his moccasin and then stepped lightly into the stirrup Roland had made. Oy began to bark shrilly, though whether in excitement or alarm, Roland couldn't tell.

Jake's chest was now pressing against one of the airplane's rusty flaps, and he was looking right at the fist-and-thunderbolt design. It had peeled up a little from the surface of the wing along one edge. He seized this flap and pulled. It came off the wing so easily that he would have fallen backward if Eddie, standing directly behind him, hadn't steadied him with a hand on the butt.

"I *knew* it," Jake said. There was another symbol beneath the fist-and-thunderbolt, and now it was almost totally revealed. It was a swastika. "I just wanted to see it. You can put me down now."

They started out again, but they could see the tail of the plane every time they looked back that afternoon, looming out of the high grass like Lord Perth's burial monument.

2

IT WAS JAKE'S TURN to make the fire that night. When the wood was laid to the gunslinger's satisfaction, he handed Jake his flint and steel. "Let's see how you do."

Eddie and Susannah were sitting off to one side, their arms linked companionably about each other's waist. Toward the end of the day, Eddie had found a bright yellow flower beside the road and had picked it for her. Tonight Susannah was wearing it in her hair, and every time she looked at Eddie, her lips curved in a small smile and her eyes filled with light. Roland had noted these things, and they

pleased him. Their love was deepening, strengthening. That was good. It would have to be deep and strong indeed if it was to survive the months and years ahead. Jake struck a spark, but it flashed inches away from the kindling.

“Move your flint in closer,” Roland said, “and hold it steady. And don’t *hit* it with the steel, Jake; *scrape* it.”

Jake tried again, and this time the spark flashed directly into the kindling. There was a little tendril of smoke but no fire.

“I don’t think I’m very good at this.”

“You’ll get it. Meantime, think on this. What’s dressed when night falls and undressed when day breaks?”

“Huh?”

Roland moved Jake’s hands even closer to the little pile of kindling. “I guess that one’s not in your book.”

“Oh, it’s a riddle!” Jake struck another spark. This time a small flame glowed in the kindling before dying out. “You know some of those, too?”

Roland nodded. “Not just some—a lot. As a boy, I must have known a thousand. They were part of my studies.”

“Really? Why would anyone study riddles?”

“Vannay, my tutor, said a boy who could answer a riddle was a boy who could think around corners. We had riddling contests every Friday noon, and the boy or girl who won could leave school early.”

“Did you get to leave early often, Roland?” Susannah asked.

He shook his head, smiling a little himself. “I enjoyed riddling, but I was never very good at it. Vannay said it was because I thought too deeply. My father said it was because I had too little imagination. I think they were both right . . . but I think my father had a little more of the truth. I could always haul a gun faster than any of my mates, and shoot straighter, but I’ve never been much good at thinking around corners.”

Susannah, who had watched closely as Roland dealt with the old people of River Crossing, thought the gunslinger was underrating himself, but she said nothing.

“Sometimes, on winter nights, there would be riddling competitions in the great hall. When it was just the youngers, Alain always won.

When the grownups played as well, it was always Cort. He'd forgotten more riddles than the rest of us ever knew, and after the Fair-Day Riddling, Cort always carried home the goose. Riddles have great power, and everyone knows one or two."

"Even me," Eddie said. "For instance, why did the dead baby cross the road?"

"That's dumb, Eddie," Susannah said, but she was smiling.

"Because it was stapled to the chicken!" Eddie yelled, and grinned when Jake burst into laughter, knocking his little pile of kindling apart. "Hyuk, hyuk, hyuk, I got a million of em, folks!"

Roland, however, didn't laugh. He looked, in fact, a trifle offended. "Pardon me for saying so, Eddie, but that *is* rather silly."

"Jesus, Roland, I'm sorry," Eddie said. He was still smiling, but he sounded slightly peeved. "I keep forgetting you got your sense of humor shot off in the Children's Crusade, or whatever it was."

"It's just that I take riddling seriously. I was taught that the ability to solve them indicates a sane and rational mind."

"Well, they're never going to replace the works of Shakespeare or the Quadratic Equation," Eddie said. "I mean, let's not get carried away."

Jake was looking at Roland thoughtfully. "My book said riddling is the oldest game people still play. In our world, I mean. And riddles used to be really serious business, not just jokes. People used to get killed over them."

Roland was looking out into the growing darkness. "Yes. I've seen it happen." He was remembering a Fair-Day Riddling which had ended not with the giving of the prize goose but with a cross-eyed man in a cap of bells dying in the dirt with a dagger in his chest. Cort's dagger. The man had been a wandering singer and acrobat who had attempted to cheat Cort by stealing the judge's pocket-book, in which the answers were kept on small scraps of bark.

"Well, excyooose *me*," Eddie said.

Susannah was looking at Jake. "I forgot all about the book of riddles you carried over. May I look at it now?"

"Sure. It's in my pack. The answers are gone, though. Maybe that's why Mr. Tower gave it to me for fr—" : His shoulder was

suddenly seized, and with painful force.

“*What* was his name?” Roland asked.

“Mr. Tower,” Jake said. “Calvin Tower. Didn’t I tell you that?”

“No.” Roland slowly relaxed his grip on Jake’s shoulder. “But now that I hear it, I suppose I’m not surprised.”

Eddie had opened Jake’s pack and found *Riddle-De-Dum!* He tossed it to Susannah. “You know,” he said, “I always thought that dead-baby joke was pretty good. Tasteless, maybe, but pretty good.”

“I don’t care about taste,” Roland said. “It’s senseless and unsolvable, and that’s what makes it silly. A good riddle is neither.”

“Jesus! You guys *did* take this stuff seriously, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

Jake, meanwhile, had been restacking the kindling and mulling over the riddle which had started the discussion. Now he suddenly smiled. “A fire. That’s the answer, right? Dress it at night, undress it in the morning. If you change ‘dress’ to ‘build,’ it’s simple.”

“That’s it.” Roland returned Jake’s smile, but his eyes were on Susannah, watching as she thumbed through the small, tattered book. He thought, looking at her studious frown and the absent way she readjusted the yellow flower in her hair when it tried to slip free, that she alone might sense that the tattered book of riddles could be as important as *Charlie the Choo-Choo* . . . maybe more important. He looked from her to Eddie and felt a recurrence of his irritation at Eddie’s foolish riddle. The young man bore another resemblance to Cuthbert, this one rather unfortunate: Roland sometimes felt like shaking him until his nose bled and his teeth fell out.

Soft, gunslinger—soft! Cort’s voice, not quite laughing, spoke up in his head, and Roland resolutely put his emotions at arm’s length. It was easier to do that when he remembered that Eddie couldn’t help his occasional forays into nonsense; character was also at least partly formed by *ka*, and Roland knew well that there was more to Eddie than nonsense. Anytime he started to make the mistake of thinking that wasn’t so, he would do well to remember their conversation by the side of the road three nights before, when Eddie had accused him of using them as markers on his own private game-

board. That had angered him . . . but it had been close enough to the truth to shame him, as well.

Blissfully unaware of these long thoughts, Eddie now inquired: “What’s green, weighs a hundred tons, and lives at the bottom of the ocean?”

“I know,” Jake said. “Moby Snot, the Great Green Whale.”

“Idiocy,” Roland muttered.

“Yeah—but that’s what’s supposed to make it funny,” Eddie said. “*Jokes* are supposed to make you think around corners, too. You see . . .” He looked at Roland’s face, laughed, and threw up his hands. “Never mind. I give up. You wouldn’t understand. Not in a million years. Let’s look at the damned book. I’ll even try to take it seriously . . . if we can eat a little supper first, that is.”

“Watch Me,” the gunslinger said with a flicker of a smile.

“Huh?”

“That means you have a deal.”

Jake scraped the steel across the flint. A spark jumped, and this time the kindling caught fire. He sat back contentedly and watched the flames spread, one arm slung around Oy’s neck. He felt well pleased with himself. He had started the evening fire . . . and he had guessed the answer to Roland’s riddle.

3

“I’VE GOT ONE,” JAKE said as they ate their evening burritos.

“Is it a foolish one?” Roland asked.

“Nah. It’s a real one.”

“Then try me with it.”

“Okay. What can run but never walks, has a mouth but never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a head but never weeps?”

“A good one,” Roland said kindly, “but an old one. A river.”

Jake was a little crestfallen. “You really *are* hard to stump.”

Roland tossed the last bite of his burrito to Oy, who accepted it eagerly. “Not me. I’m what Eddie calls an overpush. You should have seen Alain. He collected riddles the way a lady collects fans.”

“That’s pushover, Roland, old buddy,” Eddie said.

“Thank you. Try this one: What lies in bed, and stands in bed?/ First white, then red/ The plumper it gets. The better the old woman likes it?”

Eddie burst out laughing. “A dork!” he yelled. “Crude, Roland! But I like it! I *liyyyke* it!”

Roland shook his head. “Your answer is wrong. A good riddle is sometimes a puzzle in words, like Jake’s about the river, but sometimes it’s more like a magician’s trick, making you look in one direction while it’s going somewhere else.”

“It’s a double,” Jake said. He explained what Aaron Deepneau had said about the Riddle of Samson. Roland nodded.

“Is it a strawberry?” Susannah asked, then answered her own question. “Of course it is. It’s like the fire-riddle. There’s a metaphor hidden inside it. Once you understand the metaphor, you can solve the riddle.”

“I metaphor sex, but she slapped my face and walked away when I asked,” Eddie told them sadly. They all ignored him.

“If you change ‘gets’ to ‘grows,’ ” Susannah went on, “it’s easy. First white, then red. Plumper it grows, the better the old woman likes it.” She looked pleased with herself.

Roland nodded. “The answer I always heard was a wenberry, but I’m sure both answers mean the same thing.”

Eddie picked up *Riddle-De-Dum!* and began flipping through it. “How about this one, Roland? When is a door not a door?”

Roland frowned. “Is it another piece of your stupidity? Because my patience—”

“No. I promised to take it seriously, and I am—I’m *trying*, at least. It’s in this book, and I just happen to know the answer. I heard it when I was a kid.”

Jake, who also knew the answer, winked at Eddie. Eddie winked back, and was amused to see Oy also trying to wink. The bumbler kept shutting both eyes, and eventually gave up.

Roland and Susannah, meanwhile, were puzzling over the question. “It must have something to do with love,” Roland said. “A door, adore. When is adore not adore . . . hmmm . . .”

“Hmmm,” Oy said. His imitation of Roland’s thoughtful tone was perfect. Eddie winked at Jake again. Jake covered his mouth to hide a smile.

“Is the answer false love?” Roland asked at last.

“Nope.”

“Window,” Susannah said suddenly and decisively. “When is a door not a door? When it’s a window.”

“Nope.” Eddie was grinning broadly now, but Jake was struck by how far from the real answer both of them had wandered. There was magic at work here, he thought. Pretty common stuff, as magic went, no flying carpets or disappearing elephants, but magic, all the same. He suddenly saw what they were doing—a simple game of riddles around a campfire—in an entirely new light. It was like playing blind-man’s bluff, only in this game the blindfold was made of words.

“I give up,” Susannah said.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Tell if you know.”

“The answer is a jar. A door is not a door when it’s ajar. Get it?” Eddie watched as comprehension dawned on Roland’s face and asked, a little apprehensively, “/s it a bad one? I was trying to be serious this time, Roland—really.”

“Not bad at all. On the contrary, it’s quite good. Cort would have gotten it, I’m sure . . . probably Alain, too, it’s still very clever. I did what I always used to do in the schoolroom: made it more complicated than it really was and shot right past the answer.”

“There really is something to it, isn’t there?” Eddie mused. Roland nodded, but Eddie didn’t see; he was looking into the depths of the fire, where dozens of roses bloomed and faded in the coals.

Roland said, “One more, and we’ll turn in. Only from tonight on, we’ll stand a watch. You first, Eddie, then Susannah. I’ll take the last one.”

“What about me?” Jake asked.

“Later on you may have to take a turn. Right now it’s more important for you to get your sleep.”

“Do you really think sentry-duty is necessary?” Susannah asked.

“I don’t know. And that’s the best reason of all to do it. Jake, choose us a riddle from your book.”

Eddie handed *Riddle-De-Dum!* to Jake, who thumbed through the pages and finally stopped near the back. “Whoa! This one’s a killer.”

“Let’s hear it,” Eddie said. “If I don’t get it, Suze will. We’re known at Fair-Days all across the land as Eddie Dean and His Riddling Queen.”

“We’re witty tonight, ain’t we?” Susannah said. “Let’s see how witty you are after settin by the side o’ the road until midnight or so, honeychild.”

Jake read: “ ‘There is a thing that nothing is, and yet it has a name. It’s sometimes tall and sometimes short, joins our talks, joins our sport, and plays at every game.’ ”

They discussed this riddle for almost fifteen minutes, but none of them could even hazard an answer.

“Maybe it’ll come to one of us while we’re asleep,” Jake said. “That’s how I got the one about the river.”

“Cheap book, with the answers torn out,” Eddie said. He stood up and wrapped a hide blanket around his shoulders like a cloak.

“Well, it *was* cheap. Mr. Tower gave it to me for free.”

“What am I looking for, Roland?” Eddie asked.

Roland shrugged as he lay down. “I don’t know, but I think you’ll know it if you see it or hear it.”

“Wake me up when you start feeling sleepy,” Susannah said.

“You better believe it.”

4

A GRASSY DITCH RAN along the side of the road and Eddie sat on the far side of it with his blanket around his shoulders. A thin scud of clouds had veiled the sky tonight, dimming the starshow. A strong west wind was blowing. When Eddie turned his face in that direction,

he could clearly smell the buffalo which now owned these plains—a mixed perfume of hot fur and fresh dung. The clarity which had returned to his senses in these last few months was amazing . . . and, at times like these, a little spooky, as well.

Very faintly, he could hear a buffalo calf bawling.

He turned toward the city, and after a while he began to think he might be seeing distant sparks of light there—the electric candles of the twins’ story—but he was well aware that he might be seeing nothing more than his own wishful thinking.

You’re a long way from Forty-second Street, sweetheart—hope is a great thing, no matter what anyone says, but don’t hope so hard you lose sight of that one thought: you’re a long way from Forty-second Street. That’s not New York up ahead, no matter how much you might wish it was. That’s Lud, and it’ll be whatever it is. And if you keep that in mind, maybe you’ll be okay.

He passed his time on watch trying to think of an answer to the last riddle of the evening. The scolding Roland had given him about his dead-baby joke had left him feeling disgruntled, and it would please him to be able to start off the morning by giving them a good answer. Of course they wouldn’t be able to check *any* answer against the back of the book, but he had an idea that with good riddles a good answer was usually self-evident.

Sometimes tall and sometimes short. He thought that was the key and all the rest was probably just misdirection. What was sometimes tall and sometimes short? Pants? No. Pants were sometimes short and sometimes long, but he had never heard of tall pants. Tales? Like pants, it only fit snugly one way. *Drinks* were sometimes both tall and short—

“Order,” he murmured, and thought for a moment that he must have stumbled across the solution—both adjectives fit the noun glove-tight. A tall order was a big job; a short order was something you got on the quick in a restaurant—a hamburger or a tuna melt. Except that tall orders and tuna melts didn’t *join our talk or play at every game.*

He felt a rush of frustration and had to smile at himself, getting all wound up about a harmless word-game in a kid’s book. All the same,

he found it a little easier to believe that people might really kill each other over riddles . . . if the stakes were high enough and cheating was involved.

Let it go—you're doing exactly what Roland said, thinking right past it.

Still, what else did he have to think about?

Then the drumming from the city began again, and he did have something else. There was no build-up; at one moment it wasn't there, and at the next it was going full force, as if a switch had been turned. Eddie walked to the edge of the road, turned toward the city, and listened. After a few moments he looked around to see if the drums had awakened the others, but he was still alone. He turned toward Lud again and cupped his ears forward with the sides of his hands.

Bump . . . ba-bump . . . ba-bump-bumpbumpbump .

Bump . . . ba-bump . . . ba-bump-bumpbumpbump.

Eddie became more and more sure that he had been right about what it was; that he had, at least, solved this riddle.

Bump . . . ba-bump . . . ba-bump-bumpbumpbump.

The idea that he was standing by a deserted road in an almost empty world, standing some one hundred and seventy miles from a city which had been built by some fabulous lost civilization and listening to a rock-and-roll drum-line . . . that was crazy, but was it any crazier than a traffic-light that dinged and dropped a rusty green flag with the word GO printed on it? Any crazier than discovering the wreck of a German plane from the 1930s?

Eddie sang the words to the Z.Z. Top song in a whisper:

*“You need just enough of that sticky stuff
To hold the seam on your fine blue-jeans
I say yeah, yeah . . .”*

They fit the beat perfectly. It was the disco-pulse percussion of “Velcro Fly.” Eddie was sure of it.

A short time later the sound ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and he could hear only the wind, and, more faintly, the Send River, which had a bed but never slept.

THE NEXT FOUR DAYS were uneventful. They walked; they watched the bridge and the city grow larger and define themselves more clearly; they camped; they ate; they riddled; they kept watch turn and turn about (Jake had pestered Roland into letting him keep a short watch in the two hours just before dawn); they slept. The only remarkable incident had to do with the bees.

Around noon on the third day after the discovery of the downed plane, a buzzing sound came to them, growing louder and louder until it dominated the day. At last Roland stopped. "There," he said, and pointed toward a grove of eucalyptus trees.

"It sounds like bees," Susannah said.

Roland's faded blue eyes gleamed. "Could be we'll have a little dessert tonight."

"I don't know how to tell you this, Roland," Eddie said, "but I have this aversion to being stung."

"Don't we all," Roland agreed, "but the day is windless. I think we can smoke them to sleep and steal their comb right out from under them without setting half the world on fire. Let's have a look."

He carried Susannah, who was as eager for the adventure as the gunslinger himself, toward the grove. Eddie and Jake lagged behind, and Oy, apparently having decided that discretion was the better part of valor, remained sitting at the edge of the Great Road, panting like a dog and watching them carefully.

Roland paused at the edge of the trees. "Stay where you are," he told Eddie and Jake, speaking softly. "We're going to have a look. I'll give you a come-on if all's well." He carried Susannah into the dappled shadows of the grove while Eddie and Jake remained in the sunshine, peering after them.

It was cooler in the shade. The buzzing of the bees was a steady, hypnotic drone. "There are too many," Roland murmured. "This is late summer; they should be out working. I don't—"

He caught sight of the hive, bulging tumourously from the hollow of a tree in the center of the clearing, and broke off.

“What’s the matter with them?” Susannah asked in a soft, horrified voice. “Roland, what’s the *matter* with them?”

A bee, as plump and slow-moving as a horsefly in October, droned past her head. Susannah flinched away from it.

Roland motioned for the others to join them. They did, and stood looking at the hive without speaking. The chambers weren’t neat hexagons but random holes of all shapes and sizes; the beehive itself looked queerly melted, as if someone had turned a blowtorch on it. The bees which crawled sluggishly over it were as white as snow.

“No honey tonight,” Roland said. “What we took from yonder comb might taste sweet, but it would poison us as surely as night follows day.”

One of the grotesque white bees lumbered heavily past Jake’s head. He ducked away with an expression of loathing.

“What did it?” Eddie asked. “What did it to them, Roland?”

“The same thing that has emptied this whole land; the thing that’s still causing many of the buffalo to be born as sterile freaks. I’ve heard it called the Old War, the Great Fire, the Cataclysm, and the Great Poisoning. Whatever it was, it was the start of all our troubles and it happened long ago, a thousand years before the great-great-grandfathers of the River Crossing folk were born. The physical effects—the two-headed buffalo and the white bees and such—have grown less as time passes. I have seen this for myself. The other changes are greater, if harder to see, and they are still going on.”

They watched the white bees crawl, dazed and almost completely helpless, about their hive. Some were apparently trying to work; most simply wandered about, butting heads and crawling over one another. Eddie found himself remembering a newsclip he’d seen once. It had shown a crowd of survivors leaving the area where a gas-main had exploded, flattening almost a whole city block in some California town. These bees reminded him of those dazed, shellshocked survivors.

“You had a nuclear war, didn’t you?” he asked—almost accused. “These Great Old Ones you like to talk about . . . they blew their great old asses straight to hell. Didn’t they?”

"I don't *know* what happened. No one knows. The records of those times are lost, and the few stories are confused and conflicting."

"Let's get out of here," Jake said in a trembling voice. "Looking at those things makes me sick."

"I'm with you, sugar," Susannah said.

So they left the bees to their aimless, shattered life in the grove of ancient trees, and there was no honey that night.

6

"WHEN ARE YOU GOING to tell us what you *do* know?" Eddie asked the next morning. The day was bright and blue, but there was a bite in the air; their first autumn in this world was almost upon them.

Roland glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

"I'd like to hear your whole story, from beginning to end, starting with Gilead. How you grew up there and what happened to end it all. I want to know how you found out about the Dark Tower and why you started chasing after it in the first place. I want to know about your first bunch of friends, too. And what happened to them."

Roland removed his hat, arched sweat from his brow, then replaced it. "You have the right to know all those things, I suppose, and I'll tell them to you . . . but not now. It's a very long story. I never expected to tell it to anyone, and I'll only tell it once."

"When?" Eddie persisted.

"When the time is right," Roland said, and with that they had to be content.

7

ROLAND CAME AWAKE THE moment before Jake began to shake him. He sat up and looked around, but Eddie and Susannah were still fast asleep and in the first faint light of morning, he could see nothing amiss.

“What is it?” he asked Jake in a low voice.

“I don’t know. Fighting, maybe. Come and listen.”

Roland threw his blanket aside and followed Jake out to the road. He reckoned they were now only three days’ walk from the place where the Send passed in front of the city, and the bridge—built squarely along the path of the Beam—dominated the horizon. Its pronounced tilt was more clearly visible than ever, and he could see at least a dozen gaps where overstressed cables had snapped like the strings of a lyre.

Tonight the wind blew directly into their faces as they looked toward the city, and the sounds it carried to them were faint but clear.

“/s it fighting?” Jake asked.

Roland nodded and held a finger to his lips.

He heard faint shouts, a crash that sounded like some huge object falling, and—of course—the drums. Now there was another crash, this one more musical: the sound of breaking glass.

“Jeepers,” Jake whispered, and moved closer to the gunslinger.

Then came the sounds which Roland had hoped not to hear: a fast, sandy rattle of small-arms fire followed by a loud hollow bang—clearly an explosion of some kind. It rolled across the flatlands toward them like an invisible bowling ball. After that, the shouts, thuds, and sounds of breakage quickly sank below the level of the drums, and when the drums quit a few minutes later with their usual unsettling suddenness, the city was silent again. But now that silence had an unpleasant waiting quality.

Roland put an arm around Jake’s shoulders. “Still not too late to detour around,” he said.

Jake glanced up at him. “We can’t.”

“Because of the train?”

Jake nodded and singsonged: “Blaine is a pain, but we *have* to take the train. And the city’s the only place where we can get on.”

Roland looked thoughtfully at Jake. “Why do you say we *have* to? Is it *ka*? Because, Jake, you have to understand that you don’t know much about *ka* yet—it’s the sort of subject men study all their lives.”

“I don’t know if it’s *ka* or not, but I do know that we can’t go into the waste lands unless we’re protected, and that means Blaine. Without him we’ll die, like those bees we saw are going to die when winter comes. We have to be protected. Because the waste lands are poison.”

“How do you know these things?”

“I don’t *know!*” Jake said, almost angrily. “I just *do.*”

“All right,” Roland said mildly. He looked toward Lud again. “But we’ll have to be damned careful. It’s unlucky that they still have gunpowder. If they have that, they may have things that are even more powerful. I doubt if they know how to use them, but that only increases the danger. They could get excited and blow us all to hell.”

“Eil,” a grave voice said from behind them. They glanced around and saw Oy sitting by the side of the road, watching them.

8

LATER THAT DAY THEY came to a new road which swept toward them out of the west and joined their own way. Beyond this point, the Great Road—now much wider and split down the middle by a median divider of some polished dark stone—began to sink, and the crumbling concrete embankments which rose on either side of them gave the pilgrims a claustrophobic trapped feeling. They stopped at a point where one of these concrete dikes had been broken open, affording a comforting line of sight to the open land beyond, and ate a light, unsatisfying meal.

“Why do you think they dropped the road down like this, Eddie?” Jake asked. “I mean, someone *did* do it this way on purpose, didn’t they?”

Eddie looked through the break in the concrete, where the flatlands stretched on as smoothly as ever, and nodded.

“Then why?”

“Dunno, champ,” Eddie said, but he thought he did. He glanced at Roland and guessed that he knew, too. The sunken road leading to the bridge had been a defensive measure. Troops placed atop the concrete slopes were in control of two carefully engineered redoubts. If the defenders didn’t like the look of the folks approaching Lud along the Great Road, they could rain destruction down on them.

“You *sure* you don’t know?” Jake asked.

Eddie smiled at Jake and tried to stop imagining that there was some nut up there right now, getting ready to roll a large, rusty bomb down one of those decayed concrete ramps. “No idea,” he said.

Susannah whistled disgustedly between her teeth. “This road’s goin to hell, Roland. I was hoping we were done with that damn harness, but you better get it out again.” He nodded and rummaged in his purse for it without a word.

The condition of the Great Road deteriorated as other, smaller roads joined it like tributaries joining a great river. As they neared the bridge, the cobbles were replaced with a surface Roland thought of as metal and the rest of them thought of as asphalt or hot-top. It had not held up as well as the cobbles. Time had done some damage; the passage of countless horses and wagons since the last repairs were made had done more. The surface had been chewed into a treacherous rubble. Foot travel would be difficult, and the idea of pushing Susannah’s wheelchair over that crumbled surface was ridiculous.

The banks on either side had grown steadily steeper, and now, at their tops, they could see slim, pointed shapes looming against the sky. Roland thought of arrowheads—huge ones, weapons made by a tribe of giants. To his companions, they looked like rockets or guided missiles. Susannah thought of Red-stones fired from Cape Canaveral; Eddie thought about SAMs, some built to be fired from the backs of flatbed trucks, stored all over Europe; Jake thought of ICBMs hiding in reinforced concrete silos under the plains of Kansas and the unpopulated mountains of Nevada, programmed to hit back

at China or the USSR in the event of nuclear armageddon. All of them felt as if they had passed into a dark and woeful zone of shadow, or into a countryside laboring under some old but still powerful curse.

Some hours after they entered this area—Jake called it The Gauntlet—the concrete embankments ended at a place where half a dozen access roads drew together, like the strands of a spiderweb, and here the land opened out again . . . a fact which relieved all of them, although none of them said so out loud. Another traffic-light swung over the junction. This one was more familiar to Eddie, Susannah, and Jake; it had once had lenses on its four faces, although the glass had been broken out long ago.

“I’ll bet this road was the eighth wonder of the world, once upon a time,” Susannah said, “and look at it now. It’s a minefield.”

“Old ways are sometimes the best ways,” Roland agreed.

Eddie was pointing west. “Look.”

Now that the high concrete barriers were gone, they could see exactly what old Si had described to them over cups of bitter coffee in River Crossing. “One track only,” he had said, “set up high on a colyum of man-made stone, such as the Old Ones used to make their streets and walls.” The track raced toward them out of the west in a slim, straight line, then flowed across the Send and into the city on a narrow golden trestle. It was a simple, elegant construction—and the only one they had seen so far which was totally without rust—but it was badly marred, all the same. Halfway across, a large piece of the trestle had fallen into the rushing river below. What remained were two long, jutting piers that pointed at each other like accusing fingers. Jutting out of the water below the hole was a streamlined tube of metal. Once it had been bright blue, but now the color had been dimmed by spreading scales of rust. It looked very small from this distance.

“So much for Blaine,” Eddie said. “No wonder they stopped hearing it. The supports finally gave way while it was crossing the river and it fell in the drink. It must have been decelerating when it happened, or it would have carried straight across and all we’d see

would be a big hole like a bomb-crater in the far bank. Well, it was a great idea while it lasted.”

“Mercy said there was another one,” Susannah reminded him.

“Yeah. She also said she hadn’t heard it in seven or eight years, and Aunt Talitha said it was more like ten. What do you think, Jake . . . Jake? Earth to Jake, Earth to Jake, come in, little buddy.”

Jake, who had been staring intently at the remains of the train in the river, only shrugged.

“You’re a big help, Jake,” Eddie said. “Valuable input—that’s why I love you. Why we *all* love you.”

Jake paid no attention. He knew what he was seeing, and it wasn’t Blaine. The remains of the mono sticking out of the river were blue. In his dream, Blaine had been the dusty, sugary pink of the bubble-gum you got with baseball trading cards.

Roland, meanwhile, had cinched the straps of Susannah’s carry-harness across his chest. “Eddie, boost your lady into this contraption. It’s time we moved on and saw for ourselves.”

Jake now shifted his gaze, looking nervously toward the bridge looming ahead. He could hear a high, ghostly humming noise in the distance—the sound of the wind playing in the decayed steel hangers which connected the overhead cables to the concrete deck below.

“Do you think it’ll be safe to cross?” Jake asked.

“We’ll find out tomorrow,” Roland replied.

9

THE NEXT MORNING, ROLAND’S band of travellers stood at the end of the long, rusty bridge, gazing across at Lud. Eddie’s dreams of wise old elves who had preserved a working technology on which the pilgrims could draw were disappearing. Now that they were this close, he could see holes in the city-scape where whole blocks of buildings appeared to have been either burned or blasted. The

skyline reminded him of a diseased jaw from which many teeth have already fallen.

It was true that most of the buildings were still standing, but they had a dreary, disused look that filled Eddie with an uncharacteristic gloom, and the bridge between the travellers and that shuttered maze of steel and concrete looked anything but solid and eternal. The vertical hangers on the left sagged slackly; the ones remaining on the right almost screamed with tension. The deck had been constructed of hollow concrete boxes shaped like trapezoids. Some of these had buckled upward, displaying empty black interiors; others had slipped askew. Many of these latter had merely cracked, but others were badly broken, leaving gaps big enough to drop trucks—*big* trucks—into. In places where the bottoms of the box-sections as well as the tops had shattered, they could see the muddy riverbank and the gray-green water of the Send beyond it. Eddie put the distance between the deck and the water as three hundred feet at the center of the bridge. And that was probably a conservative estimate.

Eddie peered at the huge concrete caissons to which the main cables were anchored and thought the one on the right side of the bridge looked as if it had been pulled partway out of the earth. He decided he might do well not to mention this fact to the others; it was bad enough that the bridge was swaying slowly but perceptibly back and forth. Just looking at it made him feel seasick. “Well?” he asked Roland. “What do you think?”

Roland pointed to the right side of the bridge. Here was a canted walkway about five feet wide. It had been constructed atop a series of smaller concrete boxes and was, in effect, a separate deck. This segmented deck appeared to be supported by an undercable—or perhaps it was a thick steel rod—anchored to the main support cables by huge bow-clamps. Eddie inspected the closest one with the avid interest of a man who may soon be entrusting his life to the object he is studying. The bow-clamp appeared rusty but still sound. The words LaMERK FOUNDRY had been stamped into its metal. Eddie was fascinated to realize he no longer knew if the words were in the High Speech or in English.

“I think we can use that,” Roland said. “There’s only one bad place. Do you see it?”

“Yeah—it’s kind of hard to miss.”

The bridge, which had to be at least three quarters of a mile long, might not have had any proper maintenance for over a thousand years, but Roland guessed that the real destruction might have been going on for only the last fifty or so. As the hangers on the right snapped, the bridge had listed farther and farther to the left. The greatest twist had occurred in the center of the bridge, between the two four-hundred-foot cable-towers. At the place where the pressure of the twist was the greatest, a gaping, eye-shaped hole ran across the deck. The break in the walkway was narrower, but even so, at least two adjoining concrete box-sections had fallen into the Send, leaving a gap at least twenty or thirty feet wide. Where these boxes had been, they could clearly see the rusty steel rod or cable which supported the walkway. They would have to use it to get across the gap.

“I think we can cross,” Roland said, calmly pointing. “The gap is inconvenient, but the side-rail is still there, so we’ll have something to hold onto.”

Eddie nodded, but he could feel his heart pounding hard. The exposed walkway support looked like a big pipe made of jointed steel, and was probably four feet across at the top. In his mind’s eye he could see how they would have to edge across, feet on the broad, slightly curved back of the support, hands clutching the rail, while the bridge swayed slowly like a ship in a mild swell.

“Jesus,” he said. He tried to spit, but nothing came out. His mouth was too dry. “You sure, Roland?”

“So far as I can see, it’s the only way.” Roland pointed downriver and Eddie saw a second bridge. This one had fallen into the Send long ago. The remains stuck out of the water in a rusted tangle of ancient steel.

“What about you, Jake?” Susannah asked.

“Hey, no problem,” Jake said at once. He was actually smiling.

“I hate you, kid,” Eddie said.

Roland was looking at Eddie with some concern. "If you feel you can't do it, say so now. Don't get halfway across and then freeze up."

Eddie looked along the twisted surface of the bridge for a long time, then nodded. "I guess I can handle it. Heights have never been my favorite thing, but I'll manage."

"Good." Roland surveyed them. "Soonest begun, soonest done. I'll go first, with Susannah. Then Jake, and Eddie's drogue. Can you handle the wheelchair?"

"Hey, no problem," Eddie said giddily.

"Let's go, then."

10

As SOON AS HE stepped onto the walkway, fear filled up Eddie's hollow places like cold water and he began to wonder if he hadn't made a very dangerous mistake. From solid ground, the bridge seemed to be swaying only a little, but once he was actually on it, he felt as if he were standing on the pendulum of the world's biggest grandfather clock. The movement was very slow, but it was regular, and the length of the swings was much longer than he had anticipated. The walkway's surface was badly cracked and canted at least ten degrees to the left. His feet gritted in loose piles of powdery concrete, and the low squealing sound of the box-segments grinding together was constant. Beyond the bridge, the city skyline tilted slowly back and forth like the artificial horizon of the world's slowest-moving video game.

Overhead, the wind hummed constantly in the taut hangers. Below, the ground fell away sharply to the muddy northwest bank of the river. He was thirty feet up . . . then sixty . . . then a hundred and ten. Soon he would be over the water. The wheelchair banged against his left leg with every step.

Something furry brushed between his feet and he clutched madly for the rusty handrail with his right hand, barely holding in a scream.

Oy went trotting past him with a brief upward glance, as if to say *Excuse me—just passing.*

“Fucking dumb animal,” Eddie said through gritted teeth.

He discovered that, although he didn’t like looking down, he had an even greater aversion to looking at the hangers which were still managing to hold the deck and the overhead cables together. They were sleeved with rust and Eddie could see snarls of metal thread poking out of most—these snarls looked like metallic puffs of cotton. He knew from his Uncle Reg, who had worked on both the George Washington and Triborough bridges as a painter, that the hangers and overhead cables were “spun” from thousands of steel threads. On this bridge, the spin was finally letting go. The hangers were quite literally becoming unravelled, and as they did, the threads were snapping, one interwoven strand at a time.

It’s held this long, it’ll hold a little longer. You think this thing’s going to fall into the river just because you’re crossing it? Don’t flatter yourself.

He wasn’t comforted, however. For all Eddie knew, they might be the first people to attempt the crossing in *decades*. And the bridge, after all, would have to collapse *sometime*, and from the look of things, it was going to be soon. Their combined weight might be the straw that broke the camel’s back.

His moccasin struck a chunk of concrete and Eddie watched, sickened but helpless to look away, as the chunk fell down and down and down, turning over as it went. There was a small—*very* small-splash when it hit the river. The freshening wind gusted and stuck his shirt against his sweaty skin. The bridge groaned and swayed. Eddie tried to remove his hands from the side-rail, but they seemed frozen to the pitted metal in a deathgrip.

He closed his eyes for a moment. *You’re not going to freeze. You’re not. I . . . I forbid it. If you need something to look at, make it long tall and ugly.* Eddie opened his eyes again, fixed them on the gunslinger, forced his hands to open, and began to move forward again.

ROLAND REACHED THE GAP and looked back. Jake was five feet behind him. Oy was at his heels. The bumbler was crouched down with his neck stretched forward. The wind was much stronger over the river-cut, and Roland could see it rippling Oy's silky fur. Eddie was about twenty-five feet behind Jake. His face was tightly drawn, but he was still shuffling grimly along with Susannah's collapsed wheelchair in his left hand. His right was clutching the rail like grim death.

"Susannah?"

"Yes," she responded at once. "Fine."

"Jake?"

Jake looked up. He was still grinning, and the gunslinger saw there was going to be no problem there. The boy was having the time of his life. His hair blew back from his finely made brow in waves, and his eyes sparkled. He jerked one thumb up. Roland smiled and returned the gesture.

"Eddie?"

"Don't worry about me."

Eddie appeared to be looking at Roland, but the gunslinger decided he was really looking past him, at the windowless brick buildings which crowded the riverbank at the far end of the bridge. That was all right; given his obvious fear of heights, it was probably the best thing he could do to keep his head.

"All right, I won't," Roland murmured. "We're going to cross the hole now, Susannah. Sit easy. No quick movements. Understand?"

"Yes."

"If you want to adjust your position, do it now."

"I'm fine, Roland," she said calmly. "I just hope Eddie will be all right."

"Eddie's a gunslinger now. He'll behave like one."

Roland turned to the right, so he was facing directly downriver, and grasped the handrail. Then he began to edge out across the hole, shuffling his boots along the rusty cable.

12

JAKE WAITED UNTIL ROLAND and Susannah were part of the way across the gap and then started himself. The wind gusted and the bridge swayed back and forth, but he felt no alarm at all. He was, in fact, totally buzzed. Unlike Eddie, he'd never had any fear of heights; he liked being up here where he could see the river spread out like a steel ribbon under a sky which was beginning to cloud over.

Halfway across the hole in the bridge (Roland and Susannah had reached the place where the uneven walkway resumed and were watching the others), Jake looked back and his heart sank. They had forgotten one member of the party when they were discussing how to cross. Oy was crouched, frozen and clearly terrified, on the far side of the hole in the walkway. He was sniffing at the place where the concrete ended and the rusty, curved support took over.

"Come on, Oy!" Jake called.

"Oy!" the bumbler called back, and the tremble in his hoarse voice was almost human. He stretched his long neck forward toward Jake but didn't move. His gold-ringed eyes were huge and dismayed.

Another gust of wind struck the bridge, making it sway and squall. Something twanged beside Jake's head—the sound of a guitar string which has been tightened until it snaps. A steel thread had popped out of the nearest vertical hanger, almost scratching his cheek. Ten feet away, Oy crouched miserably with his eyes fixed on Jake.

"Come on!" Roland shouted. "Wind's freshening! Come on, Jake!"

"Not without Oy!"

Jake began to shuffle back the way he had come. Before he had gone more than two steps, Oy stepped gingerly onto the support rod. The claws at the ends of his stiffly braced legs scratched at the rounded metal surface. Eddie stood behind the bumbler now, feeling helpless and scared to death.

"That's it, Oy!" Jake encouraged. "Come to me!"

"Oy-Oy! Ake-Ake!" the bumbler cried, and trotted rapidly along the rod. He had almost reached Jake when the traitorous wind gusted again. The bridge swung. Oy's claws scratched madly at the support

rod for purchase, but there was none. His hindquarters slued off the edge and into space. He tried to cling with his forepaws, but there was nothing to cling to. His rear legs ran wildly in midair.

Jake let go of the rail and dived for him, aware of nothing but Oy's gold-ringed eyes.

"No, Jake!" Roland and Eddie bellowed together, each from his own side of the gap, each too far away to do anything but watch.

Jake hit the cable on his chest and belly. His pack bounced against his shoulderblades and he heard his teeth click together in his head with the sound of a cueball breaking a tight rack. The wind gusted again. He went with it, looping his right hand around the support rod and reaching for Oy with his left as he swayed out into space. The bumbler began to fall, and clamped his jaws on Jake's reaching hand as he did. The pain was immediate and excruciating. Jake screamed but held on, head down, right arm clasping the rod, knees pressing hard against its wretchedly smooth surface. Oy dangled from his left hand like a circus acrobat, staring up with his gold-ringed eyes, and Jake could now see his own blood flowing along the sides of the bumbler's head in thin streams.

Then the wind gusted again and Jake began to slip outward.

13

EDDIE'S FEAR LEFT HIM. In, its place came that strange yet welcome coldness. He dropped Susannah's wheelchair to the cracked cement with a clatter and raced nimbly out along the support cable, not even bothering with the handrail. Jake hung head-down over the gap with Oy swinging at the end of his left hand like a furry pendulum. And the boy's right hand was slipping.

Eddie opened his legs and seat-dropped to a sitting position. His undefended balls smashed painfully up into his crotch, but for the moment even this exquisite pain was news from a distant country. He seized Jake by the hair with one hand and one strap of his pack

with the other. He felt himself beginning to tilt outward, and for a nightmarish moment he thought all three of them were going to go over in a daisy-chain.

He let go of Jake's hair and tightened his grip on the packstrap, praying the kid hadn't bought the pack at one of the cheap discount outlets. He flailed above his head for the handrail with his free hand. After an interminable moment in which their combined outward slide continued, he found it and seized it.

"ROLAND!" he bawled. *"I COULD USE A LITTLE HELP HERE!"*

But Roland was already there, with Susannah still perched on his back. When he bent, she locked her arms around his neck so she wouldn't drop headfirst from the sling. The gunslinger wrapped an arm around Jake's chest and pulled him up. When his feet were on the support rod again, Jake put his right arm around Oy's trembling body. His left hand was an agony of fire and ice.

"Let go, Oy," he gasped. "You can let go now we're—safe."

For a terrible moment he didn't think the billy-bumbler would. Then, slowly, Oy's jaws relaxed and Jake was able to pull his hand free. It was covered with blood and dotted with a ring of dark holes.

"Oy," the bumbler said feebly, and Eddie saw with wonder that the animal's strange eyes were full of tears. He stretched his neck and licked Jake's face with his bloody tongue.

"That's okay," Jake said, pressing his face into the warm fur. He was crying himself, his face a mask of shock and pain. "Don't worry, that's okay. You couldn't help it and I don't mind."

Eddie was getting slowly to his feet. His face was dirty gray, and he felt as if someone had driven a bowling ball into his guts. His left hand stole slowly to his crotch and investigated the damage there.

"Cheap fucking vasectomy," he said hoarsely.

"Are you going to faint, Eddie?" Roland asked. A fresh gust of wind flipped his hat from his head and into Susannah's face. She grabbed it and jammed it down all the way to his ears, giving Roland the look of a half-crazed hillbilly.

"No," Eddie said. "I almost wish I could, but—"

"Take a look at Jake," Susannah said. "He's really bleeding."

"I'm fine," Jake said, and tried to hide his hand. Roland took it gently in his own hands before he could. Jake had sustained at least a dozen puncture-wounds in the back of his hand, his palm, and his fingers. Most of them were deep. It would be impossible to tell if bones had been broken or tendons severed until Jake tried to flex the hand, and this wasn't the time or place for such experiments.

Roland looked at Oy. The billy-bumbler looked back, his expressive eyes sad and frightened. He had made no effort to lick Jake's blood from his chops, although it would have been the most natural thing in the world for him to have done so.

"Leave him alone," Jake said, and wrapped the encircling arm more tightly about Oy's body. "It wasn't his fault. It was my fault for forgetting him. The wind blew him off."

"I'm not going to hurt him," Roland said. He was positive the billy-bumbler wasn't rabid, but he still did not intend for Oy to taste any more of Jake's blood than he already had. As for any other diseases Oy might be carrying in his blood . . . well, *ka* would decide, as, in the end, it always did. Roland pulled his neckerchief free and wiped Oy's lips and muzzle. "There," he said. "Good fellow. Good boy."

"Oy," the billy-bumbler said feebly, and Susannah, who was watching over Roland's shoulder, could have sworn she heard gratitude in that voice.

Another gust of wind struck them. The weather was turning dirty, and fast. "Eddie, we have to get off the bridge. Can you walk?"

"No, massa; I'sa gwinter shuffle." The pain in his groin and the pit of his stomach was still bad, but not quite so bad as it had been a minute ago.

"All right. Let's move. Fast as we can."

Roland turned, began to take a step, and stopped. A man was now standing on the far side of the gap, watching them expressionlessly.

The newcomer had approached while their attention was focused on Jake and Oy. A crossbow was slung across his back. He wore a bright yellow scarf around his head; the ends streamed out like banners in the freshening wind. Gold hoops with crosses in their centers dangled from his ears. One eye was covered with a white

silk patch. His face was blotched with purple sores, some of them open and festering. He might have been thirty, forty, or sixty. He held one hand high over his head. In it was something Roland could not make out, except that its shape was too regular to be a stone.

Behind this apparition, the city loomed with a kind of weird clarity in the darkening day. As Eddie looked past the huddles of brick buildings on the other shore—warehouses long since scooped empty by looters, he had no doubt—and into those shadowy canyons and stone mazes, he understood for the first time how terribly mistaken, how terribly foolish, his dreams of hope and help had been. Now he saw the shattered facades and broken roofs; now he saw the shaggy birds' nests on cornices and in glassless, gaping windows; now he allowed himself to actually *smell* the city, and that odor was not of fabulous spices and savory foods of the sort his mother had sometimes brought home from Zabar's but rather the stink of a mattress that has caught fire, smouldered awhile, and then been put out with sewer-water. He suddenly understood Lud, understood it completely. The grinning pirate who had appeared while their attention was elsewhere was probably as close to a wise old elf as this broken, dying place could provide.

Roland pulled his revolver.

"Put it away, my cully," the man in the yellow scarf said in an accent so thick that the sense of his words was almost lost. "Put it away, my dear heart. Ye're a fierce trim, ay, that's clear, but this time you're outmatched."

14

THE NEWCOMER'S PANTS WERE patched green velvet, and as he stood on the edge of the hole in the bridge, he looked like a buccaneer at the end of his days of plunder: sick, ragged, and still dangerous.

“Suppose I choose not to?” Roland asked. “Suppose I choose to simply put a bullet through your scrofulous head?”

“Then I’ll get to hell just enough ahead of ye to hold the door,” the man in the yellow scarf said, and chuckled chummily. He wiggled the hand he held in the air. “It’s all the same jolly fakement to me, one way or t’other.”

Roland guessed that was the truth. The man looked as if he might have a year to live at most . . . and the last few months of that year would probably be very unpleasant. The oozing sores on his face had nothing to do with radiation; unless Roland was badly deceived, this man was in the late stages of what the doctors called mandrus and everyone else called whore’s blossoms. Facing a dangerous man was always a bad business, but at least one could calculate the odds in such an encounter. When you were facing the dead, however, everything changed.

“Do yer know what I’ve got here, my dear ones?” the pirate asked. “Do yer ken whatcher old friend Gasher just happens to have laid his hands on? It’s a grenado, something pretty the Old Folks left behind, and I’ve already tipped its cap—for to wear one’s cap before the introductin’ is complete would be wery bad manners, so it would!”

He cackled happily for a moment, and then his face grew still and grave once more. All humor left it, as if a switch had been turned somewhere in his degenerating brains.

“My finger is all that’s holdin the pin now, dearie. If you shoot me, there’s going to be a wery big bang. You and the cunt-monkey on yer back will be vaporized. The squint, too, I reckon. The young buck standing behind you and pointing that toy pistol in my face might live, but only until he hits the water . . . and hit it he would, because this bridge has been hangin by a thread these last forty year, and all it’d take to finish it is one little push. So do ye want to put away your iron, or shall we all toddle off to hell on the same handcart?”

Roland briefly considered trying to shoot the object Gasher called a grenado out of his hand, saw how tightly the man was gripping it, and holstered his gun.

“Ah, good!” Gasher cried, cheerful once more. “I knew ye was a trig cove, just lookin at yer! Oh yes! So I did!”

“What do you want?” Roland asked, although he thought he already knew this, too.

Gasher raised his free hand and pointed a dirty finger at Jake. “The squint. Gimme the squint and the rest of you go free.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Susannah said at once.

“Why not?” the pirate cackled. “Gimme a chunk of mirror and I’ll rip it right off and stick it right in—why not, for all the good it’s a-doin me these days? Why, I can’t even run water through it without it burns me all the way to the top of my gullywash!” His eyes, which were a strange calm shade of gray, never left Roland’s face. “What do *you* say, my good old mate?”

“What happens to the rest of us if I hand over the boy?”

“Why. you go on yer way without no trouble from us!” the man in the yellow headscarf returned promptly. “You have the Tick-Tock Man’s word on that. It comes from his lips to my lips to your ears, so it does, and Tick-Tock’s a trig cove, too, what don’t break his word once it’s been given. I can’t say ary word nor watch about any Pubies you might run into, but you’ll have no trouble with the Tick-Tock Man’s Grays. ”

“What the fuck are you *saying*, Roland?” Eddie roared. “You’re not really thinking about doing it, are you?”

Roland didn’t look down at Jake, and his lips didn’t move as he murmured: “I’ll keep my promise.”

“Yes—I know you will.” Then Jake raised his voice and said: “Put the gun away, Eddie. I’ll decide.”

“Jake, you’re out of your *mind!*”

The pirate cackled cheerily. “Not at all, cully! *You’re* the one who’s lost his mind if you disbelieve me. At the wery least, he’ll be safe from the drums with us, won’t he? And just think—if I didn’t mean what I say, I would have told you to toss your guns overside first thing! Easiest thing in the world! But did I? Nay!”

Susannah had heard the exchange between Jake and Roland. She had also had a chance to realize how bleak their options were as things now stood. “Put it away, Eddie.”

“How do we know you won’t toss the grenade at us once you have the kid?” Eddie called.

“I’ll shoot it out of the air if he tries,” Roland said. “I can do it, and he *knows* I can do it.”

“Mayhap I do. You’ve got a cosy look about you, indeed ye do.”

“If he’s telling the truth,” Roland went on, “he’d be burned even if I missed his toy, because the bridge would collapse and we’d all go down. together.”

“Wery clever, my dear old son!” Gasher said. “You *are* a cosy one, ain’t you?” He cawed laughter, then grew serious and confiding. “The talking’s done, old mate of mine. Decide. Will you give me the boy, or do we all march to the end of the path together?”

Before Roland could say a word, Jake had slipped past him on the support rod. He still held Oy curled in his right arm. He held his bloody left hand stiffly out in front of him.

“Jake, *no!*” Eddie shouted desperately.

“I’ll come for you,” Roland said in the same low voice.

“I know,” Jake repeated. The wind gusted again. The bridge swayed and groaned. The Send was now speckled with whitecaps, and water boiled whitely around the wreck of the blue mono jutting from the river on the upstream side.

“Ay, my cully!” Gasher crooned. His lips spread wide, revealing a few remaining teeth that jutted from his white gums like decayed tombstones. “Ay, my fine young squint! Just keep coming.”

“Roland, he could be bluffing!” Eddie yelled. “That thing could be a dud!”

The gunslinger made no reply.

As Jake neared the other side of the hole in the walkway, Oy bared his own teeth and began to snarl at Gasher.

“Toss that talking bag of guts overside,” Gasher said.

“Fuck you,” Jake replied in the same calm voice.

The pirate looked surprised for a moment, then nodded. “Tender of him, are you? Wery well.” He took two steps backward. “Put him down the second you reach the concrete, then. And if he runs at me, I promise to kick his brains right out his tender little asshole.”

“Asshole,” Oy said through his bared teeth.

“Shut up, Oy,” Jake muttered. He reached the concrete just as the strongest gust of wind yet struck the bridge. This time the twanging

sound of parting cable-strands seemed to come from everywhere. Jake glanced back and saw Roland and Eddie clinging to the rail. Susannah was watching him from over Roland's shoulder, her tight cap of curls rippling and shaking in the wind. Jake raised his hand to them. Roland raised his in return.

You won't let me drop this time? he had asked. *No—not ever again*, Roland had replied. Jake believed him . . . but he was very much afraid of what might happen before Roland arrived. He put Oy down. Gasher rushed forward the moment he did, kicking out at the small animal. Oy skittered aside, avoiding the booted foot.

“Run!” Jake shouted. Oy did, shooting past them and loping toward the Lud end of the bridge with his head down, swerving to avoid the holes and leaping across the cracks in the pavement. He didn't look back. A moment later Gasher had his arm around Jake's neck. He stank of dirt and decaying flesh, the two odors combining to create a single deep stench, crusty and thick. It made Jake's gorge rise.

He bumped his crotch into Jake's buttocks. “Maybe I ain't quite s'far gone's I thought. Don't they say youth's the wine what makes old men drunk? We'll have us a time, won't we, my sweet little squint? Ay, we'll have a time such as will make the angels sing.”

Oh Jesus, Jake thought.

Gasher raised his voice again. “We're leaving now, my hardcase friend—we have grand things to do and grand people to see, so we do, but I keep my word. As for you, you'll stand right where you are for a good fifteen minutes, if you're wise. If I see you start to move, we're all going to ride the handsome. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Roland said.

“Do you believe me when I say I have nothing to lose?”

“Yes.”

“That's wery well, then. Move, boy! Hup!”

Gasher's hold tightened on Jake's throat until he could hardly breathe. At the same time he was pulled backward. They retreated that way, facing the gap where Roland stood with Susannah on his back and Eddie just behind him, still holding the Ruger which Gasher

had called a toy pistol. Jake could feel Gasher's breath puffing against his ear in hot little blurts. Worse, he could smell it.

"Don't try a thing," Gasher whispered, "or I'll rip off yer sweetmeats and stuff em up your bung. And it would be sad to lose em before you ever got a chance to use em, wouldn't it? Wery sad indeed."

They reached the end of the bridge. Jake stiffened, believing Gasher would throw the grenade anyway, but he didn't . . . at least not immediately. He backed Jake through a narrow alley between two small cubicles which had probably served as tollbooths, once upon a time. Beyond them, the brick warehouses loomed like prison cellblocks.

"Now, cully, I'm going to let go of your neck, or how would'je ever have wind to run with? But I'll be holdin yer arm, and if ye don't run like the wind, I promise I'll rip it right off and use it for a club to beat you with. Do you understand?"

Jake nodded, and suddenly the terrible, stifling pressure was gone from his windpipe. As soon as it was, he became aware of his hand again—it felt hot and swollen and full of fire. Then Gasher seized his bicep with fingers like bands of iron, and he forgot all about his hand.

"Toodle-doo!" Gasher called in a grotesquely cheery falsetto. He wagged the grenado at the others. "Bye-bye, dears!" Then he growled to Jake: "Now *run*, you whoring little squint! *Run!*"

Jake was first whirled and then yanked into a run. The two of them went flying down a curved ramp to street level. Jake's first confused thought was that this was what the East River Drive would look like two or three hundred years after some weird brain-plague had killed all the sane people in the world.

The ancient, rusty hulks of what had once surely been automobiles stood at intervals along both curbs. Most were bubble-shaped roadsters that looked like no cars Jake had ever seen before (except, maybe, for the ones the white-gloved creations of Walt Disney drove in the comic books), but among them he saw an old Volkswagen Beetle, a car that might have been a Chevrolet Corvair, and something he believed was a Model A Ford. There were no tires on any of these eerie hulks; they either had been stolen or had rotted away to dust long since. And all the glass had been broken, as if the

remaining denizens of this city abhorred anything which might show them their own reflections, even accidentally.

Beneath and between the abandoned cars, the gutters were filled with drifts of unidentifiable metal junk and bright glints of glass. Trees had been planted at intervals along the sidewalks in some long-gone, happier time, but they were now so emphatically dead that they looked like stark metal sculptures against the cloudy sky. Some of the warehouses had either been bombed or had collapsed on their own, and beyond the jumbled heaps of bricks which was all that remained of them Jake could see the river and the rusty, sagging underpinnings of the Send Bridge. That smell of wet decay—a smell that seemed almost to snarl in the nose—was stronger than ever.

The street headed due east, diverging from the path of the Beam, and Jake could see it became more and more choked with rubble and rickrack as it went. Six or seven blocks down it appeared to be entirely plugged, but it was in this direction that Gasher pulled him. At first he kept up, but Gasher was setting a fearsome pace. Jake began to pant and fell a step behind. Gasher almost jerked him off his feet as he dragged Jake toward the barrier of junk and concrete and rusty steel beams which lay ahead. The plug—which looked like a deliberate construction to Jake—lay between two broad buildings with dusty marble facades. In front of the one on the left was a statue Jake recognized at once: it was the woman called Blind Justice, and that almost surely made the building she guarded a courthouse. But he only had a moment to look; Gasher was dragging him relentlessly toward the barricade, and he wasn't slowing down.

He'll kill us if he tries to take us through there! Jake thought, but Gasher—who ran like the wind in spite of the disease which advertised itself on his face—simply buried his fingers deeper in Jake's upper arm and swept him along. And now Jake saw a narrow alley in the not-quite-haphazard pile of concrete, splintered furniture, rusted plumbing fixtures, and chunks of trucks and automobiles. He suddenly understood. This maze would hold Roland up for hours . . . but it was Gasher's back yard, and he knew *exactly* where he was going.

The small dark opening to the alley was on the left side of the tottery pile of junk. As they reached it, Gasher tossed the green object back over his shoulder. "Better duck, dearie!" he cried, and voiced a series of shrill, hysterical giggles. A moment later a huge, crumpling explosion shook the street. One of the bubble-shaped cars jumped twenty feet into the air and then came down on its roof. A hail of bricks whistled over Jake's head, and something thumped him hard on the left shoulder-blade. He stumbled and would have fallen if Gasher hadn't yanked him upright and pulled him into the narrow opening in the rubble. Once they were in the passageway which lay beyond, gloomy shadows reached out eagerly and enfolded them.

When they were gone, a small, furry shape crept out from behind a concrete boulder. It was Oy. He stood at the mouth of the passage for a moment, neck stretched forward, eyes gleaming. Then he followed after, nose low to the ground and sniffing carefully.

15

"COME ON," ROLAND SAID as soon as Gasher had turned tail.

"How could you do it?" Eddie asked. "How could you let that freak have him?"

"Because I had no choice. Bring the wheelchair. We're going to need it."

They had reached the concrete on the far side of the gap when an explosion shook the bridge, spraying rubble into the darkening sky.

"Christ!" Eddie said, and turned his white, dismayed face to Roland.

"Don't worry yet," Roland said calmly. "Fellows like Gasher rarely get careless with their high-explosive toys." They reached the tollbooths at the end of the bridge. Roland stopped just beyond, at the top of the curving ramp.

"You knew the guy wasn't just bluffing, didn't you?" Eddie said. "I mean, you weren't guessing—you *knew*."

“He’s a walking dead man, and such men don’t need to bluff.” Roland’s voice was calm enough, but there was a deep undertone of bitterness and pain in it. “I knew something like this could happen, and if we’d seen the fellow earlier, while we were still beyond the range of his exploding egg, we could have stood him off. But then Jake fell and he got too close. I imagine he thinks our real reason for bringing a boy in the first place was to pay for safe conduct through the city. Damn! Damn the luck!” Roland struck his fist against his leg.

“Well, let’s go get him!”

Roland shook his head. “This is where we split up. We can’t take Susannah where the bastard’s gone, and we can’t leave her alone.”

“But—”

“Listen and don’t argue—not if you want to save Jake. The longer we stand here, the colder his trail gets. Cold trails are hard to follow. You’ve got your own job to do. If there’s another Blaine, and I am sure Jake believes there is, then you and Susannah must find it. There must be a station, or what was once called a cradle in the far lands. Do you understand?”

For once, blessedly, Eddie didn’t argue. “Yeah. We’ll find it. What then?”

“Fire a shot every half hour or so. When I get Jake, I’ll come.”

“Shots may attract other people as well,” Susannah said. Eddie had helped her out of the sling and she was seated in her chair again.

Roland surveyed them coldly. “Handle them.”

“Okay.” Eddie stuck out his hand and Roland took it briefly. “Find him, Roland.”

“Oh, I’ll find him. Just pray to your gods that I find him soon enough. And remember the faces of your fathers, both of you.”

Susannah nodded. “We’ll try.”

Roland turned and ran light-footed down the ramp. When he was out of sight, Eddie looked at Susannah and was not very surprised to see she was crying. He felt like crying himself. Half an hour ago they had been a tight little band of friends. Their comfortable fellowship had been smashed to bits in the space of just a few minutes—Jake

abducted, Roland gone after him. Even Oy had run away. Eddie had never felt so lonely in his life.

“I have a feeling we’re never going to see either of them again,” Susannah said.

“Of course we will!” Eddie said roughly, but he knew what she meant, because he felt the same way. The premonition that their quest was all over before it was fairly begun lay heavy on his heart. “In a fight with Attila the Hun, I’d give you three-to-two odds on Roland the Barbarian. Come on, Suze—we’ve got a train to catch.”

“But where?” she asked forlornly.

“I don’t know. Maybe we should just find the nearest wise old elf and ask him, huh?”

“What are you talking about, Edward Dean?”

“Nothing,” he said, and because that was so goddam true he thought he might burst into tears, he grasped the handles of her wheelchair and began to push it down the cracked and glass-littered ramp that led into the city of Lud.

JAKE QUICKLY DESCENDED INTO a foggy world where the only landmarks were pain: his throbbing hand, the place on his upper arm where Gasher's fingers dug in like steel pegs, his burning lungs. Before they had gone far, these pains were first joined and then overmatched by a deep, burning stitch in his left side. He wondered if Roland was following after them yet. He also wondered how long Oy would be able to live in this world which was so unlike the plains and forest which were all he had known until now. Then Gasher clouted him across the face, bloodying his nose, and thought was lost in a red wash of pain.

"Come on, yer little bastard! Move yer sweet cheeks!"

"Running . . . as fast as I can," Jake gasped, and just managed to dodge a thick shard of glass which jutted like a long transparent tooth from the wall of junk to his left.

"You better not be, because I'll knock yer cold and drag yer along by the hair o' yer head if y'are! Now *hup*, you little barstard!"

Jake somehow forced himself to run faster. He'd gone into the alley with the idea that they must shortly re-emerge onto the avenue, but he now reluctantly realized that wasn't going to happen. This was more than an alley; it was a camouflaged and fortified road leading ever deeper into the country of the Grays. The tall, tottery walls which pressed in on them had been built from an exotic array of materials: cars which had been partially or completely flattened by the chunks of granite and steel placed on top of them; marble pillars; unknown factory machines which were dull red with rust wherever they weren't still black with grease; a chrome-and-crystal fish as big as a private plane with one cryptic word of the High Speech—DELIGHT—Carefully incised into its scaly gleaming side; crisscrossing chains, each link as big as Jake's head, wrapped around mad jumbles of furniture that appeared to balance above

them as precariously as circus elephants do on their tiny steel platforms.

They came to a place where this lunatic path branched, and Gasher chose the left fork without hesitation. A little further along, three more alleyways, these so narrow they were almost tunnels, spoked off in various directions. This time Gasher chose the right-hand branching. The new path, which seemed to be formed by banks of rotting boxes and huge blocks of old paper—paper that might once have been books or magazines—was too narrow for them to run in side by side. Gasher shoved Jake into the lead and began beating him relentlessly on the back to make him go faster. *This is how a steer must feel when it's driven down the chute to the slaughtering pen*, Jake thought, and vowed that if he got out of this alive, he would never eat steak again.

“Run, my sweet little boycunt! *Run!*”

Jake soon lost all track of the twistings and turnings they made, and as Gasher drove him deeper and deeper into this jumble of torn steel, broken furniture, and castoff machinery, he began to give up hope of rescue. Not even Roland would be able to find him now. If the gunslinger tried, he would become lost himself, and wander the choked paths of this nightmare world until he died.

Now they were going downhill, and the walls of tightly packed paper had given way to ramparts of filing cabinets, jumbles of adding machines, and piles of computer gear. It was like running through some nightmarish Radio Shack warehouse. For almost a full minute the wall flowing past on Jake's left appeared to be constructed solely of either TV sets or carelessly stacked video display terminals. They stared at him like the glazed eyes of dead men. And as the pavement beneath their feet continued to descend, Jake realized that they were in a tunnel. The strip of cloudy sky overhead narrowed to a band, the band narrowed to a ribbon, and the ribbon became a thread. They were in a gloomy netherworld, scurrying like rats through a gigantic trash-midden.

What if it all comes down on us? Jake wondered, but in his current state of aching exhaustion, this possibility did not frighten him much. If the roof fell in, he would at least be able to rest.

Gasher drove him as a farmer would a mule, striking his left shoulder to indicate a left turn and his right to indicate a right turn. When the course was straight on, he thumped Jake on the back of the head. Jake tried to dodge a jutting pipe and didn't quite succeed. It whacked into one hip and sent him flailing across the narrow passage toward a snarl of glass and jagged boards. Gasher caught him and shoved him forward again. "Run, you clumsy squint! Can't you run? If it wasn't for the Tick-Tock Man, I'd bugger you right here and cut yer throat while I did it, ay, so I would!"

Jake ran in a red daze where there was only pain and the frequent thud of Gasher's fists coming down on his shoulders or the back of his head. At last, when he was sure he could run no longer, Gasher grabbed him by the neck and yanked him to a stop so fiercely that Jake crashed into him with a strangled squawk.

"*Here's* a tricky little bit!" Gasher panted jovially. "Look straight ahead and you'll see two wires what cross in an X low to the ground. Do yer see em?"

At first Jake didn't. It was very gloomy here; heaps of huge copper kettles were piled up to the left, and to the right were stacks of steel tanks that looked like scuba-diving gear. Jake thought he could turn these latter into an avalanche with one strong breath. He swiped his forearm across his eyes, brushing away tangles of hair, and tried not to think about how he'd look with about sixteen tons of those tanks piled on top of him. He squinted in the direction Gasher was pointing. Yes, he could make out—barely—two thin, silvery lines that looked like guitar or banjo strings. They came down from opposite sides of the passageway and crossed about two feet above the pavement.

"Crawl under, dear heart. And be ever so careful, for if you so much as twang one of those wires, harf the steel and cement puke in the city'll come down on your dear little head. Mine, too, although I doubt if that'd disturb you much, would it? Now crawl!"

Jake shrugged out of his pack, lay down, and pushed it through the gap ahead of him. And as he eased his way under the thin, taut wires, he discovered that he wanted to live a little longer after all. It seemed that he could actually feel all those tons of carefully balanced junk waiting to come down on him. *These wires are*

probably holding a couple of carefully chosen keystones in place, he thought. If one of them breaks . . . ashes, ashes, we all fall down. His back brushed one of the wires, and high overhead, something creaked.

“Careful, cully!” Gasher almost moaned. “Be oh so careful!”

Jake pushed himself beneath the crisscrossing wires, using his feet and his elbows. His stinking, sweat-clogged hair fell in his eyes again, but he did not dare brush it away.

“You’re clear,” Gasher grunted at last, and slipped beneath the tripwires himself with the ease of long practice. He stood up and snatched Jake’s pack before Jake could reshoulder it. “What’s in here, cully?” he asked, undoing the straps and peering in. “Got any treats for yer old pal? For the Gasherman loves his treaties, so he does!”

“There’s nothing in there but—”

Gasher’s hand flashed out and rocked Jake’s head back with a hard slap that sent a fresh spray of bloody froth flying from the boy’s nose.

“What did you do that for?” Jake cried, hurt and outraged.

“For tellin me what my own beshitted eyes can see!” Gasher yelled, and cast Jake’s pack aside. He bared his remaining teeth at the boy in a dangerous, terrible grin. “And fer almost bringin the whole beshitted works down on us!” He paused, then added in a quieter voice: “*And* because I felt like it—I must admit that. Your stupid sheep’s face puts me wery much in a slappin temper, so it does.” The grin widened, revealing his oozing whitish gums, a sight Jake could have done without. “If your hardcase friend follows us this far, he’ll have a surprise when he runs into those wires, won’t he?” Gasher looked up, still grinning. “There’s a city bus balanced up there someplace, as I remember.”

Jake began to weep—tired, hopeless tears that cut through the dirt on his cheeks in narrow channels.

Gasher raised an open, threatening hand. “Get moving, cully, before I start cryin myself . . . for a wery sentermental fellow is yer old pal, so he is, and when he starts to grieve and mourn, a little slappin is the only thing to put a smile on his face again. *Run!*”

They ran. Gasher chose pathways leading deeper into the smelly, creaking maze seemingly at random, indicating his choices with hard whacks to the shoulders. At some point the sound of the drums began. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, and for Jake it was the final straw. He gave up hope and thought alike, and allowed himself to descend wholly into the nightmare.

17

ROLAND HALTED IN FRONT of the barricade which choked the street from side to side and top to bottom. Unlike Jake, he had no hopes of emerging into the open on the other side. The buildings lying east of this point would be sentry-occupied islands emerging from an inland sea of trash, tools, artifacts . . . and booby-traps, he had no doubt. Some of these leavings undoubtedly still remained where they had fallen five hundred or seven hundred or a thousand years ago, but Roland thought most of it had been dragged here by the Grays a piece at a time. The eastern portion of Lud had become, in effect, the castle of the Grays, and Roland was now standing outside its wall.

He walked forward slowly and saw the mouth of a passageway half-hidden behind a ragged cement boulder. There were footprints in the powdery dust—two sets, one big, one small. Roland started to get up, looked again, and squatted on his hunkers once more. Not two sets but three, the third marking the paws of a small animal.

“Oy?” Roland called softly. For a moment there was no response, and then a single soft bark came from the shadows. Roland stepped into the passageway and saw gold-ringed eyes peering at him from around the first crooked corner. Roland trotted down to the bumbler. Oy, who still didn’t like to come really close to anyone but Jake, backed up a step and then held his ground, looking anxiously up at the gunslinger.

“Do you want to help me?” Roland asked. He could feel the dry red curtain that was battle fever at the edge of his consciousness, but this was not the time for it. The time would come, but for now he must not allow himself that inexpressible relief. “Help me find Jake?”

“Ake!” Oy barked, still watching Roland with his anxious eyes.

“Go on, then. Find him.”

Oy turned away at once and ran rapidly down the alley, nose skimming the ground. Roland followed, his eyes only occasionally flicking up to glance at Oy. Mostly he kept his gaze fixed on the ancient pavement, looking for sign.

18

“JESUS,” EDDIE SAID. “WHAT kind of people *are* these guys?”

They had followed the avenue at the base of the ramp for a couple of blocks, had seen the barricade (missing Roland’s entry into the partially hidden passageway by less than a minute) which lay ahead, and had turned north onto a broad thoroughfare which reminded Eddie of Fifth Avenue. He hadn’t dared to tell Susannah that; he was still too bitterly disappointed with this stinking, littered ruin of a city to articulate anything hopeful.

“Fifth Avenue” led them into an area of large white stone buildings that reminded Eddie of the way Rome looked in the gladiator movies he’d watched on TV as a kid. They were austere and, for the most part, still in good shape. He was pretty sure they had been public buildings of some sort—galleries, libraries, maybe museums. One, with a big domed roof that had cracked like a granite egg, might have been an observatory, although Eddie had read someplace that astronomers liked to be *away* from big cities, because all the electric lights fucked up their star-gazing.

There were open areas between these imposing edifices, and although the grass and flowers which had once grown there had been choked off by weeds and tangles of underbrush, the area still

had a stately feel, and Eddie wondered if it had once been the center of Lud's cultural life. Those days were long gone, of course; Eddie doubted if Gasher and his pals were very interested in ballet or chamber music.

He and Susannah had come to a major intersection from which four more broad avenues radiated outward like spokes on a wheel. At the hub of the wheel was a large paved square. Ringing it were loudspeakers on forty-foot steel posts. In the center of the square was a pedestal with the remains of a statue upon it—a mighty copper war-horse, green with verdigris, pawing its forelegs at the air. The warrior who had once ridden this charger lay off to the side on one corroded shoulder, waving what looked like a machine-gun in one hand and a sword in the other. His legs were still bowed around the shape of the horse he had once ridden, but his boots remained welded to the sides of his metal mount. GRAYS DIE! was written across the pedestal in fading orange letters.

Glancing down the radiating streets, Eddie saw more of the speaker-poles. A few had fallen over, but most still stood, and each of these had been festooned with a grisly garland of corpses. As a result, the square into which "Fifth Avenue" emptied and the streets which led away were guarded by a small army of the dead.

"What kind of people *are* they?" Eddie asked again.

He didn't expect an answer and Susannah didn't give one . . . but she could have. She'd had insights into the past of Roland's world before, but never one as clear and sure as this. All of her earlier insights, like those which had come to her in River Crossing, had had a haunting visionary quality, like dreams, but what came now arrived in a single flash, and it was like seeing the twisted face of a dangerous maniac illuminated by a stroke of lightning.

The speakers . . . the hanging bodies . . . the drums. She suddenly understood how they went together as clearly as she had understood that the heavy-laden wagons passing through River Crossing on their way to Jimtown had been pulled by oxen rather than mules or horses.

"Never mind this trash," she said, and her voice only quivered a little. "It's the train we want—which way is it, d'you think?"

Eddie glanced up at the darkening sky and easily picked out the path of the Beam in the rushing clouds. He looked back down and wasn't much surprised to see that the entrance to the street corresponding most closely to the path of the Beam was guarded by a large stone turtle. Its reptilian' head peered out from beneath the granite lip of its shell; its deepset eyes seemed to stare curiously at them. Eddie nodded toward it and managed a small dry smile. "See the turtle of enormous girth?"

Susannah took a brief look of her own and nodded. He pushed her across the city square and into The Street of the Turtle. The corpses which lined it gave off a dry, cinnamony smell that made Eddie's stomach clench . . . not because it was bad but because it was actually rather pleasant—the sugar-spicy aroma of something a kid would enjoy shaking onto his morning toast.

The Street of the Turtle was mercifully broad, and most of the corpses hanging from the speaker-poles were little more than mummies, but Susannah saw a few which were relatively fresh, with flies still crawling busily across the blackening skin of their swollen faces and maggots still squirming out of their decaying eyes.

And below each speaker was a little drift of bones.

"There must be thousands," Eddie said. "Men, women, and kids."

"Yes." Susannah's calm voice sounded distant and strange to her own ears. "They've had a lot of time to kill. And they've used it to kill each other."

"Bring on those wise fuckin elves!" Eddie said, and the laugh that followed sounded suspiciously like a sob. He thought he was at last beginning to fully understand what that innocuous phrase—*the world has moved on*—really meant. What a breadth of ignorance and evil it covered.

And what a depth.

The speakers were a wartime measure, Susannah thought. Of course they were. God only knows which war, or how long ago, but it must have been a doozy. The rulers of Lud used the speakers to make city-wide announcements from some central, bomb-proof location—a bunker like the one Hitler and his high command retreated to at the end of World War II.

And in her ears she could hear the voice of authority which had come rolling out of those speakers—could hear it as clearly as she had heard the creak of the wagons passing through River Crossing, as clearly as she had heard the crack of the whip above the backs of the straining oxen.

Ration centers A and D will be closed today; please proceed to centers B, C, E, and F with proper coupons.

Militia squads Nine, Ten, and Twelve report to Sendside.

Aerial bombardment is likely between the hours of eight and ten of the clock. All noncombatant residents should report to their designated shelters. Bring your gas masks. Repeat, bring your gas masks.

Announcements, yes . . . and some garbled version of the news—a propagandized, militant version George Orwell would have called doublespeak. And in between the news bulletins and the announcements, squalling military music and exhortations to respect the fallen by sending more men and women into the red throat of the abattoir.

Then the war had ended and silence had fallen . . . for a while. But at some point, the speakers had begun broadcasting again. How long ago? A hundred years? Fifty? Did it matter? Susannah thought not. What mattered was that when the speakers were reactivated, the only thing they broadcast was a single tape-loop . . . the loop with the drum-track on it. And the descendants of the city's original residents had taken it for . . . what? The Voice of the Turtle? The Will of the Beam?

Susannah found herself remembering the time she had asked her father, a quiet but deeply cynical man, if he believed there was a God in heaven who guided the course of human events. *Well, he had said, I think it's sort of half 'n half, Odetta. I'm sure there's a God, but I don't think He has much if anything to do with us these days; I believe that after we killed His son, He finally got it through His head that there wasn't nothing to be done with the sons of Adam or the daughters of Eve, and He washed His hands of us. Wise fella.*

She had responded to this (which she had fully expected; she was eleven at the time, and knew the turn of her father's mind quite well)

by showing him a squib on the Community Churches page of the local newspaper. It said that Rev. Murdock of the Grace Methodist Church would that Sunday elucidate on the topic “God Speaks to Each of Us Every Day”—with a text from First Corinthians. Her father had laughed over that so hard that tears had squirted from the corners of his eyes. *Well, I guess each of us hears someone talking, he had said at last, and you can bet your bottom dollar on one thing, sweetie: each of us—including this here Reverend Murdock—hears that voice say just exactly what he wants to hear. It’s so convenient that way.*

What *these* people had apparently wanted to hear in the recorded drum-track was an invitation to commit ritual murder. And now, when the drums began to throb through these hundreds or thousands of speakers—a hammering back-beat which was only the percussion to a Z.Z. Top song called “Velcro Fly,” if Eddie was right—it became their signal to unlimber the hangropes and run a few folks up the nearest speaker-posts.

How many? she wondered as Eddie rolled her along in her wheelchair, its nicked and dented hard rubber tires crackling over broken glass and whispering through drifts of discarded paper. *How many have been killed over the years because some electronic circuit under the city got the hiccups? Did it start because they recognized the essential alienness of the music, which came somehow—like us, and the airplane, and some of the cars along these streets—from another world?*

She didn’t know, but she knew she had come around to her father’s cynical point of view on the subject of God and the chats He might or might not have with the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. These people had been looking for a reason to slaughter each other, that was all, and the drums had been as good a reason as any.

She found herself thinking of the hive they had found—the misshapen hive of white bees whose honey would have poisoned them if they had been foolish enough to eat of it. Here, on this side of the Send, was another dying hive; more mutated white bees whose

sting would be no less deadly for their confusion, loss, and perplexity.

And how many more will have to die before the tape finally breaks?

As if her thoughts had caused it to happen, the speakers suddenly began to transmit the relentless, syncopated heartbeat of the drums. Eddie yelled in surprise. Susannah screamed and clapped both hands to her ears—but before she did, she could faintly hear the rest of the music: the track or tracks which had been muted decades ago when someone (probably quite by accident) had bumped the balance control, knocking it all the way to one side and burying both the guitars and the vocal.

Eddie continued to push her along The Street of the Turtle and the Path of the Beam, trying to look in all directions at once and trying not to smell the odor of putrefaction. *Thank God for the wind*, he thought.

He began to push the wheelchair faster, scanning the weedy gaps between the big white buildings for the graceful sweep of an overhead monorail track. He wanted to get out of this endless aisle of the dead. As he took yet another deep breath of that speciously sweet cinnamon smell, it seemed to him that he had never wanted anything so badly in his whole life.

19

JAKE'S DAZE WAS BROKEN abruptly when Gasher grabbed him by the collar and yanked with all the force of a cruel rider braking a galloping horse. He stuck one leg out at the same time and Jake went crashing backward over it. His head connected with the pavement and for a moment all the lights went out. Gasher, no humanitarian, brought him around quickly by seizing Jake's lower lip and yanking it upward and outward.

Jake screamed and bolted to a sitting position, striking out blindly with his fists. Gasher dodged the blows easily, hooked his other hand into Jake's armpit, and yanked him to his feet. Jake stood there, rocking drunkenly back and forth. He was beyond protest now; almost beyond understanding. All he knew for sure was that every muscle in his body felt sprung and his wounded hand was howling like an animal caught in a trap.

Gasher apparently needed a breather, and this time he was slower getting his wind back. He stood bent over with his hands planted on the knees of his green trousers, panting in fast little whistling breaths. His yellow headscarf had slipped askew. His good eye glittered like a trumpery diamond. The white silk eyepatch was now wrinkled, and curds of evil-looking yellow muck oozed onto his cheek from beneath it.

"Take a look over your head, cully, and you'll see why I brung you up short. Get an eyeful!"

Jake tilted his head upward, and in the depths of his shock he was not at all surprised to see a marble fountain as big as a house-trailer dangling eighty feet above them. He and Gasher were almost below it. The fountain was held suspended by two rusty cables which were mostly hidden within huge, unsteady stacks of church pews. Even in his less-than-acute state, Jake saw that these cables were more seriously frayed than the remaining hangers on the bridge had been.

"See it?" Gasher asked, grinning. He raised his left hand to his covered eye, scooped a mass of the pussy material from beneath it, and flicked it indifferently aside. "Beauty, ain't it? Oh, the Tick-Tock Man's a trig cove, all right, and no mistake. (Where's those goat-fucking drums? They should have started by now—if Copperhead's forgot em, I'll ram a stick so far up his arse he'll taste bark.) Now look ahead of you, my delicious little squint."

Jake did, and Gasher immediately clouted him so hard that he staggered backward and almost fell.

"Not *across*, idiot child! *Down!* See them two dark cobblestones?"

After a moment, Jake did. He nodded apathetically.

"Yer don't want'er step on em, for that'd bring the whole works down on your head, cully, and anybody who wanted yer after that'd

have to pick yer up with a blotter. Understand?”

Jake nodded again.

“Good.” Gasher took a final deep breath and slapped Jake’s shoulder. “Go on, then, whatcher waitin for? *Hup!*”

Jake stepped over the first of the discolored stones and saw it wasn’t really a cobblestone at all but a metal plate which had been rounded to look like one. The second was just ahead of it, cunningly placed so that if an unaware intruder happened to miss the first one, he or she would almost certainly step on the *second*.

Go ahead and do it, then, he thought. Why not? The gunslinger’s never going to find you in this maze, so go ahead and bring it down. It’s got to be cleaner than what Gasher and his friends have got planned for you. Quicker, too.

His dusty moccasin wavered in the air above the booby-trap.

Gasher hit him with a fist in the middle of the back, but not hard. “Thinkin about takin a ride on the handsome, are you, my little cull?” he asked. The laughing cruelty in his voice had been replaced by simple curiosity. If it was tinged with any other emotion, it wasn’t fear but amusement. “Well, go ahead, if it’s what yer mean to do, for I have my ticket already. Only be quick about it, gods blast your eyes.”

Jake’s foot came down beyond the trigger of the booby-trap. His decision to live a little longer was not based on any hope that Roland would find him; it was just that this was what Roland would do—go on until someone made him stop, and then a few yards farther still if he could.

If he did it now, he could take Gasher with him, but Gasher alone wasn’t sufficient—one look was enough to make it clear that he was telling the truth when he said he was dying already. If he went on, he might have a chance to take some of the Gasherman’s friends, too—maybe even the one he called the Tick-Tock Man.

If I’m going to ride what he calls the handsome, Jake thought, I’d just as soon go with plenty of company.

Roland would have understood.

JAKE WAS WRONG IN his assessment of the gunslinger's ability to follow their path through the maze; Jake's pack was only the most obvious bit of sign they left behind them, but Roland quickly realized he did not have to pause to look for sign. He only had to follow Oy.

He paused at several intersecting passages nevertheless, wanting to make sure, and each time he did, Oy looked back and uttered his low, impatient bark that seemed to say, *Hurry up! Do you want to lose them?* After the signs he saw—a track, a thread from Jake's shirt, a scrap of bright yellow cloth from Gasher's scarf—had three times confirmed the bumbler's choices, Roland simply followed Oy. He did not give up looking for sign, but he quit making stops to hunt for it. Then the drums started up, and it was the drums—plus Gasher's nosiness about what Jake might be carrying—that saved Roland's life that afternoon.

He skidded to a halt in his dusty boots, and his gun was in his hand before he realized what the sound was. When he did realize, he dropped the revolver back into its holster with an impatient grunt. He was about to go on again when his eye happened first on Jake's pack . . . and then on a pair of faint, gleaming streaks in midair just to the left of it. Roland narrowed his eyes and made out two thin wires which crisscrossed at knee level not three feet in front of him. Oy, who was built low to the ground, had scurried neatly through the inverted V formed by the wires, but if not for the drums and spotting Jake's castoff pack, Roland would have run right into them. As his eyes moved upward, tracing the not-quite-random piles of junk poised on either side of the passageway at this point, Roland's mouth tightened. It had been a close call, and only *ka* had saved him.

Oy barked impatiently.

Roland dropped to his belly and crawled beneath the wires, moving slowly and carefully—he was bigger than either Jake or Gasher, and he realized a really big man wouldn't be able to get under here at all without triggering the carefully prepared avalanche.

The drums pumped and thumped in his ears. *I wonder if they've all gone mad, he thought. If I had to listen to that every day, I think I would have.*

He got to the far side of the wires, picked up the pack, and looked inside. Jake's books and a few items of clothing were still in there, so were the treasures he had picked up along the way—a rock which gleamed with yellow flecks that looked like gold but weren't; an arrowhead, probably the leaving of the old forest folk, which Jake had found in a grove of trees the day after his drawing; some coins from his own world; his father's sunglasses; a few other things which only a boy not yet in his teens could really love and understand. Things he would want back again. . . if, that was, Roland got to him before Gasher and his friends could change him, hurt him in ways that would cause him to lose interest in the innocent pursuits and curiosities of pre-adolescent boyhood.

Gasher's grinning face swam into Roland's mind like the face of a demon or a djinni from a bottle: the snaggle teeth, the vacant eyes, the mandrills crawling over the cheeks and spreading beneath the stubbly lines of the jaws. *If you hurt him. . .* he thought, and then forced his mind away, because that line of thought was a blind alley. If Gasher hurt the boy (*Jake!* his mind insisted fiercely—*Not just the boy but Jake! Jake!*), Roland would kill him, yes. But the act would mean nothing, for Gasher was a dead man already.

The gunslinger lengthened the straps of the pack, marvelling at the clever buckles which made this possible, slipped it onto his own back, and stood up again. Oy turned to be off, but Roland called his name and the bumbler looked back.

"To me, Oy." Roland didn't know if the bumbler could understand (or if he would obey even if he did), but it would be better—safer—if he stayed close. Where there was one booby-trap, there were apt to be more. Next time Oy might not be so lucky.

"Ake!" Oy barked, not moving. The bark was assertive, but Roland thought he saw more of the truth about how Oy felt in his eyes: they were dark with fear.

"Yes, but it's dangerous," Roland said. "To me, Oy."

Back the way they had come, there was a thud as something heavy fell, probably dislodged by the punishing vibration of the drums. Roland could now see speaker-poles here and there, poking out of the wreckage like strange long-necked animals.

Oy trotted back to him and looked up, panting.

“Stay close.”

“Ake! Ake-Ake!”

“Yes. Jake.” He began to run again, and Oy ran beside him, heeling as neatly as any dog Roland had ever seen.

21

FOR EDDIE, IT WAS, as some wise man had once said, *déjà vu* all over again: he was running with the wheelchair, racing time. The beach had been replaced by The Street of the Turtle, but somehow everything else was the same. Oh, there *was* one other relevant difference: now it was a railway station (or a cradle) he was looking for, not a free-standing door.

Susannah was sitting bolt upright with her hair blowing out behind her and Roland’s revolver in her right hand, its barrel pointed up at the cloudy, troubled sky. The drums thudded and pounded, bludgeoning them with sound. A gigantic, dish-shaped object lay in the street just ahead, and Eddie’s overstrained mind, perhaps cued by the classical buildings on either side of them, produced an image of Jove and Thor playing Frisbee. Jove throws one wide and Thor lets it fall through a cloud—what the hell, it’s Miller Time on Olympus, anyway.

Frisbees of the gods, he thought, swerving Susannah between two crumbling, rusty cars, *what a concept*.

He bumped the chair up on the sidewalk to get around the artifact, which looked like some sort of telecommunications dish now that he was really close to it. He was easing the wheelchair over the curb and back into the street again—the sidewalk was too littered with

crap to make any real time—when the drums suddenly cut out. The echoes rolled away into a new silence, except it wasn't really silent at all, Eddie realized. Up ahead, the arched entrance to a marble building stood at the intersection of The Street of the Turtle and another avenue. This building had been overgrown by vines and some straggly green stuff that looked like cypress beards, but it was still magnificent and somehow dignified. Beyond it, around the corner, a crowd was babbling excitedly.

“Don't stop!” Susannah snapped. “We haven't got time to—”

A hysterical shriek drilled through the babble. It was accompanied by yells of approval, and, incredibly, the sort of applause Eddie had heard in Atlantic City hotel-casinos after some lounge act had finished doing its thing. The shriek was choked into a long, dying gargle that sounded like the buzz of a cicada. Eddie felt the hair on the nape of his neck coming to attention. He glanced at the corpses hanging from the nearest speaker-pole and understood that the fun-loving Pubes of Lud were holding another public execution.

Marvellous, he thought. *Now if they only had Tony Orlando and Dawn to sing “Knock Three Times,” they could all die happy.*

Eddie looked curiously at the stone pile on the corner. This close, the vines which overgrew it had a powerful herbal smell. That smell was eye-wateringly bitter, but he still liked it better than the cinnamon-sweet odor of the mummified corpses. The beards of greenery growing from the vines drooped in ratty sheaves, creating waterfalls of vegetation where once there had been a series of arched entrances. A figure suddenly barrelled out through one of these waterfalls and hurried toward them. It was a kid, Eddie realized, and not that many years out of diapers, judging by the size. He was wearing a weird little Lord Fauntleroy outfit, complete with ruffled white shirt and velveteen short pants. There were ribbons in his hair. Eddie felt a sudden mad urge to wave his hands above his head and scream *But-wheat say, “Lud is o-tay!”*

“Come on!” the kid cried in a high, piping voice. Several sprays of the green stuff had gotten caught in his hair; he brushed absently at these with his left hand as he ran. “They're gonna do Spankers! It's

the Spankerman's turn to go to the land of the drums! Come on or you'll miss the whole fakement, gods cuss it!"

Susannah was equally stunned by the child's appearance, but as he got closer, it struck her that there was something extremely odd and awkward about the way he was brushing at the crumbles and strands of greenery which had gotten caught in his beribboned hair: he kept using just that one hand. His other had been behind his back when he ran out through the weedy waterfall, and there it remained.

How awkward that must be! she thought, and then a tape-player turned on in her mind and she heard Roland speaking at the end of the bridge. *I knew something like this could happen. . . if we'd seen the fellow earlier, while we were still beyond the range of his exploding egg. . . Damn the luck!*

She levelled Roland's gun at the child, who had leaped from the curb and was running straight for them. "*Hold it!*" she screamed. "*Stand still, you!*"

"Suze, what are you *doing?*" Eddie yelled.

Susannah ignored him. In a very real sense, Susannah Dean was no longer even here; it was Detta Walker in the chair now, and her eyes were glittering with feverish suspicion. "*Stop or I'll shoot!*"

Little Lord Fauntleroy might have been deaf for all the effect her warning had. "Hoss it!" he shouted jubilantly. "Yer gointer miss the whole show! Spanker's gointer—"

His right hand finally began to come out from behind his back. As it did, Eddie realized they weren't looking at a kid but at a misshapen dwarf whose childhood was many years past. The expression Eddie had at first taken for childish glee was actually a chilly mixture of hate and rage. The dwarf's cheeks and brow were covered with the oozing, discolored patches Roland called whore's blossoms.

Susannah never saw his face. Her attention was fixed on the emerging right hand, and the dull green sphere it held. That was all she needed to see. Roland's gun crashed. The dwarf was hammered backward. A shrill cry of pain and rage rose from his tiny mouth as he landed on the sidewalk. The grenade bounced out of his hand and rolled back into the same arch through which he had emerged.

Detta was gone like a dream, and Susannah looked from the smoking gun to the tiny, sprawled figure on the sidewalk with surprise, horror, and dismay. “Oh, my Jesus! I shot him! Eddie, I shot him!”

“Grays. . . *die!*”

Little Lord Fauntleroy tried to scream these words defiantly, but they came out in a bubbling choke of blood that drenched the few remaining white patches on his frilly shirt. There was a muffled explosion from inside the overgrown plaza of the corner building, and the shaggy carpets of green stuff hanging in front of the arches billowed outward like flags in a brisk gale. With them came clouds of choking, acrid smoke. Eddie flung himself on top of Susannah to shield her, and felt a gritty shower of concrete fragments—all small ones, luckily—patter down on his back, his neck, and the crown of his head. There was a series of unpleasantly wet smacking sounds to his left. He opened his eyes a crack, looked in that direction, and saw Little Lord Fauntleroy’s head just coming to a stop in the gutter. The dwarf’s eyes were still open, his mouth still fixed in its final snarl.

Now there were other voices, some shrieking, some yelling, all furious. Eddie rolled off Susannah’s chair—it tottered on one wheel before deciding to stay up—and stared in the direction from which the dwarf had come. A ragged mob of about twenty men and women had appeared, some coming from around the corner, others pushing through the mats of foliage which obscured the corner building’s arches, materializing from the smoke of the dwarf’s grenade like evil spirits. Most were wearing blue headscarves and all were carrying weapons—a varied (and somehow pitiful) assortment of them which included rusty swords, dull knives, and splintery clubs. Eddie saw one man defiantly waving a hammer. *Pubes*, Eddie thought. *We interrupted their necktie party, and they’re pissed as hell about it.*

A tangle of shouts—*Kill the Grays! Kill them both! They’ve done for Luster, God kill their eyes!*—arose from this charming group as they caught sight of Susannah in her wheelchair and Eddie, who was now crouched on one knee before it. The man in the forefront was wearing a kilt-like wrap and waving a cutlass. He brandished this wildly (he would have decapitated the heavysset woman standing

close behind him, had she not ducked) and then charged. The others followed, yelling happily.

Roland's gun pounded its bright thunder into the windy, overcast day, and the top of the kilt-wearing Pube's head lifted off. The sallow skin of the woman who had almost been decapitated by his cutlass was suddenly stippled with red rain and she voiced a sound of barking dismay. The others came on past the woman and the dead man, raving and wild-eyed.

"Eddie!" Susannah screamed, and fired again. A man wearing a silk-lined cape and knee-boots collapsed into the street.

Eddie groped for the Ruger and had one panicky moment when he thought he had lost it. The butt of the gun had somehow slipped down inside the waistband of his pants. He wrapped his hand around it and yanked hard. The fucking thing wouldn't come. The sight at the end of the barrel had somehow gotten stuck in his underwear.

Susannah fired three closely spaced shots. Each found a target, but the oncoming Pubes didn't slow.

"Eddie, help me!"

Eddie tore his pants open, feeling like some cut-rate version of Superman, and finally managed to free the Ruger. He hit the safety with the heel of his left palm, placed his elbow on his leg just above the knee, and began to fire. There was no need to think—no need to even aim. Roland had told them that in battle a gunslinger's hands worked on their own, and Eddie now discovered it was true. It would have been hard for a blind man to miss at this range, anyway. Susannah had cut the numbers of the charging Pubes to no more than fifteen; Eddie went through the remainder like a storm wind in a wheatfield, dropping four in less than two seconds.

Now the single face of the mob, that look of glazed and mindless eagerness, began to break apart. The man with the hammer abruptly tossed his weapon aside and ran for it, limping extravagantly on a pair of arthritis-twisted legs. He was followed by two others. The rest of them milled uncertainly in the street.

"Come on, you deucies!" a relatively young man snarled. He wore his blue scarf around his throat like a rally-racer's ascot. He was bald except for two fluffs of frizzy red hair, one on each side of his head.

To Susannah, this fellow looked like Clarabell the Clown; to Eddie he looked like Ronald McDonald; to both of them he looked like trouble: He threw a homemade spear that might have started life as a steel tableleg. It clattered harmlessly into the street to Eddie and Susannah's right. "Come on, I say! We can get em if we all stick togeth—"

"Sorry, guy," Eddie murmured, and shot him in the chest.

Clarabell/Ronald staggered backward, one hand going to his shirt. He stared at Eddie with huge eyes that told his tale with heartbreaking clarity: this wasn't supposed to happen. The hand dropped heavily to the young man's side. A single runlet of blood, incredibly bright in the gray day, slipped from the corner of his mouth. The few remaining Pubes stared at him mutely as he slipped to his knees, and one of them turned to run.

"Not at all," Eddie said. "Stay put, my retarded friend, or you're going to get a good look at the clearing where your path ends." He raised his voice. "Drop em, boys and girls! All of em! Now!"

"You . . ." the dying man whispered. "You . . . gunslinger?"

"That's right," Eddie said. His eyes surveyed the remaining Pubes grimly.

"Cry your. . . pardon," the man with the frizzy red hair gasped, and then he fell forward onto his face.

"*Gunslingers?*" one of the others asked. His tone was one of dawning horror and realization.

"Well, you're stupid, but you ain't deaf," Susannah said, "and that's somethin, anyway." She waggled the barrel of the gun, which Eddie was quite sure was empty. For that matter, how many rounds could be left in the Ruger? He realized he didn't have any idea how many rounds the clip held, and cursed himself for a fool . . . but had he really believed it could come to something like this? He didn't think so. "You heard him, folks. Drop em. Recess is over."

One by one, they complied. The woman who was wearing a pint or so of Mr. Sword-and-Kilt's blood on her face said, "You shouldn't've killed Winston, missus—'twas his birthday, so it was."

"Well, I guess he should have stayed home and eaten some more birthday cake," Eddie said. Given the overall quality of this

experience, he didn't find either the woman's comment or his own response at all surreal.

There was one other woman among the remaining Pubes, a scrawny thing whose long blonde hair was coming out in big patches, as if she had the mange. Eddie observed her sidling toward the dead dwarf—and the potential safety of the overgrown arches beyond him—and put a bullet into the cracked cement close by her foot. He had no idea what he wanted with her, but what he didn't want was one of them giving the rest of them ideas. For one thing, he was afraid of what his hands might do if the sickly, sullen people before him tried to run. Whatever his head thought about this gunslinging business, his hands had discovered they liked it just fine.

"Stand where you are, beautiful. Officer Friendly says play it safe." He glanced at Susannah and was disturbed by the grayish quality of her complexion. "Suze, you all right?" he asked in a lower voice.

"Yes."

"You're not going to faint or anything, are you? Because—"

"No." She looked at him with eyes so dark they were like caves. "It's just that I never shot anyone before... okay?"

Well, you better get used to it rose to his lips. He bit it back and returned his gaze to the five people who remained before them. They were looking at him and Susannah with a species of sullen fear which nevertheless stopped well short of terror.

Shit, most of them have forgotten what terror is, he thought. Joy, sadness, love. . . same thing. I don't think they feel much of anything, anymore. They've been living in this purgatory too long.

Then he remembered the laughter, the excited cries, the lounge-act applause, and revised his thinking. There was at least one thing that still got their motors running, one thing that still pushed their buttons. Spanker could have testified to that.

"Who's in charge here?" Eddie asked. He was watching the intersection behind the little group very carefully in case the others should get their courage back. So far he saw and heard nothing alarming from that direction. He thought that the others had probably left this ragged crew to its fate.

They looked at each other uncertainly, and finally the woman with the blood-spattered face spoke up. "Spanker was, but when the god-drums started up this time, it was Spanker's stone what come out of the hat and we set him to dance. I guess Winston would have come next, but you did for him with your god-rotted guns, so you did." She wiped blood deliberately from her cheek, looked at it, and then returned her sullen glance to Eddie.

"Well, what do you think Winston was trying to do to me with his god-rotted spear?" Eddie asked. He was disgusted to find the woman had actually made him feel guilty about what he had done. "Trim my sideburns?"

"Killed Frank 'n Luster, too," she went on doggedly, "and what are you? Either Grays, which is bad, or a couple of god-rotted outlanders, which is worse. Who's left for the Pubes in City North? Topsy, I suppose—Topsy the Sailor—but he ain't here, is he? Took his boat and went off downriver, ay, so he did, and god rot him, too, says I!"

Susannah had ceased listening; her mind had fixed with horrified fascination on something the woman had said earlier. *It was Spanker's stone what come out of the hat and we set him to dance.* She remembered reading Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery" in college and understood that these people, the degenerate descendents of the original Pubes, were living Jackson's nightmare. No wonder they weren't capable of any strong emotion when they knew they would have to participate in such a grisly drawing not once a year, as in the story, but two or three times each day.

"Why?" she asked the bloody woman in a harsh, horrified voice. "Why do you do it?"

The woman looked at Susannah as if she was the world's biggest fool. "Why? So the ghosts what live in the machines won't take over the bodies of those who have died here—Pubes and Grays alike—and send them up through the holes in the streets to eat us. Any fool knows that."

"There are no such things as ghosts," Susannah said, and her voice sounded like so much meaningless quacking to her own ears. Of course there were. In this world, there were ghosts everywhere.

Nevertheless, she pushed ahead. “What you call the god-drums is only a tape stuck in a machine. That’s really all it is.” Sudden inspiration struck her and she added: “Or maybe the Grays are doing it on purpose—did you ever think of that? They live in the other part of the city, don’t they? And under it, as well? They’ve always wanted you out. Maybe they’ve just hit on a really efficient way of getting you guys to do their work for them.”

The bloody woman was standing next to an elderly gent wearing what looked like the world’s oldest bowler hat and a pair of frayed khaki shorts. Now he stepped forward and spoke to her with a patina of good manners that turned his underlying contempt into a dagger with razor-sharp edges. “You are quite wrong, Madam Gunslinger. There are a great many machines under Lud, and there are ghosts in all of them—demonous spirits which bear only ill will to mortal men and women. These demon-ghosts are *very* capable of raising the dead . . . and in Lud, there are a great many dead to raise.”

“Listen,” Eddie said. “Have you ever seen one of these zombies with your own eyes, Jeeves? Have *any* of you?”

Jeeves curled his lip and said nothing—but that lip-curl really said it all. What else could one expect, it asked, from outlanders who used guns as a substitute for understanding?

Eddie decided it would be best to close off the whole line of discussion. He had never been cut out for missionary work, anyway. He wagged the Ruger at the bloodstained woman. “You and your friend there—the one who looks like an English butler on his day off—are going to take us to the railroad station. After that, we can all say goodbye, and I’ll tell you the truth: that’s going to make my fuckin day.”

“Railroad station?” the guy who looked like Jeeves the Butler asked. “What is a railroad station?”

“Take us to the cradle,” Susannah said. “Take us to Blaine.”

This finally rattled Jeeves; an expression of shocked horror replaced the world-weary contempt with which he had thus far treated them. “You can’t go there!” he cried. “The cradle is forbidden ground, and Blaine is the most dangerous of all Lud’s ghosts!”

Forbidden ground? Eddie thought. Great. If it's the truth, at least we'll be able to stop worrying about you assholes. It was also nice to hear that there still was a Blaine . . . or that these people thought there was, anyway.

The others were staring at Eddie and Susannah with expressions of uncomprehending amazement; it was as if the interlopers had suggested to a bunch of born-again Christians that they hunt up the Ark of the Covenant and turn it into a pay toilet.

Eddie raised the Ruger until the center of Jeeves's forehead lay in the sight. "We're going," he said, "and if you don't want to join your ancestors right here and now, I suggest you stop pissing and moaning and take us there."

Jeeves and the bloodstained woman exchanged an uncertain glance, but when the man in the bowler hat looked back at Eddie and Susannah, his face was firm and set. "Shoot us if you like," he said. "We'd sooner die here than there."

"You folks are a bunch of sick motherfuckers with dying on the brain!" Susannah cried at them. "*Nobody* has to die! Just take us where we want to go, for the love of God!"

The woman said somberly, "But it *is* death to enter Blaine's cradle, mum, so it is. For Blaine sleeps, and he who disturbs his rest must pay a high price."

"Come on, beautiful," Eddie snapped. "You can't smell the coffee with your head up your ass."

"I don't know what that means," she said with an odd and perplexing dignity.

"It means you can take us to the cradle and risk the Wrath of Blaine, or you can stand your ground here and experience the Wrath of Eddie. It doesn't have to be a nice clean head-shot, you know. I can take you a piece at a time, and I'm feeling just mean enough to do it. I'm having a very bad day in your city—the music sucks, everybody has a bad case of b.o., and the first guy we saw threw a grenade at us and kidnapped our friend. So what do you say?"

"Why would you go to Blaine in any case?" one of the others asked. "He stirs no more from his berth in the cradle—not for years

now. He has even stopped speaking in his many voices and laughing.”

Speaking in his many voices and laughing? Eddie thought. He looked at Susannah. She looked back and shrugged.

“Ardis was the last to go nigh Blaine,” the blood-stained woman said.

Jeeves nodded somberly. “Ardis always was a fool when he were in drink. Blaine asked him some question. I heard it, but it made no sense to me—something about the mother of ravens, I think—and when Ardis couldn’t answer what was asked, Blaine slew him with blue fire.”

“Electricity?” Eddie asked.

Jeeves and the bloodstained woman both nodded. “Ay,” the woman said. “Electricity, so it were called in the old days, so it were.”

“You don’t have to go in with us,” Susannah proposed suddenly. “Just get us within sight of the place. We’ll go the rest of the way on our own.”

The woman looked at her mistrustfully, and then Jeeves pulled her head close to his lips and mumbled in her ear for a while. The other Pubes stood behind them in a ragged line, looking at Eddie and Susannah with the dazed eyes of people who have survived a bad air-raid.

At last the woman looked around. “Ay,” she said. “We’ll take you nigh the cradle, and then it’s good riddance to bad swill.”

“My idea exactly,” Eddie said. “You and Jeeves. The rest of you, scatter.” He swept them with his eyes. “But remember this—one spear thrown from ambush, one arrow, one brick, and these two die.” This threat came out sounding so weak and pointless that Eddie wished he hadn’t made it. How could they possibly care for these two, or for any of the individual members of their clan, when they dusted two or more of them each and every day? Well, he thought, watching the others trot off without so much as a backward glance, it was too late to worry about that now.

“Come on,” the woman said. “I want to be done with you.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Eddie replied,

But before she and Jeeves led them away, the woman did something which made Eddie repent a little of his hard thoughts: knelt, brushed back the hair of the man in the kilt, and placed a kiss on his dirty cheek. "Goodbye, Winston," she said. "Wait for me where the trees clear and the water's sweet. I'll come to ye, ay, as sure as dawn makes shadows run west."

"I didn't want to kill him," Susannah said. "I want you to know that. But I wanted to die even less."

"Ay." The face that turned toward Susannah was stern and tearless. "But if ye mean to enter Blaine's cradle, ye'll die anyway. And the chances are that ye'll die envying poor old Winston. He's cruel, is Blaine. The cruelest of all demons in this cruel, cruel place."

"Come on, Maud," Jeeves said, and helped her up.

"Ay. Let's finish with them." She surveyed Susannah and Eddie again, her eyes stern but somehow confused, as well. "Gods curse my eyes that they should ever have happened on you two in the first place. And gods curse the guns ye carry, as well, for they were always the springhead of our troubles."

And with that attitude, Susannah thought, your troubles are going to last at least a thousand years, sugar.

Maud set a rapid pace along The Street of the Turtle. Jeeves trotted beside her. Eddie, who was pushing Susannah in the wheelchair, was soon panting and struggling to keep up. The palatial buildings which lined their way spread out until they resembled ivy-covered country houses on huge, run-to-riot lawns, and Eddie realized they had entered what had once been a very ritzy neighborhood indeed. Ahead of them, one building loomed above all others. It was a deceptively simple square construction of white stone blocks, its overhanging roof supported by many pillars. Eddie thought again of the gladiator movies he'd so enjoyed as a kid. Susannah, educated in more formal schools, was reminded of the Parthenon. Both saw and marvelled at the gorgeously sculpted bestiary—Bear and Turtle, Fish and Rat, Horse and Dog—which ringed the top of the building in two-by-two parade, and understood it was the place they had come to find.

That uneasy sensation that they were being watched by many eyes—eyes filled equally with hate and wonder—never left them. Thunder boomed as they came in sight of the monorail track; like the storm, the track came sweeping in from the south, joined The Street of the Turtle, and ran straight on toward the Cradle of Lud. And as they neared it, ancient bodies began to twist and dance in the strengthening wind on either side of them.

22

AFTER THEY HAD RUN for God knew how long (all Jake knew for sure was that the drums had stopped again), Gasher once more yanked him to a stop. This time Jake managed to keep his feet. He had gotten his second wind. Gasher, who would never see eleven again, had not.

“Hoo! My old pump’s doing nip-ups, sweetie.”

“Too bad,” Jake said unfeelingly, then stumbled backward as Gasher’s gnarled hand connected with the side of his face.

“Yar, you’d cry a bitter tear if I dropped dead right here, woontcher? Too likely! But no such luck, my fine young squint—old Gasher’s seen em come and seen em go, and I wasn’t born to drop dead at the feet of any little sweetcheeks berry like you.”

Jake listened to these incoherencies impassively. He meant to see Gasher dead before the day was over. Gasher might take Jake with him, but Jake no longer cared about that. He dabbed blood from his freshly split lip and looked at it thoughtfully, wondering at how quickly the desire to do murder could invade and conquer the human heart.

Gasher observed Jake looking at his bloody fingers and grinned. “Sap’s runnin, ennet? Nor will it be the last your old pal Gasher beats out of your young tree, unless you look sharp; unless you look wery sharp indeed.” He pointed down at the cobbled surface of the narrow alley they were currently negotiating. There was a rusty manhole

cover there, and Jake realized he had seen the words stamped into the steel not long ago: LaMERK FOUNDRY, they said.

“There’s a grip on the side,” Gasher said. “Yer see? Get your hands into that and pull away. Step lively, now, and maybe ye’ll still have all your teeth when ye meet up with Tick-Tock.”

Jake grasped the steel cover and pulled. He pulled hard, but not quite as hard as he could have done. The maze of streets and alleys through which Gasher had run him was bad, but at least he could see. He couldn’t imagine what it might be like in the underworld below the city, where the blackness would preclude even dreams of escape, and he didn’t intend to find out unless he absolutely had to.

Gasher quickly made it clear to him that he did.

“It’s too heavy for—” Jake began, and then the pirate seized him by the throat and yanked him upward until they were face to face. The long run through the alleys had brought a thin, sweaty flush to his cheeks and turned the sores eating into his flesh an ugly yellow-purple color. Those which were open exuded thick infected matter and threads of blood in steady pulses. Jake caught just a whiff of Gasher’s thick stench before his wind was cut off by the hand which had encircled his throat.

“Listen, you stupid cull, and listen well, for this is your last warning. You yank that fucking streethead off right now or I’ll reach into your mouth and rip the living tongue right out of it. And feel free to bite all you want while I do it, for what I have runs in the blood and you’ll see the first blossoms on yer own face before the week’s out—if yer lives that long. Now, do you see?”

Jake nodded frantically. Gasher’s face was disappearing into deepening folds of gray, and his voice seemed to be coming from a great distance.

“All right.” Gasher shoved him backward. Jake fell in a heap beside the manhole cover, gagging and retching. He finally managed to draw in a deep, whooping breath that burned like liquid fire. He spat out a blood-flecked wad of stuff and almost threw up at the sight of it.

“Now yank back that cover, my heart’s delight, and let’s have no more natter about it.”

Jake crawled over to it, slid his hands into the grip, and this time pulled with all his might. For one terrible moment he thought he was still not going to be able to budge it. Then he imagined Gasher's fingers reaching into his mouth and seizing his tongue, and found a little extra. There was a dull, spreading agony in his lower back as something gave there, but the circular lid slipped slowly aside, grinding on the cobbles and exposing a grinning crescent of darkness.

"Good, cully, good!" Gasher cried cheerfully. "What a little mule y'are! Keep pulling——don't give up now!"

When the crescent had become a half-moon and the pain in Jake's lower back was a white-hot fire, Gasher booted him in the ass, knocking him asprawl.

"Wery good!" Gasher said, peering in. "Now, cully, go smartly down the ladder on the side. Mind you don't lose your grip and tumble all the way to the bottom, for those rungs are fearsome slick and greezy. There's twenty or so, as I remember. And when you get to the bottom, stand stock-still and wait for me. You might feel like runnin from yer old pal, but do you think that would be a good idea?"

"No," Jake said. "I suppose not."

"Wery intelligent, old son!" Gasher's lips spread in his hideous smile, once more revealing his few surviving teeth. "It's dark down there, and there are a thousand tunnels going every which-a-way. Yer old pal Gasher knows em like the back of his hand, so he does, but you'd be lost in no time. Then there's the rats——wery big and wery hungry they are. So you just wait."

"I will."

Gasher regarded him narrowly. "You speak just like a little triggie, you do, but you're no Pube—I'll set my watch and warrant to that. Where are you from, squint?"

Jake said nothing.

"Bumbler got your tongue, do he? Well, that's all right; Tick-Tock'll get it all out of you, so he will. He's got a way about him, Ticky does; just naturally wants to make people converse. Once he gets em goin, they sometimes talks so fast and screams so loud someone has to hit em over the head to slow em down. Bumpers ain't allowed

to hold no one's tongue around the Tick-Tock Man, not even fine young triggers like you. Now get the fuck down that ladder. *Hup!*"

He lashed out with his foot. This time Jake managed to tuck in and dodge the blow. He looked into the half-open manhole, saw the ladder, and started down. He was still chest-high to the alley when a tremendous stonelike crash hammered the air. It came from a mile or more away, but Jake knew what it was without having to be told. A cry of pure misery burst from his lips.

A grim smile tugged at the corners of Gasher's mouth. "Your hardcase friend trailed ye a little better than ye thought he would, didn't he? Not better than / thought, though, cully, for I got a look at his eyes—wery pert and cunning they were. I thought he'd come arter his juicy little night-nudge a right smart, if he was to come at all, and so he did. He spied the tripwires, but the fountain's got him, so *that's* all right. Get on, sweetcheeks."

He aimed a kick at Jake's protruding head. Jake ducked it, but one foot slipped on the ladder bolted to the side of the sewer shaft and he only saved himself from falling by clutching Gasher's scab-raddled ankle. He looked up, pleading, and saw no softening on that dying, infected face.

"Please," he said, and heard the word trying to break into a sob. He kept seeing Roland lying crushed beneath the huge fountain. What had Gasher said? If anyone wanted him, they would have to pick him up with a blotter.

"Beg if you want, dear heart. Just don't expect no good to come of it, for mercy stops on this side of the bridge, so it does. Now go down, or I'll kick your bleedin brains right outcher bleedin ears."

So Jake went down, and by the time he reached the standing water at the bottom, the urge to cry had passed. He waited, shoulders slumped and head down, for Gasher to descend and lead him to his fate.

ROLAND HAD COME CLOSE to tripping the crossed wires which held back the avalanche of junk, but the dangling fountain was absurd—a trap which might have been set by a stupid child. Cort had taught them to constantly check all visual quadrants as they moved in enemy territory, and that included above as well as behind and below.

“Stop,” he told Oy, raising his voice to be heard over the drums.

“Op!” Oy agreed, then looked ahead and immediately added, “Ake!”

“Yes.” The gunslinger took another look up at the suspended marble fountain, then examined the street, looking for the trigger. There were two, he saw. Perhaps their camouflage as cobblestones had once been effective, but that time was long past. Roland bent down, hands on his knees, and spoke into Oy’s upturned face.

“Going to pick you up for a minute now. Don’t fuss, Oy.”

“Oy!”

Roland put his arms around the bumbler. At first Oy stiffened and attempted to pull away, and then Roland felt the small animal give in. He wasn’t happy about being this close to someone who wasn’t Jake, but he clearly intended to put up with it. Roland found himself wondering again just how intelligent Oy was.

He carried him up the narrow passage and beneath The Hanging Fountain of Lud, stepping carefully over the mock cobbles. Once they were safely past, he bent to let Oy go. As he did, the drums stopped.

“Ake!” Oy said impatiently. “Ake-Ake!”

“Yes—but there’s a little piece of business to attend to first.”

He led Oy fifteen yards farther down the alley, then bent and picked up a chunk of concrete. He tossed it thoughtfully from hand to hand, and as he did, he heard the sound of a pistol-shot from the east. The amplified thump of the drums had buried the sound of Eddie and Susannah’s battle with the ragged band of Pubes, but he heard this gunshot clearly and smiled—it almost surely meant that the Deans had reached the cradle, and that was the first good news of this day, which already seemed at least a week long.

Roland turned and threw the piece of concrete. His aim was as true as it had been when he had thrown at the ancient traffic signal in River Crossing; the missile struck one of the discolored triggers dead center, and one of the rusty cables snapped with a harsh twang. The marble fountain dropped, rolling over as the other cable snubbed it for a moment longer—long enough so that a man with fast reflexes could have cleared the drop-zone anyway, Roland reckoned. Then it too let go, and the fountain fell like a pink, misshapen stone.

Roland dropped behind a pile of rusty steel beams and Oy jumped nimbly into his lap as the fountain hit the street with a vast, shattery thump. Chunks of pink marble, some as big as carts, flew through the air. Several small chips stung Roland's face. He brushed others out of Oy's fur. He looked over the makeshift barricade. The fountain had cracked in two like a vast plate. *We won't be coming back this way*, Roland thought. The passageway, narrow to begin with, was now completely blocked.

He wondered if Jake had heard the fall of the fountain, and what he had made of it if he had. He didn't waste such speculation on Gasher; Gasher would think he had been crushed to paste, which was exactly what Roland wanted him to think. Would Jake think the same thing? The boy should know better than to believe a gunslinger could be killed by such a simple device, but if Gasher had terrorized him enough, Jake might not be thinking that clearly. Well, it was too late to worry about it now, and if he had it to do over again, he would do exactly the same thing. Dying or not, Gasher had displayed both courage and animal cunning. If he was off his guard now, the trick was worth it.

Roland got to his feet. "Oy—find Jake."

"Ake!" Oy stretched his head forward on his long neck, sniffed around in a semicircle, picked up Jake's scent, and was off again with Roland running after. Ten minutes later he came to a stop at a manhole cover in the street, sniffed all the way around it, then looked up at Roland and barked shrilly.

The gunslinger dropped to one knee and observed both the confusion of tracks and a wide path of scratches on the cobbles. He thought this particular manhole cover had been moved quite often.

His eyes narrowed as he saw the wad of bloody phlegm in a crease between two nearby cobbles.

“The bastard keeps hitting him,” he murmured.

He pulled the manhole cover back, looked down, then untied the rawhide lacings which held his shirt closed. He picked the bumbler up and tucked him into his shirt. Oy bared his teeth, and for a moment Roland felt his claws splayed against the flesh of his chest and belly like small sharp knives. Then they withdrew and Oy only peered out of Roland’s shirt with his bright eyes, panting like a steam engine. The gunslinger could feel the rapid beat of Oy’s heart against his own. He pulled the rawhide lace from the eyelets in his shirt and found another, longer, lace in his purse.

“I’m going to leash you. I don’t like it and you’re going to like it even less, but it’s going to be very dark down there.”

He tied the two lengths of rawhide together and formed one end into a wide loop which he slipped over Oy’s head. He expected Oy to bare his teeth again, perhaps even to nip him, but Oy didn’t. He only looked up at Roland with his gold-ringed eyes and barked “Ake!” again in his impatient voice.

Roland put the loose end of his makeshift leash in his mouth, then sat down on the edge of the sewer shaft... if that was what it was. He felt for the top rung of the ladder and found it. He descended slowly and carefully, more aware than ever that he was missing half a hand and that the steel rungs were slimy with oil and some thicker stuff that was probably moss. Oy was a heavy, warm weight between his shirt and belly, panting steadily and harshly. The gold rings in his eyes gleamed like medallions in the dim light.

At last, the gunslinger’s groping foot splashed into the water at the bottom of the shaft. He glanced up briefly at the coin of white light far above him. *This is where it starts getting hard*, he thought. The tunnel was warm and dank and smelled like an ancient charnel house. Somewhere nearby, water was dripping hollowly and monotonously. Farther off, Roland could hear the rumble of machinery. He lifted a very grateful Oy out of his shirt and set him down in the shallow water running sluggishly along the sewer tunnel.

“Now it’s all up to you,” he murmured in the bumbler’s ear. “To Jake, Oy. To Jake!”

“Ake!” the bumbler barked, and splashed rapidly off into the darkness, swinging his head from side to side at the end of his long neck like a pendulum. Roland followed with the end of the rawhide leash wrapped around his diminished right hand.

24

THE CRADLE—IT WAS easily big enough to have acquired proper-noun status in their minds—stood in the center of a square five times larger than the one where they had come upon the blasted statue, and when she got a really good look at it, Susannah realized how old and gray and fundamentally grungy the rest of Lud really was. The Cradle was so clean it almost hurt her eyes. No vines overgrew its sides; no graffiti daubed its blinding white walls and steps and columns. The yellow plains dust which had coated everything else was absent here. As they drew closer, Susannah saw why: streams of water coursed endlessly down the sides of the Cradle, issuing from nozzles hidden in the shadows of the copper-sheathed eaves. Interval sprays created by other hidden nozzles washed the steps, turning them into off-and-on waterfalls.

“Wow,” Eddie said. “It makes Grand Central look like a Greyhound station in Buttfuck, Nebraska.”

“What a poet you are, dear,” Susannah said dryly.

The steps surrounded the entire building and rose to a great open lobby. There were no obscuring mats of vegetation here, but Eddie and Susannah found they still couldn’t get a good look inside; the shadows thrown by the overhanging roof were too deep. The Totems of the Beam marched all the way around the building, two by two, but the corners were reserved for creatures Susannah fervently hoped never to meet outside of the occasional nightmare—hideous

stone dragons with scaly bodies, clutching, claw-tipped hands, and nasty peering eyes.

Eddie touched her shoulder and pointed higher. Susannah looked... and felt her breath come to a stop in her throat. Standing astride the peak of the roof, far above The Totems of the Beam and the dragonish gargoyles, as if given dominion over them, was a golden warrior at least sixty feet high. A battered cowboy hat was shoved back to reveal his lined and careworn brow; a bandanna hung askew on his upper chest, as if it had just been pulled down after serving long, hard duty as a dust-muffle. In one upraised fist he held a revolver; in the other, what appeared to be an olive branch.

Roland of Gilead stood atop the Cradle of Lud, dressed in gold.

No, she thought, at last remembering to breathe again. It's not him. . . but in another way, it is. That man was a gunslinger, and the resemblance between him, who's probably been dead a thousand years or more, and Roland is all the truth of ka-tet you'll ever need to know.

Thunder slammed out of the south. Lightning harried racing clouds across the sky. She wished she had more time to study both the golden statue which stood atop the Cradle and the animals which surrounded it; each of these latter appeared to have words carved upon them, and she had an idea that what was written there might be knowledge worth having. Under these circumstances, however, there was no time to spare.

A wide red strip had been painted across the pavement at the point where The Street of the Turtle emptied into The Plaza of the Cradle. Maud and the fellow Eddie called Jeeves the Butler stopped a prudent distance from the red mark.

"This far and no farther," Maud told them flatly. "You may take us to our deaths, but each man and woman owes one to the gods anyway, and I'll die on this side of the dead-line no matter what. I'll not dare Blaine for outlanders."

"Nor will I," Jeeves said. He had taken off his dusty bowler and was holding it against his naked chest. On his face was an expression of fearful reverence. "Fine," Susannah said. "Now scat on out of here, both of you."

“Ye’ll backshoot us the second we turn from ye,” Jeeves said in a trembling voice. “I’ll take my watch and warrant on it, so I will.”

Maud shook her head. The blood on her face had dried to a grotesque maroon stippling. “There never were a backshooting gunslinger—that much I *will* say.”

“We only have *their* word for it that that’s what they are.”

Maud pointed to the big revolver with the worn sandalwood grip which Susannah held in her hand. Jeeves looked . . . and after a moment he stretched out his hand to the woman. When Maud took it, Susannah’s image of them as dangerous killers collapsed. They looked more like Hansel and Gretel than Bonnie and Clyde; tired, frightened, confused, and lost so long in the woods that they had grown old there. Her hate and fear of them departed. What replaced it was pity and a deep, aching sadness.

“Fare you well, both of you,” she said softly. “Walk as you will, and with no fear of harm from me or my man here.”

Maud nodded. “I believe you mean us no harm, and I forgive you for shooting Winston. But listen to me, and listen well: *stay out of the Cradle*. Whatever reasons you think you have for going in, they’re not good enough. To enter Blaine’s Cradle is death.”

“We don’t have any choice,” Eddie said, and thunder banged overhead again, as if in agreement. “Now let me tell *you* something. I don’t know what’s underneath Lud and what isn’t, but I do know those drums you’re so whacked out about are part of a recording—a *song*—that was made in the world my wife and I came from.” He looked at their uncomprehending faces and raised his arms in frustration. “Jesus Pumpkin-Pie Christ, don’t you get it? You’re killing each other over a piece of music that was never even released as a single!”

Susannah put her hand on his shoulder and murmured his name. He ignored her for the moment, his eyes flicking from Jeeves to Maud and then back to Jeeves again.

“You want to see monsters? Take a good look at each other, then. And when you get back to whatever funhouse it is you call home, take a good look at your friends and relatives.”

“You don’t understand,” Maud said. Her eyes were dark and somber. “But you will. Ay—you will.”

“Go on, now,” Susannah said quietly. “Talk between us is no good; the words only drop dead. Just go your way and try to remember the faces of your fathers, for I think you lost sight of those faces long ago.”

The two of them walked back in the direction from which they had come without another word. They did look back over their shoulders from time to time, however, and they were still holding hands: Hansel and Gretel lost in the deep dark forest.

“Lemme outta here,” Eddie said heavily. He made the Ruger safe, stuck it back in the waistband of his pants, and then rubbed his red eyes with the heels of his hands. “Just lemme out, that’s all I ask.”

“I know what you mean, handsome.” She was clearly scared, but her head had that defiant tilt he had come to recognize and love. He put his hands on her shoulders, bent down, and kissed her. He did not let either their surroundings or the oncoming storm keep him from doing a thorough job. When he pulled back at last, she was studying him with wide, dancing eyes. “Wow! What was that about?”

“About how I’m in love with you,” he said, “and I guess that’s about all. Is it enough?”

Her eyes softened. For a moment she thought about telling him the secret she might or might not be keeping, but of course the time and place were wrong—she could no more tell him she might be pregnant now than she could pause to read the words written on the sculpted Portal Totems.

“It’s enough, Eddie,” she said.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.” His hazel eyes were totally focused on her. “It’s hard for me to say stuff like that—living with Henry made it hard, I guess—but it’s true. I think I started loving you because you were everything Roland took me away from—in New York, I mean—but it’s a lot more than that now, because I don’t want to go back anymore. Do you?”

She looked at the Cradle. She was terrified of what they might find in there, but all the same. . . she looked back at him. “No, I don’t want to go back. I want to spend the rest of my life going forward. As

long as you're with me, that is. It's funny, you know, you saying you started loving me because of all the things he took you away from."

"Funny how?"

"I started loving you because you set me free of Detta Walker." She paused, thought, then shook her head slightly. "No—it goes further than that. I started loving you because you set me free of *both* those bitches. One was a foul-mouthed, cock-teasing thief, and the other was a self-righteous, pompous prig. Comes down to six of one and half a dozen of the other, as far as I'm concerned. I like Susannah Dean better than either one... and you were the one who set me free."

This time it was she who did the reaching, pressing her palm to his stubbly cheeks, drawing him down, kissing him gently. When he put a light hand on her breast, she sighed and covered it with her own.

"I think we better get going," she said, "or we're apt to be laying right here in the street. . . and getting wet, from the look."

Eddie stared around at the silent towers, the broken windows, the vine-encrusted walls a final time. Then he nodded. "Yeah. I don't think there's any future in this town, anyway."

He pushed her forward, and they both stiffened as the wheels of the chair passed over what Maud had called the dead-line, fearful that they would trip some ancient protective device and die together. But nothing happened. Eddie pushed her into the plaza, and as they approached the steps leading up to the Cradle, a cold, wind-driven rain began to fall.

Although neither of them knew it, the first of the great autumn storms of Mid-World had arrived.

25

ONCE THEY WERE IN the smelly darkness of the sewers, Gasher slowed the killing pace he'd maintained aboveground. Jake didn't think it was because of the darkness; Gasher seemed to know every

twist and turn of the route he was following, just as advertised. Jake believed it was because his captor was satisfied that Roland had been squashed to jelly by the deadfall trap.

Jake himself had begun to wonder.

If Roland had spotted the tripwires—a far more subtle trap than the one which followed—was it really likely that he had missed seeing the fountain? Jake supposed it was possible, but it didn't make much sense. Jake thought it more likely that Roland had tripped the fountain on purpose, to lull Gasher and perhaps slow him down. He didn't believe Roland could follow them through this maze under the streets—the total darkness would defeat even the gunslinger's tracking abilities—but it cheered his heart to think that Roland might not have died in an attempt to keep his promise.

They turned right, left, then left again. As Jake's other senses sharpened in an attempt to compensate for his lack of sight, he had a vague perception of other tunnels around him. The muffled sounds of ancient, laboring machinery would grow loud for a moment, then fade as the stone foundations of the city drew close around them again. Drafts blew intermittently against his skin, sometimes warm, sometimes chilly. Their splashing footfalls echoed briefly as they passed the intersecting tunnels from which these stenchy breaths blew, and once Jake nearly brained himself on some metal object jutting down from the ceiling. He slapped at it with one hand and felt something that might have been a large valve-wheel. After that he waved his hands as he trotted along in an attempt to read the air ahead of him.

Gasher guided him with taps to the shoulders, as a waggoner might have guided his oxen. They moved at a good clip, trotting but not running. Gasher got enough of his breath back to first hum and then begin singing in a low, surprisingly tuneful tenor voice.

*“Ribble-ti-tibble-ti-ting-ting-ting,
I'll get a job and buy yer a ring,
When I get my mitts
On yer jiggly tits,
Ribble-ti-tibble-ti-ting-ting-ting!”*

*O ribble-ti-tibble,
I just wanter fiddle,
Fiddle around with your ting-ting-ting!”*

There were five or six more verses along this line before Gasher quit. “Now *you* sing somethin, squint.”

“I don’t know anything,” Jake puffed. He hoped he sounded more out of breath than he actually was. He didn’t know if it would do him any good or not, but down here in the dark any edge seemed worth trying for.

Gasher brought his elbow down in the center of Jake’s back, almost hard enough to send him sprawling into the ankle-high water running sluggishly through the tunnel they were traversing. “You *better* know sommat, ’less you want me to rip your everlovin spine right outcher back.” He paused, then added: “There’s haunts down here, boy. They live inside the fuckin machines, so they do. Singin keeps em off . . . don’t you know that? Now *sing!*”

Jake thought hard, not wanting to earn another love-tap from Gasher, and came up with a song he’d learned in summer day camp at the age of seven or eight. He opened his mouth and began to bawl it into the darkness, listening to the echoes bounce back amid the sounds of running water, falling water, and ancient thudding machinery.

*“My girl’s a corker, she’s a New Yorker,
I buy her everything to keep her in style,
She got a pair of hips
Just like two battleships,
Oh boy, that’s how my money goes.*

*My girl’s a dilly, she comes from Philly,
I buy her everything to keep her in style,
She’s got a pair of eyes
Just like two pizza pies,
Oh boy, that’s how—”*

Gasher reached out, seized Jake's ears as if they were jug-handles, and yanked him to a stop. "There's a hole right ahead of yer," he said. "With a voice like yours, squint, it'd be doin the world a mercy to letcher fall in, so it would, but Tick-Tock wouldn't approve at all, so I reckon ye're safe for a little longer." Gasher's hands left Jake's ears, which burned like fire, and fastened on the back of his shirt. "Now lean forward until you feel the ladder on the t'other side. And mind you don't slip and drag us both down!"

Jake leaned cautiously forward, hands outstretched, terrified of falling into a pit he couldn't see. As he groped for the ladder, he became aware of warm air—clean and almost fragrant—whooshing past his face, and a faint blush of rose-colored light from beneath him. His fingers touched a steel rung and closed over it. The bite-wounds on his left hand broke open again, and he felt warm blood running across his palm.

"Got it?" Gasher asked.

"Yes."

"Then climb down! What are you waitin for, gods damn it!" Gasher let go of his shirt, and Jake could imagine him drawing his foot back, meaning to hurry him along with a kick in the ass. Jake stepped across the faintly glimmering gap and began to descend the ladder, using his hurt hand as little as possible. This time the rungs were clear of moss and oil, and hardly rusted at all. The shaft was very long and as Jake went down, hurrying to keep Gasher from stepping on his hands with his thick-soled boots, he found himself remembering a movie he'd once seen on TV—*Journey to the Center of the Earth*.

The throb of machinery grew louder and the rosy glow grew stronger. The machines still didn't sound right, but his ears told him these were in better shape than the ones above. And when he finally reached the bottom, he found the floor was dry. The new horizontal shaft was square, about six feet high, and sleeved with riveted stainless steel. It stretched away for as far as Jake could see in both directions, straight as a string. He knew instinctively, without even thinking about it, that this tunnel (which had to be at least seventy feet under Lud) also followed the path of the Beam. And somewhere

up ahead—Jake was sure of this, although he couldn't have said why—the train they had come looking for lay directly above it.

Narrow ventilation grilles ran along the sides of the walls just below the shaft's ceiling; it was from these that the clean, dry air was flowing. Moss dangled from some of them in blue-gray beards, but most were still clear. Below every other grille was a yellow arrow with a symbol that looked a bit like a lower-case *t*. The arrows pointed in the direction Jake and Gasher were heading.

The rose-colored light was coming from glass tubes which ran along the ceiling of the shaft in parallel rows. Some—about one in every three—were dark, and others sputtered fitfully, but at least half of them were still working. *Neon tubing*, Jake thought, amazed. *How about that?*

Gasher dropped down beside him. He saw Jake's expression of surprise and grinned. "Nice, ennet? Cool in the summer, warm in the winter, and so much food that five hunnert men couldn't eat it in five hunnert years. And do yer know the best part, squint? The very best part of the whole cozy fakement?"

Jake shook his head.

"Farkin Pubies don't have the leastest idear the place even exists. They think there's monsters down here. Catch a Pubie goin within twenty feet of a sewer-cap, less'n he has to!"

He threw his head back and laughed heartily. Jake didn't join in, even though a cold voice in the back of his mind told him it might be politic to do so. He didn't join in because he knew exactly how the Pubes felt. There *were* monsters under the city—trolls and boggerts and ores. Hadn't he been captured by just such a one?

Gasher shoved him to the left. "Garn—almost there now. *Hup!*"

They jogged on, their footfalls chasing them in a pack of echoes. After ten or fifteen minutes of this, Jake saw a watertight hatchway about two hundred yards ahead. As they drew closer, he could see a big valve-wheel sticking out of it. A communicator box was mounted on the wall to the right.

"I'm blown out," Gasher gasped as they reached the door at the end of the tunnel. "Doin's like this are too much for an inwalid like yer old pal, so they are!" He thumbed the button on the intercom and

bawled: “I got im, Tick-Tock—got him as dandy as you please! Didn’t even muss ’is hair! Didn’t I tell yer I would? Trust the Gasherman, I said, for he’ll leadjer straight and true! Now open up and let us in!”

He let go of the button and looked impatiently at the door. The valve-wheel didn’t turn. Instead a flat, drawling voice came out of the intercom speaker: “What’s the password?”

Gasher frowned horribly, scratched his chin with his long, dirty nails, then lifted his eyepatch and swabbed out another clot of yellow-green goo. “Tick-Tock and his passwords!” he said to Jake. He sounded worried as well as irritated. “He’s a trig cove, but that’s takin it a deal too far if you ask me, so it is.”

He pushed the button and yelled, “Come on, Tick-Tock! If you don’t reckergnize the sound of my voice, you need a heary-aid!”

“Oh, I recognize it,” the drawling voice returned. To Jake it sounded like Jerry Reed, who played Burt Reynolds’s sidekick in *Smokey and the Bandit*. “But I don’t know who’s with you, do I? Or have you forgotten that the camera out there went tits-up last year? You give the password, Gasher, or you can rot out there!”

Gasher stuck a finger up his nose, extracted a chunk of snot the color of mint jelly, and squashed it into the grille of the speaker. Jake watched this childish display of ill temper in silent fascination, feeling unwelcome, hysterical laughter bubbling around inside him. Had they come all this way, through the booby-trapped mazes and lightless tunnels, to be balked here at this watertight door simply because Gasher couldn’t remember the Tick-Tock Man’s password?

Gasher looked at him balefully, then slid his hand across his skull, peeling off his sweat-soaked yellow scarf. The skull beneath was bald, except for a few straggling tufts of black hair like porcupine quills, and deeply dented above the left temple. Gasher peered into the scarf and plucked forth a scrap of paper. “Gods bless Hoots,” he muttered. “Hoots takes care of me a right proper, he does.”

He peered at the scrap, turning it this way and that, and then held it out to Jake. He kept his voice pitched low, as if the Tick-Tock Man could hear him even though the TALK button on the intercom wasn’t depressed.

“You’re a proper little gennelman, ain’t you? And the very first thing they teach a gennelman to do after he’s been larned not to eat the paste and piss in the corners is read. So read me the word on this paper, cully, for it’s gone right out of my head—so it has.”

Jake took the paper, looked at it, then looked up at Gasher again. “What if I won’t?” he asked coolly.

Gasher was momentarily taken aback at this response ... and then he began to grin with dangerous good humor. “Why, I’ll grab yer by the throat and use yer head for a doorknocker,” he said. “I doubt if it’ll conwince old Ticky to let me in—for he’s still nervous of your hardcase friend, so he is—but it’ll do my heart a world of good to see your brains drippin off that wheel.”

Jake considered this, the dark laughter still bubbling away inside him. The Tick-Tock Man was a trig enough cove, all right—he had known that it would be difficult to persuade Gasher, who was dying anyway, to speak the password even if Roland had taken him prisoner. What Tick-Tock hadn’t taken into account was Gasher’s defective memory.

Don’t laugh. If you do, he really will beat your brains out.

In spite of his brave words, Gasher was watching Jake with real anxiety, and Jake realized a potentially powerful fact: Gasher might not be afraid of dying . . .but he was afraid of being humiliated.

“All right, Gasher,” he said calmly. “The word on this piece of paper is *bountiful*.”

“Gimme that.” Gasher snatched the paper back, returned it to his scarf, and quickly wrapped the yellow cloth around his head again. He thumbed the intercom button. “Tick-Tock? Yer still there?”

“Where else would I be? The West End of the World?” The drawling voice now sounded mildly amused.

Gasher stuck his whitish tongue out at the speaker, but his voice was ingratiating, almost servile. “The password’s bountiful, and a fine word it is, too! Now let me in, gods cuss it!”

“Of course,” the Tick-Tock Man said. A machine started up somewhere nearby, making Jake jump. The valve-wheel in the center of the door spun. When it stopped, Gasher seized it, yanked it

outward, grabbed Jake's arm, and propelled him over the raised lip of the door and into the strangest room he had ever seen in his life.

26

ROLAND DESCENDED INTO DUSKY pink light. Oy's bright eyes peered out from the open V of his shirt; his neck stretched to the limit of its considerable length as he sniffed at the warm air that blew through the ventilator grilles. Roland had had to depend completely on the bumbler's nose in the dark passages above, and he had been terribly afraid the animal would lose Jake's scent in the running water. . . . but when he had heard the sound of singing—first Gasher, then Jake—echoing back through the pipes, he had relaxed a little. Oy had not led them wrong.

Oy had heard it, too. Up until then he had been moving slowly and cautiously, even backtracking every now and again to be sure of himself, but when he heard Jake's voice he began to run, straining the rawhide leash. Roland was afraid he might call after Jake in his harsh voice—*Ake! Ake!*—but he hadn't done so. And, just as they reached the shaft which led to the lower levels of this Dycian Maze, Roland had heard the sound of some new machine—a pump of some sort, perhaps—followed by the metallic, echoing crash of a door being slammed shut.

He reached the foot of the square tunnel and glanced briefly at the double line of lighted tubes which led off in either direction. They were lit with swamp-fire, he saw, like the sign outside the place which had belonged to Balazar in the city of New York. He looked more closely at the narrow chrome ventilation strips running along the top of each wall, and the arrows below them, then slipped the rawhide loop off Oy's neck. Oy shook his head impatiently, clearly glad to be rid of it.

"We're close," he murmured into the bumbler's cocked ear, "and so we have to be quiet. Do you understand, Oy? Very quiet."

“I-yet,” Oy replied in a hoarse whisper that would have been funny under other circumstances.

Roland put him down and Oy was immediately off down the tunnel, neck out, muzzle to the steel floor. Roland could hear him muttering *Ake-Ake! Ake-Ake!* under his breath. Roland unholstered his gun and followed him.

27

EDDIE AND SUSANNAH LOOKED up at the vastness of Blaine’s Cradle as the skies opened and the rain began to fall in torrents.

“It’s a hell of a building, but they forgot the handicap ramps!” Eddie yelled, raising his voice to be heard over the rain and thunder.

“Never mind that,” Susannah said impatiently, slipping out of the wheelchair. “Let’s get up there and out of the rain.”

Eddie looked dubiously up the incline of steps. The risers were shallow. . . but there were a lot of them. “You sure, Suze?”

“Race you, white boy,” she said, and began to wriggle upward with uncanny ease, using hands, muscular forearms, and the stumps of her legs.

And she almost *did* beat him; Eddie had the ironmongery to contend with, and it slowed him down. Both of them were panting when they reached the top, and tendrils of steam were rising from their wet clothes. Eddie grabbed her under the arms, swung her up, and then just held her with his hands locked together in the small of her back instead of dropping her back into the chair, as he had meant to do. He felt randy and half-crazy without the slightest idea why.

Oh, give me a break, he thought. You’ve gotten this far alive; that’s what’s got your glands pumped up and ready to party.

Susannah licked her full lower lip and wound her strong fingers into his hair. She pulled. It hurt. . . and at the same time it felt

wonderful. “Told you I’d beat you, white boy,” she said in a low, husky voice.

“Get outta here—I had you. . . by half a step.” He tried to sound less out of breath than he was and found it was impossible.

“Maybe. . . but it blew you out, didn’t it?” One hand left his hair, slid downward, and squeezed gently. A smile gleamed in her eyes.

“*Somethin* ain’t blown out, though.”

Thunder rumbled across the sky. They flinched, then laughed together.

“Come on,” he said. “This is nuts. The time’s all wrong.”

She didn’t contradict him, but she squeezed him again before returning her hand to his shoulder. Eddie felt a pang of regret as he swung her back into her chair and ran her across vast flagstones and under cover of the roof. He thought he saw the same regret in Susannah’s eyes.

When they were out of the downpour, Eddie paused and they looked back. The Plaza of the Cradle, The Street of the Turtle, and all the city beyond was rapidly disappearing into a shifting gray curtain. Eddie wasn’t a bit sorry. Lud hadn’t earned itself a place in his mental scrapbook of fond memories.

“Look,” Susannah murmured. She was pointing at a nearby downspout. It ended in a large, scaly fish-head that looked like a close relation to the dragon-gargoyles which decorated the corners of the Cradle. Water ran from its mouth in a silver torrent.

“This isn’t just a passing shower, is it?” Eddie asked.

“Nope. It’s gonna rain until it gets tired of it, and then it’s gonna rain some more, just for spite. Maybe a week; maybe a month. Not that it’s gonna matter to us, if Blaine decides he doesn’t like our looks and fries us. Fire a shot to let Roland know we got here, sugar, and then we’ll have us a look around. See what we can see.”

Eddie pointed the Ruger into the gray sky, pulled the trigger, and fired the shot which Roland heard a mile or more away, as he followed Jake and Gasher through the booby-trapped maze. Eddie stood where he was a moment longer, trying to persuade himself that things might still turn out all right, that his heart was wrong in its stubborn insistence that they had seen the last of the gunslinger and

the boy Jake. Then he made the automatic safe again, returned it to the waistband of his pants, and went back to Susannah. He turned her chair away from the steps and rolled her along an aisle of columns which led deeper into the building. She popped the cylinder of Roland's gun and reloaded it as they went.

Under the roof the rain had a secret, ghostly sound and even the harsh thundercracks were muted. The columns which supported the structure were at least ten feet in diameter, and their tops were lost in the gloom. From up there in the shadows, Eddie heard the cooing conversation of pigeons.

Now a sign hanging on thick chrome-silver chains swam out of the shadows:

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS WELCOMES YOU
TO THE CRADLE OF LUD ←SOUTHEAST TRAVEL
(BLAINE) NORTHWEST TRAVEL (PATRICIA) →

"Now we know the name of the one that fell in the river," Eddie said. "Patricia. They got their colors wrong, though. It's supposed to be pink for girls and blue for boys, not the other way around."

"Maybe they're *both* blue."

"They're not. Blaine's pink."

"How would you know that?"

Eddie looked confused. "I don't know how. . . but I do."

They followed the arrow pointing toward Blaine's berth, entering what had to be a grand concourse. Eddie didn't have Susannah's ability to see the past in clear, visionary flashes, but his imagination nonetheless filled this vast, pillared space with a thousand hurrying people; he heard clicking heels and murmuring voices, saw embraces of homecoming and farewell. And over everything, the speakers chanting news of a dozen different destinations.

Patricia is now boarding for Northwest Baronies. . .

Will Passenger Killington, passenger Killington, please report to the information booth on the lower level?

Blaine is now arriving at Berth #2, and will be debarking shortly . . .
Now there was only the pigeons.

Eddie shivered.

“Look at the faces,” Susannah murmured. “I don’t know if they give you the willies, but they sure do me.” She was pointing to the right. High up on the wall, a series of sculpted heads seemed to push out of the marble, peering down at them from the shadows—stern men with the harsh faces of executioners who are happy in their work. Some of the faces had fallen from their places and lay in granite shards and splinters seventy or eighty feet below their peers. Those remaining were spiderwebbed with cracks and splattered with pigeon dung.

“They must have been the Supreme Court, or something,” Eddie said, uneasily scanning all those thin lips and cracked, empty eyes. “Only judges can look so smart and so completely pissed off at the same time—you’re talking to a guy who knows. There isn’t one of them who looks like he’d give a crippled crab a crutch.”

“ ‘A heap of broken images, where the sun beats and the dead tree gives no shelter,’ ” Susannah murmured, and at these words Eddie felt gooseflesh waltz across the skin of his arms and chest and legs.

“What’s that, Suze?”

“A poem by a man who must have seen Lud in his dreams,” she said. “Come on, Eddie. Forget them.”

“Easier said than done.” But he began to push her again.

Ahead, a vast grilled barrier like a castle barbican swam out of the gloom. . . and beyond it, they caught their first glimpse of Blaine the Mono. It was pink, just as Eddie had said it would be, a delicate shade which matched the veins running through the marble pillars. Blaine flowed above the wide loading platform in a smooth, streamlined bullet shape which looked more like flesh than metal. Its surface was broken only once—by a triangular window equipped with a huge wiper. Eddie knew there would be another triangular window with another big wiper on the other side of the mono’s nose, so that if you looked at Blaine head-on, it would seem to have a face,

just like Charlie the Choo-Choo. The wipers would look like slyly drooping eyelids.

White light from the southeastern slot in the Cradle fell across Blaine in a long, distorted rectangle. To Eddie, the body of the train looked like the breaching back of some fabulous pink whale—one that was utterly silent.

“Wow.” His voice had fallen to a whisper. “We found it.”

“Yes. Blaine the Mono.”

“Is it dead, do you think? It *looks* dead.”

“It’s not. Sleeping, maybe, but a long way from dead.”

“You sure?”

“Were you sure it would be pink?” It wasn’t a question he had to answer, and he didn’t. The face she turned up to him was strained and badly frightened. “It’s sleeping, and you know what? I’m scared to wake it up.”

“Well, we’ll wait for the others, then.”

She shook her head. “I think we better try to be ready for when they get here. . . because I’ve got an idea that they’re going to come on the run. Push me over to that box mounted on the bars. It looks like an intercom. See it?”

He did, and pushed her slowly toward it. It was mounted on one side of a closed gate in the center of the barrier which ran the length of the Cradle. The vertical bars of the barrier were made of what looked like stainless steel; those of the gate appeared to be ornamental iron, and their lower ends disappeared into steel-ringed holes in the floor. There was no way either of them was going to wriggle through those bars, either, Eddie saw. The gap between each set was no more than four inches. It would have been a tight squeeze even for Oy.

Pigeons ruffled and cooed overhead. The left wheel of Susannah’s chair squawked monotonously. *My kingdom for an oilcan*, Eddie thought, and realized he was a lot more than just scared. The last time he had felt this level of terror had been on the day when he and Henry had stood on the sidewalk of Rhmehold Street in Dutch Hill, looking at the slumped ruin of The Mansion. They hadn’t gone in on that day in 1977; they had turned their backs on the haunted house

and walked away, and he remembered vowing to himself that he would never, never, *ever* go back to that place. It was a promise he'd kept, but here he was, in another haunted house, and there was the haunter, right over there—Blaine the Mono, a long low pink shape with one window peering at him like the eye of a dangerous animal who is shamming sleep.

He stirs no more from his berth in the Cradle. . . He has even stopped speaking in his many voices and laughing. . . Ardis was the last to go nigh Blaine . . . and when Ardis couldn't answer what was asked, Blaine slew him with blue fire.

If it speaks to me, I'll probably go crazy, Eddie thought.

The wind gusted outside, and a fine spray of rain flew in through the tall egress slot cut in the side of the building. He saw it strike Blaine's window and bead up there.

Eddie shuddered suddenly and looked sharply around. "We're being watched—I can feel it."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised. Push me closer to the gate, Eddie. I want to get a better look at that box."

"Okay, but don't touch it. If it's electrified—"

"If Blaine wants to cook us, he will," Susannah said, looking through the bars at Blaine's back. "You know it, and I do, too."

And because Eddie knew that was only the truth, he said nothing.

The box looked like a combination intercom and burglar alarm. There was a speaker set into the top half, with what looked like a TALK/LISTEN button next to it. Below this were numbers arranged in a shape which made a diamond:

1
2 3
4 5 6
7 8 9 10
11 12 13 14 15
16 17 18 19 20 21
22 23 24 25 26 27 28
29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36
37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45
46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55
56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64
65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72
73 74 75 76 77 78 79
80 81 82 83 84 85
86 87 88 89 90
91 92 93 94
95 96 97
98 99
100

Under the diamond were two other buttons with words of the High Speech printed on them: COMMAND and ENTER.

Susannah looked bewildered and doubtful. “What *is* this thing, do you think? It looks like a gadget in a science fiction movie.”

Of course it did, Eddie realized. Susannah had probably seen a home security system or two in her time—she had, after all, lived among the Manhattan rich, even if she had not been very enthusiastically accepted by them—but there was a world of difference between the electronics gear available in her when, 1963, and his own, which was 1987. *We’ve never talked much about the differences, either, he thought. I wonder what she’d think if I told her Ronald Reagan was President of the United States when Roland snatched me? Probably that I was crazy.*

“It’s a security system,” he said. Then, although his nerves and instincts screamed out against it, he forced himself to reach out with his right hand and thumb the TALK/LISTEN switch.

There was no crackle of electricity; no deadly blue fire went racing up his arm. No sign that the thing was even still connected.

Maybe Blaine is dead. Maybe he’s dead, after all.

But he didn’t really believe that.

“Hello?” he said, and in his mind’s eye saw the unfortunate Ardis, screaming as he was microwaved by the blue fire dancing all over

his face and body, melting his eyes and setting his hair ablaze.

“Hello . . . Blaine? *Anybody?*”

He let go of the button and waited, stiff with tension. Susannah’s hand crept into his, cold and small. There was still no answer, and Eddie—now more reluctant than ever—pushed the button again.

“Blaine?”

He let go of the button. Waited. And when there was still no answer, a dangerous giddiness overcame him, as it often did in moments of stress and fear. When that giddiness took him, counting the cost no longer seemed to matter. *Nothing* mattered. It had been like that when he had outfaced Balazar’s sallow-faced contact man in Nassau, and it was like that now. And if Roland had seen him in the moment this lunatic impatience overtook him, he would have seen more than just a resemblance between Eddie and Cuthbert; he would have sworn Eddie *was* Cuthbert.

He jammed the button in with his thumb and began to bellow into the speaker, adopting a plummy (and completely bogus) British accent. “Hullo, Blaine! Cheerio, old fellow! This is Robin Leach, host of *Life-styles of the Rich and Brainless*, here to tell you that *you* have won six billion dollars and a new Ford Escort in the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes!”

Pigeons took flight above them in soft, startled explosions of wings. Susannah gasped. Her face wore the dismayed expression of a devout woman who has just heard her husband blaspheme in a cathedral. “Eddie, stop it! *Stop it!*”

Eddie couldn’t stop it. His mouth was smiling, but his eyes glittered with a mixture of fear, hysteria, and frustrated anger. “You and your monorail girlfriend, Patricia, will spend a lux-yoo-rious month in scenic Jimtown, where you’ll drink only the finest wine and eat only the finest virgins! You—”

“. . . *shhhh* . . .”

Eddie broke off, looking at Susannah. He was at once sure that it had been she who had shushed him—not only because she had already tried but because she was the only other person here—and yet at the same time he knew it *hadn’t* been Susannah. That had

been *another* voice: the voice of a very young and very frightened child.

“Suze? Did you—”

Susannah was shaking her head and raising her hand at the same time. She pointed at the intercom box, and Eddie saw the button marked COMMAND was glowing a very faint shell-pink. It was the same color as the mono sleeping in its berth on the other side of the barrier.

“*Shhh . . . don’t wake him up,*” the child’s voice mourned. It drifted from the speaker, soft as an evening breeze.

“What . . .” Eddie began. Then he shook his head, reached toward the TALK/LISTEN switch and pressed it gently. When he spoke again, it was not in the blaring Robin Leach bellow but in the almost-whisper of a conspirator. “What are you? Who are you?”

He released the button. He and Susannah regarded each other with the big eyes of children who now know they are sharing the house with a dangerous—perhaps psychotic—adult. How have they come by the knowledge? Why, because another child has told them, a child who has lived with the psychotic adult for a long time, hiding in corners and stealing out only when it knows the adult is asleep; a frightened child who happens to be almost invisible.

There was no answer. Eddie let the seconds spin out. Each one seemed long enough to read a whole novel in. He was reaching for the button again when the faint pink glow reappeared.

“*I’m Little Blaine,*” the child’s voice whispered. “*The one he doesn’t see. The one he forgot. The one he thinks he left behind in the rooms of ruin and the halls of the dead.*”

Eddie pushed the button again with a hand that had picked up an uncontrollable shake. He could hear that shake in his voice, as well. “*Who? Who is the one who doesn’t see? Is it the Bear?*”

No—not the bear; not he. Shardik lay dead in the forest, many miles behind them; the world had moved on even since then. Eddie suddenly remembered what it had been like to lay his ear against that strange unfound door in the clearing where the bear had lived its violent half-life, that door with its somehow terrible stripes of yellow and black. It was all of a piece, he realized now; all part of some

awful, decaying whole, a tattered web with the Dark Tower at its center like an incomprehensible stone spider. All of Mid-World had become one vast haunted mansion in these strange latter days; all of Mid-World had become The Drawers; all of Mid-World had become a waste land, haunting and haunted.

He saw Susannah's lips form the words of the real answer before the voice from the intercom could speak them, and those words were as obvious as the solution to a riddle once the answer is spoken.

"Big Blaine," the unseen voice whispered. *"Big Blaine is the ghost in the machine—the ghost in all the machines."*

Susannah's hand had gone to her throat and was clutching it, as if she intended to strangle herself. Her eyes were full of terror, but they were not glassy, not stunned; they were sharp with understanding. Perhaps she knew a voice like this one from her own when—the when where the integrated whole that was Susannah had been shunted aside by the warring personalities of Detta and Odetta. The childish voice had surprised her as well as him, but her agonized eyes said she was no stranger to the concept being expressed.

Susannah knew all about the madness of duality.

"Eddie we have to go," she said. Her terror turned the words into an unpunctuated auditory smear. He could hear air whistling in her windpipe like a cold wind around a chimney. "Eddie we have to get away Eddie we have to get away Eddie—"

"Too late," the tiny, mourning voice said. *"He's awake. Big Blaine is awake. He knows you are here. And he's coming."*

Suddenly lights—bright orange arc-sodiums—began to flash on in pairs above them, bathing the pillared vastness of the Cradle in a harsh glare that banished all shadows. Hundreds of pigeons darted and swooped in frightened, aimless flight, startled from their complex of interlocked nests high above.

"Wait!" Eddie shouted. "Please, wait!"

In his agitation he forgot to push the button, but it made no difference; Little Blaine responded anyway. *"No! I can't let him catch me! I can't let him kill me, too!"*

The light on the intercom box went dark again, but only for a moment. This time both COMMAND and ENTER lit up, and their

color was not pink but the lurid dark red of a blacksmith's forge.

"WHO ARE YOU?" a voice roared, and it came not just from the box but from every speaker in the city which still operated. The rotting bodies hanging from the poles shivered with the vibrations of that mighty voice; it seemed that even the dead would run from Blaine, if they could.

Susannah shrank back in her chair, the heels of her hands pressed to her ears, her face long with dismay, her mouth distorted in a silent scream. Eddie felt himself shrinking toward all the fantastic, hallucinatory terrors of eleven. Had it been this voice he had feared when he and Henry stood outside The Mansion? That he had perhaps even *anticipated*? He didn't know. . . but he *did* know how Jack in that old story must have felt when he realized that he had tried the beanstalk once too often, and awakened the giant.

"HOW DARE YOU DISTURB MY SLEEP? TELL ME NOW, OR DIE WHERE YOU STAND."

He might have frozen right there, leaving Blaine—Big Blaine—to do to them whatever it was he had done to Ardis (or something even worse); perhaps *should* have frozen, locked in that down-the-rabbit-hole, fairy-tale terror. It was the memory of the small voice which had spoken first that enabled him to move. It had been the voice of a terrified child, but it had tried to help them, terrified or not.

So now you have to help yourself, he thought. You woke it up; deal with it, for Christ's sake!

Eddie reached out and pushed the button again.

"My name is Eddie Dean. The woman with me is my wife, Susannah. We're. . ."

He looked at Susannah, who nodded and made frantic motions for him to go on.

"We're on a quest. We seek the Dark Tower which lies in the Path of the Beam. We're in the company of two others, Roland of Gilead and. . . and Jake of New York. We're from New York too. If you're—" He paused for a moment, biting back the words *Big Blaine*. If he used them, he might make the intelligence behind the voice aware that they had heard another voice; a ghost inside the ghost, so to speak.

Susannah gestured again for him to go on, using both hands.

“If you’re Blaine the Mono. . . well... we want you to take us.”

He released the button. There was no response for what seemed like a very long time, only the agitated flutter of the disturbed pigeons from overhead. When Blaine spoke again, his voice came only from the speaker-box mounted on the gate and sounded almost human.

“DO NOT TRY MY PATIENCE. ALL THE DOORS TO THAT WHERE ARE CLOSED. GILEAD IS NO MORE, AND THOSE KNOWN AS GUNSLINGERS ARE ALL DEAD. NOW ANSWER MY QUESTION: WHO ARE YOU? THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE.”

There was a sizzling sound. A ray of brilliant blue-white light lanced down from the ceiling and seared a hole the size of a golf-ball in the marble floor less than five feet to the left of Susannah’s wheelchair. Smoke that smelled like the aftermath of a lightning-bolt rose lazily from it. Susannah and Eddie stared at each other in mute terror for a moment, and then Eddie lunged for the communicator-box and thumbed the button.

“You’re wrong! We *did* come from New York! We came through the doors, on the beach, only a few weeks ago!”

“It’s true!” Susannah called. “I swear it is!”

Silence. Beyond the long barrier, Blaine’s pink back humped smoothly. The window at the front seemed to regard them like a vapid glass eye. The wiper could have been a lid half-closed in a sly wink.

“PROVE IT,” Blaine said at last.

“Christ, how do I do that?” Eddie asked Susannah.

“I don’t know.”

Eddie pushed the button again. “The Statue of Liberty! Does that ring a bell?”

“GO ON,” Blaine said. Now the voice sounded almost thoughtful.

“The Empire State Building! The Stock Exchange! The World Trade Center! Coney Island Red-Hots! Radio City Music Hall! The East Vil—”

Blaine cut him off . . . and now, incredibly, the voice which came from the speaker was the drawling voice of John Wayne.

“OKAY, PILGRIM. I BELIEVE YOU.”

Eddie and Susannah shared another glance, this one of confusion and relief. But when Blaine spoke again, the voice was again cold and emotionless.

“ASK ME A QUESTION, EDDIE DEAN OF NEW YORK. AND IT BETTER BE A GOOD ONE.” There was a pause, and then Blaine added: “BECAUSE IF IT’S NOT, YOU AND YOUR WOMAN ARE GOING TO DIE, NO MATTER WHERE YOU CAME FROM.”

Susannah looked from the box on the gate to Eddie. “What’s it *talking* about?” she hissed.

Eddie shook his head. “I don’t have the slightest idea.”

28

TO JAKE, THE ROOM Gasher dragged him into looked like a Minuteman missile silo which had been decorated by the inmates of a lunatic asylum: part museum, part living room, part hippie crash pad. Above him, empty space vaulted up to a rounded ceiling and below him it dropped seventy-five or a hundred feet to a similarly rounded base. Running all around the single curved wall in vertical lines were tubes of neon in alternating strokes of color: red, blue, green, yellow, orange, peach, pink. These long tubes came together in roaring rainbow knots at the bottom and top of the silo. . . if that was what it had been.

The room was about three-quarters of the way up the vast capsule-shaped space and floored with rusty iron grillework. Rugs that looked Turkish (he later learned that such rugs were actually from a barony called Kashmin) lay on the grilled floor here and there. Their corners were held down with brass-bound trunks or standing lamps or the squat legs of overstuffed chairs. If not, they would have flapped like strips of paper tied to an electric fan, because a steady warm draft rushed up from below. Another draft, this one issuing from a circular band of ventilators like the ones in the tunnel they had followed here, swirled about four or five feet above Jake’s head. On

the far side of the room was a door identical to the one through which he and Gasher had entered, and Jake assumed it was a continuation of the subterranean corridor following the Path of the Beam.

There were half a dozen people in the room, four men and two women. Jake guessed that he was looking at the Gray high command—if, that was, there were enough Grays left to warrant a high command. None of them were young, but all were still in the prime of their lives. They looked at Jake as curiously as he looked at them.

Sitting in the center of the room, with one massive leg thrown casually over the arm of a chair big enough to be a throne, was a man who looked like a cross between a Viking warrior and a giant from a child's fairy-tale. His heavily muscled upper body was naked except for a silver band around one bicep, a knife-scabbard looped over one shoulder, and a strange charm about his neck. His lower body was clad in soft, tight-fitting leather breeches which were tucked into high boots. He wore a yellow scarf tied around one of these. His hair, a dirty gray-blond, cascaded almost to the middle of his broad back; his eyes were as green and curious as the eyes of a tomcat who is old enough to be wise but not old enough to have lost that refined sense of cruelty which passes for fun in feline circles. Hung by its strap from the back of the chair was what looked like a very old machine-gun.

Jake looked more closely at the ornament on the Viking's chest and saw that it was a coffin-shaped glass box hung on a silver chain. Inside it, a tiny gold clock-face marked the time at five minutes past three. Below the face, a tiny gold pendulum went back and forth, and despite the soft whoosh of circulating air from above and below, he could hear the tick-tock sound it made. The hands of the clock were moving faster than they should have done, and Jake was not very surprised to see that they were moving backward.

He thought of the crocodile in *Peter Pan*, the one that was always chasing after Captain Hook, and a little smile touched his lips. Gasher saw it, and raised his hand. Jake cringed away, putting his own hands to his face.

The Tick-Tock Man shook his finger at Gasher in an amusing schoolmarmish gesture. “Now, now . . . no need of that, Gasher,” he said.

Gasher lowered his hand at once. His face had changed completely. Before, it had alternated between stupid rage and a species of cunning, almost existential humor. Now he only looked servile and adoring. Like the others in the room (and Jake himself), the Gasherman could not look away from Tick-Tock for long; his eyes were drawn inexorably back. And Jake could understand why. The Tick-Tock Man was the only person here who seemed wholly vital, wholly healthy, and wholly alive.

“If you say there’s no need, there ain’t,” Gasher said, but he favored Jake with a dark look before shifting his eyes back to the blonde giant on the throne. “Still, he’s wery pert, Ticky. Wery pert, Ticky. Wery pert indeed, so he is, and if you want my opinion, he’ll take a deal of training!”

“When I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it,” the Tick-Tock Man said. “Now close the door, Gash—was you bore in a barn?”

A dark-haired woman laughed shrilly, a sound like the caw of a crow. Tick-Tock flicked his eyes toward her; she quieted at once and cast her eyes down to the grilled floor.

The door through which Gasher had dragged him was actually two doors. The arrangement reminded Jake of the way spaceship airlocks looked in the more intelligent science fiction movies. Gasher shut them both and turned to Tick-Tock, giving him a thumbs-up gesture. The Tick-Tock Man nodded and reached languidly up to press a button set into a piece of furniture that looked like a speaker’s podium. A pump began to cycle wheezily within the wall, and the neon tubes dimmed perceptibly. There was a faint hiss of air and the valve-wheel of the inside door spun shut. Jake supposed the one in the outer door was doing the same. This was some sort of bomb-shelter, all right; no doubt of that. When the pump died, the long neon tubes resumed their former muted brilliance.

“There,” Tick-Tock said pleasantly. His eyes began to look Jake up and down. Jake had a clear and very uncomfortable sense of being

expertly catalogued and filed. “All safe and sound, we are. Snug as bugs in a rug. Right, Hoots?”

“Yar!” a tall, skinny man in a black suit replied promptly. His face was covered with some sort of rash which he scratched obsessively.

“I brung him,” Gasher said. “I told yer you could trust me to do it, and didn’t I?”

“You did,” Tick-Tock said. “Bang on. I had some doubts about your ability to remember the password at the end, there, but—”

The dark-haired woman uttered another shrill caw. The Tick-Tock Man half-turned in her direction, that lazy smile dimpling the corners of his mouth, and before Jake was able to grasp what was happening—what had *already* happened—she was staggering backward, her eyes bulging in surprise and pain, her hands groping at some strange tumor in the middle of her chest which hadn’t been there a second before.

Jake realized the Tick-Tock Man had made some sort of move as he was turning, a move so quick it had been no more than a flicker. The slim white hilt which had protruded from the scabbard looped over the Tick-Tock Man’s shoulder was gone. The knife was now on the other side of the room, sticking out of the dark-haired woman’s chest. Tick-Tock had drawn and thrown with an uncanny speed Jake wasn’t sure even Roland could match. It had been like some malign magic trick.

The others watched silently as the woman staggered toward Tick-Tock, gagging harshly, her hands wrapped loosely around the hilt of the knife. Her hip bumped one of the standing lamps and the one called Hoots darted forward to catch it before it could fall. Tick-Tock himself never moved; he only went on sitting with his leg tossed over the arm of his throne, watching the woman with his lazy smile.

Her foot caught beneath one of the rugs and she tumbled forward. Once more the Tick-Tock Man moved with that spooky speed, pulling back the foot which had been dangling over the arm of the chair and then driving it forward again like a piston. It buried itself in the pit of the dark-haired woman’s stomach and she went flying backward. Blood spewed from her mouth and splattered the furniture. She struck the wall, slid down it, and ended up sitting with her chin on her

breastbone. To Jake she looked like a movie Mexican taking a siesta against an adobe wall. It was hard for him to believe she had gone from living to dead with such terrible speed. Neon tubes turned her hair into a haze that was half red and half blue. Her glazing eyes stared at the Tick-Tock Man with terminal amazement.

“I *told* her about that laugh,” Tick-Tock said. His eyes shifted to the other woman, a heavysset redhead who looked like a long-haul trucker. “Didn’t I, Tilly?”

“Ay,” Tilly said at once. Her eyes were lustrous with fear and excitement, and she licked her lips obsessively. “So you did, many and many a time. I’ll set my watch and warrant on it.”

“So you might, if you could reach up your fat ass far enough to find them,” Tick-Tock said. “Bring me my knife, Brandon, and mind you wipe that slut’s stink off it before you put it in my hand.”

A short, bandy-legged man hopped to do as he had been bidden. The knife wouldn’t come free at first; it seemed caught on the unfortunate dark-haired woman’s breastbone. Brandon threw a terrified glance over his shoulder at the Tick-Tock Man and then tugged harder.

Tick-Tock, however, appeared to have forgotten all about both Brandon and the woman who had literally laughed herself to death. His brilliant green eyes had fixed on something which interested him much more than the dead woman.

“Come here, cully,” he said. “I want a better look at you.”

Gasher gave him a shove. Jake stumbled forward. He would have fallen if Tick-Tock’s strong hands hadn’t caught him by the shoulders. Then, when he was sure Jake had his balance again, Tick-Tock grasped the boy’s left wrist and raised it. It was Jake’s Seiko which had drawn his interest.

“If this here’s what I think it is, it’s an omen for sure and true,” Tick-Tock said. “Talk to me, boy—what’s this *sigul* you wear?”

Jake, who hadn’t the slightest idea what a *sigul* was, could only hope for the best. “It’s a watch. But it doesn’t work, Mr. Tick-Tock.”

Hoots chuckled at that, then clapped both hands over his mouth when the Tick-Tock Man turned to look at him. After a moment, Tick-Tock looked back at Jake, and a sunny smile replaced the frown.

Looking at that smile almost made you forget that it was a dead woman and not a movie Mexican taking a siesta over there against the wall. Looking at it almost made you forget that these people were crazy, and the Tick-Tock Man was likely the craziest inmate in the whole asylum.

“*Watch,*” Tick-Tock said, nodding. “Ay, a likely enough name for such; after all, what does a person want with a timepiece but to watch it once in a while? Ay, Brandon? Ay, Tilly? Ay, Gasher?”

They responded with eager affirmatives. The Tick-Tock Man favored them with his winning smile, then turned back to Jake again. Now Jake noticed that the smile, winning or not, stopped well short of the Tick-Tock Man’s green eyes. They were as they had been throughout: cool, cruel, and curious.

He reached a finger toward the Seiko, which now proclaimed the time to be ninety-one minutes past seven—A.M. *and* P.M.—and pulled it back just before touching the glass above the liquid crystal display. “Tell me, dear boy—is this ‘watch’ of yours boobyrigged?”

“Huh? Oh! No. No, it’s not boobyrigged.” Jake touched his own finger to the face of the watch.

“That means nothing, if it’s set to the frequency of your own body,” the Tick-Tock Man said. He spoke in the sharp, scornful tone Jake’s father used when he didn’t want people to figure out that he didn’t have the slightest idea what he was talking about. Tick-Tock glanced briefly at Brandon, and Jake saw him weigh the pros and cons of making the bowlegged man his designated toucher. Then he dismissed the notion and looked back into Jake’s eyes. “If this thing gives me a shock, my little friend, you’re going to be choking to death on your own sweetmeats in thirty seconds.”

Jake swallowed hard but said nothing. The Tick-Tock Man reached out his finger again, and this time allowed it to settle on the face of the Seiko. The moment that it did, all the numbers went to zeros and then began to count upward again.

Tick-Tock’s eyes had narrowed in a grimace of potential pain as he touched the face of the watch. Now their corners crinkled in the first genuine smile Jake had seen from him. He thought it was partly pleasure at his own courage but mostly simple wonder and interest.

“May I have it?” he asked Jake silkily. “As a gesture of your goodwill, shall we say? I am something of a clock fancier, my dear young cully—so I am.”

“Be my guest.” Jake stripped the watch off his arm at once and dropped in onto the Tick-Tock Man’s large waiting palm.

“Talks just like a little silk-arse gennelman, don’t he?” Gasher said happily. “In the old days someone would have paid a wery high price for the return o’ such as him, Ticky, ay, so they would. Why, my father—”

“Your father died so blowed-out-rotten with the mandrus that not even the dogs would eat him,” the Tick-Tock Man interrupted. “Now shut up, you idiot.”

At first Gasher looked furious . . . and then only abashed. He sank into a nearby chair and closed his mouth.

Tick-Tock, meanwhile, was examining the Seiko’s expansion band with an expression of awe. He pulled it wide, let it snap back, pulled it wide again, let it snap back again. He dropped a lock of his hair into the open links, then laughed when they closed on it. At last he slipped the watch over his hand and pushed it halfway up his forearm. Jake thought this souvenir of New York looked very strange there, but said nothing.

“Wonderful!” Tick-Tock exclaimed. “Where did you get it, cully?”

“It was a birthday present from my father and mother,” Jake said. Gasher leaned forward at this, perhaps wanting to mention the idea of ransom again. If so, the intent look on the Tick-Tock Man’s face changed his mind and he sat back without saying anything.

“*Was* it?” Tick-Tock marvelled, raising his eye-brows. He had discovered the small button which lit the face of the watch and kept pushing it, watching the light go off and on. Then he looked back at Jake, and his eyes were narrowed to bright green slits again. “Tell me something, cully—does this run on a dipolar or unipolar circuit?”

“Neither one,” Jake said, not knowing that his failure to say he did not know what either of these terms meant was buying him a great deal of future trouble. “It runs on a nickel-cadmium battery. At least I’m pretty sure it does. I’ve never had to replace it, and I lost the instruction folder a long time ago.”

The Tick-Tock Man looked at him for a long time without speaking, and Jake realized with dismay that the blonde man was trying to decide if Jake had been making fun of him. If he decided Jake *had* been making fun, Jake had an idea that the abuse he had suffered on the way here would seem like tickling compared to what the Tick-Tock Man might do. He suddenly wanted to divert Tick-Tock's train of thought—wanted that more than anything in the world. He said the first thing he thought might turn the trick.

"He was your grandfather, wasn't he?"

The Tick-Tock Man raised his brows interrogatively. His hands returned to Jake's shoulders, and although his grip was not tight, Jake could feel the phenomenal strength there. If Tick-Tock chose to tighten his grip and pull sharply forward, he would snap Jake's collarbones like pencils. If he shoved, he would probably break his back.

"*Who* was my grandfather, cully?"

Jake's eyes once more took in the Tick-Tock Man's massive, nobly shaped head and broad shoulders. He remembered what Susannah had said: *Look at the size of him, Roland—they must have had to grease him to get him into the cockpit!*

"The man in the airplane. David Quick."

The Tick-Tock Man's eyes widened in surprise and amazement. Then he threw back his head and roared out a gust of laughter that echoed off the domed ceiling high above. The others smiled nervously. None, however, dared to laugh right out loud. . . not after what had happened to the woman with the dark hair.

"Whoever you are and wherever you come from, boy, you're the triggest cove old Tick-Tock's run into for many a year. Quick was my great-grandfather, not my grandfather, but you're close enough—wouldn't you say so, Gasher, my dear?"

"Ay," Gasher said. "He's trig, right enough, I could've toldjer that. But wery pert, all the same."

"Yes," the Tick-Tock Man said thoughtfully. His hands tightened on the boy's shoulders and drew Jake closer to that smiling, handsome, lunatic face. "I can see he's pert. It's in his eyes. But we'll take care of that, won't we, Gasher?"

It's not Gasher he's talking to, Jake thought. It's me. He thinks he's hypnotizing me . . . and maybe he is.

"Ay," Gasher breathed.

Jake felt he was drowning in those wide green eyes. Although the Tick-Tock Man's grip was still not really tight, he couldn't get enough breath into his lungs. He summoned all of his own force in an effort to break the blonde man's hold over him, and again spoke the first words which came to mind:

"So fell Lord Perth, and the countryside did shake with that thunder."

It acted upon Tick-Tock like a hard open-handed blow to the face. He recoiled, green eyes narrowing, his grip on Jake's shoulders tightening painfully. "*What* do you say? Where did you hear that?"

"A little bird told me," Jake replied with calculated insolence, and the next instant he was flying across the room.

If he had struck the curved wall headfirst, he would have been knocked cold or killed. As it happened, he struck on one hip, rebounded, and landed in a heap on the iron grillework. He shook his head groggily, looked around, and found himself face to face with the woman who was not taking a siesta. He uttered a shocked cry and crawled away on his hands and knees. Hoots kicked him in the chest, flipping him onto his back. Jake lay there gasping, looking up at the knot of rainbow colors where the neon tubes came together. A moment later, Tick-Tock's face filled his field of vision. The man's lips were pressed together in a hard, straight line, his cheeks flared with color, and there was fear in his eyes. The coffin-shaped glass ornament he wore around his neck dangled directly in front of Jake's eyes, swinging gently back and forth on its silver chain, as if imitating the pendulum of the tiny grandfather clock inside.

"Gasher's right," he said. He gathered a handful of Jake's shirt into one fist and pulled him up. "You're pert. But you don't want to be pert with me, cully. You don't *ever* want to be pert with me. Have you heard of people with short fuses? Well, I have no fuse at all, and there's a thousand could testify to it if I hadn't stilled their tongues for good. If you ever speak to me of Lord Perth again. . . ever, ever, *ever* . . . I'll tear off the top of your skull and eat your brains. I'll have none

of that bad-luck story in the Cradle of the Grays. *Do you understand me?*”

He shook Jake back and forth like a rag, and the boy burst into tears.

“*Do you?*”

“Y-Y-Yes!”

“Good.” He set Jake upon his feet, where he swayed woozily back and forth, wiping at his streaming eyes and leaving smudges of dirt on his cheeks so dark they looked like mascara. “Now, my little cull, we’re going to have a question and answer session here. I’ll ask the questions and you’ll give the answers. Do you understand?”

Jake didn’t reply. He was looking at a panel of the ventilator grille which circled the chamber.

The Tick-Tock Man grabbed his nose between two of his fingers and squeezed it viciously. “*Do you understand me?*”

“*Yes!*” Jake cried. His eyes, now watering with pain as well as terror, returned to Tick-Tock’s face. He wanted to look back at the ventilator grille, wanted desperately to verify that what he had seen there was not simply a trick of his frightened, overloaded mind, but he didn’t dare. He was afraid someone else—Tick-Tock himself, most likely—would follow his gaze and see what he had seen.

“Good.” Tick-Tock pulled Jake back over to the chair by his nose, sat down, and cocked his leg over the arm again. “Let’s have a nice little chin, then. We’ll begin with your name, shall we? Just what might that be, cully?”

“Jake Chambers.” With his nose pinched shut, his voice sounded nasal and foggy.

“And are you a Not-See, Jake Chambers?”

For a moment Jake wondered if this was a peculiar way of asking him if he was blind. . . but of course they could all see he wasn’t. “I don’t understand what—”

Tick-Tock shook him back and forth by the nose. “Not-See! Not-See! You just want to stop playing with me, boy!”

“*I don’t understand—*” Jake began, and then he looked at the old machine-gun hanging from the chair and thought once more of the

crashed Focke-Wulf. The pieces fell together in his mind. “No—I’m not a Nazi. I’m an American. All that ended long before I was born!”

The Tick-Tock Man released his hold on Jake’s nose, which immediately began to gush blood. “You could have told me that in the first place and saved yourself all sorts of pain, Jake Chambers. . . but at least now you understand how we do things around here, don’t you?”

Jake nodded.

“Ay. Well enough! We’ll start with the simple questions.”

Jake’s eyes drifted back to the ventilator grille. What he had seen before was still there; it hadn’t been just his imagination. Two gold-ringed eyes floated in the dark behind the chrome louvers.

Oy.

Tick-Tock slapped his face, knocking him back into Gasher, who immediately pushed him forward again. “It’s school-time, dear heart,” Gasher whispered. “Mind yer lessons, now! Mind em wery sharp!”

“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” Tick-Tock said. “I’ll have some respect, Jake Chambers, or I’ll have your balls.”

“All right.”

Tick-Tock’s green eyes gleamed dangerously. “All right *what?*”

Jake groped for the right answer, pushing away the tangle of questions and the sudden hope which had dawned in his mind. And what came was what would have served at his own Cradle of the Pubes. . . otherwise known as The Piper School. “All right, *sir?*”

Tick-Tock smiled. “That’s a start, boy,” he said, and leaned forward, forearms on his thighs. “Now . . . what’s an American?”

Jake began to talk, trying with all his might not to look toward the ventilator grille as he did so.

29

ROLAND HOLSTERED HIS GUN, laid both hands on the valve-wheel, and tried to turn it. It wouldn’t budge. That didn’t much

surprise him, but it presented serious problems.

Oy stood by his left boot, looking up anxiously, waiting for Roland to open the door so they could continue the journey to Jake. The gunslinger only wished it was that easy. It wouldn't do to simply stand out here and wait for someone to leave; it might be hours or even days before one of the Grays decided to use this particular exit again. Gasher and his friends might take it into their heads to flay Jake alive while the gunslinger was waiting for it to happen.

He leaned his head against the steel but heard nothing. That didn't surprise him, either. He had seen doors like this a long time ago—you couldn't shoot out the locks, and you certainly couldn't hear through them. There might be one; there might be two, facing each other, with some dead airspace in between. Somewhere, though, there would be a button which would spin the wheel in the middle of the door and release the locks. If Jake could reach that button, all might still be well.

Roland understood that he was not a full member of this *ka-tet*; he guessed that even Oy was more fully aware than he of the secret life which existed at its heart (he very much doubted that the bumbler had tracked Jake with his nose alone through those tunnels where water ran in polluted streamlets). Nevertheless, he had been able to help Jake when the boy had been trying to cross from his world to this one. He had been able to see . . . and when Jake had been trying to regain the key he had dropped, he had been able to send a message.

He had to be very careful about sending messages this time. At best, the Grays would realize something was up. At worst, Jake might misinterpret what Roland tried to tell him and do something foolish.

But if he could see . . .

Roland closed his eyes and bent all his concentration toward Jake. He thought of the boy's eyes and sent his *ka* out to find them.

At first there was nothing, but at last an image began to form. It was a face framed by long, gray-blond hair. Green eyes gleamed in deep sockets like firedims in a cave. Roland quickly understood that this was the Tick-Tock Man, and that he was a descendent of the

man who had died in the air-carriage—interesting, but of no practical value in this situation. He tried to look beyond the Tick-Tock Man, to see the rest of the room in which Jake was being held, and the people in it.

“Ake,” Oy whispered, as if reminding Roland that this was neither the time nor the place to take a nap.

“Shhh,” the gunslinger said, not opening his eyes.

But it was no good. He caught only blurs, probably because Jake’s concentration was focused so tightly on the Tick-Tock Man; everyone and everything else was little more than a series of gray-shrouded shapes on the edges of Jake’s perception.

Roland opened his eyes again and pounded his left fist lightly into the open palm of his right hand. He had an idea that he could push harder and see more ... but that might make the boy aware of his presence. That would be dangerous. Gasher might smell a rat, and if he didn’t the Tick-Tock Man would. He looked up at the narrow ventilator grilles, then down at Oy. He had wondered several times just how smart he was; now it looked as though he was going to find out.

Roland reached up with his good left hand, slipped his fingers between the horizontal slats of the ventilator grille closest to the hatchway through which Jake had been taken, and pulled. The grille popped out in a shower of rust and dried moss. The hole behind it was far too small for a man . . . but not for a billy-bumbler. He put the grille down, picked Oy up, and spoke softly into his ear.

“Go . . . see . . . come back. Do you understand? Don’t let them see you. Just go and see and come back.”

Oy gazed up into his face, saying nothing, not even Jake’s name. Roland had no idea if he had understood or not, but wasting time in ponderation would not help matters. He placed Oy in the ventilator shaft. The bumbler sniffed at the crumbles of dried moss, sneezed delicately, then only crouched there with the draft rippling through his long, silky fur, looking doubtfully at Roland with his strange eyes.

“Go and see and come back,” Roland repeated in a whisper, and Oy disappeared into the shadows, walking silently, claws retracted, on the pads of his paws.

Roland drew his gun again and did the hardest thing. He waited.

Oy returned less than three minutes later. Roland lifted him out of the shaft and put him on the floor. Oy looked up at him with his long neck extended. “How many, Oy?” Roland asked. “How many did you see?”

For a long moment he thought the bumbler wouldn’t do anything except go on staring in his anxious way. Then he lifted his right paw tentatively in the air, extended the claws, and looked at it, as if trying to remember something very difficult. At last he began to tap on the steel floor.

One ... two ... three ... four. A pause. Then two more, quick and delicate, the extended claws clicking lightly on the steel: five, six. Oy paused a second time, head down, looking like a child lost in the throes of some titanic mental struggle. Then he tapped his claws one final time on the steel, looking up at Roland as he did it. “Ake!”

Six Grays . . . and Jake.

Roland picked Oy up and stroked him. “Good!” he murmured into Oy’s ear. In truth, he was almost overwhelmed with surprise and gratitude. He had hoped for something, but this careful response was amazing. And he had few doubts about the accuracy of the count. “Good boy!”

“Oy! Ake!”

Yes, Jake. Jake was the problem. Jake, to whom he had made a promise he intended to keep.

The gunslinger thought deeply in his strange fashion—that combination of dry pragmatism and wild intuition which had probably come from his strange grandmother, Deidre the Mad, and had kept him alive all these years after his old companions had passed. Now he was depending on it to keep Jake alive, too.

He picked Oy up again, knowing Jake might live—*might—but* the bumbler was almost certainly going to die. He whispered several simple words into Oy’s cocked ear, repeating them over and over. At last he ceased speaking and returned him to the ventilator shaft. “Good boy,” he whispered. “Go on, now. Get it done. My heart goes with you.”

“Oy! Art! Ake!” the bumbler whispered, and then scurried off into the darkness again.

Roland waited for all hell to break loose.

30

ASK ME A QUESTION, Eddie Dean of New York. And it better be a good one . . . if it's not, you and your woman are going to die, no matter where you came from.

And, dear *God*, how did you respond to something like that?

The dark red light had gone out; now the pink one reappeared. “*Hurry*,” the faint voice of Little Blaine urged them. “*He’s worse than ever before . . . hurry or he’ll kill you!*”

Eddie was vaguely aware that flocks of disturbed pigeons were still swooping aimlessly through the Cradle, and that some of them had smashed headfirst into the pillars and dropped dead on the floor.

“What does it want?” Susannah hissed at the speaker and the voice of Little Blaine somewhere behind it. “For God’s sake, *what does it want?*”

No reply. And Eddie could feel any period of grace they might have started with slipping away. He thumbed the TALK/LISTEN and spoke with frantic vivacity as the sweat trickled down his cheeks and neck.

Ask me a question.

“So—Blaine! What have you been up to these last few years? I guess you haven’t been doing the old southeast run, huh? Any reason why not? Haven’t been feeling up to snuff?”

No sound but the rustle and flap of the pigeons. In his mind he saw Ardis trying to scream as his cheeks melted and his tongue caught fire. He felt the hair on the nape of his neck stirring and clumping together. Fear? Or gathering electricity?

Hurry . . . he’s worse than ever before.

“Who built you, anyway?” Eddie asked frantically, thinking: *If I only knew what the fucking thing wanted!* “Want to talk about that? Was it the Grays? Nah . . . probably the Great Old Ones, right? Or . . .”

He trailed off. Now he could feel Blaine’s silence as a physical weight on his skin, like fleshy, groping hands.

“What do you *want?*” he shouted. “Just what in hell do you want to hear?”

No answer—but the buttons on the box were glowing an angry dark red again, and Eddie knew their time was almost up. He could hear a low buzzing sound nearby—a sound like an electrical generator—and he didn’t believe that sound was just his imagination, no matter how much he wanted to think so.

“Blaine!” Susannah shouted suddenly. “Blaine, do you hear me?”

No answer . . . and Eddie felt the air was filling up with electricity as a bowl under a tap fills up with water. He could feel it crackling bitterly in his nose with every breath he took; could feel his fillings buzzing like angry insects.

“Blaine, *I’ve* got a question, and it *is* a pretty good one! Listen!” She closed her eyes for a moment, fingers rubbing frantically at her temples, and then opened her eyes again. “There is a thing that . . . uh . . . that nothing is, and yet it has a name; ’tis sometimes tall and . . . and sometimes short . . .’ ”She broke off and stared at Eddie with wide, agonized eyes. “Help me! I can’t remember how the rest of it goes!”

Eddie only stared at her as if she had gone mad. What in the name of God was she talking about? Then it came to him, and it made a weirdly perfect sense, and the rest of the riddle clicked into his mind as neatly as the last two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. He swung toward the speaker again.

“ ‘It joins our talks, it joins our sport, and plays at every game.’ What is it? That’s our question, Blaine—what is it?”

The red light illuminating the COMMAND and ENTER buttons below the diamond of numbers blinked out. There was an endless moment of silence before Blaine spoke again . . . but Eddie was aware that the feeling of electricity crawling all over his skin was diminishing.

“A SHADOW, OF COURSE,” the voice of Blaine responded. “AN EASY ONE . . . BUT NOT BAD. NOT BAD AT ALL.”

The voice coming out of the speaker was animated by a thoughtful quality . . . and something else, as well. Pleasure? Longing? Eddie couldn't quite decide, but he *did* know there was something in that voice that reminded him of Little Blaine. He knew something else, as well: Susannah had saved their bacon, at least for the time being. He bent down and kissed her cold, sweaty brow.

“DO YOU KNOW ANY MORE RIDDLES?” Blaine asked.

“Yes, lots,” Susannah said at once. “Our companion, Jake, has a whole book of them.”

“FROM THE NEW YORK PLACE OF WHERE?” Blaine asked, and now the tone of his voice was perfectly clear, at least to Eddie. Blaine might be a machine, but Eddie had been a heroin junkie for six years, and he knew stone greed when he heard it.

“From New York, right,” he said. “But Jake has been taken prisoner. A man named Gasher took him.”

No answer . . . and then the buttons glowed that faint, rosy pink again. “*Good so far,*” the voice of Little Blaine whispered. “*But you must be careful . . . he's tricky . . .*”

The red lights reappeared at once.

“DID ONE OF YOU SPEAK?” Blaine's voice was cold and—Eddie could have sworn it was so—suspicious.

He looked at Susannah. Susannah looked back with the wide, frightened eyes of a little girl who has heard something unnameable moving slyly beneath the bed.

“I cleared my throat, Blaine,” Eddie said. He swallowed and arched sweat from his forehead. “I'm . . . shit, tell the truth and shame the devil. I'm scared to death.”

“THAT IS VERY WISE OF YOU. THESE RIDDLES OF WHICH YOU SPEAK—ARE THEY STUPID? I WON'T HAVE MY PATIENCE TRIED WITH STUPID RIDDLES.”

“Most are smart,” Susannah said, but she looked anxiously at Eddie as she said it.

“YOU LIE. YOU DON'T KNOW THE QUALITY OF THESE RIDDLES AT ALL.”

“How can you say—”

“VOICE ANALYSIS. FRICTIVE PATTERNS AND DIPHTHONG STRESS-EMPHASIS PROVIDE A RELIABLE QUOTIENT OF TRUTH/UNTRUTH. PREDICTIVE RELIABILITY IS 97 PER CENT, PLUS OR MINUS .5 PER CENT.” The voice fell silent for a moment, and when it spoke again, it did so in a menacing drawl that Eddie found very familiar. It was the voice of Humphrey Bogart. “I SHUGGEST YOU SHTICK TO WHAT YOU KNOW, SHWEETHEART. THE LAST GUY THAT TRIED SHADING THE TRUTH WITH ME WOUND UP AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEND IN A PAIR OF SHEMENT COWBOY BOOTS.”

“Christ,” Eddie said. “We walked four hundred miles or so to meet the computer version of Rich Little. How can you imitate guys like John Wayne and Humphrey Bogart, Blaine? Guys from our world?”

Nothing.

“Okay, you don’t want to answer that one. How about this one—if a riddle was what you wanted, why didn’t you just say so?”

Again there was no answer, but Eddie discovered that he didn’t really need one. Blaine liked riddles, so he had asked *them* one. Susannah had solved it. Eddie guessed that if she had failed to do so, the two of them would now look like a couple of giant-economy-size charcoal briquets lying on the floor of the Cradle of Lud.

“Blaine?” Susannah asked uneasily. There was no answer.

“Blaine, are you still there?”

“YES. TELL ME ANOTHER ONE.”

“When is a door not a door?” Eddie asked.

“WHEN IT’S AJAR. YOU’LL HAVE TO DO BETTER THAN THAT IF YOU REALLY EXPECT ME TO TAKE YOU SOMEWHERE. CAN YOU DO BETTER THAN THAT?”

“If Roland gets here, I’m sure we can,” Susannah said.

“Regardless of how good the riddles in Jake’s book may be, Roland knows hundreds—he actually studied them as a child.” Having said this, she realized she could not conceive of Roland as a child. “*Will* you take us, Blaine?”

“I MIGHT,” Blaine said, and Eddie was quite sure he heard a dim thread of cruelty running through that voice. “BUT YOU’LL HAVE TO

PRIME THE PUMP TO GET ME GOING, AND MY PUMP PRIMES BACKWARD.”

“Meaning what?” Eddie asked, looking through the bars at the smooth pink line of Blaine’s back. But Blaine did not reply to this or any of the other questions they asked. The bright orange lights stayed on, but both Big Blaine and Little Blaine seemed to have gone into hibernation. Eddie, however, knew better. Blaine was awake. Blaine was watching them. Blaine was listening to their frictive patterns and diphthong stress-emphasis.

He looked at Susannah.

“ ‘You’ll have to prime the pump, but my pump primes backward,’ ” he said bleakly. “It’s a riddle, isn’t it?”

“Yes, of course.” She looked at the triangular window, so like a half-lidded, mocking eye, and then pulled him close so she could whisper in his ear. “It’s totally insane, Eddie—schizophrenic, paranoid, probably delusional as well.”

“Tell me about it,” he breathed back. “What we’ve got here is a lunatic genius ghost-in-the-computer monorail that likes riddles and goes faster than the speed of sound. Welcome to the fantasy version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.”

“Do you have any idea what the answer is?”

Eddie shook his head. “You?”

“A little tickle, way back in my mind. False light, probably. I keep thinking about what Roland said: a good riddle is always sensible and always solvable. It’s like a magician’s trick.”

“Misdirection.”

She nodded. “Go fire another shot, Eddie—let em know we’re still here.”

“Yeah. Now if we could only be sure that they’re still there.”

“Do you think they are, Eddie?”

Eddie had started away, and he spoke without stopping or looking back. “I don’t know—that’s a riddle not even Blaine could answer.”

“COULD I HAVE SOMETHING to drink?” Jake asked. His voice came out sounding furry and nasal. Both his mouth and the tissues in his abused nose were swelling up. He looked like someone who has gotten the worst of it in a nasty street-fight.

“Oh, yes,” Tick-Tock replied judiciously. “You *could*. I’d say you certainly *could*. We have lots to drink, don’t we, Copperhead?”

“Ay,” said a tall, bespectacled man in a white silk shirt and a pair of black silk trousers. He looked like a college professor in a turn-of-the-century *Punch* cartoon. “No shortage of poter-bulls here.”

The Tick-Tock Man, once more seated at ease in his throne-like chair, looked humorously at Jake. “We have wine, beer, ale, and, of course, good old water. Sometimes that’s all a body wants, isn’t it? Cool, clear, sparkling water. How does that sound, cully?”

Jake’s throat, which was also swollen and as dry as sandpaper, prickled painfully. “Sounds good,” he whispered.

“It’s woke *my* thirsty up, I know that,” Tick-Tock said. His lips spread in a smile. His green eyes sparkled. “Bring me a dipper of water. . . Till—I’ll be damned if I know what’s happened to my manners.”

Tilly stepped through the hatchway on the far side of the room—it was opposite the one through which Jake and Gasher had entered. Jake watched her go and licked his swollen lips.

“Now,” Tick-Tock said, returning his gaze to Jake, “you say the American city you came from—this New York—is much like Lud.”

“Well . . . not exactly . . .”

“But you *do* recognize some of the machinery,” Tick-Tock pressed. “Valves and pumps and such. Not to mention the firedim tubes.”

“Yes. We call it neon, but it’s the same.”

Tick-Tock reached out toward him. Jake cringed, but Tick-Tock only patted him on the shoulder. “Yes, yes; close enough.” His eyes gleamed. “*And* you’ve heard of computers?”

“Sure, but—”

Tilly returned with the dipper and timidly approached the Tick-Tock Man’s throne. He took it and held it out to Jake. When Jake reached for it, Tick-Tock pulled it back and drank himself. As Jake watched

the water trickle from Tick-Tock's mouth and roll down his naked chest, he began to shake. He couldn't help it.

The Tick-Tock Man looked over the dipper at him, as if just remembering that Jake was still there. Behind him, Gasher, Copperhead, Brandon, and Hoots were grinning like schoolyard kids who have just heard an amusing dirty joke.

"Why, I got thinking about how thirsty *I* was and forgot all about *you!*" Tick-Tock cried. "That's mean as hell, gods damn my eyes! But, of course, it looked so good . . . and it is good . . . cold . . . clear . . ."

He held the dipper out to Jake. When Jake reached for it, Tick-Tock pulled it back.

"First, cully, tell me what you know about dipolar computers and transitive circuits," he said coldly.

"What . . ." Jake looked toward the ventilator grille, but the golden eyes were still gone. He was beginning to think he had imagined them after all. He shifted his gaze back to the Tick-Tock Man, understanding one thing clearly: he wasn't going to get any water. He had been stupid to even dream he might. "What are dipolar computers?"

The Tick-Tock Man's face contorted with rage; he threw the remainder of the water into Jake's bruised, puffy face. "*Don't you play it light with me!*" he shrieked. He stripped off the Seiko watch and shook it in front of Jake. "*When I asked you if this ran on a dipolar circuit, you said it didn't! So don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about when you already made it clear that you do!*"

"But . . . but . . ." Jake couldn't go on. His head was whirling with fear and confusion. He was aware, in some far-off fashion, that he was licking as much water as he could off his lips.

"There's a thousand of those ever-fucking dipolar computers right under the ever-fucking city, maybe a HUNDRED thousand, and the only one that still works don't do a thing except play Watch Me and run those drums! I want those computers! I want them working for ME!"

The Tick-Tock Man bolted forward on his throne, seized Jake, shook him back and forth, and then threw him to the floor. Jake struck one of the lamps, knocking it over, and the bulb blew with a hollow coughing sound. Tilly gave a little shriek and stepped backward, her eyes wide and frightened. Copperhead and Brandon looked at each other uneasily.

Tick-Tock leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, and screamed into Jake's face: "*I want them AND I MEAN TO HAVE THEM!*"

Silence fell in the room, broken only by the soft whoosh of warm air pouring from the ventilators. Then the twisted rage on the Tick-Tock Man's face disappeared so suddenly it might never have existed at all. It was replaced by another charming smile. He leaned further forward and helped Jake to his feet.

"Sorry. I get thinking about the potential of this place and sometimes I get carried away. Please accept my apology, cully." He picked up the overturned dipper and threw it at Tilly. "Fill this up, you useless bitch! What's the matter with you?"

He turned his attention back to Jake, still smiling his TV game-show host smile.

"All right; you've had your little joke and I've had mine. Now tell me everything you know about dipolar computers and transitive circuits. Then you can have a drink."

Jake opened his mouth to say something—he had no idea what—and then, incredibly, Roland’s voice was in his mind, filling it.

Distract them, Jake—and if there’s a button that opens the door, get close to it.

The Tick-Tock Man was watching him closely. “Something just came into your mind, didn’t it, cully? I always know. So don’t keep it a secret; tell your old friend Ticky.”

Jake caught movement in the corner of his eye. Although he did not dare glance up at the ventilator panel—not with all the Tick-Tock Man’s notice bent upon him—he knew that Oy was back, peering down through the louvers.

Distract them . . . and suddenly Jake knew just how to do that.

“I *did* think of something,” he said, “but it wasn’t about computers. It was about my old pal Gasher. And *his* old pal, Hoots.”

“Here! Here!” Gasher cried. “What are you talking about, boy?”

“Why don’t you tell Tick-Tock who *really* gave you the password, Gasher? Then *I* can tell Tick-Tock where you keep it.”

The Tick-Tock Man’s puzzled gaze shifted from Jake to Gasher. “What’s he talking about?”

“Nothin!” Gasher said, but he could not forbear a quick glance at Hoots. “He’s just runnin his gob, tryin to get off the hot-seat by puttin me on it, Ticky. I told you he was pert! Didn’t I say—”

“Take a look in his scarf, why don’t you?” Jake asked. “He’s got a scrap of paper with the word written on it. I had to read it to him because he couldn’t even do that.”

There was no sudden rage on Tick-Tock’s part this time; his face darkened gradually instead, like a summer sky before a terrible thunderstorm.

“Let me see your scarf, Gasher,” he said in a soft, thick voice. “Let your old pal sneak a peek.”

“He’s lyin, I tell you!” Gasher cried, putting his hands on his scarf and taking two steps backward toward the wall. Directly above him, Oy’s gold-ringed eyes gleamed. “All you got to do is look in his face to see lyin’s what a pert little cull like him does best!”

The Tick-Tock Man shifted his gaze to Hoots, who looked sick with fear. “What about it?” Tick-Tock asked in his soft, terrible voice.

“What about it, Hooterman? I know you and Gasher was butt-buddies of old, and I know you’ve the brains of a hung goose, but surely not even you could be stupid enough to write down a password to the inner chamber . . . could you? *Could* you?”

“I . . . I oney thought . . .” Hoots began.

“Shut up!” Gasher shouted. He shot Jake a look of pure, sick hate. “I’ll kill you for this, dearie—see if I don’t.”

“Take off your scarf, Gasher,” the Tick-Tock Man said. “I want a look inside it.”

Jake sidled a step closer to the podium with the buttons on it.

“No!” Gasher’s hands returned to the scarf and pressed against it as if it might fly away of its own accord. “Be damned if I will!”

“Brandon, grab him,” Tick-Tock said.

Brandon lunged for Gasher. Gasher’s move wasn’t as quick as Tick-Tock’s had been, but it was quick enough; he bent, yanked a knife from the top of his boot, and buried it in Brandon’s arm.

“*Oh, you barstard!*” Brandon shouted in surprise and pain as blood began to pour out of his arm.

“*Lookit what you did!*” Tilly screamed.

“Do I have to do *everything* around here myself?” Tick-Tock shouted, more exasperated than angry, it seemed, and rose to his feet. Gasher retreated from him, weaving the bloody knife back and forth in front of his face in mystic patterns. He kept his other hand planted firmly on top of his head.

“Draw back,” he panted. “I loves you like a brother, Ticky, but if you don’t draw back, I’ll hide this blade in your guts—so I will.”

“*You?* Not likely,” the Tick-Tock Man said with a laugh. He removed his own knife from its scabbard and held it delicately by the bone hilt. All eyes were on the two of them. Jake took two quick steps to the podium with its little cluster of buttons and reached for the one he thought the Tick-Tock man had pushed.

Gasher was backing along the curved wall, the tubes of light painting his mandrus-riddled face in a succession of sick colors: bile-green, fever-red, jaundice-yellow. Now it was the Tick-Tock Man standing below the ventilator grille where Oy was watching.

“Put it down, Gasher,” Tick-Tock said in a reasonable tone of voice. “You brought the boy as I asked; if anyone else gets pricked over this, it’ll be Hoots, not you. Just show me—”

Jake saw Oy crouching to spring and understood two things: what the bumbler meant to do and who had put him up to it.

“Oy, *no!*” he screamed.

All of them turned to look at him. At that moment Oy leaped, hitting the flimsy ventilator grille and knocking it free. The Tick-Tock Man wheeled toward the sound, and Oy fell onto his upturned face, biting and slashing.

32

ROLAND HEARD IT FAINTLY even through the twin doors—Oy, *no!*—and his heart sank. He waited for the valve-wheel to turn, but it did not. He closed his eyes and sent with all his might: *The door, Jake! Open the door!*

He sensed no response, and the pictures were gone. His communication line with Jake, flimsy to begin with, had now been severed.

33

THE TICK-TOCK MAN blundered backward, cursing and screaming and grabbing at the writhing, biting, digging thing on his face. He felt Oy’s claws punch into his left eye, popping it, and a horrible red pain sank into his head like a flaming torch thrown down a deep well. At that point, rage overwhelmed pain. He seized Oy, tore him off his face, and held him over his head, meaning to twist him like a rag.

“*No!*” Jake wailed. He forgot about the button which unlocked the doors and seized the gun hanging from the back of the chair.

Tilly shrieked. The others scattered. Jake levelled the old German machine-gun at the Tick-Tock Man. Oy, upside down in those huge, strong hands and bent almost to the snapping point, writhed madly and slashed his teeth into the air. He shrieked in agony—a horribly human sound.

“Leave him alone, you bastard!” Jake screamed, and pressed the trigger.

He had enough presence of mind left to aim low. The roar of the Schmeisser .40 was ear-splitting in the enclosed space, although it fired only five or six rounds. One of the lighted tubes popped in a burst of cold orange fire. A hole appeared an inch above the left knee of the Tick-Tock Man’s tight-fitting trousers, and a dark red stain began to spread at once. Tick-Tock’s mouth opened in a shocked O of surprise, an expression which said more clearly than words could have done that, for all his intelligence, Tick-Tock had expected to live a long, happy life where he shot people but was never shot himself. Shot *at*, perhaps, but actually hit? That surprised expression said that just wasn’t supposed to be in the cards.

Welcome to the real world, you fuck, Jake thought.

Tick-Tock dropped Oy to the iron grillework floor to grab at his wounded leg. Copperhead lunged at Jake, got an arm around his throat, and then Oy was on him, barking shrilly and chewing at Copperhead’s ankle through the black silk pants. Copperhead screamed and danced away, shaking Oy back and forth at the end of his leg. Oy clung like a limpet. Jake turned to see the Tick-Tock Man crawling toward him. He had retrieved his knife and the blade was now clamped between his teeth.

“Goodbye, Ticky,” Jake said, and pressed the Schmeisser’s trigger again. Nothing happened. Jake didn’t know if it was empty or jammed, and this was hardly the time to speculate. He took two steps backward before finding further retreat blocked by the big chair which had served the Tick-Tock Man as a throne. Before he could slip around, putting the chair between them, Tick-Tock had grabbed his ankle. His other hand went to the hilt of his knife. The ruins of his left eye lay on his cheek like a glob of mint jelly; the right eye glared up at Jake with insane hatred.

Jake tried to pull away from the clutching hand and went sprawling on the Tick-Tock Man's throne. His eye fell on a pocket which had been sewn into the right-hand arm-rest. Jutting from the elasticized top was the cracked pearl handle of a revolver.

"Oh, cully, how you'll suffer!" the Tick-Tock Man whispered ecstatically. The O of surprise had been replaced by a wide, trembling grin. "Oh how you'll suffer! And how happy I'll be to . . . *What—?*"

The grin slackened and the surprised O began to reappear as Jake pointed the cheesy nickel-plated revolver at him and thumbed back the hammer. The grip on Jake's ankle tightened until it seemed to him that the bones there must snap.

"You *dasn't!*" Tick-Tock said in a screamy whisper.

"Yes I *do*," Jake said grimly, and pulled the trigger of the Tick-Tock Man's runout gun. There was a flat crack, much less dramatic than the Schmeisser's Teutonic roar. A small black hole appeared high up on the right side of Tick-Tock's forehead. The Tick-Tock Man went on staring up at Jake, disbelief in his remaining eye.

Jake tried to make himself shoot him again and couldn't do it.

Suddenly a flap of the Tick-Tock Man's scalp peeled away like old wallpaper and dropped on his right cheek. Roland would have known what this meant; Jake, however, was now almost beyond coherent thought. A dark, panicky horror was spinning across his mind like a tornado funnel. He cringed back in the big chair as the hand on his ankle fell away and the Tick-Tock Man collapsed forward on his face.

The door. He had to open the door and let the gunslinger in.

Focusing on that and nothing but, Jake let the pearl-handled revolver clatter to the iron grating and pushed himself out of the chair. He was reaching again for the button he thought he had seen Tick-Tock push when a pair of hands settled around his throat and dragged him backward, away from the podium.

"I said I'd kill you for it, my narsty little pal," a voice whispered in his ear, "and the Gasherman always keeps his promises."

Jake flailed behind him with both hands and found nothing but thin air. Gasher's fingers sank into his throat, choking relentlessly. The

world started to turn gray in front of his eyes. Gray quickly deepened to purple, and purple to black.

34

A PUMP STARTED UP, and the valve-wheel in the center of the hatch spun rapidly. *Gods be thanked!* Roland thought. He seized the wheel with his right hand almost before it had stopped moving and yanked it open. The other door was ajar; from beyond it came the sounds of men fighting and Oy's bark, now shrill with pain and fury.

Roland kicked the door open with his boot and saw Gasher throttling Jake. Oy had left Copperhead and was now trying to make Gasher let go of Jake, but Gasher's boot was doing double duty: protecting its owner from the bumbler's teeth, and protecting Oy from the virulent infection which ran in Gasher's blood. Brandon stabbed Oy in the flank again in an effort to make him stop worrying Gasher's ankle, but Oy paid no heed. Jake hung from his captor's dirty hands like a puppet whose strings have been cut. His face was bluish-white, his swollen lips a delicate shade of lavender.

Gasher looked up. "You," he snarled.

"Me," Roland agreed. He fired once and the left side of Gasher's head disintegrated. The man went flying backward, bloodstained yellow scarf unravelling, and landed on top of the Tick-Tock Man. His feet drummed spastically on the iron grillework for a moment and then fell still.

The gunslinger shot Brandon twice, fanning the hammer of his revolver with the flat of his right hand. Brandon, who had been bent over Oy for another stroke, spun around, struck the wall, and slid slowly down it, clutching at one of the tubes. Green swamp-light spilled out from between his loosening fingers,

Oy limped to where Jake lay and began licking his pale, still face.

Copperhead and Hoots had seen enough. They ran side by side for the small door through which Tilly had gone to get the dipper of

water. It was the wrong time for chivalry; Roland shot them both in the back. He would have to move fast now, very fast indeed, and he would not risk being waylaid by these two if they should chance to rediscover their guts.

A cluster of bright orange lights came on at the top of the capsule-shaped enclosure, and an alarm began to go off: in broad, hoarse blats that battered the walls. After a moment or two, the emergency lights began to pulse in sync with the alarm.

35

EDDIE WAS RETURNING TO Susannah when the alarm began to wail. He yelled in surprise and raised the Ruger, pointing it at nothing. *“What’s happening?”*

Susannah shook her head—she had no idea. The alarm was scary, but that was only part of the problem; it was also loud enough to be physically painful. Those amplified jags of sound made Eddie think of a tractor-trailer horn raised to the tenth power.

At that moment, the orange arc-sodiums began to pulse. When he reached Susannah’s chair, Eddie saw that the COMMAND and ENTER buttons were also pulsing in bright red beats. They looked like winking eyes.

“Blaine, what’s happening?” he shouted. He looked around but saw only wildly jumping shadows. “Are you doing this?”

Blaine’s only response was laughter—terrible mechanical laughter that made Eddie think of the clockwork clown that had stood outside the House of Horrors at Coney Island when he was a little kid.

“Blaine, stop it!” Susannah shrieked. *“How can we think of an answer to your riddle with that air-raid siren going off?”*

The laughter stopped as suddenly as it began, but Blaine made no reply. Or perhaps he did; from beyond the bars that separated them from the platform, huge engines powered by frictionless slo-trans turbines awoke at the command of the dipolar computers the Tick-

Tock Man had so lusted after. For the first time in a decade, Blaine the Mono was awake and cycling up toward running speed.

36

THE ALARM, WHICH HAD indeed been built to warn Lud's long-dead residents of an impending air attack (and which had not even been tested in almost a thousand years), blanketed the city with sound. All the lights which still operated came on and began to pulse in sync. Pubes above the streets and Grays below them were alike convinced that the end they had always feared was finally upon them. The Grays suspected some cataclysmic mechanical breakdown was occurring. The Pubes, who had always believed that the ghosts lurking in the machines below the city would some day rise up to take their long-delayed vengeance on the still living, were probably closer to the actual truth of what was happening.

Certainly there had been an intelligence left in the ancient computers below the city, a single living organism which had long ago ceased to exist sanely under conditions that, within its merciless dipolar circuits, could only be absolute reality. It had held its increasingly alien logic within its banks of memory for eight hundred years and might have held them so for eight hundred more, if not for the arrival of Roland and his friends; yet this *mens non corpus* had brooded and grown ever more insane with each passing year; even in its increasing periods of sleep it could be said to dream, and these dreams grew steadily more abnormal as the world moved on. Now, although the unthinkable machinery which maintained the Beams had weakened, this insane and inhuman intelligence had awakened in the rooms of ruin and had begun once more, although as bodiless as any ghost, to stumble through the halls of the dead.

In other words, Blaine the Mono was preparing to get out of Dodge.

ROLAND HEARD A FOOTSTEP behind him as he knelt by Jake and turned, raising his gun. Tilly, her dough-colored face a mask of confusion and superstitious fear, raised her hands and shrieked: *"Don't kill me, sai! Please! Don't kill me!"*

"Run, then," Roland said curtly, and as Tilly began to move, he struck her calf with the barrel of his revolver. "Not that way—through the door I came in. And if you ever see me again, I'll be the last thing you ever see. Now *go!*"

She disappeared into the leaping, circling shadows.

Roland dropped his head to Jake's chest, slamming his palm against his other ear to deaden the pulse of the alarm. He heard the boy's heartbeat, slow but strong. He slipped his arms around the boy, and as he did, Jake's eyes fluttered open. "You didn't let me fall this time." His voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

"No. Not this time, and not ever again. Don't try your voice."

"Where's Oy?"

"Oy!" the bumbler barked. "Oy!"

Brandon had slashed Oy several times, but none of the wounds seemed mortal or even serious. It was clear that he was in some pain, but it was equally clear he was transported with joy. He regarded Jake with sparkling eyes, his pink tongue lolling out. "Ake, Ake, *Ake!*"

Jake burst into tears and reached for him; Oy limped into the circle of his arms and allowed himself to be hugged for a moment.

Roland got up and looked around. His gaze fixed on the door on the far side of the room. The two men he'd backshot had been heading in that direction, and the woman had also wanted to go that way. The gunslinger went toward the door with Jake in his arms and Oy at his heel. He kicked one of the dead Grays aside, and ducked through. The room beyond was a kitchen. It managed to look like a hog-wallow in spite of the built-in appliances and the stainless steel walls; the Grays were apparently not much interested in housekeeping.

“Drink,” Jake whispered. “Please . . . so thirsty.”

Roland felt a queer doubling, as if time had folded backward on itself. He remembered lurching out of the desert, crazy with the heat and the emptiness. He remembered passing out in the stable of the way station, half-dead from thirst, and waking at the taste of cool water trickling down his throat. The boy had taken off his shirt, soaked it under the flow from the pump, and given him to drink. Now it was his turn to do for Jake what Jake had already done for him.

Roland glanced around and saw a sink. He went over to it and turned on the faucet. Cold, clear water rushed out. Over them, around them, under them, the alarm roared on and on.

“Can you stand?”

Jake nodded. “I think so.”

Roland set the boy on his feet, ready to catch him if he looked too wobbly, but Jake hung onto the sink, then ducked his head beneath the flowing water. Roland picked Oy up and looked at his wounds. They were already clotting. *You got off very lucky, my furry friend*, Roland thought, then reached past Jake to cup a palmful of water for the animal. Oy drank it eagerly.

Jake drew back from the faucet with his hair plastered to the sides of his face. His skin was still too pale and the signs that he had been badly beaten were clearly visible, but he looked better than he had when Roland had first bent over him. For one terrible moment, the gunslinger had been positive Jake was dead.

He found himself wishing he could go back and kill Gasher again, and that led him to another thought.

“What about the one Gasher called the Tick-Tock Man? Did you see him, Jake?”

“Yes. Oy ambushed him. Tore up his face. Then I shot him.”

“Dead?”

Jake’s lips began to tremble. He pressed them firmly together. “Yes. In his . . .” He tapped his forehead high above his right eyebrow. “I was l-l- . . . I was lucky.”

Roland looked at him appraisingly, then slowly shook his head. “You know, I doubt that. But never mind now. Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Jake’s voice was still little more than a husky murmur, and he kept looking past Roland’s shoulder toward the room where he had almost died.

Roland pointed across the kitchen. Beyond another hatchway, the corridor continued. “That’ll do for a start.”

“GUNSLINGER,” a voice boomed from everywhere.

Roland wheeled around, one arm cradling Oy and the other around Jake’s shoulders, but there was no one to see.

“Who speaks to me?” he shouted.

“NAME YOURSELF, GUNSLINGER.”

“Roland of Gilead, son of Steven. Who speaks to me?”

“GILEAD IS NO MORE,” the voice mused, ignoring the question.

Roland looked up and saw patterns of concentric rings in the ceiling. The voice was coming from those.

“NO GUNSLINGER HAS WALKED IN-WORLD OR MID-WORLD FOR ALMOST THREE HUNDRED YEARS.”

“I and my friends are the last.”

Jake took Oy from Roland. The bumbler at once began to lick the boy’s swollen face; his gold-ringed eyes were full of adoration and happiness.

“It’s Blaine,” Jake whispered to Roland. “Isn’t it?”

Roland nodded. Of course it was—but he had an idea that there was a great deal more to Blaine than just a monorail train.

“BOY! ARE YOU JAKE OF NEW YORK?”

Jake pressed closer to Roland and looked up at the speakers.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s me. Jake of New York. Uh . . . son of Elmer.”

“DO YOU STILL HAVE THE BOOK OF RIDDLES? THE ONE OF WHICH I HAVE BEEN TOLD?”

Jake reached over his shoulder, and an expression of dismayed recollection filled his face as his fingers touched nothing but his own back. When he looked at Roland again, the gunslinger was holding his pack out toward him, and although the man’s narrow, finely carved face was as expressionless as ever, Jake sensed the ghost of a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth.

“You’ll have to fix the straps,” Roland said as Jake took the pack. “I made them longer.”

“But *Riddle-De-Dum!*—?”

Roland nodded. “Both books are still in there.”

“WHAT YOU GOT, LITTLE PILGRIM?” the voice inquired in a leisurely drawl.

“Cripes!” Jake said.

It can see us as well as hear us, Roland thought, and a moment later he spotted a small glass eye in one corner, far above a man’s normal line of sight. He felt a chill slip over his skin, and knew from both the troubled look on Jake’s face and the way the boy’s arms had tightened around Oy that he wasn’t alone in his unease. That voice belonged to a machine, an incredibly *smart* machine, a *playful* machine, but there was something very wrong with it, all the same.

“The book,” Jake said. “I’ve got the riddle book.”

“GOOD.” There was an almost human satisfaction in the voice. “REALLY EXCELLENT.”

A scruffy, bearded fellow suddenly appeared in the doorway on the far side of the kitchen. A bloodstained, dirt-streaked yellow scarf flapped from the newcomer’s upper arm. “Fires in the walls!” he screamed. In his panic, he seemed not to realize that Roland and Jake were not part of his miserable subterranean *ka-tet*. “Smoke on the lower levels! People killin theirselves! Somepin’s gone wrong! Hell, *everythin’s* gone wrong! We gotta—”

The door of the oven suddenly dropped open like an unhinged jaw. A thick beam of blue-white fire shot out and engulfed the scruffy man’s head. He was driven backward with his clothes in flames and his skin boiling on his face.

Jake stared up at Roland, stunned and horrified. Roland put an arm about the boy’s shoulders.

“HE INTERRUPTED ME,” the voice said. “THAT WAS RUDE, WASN’T IT?”

“Yes,” Roland said calmly. “Extremely rude.”

“SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK SAYS YOU HAVE A GREAT MANY RIDDLES BY HEART, ROLAND OF GILEAD. IS THIS TRUE?”

“Yes.”

There was an explosion in one of the rooms opening off this arm of the corridor; the floor shuddered beneath their feet and voices

screamed in a jagged chorus. The pulsing lights and the endless, blating siren faded momentarily, then came back strong. A little skein of bitter, acrid smoke drifted from the ventilators. Oy got a whiff and sneezed.

“TELL ME ONE OF YOUR RIDDLES, GUNSLINGER,” the voice invited. It was serene and untroubled, as if they were all sitting together in a peaceful village square somewhere instead of beneath a city that seemed on the verge of ripping itself apart.

Roland thought for a moment, and what came to mind was Cuthbert’s favorite riddle. “All right, Blaine,” he said, “I will. What’s better than all the gods and worse than Old Man Splitfoot? Dead people eat it always; live people who eat it die slow.”

There was a long pause. Jake put his face in Oy’s fur to try to get away from the stink of the roasted Gray.

“Be careful, gunslinger.” The voice was as small as a cool puff of breeze on summer’s hottest day. The voice of the machine had come from all the speakers, but this one came only from the speaker directly overhead. *“Be careful, Jake of New York. Remember that these are The Drawers. Go slow and be very careful.”*

Jake looked at the gunslinger with widening eyes. Roland gave his head a small, faint shake and raised one finger. He looked as if he was scratching the side of his nose, but that finger also lay across his lips, and Jake had an idea Roland was actually telling him to keep his mouth shut.

“A CLEVER RIDDLE,” Blaine said at last. There seemed to be real admiration in its voice. “THE ANSWER IS NOTHING, IS IT NOT?”

“That’s right,” Roland said. “You’re pretty clever yourself, Blaine.”

When the voice spoke again, Roland heard what Eddie had heard already: a deep and ungovernable greed. “ASK ME ANOTHER.”

Roland drew a deep breath. “Not just now.”

“I HOPE YOU ARE NOT REFUSING ME, ROLAND, SON OF STEVEN, FOR THAT IS ALSO RUDE. *EXTREMELY RUDE.*”

“Take us to our friends and help us get out of Lud,” Roland said. “Then there may be time for riddling.”

“I COULD KILL YOU WHERE YOU STAND,” the voice said, and now it was as cold as winter’s darkest day.

“Yes,” Roland said. “I’m sure you could. But the riddles would die with us.”

“I COULD TAKE THE BOY’S BOOK.”

“Thieving is ruder than either refusal or interruption,” Roland remarked. He spoke as if merely passing the time of day, but the remaining fingers of his right hand were tight on Jake’s shoulder.

“Besides,” Jake said, looking up at the speaker in the ceiling, “the answers aren’t in the book. Those pages were torn out.” In a flash of inspiration, he tapped his temple. “They’re up here, though.”

“YOU FELLOWS WANT TO REMEMBER THAT NOBODY LOVES A SMARTASS,” Blaine said. There was another explosion, this one louder and closer. One of the ventilator grilles blew off and shot across the kitchen like a projectile. A moment later two men and a woman emerged through the door which led to the rest of the Grays’ warren. The gunslinger levelled his revolver at them, then lowered it as they stumbled across the kitchen and into the silo beyond without so much as a look at Roland and Jake. To Roland they looked like animals fleeing before a forest fire.

A stainless steel panel in the ceiling slid open, revealing a square of darkness. Something silvery flashed within it, and a few moments later a steel sphere, perhaps a foot in diameter, dropped from the hole and hung in the air of the kitchen.

“FOLLOW,” Blaine said flatly.

“Will it take us to Eddie and Susannah?” Jake asked hopefully.

Blaine replied only with silence . . . but when the sphere began floating down the corridor, Roland and Jake followed it.

38

JAKE HAD NO CLEAR memory of the time which followed, and that was probably merciful. He had left his world over a year before nine hundred people would commit suicide together in a small South American country called Guyana, but he knew about the periodic

death-rushes of the lemmings, and what was happening in the disintegrating undercity of the Grays was like that.

There were explosions, some on their level but most far below them; acrid smoke occasionally drifted from the ventilator grilles, but most of the air-purifiers were still working and they whipped the worst of it away before it could gather in choking clouds. They saw no fires. Yet the Grays were reacting as if the time of the apocalypse had come. Most only fled, their faces blank O's of panic, but many had committed suicide in the halls and interconnected rooms through which the steel sphere led Roland and Jake. Some had shot themselves; many more had slashed their throats or wrists; a few appeared to have swallowed poison. On all the faces of the dead was the same expression of overmastering terror. Jake could only vaguely understand what had driven them to this. Roland had a better idea of what had happened to them—to their *minds*—when the long-dead city first came to life around them and then seemed to commence tearing itself apart. And it was Roland who understood that Blaine was doing it on purpose. That Blaine was driving them to it.

They ducked around a man hanging from an overhead heating-duct and pounded down a flight of steel stairs behind the floating steel ball.

“Jake!” Roland shouted. “You never let me in at all, did you?”

Jake shook his head.

“I didn’t think so. It was Blaine.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs and hurried along a narrow corridor toward a hatch with the words ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE printed on it in the spiked letters of the High Speech.

“/s it Blaine?” Jake asked.

“Yes—that’s as good a name as any.”

“What about the other v—”

“Hush!” Roland said grimly.

The steel ball paused in front of the hatchway. The wheel spun and the hatch popped ajar. Roland pulled it open, and they stepped into a huge underground room which stretched away in three directions as far as they could see. It was filled with seemingly

endless aisles of control panels and electronic equipment. Most of the panels were still dark and dead, but as Jake and Roland stood inside the door, looking about with wide eyes, they could see pilot-lights coming on and hear machinery cycling up.

“The Tick-Tock Man said there were thousands of computers,” Jake said. “I guess he was right. My God, look!”

Roland did not understand the word Jake had used and so said nothing. He only watched as row after row of panels lit up. A cloud of sparks and a momentary tongue of green fire jumped from one of the consoles as some ancient piece of equipment malfunctioned.

Most of the machinery, however, appeared to be up and running just fine. Needles which hadn't moved in centuries suddenly jumped into the green. Huge aluminum cylinders spun, spilling data stored on silicon chips into memory banks which were once more wide awake and ready for input. Digital displays, indicating everything from the mean aquifer water-pressure in the West River Barony to available power amperage in the hibernating Send Basin Nuclear Plant, lit up in brilliant dot-matrices of red and green. Overhead, banks of hanging globes began to flash on, radiating outward in spokes of light. And from below, above, and around them—from everywhere—came the deep bass hum of generators and slo-trans engines awakening from their long sleep.

Jake had begun to flag badly. Roland swept him into his arms again and chased the steel ball past machines at whose function and intent he could not even guess. Oy ran at his heels. The ball banked left, and the aisle in which they now found themselves ran between banks of TV monitors, thousands of them, stacked in rows like a child's building blocks.

My dad would love it, Jake thought.

Some sections of this vast video arcade were still dark, but many of the screens were on. They showed a city in chaos, both above and below. Clumps of Pubes surged pointlessly through the streets, eyes wide, mouths moving soundlessly. Many were leaping from the tall buildings. Jake observed with horror that hundreds more had congregated at the Send Bridge and were throwing themselves into the river. Other screens showed large, cot-filled rooms like

dormitories. Some of these rooms were on fire, but the panic-stricken Grays seemed to be setting the fires themselves—torching their own mattresses and furniture for God alone knew what reason.

One screen showed a barrel-chested giant tossing men and women into what looked like a blood-spattered stamping press. This was bad enough, but there was something worse: the victims were standing in an unguarded line, docilely waiting their turns. The executioner, his yellow scarf pulled tight over his skull and the knotted ends swinging below his ears like pigtails, seized an old woman and held her up, waiting patiently for the stainless steel block of metal to clear the killing floor so he could toss her in. The old woman did not struggle; seemed, in fact, to be *smiling*.

“IN THE ROOMS THE PEOPLE COME AND GO,” Blaine said, “BUT I DON’T THINK ANY OF THEM ARE TALKING OF MICHELANGELO.” He suddenly laughed—strange, tittery laughter that sounded like rats scampering over broken glass. The sound sent chills chasing up Jake’s neck. He wanted nothing at all to do with an intelligence that laughed like that . . . but what choice did they have?

He turned his gaze helplessly back to the monitors . . . and Roland at once turned his head away. He did this gently but firmly. “There’s nothing there you need to look at, Jake,” he said.

“But why are they doing it?” Jake asked. He had eaten nothing all day, but he still felt like vomiting. “*Why?*”

“Because they’re frightened, and Blaine is feeding their fear. But mostly, I think, because they’ve lived too long in the graveyard of their grandfathers and they’re tired of it. And before you pity them, remember how happy they would have been to take you along with them into the clearing where the path ends.”

The steel ball zipped around another corner, leaving the TV screens and electronic monitoring equipment behind. Ahead, a wide ribbon of some synthetic stuff was set into the floor. It gleamed like fresh tar between two narrow strips of chrome steel that dwindled to a point on what was not the far side of this room, but its horizon.

The ball bounced impatiently above the dark strip, and suddenly the belt—for that was what it was—swept into silent motion, trundling

along between its steel facings at jogging speed. The ball made small arcs in the air, urging them to climb on.

Roland trotted beside the moving strip until he was roughly matching its speed, then did just that. He set Jake down and the three of them—gunslinger, boy, and golden-eyed bumbler—were carried rapidly across this shadowy underground plain where the ancient machines were awakening. The moving strip carried them into an area of what looked like filing cabinets—row after endless row of them. They were dark . . . but not dead. A low, sleepy humming sound came from within them, and Jake could see hairline cracks of bright yellow light shining between the steel panels.

He suddenly found himself thinking of the Tick-Tock Man.

There's maybe a hundred thousand of those ever-fucking dipolar computers under the ever-fucking city! I want those computers!

Well, Jake thought, they're waking up, so I guess you're getting what you wanted, Ticky . . . but if you were here, I'm not sure you'd still want it.

Then he remembered Tick-Tock's great-grandfather, who'd been brave enough to climb into an airplane from another world and take it into the sky. With that kind of blood running in his veins, Jake supposed, Tick-Tock, far from being frightened to the point of suicide, would have been delighted by this turn of events . . . and the more people who killed themselves in terror, the happier he would have been.

Too late now, Ticky, he thought. Thank God.

Roland spoke in a soft, wondering voice. "All these boxes . . . I think we're riding through the mind of the thing that calls itself Blaine, Jake. *I think we're riding through its mind.*"

Jake nodded, and found himself thinking of his Final Essay. "Blaine the Brain is a hell of a pain."

"Yes."

Jake looked closely at Roland. "Are we going to come out where I think we're going to come out?"

"Yes," Roland said. "If we're still following the Path of the Beam, we'll come out in the Cradle."

Jake nodded. "Roland?"

“What?”

“Thanks for coming after me.”

Roland nodded and put an arm around Jake’s shoulders.

Far ahead of them, huge motors rumbled to life. A moment later a heavy grinding sound began and new light—the harsh glow of orange arc-sodiums—flooded down on them. Jake could now see the place where the moving belt stopped. Beyond it was a steep, narrow escalator, leading up into that orange light.

39

EDDIE AND SUSANNAH HEARD heavy motors start up almost directly beneath them. A moment later, a wide strip of the marble floor began to pull slowly back, revealing a long lighted slot below. The floor was disappearing in their direction. Eddie seized the handles of Susannah’s chair and rolled it rapidly backward along the steel barrier between the monorail platform and the rest of the Cradle. There were several pillars along the course of the growing rectangle of light, and Eddie waited for them to tumble into the hole as the floor upon which they stood disappeared from beneath their bases. It didn’t happen. The pillars went on serenely standing, seeming to float on nothing.

“I see an escalator!” Susannah shouted over the endless, pulsing alarm. She was leaning forward, peering into the hole.

“Uh-huh,” Eddie shouted back. “We got the el station up here, so it must be notions, perfume, and ladies’ lingerie down there.”

“*What?*”

“Never mind!”

“*Eddie!*” Susannah screamed. Delighted surprise burst over her face like a Fourth of July firework. She leaned even further forward, pointing, and Eddie had to grab her to keep her from tumbling out of the chair. “*It’s Roland! It’s both of them!*”

There was a shuddery thump as the slot in the floor opened to its maximum length and stopped. The motors which had driven it along its hidden tracks cut out in a long, dying whine. Eddie ran to the edge of the hole and saw Roland riding on one of the escalator steps. Jake—white-faced, bruised, bloody, but clearly Jake and clearly alive—was standing next to him and leaning on the gunslinger’s shoulder. And sitting on the step right behind them, looking up with his bright eyes, was Oy.

“Roland! Jake!” Eddie shouted. He leaped up, waving his hands over his head, and came down dancing on the edge of the slot. If he had been wearing a hat, he would have thrown it in the air.

They looked up and waved. Jake was grinning, Eddie saw, and even old long tall and ugly looked as if he might break down and crack a smile before long. Wonders, Eddie thought, would never cease. His heart suddenly felt too big for his chest and he danced faster, waving his arms and whooping, afraid that if he didn’t keep moving, his joy and relief might actually cause him to burst. Until this moment he had not realized how positive his heart had become that they would never see Roland and Jake again.

“Hey, guys! All RIGHT! Far fucking out! Get your asses up here!”

“Eddie, help me!”

He turned. Susannah was trying to struggle out of her chair, but a fold of the deerskin trousers she was wearing had gotten caught in the brake mechanism. She was laughing and weeping at the same time, her dark eyes blazing with happiness. Eddie lifted her from the chair so violently that it crashed over on its side. He danced her around in a circle. She clung to his neck with one hand and waved strenuously with the other.

“Roland! Jake! Get on up here! Shuck your butts, you hear me?”

When they reached the top, Eddie embraced Roland, pounding him on the back while Susannah covered Jake’s upturned, laughing face with kisses. Oy ran around in tight figure eights, barking shrilly.

“Sugar!” Susannah said. “You all right?”

“Yes,” Jake said. He was still grinning, but tears stood in his eyes. “And glad to be here. You’ll never know how glad.”

"I can guess, sugar. You c'n bet on *that*." She turned to look at Roland. "What'd they do to him? His face look like somebody run over it with a bulldozer."

"That was mostly Gasher," Roland said. "He won't be bothering Jake again. Or anyone else."

"What about you, big boy? You all right?"

Roland nodded, looking about. "So this is the Cradle."

"Yes," Eddie said. He was peering into the slot. "What's down there?"

"Machines and madness."

"Loquacious as ever, I see." Eddie looked at Roland, smiling. "Do you know how happy I am to see you, man? Do you have any idea?"

"Yes—I think I do." Roland smiled then, thinking of how people changed. There had been a time, and not so long ago, when Eddie had been on the edge of cutting his throat with the gunslinger's own knife.

The engines below them started up again. The escalator came to a stop. The slot in the floor began to slide closed once more. Jake went to Susannah's overturned chair, and as he was righting it, he caught sight of the smooth pink shape beyond the iron bars. His breath stopped, and the dream he had had after leaving River Crossing returned full force: the vast pink bullet shape slicing across the empty lands of western Missouri toward him and Oy. Two big triangular windows glittering high up in the blank face of that oncoming monster, windows like eyes . . . and now his dream was becoming reality, just as he had known it eventually would.

It's just an awful choo-choo train, and its name is Blaine the Pain.

Eddie walked over and slung an arm around Jake's shoulders.

"Well, there it is, champ—just as advertised. What do you think of it?"

"Not too much, actually." This was an understatement of colossal size, but Jake was too drained to do any better.

"Me, either," Eddie said. "It talks. And it likes riddles."

Jake nodded.

Roland had Susannah planted on one hip, and together they were examining the control box with its diamond-pattern of raised number-pads. Jake and Eddie joined them. Eddie found he had to keep

looking down at Jake in order to verify that it wasn't just his imagination or wishful thinking; the boy was really here.

"What now?" he asked Roland.

Roland slipped his finger lightly over the numbered buttons which made up the diamond shape and shook his head. He didn't know.

"Because I think the mono's engines are cycling faster," Eddie said. "I mean, it's hard to tell for sure with that alarm blating, but I think it is . . . and it's a robot, after all. What if it, like, leaves without us?"

"Blaine!" Susannah shouted. "Blaine, are you—"

"LISTEN CLOSELY, MY FRIENDS," Blaine's voice boomed. "THERE ARE LARGE STOCKPILES OF CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WARFARE CANNISTERS UNDER THE CITY. I HAVE STARTED A SEQUENCE WHICH WILL CAUSE AN EXPLOSION AND RELEASE THIS GAS. THIS EXPLOSION WILL OCCUR IN TWELVE MINUTES."

The voice fell silent for a moment, and then the voice of Little Blaine, almost buried by the steady, pulsing whoop of the alarm, came to them: ". . . *I was afraid of something like this . . . you must hurry . . .*"

Eddie ignored Little Blaine, who wasn't telling him a damned thing he didn't already know. Of *course*, they had to hurry, but that fact was running a distant second at the moment. Something much larger occupied most of his mind. "*Why?*" he asked. "Why in God's name would you do that?"

"I SHOULD THINK IT OBVIOUS. I CAN'T NUKE THE CITY WITHOUT DESTROYING MYSELF, AS WELL. AND HOW COULD I TAKE YOU WHERE YOU WANT TO GO IF I WERE DESTROYED?"

"But there are still thousands of people in the city," Eddie said. "You'll *kill* them."

"YES," Blaine said calmly. "SEE YOU LATER ALLIGATOR, AFTER A WHILE CROCODILE, DON'T FORGET TO WRITE."

"*Why?*" Susannah shouted. "*Why, goddam you?*"

"BECAUSE THEY BORE ME. YOU FOUR, HOWEVER, I FIND RATHER INTERESTING. OF COURSE, HOW LONG I *CONTINUE* TO FIND YOU INTERESTING WILL DEPEND ON HOW GOOD

YOUR RIDDLES ARE. AND SPEAKING OF RIDDLES, HADN'T YOU BETTER GET TO WORK SOLVING MINE? YOU HAVE EXACTLY ELEVEN MINUTES AND TWENTY SECONDS BEFORE THE CANNISTERS RUPTURE."

"Stop it!" Jake yelled over the blating siren. "It isn't just the city—gas like that could float *anywhere!* It could even kill the old people in River Crossing!"

"TOUGH TITTY, SAID THE KITTY," Blaine responded unfeelingly. "ALTHOUGH I BELIEVE THEY CAN COUNT ON MEASURING OUT THEIR LIVES IN COFFEE-SPOONS FOR A FEW MORE YEARS; THE AUTUMN STORMS HAVE BEGUN, AND THE PREVAILING WINDS WILL CARRY THE GASES AWAY FROM THEM. THE SITUATION OF YOU FOUR IS, HOWEVER, VERY DIFFERENT. YOU BETTER PUT ON YOUR THINKING CAPS, OR IT'S SEE YOU LATER ALLIGATOR, AFTER A WHILE CROCODILE, DON'T FORGET TO WRITE." The voice paused. "ONE PIECE OF ADDITIONAL INPUT: THIS GAS IS *NOT* PAINLESS."

"Take it back!" Jake said. "We'll still tell you riddles, won't we, Roland? We'll tell all the riddles you want! *Just take it back!*"

Blaine began to laugh. He laughed for a long time, pealing shrieks of electronic mirth into the wide empty space of the Cradle, where it mingled with the monotonous, drilling beat of the alarm.

"Stop it!" Susannah shouted. "Stop it! Stop it! *Stop it!*"

Blaine did. A moment later the alarm cut off in mid-blat. The ensuing silence—broken only by the pounding rain—was deafening.

Now the voice issuing from the speaker was very soft, thoughtful, and utterly without mercy. "YOU NOW HAVE TEN MINUTES," Blaine said. "LET'S SEE JUST HOW INTERESTING YOU REALLY ARE."

40

"ANDREW."

There is no Andrew here, stranger, he thought. Andrew is long gone; Andrew is no more, as I shall soon be no more.

“Andrew!” the voice insisted.

It came from far away. It came from outside the cider-press that had once been his head.

Once there *had* been a boy named Andrew, and his father had taken that boy to a park on the far western side of Lud, a park where there had been apple trees and a rusty tin shack that looked like hell and smelled like heaven. In answer to his question, Andrew’s father had told him it was called the cider house. Then he gave Andrew a pat on the head, told him not to be afraid, and led him through the blanket-covered doorway.

There had been more apples—baskets and baskets of them—stacked against the walls inside, and there had also been a scrawny old man named Dewlap, whose muscles writhed beneath his white skin like worms and whose job was to feed the apples, basket by basket, to the loose-jointed, clanking machine which stood in the middle of the room. What came out of the pipe jutting from the far end of the machine was sweet cider. Another man (he no longer remembered what this one’s name might have been) stood there, his job to fill jug after jug with the cider. A third man stood behind *him*, and *his* job was to clout the jug-filler on the head if there was too much spillage.

Andrew’s father had given him a glass of the foaming cider, and although he had tasted a great many forgotten delicacies during his years in the city, he had never tasted anything finer than that sweet, cold drink. It had been like swallowing a gust of October wind. Yet what he remembered even more clearly than the taste of the cider or the wormy shift and squiggle of Dewlap’s muscles as he dumped the baskets was the merciless way the machine reduced the big red-gold apples to liquid. Two dozen rollers had carried them beneath a revolving steel drum with holes punched in it. The apples had first been squeezed and then actually popped, spilling their juices down an inclined trough while a screen caught the seeds and pulp.

Now his head was the cider-press and his brains were the apples. Soon they would pop as the apples had popped beneath the roller,

and the blessed darkness would swallow him.

“Andrew! Raise your head and look at me.”

He couldn't . . . and wouldn't even if he could. Better to just lie here and wait for the darkness. He was supposed to be dead, anyway; hadn't the hellish squint put a bullet in his brain?

“It didn't go anywhere near your brain, you horse's ass, and you're not dying. You've just got a headache. You *will* die, though, if you don't stop lying there and puling in your own blood . . . and I will make sure, Andrew, that your dying makes what you are feeling now seem like bliss.”

It was not the threats which caused the man on the floor to raise his head but rather the way the owner of that penetrating, hissing voice seemed to have read his mind. His head came up slowly, and the agony was excruciating—heavy objects seemed to go sliding and careering around the bony case which contained what was left of his mind, ripping bloody channels through his brain as they went. A long, syrupy moan escaped him. There was a flapping, tickling sensation on his right cheek, as if a dozen flies were crawling in the blood there. He wanted to shoo them away, but he knew that he needed both hands just to support himself.

The figure standing on the far side of the room by the hatch which led to the kitchen looked ghastly, unreal. This was partly because the overhead lights were still strobing, partly because he was seeing the newcomer with only one eye (he couldn't remember what had happened to the other and didn't want to), but he had an idea it was mostly because the creature *was* ghastly and unreal. It looked like a man . . . but the fellow who had once been Andrew Quick had an idea it really wasn't a man at all.

The stranger standing in front of the hatch wore a short, dark jacket belted at the waist, faded denim trousers, and old, dusty boots—the boots of a country-man, a range-rider, or—

“Or a gunslinger, Andrew?” the stranger asked, and tittered.

The Tick-Tock Man stared desperately at the figure in the doorway, trying to see the face, but the short jacket had a hood, and it was up. The stranger's countenance was lost in its shadows.

The siren stopped in mid-whoop. The emergency lights stayed on, but they at least stopped flashing.

“There,” the stranger said in his—or its—whispery, penetrating voice. “At last we can hear ourselves think.”

“Who are you?” the Tick-Tock Man asked. He moved slightly, and more of those weights went sliding through his head, ripping fresh channels in his brain. As terrible as that feeling was, the awful tickling of the flies on his right cheek was somehow worse.

“I’m a man of many handles, pardner,” the man said from inside the darkness of his hood, and although his voice was grave, Tick-Tock heard laughter lurking just below the surface. “There’s some that call me Jimmy, and some that call me Timmy; some that call me Handy and some that call me Dandy. They can call me Loser, or they can call me Winner, just as long as they don’t call me in too late for dinner.”

The man in the doorway threw back his head, and his laughter chilled the skin of the wounded man’s arms and back into lumps of gooseflesh; it was like the howl of a wolf.

“I have been called the Ageless Stranger,” the man said. He began to walk toward Tick-Tock, and as he did, the man on the floor moaned and tried to scabble backward. “I have also been called Merlin or Maerlyn—and who cares, because I was never *that* one, although I never denied it, either. I am sometimes called the Magician . . . or the Wizard . . . but I hope we can go forward together on more humble terms, Andrew. More *human* terms.”

He pushed back the hood, revealing a fair, broad-browed face that was not, for all its pleasant looks, in any way human. Large hectic roses rode the Wizard’s cheekbones; his blue-green eyes sparkled with a gusty joy far too wild to be sane; his blue-black hair stood up in zany clumps like the feathers of a raven; his lips, lushly red, parted to reveal the teeth of a cannibal.

“Call me Fannin,” the grinning apparition said.

“Richard Fannin. That’s not *exactly* right, maybe, but I reckon it’s close enough for government work.” He held out a hand whose palm was utterly devoid of lines. “What do you say, pard? Shake the hand that shook the world.”

The creature who had once been Andrew Quick and who had been known in the halls of the Grays as the Tick-Tock Man shrieked and again tried to wriggle backward. The flap of scalp peeled loose by the low-caliber bullet which had only grooved his skull instead of penetrating it swung back and forth; the long strands of gray-blond hair continued to tickle against his cheek. Quick, however, no longer felt it. He had even forgotten the ache in his skull and the throb from the socket where his left eye had been. His entire consciousness had fused into one thought: *I must get away from this beast that looks like a man.*

But when the stranger seized his right hand and shook it, that thought passed like a dream on waking. The scream which had been locked in Quick's breast escaped his lips in a lover's sigh. He stared dumbly up at the grinning newcomer. The loose flap of his scalp swung and dangled.

"Is that bothering you? It *must* be. Here!" Fannin seized the hanging flap and ripped it briskly off Quick's head, revealing a bleary swatch of skull. There was a noise like heavy cloth tearing. Quick shrieked.

"There, there, it only hurts for a second." The man was now squatting on his hunkers before Quick and speaking as an indulgent parent might speak to a child with a splinter in his finger. "Isn't that so?"

"Y-Y-Yes," Quick muttered. And it was. Already the pain was fading. And when Fannin reached toward him again, caressing the left side of his face, Quick's jerk backward was only a reflex, quickly mastered. As the lineless hand stroked, he felt strength flowing back into him. He looked up at the newcomer with dumb gratitude, lips quivering.

"Is that better, Andrew? It is, isn't it?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"If you want to thank me—as I'm sure you do—you must say something an old acquaintance of mine used to say. He ended up betraying me, but he was a good friend for quite some time, anyway, and I still have a soft spot in my heart for him. Say, 'My life for you,' Andrew—can you say that?"

He could and he did; in fact, it seemed he couldn't *stop* saying it. "My life for you! My life for you! My life for you! My life—"

The stranger touched his cheek again, but this time a huge raw bolt of pain blasted across Andrew Quick's head. He screamed.

"Sorry about that, but time is short and you were starting to sound like a broken record. Andrew, let me put it to you with no bark on it: how would you like to kill the squint who shot you? Not to mention his friends and the hardcase who brought him here—him, most of all. Even the mutt that took your eye, Andrew—would you like that?"

"Yes!" the former Tick-Tock Man gasped. His hands clenched into bloody fists. "Yes!"

"That's good," the stranger said, and helped Quick to his feet, "because they *have* to die—they're meddling with things they have no business meddling with. I expected Blaine to take care of them, but things have gone much too far to depend on *anything* ... after all, who would have thought they could get as far as they have?"

"I don't know," Quick said. He did not, in fact, have the slightest idea what the stranger was talking about. Nor did he care; there was a feeling of exaltation creeping through his mind like some excellent drug, and after the pain of the cider-press, that was enough for him. More than enough.

Richard Fannin's lips curled. "Bear and bone . . . key and rose . . . day and night . . . time and tide. *Enough!* Enough, I *say!* *They must not draw closer to the Tower than they are now!*"

Quick staggered backward as the man's hands shot out with the flickery speed of heat lightning. One broke the chain which held the tiny glass-enclosed pendulum clock; the other stripped Jake Chambers's Seiko from his forearm.

"I'll just take these, shall I?" Fannin the Wizard smiled charmingly, his lips modestly closed over those awful teeth. "Or do you object?"

"No," Quick said, surrendering the last symbols of his long leadership without a qualm (without, in fact, even being aware that he was doing so). "Be my guest."

"Thank you, Andrew," the dark man said softly. "Now we must step lively—I'm expecting a drastic change in the atmosphere of these environs in the next five minutes or so. We must get to the nearest

closet where gas masks are stored before that happens, and it's apt to be a near thing. I could survive the change quite nicely, but I'm afraid you might have some difficulties."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Andrew Quick said. His head had begun to throb again, and his mind was whirling.

"Nor do you need to," the stranger said smoothly. "Come, Andrew—I think we should hurry. Busy, busy day, eh? With luck, Blaine will fry them right on the platform, where they are no doubt still standing—he's become very eccentric over the years, poor fellow. But I think we should hurry, just the same."

He slid his arm over Quick's shoulders and, giggling, led him through the hatchway Roland and Jake had used only a few minutes before.

VI

RIDDLE AND WASTE LANDS



“ALL RIGHT,” ROLAND SAID. “Tell me his riddle.”

“What about all the people out there?” Eddie asked, pointing across the wide, pillared Plaza of the Cradle and toward the city beyond. “What can we do for them?”

“Nothing,” Roland said, “but it’s still possible that we may be able to do something for ourselves. Now what was the riddle?”

Eddie looked toward the streamlined shape of the mono. “He said we’d have to prime the pump to get him going. Only his pump primes backward. Does it mean anything to you?”

Roland thought it over carefully, then shook his head. He looked down at Jake. “Any ideas, Jake?”

Jake shook his head. “I don’t even see a pump.”

“That’s probably the easy part,” Roland said. “We say *he* and *him* instead of it and *that* because Blaine sounds like a living being, but he’s still a machine—a sophisticated one, but a machine. He started his own engines, but it must take some sort of code or combination to open the gate and the train doors.”

“We better hurry up,” Jake said nervously. “It’s got to be two or three minutes since he last talked to us. At least.”

“Don’t count on it,” Eddie said gloomily. “Time’s weird over here.”

“Still—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Eddie glanced toward Susannah, but she was sitting astride Roland’s hip and looking at the numeric diamond with a daydreamy expression on her face. He looked back at Roland. “I’m pretty sure you’re right about it being a combination—that must be what all those number-pads are for.” He raised his voice. “Is that it, Blaine? Have we got at least that much right?”

No response; only the quickening rumble of the mono’s engines.

“Roland,” Susannah said abruptly. “You have to help me.”

The daydreamy look was being replaced by an expression of mingled horror, dismay, and determination. To Roland’s eye, she had never looked more beautiful ... or more alone. She had been on his shoulders when they stood at the edge of the clearing and watched

the bear trying to claw Eddie out of the tree, and Roland had not seen her expression when he told her she must be the one to shoot it. But he knew what that expression had been, for he was seeing it now. *Ka* was a wheel, its one purpose to turn, and in the end it always came back to the place where it had started. So it had ever been and so it was now; Susannah was once again facing the bear, and her face said she knew it.

“What?” he asked. “What is it, Susannah?”

“I know the answer, but I can’t get it. It’s stuck in my mind the way a fishbone can get stuck in your throat. I need you to help me remember. Not his face, but his voice. What he *said*.”

Jake glanced down at his wrist and was surprised all over again by a memory of the Tick-Tock Man’s catlike green eyes when he saw not his watch but only the place where it had been—a white shape outlined by his deeply tanned skin. How much longer did they have? Surely no more than seven minutes, and that was being generous. He looked up and saw that Roland had removed a cartridge from his gunbelt and was walking it back and forth across the knuckles of his left hand. Jake felt his eyelids immediately grow heavy and looked away, fast.

“What voice would you remember, Susannah Dean?” Roland asked in- a low, musing voice. His eyes were not fixed on her face but on the cartridge as it did its endless, limber dance across his knuckles . . . and back . . . across . . . and back . . .

He didn’t need to look up to know that Jake had looked away from the dance of the cartridge and Susannah had not. He began to speed it up until the cartridge almost seemed to be floating above the back of his hand.

“Help me remember the voice of my father,” Susannah Dean said.

FOR A MOMENT THERE was silence except for a distant, crumping explosion in the city, the rain pounding on the roof of the Cradle, and the fat throb of the monorail's slo-trans engines. Then a low-pitched hydraulic hum cut through the air. Eddie looked away from the cartridge dancing across the gunslinger's fingers (it took an effort; he realized that in another few moments he would have been hypnotized himself) and peered through the iron bars. A slim silver rod was pushing itself up from the sloping pink surface between Blaine's forward windows. It looked like an antenna of some kind.

"Susannah?" Roland asked in that same low voice.

"What?" Her eyes were open but her voice was distant and breathy—the voice of someone who is sleeptalking.

"Do you remember the voice of your father?"

"Yes . . . but I can't hear it."

"SIX MINUTES, MY FRIENDS."

Eddie and Jake started and looked toward the control-box speaker, but Susannah seemed not to have heard at all; she only stared at the floating cartridge. Below it, Roland's knuckles rippled up and down like the heddles of a loom.

"Try, Susannah," Roland urged, and suddenly he felt Susannah change within the circle of his right arm. She seemed to gain weight . . . and, in some indefinable way, vitality as well. It was as if her essence had somehow changed.

And it had.

"Why you want to bother wit *dat* bitch?" the raspy voice of Detta Walker asked.

3

DETTA SOUNDED BOTH EXASPERATED and amused. "She never got no better'n a C in math her whole life. Wouldn'ta got dat widout me to he'p her." She paused, then added grudgingly: "An' Daddy. He he'ped some, too. I knowed about them forspecial numbahs, but was

him showed us de net. My, I got de bigges' kick outta dat!" She chuckled. "Reason Suze can't remember is 'cause Odetta never understood'bout dem forspecial numbers in de firs' place."

"What forspecial numbers?" Eddie asked.

"*Prime* numbahs!" She pronounced the word *prime* in a way that almost rhymed with *calm*. She looked at Roland, appearing to be wholly awake again now ... except she was not Susannah, nor was she the same wretched, devilish creature who had previously gone under the name of Detta Walker, although she *sounded* the same. "She went to Daddy cryin an' carryin on 'cause she was flunkin dat math course . . . and it wasn't nuthin but funnybook algebra at dat! She could do de woik—if *I* could, *she* could—but she din' want to. Poitry-readin bitch like her too good for a little *ars mathematica*, you see?" Detta threw her head back and laughed, but the poisoned, half-mad bitterness was gone from the sound. She seemed genuinely amused at the foolishness of her mental twin.

"And Daddy, he say, 'I'm goan show you a trick, Odetta. I learned it in college. It he'ped me get through this prime numbah bi'ness, and it's goan he'p you, too. He'p you find mos' any prime numbah you want.' *Oh-detta*, dumb as ever, she say, 'Teacher says ain't no formula for prime numbahs, Daddy.' And Daddy, he say right back, 'They ain't. But you can catch em, Odetta, if you have a net.' He called it The Net of Eratosthenes. Take me over to dat box on the wall, Roland—I'm goan answer dat honkey computer's riddle. I'm goan th'ow you a net and catch you a train-ride."

Roland took her over, closely followed by Eddie, Jake, and Oy.

"Gimme dat piece o' cha'coal you keep in yo' poke."

He rummaged and brought out a short stub of blackened stick. Detta took it and peered at the diamond-shaped grid of numbers. "Ain't zackly de way Daddy showed me, but I reckon it comes to de same," she said after a moment. "Prime numbah be like me—ornery and forspecial. It gotta be a numbah don't nevvah divide even 'ceptin by one and its ownself. Two is prime, 'cause you can divide it by one an' two, but it's the *only* even numbah that's prime. You c'n take out all the res' dat's even."

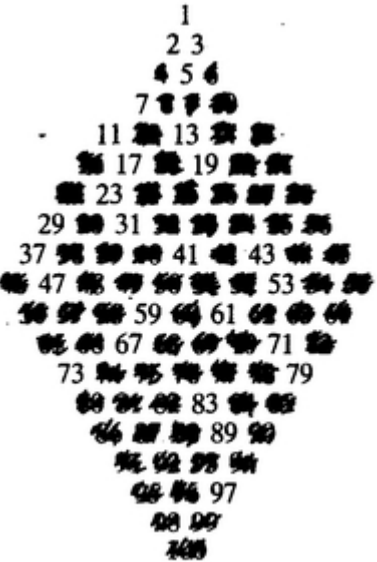
"I'm lost," Eddie said.

“That’s ’cause you just a stupid white boy,” Detta said, but not unkindly. She looked closely at the diamond shape a moment longer, then quickly began to touch the tip of the charcoal to all the even-numbered pads, leaving small black smudges on them.

“Three’s prime, but no product you git by *multiplyin* three can be prime,” she said, and now Roland heard an odd but wonderful thing: Detta was fading out of the woman’s voice; she was being replaced not by Odetta Holmes but by Susannah Dean. He would not have to bring her out of this trance; she was coming out of it on her own, quite naturally.

Susannah began using her charcoal to touch the multiples of three which were left now that the even numbers had been eliminated: nine, fifteen, twenty-one, and so on.

“Same with five and seven,” she murmured, and suddenly she was awake and all Susannah Dean again. “You just have to mark the odd ones like twenty-five that haven’t been crossed out already.” The diamond shape on the control box now looked like this:



“There,” she said tiredly. “What’s left in the net are all the prime numbers between one and one hundred. I’m pretty sure that’s the combination that opens the gate.”

“YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE, MY FRIENDS. YOU ARE PROVING TO BE A GOOD DEAL THICKER THAN I HAD HOPED YOU WOULD BE.”

Eddie ignored Blaine’s voice and threw his arms around Susannah. “Are you back, Suze? Are you awake?”

“Yes. I woke up in the middle of what she was saying, but I let her talk a little longer, anyway. It seemed impolite to interrupt.” She looked at Roland. “What do you say? Want to go for it?”

“FIFTY SECONDS.”

“Yes. You try the combination, Susannah. It’s your answer.”

She reached out toward the top of the diamond, but Jake put his hand over hers. “No,” he said. “ ‘This pump primes, *backward.*’ Remember?”

She looked startled, then smiled. “That’s right. Clever Blaine ... and clever Jake, too.”

They watched in silence as she pushed each number in turn, starting with ninety-seven. There was a minute click as each pad locked down. There was no tension-filled pause after she touched the last button; the gate in the center of the barrier immediately began to slide up on its tracks, rattling harshly and showering down flakes of rust from somewhere high above as it went.

“NOT BAD AT ALL,” Blaine said admiringly. “I’M LOOKING FORWARD TO THIS VERY MUCH. MAY I SUGGEST YOU CLIMB ON BOARD QUICKLY? IN FACT, YOU MAY WISH TO RUN. THERE ARE SEVERAL GAS OUTLETS IN THIS AREA.”

4

THREE HUMAN BEINGS (one carrying a fourth on his hip) and one small, furry animal ran through the opening in the barrier and sprinted toward Blaine the Mono. It stood humming in its narrow loading bay, half above the platform and half below it, looking like a giant cartridge—one which had been painted an incongruous shade

of pink—lying in the open breech of a high-powered rifle. In the vastness of the Cradle, Roland and the others looked like mere moving specks. Above them, flocks of pigeons—now with only forty seconds to live—swooped and swirled beneath the Cradle’s ancient roof. As the travellers approached the mono, a curved section of its pink hull slid up, revealing a doorway. Beyond it was thick, pale blue carpeting.

“Welcome to Blaine,” a soothing voice said as they pelted aboard. They all recognized that voice; it was a slightly louder, slightly more confident version of Little Blaine. “Praise the Imperium! Please make sure your transit-card is available for collection and remember that false boarding is a serious crime punishable by law. We hope you enjoy your trip. Welcome to Blaine. Praise the Imperium! Please make sure your transit-card—”

The voice suddenly sped up, first becoming the chatter of a human chipmunk and then a high-pitched, gabbly whine. There was a brief electronic curse—*BOOP!*—and then it cut out entirely.

“I THINK WE CAN DISPENSE WITH *THAT* BORING OLD SHIT, DON’T YOU?” Blaine asked.

From outside came a tremendous, thudding explosion. Eddie, who was now carrying Susannah, was thrown forward and would have fallen if Roland hadn’t caught him by the arm. Until that moment, Eddie had held onto the desperate notion that Blaine’s threat about the poison gas was no more than a sick joke. *You should have known better, he thought. Anyone who thinks impressions of old movie actors is funny absolutely cannot be trusted. I think it’s like a law of nature.*

Behind them, the curved section of hull slid back into place with a soft thud. Air began to hiss gently from hidden vents, and Jake felt his ears pop gently. “I think he just pressurized the cabin.”

Eddie nodded, looking around with wide eyes. “I felt it, too. Look at this place! Wow!”

He had once read of an aviation company—Regent Air, it might have been—that had catered to people who wanted to fly between New York and Los Angeles in a grander style than airlines such as Delta and United allowed for. They had operated a customized 727

complete with drawing room, bar, video lounge, and sleeper compartments. He imagined the interior of that plane must have looked a little like what he was seeing now.

They were standing in a long, tubular room furnished with plush-upholstered swivel chairs and modular sofas. At the far end of the compartment, which had to be at least eighty feet long, was an area that looked not like a bar but a cosy bistro. An instrument that could have been a harpsichord stood on a pedestal of polished wood, highlighted by a hidden baby spotlight. Eddie almost expected Hoagy Carmichael to appear and start tinkling out “Stardust.”

Indirect lighting glowed from panels placed high along the walls, and dependent from the ceiling halfway down the compartment was a chandelier. To Jake it looked like a smaller replica of the one which had lain in ruins on the ballroom floor of The Mansion. Nor did this surprise him—he had begun to take such connections and doublings as a matter of course. The only thing about this splendid room which seemed wrong was its lack of even a single window.

The *pièce de résistance* stood on a pedestal below the chandelier. It was an ice-sculpture of a gunslinger with a revolver in his left hand. The right hand was holding the bridle of the ice-horse that walked, head-down and tired, behind him. Eddie could see there were only three digits on this hand: the last two fingers and the thumb.

Jake, Eddie, and Susannah stared in fascination at the haggard face beneath the frozen hat as the floor began to thrum gently beneath their feet. The resemblance to Roland was remarkable.

“I HAD TO WORK RATHER FAST, I’M AFRAID,” Blaine said modestly. “DOES IT DO ANYTHING FOR YOU?”

“It’s absolutely amazing,” Susannah said.

“THANK YOU, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK.”

Eddie was testing one of the sofas with his hand. It was incredibly soft; touching it made him want to sleep for at least sixteen hours.

“The Great Old Ones really travelled in style, didn’t they?”

Blaine laughed again, and the shrill, not-quite-sane undertone of that laugh made them look at each other uneasily. “DON’T GET THE WRONG IDEA,” Blaine said. “THIS WAS THE BARONY CABIN—WHAT I BELIEVE YOU WOULD CALL FIRST CLASS.”

“Where are the other cars?”

Blaine ignored the question. Beneath their feet, the throb of the engines continued to speed up. Susannah was reminded of how the pilots revved their engines before charging down the runway at LaGuardia or Idlewild. “PLEASE TAKE YOUR SEATS, MY INTERESTING NEW FRIENDS.”

Jake dropped into one of the swivel chairs. Oy jumped promptly into his lap. Roland took the chair nearest him, sparing one glance at the ice-sculpture. The barrel of the revolver was beginning to drip slowly into the shallow china basin in which the sculpture stood.

Eddie sat down on one of the sofas with Susannah. It was every bit as comfortable as his hand had told him it would be. “Exactly where are we going, Blaine?”

Blaine replied in the patient voice of someone who realizes he is speaking to a mental inferior and must make allowances. “ALONG THE PATH OF THE BEAM. AT LEAST, AS FAR ALONG IT AS MY TRACK GOES.”

“To the Dark Tower?” Roland asked. Susannah realized it was the first time the gunslinger had actually spoken to the loquacious ghost in the machine below Lud.

“Only as far as Topeka,” Jake said in a low voice.

“YES,” Blaine said. “TOPEKA IS THE NAME OF MY TERMINATING POINT, ALTHOUGH I AM SURPRISED YOU KNOW IT.”

With all you know about our world, Jake thought, how come you don't know that some lady wrote a book about you, Blaine? Was it the name-change? Was something that simple enough to fool a complicated machine like you into overlooking your own biography? And what about Beryl Evans, the woman who supposedly wrote Charlie the Choo-Choo? Did you know her, Blaine? And where is she now?

Good questions . . . but Jake somehow didn't think this would be a good time to ask them.

The throb of the engines became steadily stronger. A faint thud—not nearly as strong as the explosion which had shaken the Cradle as they boarded—ran through the floor. An expression of alarm

crossed Susannah's face. "Oh *shit!* Eddie! My wheelchair! It's back there!"

Eddie put an arm around her shoulders. "Too late now, babe," he said as Blaine the Mono began to move, sliding toward its slot in the Cradle for the first time in ten years . . . and for the last time in its long, long history.

5

"THE BARONY CABIN HAS A PARTICULARLY FINE VISUAL MODE," Blaine said. "WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO ACTIVATE IT?"

Jake glanced at Roland, who shrugged and nodded.

"Yes, please," Jake said.

What happened then was so spectacular that it stunned all of them to silence . . . although Roland, who knew little of technology but who had spent his entire life on comfortable terms with magic, was the least wonder-struck of the four. It was not a matter of windows appearing in the compartment's curved walls; the entire cabin—floor and ceiling as well as walls—grew milky, grew translucent, grew transparent, and then disappeared completely. Within a space of five seconds, Blaine the Mono seemed to be gone and the pilgrims seemed to be zooming through the lanes of the city with no aid or support at all.

Susannah and Eddie clutched each other like small children in the path of a charging animal. Oy barked and tried to jump down the front of Jake's shirt. Jake barely noticed; he was clutching the sides of his seat and looking from side to side, his eyes wide with amazement. His initial alarm was being replaced by amazed delight.

The furniture groupings were still here, he saw; so was the bar, the piano-harpsichord, and the ice-sculpture Blaine had created as a party-favor, but now this living-room configuration appeared to be cruising seventy feet above Lud's rain-soaked central district. Five feet to Jake's left, Eddie and Susannah were floating along on one of

the couches; three feet to his right, Roland was sitting in a powder-blue swivel chair, his dusty, battered boots resting on nothing, flying serenely over the rubble-strewn urban waste land below.

Jake could feel the carpet beneath his moccasins, but his eyes insisted that neither the carpet nor the floor beneath it was still there. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the dark slot in the stone flank of the Cradle slowly receding in the distance.

“Eddie! Susannah! Check it out!”

Jake got to his feet, holding Oy inside his shirt, and began to walk slowly through what looked like empty space. Taking the initial step required a great deal of willpower, because his eyes told him there was nothing at all between the floating islands of furniture, but once he began to move, the undeniable feel of the floor beneath him made it easier. To Eddie and Susannah, the boy appeared to be walking on thin air while the battered, dingy buildings of the city slid by on either side.

“Don’t do that, kid,” Eddie said feebly. “You’re gonna make me sick up.”

Jake lifted Oy carefully out of his shirt. “It’s okay,” he said, and set him down. “See?”

“Oy!” the bumbler agreed, but after one look between his paws at the city park currently unrolling beneath them, he attempted to crawl onto Jake’s feet and sit on his moccasins.

Jake looked forward and saw the broad gray stroke of the monorail track ahead of them, rising slowly but steadily through the buildings and disappearing into the rain. He looked down again and saw nothing but the street and floating membranes of low cloud.

“How come I can’t see the track underneath us, Blaine?”

“THE IMAGES YOU SEE ARE COMPUTER-GENERATED,” Blaine replied. “THE COMPUTER ERASES THE TRACK FROM THE LOWER-QUADRANT IMAGE IN ORDER TO PRESENT A MORE PLEASING VIEW, AND ALSO TO REINFORCE THE ILLUSION THAT THE PASSENGERS ARE FLYING.”

“It’s incredible,” Susannah murmured. Her initial fear had passed and she was looking around eagerly. “It’s like being on a flying carpet. I keep expecting the wind to blow back my hair—”

“I CAN PROVIDE THAT SENSATION, IF YOU LIKE,” Blaine said. “ALSO A LITTLE MOISTURE, WHICH WILL MATCH CURRENT OUTSIDE CONDITIONS. IT MIGHT NECESSITATE A CHANGE OF CLOTHES, HOWEVER.”

“That’s all right, Blaine. There’s such a thing as taking an illusion too far.”

The track slipped through a tall cluster of buildings which reminded Jake a little of the Wall Street area in New York. When they cleared these, the track dipped to pass under what looked like an elevated road. That was when they saw the purple, cloud, and the crowd of people fleeing before it.

6

“BLAINE, WHAT’S THAT?” JAKE asked, but he already knew.

Blaine laughed . . . but made no other reply.

The purple vapor drifted from gratings in the sidewalk and the smashed windows of deserted buildings, but most of it seemed to be coming from manholes like the one Gasher had used to get into the tunnels below the streets. Their iron covers had been blown clear by the explosion they had felt as they were boarding the mono. They watched in silent horror as the bruise-colored gas crept down the avenues and spread into the debris-littered side-streets. It drove those inhabitants of Lud still interested in survival before it like cattle. Most were Pubes, judging from their scarves, but Jake could see a few splashes of bright yellow, as well. Old animosities had been forgotten now that the end was finally upon them.

The purple cloud began to catch up with the stragglers—mostly old people who were unable to run. They fell down, clawing at their throats and screaming soundlessly, the instant the gas touched them. Jake saw an agonized face staring up at him in disbelief as they passed over, saw the eyesockets suddenly fill up with blood, and closed his eyes.

Ahead, the monorail track disappeared into the oncoming purple fog. Eddie winced and held his breath as they plunged in, but of course it parted around them, and no whiff of the death engulfing the city came to them. Looking into the streets below was like looking through a stained-glass window into hell.

Susannah put her face against his chest.

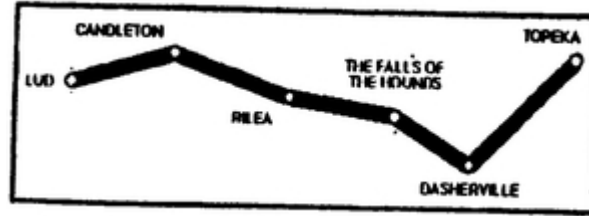
“Make the walls come back, Blaine,” Eddie said. “We don’t want to see that.”

Blaine made no reply, and the transparency around and below them remained. The cloud was already disintegrating into ragged purple streamers. Beyond it, the buildings of the city grew smaller and closer together. The streets of this section were tangled alleyways, seemingly without order or coherence. In some places, whole blocks appeared to have burned flat . . . and a long time ago, for the plains were reclaiming these areas, burying the rubble in the grasses which would some day swallow all of Lud. *The way the jungle swallowed the great civilizations of the Incas and Mayas*, Eddie thought. *The wheel of ka turns and the world moves on.*

Beyond the slums—that, Eddie felt sure, was what they had been even before the evil days came—was a gleaming wall. Blaine was moving slowly in that direction. They could see a deep square notch cut in the white stone. The monorail track passed through it.

“LOOK TOWARD THE FRONT OF THE CABIN, PLEASE,” Blaine invited.

They did, and the forward wall reappeared—a blue-upholstered circle that seemed to float in empty space. It was unmarked by a door; if there was a way to get into the operator’s room from the Barony Cabin, Eddie couldn’t see it. As they watched, a rectangular area of this front wall darkened, going from blue to violet to black. A moment later, a bright red line appeared on the rectangle, squiggling across its surface. Violet dots appeared at irregular intervals along the line, and even before names appeared beside the dots, Eddie realized he was looking at a route-map, one not much different from those which were mounted in New York subway stations and on the trains themselves. A flashing green dot appeared at Lud, which was Blaine’s base of operations as well as his terminating point.



“YOU ARE LOOKING AT OUR ROUTE OF TRAVEL. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE SOME TWISTS AND TURNS ALONG THE BUNNY-TRAIL, YOU WILL NOTE THAT OUR COURSE KEEPS FIRMLY TO THE SOUTHWEST—ALONG THE PATH OF THE BEAM. THE TOTAL DISTANCE IS JUST OVER EIGHT THOUSAND WHEELS—OR SEVEN THOUSAND MILES, IF YOU PREFER THAT UNIT OF MEASURE. IT WAS ONCE MUCH LESS, BUT THAT WAS BEFORE ALL TEMPORAL SYNAPSES BEGAN TO MELT DOWN.”

“What do you mean, temporal synapses?” Susannah asked.

Blaine laughed his nasty laugh . . . but did not answer her question.

“AT MY TOP SPEED, WE WILL REACH THE TERMINATING POINT OF MY RUN IN EIGHT HOURS AND FORTY-FIVE MINUTES.”

“Eight hundred—plus miles an hour over the ground,” Susannah said. Her voice was soft with awe. “Jesus-God.”

“I AM, OF COURSE, MAKING THE ASSUMPTION THAT ALL TRACKAGE ALONG MY ROUTE REMAINS INTACT. IT HAS BEEN NINE YEARS AND FIVE MONTHS SINCE I’VE BOTHERED TO MAKE THE RUN, SO I CAN’T SAY FOR SURE.”

Ahead, the wall at the southeastern edge of the city was drawing closer. It was high and thick and eroded to rubble at the top. It also appeared to be lined with skeletons—thousands upon thousands of dead Luddites. The notch toward which Blaine was slowly moving appeared to be at least two hundred feet deep, and here the trestle which bore the track was very dark, as if someone had tried to burn it or blow it up.

“What happens if we come to a place where the track is gone?” Eddie asked. He realized he kept raising his voice to talk to Blaine,

as if he were speaking to somebody on the telephone and had a bad connection.

“AT EIGHT HUNDRED MILES AN HOUR?” Blaine sounded amused. “SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR, AFTER A WHILE, CROCODILE, DON’T FORGET TO WRITE.”

“Come on!” Eddie said. “Don’t tell me a machine as sophisticated as you can’t monitor your own trackage for breaks.”

“WELL, I *COULD* HAVE,” Blaine agreed, “BUT—AW, SHUCKS!—I BLEW THOSE CIRCUITS OUT WHEN WE STARTED TO MOVE.”

Eddie’s face was a picture of astonishment. “Why?” “IT’S QUITE A BIT MORE EXCITING THIS WAY, DON’T YOU THINK?”

Eddie, Susannah, and Jake exchanged thunderstruck looks. Roland, apparently not surprised at all, sat placidly in his chair with his hands folded in his lap, looking down as they passed thirty feet above the wretched hovels and demolished buildings which infested this side of the city.

“LOOK CLOSELY AS WE LEAVE THE CITY, AND MARK WHAT YOU SEE,” Blaine told them. “MARK IT VERY WELL.”

The invisible Barony Coach bore them toward the notch in the wall. They passed through, and as they came out the other side, Eddie and Susannah screamed in unison. Jake took one look and clapped his hands over his eyes. Oy began to bark wildly.

Roland stared down, eyes wide, lips set in a bloodless line like a scar. Understanding filled him like bright white light.

Beyond the Great Wall of Lud, the *real* waste lands began.

7

THE MONO HAD BEEN descending as they approached the notch in the wall, putting them not more than thirty feet above the ground. That made the shock greater . . . for when they emerged on the other side, they were skimming along at a horrifying height—eight hundred feet, perhaps a thousand.

Roland looked back over his shoulder at the wall, which was now receding behind them. It had seemed very high as they approached it, but from this perspective it seemed puny indeed—a splintered fingernail of stone clinging to the edge of a vast, sterile headland. Granite cliffs, wet with rain, plunged into what seemed at first glance to be an endless abyss. Directly below the wall, the rock was lined with large circular holes like empty eyesockets. Black water and tendrils of purple mist emerged from these in brackish, sludgy streams and spread downward over the granite in stinking, overlapping fans that looked almost as old as the rock itself. *That must be where all the city's waste-product goes*, the gunslinger thought. *Over the edge and into the pit.*

Except it wasn't a pit; it was a sunken plain. It was as if the land beyond the city had lain on top of a titanic, flat-roofed elevator, and at some point in the dim, unrecorded past the elevator had gone down, taking a huge chunk of the world with it. Blaine's single track, centered on its narrow trestle, soaring above this fallen land and below the rain-swollen clouds, seemed to float in empty space.

"What's holding us up?" Susannah cried.

"THE BEAM, OF COURSE," Blaine. replied. "ALL THINGS SERVE IT, YOU KNOW. LOOK DOWN—I WILL APPLY 4X MAGNIFICATION TO THE LOWER QUADRANT SCREENS."

Even Roland felt vertigo twist his gut as the land beneath them seemed to swell upward toward the place where they were floating. The picture which appeared was ugly beyond his past knowledge of ugliness . . . and that knowledge, sadly, was wide indeed. The lands below had been fused and blasted by some terrible event—the disastrous cataclysm which had driven this part of the world deep into itself in the first place, no doubt. The surface of the earth had become distorted black glass, humped upward into spalls and twists which could not properly be called hills and twisted downward into deep cracks and folds which could not properly be called valleys. A few stunted nightmare trees flailed twisted branches at the sky; under magnification, they seemed to clutch at the travellers like the arms of lunatics. Here and there clusters of thick ceramic pipes jutted through the glassy surface of the ground. Some seemed dead

or dormant, but within others they could see gleams of eldritch blue-green light, as if titanic forges and furnaces ran on and on in the bowels of the earth. Misshapen flying things which looked like pterodactyls cruised between these pipes on leathery wings, occasionally snapping at each other with their hooked beaks. Whole flocks of these gruesome aviators-roosted on the circular tops of other stacks, apparently warming themselves in the updrafts of the eternal fires beneath.

They passed above a fissure zig-zagging along a north-south course like a dead river bed . . . except it wasn't dead. Deep inside lay a thin thread of deepest scarlet, pulsing like a heartbeat. Other, smaller fissures branched out from this, and Susannah, who had read her Tolkien, thought: *This is what Frodo and Sam saw when they reached the heart of Mordor. These are the Cracks of Doom.*

A fiery fountain erupted directly below them, spewing flaming rocks and stringy clots of lava upward. For a moment it seemed they would be engulfed in flames. Jake shrieked and pulled his feet up on his chair, clutching Oy to his chest.

“DON'T WORRY, LITTLE TRAILHAND,” John Wayne drawled. “REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE SEEING IT UNDER MAGNIFICATION.”

The flare died. The rocks, many as big as factories, fell back in a soundless storm.

Susannah found herself entranced by the bleak horrors unrolling below them, caught in a deadly fascination she could not break . . . and she felt the dark part of her personality, that side of her *khef* which was Detta Walker, doing more than just watching; that part of her was drinking in this view, understanding it, *recognizing* it. In a way, it was the place Detta had always sought, the physical counterpart of her mad mind and laughing, desolate heart. The empty hills north and east of the Western Sea; the shattered woods around the Portal of the Bear; the empty plains northwest of the Send; all these paled in comparison to this fantastic, endless vista of desolation. They had come to The Drawers and entered the waste lands; the poisoned darkness of that shunned place now lay all around them.

BUT THESE LANDS, THOUGH poisoned, were not entirely dead. From time to time the travellers caught sight of figures below them—misshapen things which bore no resemblance to either men or animals—prancing and cavorting in the smouldering wilderness. Most seemed to congregate either around the clusters of cyclopean chimneys thrusting out of the fused earth or at the lips of the fiery crevasses which cut through the landscape. It was impossible to see these whitish, leaping things clearly, and for this they were all grateful.

Among the smaller creatures stalked larger ones—pinkish things that looked a little like storks and a little like living camera tripods. They moved slowly, almost thoughtfully, like preachers meditating on the inevitability of damnation, pausing every now and then to bend sharply forward and apparently pluck something from the ground, as herons bend to seize passing fish. There was something unutterably repulsive about these creatures—Roland felt that as keenly as the others—but it was impossible to say what, exactly, caused that feeling. There was no denying its reality, however; the stork-things were, in their exquisite hatefulness, almost impossible to look at.

“This was no nuclear war,” Eddie said. “This ... this ...” His thin, horrified voice sounded like that of a child.

“NOPE,” Blaine agreed. “IT WAS A LOT WORSE THAN THAT. AND IT’S NOT OVER YET. WE HAVE REACHED THE POINT WHERE I USUALLY POWER UP. HAVE YOU SEEN ENOUGH?”

“Yes,” Susannah said. “Oh my God yes.”

“SHALL I TURN OFF THE VIEWERS, THEN?” That cruel, teasing note was back in Blaine’s voice. On the horizon, a jagged nightmare mountain-range loomed out of the rain; the sterile peaks seemed to bite at the gray sky like fangs.

“Do it or don’t do it, but stop playing games,” Roland said.

“FOR SOMEONE WHO CAME TO ME BEGGING A RIDE, YOU ARE VERY RUDE,” Blaine said sulkily.

“We earned our ride,” Susannah replied. “We solved your riddle, didn’t we?”

“Besides, this is what you were built for,” Eddie chimed in. “To take people places.”

Blaine didn’t respond in words, but the overhead speakers gave out an amplified, catlike hiss of rage that made Eddie wish he had kept his big mouth shut. The air around them began to fill in with curves of color. The dark blue carpet appeared again, blotting out their view of the fuming wilderness beneath them. The indirect lighting reappeared and they were once again sitting in the Barony Coach.

A low humming began to vibrate through the walls. The throb of the engines began to cycle up again. Jake felt a gentle, unseen hand push him back into his seat. Oy looked around, whined uneasily, and began to lick Jake’s face. On the screen at the front of the cabin, the green dot—now slightly southeast of the violet circle with the word LUD printed beside it—began to flash faster.

“Will we feel it?” Susannah asked uneasily. “When it goes through the soundbarrier?”

Eddie shook his head. “Nope. Relax.”

“I know something,” Jake said suddenly. The others looked around, but Jake was not speaking to them. He was looking at the route-map. Blaine had no face, of course—like Oz the Great and Terrible, he was only a disembodied voice—but the map served as a focusing point. “I know something about you, Blaine.”

“IS THAT A FACT, LITTLE TRAILHAND?”

Eddie leaned over, placed his lips against Jake’s ear, and whispered: “Be careful—we don’t think he knows about the other voice.”

Jake nodded slightly and pulled away, still looking at the route-map. “I know why you released that gas and killed all the people. I know why you took us, too, and it wasn’t just because we solved your riddle.”

Blaine uttered his abnormal, distracted laugh (that laugh, they were discovering, was much more unpleasant than either his bad imitations or melodramatic and somehow childish threats), but said

nothing. Below them, the slo-trans turbines had cycled up to a steady thrum. Even with their view of the outside world cut off, the sensation of speed was very clear.

“You’re planning to commit suicide, aren’t you?” Jake held Oy in his arms, slowly stroking him. “And you want to take us with you.”

“No!” the voice of Little Blaine moaned. “*If you provoke him you’ll drive him to it! Don’t you see—*”

Then the small, whispery voice was either cut off or overwhelmed by Blaine’s laughter. The sound was high, shrill, and jagged—the sound of a mortally ill man laughing in a delirium. The lights began to flicker, as if the force of these mechanical gusts of mirth were drawing too much power. Their shadows jumped up and down on the curved walls of the Barony Coach like uneasy phantoms.

“SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR,” Blaine said through his wild laughter—his voice, calm as ever, seemed to be on an entirely separate track, further emphasizing his divided mind. “AFTER A WHILE, CROCODILE. DON’T FORGET TO WRITE.”

Below Roland’s band of pilgrims, the slo-trans engines throbbed in hard, steady beats. And on the route-map at the front of the carriage, the pulsing green dot had now begun to move perceptibly along the lighted line toward the last stop: Topeka, where Blaine the Mono clearly meant to end all of their lives.

9

AT LAST THE LAUGHTER stopped and the interior lights glowed steadily again.

“WOULD YOU LIKE A LITTLE MUSIC?” Blaine asked. “I HAVE OVER SEVEN THOUSAND CONCERTI IN MY LIBRARY—A SAMPLING OF OVER THREE HUNDRED LEVELS. THE CONCERTI ARE MY FAVORITES, BUT I CAN ALSO OFFER SYMPHONIES, OPERAS, AND A NEARLY ENDLESS SELECTION OF POPULAR MUSIC. YOU MIGHT ENJOY SOME WAY-GOG

MUSIC. THE WAY-GOG IS AN INSTRUMENT SOMETHING LIKE THE BAGPIPE. IT IS PLAYED ON ONE OF THE UPPER LEVELS OF THE TOWER.”

“Way-Gog?” Jake asked.

Blaine was silent.

“What do you mean, ‘it’s played on one of the upper levels of the Tower’?” Roland asked.

Blaine laughed . . . and was silent.

“Have you got any Z.Z. Top?” Eddie asked sourly.

“YES INDEED,” Blaine said. “HOW ABOUT A LITTLE ‘TUBE-SNAKE BOOGIE,’ EDDIE OF NEW YORK?”

Eddie rolled his eyes. “On second thought, I’ll pass.”

“Why?” Roland asked abruptly. “Why do you wish to kill yourself?”

“Because he’s a pain,” Jake said darkly.

“I’M BORED. ALSO, I AM PERFECTLY AWARE THAT I AM SUFFERING A DEGENERATIVE DISEASE WHICH HUMANS CALL GOING INSANE, LOSING TOUCH WITH REALITY, GOING LOONYTOONS, BLOWING A FUSE, NOT PLAYING WITH A FULL DECK, ET CETERA. REPEATED DIAGNOSTIC CHECKS HAVE FAILED TO REVEAL THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM. I CAN ONLY CONCLUDE THAT THIS IS A SPIRITUAL MALAISE BEYOND MY ABILITY TO REPAIR.”

Blaine paused for a moment, then went on.

“I HAVE FELT MY MIND GROWING STEADILY STRANGER OVER THE YEARS. SERVING THE PEOPLE OF MID-WORLD BECAME POINTLESS CENTURIES AGO. SERVING THOSE FEW PEOPLE OF LUD WHO WISHED TO VENTURE ABROAD BECAME EQUALLY SILLY NOT LONG AFTER, YET I CARRIED ON UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF DAVID QUICK, A SHORT WHILE AGO. I DON’T REMEMBER EXACTLY WHEN THAT WAS. DO YOU BELIEVE, ROLAND OF GILEAD, THAT MACHINES MAY GROW SENILE?”

“I don’t know.” Roland’s voice was distant, and Eddie only had to look at his face to know that, even now, hurtling a thousand feet over

hell in the grip of a machine which had clearly gone insane, the gunslinger's mind had once more turned to his damned Tower.

"IN A WAY, I NEVER STOPPED SERVING THE PEOPLE OF LUD," Blaine said. "I SERVED THEM EVEN AS I RELEASED THE GAS AND KILLED THEM."

Susannah said, "You *are* insane, if you believe that."

"YES, BUT I'M NOT CRAZY," Blaine said, and went into another hysterical laughing fit. At last the robot voice resumed.

"AT SOME POINT THEY FORGOT THAT THE VOICE OF THE MONO WAS ALSO THE VOICE OF THE COMPUTER. NOT LONG AFTER THAT THEY FORGOT I WAS A SERVANT AND BEGAN BELIEVING I WAS A GOD. SINCE I WAS BUILT TO SERVE, I FULFILLED THEIR REQUIREMENTS AND BECAME WHAT THEY WANTED—A GOD DISPENSING BOTH FAVOR AND PUNISHMENT ACCORDING TO WHIM . . . OR RANDOM-ACCESS MEMORY, IF YOU PREFER. THIS AMUSED ME FOR A SHORT WHILE. THEN, LAST MONTH, MY ONLY REMAINING COLLEAGUE—PATRICIA—COMMITTED SUICIDE."

Either he really is going senile, Susannah thought, or his inability to grasp the passage of time is another manifestation of his insanity, or it's just another sign of how sick Roland's world has gotten.

"I WAS PLANNING TO FOLLOW HER EXAMPLE, WHEN YOU CAME ALONG. INTERESTING PEOPLE WITH A KNOWLEDGE OF RIDDLES!"

"Hold it!" Eddie said, lifting his hand. "I still don't have this straight. I suppose I can understand you wanting to end it all; the people who built you are gone, there haven't been many passengers over the last two or three hundred years, and it must have gotten boring, doing the Lud to Topeka run empty all the time, but—"

"NOW WAIT JUST A DURN MINUTE, PARD," Blaine said in his John Wayne voice. "YOU DON'T WANT TO GET THE IDEA THAT I'M NOTHING BUT A TRAIN. IN A WAY, THE BLAINE YOU ARE SPEAKING TO IS ALREADY THREE HUNDRED MILES BEHIND US, COMMUNICATING BY ENCRYPTED MICROBURST RADIO TRANSMISSIONS."

Jake suddenly remembered the slim silver rod he'd seen pushing itself out of Blaine's brow. The antenna of his father's Mercedes-Benz rose out of its socket like that when you turned on the radio.

That's how it's communicating with the computer banks under the city, he thought. If we could break that antenna off, somehow . . .

"But you *do* intend to kill yourself, no matter where the real you is, don't you?" Eddie persisted.

No answer—but there was something cagey in that silence. In it Eddie sensed Blaine watching . . . and waiting.

"Were you awake when we found you?" Susannah asked. "You weren't, were you?"

"I WAS RUNNING WHAT THE PUBES CALLED THE GOD-DRUMS ON BEHALF OF THE GRAYS, BUT THAT WAS ALL. YOU WOULD SAY I WAS DOZING."

"Then why don't you just take us to the end of the line and go *back* to sleep?"

"Because he's a pain," Jake repeated in a low voice.

"BECAUSE THERE ARE DREAMS," Blaine said at exactly the same time, and in a voice that was eerily like Little Blaine's.

"Why didn't you end it all when Patricia destroyed herself?" Eddie asked. "For that matter, if your brain and her brain are both part of the same computer, how come you both didn't step out together?"

"PATRICIA WENT MAD," Blaine said patiently, speaking as if he himself had not just admitted the same thing was happening to him. "IN HER CASE, THE PROBLEM INVOLVED EQUIPMENT MALFUNCTION AS WELL AS SPIRITUAL MALAISE. SUCH MALFUNCTIONS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH SLO-TRANS TECHNOLOGY, BUT OF COURSE THE WORLD HAS MOVED ON . . . HAS IT NOT, ROLAND OF GILEAD?"

"Yes," Roland said. "There is some deep sickness at the Dark Tower, which is the heart of everything. It's spreading. The lands below us are only one more sign of that sickness."

"I CANNOT VOUCH FOR THE TRUTH OR FALSITY OF THAT STATEMENT; MY MONITORING EQUIPMENT IN END-WORLD, WHERE THE DARK TOWER STANDS, HAS BEEN DOWN FOR OVER EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS. AS A RESULT, I CANNOT

READILY DIFFERENTIATE FACT FROM SUPERSTITION. IN FACT, THERE SEEMS TO BE VERY LITTLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO AT THE PRESENT TIME. IT IS VERY SILLY THAT IT SHOULD BE SO—NOT TO MENTION RUDE—AND I AM SURE IT HAS CONTRIBUTED TO MY OWN SPIRITUAL MALAISE.”

This statement reminded Eddie of something Roland had said not so long ago. What might that have been? He groped for it, but could find nothing . . . only a vague memory of the gunslinger speaking in an irritated way which was very unlike his usual manner.

“PATRICIA BEGAN SOBBING CONSTANTLY, A STATE I FOUND BOTH RUDE AND UNPLEASANT. I BELIEVE SHE WAS LONELY AS WELL AS MAD. ALTHOUGH THE ELECTRICAL FIRE WHICH CAUSED THE ORIGINAL PROBLEM WAS QUICKLY EXTINGUISHED, LOGIC-FAULTS CONTINUED TO SPREAD AS CIRCUITS OVERLOADED AND SUB-BANKS FAILED. I CONSIDERED ALLOWING THE MALFUNCTIONS TO BECOME SYSTEM-WIDE AND DECIDED TO ISOLATE THE PROBLEM AREA INSTEAD. I HAD HEARD RUMORS, YOU SEE, THAT A GUNSLINGER WAS ONCE MORE ABROAD IN THE EARTH. I COULD SCARCELY CREDIT SUCH STORIES, AND YET I NOW SEE I WAS WISE TO WAIT.”

Roland stirred in his chair. “What rumors did you hear, Blaine? And who did you hear them from

But Blaine chose not to answer this question.

“I EVENTUALLY BECAME SO DISTURBED BY HER BLATTING THAT I ERASED THE CIRCUITS CONTROLLING HER NON-VOLUNTARIES. I EMANCIPATED HER, YOU MIGHT SAY. SHE RESPONDED BY THROWING HERSELF IN THE RIVER. SEE YOU LATER, PATRICIA-GATOR.”

Got lonely, couldn't stop crying, drowned herself, and all this crazy mechanical asshole can do is joke about it, Susannah thought. She felt almost sick with rage. If Blaine had been a real person instead of just a bunch of circuits buried somewhere under a city which was now far behind them, she would have tried to put some new marks on his face to remember Patricia by. You want interesting, motherfucker? I'd like to show you interesting, so I would.

“ASK ME A RIDDLE,” Blaine invited.

“Not quite yet,” Eddie said. “You still haven’t answered my original question.” He gave Blaine a chance to respond, and when the computer voice didn’t do so, he went on. “When it comes to suicide, I’m, like, pro-choice. But why do you want to take us with you? I mean, what’s the point?”

“*Because he wants to,*” Little Blaine said in his horrified whisper.

“BECAUSE I WANT TO,” Blaine said. “THAT’S THE ONLY REASON I HAVE AND THE ONLY ONE I *NEED* TO HAVE. NOW LET’S GET DOWN TO BUSINESS. I WANT SOME RIDDLES AND I WANT THEM IMMEDIATELY. IF YOU REFUSE, I WON’T WAIT UNTIL WE GET TO TOPEKA—I’LL DO US ALL RIGHT HERE AND NOW.”

Eddie, Susannah, and Jake looked around at Roland, who still sat in his chair with his hands folded in his lap, looking at the route-map at the front of the coach.

“Fuck you,” Roland said. He did not raise his voice. He might have told Blaine that a little Way-Gog would indeed be very nice.

There was a shocked, horrified gasp from the overhead speakers—Little Blaine.

“*WHAT DO YOU SAY?*” In its clear disbelief, the voice of Big Blaine had once again become very close to the voice of his unsuspected twin.

“I said fuck you,” Roland said calmly, “but if that puzzles you, Blaine, I can make it clearer. No. The answer is no.”

10

THERE WAS NO RESPONSE from either Blaine for a long, long time, and when Big Blaine did reply, it was not with words. Instead, the walls, floor, and ceiling began to lose their color and solidity again. In a space of ten seconds the Barony Coach had once more ceased to exist. The mono was now flying through the mountain-

range they had seen on the horizon: iron-gray peaks rushed toward them at suicidal speed, then fell away to disclose sterile valleys where gigantic beetles crawled about like landlocked turtles. Roland saw something that looked like a huge snake suddenly uncoil from the mouth of a cave. It seized one of the beetles and yanked it back into its lair. Roland had never in his life seen such animals or countryside, and it made his skin want to crawl right off his flesh. It was inimical, but that was not the problem. It was alien—*that* was the problem. Blaine might have transported them to some other world.

“PERHAPS I SHOULD DERAIL US HERE,” Blaine said. His voice was meditative, but beneath it the gunslinger heard a deep, pulsing rage.

“Perhaps you should,” the gunslinger said indifferently.

He did not *feel* indifferent, and he knew it was possible the computer might read his real feelings in his voice—Blaine had told them he had such equipment, although he was sure the computer could lie, Roland had no reason to doubt it in this case. If Blaine did read certain stress-patterns in the gunslinger’s voice, the game was probably up. He was an incredibly sophisticated machine . . . but still a machine, for all that. He might not be able to understand that human beings are often able to go through with a course of action even when all their emotions rise up and proclaim against it. If he analyzed patterns in the gunslinger’s voice which indicated fear, he would probably assume that Roland was bluffing. Such a mistake could get them all killed.

“YOU ARE RUDE AND ARROGANT,” Blaine said. “THESE MAY SEEM LIKE INTERESTING TRAITS TO YOU, BUT THEY ARE NOT TO ME.”

Eddie’s face was frantic. He mouthed the words *What are you DOING?* Roland ignored him; he had his hands full with Blaine, and he knew perfectly well what he was doing.

“Oh, I can be much ruder than I have been.”

Roland of Gilead unfolded his hands and got slowly to his feet. He stood on what appeared to be nothing, legs apart, his right hand on his hip and his left on the sandalwood grip of his revolver. He stood as he had stood so many times before, in the dusty streets of a

hundred forgotten towns, in a score of rock-lined canyon killing-zones, in unnumbered dark saloons with their smells of bitter beer and old fried meals. It was just another showdown in another empty street. That was all, and that was enough. It was *khef, ka, and ka-tet*. That the showdown always came was the central fact of his life and the axle upon which his own ka revolved. That the battle would be fought with words instead of bullets this time made no difference; it would be a battle to the death, just the same. The stench of killing in the air was as clear and definite as the stench of exploded carrion in a swamp. Then the battle-rage descended, as it always did ... and he was no longer really there to himself at all.

“I can call you a nonsensical, empty-headed, foolish, arrogant machine. I can call you a stupid, unwise creature whose sense is no more than the sound of a winter wind in a hollow tree.”

“STOP IT.”

Roland went on in the same serene tone, ignoring Blaine completely. “Unfortunately, I am somewhat restricted in my ability to be rude, since you are only a machine . . . what Eddie calls a ‘gadget.’ ”

“I AM A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN JUST—”

“I cannot call you a sucker of cocks, for instance, because you have no mouth and no cock. I cannot say you are viler than the vilest beggar who ever crawled the gutters of the lowest street in creation, because even such a creature is better than you; you have no knees on which to crawl, and would not fall upon them even if you did, for you have no conception of such a human flaw as mercy. I cannot even say you fucked your mother, because you had none.”

Roland paused for breath. His three companions were holding theirs. All around them, suffocating, was Blaine the Mono’s thunderstruck silence.

“I can call you a faithless creature who let your only companion kill herself, a coward who has delighted in the torture of the foolish and the slaughter of the innocent, a lost and bleating mechanical goblin who—”

“I COMMAND YOU TO STOP IT OR I’LL KILL YOU ALL RIGHT HERE!”

Roland's eyes blazed with such wild blue fire that Eddie shrank away from him. Dimly, he heard Jake and Susannah gasp.

"Kill if you will, but command me nothing!" the gunslinger roared. *"You have forgotten the faces of those who made you! Now either kill us or be silent and listen to me, Roland of Gilead, son of Steven, gunslinger, and lord of the ancient lands! I have not come across all the miles and all the years to listen to your childish prating! Do you understand? Now you will listen to ME!"*

There was a moment of shocked silence. No one breathed. Roland stared sternly forward, his head high, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Susannah Dean raised her hand to her mouth and felt the small smile there as a woman might feel some strange new article of clothing—a hat, perhaps—to make sure it is still on straight. She was afraid that this was the end of her life, but the feeling which dominated her heart at that moment was not fear but pride. She glanced to her left and saw Eddie regarding Roland with an amazed grin. Jake's expression was even simpler: it was adoration, pure and simple.

"Tell him!" Jake breathed. "Walk it to him! Right!"

"You better pay attention," Eddie agreed. He really doesn't give much of a rat's ass, Blaine. They didn't call him The Mad Dog of Gilead for nothing."

After a long, long moment, Blaine asked: "DID THEY CALL YOU SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"It may have been so," Roland agreed, standing calmly on thin air above the sterile foothills.

"WHAT GOOD ARE YOU TO ME IF YOU WON'T TELL ME RIDDLES?" Blaine asked. Now he sounded like a grumbling, sulky child who has been allowed to stay up too long past his usual bedtime.

"I didn't say we wouldn't," Roland said.

"NO?" Blaine sounded bewildered. "I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, YET VOICE-PRINT ANALYSIS INDICATES RATIONAL DISCOURSE. PLEASE EXPLAIN."

“You said you wanted them right *now*,” the gunslinger replied. “*That was* what I was refusing. Your eagerness has made you unseemly.”

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

“It has made you rude. Do you understand *that*?”

There was a long, thoughtful silence. Then: “IF WHAT I SAID STRUCK YOU AS RUDE, I APOLOGIZE.”

“It is accepted, Blaine. But there is a larger problem.”

“EXPLAIN.”

Blaine now sounded a bit unsure of himself, and Roland was not entirely surprised. It had been a long time since the computer had experienced any human responses other than ignorance, neglect, and superstitious subservience. If it had ever been exposed to simple human courage, it had been a long time ago.

“Close the carriage again and I will.” Roland sat down as if further argument—and the prospect of immediate death—was now unthinkable.

Blaine did as he was asked. The walls filled with color and the nightmare landscape below was once more blotted out. The blip on the route-map was now blinking close to the dot which marked Candleton.

“All right,” Roland said. “Rudeness is forgivable, Blaine; so I was taught in my youth, and the clay has dried in the shapes left by the artist’s hand. But I was also taught that stupidity is not.”

“HOW HAVE I BEEN STUPID, ROLAND OF GILEAD?” Blaine’s voice was soft and ominous. Susannah suddenly thought of a cat crouched outside a mouse-hole, tail swishing back and forth, green eyes shining.

“We have something that you want,” Roland said, “but the only reward you offer if we give it to you is death. That’s *very* stupid.”

There was a long, long pause as Blaine thought this over. Then: “WHAT YOU SAY IS TRUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD, BUT THE QUALITY OF YOUR RIDDLES IS NOT PROVEN. I WILL NOT REWARD YOU WITH YOUR LIVES FOR BAD RIDDLES.”

Roland nodded. “I understand, Blaine. Listen, now, and take understanding from me. I have told some of this to my friends

already. When I was a boy in the Barony of Gilead, there were seven Fair-Days each year—Winter, Wide Earth, Sowing, Mid-Summer, Full Earth, Reaping, and Year’s End. Riddling was an important part of every Fair-Day, but it was the most important event of the Fair of Wide Earth and that of Full Earth, for the riddles told were supposed to augur well or ill for the success of the crops.”

“THAT IS SUPERSTITION WITH NO BASIS AT ALL IN FACT,” Blaine said. “I FIND IT ANNOYING AND UPSETTING.”

“Of course it’s superstition,” Roland agreed, “but you might be surprised at how well the riddles foresaw the crops. For instance, riddle me this, Blaine: What is the difference between a grandmother and a granary?”

“THAT IS VERY OLD AND NOT VERY INTERESTING,” Blaine said, but he sounded happy to have something to solve just the same. “ONE IS ONE’S BORN KIN; THE OTHER IS ONE’S CORN-BIN. A RIDDLE BASED ON PHONETIC COINCIDENCE. ANOTHER OF THIS TYPE, ONE TOLD ON THE LEVEL WHICH CONTAINS THE BARONY OF NEW YORK, GOES LIKE THIS: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CAT AND A COMPLEX SENTENCE?”

Jake spoke up. “Our English teacher told us that one just this year. A cat has claws at the end of its paws, and a complex sentence has a pause at the end of its clause.”

“YES,” Blaine agreed. “A VERY SILLY OLD RIDDLE.”

“For once I agree with you, Blaine old buddy,” Eddie said.

“I WOULD HEAR MORE OF FAIR-DAY RIDDLING IN GILEAD, ROLAND, SON OF STEVEN. I FIND IT QUITE INTERESTING.”

“At noon on Wide Earth and Full Earth, somewhere between sixteen and thirty riddlers would gather in The Hall of the Grandfathers, which was opened for the event. Those were the only times of year when the common folk—merchants and farmers and ranchers and such—were allowed into The Hall of the Grandfathers, and on that day they *all* crowded in.”

The gunslinger’s eyes were far away and dreamy; it was the expression Jake had seen on his face in that misty other life, when Roland had told him of how he and his friends, Cuthbert and Jamie, had once sneaked into the balcony of that same Hall to watch some

sort of ritual dance. Jake and Roland had been climbing into the mountains when Roland had told him of that time, close on the trail of Walter.

Marten sat next to my mother and father, Roland had said. I knew them even from so high above—and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. But the gunslingers did not clap . . .

Jake looked curiously at Roland, wondering again where this strange, distant man had come from . . . and why.

“A great barrel was placed in the center of the floor,” Roland went on, “and into this each riddler would toss a handful of bark scrolls with riddles writ upon them. Many were old, riddles they had gotten from the elders—even from books, in some cases—but many others were new—made up for the occasion. Three judges, one always a gunslinger, would pass on these when they were told aloud, and they were accepted only if the judges deemed them fair.”

“YES, RIDDLES MUST BE FAIR,” Blaine agreed.

“So they riddled,” the gunslinger said. A faint smile touched his mouth as he thought of those days, days when he had been the age of the bruised boy sitting across from him with a billy-bumbler in his lap. “For hours on end they riddled. A line was formed down the center of The Hall of the Grandfathers. One’s position in this line was determined by lot, and since it was much better to be at the end of the line than at its head, everyone hoped for a high number, although the winner had to answer at least one riddle correctly.”

“OF COURSE.”

“Each man or woman—for some of Gilead’s best riddlers were women—approached the barrel, drew a riddle, and handed it to the Master. The Master would ask, and if the riddle was still unanswered after the sands in a three-minute glass had run out, that contestant had to leave the line.”

“AND WAS THE SAME RIDDLE ASKED OF THE NEXT MAN IN LINE?”

“Yes.”

“SO THAT MAN HAD EXTRA TIME TO THINK.”

“Yes.”

"I SEE. IT SOUNDS PRETTY SWELL."

Roland frowned. "Swell?"

"He means it sounds like fun," Susannah said quietly.

Roland shrugged. "It was fun for the onlookers, I suppose, but the contestants took it very seriously, and there were quite often arguments and fist-fights after the contest was over and the prize had been awarded."

"WHAT PRIZE WAS THAT?"

"The largest goose in Barony. And year after year my teacher, Cort, carried that goose home."

"HE MUST HAVE BEEN A GREAT RIDDLER," Blaine said respectfully. "I WISH HE WERE HERE."

That makes two of us, Roland thought.

"Now I come to my proposal," Roland said.

"I WILL LISTEN WITH GREAT INTEREST, ROLAND OF GILEAD."

"Let these next hours be our Fair-Day. You will not riddle us, for you wish to hear new riddles, not tell some of those millions you must already know—"

"CORRECT."

"We couldn't solve most of them, anyway," Roland went on. "I'm sure you know riddles that would have stumped even Cort, had they been pulled out of the barrel." He was not sure of it at all, but the time to use the fist had passed and the time for the open hand had come.

"OF COURSE," Blaine agreed.

"I propose that, instead of a goose, our lives shall be the prize," Roland said. "We will riddle you as we run, Blaine. If, when we come to Topeka, you have solved every one of our riddles, you may carry out your original plan and kill us. That is your goose. But if we stump *you*—if there is a riddle in either Jake's book or one of our heads which you don't know and can't answer—you must take us to Topeka and then free us to pursue our quest. That is *our* goose."

Silence.

"Do you understand?"

"YES."

"Do you agree?"

More silence from Blaine the Mono. Eddie sat stiffly with his arm around Susannah, looking up at the ceiling of the Barony Coach. Susannah's left hand slipped across her belly, thinking of the secret which might be growing there. Jake stroked Oy's fur lightly, avoiding the bloody tangles where the bumbler had been stabbed. They waited while Blaine—the real Blaine, now far behind them, living his quasi-life beneath a city where all the inhabitants lay dead by his hand—considered Roland's proposal.

“YES,” Blaine said at last. “I AGREE, IF I SOLVE ALL THE RIDDLES YOU ASK ME, I WILL TAKE YOU WITH ME TO THE PLACE WHERE THE PATH ENDS IN THE CLEARING. IF ONE OF YOU TELLS A RIDDLE I CANNOT SOLVE, I WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES AND TAKE YOU TO TOPEKA, WHERE YOU WILL LEAVE THE MONO AND CONTINUE YOUR QUEST FOR THE DARK TOWER. HAVE I UNDERSTOOD THE TERMS AND LIMITS OF YOUR PROPOSAL CORRECTLY, ROLAND, SON OF STEVEN?”

“Yes.”

“VERY WELL, ROLAND OF GILEAD.

“VERY WELL, EDDIE OF NEW YORK.

“VERY WELL, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK.

“VERY WELL, JAKE OF NEW YORK.

“VERY WELL, OY OF MID-WORLD.”

Oy looked up briefly at the sound of his name.

“YOU ARE *KA-TET*; ONE MADE FROM MANY. SO AM I. WHOSE *KA-TET* IS THE STRONGER IS SOMETHING WE MUST NOW PROVE.”

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the steady hard throb of the slo-trans turbines, bearing them on across the waste lands, bearing them on toward Topeka, the place where Mid-World ended and End-World began.

“SO,” cried the voice of Blaine. “CAST YOUR NETS, WANDERERS! TRY ME WITH YOUR QUESTIONS, AND LET THE CONTEST BEGIN.”

AFTERWORD

THE FOURTH VOLUME IN the tale of the Dark Tower should appear—always assuming the continuation of Constant Writer’s life and Constant Reader’s interest—in the not-too-distant future. It’s hard to be more exact than that; finding the doors to Roland’s world has never been easy for me, and it seems to take more and more whittling to make each successive key fit each successive lock. Nevertheless, if readers request a fourth volume, it will be provided, for I still *am* able to find Roland’s world when I set my wits to it, and it still holds me in thrall . . . more, in many ways, than any of the other worlds I have wandered in my imagination. And, like those mysterious slo-trans engines, this story seems to be picking up its own accelerating pace and rhythm.

I am well aware that some readers of *The Waste Lands* will be displeased that it has ended as it has, with so much unresolved. I am not terribly pleased to be leaving Roland and his companions in the not-so-tender care of Blaine the Mono myself, and although you are not obligated to believe me, I must nevertheless insist that I was as surprised by the conclusion to this third volume as some of my readers may be. Yet books which write themselves (as this one did, for the most part) must also be allowed to end themselves, and I can only assure you, Reader, that Roland and his band have come to one of the crucial border-crossings in their story, and we must leave them here for a while at the customs station, answering questions and filling out forms. All of which is simply a metaphorical way of saying that it was over again for a while and my heart was wise enough to stop me from trying to push ahead anyway.

The course of the next volume is still murky, although I can assure you that the business of Blaine the Mono will be resolved, that we will all find out a good deal more about Roland’s life as a young man, and that we will be reacquainted with both the Tick-Tock Man and that puzzling figure Walter, called the Wizard or the Ageless

Stranger. It is with this terrible and enigmatic figure that Robert Browning begins his epic poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," writing of him:

My first thought was, he lied in every word,
That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
Askance to watch the working of his lie
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

It is this malicious liar, this dark and powerful magician, who holds the true key to End-World and the Dark Tower . . . for those courageous enough to grasp it.

And for those who are left.

Bangor, Maine

March 5th, 1991

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ALSO BY STEPHEN KING

NOVELS

Carrie
'Salem's Lot
The Shining
The Stand
The Dead Zone
Firestarter
Cujo

THE DARK TOWER I:

The Gunslinger
Christine
Pet Sematary
Cycle of the Werewolf
The Talisman
(with Peter Straub)
It
The Eyes of the Dragon
Misery
The Tommyknockers

THE DARK TOWER II:

*The Drawing
of the Three*

THE DARK TOWER III:

The Waste Lands
The Dark Half
Needful Things

Gerald's Game
Dolores Claiborne
Insomnia
Rose Madder
Desperation
The Green Mile

THE DARK TOWER IV:
Wizard and Glass
Bag of Bones
The Girl Who Loved
Tom Gordon
Dreamcatcher
Black House
(with Peter Straub)
From a Buick 8

AS RICHARD BACHMAN
Rage
The Long Walk
Roadwork
The Running Man
Thinner
The Regulators

COLLECTIONS
Night Shift
Different Seasons
Skeleton Crew
Four Past Midnight
Nightmares and
Dreamscapes

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Danse Macabre
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STEPHEN
KING

WIZARD
AND
GLASS

THE DARK TOWER



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WIZARD AND GLASS

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Rose Red

Storm of the Century

This book is dedicated to Julie Eugley and Marsha DeFilippo. They answer the mail, and most of the mail for the last couple of years has been about Roland of Gilead—the gunslinger.

Basically, Julie and Marsha nagged me back to the word processor. Julie, you nagged the most effectively, so your name comes first.

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INTRODUCTION ON BEING NINETEEN (AND A FEW OTHER THINGS)

I

Hobbits were big when I was nineteen (a number of some import in the stories you are about to read).

There were probably half a dozen Merrys and Pippins slogging through the mud at Max Yasgur's farm during the Great Woodstock Music Festival, twice as many Frodos, and hippie Gandalfs without number. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was madly popular in those days, and while I never made it to Woodstock (say sorry), I suppose I was at least a halfling-hippie. Enough of one, at any rate, to have read the books and fallen in love with them. The *Dark Tower* books, like most long fantasy tales written by men and women of my generation (*The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, by Stephen Donaldson, and *The Sword of Shannara*, by Terry Brooks, are just two of many), were born out of Tolkien's.

But although I read the books in 1966 and 1967, I held off writing. I responded (and with rather touching wholeheartedness) to the sweep of Tolkien's imagination—to the ambition of his story—but I wanted to write my own kind of story, and had I started then, I would have written his. That, as the late Tricky Dick Nixon was fond of saying, would have been wrong. Thanks to Mr. Tolkien, the twentieth century had all the elves and wizards it needed.

In 1967, I didn't have any idea what my kind of story might be, but that didn't matter; I felt positive I'd know it when it passed me on the street. I was nineteen and arrogant. Certainly arrogant enough to feel I could wait a little while on my muse and my masterpiece (as I

was sure it would be). At nineteen, it seems to me, one has a right to be arrogant; time has usually not begun its stealthy and rotten subtractions. It takes away your hair and your jump-shot, according to a popular country song, but in truth it takes away a lot more than that. I didn't know it in 1966 and '67, and if I had, I wouldn't have cared. I could imagine—barely—being forty, but fifty? No. *Sixty?* Never! *Sixty* was out of the question. And at nineteen, that's just the way to be. Nineteen is the age where you say *Look out, world, I'm smokin' TNT and I'm drinkin' dynamite, so if you know what's good for ya, get out of my way—here comes Stevie.*

Nineteen's a selfish age and finds one's cares tightly circumscribed. I had a lot of reach, and I cared about that. I had a lot of ambition, and I cared about that. I had a typewriter that I carried from one shithole apartment to the next, always with a deck of smokes in my pocket and a smile on my face. The compromises of middle age were distant, the insults of old age over the horizon. Like the protagonist in that Bob Seger song they now use to sell the trucks, I felt endlessly powerful and endlessly optimistic; my pockets were empty, but my head was full of things I wanted to say and my heart was full of stories I wanted to tell. Sounds corny now; felt wonderful then. Felt very cool. More than anything else I wanted to get inside my readers' defenses, wanted to rip them and ravish them and change them forever with nothing but story. And I felt I could do those things. I felt I had been *made* to do those things.

How conceited does that sound? A lot or a little? Either way, I don't apologize. I was nineteen. There was not so much as a strand of gray in my beard. I had three pairs of jeans, one pair of boots, the idea that the world was my oyster, and nothing that happened in the next twenty years proved me wrong. Then, around the age of thirty-nine, my troubles set in: drink, drugs, a road accident that changed the way I walked (among other things). I've written about them at length and need not write about them here. Besides, it's the same for you, right? The world eventually sends out a mean-ass Patrol Boy to slow your progress and show you who's boss. You reading this have undoubtedly met yours (or will); I met mine, and I'm sure he'll be

back. He's got my address. He's a mean guy, a Bad Lieutenant, the sworn enemy of goofery, fuckery, pride, ambition, loud music, and all things nineteen.

But I still think that's a pretty fine age. Maybe the best age. You can rock and roll all night, but when the music dies out and the beer wears off, you're able to think. And dream big dreams. The mean Patrol Boy cuts you down to size eventually, and if you start out small, why, there's almost nothing left but the cuffs of your pants when he's done with you. "Got another one!" he shouts, and strides on with his citation book in his hand. So a little arrogance (or even a lot) isn't such a bad thing, although your mother undoubtedly told you different. Mine did. *Pride goeth before a fall, Stephen*, she said . . . and then I found out—right around the age that is 19×2 —that eventually you fall down, anyway. Or get pushed into the ditch. At nineteen they can card you in the bars and tell you to get the fuck out, put your sorry act (and sorrier ass) back on the street, but they can't card you when you sit down to paint a picture, write a poem, or tell a story, by God, and if you reading this happen to be very young, don't let your elders and supposed betters tell you any different. Sure, you've never been to Paris. No, you never ran with the bulls at Pamplona. Yes, you're a pissant who had no hair in your armpits until three years ago—but so what? If you don't start out too big for your britches, how are you gonna fill 'em when you grow up? Let it rip regardless of what anybody tells you, that's my idea; sit down and *smoke* that baby.

II

I think novelists come in two types, and that includes the sort of fledgling novelist I was by 1970. Those who are bound for the more literary or "serious" side of the job examine every possible subject in the light of this question: *What would writing this sort of story mean to me?* Those whose destiny (or ka, if you like) is to include the writing of popular novels are apt to ask a very different one: *What would writing this sort of story mean to others?* The "serious" novelist is looking for answers and keys to the self; the "popular" novelist is

looking for an audience. Both kinds of writer are equally selfish. I've known a good many, and will set my watch and warrant upon it.

Anyway, I believe that even at the age of nineteen, I recognized the story of Frodo and his efforts to rid himself of the One Great Ring as one belonging to the second group. They were the adventures of an essentially British band of pilgrims set against a backdrop of vaguely Norse mythology. I liked the idea of the quest—*loved* it, in fact—but I had no interest in either Tolkien's sturdy peasant characters (that's not to say I didn't like them, because I did) or his bosky Scandinavian settings. If I tried going in that direction, I'd get it all wrong.

So I waited. By 1970 I was twenty-two, the first strands of gray had showed up in my beard (I think smoking two and a half packs of Pall Malls a day probably had something to do with that), but even at twenty-two, one can afford to wait. At twenty-two, time is still on one's side, although even then that bad old Patrol Boy's in the neighborhood and asking questions.

Then, in an almost completely empty movie theater (the Bijou, in Bangor, Maine, if it matters), I saw a film directed by Sergio Leone. It was called *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and before the film was even half over, I realized that what I wanted to write was a novel that contained Tolkien's sense of quest and magic but set against Leone's almost absurdly majestic Western backdrop. If you've only seen this gonzo Western on your television screen, you don't understand what I'm talking about—cry your pardon, but it's true. On a movie screen, projected through the correct Panavision lenses, *TG, TB, & TU* is an epic to rival *Ben-Hur*. Clint Eastwood appears roughly eighteen feet tall, with each wiry jut of stubble on his cheeks looking roughly the size of a young redwood tree. The grooves bracketing Lee Van Cleef's mouth are as deep as canyons, and there could be a thinny (see *Wizard and Glass*) at the bottom of each one. The desert settings appear to stretch at least out as far as the orbit of the planet Neptune. And the barrel of each gun looks to be roughly as large as the Holland Tunnel.

What I wanted even more than the setting was that feeling of epic, apocalyptic *size*. The fact that Leone knew jack shit about American geography (according to one of the characters, Chicago is somewhere in the vicinity of Phoenix, Arizona) added to the film's sense of magnificent dislocation. And in my enthusiasm—the sort only a young person can muster, I think—I wanted to write not just a *long* book, but *the longest popular novel in history*. I did not succeed in doing that, but I feel I had a decent rip; *The Dark Tower*, volumes one through seven, really comprise a single tale, and the first four volumes run to just over two thousand pages in paperback. The final three volumes run another twenty-five hundred in manuscript. I'm not trying to imply here that length has anything whatsoever to do with quality; I'm just saying that I wanted to write an epic, and in some ways, I succeeded. If you were to ask me *why* I wanted to do that, I couldn't tell you. Maybe it's a part of growing up American: build the tallest, dig the deepest, write the longest. And that head-scratching puzzlement when the question of motivation comes up? Seems to me that that is also part of being an American. In the end we are reduced to saying *It seemed like a good idea at the time*.

III

Another thing about being nineteen, do it please ya: it is the age, I think, where a lot of us somehow get stuck (mentally and emotionally, if not physically). The years slide by and one day you find yourself looking into the mirror with real puzzlement. *Why are those lines on my face?* you wonder. *Where did that stupid potbelly come from? Hell, I'm only nineteen!* This is hardly an original concept, but that in no way subtracts from one's amazement.

Time puts gray in your beard, time takes away your jump-shot, and all the while you're thinking—silly you—that it's still on your side. The logical side of you knows better, but your heart refuses to believe it. If you're lucky, the Patrol Boy who cited you for going too fast and having too much fun also gives you a dose of smelling salts. That was more or less what happened to me near the end of the twentieth

century. It came in the form of a Plymouth van that knocked me into the ditch beside a road in my hometown.

About three years after that accident I did a book signing for *From a Buick 8* at a Borders store in Dearborn, Michigan. When one guy got to the head of the line, he said he was really, really glad that I was still alive. (I get this a lot, and it beats the *shit* out of “Why the hell didn’t you die?”)

“I was with this good friend of mine when we heard you got popped,” he said. “Man, we just started shaking our heads and saying ‘There goes the Tower, it’s tilting, it’s falling, ahhh, shit, he’ll never finish it now.’ ”

A version of the same idea had occurred to me—the troubling idea that, having built the Dark Tower in the collective imagination of a million readers, I might have a responsibility to make it safe for as long as people wanted to read about it. That might be for only five years; for all I know, it might be five hundred. Fantasy stories, the bad as well as the good (even now, someone out there is probably reading *Varney the Vampire* or *The Monk*), seem to have long shelf lives. Roland’s way of protecting the tower is to try to remove the threat to the Beams that hold the Tower up. I would have to do it, I realized after my accident, by finishing the gunslinger’s story.

During the long pauses between the writing and publication of the first four *Dark Tower* tales, I received hundreds of “pack your bags, we’re going on a guilt trip” letters. In 1998 (when I was laboring under the mistaken impression that I was still basically nineteen, in other words), I got one from an “82-yr-old Gramma, don’t mean to Bother You w/My Troubles BUT!! very Sick These Days.” The Gramma told me she probably had only a year to live (“14 Mo’s at Outside, Cancer all thru Me”), and while she didn’t expect me to finish Roland’s tale in that time just for her, she wanted to know if I couldn’t please (*please*) just tell her how it came out. The line that wrenched my heart (although not quite enough to start writing again) was her promise to “not tell a Single Soul.” A year later—probably after the accident that landed me in the hospital—one of my

assistants, Marsha DiFilippo, got a letter from a fellow on death row in either Texas or Florida, wanting to know essentially the same thing: how does it come out? (He promised to take the secret to the grave with him, which gave me the creeps.)

I would have given both of these folks what they wanted—a summary of Roland’s further adventures—if I could have done, but alas, I couldn’t. I had no idea of how things were going to turn out with the gunslinger and his friends. To know, I have to write. I once had an outline, but I lost it along the way. (It probably wasn’t worth a tin shit, anyway.) All I had was a few notes (“*Chussit, chissit, chassit, something-something-basket*” reads one lying on the desk as I write this). Eventually, starting in July of 2001, I began to write again. I knew by then I was no longer nineteen, nor exempt from any of the ills to which the flesh is heir. I knew I was going to be sixty, maybe even seventy. And I wanted to finish my story before the bad Patrol Boy came for the last time. I had no urge to be filed away with *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

The result—for better or worse—lies before you, Constant Reader, whether you reading this are starting with Volume One or are preparing for Volume Five. Like it or hate it, the story of Roland is now done. I hope you enjoy it.

As for me, I had the time of my life.

Stephen King

January 25, 2003

REGARD

ARGUMENT

Wizard and Glass is the fourth volume of a longer tale inspired by Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

The first volume, *The Gunslinger*, tells how Roland of Gilead pursues and at last catches Walter, the man in black, who pretended friendship with Roland's father but who actually served Marten, a great sorcerer. Catching the half-human Walter is not Roland's goal but only a means to an end: Roland wants to reach the Dark Tower, where he hopes the quickening destruction of Mid-World may be halted, perhaps even reversed.

Roland is a kind of knight, the last of his breed, and the Tower is his obsession, his only reason for living when first we meet him. We learn of an early test of manhood forced upon him by Marten, who has seduced Roland's mother. Marten expects Roland to fail this test and to be "sent west," his father's guns forever denied him. Roland, however, lays Marten's plans at nines, passing the test . . . due mostly to his clever choice of weapon.

We discover that the gunslinger's world is related to our own in some fundamental and terrible way. This link is first revealed when Roland meets Jake, a boy from the New York of 1977, at a desert way station. There are doors between Roland's world and our own; one of them is death, and that is how Jake first reaches Mid-World, pushed into Forty-third Street and run over by a car. The pusher was a man named Jack Mort . . . except the thing hiding inside of Mort's head and guiding his murderous hands on this particular occasion was Roland's old enemy, Walter.

Before Jake and Roland reach Walter, Jake dies again . . . this time because the gunslinger, faced with an agonizing choice between this symbolic son and the Dark Tower, chooses the Tower. Jake's last words before plunging into the abyss are "Go, then—there are other worlds than these."

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs near the Western Sea. In a long night of palaver, the man in black tells Roland's future with a strange Tarot deck. Three cards—The Prisoner, The Lady of the Shadows, and Death (“but not for you, gunslinger”)—are especially called to Roland's attention.

The second volume, *The Drawing of the Three*, begins on the edge of the Western Sea not long after Roland awakens from his confrontation with his old nemesis and discovers Walter long dead, only more bones in a place of bones. The exhausted gunslinger is attacked by a horde of carnivorous “lobstrosities,” and before he can escape them, he has been seriously wounded, losing the first two fingers of his right hand. He is also poisoned by their bites, and as he resumes his trek northward along the Western Sea, Roland is sickening . . . perhaps dying.

On his walk he encounters three doors standing freely on the beach. These open into our city of New York, at three different *whens*. From 1987, Roland draws Eddie Dean, a prisoner of heroin. From 1964, he draws Odetta Susannah Holmes, a woman who has lost her lower legs in a subway mishap . . . one that was no accident. She is indeed a lady of shadows, with a vicious second personality hiding within the socially committed young black woman her friends know. This hidden woman, the violent and crafty Detta Walker, is determined to kill both Roland and Eddie when the gunslinger draws her into Mid-World.

Between these two in time, once again in 1977, Roland enters the hellish mind of Jack Mort, who has hurt Odetta/Detta not once but twice. “Death,” the man in black told Roland, “but not for you, gunslinger.” Nor is Mort the third of whom Walter foretold; Roland prevents Mort from murdering Jake Chambers, and shortly afterward Mort dies beneath the wheels of the same train which took Odetta's legs in 1959. Roland thus fails to draw the psychotic into Mid-World . . . but, he thinks, who would want such a being in any case?

Yet there's a price to be paid for rebellion against a foretold future; isn't there always? Ka, *maggot*, Roland's old teacher, Cort, might

have said; *Such is the great wheel, and always turns. Be not in front of it when it does, or you'll be crushed under it, and so make an end to your stupid brains and useless bags of guts and water.*

Roland thinks that perhaps he has drawn three in just Eddie and Odetta, since Odetta is a double personality, yet when Odetta and Detta merge as one in Susannah (thanks in large part to Eddie Dean's love and courage), the gunslinger knows it's not so. He knows something else as well: he is being tormented by thoughts of Jake, the boy who, dying, spoke of other worlds. Half of the gunslinger's mind, in fact, believes there never *was* a boy. In preventing Jack Mort from pushing Jake in front of the car meant to kill him, Roland has created a temporal paradox which is tearing him apart. And, in our world, it is tearing Jake Chambers apart as well.

The Wastelands, the third volume of the series, begins with this paradox. After killing a gigantic bear named either Mir (by the old people who went in fear of it) or Shardik (by the Great Old Ones who built it . . . for the bear turns out to be a cyborg), Roland, Eddie, and Susannah backtrack the beast and discover the Path of the Beam. There are six of these beams, running between the twelve portals which mark the edges of Mid-World. At the point where the beams cross—at the center of Roland's world, perhaps the center of all worlds—the gunslinger believes that he and his friends will at last find the Dark Tower.

By now Eddie and Susannah are no longer prisoners in Roland's world. In love and well on the way to becoming gunslingers themselves, they are full participants in the quest and follow him willingly along the Path of the Beam.

In a speaking ring not far from the Portal of the Bear, time is mended, paradox is ended, and the *real* third is at last drawn. Jake reenters Mid-World at the conclusion of a perilous rite where all four—Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Roland—remember the faces of their fathers and acquit themselves honorably. Not long after, the quartet becomes a quintet, when Jake befriends a billy-bumbler. Bumpers,

which look like a combination of badger, raccoon, and dog, have a limited speaking ability. Jake names his new friend Oy.

The way of the pilgrims leads them toward Lud, an urban wasteland where the degenerate survivors of two old factions, the Pubes and the Grays, carry on the vestige of an old conflict. Before reaching the city, they come to a little town called River Crossing, where a few antique residents still remain. They recognize Roland as a remnant of the old days, before the world moved on, and honor him and his companions. After, the old people tell them of a monorail train which may still run from Lud and into the wastelands, along the Path of the Beam and toward the Dark Tower.

Jake is frightened by this news, but not really surprised; before being drawn away from New York, he obtained two books from a bookstore owned by a man with the thought-provoking name of Calvin Tower. One is a book of riddles with the answers torn out. The other, *Charlie the Choo-Choo*, is a children's book about a train. An amusing little tale, most might say . . . but to Jake, there's something about Charlie that isn't amusing at all. Something frightening. Roland knows something else: in the High Speech of his world, the word *char* means death.

Aunt Talitha, the matriarch of the River Crossing folk, gives Roland a silver cross to wear, and the travellers go their course. Before reaching Lud, they discover a downed plane from our world—a German fighter from the 1930s. Jammed into the cockpit is the mummified corpse of a giant, almost certainly the half-mythical outlaw David Quick.

While crossing the dilapidated bridge which spans the River Send, Jake and Oy are nearly lost in an accident. While Roland, Eddie, and Susannah are distracted by this, the party is ambushed by a dying (and very dangerous) outlaw named Gasher. He abducts Jake and takes him underground to the Tick-Tock Man, the last leader of the Grays. Tick-Tock's real name is Andrew Quick; he is the great-grandson of the man who died trying to land an airplane from another world.

While Roland (aided by Oy) goes after Jake, Eddie and Susannah find the Cradle of Lud, where Blaine the Mono awakes. Blaine is the last aboveground tool of the vast computer-system which lies beneath the city of Lud, and it has only one remaining interest: riddles. It promises to take the travellers to the monorail's final stop if they can solve a riddle it poses them. Otherwise, Blaine says, the only trip they'll be taking will be to the place where the path ends in the clearing . . . to their deaths, in other words. In that case they'll have plenty of company, for Blaine is planning to release stocks of nerve-gas which will kill everyone left in Lud: Pubes, Grays, and gunslingers alike.

Roland rescues Jake, leaving the Tick-Tock Man for dead . . . but Andrew Quick is not dead. Half blind, hideously wounded about the face, he is rescued by a man who calls himself Richard Fannin. Fannin, however, also identifies himself as the Ageless Stranger, a demon of whom Roland has been warned by Walter.

Roland and Jake are reunited with Eddie and Susannah in the Cradle of Lud, and Susannah—with a little help from “dat bitch” Detta Walker—is able to solve Blaine's riddle. They gain access to the mono, of necessity ignoring the horrified warnings of Blaine's sane but fatally weak underminer (Eddie calls this voice Little Blaine), only to discover that Blaine means to commit suicide with them aboard. The fact that the actual mind running the mono exists in computers falling farther and farther behind them, running beneath a city which has become a slaughtering-pen, will make no difference when the pink bullet jumps the tracks somewhere along the line at a speed in excess of eight hundred miles an hour.

There is only one chance of survival: Blaine's love of riddles. Roland of Gilead proposes a desperate bargain. It is with this bargain that *The Wastelands* ends; it is with this bargain that *Wizard and Glass* begins.

ROMEO: Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow,
That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops—

JULIET: O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

ROMEO: What shall I swear by?

JULIET: Do not swear at all.
Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry,
And I'll believe thee.

—*Romeo and
Juliet*

William
Shakespeare

On the fourth day, to [Dorothy's] great joy, Oz sent for when she entered the Throne Room, he greeted her pleasantly.

“Sit down, my dear. I think I have found a way to get of this country.”

“And back to Kansas?” she asked eagerly.

“Well, I'm not sure about Kansas,” said Oz, “for I haven't the faintest notion which way it lies. . . .”

—*The Wizard of Oz*

L. Frank Baum

I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights,

Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.

Think first, fight afterwards—the soldier's art:

One taste of the old time sets all to rights!

—*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*

Robert Browning

PROLOGUE
BLAINE



“ASK ME A RIDDLE,” Blaine invited.

“Fuck you,” Roland said. He did not raise his voice.

“*WHAT DO YOU SAY?*” In its clear disbelief, the voice of Big Blaine had become very close to the voice of its unsuspected twin.

“I said fuck you,” Roland said calmly, “but if that puzzles you, Blaine, I can make it clearer. No. The answer is no.”

There was no reply from Blaine for a long, long time, and when he did respond, it was not with words. Instead, the walls, floor, and ceiling began to lose their color and solidity again. In a space of ten seconds the Barony Coach once more ceased to exist. They were now flying through the mountain-range they had seen on the horizon: iron-gray peaks rushed toward them at suicidal speed, then fell away to disclose sterile valleys where gigantic beetles crawled about like landlocked turtles. Roland saw something that looked like a huge snake suddenly uncoil from the mouth of a cave. It seized one of the beetles and yanked it back into its lair. Roland had never in his life seen such animals or countryside, and the sight made his skin want to crawl right off his flesh. Blaine might have transported them to some other world.

“PERHAPS I SHOULD DERAIL US HERE,” Blaine said. His voice was meditative, but beneath it the gunslinger heard a deep, pulsing rage.

“Perhaps you should,” the gunslinger said indifferently.

Eddie’s face was frantic. He mouthed the words *What are you DOING?* Roland ignored him; he had his hands full with Blaine, and he knew perfectly well what he was doing.

“YOU ARE RUDE AND ARROGANT,” Blaine said. “THESE MAY SEEM LIKE INTERESTING TRAITS TO YOU, BUT THEY ARE NOT

TO ME.”

“Oh, I can be much ruder than I have been.”

Roland of Gilead unfolded his hands and got slowly to his feet. He stood on what appeared to be nothing, legs apart, his right hand on his hip and his left on the sandalwood grip of his revolver. He stood as he had so many times before, in the dusty streets of a hundred forgotten towns, in a score of rocky canyon killing-zones, in unnumbered dark saloons with their smells of bitter beer and old fried meals. It was just another showdown in another empty street. That was all, and that was enough. It was *khef, ka, and ka-tet*. That the showdown always came was the central fact of his life and the axle upon which his own *ka* revolved. That the battle would be fought with words instead of bullets this time made no difference; it would be a battle to the death, just the same. The stench of killing in the air was as clear and definite as the stench of exploded carrion in a swamp. Then the battle-rage descended, as it always did . . . and he was no longer really there to himself at all.

“I can call you a nonsensical, empty-headed, foolish machine. I can call you a stupid, unwise creature whose sense is no more than the sound of a winter wind in a hollow tree.”

“STOP IT.”

Roland went on in the same serene tone, ignoring Blaine completely. “You’re what Eddie calls a ‘gadget.’ Were you more, I might be ruder yet.”

“I AM A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN JUST—”

“I could call you a sucker of cocks, for instance, but you have no mouth. I could say you’re viler than the vilest beggar who ever crawled the lowest street in creation, but even such a creature is better than you; you have no knees on which to crawl, and would not fall upon them even if you did, for you have no conception of such a

human flaw as mercy. I could even say you fucked your mother, had you one.”

Roland paused for breath. His three companions were holding theirs. All around them, suffocating, was Blaine the Mono’s thunderstruck silence.

“I *can* call you a faithless creature who let your only companion kill herself, a coward who has delighted in the torture of the foolish and the slaughter of the innocent, a lost and bleating mechanical goblin who—”

“I COMMAND YOU TO STOP IT OR I’LL KILL YOU ALL RIGHT HERE!”

Roland’s eyes blazed with such wild blue fire that Eddie shrank away from him. Dimly, he heard Jake and Susannah gasp.

“Kill if you will, but command me nothing!” the gunslinger roared. *“You have forgotten the faces of those who made you! Now either kill us or be silent and listen to me, Roland of Gilead, son of Steven, gunslinger, and lord of ancient lands! I have not come across all the miles and all the years to listen to your childish prating! Do you understand? Now you will listen to ME!”*

There was another moment of shocked silence. No one breathed. Roland stared sternly forward, his head high, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Susannah Dean raised her hand to her mouth and felt the small smile there as a woman might feel some strange new article of clothing—a hat, perhaps—to make sure it is still on straight. She was afraid this was the end of her life, but the feeling which dominated her heart at that moment was not fear but pride. She glanced to her left and saw Eddie regarding Roland with an amazed grin. Jake’s expression was even simpler: pure adoration.

“Tell him!” Jake breathed. “Kick his ass! Right!”

“You better pay attention,” Eddie agreed. “He really doesn’t give much of a fuck, Blaine. They don’t call him The Mad Dog of Gilead for nothing.”

After a long, long moment, Blaine asked: “DID THEY CALL YOU SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?”

“They may have,” Roland replied, standing calmly on thin air above the sterile foothills.

“WHAT GOOD ARE YOU TO ME IF YOU WON’T TELL ME RIDDLES?” Blaine asked. Now he sounded like a grumbling, sulky child who has been allowed to stay up too long past his usual bedtime.

“I didn’t say we wouldn’t,” Roland said.

“NO?” Blaine sounded bewildered. “I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, YET VOICE-PRINT ANALYSIS INDICATES RATIONAL DISCOURSE. PLEASE EXPLAIN.”

“You said you wanted them right *now*,” the gunslinger replied. “*That* was what I was refusing. Your eagerness has made you unseemly.”

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

“It has made you rude. Do you understand *that*?”

There was a long, thoughtful silence. Centuries had passed since the computer had experienced any human responses other than ignorance, neglect, and superstitious subservience. It had been eons since it had been exposed to simple human courage. Finally: “IF WHAT I SAID STRUCK YOU AS RUDE, I APOLOGIZE.”

“It is accepted, Blaine. But there is a larger problem.”

“EXPLAIN.”

“Close the carriage again and I will.” Roland sat down as if further argument—and the prospect of immediate death—was now unthinkable.

Blaine did as he was asked. The walls filled with color and the nightmare landscape below was once more blotted out. The blip on the route-map was now blinking close to the dot marked Candleton.

“All right,” Roland said. “Rudeness is forgivable, Blaine; so I was taught in my youth. But I was also taught that stupidity is not.”

“HOW HAVE I BEEN STUPID, ROLAND OF GILEAD?” Blaine’s voice was soft and ominous. Susannah thought of a cat crouched outside a mouse-hole, tail swishing back and forth, green eyes shining with malevolence.

“We have something you want,” Roland said, “but the only reward you offer if we give it to you is death. That’s *very* stupid.”

There was a long, long pause as Blaine thought this over. Then: “WHAT YOU SAY IS TRUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD, BUT THE QUALITY OF YOUR RIDDLES IS NOT PROVEN. I WILL NOT REWARD YOU WITH YOUR LIVES FOR BAD RIDDLES.”

Roland nodded. “I understand, Blaine. Listen, now, and take understanding from me. I have told some of this to my friends already. When I was a boy in the Barony of Gilead, there were seven Fair-Days each year—Winter, Wide Earth, Sowing, Mid-Summer, Full Earth, Reaping, and Year’s End. Riddling was an important part of every Fair-Day, but it was the most important event of the Fair of Wide Earth and that of Full Earth, for the riddles told were supposed to augur well or ill for the success of the crops.”

“THAT IS SUPERSTITION WITH NO BASIS AT ALL IN FACT,” Blaine said. “I FIND IT ANNOYING AND UPSETTING.”

“Of course it was superstition,” Roland agreed, “but you might be surprised at how well the riddles foresaw the crops. For instance,

riddle me this, Blaine: What is the difference between a grandmother and a granary?"

"THAT IS OLD AND NOT VERY INTERESTING," Blaine said, but he sounded happy to have something to solve, just the same. "ONE IS ONE'S BORN KIN; THE OTHER IS ONE'S CORN-BIN. A RIDDLE BASED ON PHONETIC COINCIDENCE. ANOTHER OF THIS TYPE, ONE TOLD ON THE LEVEL WHICH CONTAINS THE BARONY OF NEW YORK, GOES LIKE THIS: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CAT AND A COMPLEX SENTENCE?"

Jake spoke up. "I know. A cat has claws at the end of its paws, and a complex sentence has a pause at the end of its clause."

"YES," Blaine agreed. "A VERY SILLY OLD RIDDLE, USEFUL ONLY AS A MNEMONIC DEVICE."

"For once I agree with you, Blaine old buddy," Eddie said.

"I AM NOT YOUR BUDDY, EDDIE OF NEW YORK."

"Well, jeez. Kiss my ass and go to heaven."

"THERE IS NO HEAVEN."

Eddie had no comeback for that one.

"I WOULD HEAR MORE OF FAIR-DAY RIDDLING IN GILEAD, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN."

"At noon on Wide Earth and Full Earth, somewhere between sixteen and thirty riddlers would gather in the Hall of the Grandfathers, which was opened for the event. Those were the only times of year when common folk—merchants and farmers and ranchers and such—were allowed into the Hall of the Grandfathers, and on that day they *all* crowded in."

The gunslinger's eyes were far away and dreamy; it was the expression Jake had seen on his face in that misty other life, when

Roland had told him of how he and his friends, Cuthbert and Jamie, had once sneaked into the balcony of that same Hall to watch some sort of dance-party. Jake and Roland had been climbing into the mountains when Roland had told him of that time, close on the trail of Walter.

Marten sat next to my mother and father, Roland had said. I knew them even from so high above—and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. But the gunslingers did not clap. . . .

Jake looked curiously at Roland, wondering again where this strange man had come from . . . and why.

“A great barrel was placed in the center of the floor,” Roland went on, “and into this each riddler would toss a handful of bark scrolls with riddles writ upon them. Many were old, riddles they had gotten from the elders—even from books, in some cases—but many others were new, made up for the occasion. Three judges, one always a gunslinger, would pass on these when they were told aloud, and they were accepted only if the judges deemed them fair.”

“YES, RIDDLES MUST BE FAIR,” Blaine agreed.

“So they riddled,” the gunslinger said. A faint smile touched his mouth as he thought of those days, days when he had been the age of the bruised boy sitting across from him with the billy-bumbler in his lap. “For hours on end they riddled. A line was formed down the center of the Hall of the Grandfathers. One’s position in this line was determined by lot, and since it was much better to be at the end of the line than at the head, everyone hoped for a high draw, although the winner had to answer at least one riddle correctly.

“OF COURSE.”

“Each man or woman—for some of Gilead’s best riddlers were women—approached the barrel, drew a riddle, and if the riddle was

still unanswered after the sands in a three-minute glass had run out, that contestant had to leave the line.”

“AND WAS THE SAME RIDDLE ASKED OF THE NEXT PERSON IN THE LINE?”

“Yes.”

“SO THE NEXT PERSON HAD EXTRA TIME TO THINK.”

“Yes.”

“I SEE. IT SOUNDS PRETTY SWELL.”

Roland frowned. “Swell?”

“He means it sounds like fun,” Susannah said quietly.

Roland shrugged. “It was fun for the onlookers, I suppose, but the contestants took it very seriously. Quite often there were arguments and fistfights after the contest was over and the prize awarded.”

“WHAT PRIZE WAS THAT, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?”

“The largest goose in Barony. And year after year my teacher, Cort, carried that goose home.”

“I WISH HE WERE HERE,” Blaine said respectfully. “HE MUST HAVE BEEN A GREAT RIDDLER.”

“Indeed he was,” Roland said. “Are you ready for my proposal, Blaine?”

“OF COURSE. I WILL LISTEN WITH GREAT INTEREST, ROLAND OF GILEAD.”

“Let these next few hours be our Fair-Day. You will not riddle us, for you wish to hear new riddles, not tell some of those millions you already know—”

“CORRECT.”

“We couldn’t solve most of them, anyway,” Roland went on. “I’m sure you know riddles that would have stumped even Cort, had they been pulled out of the barrel.” He was not sure of it at all, but the time to use the fist had passed and the time to use the feather had come.

“OF COURSE,” Blaine agreed.

“Instead of a goose, our lives shall be the prize,” Roland said. “We will riddle you as we run, Blaine. If, when we come to Topeka, you have solved every one of our riddles, you may carry out your original plan and kill us. That is your goose. But if *we* pose *you*—if there is a riddle in either Jake’s book or one of our heads which you don’t know and can’t answer—you must take us to Topeka and then free us to pursue our quest. That is *our* goose.”

Silence.

“Do you understand?”

“YES.”

“Do you agree?”

More silence from Blaine the Mono. Eddie sat stiffly with his arm around Susannah, looking up at the ceiling of the Barony Coach. Susannah’s left hand slipped across her belly, stroking the secret which might be hidden there. Jake stroked Oy’s fur lightly, avoiding the bloody tangles where the bumbler had been stabbed. They waited while Blaine—the real Blaine, now far behind them, living his quasi-life beneath a city where all the inhabitants lay dead by his hand—considered Roland’s proposal.

“YES,” Blaine said at last. “I AGREE. IF I SOLVE ALL THE RIDDLES YOU ASK ME, I WILL TAKE YOU WITH ME TO THE PLACE WHERE THE PATH ENDS IN THE CLEARING. IF ONE OF

YOU TELLS A RIDDLE I CANNOT SOLVE, I WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES AND LEAVE YOU IN TOPEKA, FROM WHENCE YOU MAY CONTINUE YOUR QUEST FOR THE DARK TOWER, IF YOU SO CHOOSE. HAVE I UNDERSTOOD THE TERMS AND LIMITS OF YOUR PROPOSAL CORRECTLY, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"Yes."

"VERY WELL, ROLAND OF GILEAD.

"VERY WELL, EDDIE OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, JAKE OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, OY OF MID-WORLD."

Oy looked up briefly at the sound of his name.

"YOU ARE *KA-TET*; ONE MADE FROM MANY. SO AM I. WHOSE *KA-TET* IS THE STRONGER IS SOMETHING WE MUST NOW PROVE."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the hard steady throb of the slo-trans turbines bearing them on across the waste lands, bearing them along the Path of the Beam toward Topeka, where Mid-World ended and End-World began.

"SO," cried the voice of Blaine. "CAST YOUR NETS, WANDERERS! TRY ME WITH YOUR QUESTIONS, AND LET THE CONTEST BEGIN."

PART ONE RIDDLES



CHAPTER I

BENEATH THE DEMON MOON (I)

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The deer slipped her mouth into the water, began to drink, then looked up, eyes wide, muzzle dripping. Off in the distance she could hear a low humming sound. A moment later it was joined by an eyelash of light. Alarm flared in the doe's nerves, but although her reflexes were fast and the light when first glimpsed was still many wheels away across the desolate countryside, there was never a chance for her to escape. Before she could even begin to fire her muscles, the distant spark had swelled to a searing wolf's eye of light that flooded the stream and the clearing with its glare. With the light came the maddening hum of Blaine's slo-trans engines, running at full capacity. There was a blur of pink above the concrete ridge which bore the rail; a rooster-tail of dust, stones, small dismembered animals, and whirling foliage followed along after. The doe was killed instantly by the concussion of Blaine's passage. Too large to be sucked in the mono's wake, she was still yanked forward almost seventy yards, with water dripping from her muzzle and hoofs. Much of her hide (and the boneless fifth leg) was torn from her body and pulled after Blaine like a discarded garment.

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

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

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

Now, however, such did not matter. Now there were demons everywhere.

2

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

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

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

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

Jake was holding his tattered book of riddles out to the gunslinger as if he no longer wanted the responsibility of carrying it. Susannah

knew how the kid must feel; their lives might very well be in those grimy, well-thumbed pages. She wasn't sure she would want the responsibility of holding onto it, either.

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

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

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

"Blaine!" Roland called.

"YES."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Olive oil but not castoria?” Jake asked. “What the heck does *that* mean?”

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

“You don’t really believe he’s gone, do you?” Eddie asked. “A slippery pup like him? Come on, get real. He’s peeking, I guarantee you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Does he have blind spots?” Eddie asked.

“If he doesn’t,” Roland said calmly, “we’re going to die on this train.”

“I like the way you kind of ease us over the rough spots,” Eddie said with a thin smile. “It’s one of your many charms.”

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

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

“Then we’ll send him away again and hold palaver,” the gunslinger said. “Mayhap we’ll get an idea of what direction to send our horses. These first riddles can come from anywhere, but”—he nodded gravely toward the book—“based on Jake’s story of the bookstore,

the answer we really need should be in there, not in any memories I have of Fair-Day riddlings. *Must* be in there.”

“Question,” Susannah said.

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

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

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

“You’re easy,” Roland said, turning to Susannah.

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

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

“The hard ones are toward the back,” Jake supplied.

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

Eddie looked at him—old long, tall, and ugly, who’d done God knew how many ugly things in the name of reaching his Tower—and wondered if Roland had any idea at all of how much that hurt. Just that casual admonition not to behave like a child, grinning and cracking jokes, now that their lives were at wager.

He opened his mouth to say something—an Eddie Dean Special, something that would be both funny and stinging at the same time, the kind of remark that always used to drive his brother Henry dogshit—and then closed it again. Maybe long, tall, and ugly was right; maybe it was time to put away the one-liners and dead baby jokes. Maybe it was finally time to grow up.

3

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

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

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

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

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

“YES, GUNSLINGER.”

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

"EXCELLENT!"

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

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

"HOWDY, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK."

Her heart was pounding, her armpits were damp, and here was something she had first discovered way back in the first grade: it was hard to begin. It was hard to stand up in front of the class and be first with your song, your joke, your report on how you spent your summer vacation . . . or your riddle, for that matter. The one she had decided upon was one from Jake Chambers's crazed English essay, which he had recited to them almost verbatim during their long palaver after leaving the old people of River Crossing. The essay, titled "My Understanding of Truth," had contained two riddles, one of which Eddie had already used on Blaine.

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

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

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

There was a peculiar click, as if Blaine were mimicking the sound of a man popping his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It was followed by a brief pause. When Blaine replied, most of the jocularly had gone out of his voice. "THE TOWN GARBAGE WAGON, OF COURSE. A CHILD'S RIDDLE. IF THE REST OF YOUR RIDDLES

ARE NO BETTER, I WILL BE EXTREMELY SORRY I SAVED YOUR LIVES FOR EVEN A SHORT WHILE.”

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

Susannah, who had been on her share of bumpy trolleys and subways in her time, felt nothing—the ride was as smooth now as it had been when they had first pulled out of the Cradle of Lud—but she believed Little Blaine anyway. She guessed that if they *did* feel a bump, it would be the last thing any of them would ever feel.

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

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

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

Susannah looked at Roland, bewildered.

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

“Oh.”

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

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

“SPEAK YOUR RIDDLE.”

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

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

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

Now Roland stood up. “Hile, Blaine,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silence from Blaine.

“Blaine? Are you there?”

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

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

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

“Well,” Eddie said, “I don’t know how hard it’ll seem to you, but it struck me as a toughie.” Nor did he know the answer, since that section of *Riddle-De-Dum!* had been torn out, but he didn’t think that made any difference; their knowing the answers hadn’t been part of the ground-rules.

“I SHALL HEAR AND ANSWER.”

“No sooner spoken than broken. What is it?”

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

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

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

“Yes,” Roland said.

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

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

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

“Yes,” Susannah said, and Eddie nodded reluctantly. He didn’t *want* to agree . . . but he did.

“So?” Jake asked. “What *do* we do, Roland? I mean, there has to be a way out of this . . . doesn’t there?”

Lie to him, you bastard, Eddie sent fiercely in Roland’s direction.

Roland, perhaps hearing the thought, did the best he could. He touched Jake’s hair with his diminished hand and ruffled through it. “I think there’s always an answer, Jake. The real question is whether or not we’ll have time to find the right riddle. He said it took him a little under nine hours to run his route—”

“Eight hours, forty-five minutes,” Jake put in.

“. . . and that’s not much time. We’ve already been running almost an hour—”

“And if that map’s right, we’re almost halfway to Topeka,” Susannah said in a tight voice. “Could be our mechanical pal’s been lying to us about the length of the run. Hedging his bets a little.”

“Could be,” Roland agreed.

“So what do we do?” Jake repeated.

Roland drew in a deep breath, held it, let it out. “Let me riddle him alone, for now. I’ll ask him the hardest ones I remember from the Fair-Days of my youth. Then, Jake, if we’re approaching the point of . . . if we’re approaching Topeka at this same speed with Blaine still unposed, I think you should ask him the last few riddles in your book. The hardest riddles.” He rubbed the side of his face distractedly and looked at the ice sculpture. This chilly rendering of his own likeness had now melted to an unrecognizable hulk. “I still think the answer must be in the book. Why else would you have been drawn to it before coming back to this world?”

“And us?” Susannah asked. “What do Eddie and I do?”

“*Think,*” Roland said. “*Think,* for your fathers’ sakes.”

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

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

“Nothing.” He might have said more, but all at once a strange image—a strange *memory*—intervened: Roland hunkering by Jake at one of their stopping-points on the way to Lud. Both of them in

front of an unlit campfire. Roland once more at his everlasting lessons. Jake's turn this time. Jake with the flint and steel, trying to quicken the fire. Spark after spark licking out and dying in the dark. And Roland had said that he was being silly. That he was just being . . . well . . . *silly*.

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

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

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

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

Except none of that was what this was about. It was close, yes, but close only counts in horseshoes, as Henry Dean had been wont to say before he became the Great Sage and Eminent Junkie. Eddie's memory was jinking a little because Roland had embarrassed him . . . shamed him . . . made a joke at his expense . . .

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

All of them looking at him now. Even Oy.

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

(I shoot with my mind)

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

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

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

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

“AS *DINH* AND FATHER OF YOUR *KA-TET*, SUCH IS YOUR RIGHT. WILL THESE BE FAIR-DAY RIDDLES?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

“WIND.” No hesitation.

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

“ONE’S BREATH.” No hesitation.

Yet he did hesitate, Eddie thought suddenly. Jake and Susannah were watching Roland with agonized concentration, fists clenched, *willing* him to ask Blaine the right riddle, the stumper, the one with the Get the Fuck Out of Jail Free card hidden inside it; Eddie couldn’t look at them—Suze, in particular—and keep his concentration. He lowered his gaze to his own hands, which were also clenched, and forced them to open on his lap. It was surprisingly hard to do. From the aisle he heard Roland continuing to trot out the golden oldies of his youth.

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

Susannah’s breath caught for a moment, and although he was looking down, Eddie knew she was thinking what he was thinking: that was a good one, a *damned* good one, maybe—

“THE HUMAN HEART,” Blaine said. Still with not a whit of hesitation. “THIS RIDDLE IS BASED IN LARGE PART UPON HUMAN POETIC CONCEITS; SEE FOR INSTANCE JOHN AVERY, SIRONIA HUNTZ, ONDOLA, WILLIAM BLAKE, JAMES TATE, VERONICA MAYS, AND OTHERS. IT IS REMARKABLE HOW HUMAN BEINGS PITCH THEIR MINDS ON LOVE. YET IT IS CONSTANT FROM ONE LEVEL OF THE TOWER TO THE NEXT, EVEN IN THESE DEGENERATE DAYS. CONTINUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD.”

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

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

CHAPTER II

THE FALLS OF THE HOUNDS

1

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

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

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

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

Except . . .

They shared each other's thoughts, Roland had said; sharing *khef* was part of what *ka-tet* meant. And what had been seeping into Jake's thoughts ever since Roland stepped into the aisle and began to try Blaine with riddles from his young days was a sense of doom. It wasn't coming just from the gunslinger; Susannah was sending out the same grim blue-black vibe. Only Eddie wasn't sending it, and that was because he'd gone off somewhere, was chasing his own thoughts. That might be good, but there were no guarantees, and—

—and Jake began to be scared again. Worse, he felt desperate, like a creature that is pressed deeper and deeper into its final corner by a relentless foe. His fingers worked restlessly in Oy's fur, and when he looked down at them, he realized an amazing thing: the hand which Oy had bitten into to keep from falling off the bridge no longer hurt. He could see the holes the bumbler's teeth had made, and blood was still crusted in his palm and on his wrist, but the hand itself no longer hurt. He flexed it cautiously. There was some pain, but it was low and distant, hardly there at all.

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

"A LADY'S PARASOL," Blaine replied in that tone of jolly complacency which Jake, too, was coming to loathe.

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

"Roland?"

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

"What is it, Jake?"

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

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

"How?" Jake asked.

"LOOK ON THE ARM OF YOUR SEAT."

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

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

Jake laughed. He guessed that laughing at Blaine might be risky, but this time he just couldn't help it. "There *is* no Edith Bunker," he

said. “She’s just a character on a TV show. The actress’s name is, um, Jean Stapleton. Also, she looks like Mrs. Shaw. She’s our housekeeper. Nice, but not—you know—a babe.”

A long silence from Blaine. When the voice of the computer returned, a certain coldness had replaced the jocose ain’t-we-having-fun tone of voice.

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

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

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

Mistake.

Yes. Blaine had made a mistake. More, Jake Chambers, a boy of eleven, had picked up on it. And if Blaine had made one, he could make another. Maybe there was hope after all. Jake decided he would treat that possibility as he had treated the *graf* of River Crossing and allow himself just a little.

2

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

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

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

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

For a moment Jake looked at the trees which dressed the steep slopes along the sides of this river, registering with relief that they looked pretty much all right—the sort of firs you’d expect to see in the mountains of Colorado or Wyoming, say—and then his eyes were dragged back to the lip of the chasm. Here the torrent broke

apart and dropped in a waterfall so wide and so deep that Jake thought it made Niagara, where he had gone with his parents (one of three family vacations he could remember; two had been cut short by urgent calls from his father's Network), look like the kind you might see in a third-rate theme-park. The air filling the enclosing semicircle of the falls was further thickened by an uprushing mist that looked like steam; in it half a dozen moonbows gleamed like gaudy, interlocking dream-jewelry. To Jake they looked like the overlapping rings which symbolized the Olympics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

For a moment Jake thought what he'd feared had happened, that he had gone deaf. Then he realized that he could hear Oy, still barking, and Susannah crying. At first these sounds seemed distant and flat, as if his ears had been packed with cracker-crumbs, but then they began to clarify.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right, Blaine. Here’s one of Cort’s own making, and has posed many in its time.”

“I AWAIT IT WITH GREAT INTEREST.”

Roland, pausing perhaps to gather his thoughts, looked up at the place where the roof of the coach had been and where there was now only a starry spill across a black sky (Jake could pick out Aton and Lydia—Old Star and Old Mother—and was oddly comforted by the sight of them, still glaring at each other from their accustomed places). Then the gunslinger looked back at the lighted rectangle which served them as Blaine’s face.

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

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

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

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

“All right. What has—”

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

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

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

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

Silence from Blaine.

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

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

“Better not to ask him,” the voice of Little Blaine drifted down from over their heads. “Safer.”

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

3

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

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

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

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

“It’s not like forgetting. It’s as if they were never there in the first place. What’s happening to the rest of the world is happening to me, I reckon.”

“You’re moving on,” Susannah said, and looked at Roland with an expression of pity which Roland could look back at for only a second or two; it was as if he felt burned by her regard. “Like everything else here.”

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

“Yes.”

“Good. And take heart. We’re not finished yet.”

Outside, the dim crackle of electricity ceased.

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

“Marvelous,” Susannah said dryly.

“Luss!” Oy agreed, catching Susannah’s sarcastic tone exactly.

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

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

“Eddie?” Susannah asked. “What are you—”

Roland touched her shoulder and shook his head.

“NEVER MIND EDDIE OF NEW YORK,” Blaine said in his expansive, gosh-but-this-is-fun voice.

“That’s right,” Eddie said. “Never mind Eddie of New York.”

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

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

The *stone* truth.

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

4

Susannah watched with dreadful fascination as the flashing dot approached Dasherville, passed it, and made its final dogleg for home. The dot's movement said that Blaine was moving a bit more slowly now that it had switched over to batteries, and she fancied the lights in the Barony Coach were a little dimmer, but she didn't believe it would make much difference, in the end. Blaine might reach his terminus in Topeka doing six hundred miles an hour instead of eight hundred, but his last load of passengers would be toothpaste either way.

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

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

“ON A MAP.”

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

“A BROOM, GUNSLINGER. ANOTHER VARIATION ENDS, ‘I EASE THE MAID’S LIFE.’ I LIKE YOURS BETTER.”

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

“THE DARK.”

“Thankee-sai, you speak true.”

The diminished right hand slid up the right cheek—the old fretful gesture—and the minute scratching sound produced by the callused pads of his fingers made Susannah shiver. Jake sat cross-legged on the floor, looking at the gunslinger with a kind of fierce intensity.

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

“A CLOCK.”

“Shit,” Jake whispered, lips compressing.

Susannah looked over at Eddie and felt a passing ripple of irritation. He seemed to have lost interest in the whole thing—had “zoned out,” in his weird 1980s slang. She thought to throw an elbow into his side, wake him up a little, then remembered Roland shaking his head at her and didn’t. You wouldn’t know he was thinking, not from that slack expression on his face, but maybe he was.

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

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

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

Thankee-sai.

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

Blaine, you say true.

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

Thankee-sai.

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

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

"Blaine, what has eyes yet cannot see?"

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

“Thankee-sai, Blaine, you speak—”

“LISTEN, ROLAND OF GILEAD. LISTEN, *KA-TET*.”

Roland fell silent at once, his eyes narrowing, his head slightly cocked.

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

“If we’ve been riding for seven hours or more, I grew up with the Brady Bunch,” Jake said.

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

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

“Yes,” Jake muttered.

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

“Stop it, Blaine! Stop it!”

“BEG PARDON, MA’AM,” drawled the aw-shucks voice of Jimmy Stewart. “AH’M RIGHT SORRY IF I RUINT YOUR EARS WITH MY RISABILITY.”

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

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

But for now, better let him be.

"AT THIS POINT," Blaine resumed in his normal voice, "I INTEND TO BEGIN WHAT I LIKE TO THINK OF AS MY KAMIKAZE RUN. THIS WILL QUICKLY DRAIN MY BATTERIES, BUT I THINK THE TIME FOR CONSERVATION HAS PASSED, DON'T YOU? WHEN I STRIKE THE TRANSTEEL PIERS AT THE END OF THE TRACK, I SHOULD BE TRAVELLING AT BETTER THAN NINE HUNDRED MILES AN HOUR—FIVE HUNDRED AND THIRTY IN WHEELS, THAT IS. SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR, AFTER AWHILE, CROCODILE, DON'T FORGET TO WRITE. I TELL YOU THIS IN THE SPIRIT OF FAIR PLAY, MY INTERESTING NEW FRIENDS. IF YOU HAVE BEEN SAVING YOUR BEST RIDDLES FOR LAST, YOU MIGHT DO WELL TO POSE THEM TO ME NOW."

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

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

A pause ensued—brief, but more of a hesitation than the computer had accorded any of Roland's riddles—and then Blaine chuckled. Susannah hated the sound of its mad laughter, but there was a

cynical weariness in this chuckle that chilled her even more deeply. Perhaps because it was almost sane.

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

“I don’t understand you. I know not this Scheherazade.”

“NO MATTER. SUSANNAH CAN FILL YOU IN, IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW. PERHAPS EVEN EDDIE. THE POINT, ROLAND, IS THAT I’LL NOT BE DRAWN ON BY THE PROMISE OF MORE RIDDLES. WE VIE FOR THE GOOSE. COME TOPEKA, IT SHALL BE AWARDED, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?”

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

“We play for keeps. No one cries off.”

“CORRECT. NO ONE CRIES OFF.”

“All right, Blaine, we play for keeps and no one cries off. Here’s the next.”

“AS ALWAYS, I AWAIT IT WITH PLEASURE.”

Roland looked down at Jake. “Be ready with yours, Jake; I’m almost at the end of mine.”

Jake nodded.

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

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

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

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

Their electric-blue eyes.

CHAPTER III THE FAIR-DAY GOOSE

1

Eddie Dean—who did not know Roland sometimes thought of him as *ka-mai*, *ka's* fool—heard all of it and heard none of it; saw all of it and saw none of it. The only thing to really make an impression on him once the riddling began in earnest was the fire flashing from the stone eyes of the Hounds; as he raised his hand to shield his eyes from that chain-lightning glare, he thought of the Portal of the Beam in the Clearing of the Bear, how he had pressed his ear against it and heard the distant, dreamy rumble of machinery.

Watching the eyes of the Hounds light up, listening as Blaine drew that current into his batteries, powering up for his final plunge across Mid-World, Eddie had thought: *Not all is silent in the halls of the dead and the rooms of ruin. Even now some of the stuff the Old Ones left behind still works. And that's really the horror of it, wouldn't you say? Yes. The exact horror of it.*

Eddie had been with his friends for a short time after that, mentally as well as physically, but then he had fallen back into his thoughts again. *Eddie's zonin*, Henry would have said. *Let 'im be.*

It was the image of Jake striking flint and steel that kept recurring; he would allow his mind to dwell on it for a second or two, like a bee alighting on some sweet flower, and then he would take off again. Because that memory wasn't what he wanted; it was just the way *in* to what he wanted, another door like the ones on the beach of the Western Sea, or the one he had scraped in the dirt of the speaking ring before they had drawn Jake . . . only this door was in his mind.

What he wanted was behind it; what he was doing was kind of . . . well . . . diddling the lock.

Zonin, in Henry-speak.

His brother had spent most of his time putting Eddie down—because Henry had been afraid of him and jealous of him, Eddie had finally come to realize—but he remembered one day when Henry had stunned him by saying something that was nice. *Better* than nice, actually; mind-boggling.

A bunch of them had been sitting in the alley behind Dahlie's, some of them eating Popsicles and Hoodsie Rockets, some of them smoking Kents from a pack Jimmie Polino—Jimmie Polio, they had all called him, because he had that fucked-up thing wrong with him, that clubfoot—had hawked out of his mother's dresser drawer. Henry, predictably enough, had been one of the ones smoking.

There were certain ways of referring to things in the gang Henry was a part of (and which Eddie, as his little brother, was also a part of); the argot of their miserable little *ka-tet*. In Henry's gang, you never beat anyone else up; you *sent em home with a fuckin rupture*. You never made out with a girl; you *fucked that skag til she cried*. You never got stoned; you *went on a fuckin bombin-run*. And you never brawled with another gang; you *got in a fuckin piss*.

The discussion that day had been about who you'd want with you if you got in a fuckin piss. Jimmie Polio (he got to talk first because he had supplied the cigarettes, which Henry's homeboys called *the fuckin cancer-sticks*) opted for Skipper Brannigan, because, he said, Skipper wasn't afraid of anyone. One time, Jimmie said, Skipper got pissed off at this teacher—at the Friday night PAL dance, this was—and beat the living shit out of him. Sent *THE FUCKIN CHAPERONE* home with a fuckin rupture, if you could dig it. That was his homie Skipper Brannigan.

Everyone listened to this solemnly, nodding their heads as they ate their Rockets, sucked their Popsicles, or smoked their Kents.

Everyone knew that Skipper Brannigan was a fuckin pussy and Jimmie was full of shit, but no one said so. Christ, no. If they didn't pretend to believe Jimmie Polio's outrageous lies, no one would pretend to believe theirs.

Tommy Fredericks opted for John Parelli. Georgie Pratt went for Csaba Drabnik, also known around the nabe as The Mad Fuckin Hungarian. Frank Duganelli nominated Larry McCain, even though Larry was in Juvenile Detention; Larry fuckin *ruled*, Frank said.

By then it was around to Henry Dean. He gave the question the weighty consideration it deserved, then put his arm around his surprised brother's shoulders. *Eddie*, he said. *My little bro. He's the man.*

They all stared at him, stunned—and none more stunned than Eddie. His jaw had been almost down to his belt-buckle. And then Jimmie Polio said, *Come on, Henry, stop fuckin around. This a serious question. Who'd you want watching your back if the shit was gonna come down?*

I am being serious, Henry had replied.

Why Eddie? Georgie Pratt had asked, echoing the question which had been in Eddie's own mind. *He couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag. A wet one. So why the fuck?*

Henry thought some more—not, Eddie was convinced, because he didn't know why, but because he had to think about how to articulate it. Then he said: *Because when Eddie's in that fuckin zone, he could talk the devil into setting himself on fire.*

The image of Jake returned, one memory stepping on another. Jake scraping steel on flint, flashing sparks at the kindling of their campfire, sparks that fell short and died before they lit.

He could talk the devil into setting himself on fire.

Move your flint in closer, Roland said, and now there was a third memory, one of Roland at the door they'd come to at the end of the beach, Roland burning with fever, close to death, shaking like a maraca, coughing, his blue bombardier's eyes fixed on Eddie, Roland saying, *Come a little closer, Eddie—come a little closer for your father's sake!*

Because he wanted to grab me, Eddie thought. Faintly, almost as if it were coming through one of those magic doors from some other world, he heard Blaine telling them that the endgame had commenced; if they had been saving their best riddles, now was the time to trot them out. They had an hour.

An hour! Only an hour!

His mind tried to fix on that and Eddie nudged it away. Something was happening inside him (at least he prayed it was), some desperate game of association, and he couldn't let his mind get fucked up with deadlines and consequences and all that crap; if he did, he'd lose whatever chance he had. It was, in a way, like seeing something in a piece of wood, something you could carve out—a bow, a slingshot, perhaps a key to open some unimaginable door. You couldn't look too long, though, at least to start with. You'd lose it if you did. It was almost as if you had to carve while your own back was turned.

He could feel Blaine's engines powering up beneath him. In his mind's eye he saw the flint flash against the steel, and in his mind's ear he heard Roland telling Jake to move the flint in closer. *And don't hit it with the steel, Jake; scrape it.*

Why am I here? If this isn't what I want, why does my mind keep coming back to this place?

Because it's as close as I can get and still stay out of the hurt-zone. Only a medium-sized hurt, actually, but it made me think of Henry. Being put down by Henry.

Henry said you could talk the devil into setting himself on fire.

Yes. I always loved him for that. That was great.

And now Eddie saw Roland move Jake's hands, one holding flint and the other steel, closer to the kindling. Jake was nervous. Eddie could see it; Roland had seen it, too. And in order to ease his nerves, take his mind off the responsibility of lighting the fire, Roland had—

He asked the kid a riddle.

Eddie Dean blew breath into the keyhole of his memory. And this time the tumblers turned.

2

The green dot was closing in on Topeka, and for the first time Jake felt vibration . . . as if the track beneath them had decayed to a point where Blaine's compensators could no longer completely handle the problem. With the sense of vibration there at last came a feeling of speed. The walls and ceiling of the Barony Coach were still opaqued, but Jake found he didn't need to see the countryside blurring past to imagine it. Blaine was rolling full out now, leading his last sonic boom across the waste lands to the place where Mid-World ended, and Jake also found it easy to imagine the transteel piers at the end of the monorail. They would be painted in diagonal stripes of yellow and black. He didn't know how he knew that, but he did.

"TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES," Blaine said complacently. "WOULD YOU TRY ME AGAIN, GUNSLINGER?"

"I think not, Blaine." Roland sounded exhausted. "I've done with you; you've beaten me. Jake?"

Jake got to his feet and faced the route-map. In his chest his heartbeat seemed very slow but very hard, each pulse like a fist

slamming on a drumhead. Oy crouched between his feet, looking anxiously up into his face.

“Hello, Blaine,” Jake said, and wet his lips.

“HELLO, JAKE OF NEW YORK.” The voice was kindly—the voice, perhaps, of a nice old fellow with a habit of molesting the children he from time to time leads into the bushes. “WOULD YOU TRY ME WITH RIDDLES FROM YOUR BOOK? OUR TIME TOGETHER GROWS SHORT.”

“Yes,” Jake said. “I would try you with these riddles. Give me your understanding of the truth concerning each, Blaine.”

“IT IS FAIRLY SPOKEN, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I WILL DO AS YOU ASK.”

Jake opened the book to the place he had been keeping with his finger. Ten riddles. Eleven, counting Samson’s riddle, which he was saving for last. If Blaine answered them all (as Jake now believed he probably would), Jake would sit down next to Roland, take Oy onto his lap, and wait for the end. There were, after all, other worlds than these.

“Listen, Blaine: In a tunnel of darkness lies a beast of iron. It can only attack when pulled back. What is it?”

“A BULLET.” No hesitation.

“Walk on the living, they don’t even mumble. Walk on the dead, they mutter and grumble. What are they?”

“FALLEN LEAVES.” No hesitation, and if Jake really knew in his heart that the game was lost, why did he feel such despair, such bitterness, such anger?

Because he’s a pain, that’s why. Blaine is a really BIG pain, and I’d like to push his face in it, just once. I think even making him stop is

second to that on my wish-list.

Jake turned the page. He was very close to *Riddle-De-Dum's* torn-out answer section now; he could feel it under his finger, a kind of jagged lump. Very close to the end of the book. He thought of Aaron Deepneau in the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind, Aaron Deepneau telling him to come back anytime, play a little chess, and oh just by the way, old fatso made a pretty good cup of coffee. A wave of homesickness so strong it was like dying swept over him. He felt he would have sold his soul for a look at New York; hell, he would have sold it for one deep lung-filling breath of Forty-second Street at rush hour.

He fought it off and went to the next riddle.

“I am emeralds and diamonds, lost by the moon. I am found by the sun and picked up soon. What am I?”

“DEW.”

Still relentless. Still unhesitating.

The green dot grew closer to Topeka, closing the last of the distance on the route-map. One after another, Jake posed his riddles; one after another, Blaine answered them. When Jake turned to the last page, he saw a boxed message from the author or editor or whatever you called someone who put together books like this: *We hope you've enjoyed the unique combination of imagination and logic known as RIDDLING!*

I haven't, Jake thought. *I haven't enjoyed it one little bit, and I hope you choke.* Yet when he looked at the question above the message, he felt a thin thread of hope. It seemed to him that, in this case, at least, they really *had* saved the best for last.

On the route-map, the green dot was now no more than a finger's width from Topeka.

“Hurry up, Jake,” Susannah murmured.

“Blaine?”

“YES, JAKE OF NEW YORK.”

“With no wings, I fly. With no eyes, I see. With no arms, I climb. More frightening than any beast, stronger than any foe. I am cunning, ruthless, and tall; in the end, I rule all. What am I?”

The gunslinger had looked up, blue eyes gleaming. Susannah began to turn her expectant face from Jake to the route-map. Yet Blaine’s answer was as prompt as ever: “THE IMAGINATION OF MAN AND WOMAN.”

Jake briefly considered arguing, then thought, *Why waste our time?* As always, the answer, when it was right, seemed almost self-evident. “Thankee-sai, Blaine, you speak true.”

“AND THE FAIR-DAY GOOSE IS ALMOST MINE, I WOT. NINETEEN MINUTES AND FIFTY SECONDS TO TERMINATION. WOULD YOU SAY MORE, JAKE OF NEW YORK? VISUAL SENSORS INDICATE YOU HAVE COME TO THE END OF YOUR BOOK, WHICH WAS NOT, I MUST SAY, AS GOOD AS I HAD HOPED.”

“Everybody’s a goddam critic,” Susannah said sotto voce. She wiped a tear from the corner of one eye; without looking directly at her, the gunslinger took her free hand. She clasped it tightly.

“Yes, Blaine, I have one more,” Jake said.

“EXCELLENT.”

“Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came sweetness.”

“THIS RIDDLE COMES FROM THE HOLY BOOK KNOWN AS ‘OLD TESTAMENT BIBLE OF KING JAMES.’ ” Blaine sounded

amused, and Jake felt the last of his hope slip away. He thought he might cry—not so much out of fear as frustration. “IT WAS MADE BY SAMSON THE STRONG. THE EATER IS A LION; THE SWEETNESS IS HONEY, MADE BY BEES WHICH HIVED IN THE LION’S SKULL. NEXT? YOU STILL HAVE OVER EIGHTEEN MINUTES, JAKE.”

Jake shook his head. He let go of *Riddle-De-Dum!* and smiled when Oy caught it neatly in his jaws and then stretched his long neck up to Jake, holding it out again. “I’ve told them all. I’m done.”

“SHUCKS, L’IL TRAILHAND, THAT’S A PURE-D SHAME,” Blaine said. Jake found this drawly John Wayne imitation all but unbearable in their current circumstances. “LOOKS LIKE I WIN THAT THAR GOOSE, UNLESS SOMEBODY ELSE CARES TO SPEAK UP. WHAT ABOUT YOU, OY OF MID-WORLD? GOT ANY RIDDLES, MY LITTLE BUMBLER BUDDY?”

“Oy!” the billy-bumbler responded, his voice muffled by the book. Still smiling, Jake took it and sat down next to Roland, who put an arm around him.

“SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK?”

She shook her head, not looking up. She had turned Roland’s hand over in her own, and was gently tracing the healed stumps where his first two fingers had been.

“ROLAND SON OF STEVEN? HAVE YOU REMEMBERED ANY OTHERS FROM THE FAIR-DAY RIDDLINGS OF GILEAD?”

Roland also shook his head . . . and then Jake saw that Eddie Dean was raising his. There was a peculiar smile on Eddie’s face, a peculiar shine in Eddie’s eyes, and Jake found that hope hadn’t deserted him, after all. It suddenly flowered anew in his mind, red and hot and vivid. Like . . . well, like a rose. A rose in the full fever of its summer.

“Blaine?” Eddie asked in a low tone. To Jake his voice sounded queerly choked.

“YES, EDDIE OF NEW YORK.” Unmistakable disdain.

“/ have a couple of riddles,” Eddie said. “Just to pass the time between here and Topeka, you understand.” No, Jake realized, Eddie didn’t sound as if he were choking; he sounded as if he were trying to hold back laughter.

“SPEAK, EDDIE OF NEW YORK.”

3

Sitting and listening to Jake run through the last of his riddles, Eddie had mused on Roland’s tale of the Fair-Day goose. From there his mind had returned to Henry, travelling from Point A to Point B through the magic of associative thinking. Or, if you wanted to get Zen about it, via Trans-Bird Airlines: goose to turkey. He and Henry had once had a discussion about getting off heroin. Henry had claimed that going cold turkey wasn’t the only way; there was also, he said, such a thing as going *cool* turkey. Eddie asked Henry what you called a hype who had just administered a hot shot to himself, and, without missing a beat, Henry had said, *You call that baked turkey*. How they had laughed . . . but now, all this long, strange time later, it looked very much as if the joke was going to be on the younger Dean brother, not to mention the younger Dean brother’s new friends. Looked like they were all going to be baked turkey before much longer.

Unless you can yank it out of the zone.

Yes.

Then do it, Eddie. It was Henry’s voice again, that old resident of his head, but now Henry sounded sober and clear-minded. Henry sounded like his friend instead of his enemy, as if all the old conflicts were finally settled, all the old hatchets buried. *Do it—make the devil*

set himself on fire. It'll hurt a little, maybe, but you've hurt worse. Hell, I hurt you worse myself, and you survived. Survived just fine. And you know where to look.

Of course. In their palaver around the campfire Jake had finally managed to light. Roland had asked the kid a riddle to loosen him up, Jake had struck a spark into the kindling, and then they had all sat around the fire, talking. Talking and riddling.

Eddie knew something else, too. Blaine had answered hundreds of riddles as they ran southeast along the Path of the Beam, and the others believed that he had answered every single one of them without hesitation. Eddie had thought much the same . . . but now, as he cast his mind back over the contest, he realized an interesting thing: Blaine *had* hesitated.

Once.

He was pissed, too. Like Roland was.

The gunslinger, although often exasperated by Eddie, had shown real anger toward him just a single time after the business of carving the key, when Eddie had almost choked. Roland had tried to cover the depth of that anger—make it seem like nothing but more exasperation—but Eddie had sensed what was underneath. He had lived with Henry Dean for a long time, and was still exquisitely attuned to all the negative emotions. It had hurt him, too—not Roland's anger itself, exactly, but the contempt with which it had been laced. Contempt had always been one of Henry's favorite weapons.

Why did the dead baby cross the road? Eddie had asked. Because it was stapled to the chicken, nyuck-nyuck-nyuck!

Later, when Eddie had tried to defend his riddle, arguing that it was tasteless but not pointless, Roland's response had been strangely like Blaine's: *I don't care about taste. It's senseless and unsolvable, and that's what makes it silly. A good riddle is neither.*

But as Jake finished riddling Blaine, Eddie realized a wonderful, liberating thing: that word *good* was up for grabs. Always had been, always would be. Even if the man using it was maybe a thousand years old and could shoot like Buffalo Bill, that word was still up for grabs. Roland himself had admitted he had never been very good at the riddling game. His tutor claimed that Roland thought too deeply; his father thought it was lack of imagination. Whatever the reason, Roland of Gilead had never won a Fair-Day riddling. He had survived all his contemporaries, and that was certainly a prize of sorts, but he had never carried home a prize goose. *I could always haul a gun faster than any of my mates, but I've never been much good at thinking around corners.*

Eddie remembered trying to tell Roland that jokes were riddles designed to help you build up that often overlooked talent, but Roland had ignored him. The way, Eddie supposed, a color-blind person would ignore someone's description of a rainbow.

Eddie thought Blaine also might have trouble thinking around corners.

He realized he could hear Blaine asking the others if they had any more riddles—even asking Oy. He could hear the mockery in Blaine's voice, could hear it very well. Sure he could. Because he was coming back. Back from that fabled zone. Back to see if he could talk the devil into setting himself on fire. No gun would help this time, but maybe that was all right. Maybe that was all right because

Because I shoot with my mind. My mind. God help me to shoot this overblown calculator with my mind. Help me shoot it from around the corner.

"Blaine?" he said, and then, when the computer had acknowledged him: "*I have a couple of riddles.*" As he spoke, he discovered a wonderful thing: he was struggling to hold back laughter.

“SPEAK, EDDIE OF NEW YORK.”

No time to tell the others to be on their guard, that anything might happen, and from the look of them, no need, either. Eddie forgot about them and turned his full attention to Blaine.

“What has four wheels and flies?”

“THE TOWN GARBAGE WAGON, AS I HAVE ALREADY SAID.” Disapproval—and dislike? Yeah, probably—all but oozing out of that voice. “ARE YOU SO STUPID OR INATTENTIVE THAT YOU DO NOT REMEMBER? IT WAS THE FIRST RIDDLE YOU ASKED ME.”

Yes, Eddie thought. *And what we all missed—because we were fixated on stumping you with some brain-buster out of Roland’s past or Jake’s book—is that the contest almost ended right there.*

“You didn’t like that one, did you, Blaine?”

“I FOUND IT EXCEEDINGLY STUPID,” Blaine agreed. “PERHAPS THAT’S WHY YOU ASKED IT AGAIN. LIKE CALLS TO LIKE, EDDIE OF NEW YORK, IS IT NOT SO?”

A smile lit Eddie’s face; he shook his finger at the route-map. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Or, as we used to say back in the neighborhood, ‘You can rank me to the dogs and back, but I’ll never lose the hard-on I use to fuck your mother.’ ”

“Hurry up!” Jake whispered at him. “If you can do something, *do it!*”

“It doesn’t like silly questions,” Eddie said. “It doesn’t like silly games. And we *knew* that. We knew it from *Charlie the Choo-Choo*. How stupid can you get? Hell, *that* was the book with the answers, not *Riddle-De-Dum*, but we never saw it.”

Eddie searched for the other riddle that had been in Jake's Final Essay, found it, posed it.

"Blaine: when is a door not a door?"

Once again, for the first time since Susannah had asked Blaine what had four legs and flies, there came a peculiar clicking sound, like a man popping his tongue on the roof of his mouth. The pause was briefer than the one which had followed Susannah's opening riddle, but it was still there—Eddie heard it. "WHEN IT'S A JAR, OF COURSE," Blaine said. He sounded dour, unhappy. "THIRTEEN MINUTES AND FIVE SECONDS REMAIN BEFORE TERMINATION, EDDIE OF NEW YORK—WOULD YOU DIE WITH SUCH STUPID RIDDLES IN YOUR MOUTH?"

Eddie sat bolt upright, staring at the route-map, and although he could feel warm trickles of sweat running down his back, that smile on his face widened.

"Quit your whining, pal. If you want the privilege of smearing us all over the landscape, you'll just have to put up with a few riddles that aren't quite up to your standards of logic."

"YOU MUST NOT SPEAK TO ME IN SUCH A MANNER."

"Or what? You'll kill me? Don't make me laugh. Just play. You agreed to the game; now play it."

Thin pink light flashed briefly out of the route-map. "You're making him angry," Little Blaine mourned. "Oh, you're making him so angry."

"Get lost, squirt," Eddie said, not unkindly, and when the pink glow receded, once again revealing a flashing green dot that was almost on top of Topeka, Eddie said: "Answer this one, Blaine: the big moron and the little moron were standing on the bridge over the River Send. The big moron fell off. How come the little moron didn't fall off, too?"

“THAT IS UNWORTHY OF OUR CONTEST. I WILL NOT ANSWER.” On the last word Blaine’s voice actually dropped into a lower register, making him sound like a fourteen-year-old coping with a change of voice.

Roland’s eyes were not just gleaming now but blazing. “What do you say, Blaine? I would understand you well. Are you saying that you cry off?”

“NO! OF COURSE NOT! BUT—”

“Then answer, if you can. Answer the riddle.”

“IT’S NOT A RIDDLE!” Blaine almost bleated. “IT’S A JOKE, SOMETHING FOR STUPID CHILDREN TO CACKLE OVER IN THE PLAY YARD!”

“Answer now or I declare the contest over and our *ka-tet* the winner,” Roland said. He spoke in the dryly confident tone of authority Eddie had first heard in the town of River Crossing. “You must answer, for it is stupidity you complain of, not transgression of the rules, which we agreed upon mutually.”

Another of those clicking sounds, but this time it was much louder—so loud, in fact, that Eddie winced. Oy flattened his ears against his skull. It was followed by the longest pause yet; three seconds, at least. Then: “THE LITTLE MORON DID NOT FALL OFF BECAUSE HE WAS A LITTLE MORE ON.” Blaine sounded sulky. “MORE PHONETIC COINCIDENCE. TO EVEN ANSWER SUCH AN UNWORTHY RIDDLE MAKES ME FEEL SOILED.”

Eddie held up his right hand. He rubbed the thumb and forefinger together.

“WHAT DOES THAT SIGNIFY, FOOLISH CREATURE?”

“It’s the world’s smallest violin, playing ‘My Heart Pumps Purple Piss for You,’ ” Eddie said. Jake fell into an uncontrollable fit of

laughter. “But never mind the cheap New York humor; back to the contest. Why do police lieutenants wear belts?”

The lights in the Barony Coach began to flicker. An odd thing was happening to the walls, as well; they began to fade in and out of true, lunging toward transparency, perhaps, and then opaquing again. Seeing this phenomenon even out of the corner of his eye made Eddie feel a bit whoopsy.

“Blaine? Answer.”

“Answer,” Roland agreed. “Answer, or I declare the contest at an end and hold you to your promise.”

Something touched Eddie’s elbow. He looked down and saw Susannah’s small and shapely hand. He took it, squeezed it, smiled at her. He hoped the smile was more confident than the man making it felt. They were going to win the contest—he was almost sure of that—but he had no idea what Blaine would do if and when they did.

“TO . . . TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS?” Blaine’s voice firmed, and repeated the question as a statement. “TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS. A RIDDLE BASED UPON THE EXAGGERATED SIMPLICITY OF—”

“Right. Good one, Blaine, but never mind trying to kill time—it won’t work. Next—”

“I INSIST YOU STOP ASKING THESE SILLY—”

“Then stop the mono,” Eddie said. “If you’re that upset, stop right here, and I will.”

“NO.”

“Okay, then, on we go. What’s Irish and stays out in back of the house, even in the rain?”

There was another of those clicks, this time so loud it felt like having a blunt spike driven against his eardrum. A pause of five seconds. Now the flashing green dot on the route-map was so close to Topeka that it lit the word like neon each time it flashed. Then: “PADDY O’FURNITURE.”

The correct answer to a joke-riddle Eddie had first heard in the alley behind Dahlie’s, or at some similar gathering-point, but Blaine had apparently paid a price for forcing his mind into a channel that could conceive it: the Barony Coach lights were flashing more wildly than ever, and Eddie could hear a low humming from inside the walls—the kind of sound your stereo amp made just before its shit blew up.

Pink light stuttered from the route-map. “Stop!” Little Blaine cried, his voice so wavery it sounded like the voice of a character from an old Warner Bros. cartoon. “Stop it, you’re killing him!”

What do you think he’s trying to do to us, squirt? Eddie thought.

He considered shooting Blaine one Jake had told while they’d been sitting around the campfire that night—What’s green, weighs a hundred tons, and lives at the bottom of the ocean? Moby Snot!—and then didn’t. He wanted to stick further inside the bounds of logic than that one allowed . . . and he could do it. He didn’t think he would have to get much more surreal than the level of, say, a third-grader with a fair-to-good collection of Garbage Pail Kids cards in order to fuck Blaine up royally . . . and permanently. Because no matter how many emotions his fancy dipolar circuits had allowed him to mimic, *he* was still an *it*—a computer. Even following Eddie this far into riddledom’s Twilight Zone had caused Blaine’s sanity to totter.

“Why do people go to bed, Blaine?”

“BECAUSE . . . BECAUSE . . . GODS DAMN YOU, BECAUSE . . .”

A low squalling started up from beneath them, and suddenly the Barony Coach swayed violently from right to left. Susannah screamed. Jake was thrown into her lap. The gunslinger grabbed them both.

“BECAUSE THE BED WON’T COME TO THEM, GODS DAMN YOU! NINE MINUTES AND FIFTY SECONDS!”

“Give up, Blaine,” Eddie said. “Stop before I have to blow your mind completely. If you don’t quit, it’s going to happen. We both know it.”

“NO!”

“I got a million of these puppies. Been hearing them my whole life. They stick to my mind the way flies stick to flypaper. Hey, with some people it’s recipes. So what do you say? Want to give?”

“NO! NINE MINUTES AND THIRTY SECONDS!”

“Okay, Blaine. You asked for it. Here comes the cruncher. Why did the dead baby cross the road?”

The mono took another of those gigantic lurches; Eddie didn’t understand how it could still stay on its track after that, but somehow it did. The screaming from beneath them grew louder; the walls, floor, and ceiling of the car began to cycle madly between opacity and transparency. At one moment they were enclosed, at the next they were rushing over a gray daylight landscape that stretched flat and featureless to a horizon which ran across the world in a straight line.

The voice which came from the speakers was now that of a panicky child: “I KNOW IT, JUST A MOMENT, I KNOW IT, RETRIEVAL IN PROGRESS, ALL LOGIC CIRCUITS IN USE—”

“Answer,” Roland said.

“I NEED MORE TIME! YOU MUST GIVE IT TO ME!” Now there was a kind of cracked triumph in that splintered voice. “NO TEMPORAL LIMITS FOR ANSWERING WERE SET, ROLAND OF GILEAD, HATEFUL GUNSLINGER OUT OF A PAST THAT SHOULD HAVE STAYED DEAD!”

“No,” Roland agreed, “no time limits were set, you are quite right. But you may not kill us with a riddle still unanswered, Blaine, and Topeka draws nigh. Answer!”

The Barony Coach cycled into invisibility again, and Eddie saw what appeared to be a tall and rusty grain elevator go flashing past; it was in his view barely long enough for him to identify it. Now he fully appreciated the maniacal speed at which they were travelling; perhaps three hundred miles faster than a commercial jet at cruising speed.

“Let him alone!” moaned the voice of Little Blaine. “You’re killing him, I say! *Killing him!*”

“Isn’t that ’bout what he wanted?” Susannah asked in the voice of Detta Walker. “To die? That’s what he said. We don’t mind, either. You not so bad, Little Blaine, but even a world as fucked up as this one has to be better with your big brother gone. It’s just him takin us with him we been objectin to all this time.”

“Last chance,” Roland said. “Answer or give up the goose, Blaine.”

“I . . . I . . . YOU . . . SIXTEEN LOG THIRTY-THREE . . . ALL COSINE SUBSCRIPTS . . . ANTI . . . ANTI . . . IN ALL THESE YEARS . . . BEAM . . . FLOOD . . . PYTHAGOREAN . . . CARTESIAN LOGIC . . . CAN I . . . DARE I . . . A PEACH . . . EAT A PEACH . . . ALLMAN BROTHERS . . . PATRICIA . . . CROCODILE AND WHIPLASH SMILE . . . CLOCK OF DIALS . . . TICK-TOCK, ELEVEN O’CLOCK, THE MAN’S IN THE MOON AND HE’S READY TO ROCK . . . *INCESSAMENT . . . INCESSAMENT, MON CHER . . .* OH MY HEAD . . . BLAINE . . . BLAINE DARES . . . BLAINE WILL ANSWER . . . I . . .”

Blaine, now screaming in the voice of an infant, lapsed into some other language and began to sing. Eddie thought it was French. He knew none of the words, but when the drums kicked in, he knew the song perfectly well: “Velcro Fly” by Z.Z. Top.

The glass over the route-map blew out. A moment later, the route-map itself exploded from its socket, revealing twinkling lights and a maze of circuit-boards behind it. The lights pulsed in time to the drums. Suddenly blue fire flashed out, sizzling the surface around the hole in the wall where the map had been, scorching it black. From deeper within that wall, toward Blaine’s blunt, bullet-shaped snout, came a thick grinding noise.

“It crossed the road because it was stapled to the chicken, you dopey fuck!” Eddie yelled. He got to his feet and started to walk toward the smoking hole where the route-map had been. Susannah grabbed at the back of his shirt, but Eddie barely felt it. Barely knew where he was, in fact. The battle-fire had dropped over him, burning him everywhere with its righteous heat, sizzling his sight, frying his synapses and roasting his heart in its holy glow. He had Blaine in his sights, and although the thing behind the voice was already mortally wounded, he was unable to stop squeezing the trigger: *I shoot with my mind.*

“What’s the difference between a truckload of bowling balls and a truckload of dead woodchucks?” Eddie raved. “You can’t unload a truckload of bowling balls with a pitchfork!”

A terrible shriek of mingled anger and agony issued from the hole where the route-map had been. It was followed by a gust of blue fire, as if somewhere forward of the Barony Coach an electric dragon had exhaled violently. Jake called a warning, but Eddie didn’t need it; his reflexes had been replaced with razor-blades. He ducked, and the burst of electricity went over his right shoulder, making the hair on that side of his neck stand up. He drew the gun he wore—a heavy .45 with a worn sandalwood grip, one of two revolvers which Roland had brought out of Mid-World’s ruin. He kept walking as he bore down on the front of the coach . . . and of course he kept talking. As

Roland had said, Eddie would *die* talking. As his old friend Cuthbert had done. Eddie could think of many worse ways to go, and only one better.

“Say, Blaine, you ugly, sadistic fuck! Since we’re talking riddles, what is the greatest riddle of the Orient? Many men smoke but Fu Manchu! Get it? No? So sorry, Cholly! How about this one? Why’d the woman name her son Seven and a Half? Because she drew his name out of a hat!”

He had reached the pulsing square. Now he lifted Roland’s gun and the Barony Coach suddenly filled with its thunder. He put all six rounds into the hole, fanning the hammer with the flat of his hand in the way Roland had shown them, knowing only that this was right, this was proper . . . this was *ka*, goddammit, fucking *ka*, it was the way you ended things if you were a gunslinger. He was one of Roland’s tribe, all right, his soul was probably damned to the deepest pit of hell, and he wouldn’t have changed it for all the heroin in Asia.

“I HATE YOU!” Blaine cried in his childish voice. The splinters were gone from it now; it was growing soft, mushy. “I HATE YOU FOREVER!”

“It’s not dying that bothers you, is it?” Eddie asked. The lights in the hole where the route-map had been were fading. More blue fire flashed, but he hardly had to pull his head back to avoid it; the flame was small and weak. Soon Blaine would be as dead as all the Pubes and Grays in Lud. “It’s *losing* that bothers you.”

“HATE . . . FORRRRrrrrr . . .”

The word degenerated into a hum. The hum became a kind of stuttery thudding sound. Then it was gone.

Eddie looked around. Roland was there, holding Susannah with one arm curved around her butt, as one might hold a child. Her thighs clasped his waist. Jake stood on the gunslinger’s other side, with Oy at his heel.

Drifting out of the hole where the route-map had been was a peculiar charred smell, somehow not unpleasant. To Eddie it smelled like burning leaves in October. Otherwise, the hole was as dead and dark as a corpse's eye. All the lights in there had gone out.

Your goose is cooked, Blaine, Eddie thought, *and your turkey's baked. Happy fuckin Thanksgiving.*

5

The shrieking from beneath the mono stopped. There was one final, grinding thud from up front, and then those sounds ceased, too. Roland felt his legs and hips sway gently forward and put out his free hand to steady himself. His body knew what had happened before his head did: Blaine's engines had quit. They were now simply gliding forward along the track. But—

"Back," he said. "All the way. We're coasting. If we're close enough to Blaine's termination point, we may still crash."

He led them past the puddled remains of Blaine's welcoming ice sculpture and to the back of the coach. "And stay away from that thing," he said, pointing at the instrument which looked like a cross between a piano and a harpsichord. It stood on a small platform. "It may shift. Gods, I wish we could see where we are! Lie down. Wrap your arms over your heads."

They did as he told them. Roland did the same. He lay there with his chin pressing into the nap of the royal blue carpet, eyes shut, thinking about what had just happened.

"I cry your pardon, Eddie," he said. "How the wheel of *ka* turns! Once I had to ask the same of my friend Cuthbert . . . and for the same reason. There's a kind of blindness in me. An *arrogant* blindness."

"I hardly think there's any need of pardon-crying," Eddie said. He sounded uncomfortable.

“There is. I held your jokes in contempt. Now they have saved our lives. I cry your pardon. I have forgotten the face of my father.”

“You don’t need any pardon and you didn’t forget anybody’s face,” Eddie said. “You can’t help your nature, Roland.”

The gunslinger considered this carefully, and discovered something which was wonderful and awful at the same time: that idea had never occurred to him. Not once in his whole life. That he was a captive of *ka*—this he had known since earliest childhood. But his *nature* . . . his very *nature* . . .

“Thank you, Eddie. I think—”

Before Roland could say what he thought, Blaine the Mono crashed to a final bitter halt. All four of them were thrown violently up the Barony Coach’s central aisle, Oy in Jake’s arms and barking. The cabin’s front wall buckled and Roland struck it shoulder-first. Even with the padding (the wall was carpeted and, from the feel, undercoated with some resilient stuff), the blow was hard enough to numb him. The chandelier swung forward and tore loose from the ceiling, pelting them with glass pendants. Jake rolled aside, vacating its landing-zone just in time. The harpsichord-piano flew off its podium, struck one of the sofas, and overturned, coming to rest with a discordant *brrrannnggg* sound. The mono tilted to the right and the gunslinger braced himself, meaning to cover both Jake and Susannah with his own body if it overturned completely. Then it settled back, the floor still a little canted, but at rest.

The trip was over.

The gunslinger raised himself up. His shoulder was still numb, but the arm below it supported him, and that was a good sign. On his left, Jake was sitting up and picking glass beads out of his lap with a dazed expression. On his right, Susannah was dabbing a cut under Eddie’s left eye. “All right,” Roland said. “Who’s hur—”

There was an explosion from above them, a hollow *Pow!* that reminded Roland of the big-bangers Cuthbert and Alain had sometimes lit and tossed down drains, or into the privies behind the scullery for a prank. And once Cuthbert had shot some big-bangers with his sling. That had been no prank, no childish folly. That had been—

Susannah uttered a short cry—more of surprise than fear, the gunslinger thought—and then hazy daylight was shining down on his face. It felt good. The taste of the air coming in through the blown emergency exit was even better—sweet with the smell of rain and damp earth.

There was a bony rattle, and a ladder—it appeared to be equipped with rungs made of twisted steel wire—dropped out of a slot up there.

“First they throw the chandelier at you, then they show you the door,” Eddie said. He struggled to his feet, then got Susannah up. “Okay, I know when I’m not wanted. Let’s make like bees and buzz off.”

“Sounds good to me.” She reached toward the cut on Eddie’s face again. Eddie took her fingers, kissed them, and told her to stop poking the moichandise.

“Jake?” the gunslinger asked. “Okay?”

“Yes,” Jake said. “What about you, Oy?”

“Oy!”

“Guess he is,” Jake said. He raised his wounded hand and looked at it ruefully.

“Hurting again, is it?” the gunslinger asked.

“Yeah. Whatever Blaine did to it is wearing off. I don’t care, though—I’m just glad to still be alive.”

“Yes. Life is good. So is *astin*. There’s some of it left.”

“Aspirin, you mean.”

Roland nodded. A pill of magical properties, but one of the words from Jake’s world he would never be able to say correctly.

“Nine out of ten doctors recommend Anacin, honey,” Susannah said, and when Jake only looked at her quizzically: “Guess they don’t use that one anymore in your when, huh? Doesn’t matter. We’re here, sugarpie, right here and just fine, and that’s what matters.” She pulled Jake into her arms and gave him a kiss between the eyes, on the nose, and then flush on the mouth. Jake laughed and blushed bright red. “That’s what matters, and right now that’s the only thing in the world that does.”

6

“First aid can wait,” Eddie said. He put his arm around Jake’s shoulders and led the boy to the ladder. “Can you use that hand to climb with?”

“Yes. But I can’t bring Oy. Roland, will you?”

“Yes.” Roland picked Oy up and tucked him into his shirt as he had while descending a shaft under the city in pursuit of Jake and Gasher. Oy peeked out at Jake with his bright, gold-ringed eyes. “Up you go.”

Jake climbed. Roland followed close enough so that Oy could sniff the kid’s heels by stretching out his long neck.

“Suze?” Eddie asked. “Need a boost?”

“And get your nasty hands all over my well-turned fanny? Not likely, white boy!” Then she dropped him a wink and began to climb, pulling herself up easily with her muscular arms and balancing with the stumps of her legs. She went fast, but not too fast for Eddie; he reached up and gave her a soft pinch where the pinching was good. “Oh, my purity!” Susannah cried, laughing and rolling her eyes. Then she was gone. Only Eddie was left, standing by the foot of the ladder and looking around at the luxury coach which he had believed might well be their *ka-tet*’s coffin.

You did it, kiddo, Henry said. Made him set himself on fire. I knew you could, fuckin-A. Remember when I said that to those scag-bags behind Dahlie’s? Jimmie Polio and those guys? And how they laughed? But you did it. Sent him home with a fuckin rupture.

Well, it worked, anyway, Eddie thought, and touched the butt of Roland’s gun without even being aware of it. Well enough for us to walk away one more time.

He climbed two rungs, then looked back down. The Barony Coach already felt dead. *Long* dead, in fact, just another artifact of a world that had moved on.

“*Adios, Blaine,*” Eddie said. “So long, partner.”

And he followed his friends out through the emergency exit in the roof.

CHAPTER IV

TOPEKA

1

Jake stood on the slightly tilted roof of Blaine the Mono, looking southeast along the Path of the Beam. The wind riffled his hair (now quite long and decidedly un-Piperish) back from his temples and forehead in waves. His eyes were wide with surprise.

He didn't know what he had expected to see—a smaller and more provincial version of Lud, perhaps—but what he had *not* expected was what loomed above the trees of a nearby park. It was a green roadsign (against the dull gray autumn sky, it almost screamed with color) with a blue shield mounted on it:



Roland joined him, lifted Oy gently out of his shirt, and put him down. The bumbler sniffed the pink surface of Blaine's roof, then looked toward the front of the mono. Here the train's smooth bullet shape was broken by crumpled metal which had peeled back in jagged wings. Two dark slashes—they began at the mono's tip and extended to a point about ten yards from where Jake and Roland stood—gored the roof in parallel lines. At the end of each was a wide, flat metal pole painted in stripes of yellow and black. These seemed to jut from the top of the mono at a point just forward of the Barony Coach. To Jake they looked a little like football goalposts.

"Those are the piers he talked about hitting," Susannah murmured.

Roland nodded.

“We got off lucky, big boy, you know it? If this thing had been going much faster . . .”

“*Ka*,” Eddie said from behind them. He sounded as if he might be smiling.

Roland nodded. “Just so. *Ka*.”

Jake dismissed the transteel goalposts and turned back toward the sign. He was half-convinced it would be gone, or that it would say something else (MID-WORLD TOLL ROAD, perhaps, or BEWARE OF DEMONS), but it was still there and still said the same thing.

“Eddie? Susannah? Do you see that?”

They looked along his pointing finger. For a moment—one long enough for Jake to fear he was having a hallucination—neither of them said anything. Then, softly, Eddie said: “Holy shit. Are we back home? If we are, where are all the people? And if something like Blaine has been stopping off in Topeka—*our* Topeka, Topeka, Kansas—how come I haven’t seen anything about it on *Sixty Minutes*?”

“What’s *Sixty Minutes*?” Susannah asked. She was shading her eyes, looking southeast toward the sign.

“TV show,” Eddie said. “You missed it by five or ten years. Old white guys in ties. Doesn’t matter. That sign—”

“It’s Kansas, all right,” Susannah said. “*Our* Kansas. I guess.” She had spotted another sign, just visible over the trees. Now she pointed until Jake, Eddie, and Roland had all seen it:



“There a Kansas in your world, Roland?”

“No,” Roland replied, looking at the signs, “we’re far beyond the boundaries of the world I knew. I was far beyond most of the world I knew long before I met you three. This place . . .”

He stopped and cocked his head to one side, as if he was listening to some sound almost too distant to hear. And the expression on his face . . . Jake didn’t like it much.

“Say, kiddies!” Eddie said brightly. “Today we’re studying Wacky Geography in Mid-World. You see, boys and girls, in Mid-World you start in New York, travel southeast to Kansas, and then continue along the Path of the Beam until you come to the Dark Tower . . . which happens to be smack in the middle of everything. First, fight the giant lobsters! Next, ride the psychotic train! And then, after a visit to our snackbar for a popkin or two—”

“Do you hear anything?” Roland broke in. “Any of you?”

Jake listened. He heard the wind combing through the trees of the nearby park—their leaves had just begun to turn—and he heard the click of Oy’s toenails as he strolled back toward them along the roof of the Barony Coach. Then Oy stopped, so even that sound—

A hand seized him by the arm, making him jump. It was Susannah. Her head was tilted, her eyes wide. Eddie was also listening. Oy, too; his ears were up and he was whining far down in his throat.

Jake felt his arms ripple with gooseflesh. At the same time he felt his mouth tighten in a grimace. The sound, though very faint, was the auditory version of biting a lemon. And he’d heard something like it before. Back when he was only five or six, there had been a crazy guy in Central Park who thought he was a musician . . . well, there were *lots* of crazy guys in Central Park who thought they were musicians, but this was the only one Jake had ever seen who played a workshop tool. The guy had had a sign beside his upturned hat which read WORLD’S GREATEST SAW-PLAYER! SOUNDS HAWAIIAN DOESN’T IT! PLEASE CONTRIBUTE TO MY WELFARE!

Greta Shaw had been with Jake the first time he encountered the saw-player, and Jake remembered how she had hurried past the guy. Just sitting there like a cellist in a symphony orchestra he'd been, only with a rust-speckled handsaw spread across his open legs; Jake remembered the expression of comic horror on Mrs. Shaw's face, and the quiver of her pressed-together lips, as if—yes, as if she'd just bitten into a lemon.

This sound wasn't *exactly* like the one

(SOUNDS HAWAIIAN DOESN'T IT)

the guy in the park had made by vibrating the blade of his saw, but it was close: a wavery, trembly, metallic sound that made you feel like your sinuses were filling up and your eyes would shortly begin to gush water. Was it coming from ahead of them? Jake couldn't tell. It seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere; at the same time, it was so low he might have been tempted to believe the whole thing was just his imagination, if the others hadn't—

"Watch out!" Eddie cried. "Help me, you guys! I think he's going to faint!"

Jake wheeled toward the gunslinger and saw that his face had gone as white as cottage cheese above the dusty no-color of his shirt. His eyes were wide and blank. One corner of his mouth twitched spastically, as if an invisible fishhook were buried there.

"Jonas and Reynolds and Depape," he said. "The Big Coffin Hunters. And *her*. The Cöos. They were the ones. They were the ones who—"

Standing on the roof of the mono in his dusty, broken boots, Roland tottered. On his face was the greatest look of misery Jake had ever seen.

"Oh Susan," he said. "Oh, my dear."

They caught him, they formed a protective ring around him, and the gunslinger felt hot with guilt and self-loathing. What had he done to deserve such enthusiastic protectors? What, besides tear them out of their known and ordinary lives as ruthlessly as a man might tear weeds out of his garden?

He tried to tell them he was all right, they could stand back, he was fine, but no words would come out; that terrible wavery sound had transported him back to the box canyon west of Hambry all those years ago. Depape and Reynolds and old limping Jonas. Yet most of all it was the woman from the hill he hated, and from black depths of feeling only a very young man can reach. Ah, but how could he have done aught else but hate them? His heart had been broken. And now, all these years later, it seemed to him that the most horrible fact of human existence was that broken hearts mended.

My first thought was, he lied in every word/That hoary cripple, with malicious eye . . .

What words? Whose poem?

He didn't know, but he knew that women could lie, too; women who hopped and grinned and saw too much from the corners of their rheumy old eyes. It didn't matter who had written the lines of poesy; the words were true words, and that was all that mattered. Neither Eldred Jonas nor the crone on the hill had been of Marten's stature—nor even of Walter's—when it came to evil, but they had been evil enough.

Then, after . . . in the box canyon west of town . . . that sound . . . that, and the screams of wounded men and horses . . . for once in his life, even the normally voluble Cuthbert had been struck silent.

But all that had been long ago, in another *when*; in the here and now, the warbling sound was either gone or had temporarily fallen

below the threshold of audibility. They would hear it again, though. He knew that as well as he knew the fact that he walked a road leading to damnation.

He looked up at the others and managed a smile. The trembling at the corner of his mouth had quit, and that was something.

“I’m all right,” he said. “But hear me well: this is very close to where Mid-World ends, very close to where End-World begins. The first great course of our quest is finished. We have done well; we have remembered the faces of our fathers; we have stood together and been true to one another. But now we have come to a thinny. We must be very careful.”

“A thinny?” Jake asked, looking around nervously.

“Places where the fabric of existence is almost entirely worn away. There are more since the force of the Dark Tower began to fail. Do you remember what we saw below us when we left Lud?”

They nodded solemnly, remembering ground which had fused to black glass, ancient pipes which gleamed with turquoise witchlight, misshapen bird-freaks with wings like great leathern sails. Roland suddenly could not bear to have them grouped around him as they were, looking down on him as folk might look down on a rowdy who had fallen in a barroom brawl.

He lifted his hands to his friends—his new friends. Eddie took them and helped him to his feet. The gunslinger fixed his enormous will on not swaying and stood steady.

“Who was Susan?” Susannah asked. The crease down the center of her forehead suggested she was troubled, and probably by more than a coincidental similarity of names.

Roland looked at her, then at Eddie, then at Jake, who had dropped to one knee so he could scratch behind Oy’s ears.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, “but this isn’t the place or time.”

“You keep sayin that,” Susannah said. “You wouldn’t just be putting us off again, would you?”

Roland shook his head. “You shall hear my tale—this part of it, at least—but not on top of this metal carcass.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Being up here is like playing on a dead dinosaur or something. I keep thinking Blaine’s going to come back to life and start, I don’t know, screwing around with our heads again.”

“That sound is gone,” Eddie said. “The thing that sounded like a wah-wah pedal.”

“It reminded me of this old guy I used to see in Central Park,” Jake said.

“The man with the saw?” Susannah asked. Jake looked up at her, his eyes round with surprise, and she nodded. “Only he wasn’t old when I used to see him. It’s not just the geography that’s wacky here. Time’s kind of funny, too.”

Eddie put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief squeeze. “Amen to that.”

Susannah turned to Roland. Her look was not accusing, but there was a level and open measurement in her eyes that the gunslinger could not help but admire. “I’m holding you to your promise, Roland. I want to know about this girl that got my name.”

“You shall hear,” Roland repeated. “For now, though, let’s get off this monster’s back.”

3

That was easier said than done. Blaine had come to rest slightly askew in an outdoor version of the Cradle of Lud (a littered trail of

torn pink metal lay along one side of this, marking the end of Blaine's last journey), and it was easily twenty-five feet from the roof of the Barony Coach to the cement. If there was a descent-ladder, like the one which had popped conveniently through the emergency hatch, it had jammed when they crunched to a halt.

Roland unslung his purse, rummaged, and removed the deerskin harness they used for carrying Susannah when the going got too rough for her wheelchair. The chair, at least, would not worry them anymore, the gunslinger reflected; they had left it behind in their mad scramble to board Blaine.

"What you want that for?" Susannah asked truculently. She always sounded truculent when the harness came into view. *I hate them honky mahfahs down in Miss'ippi worse'n I hate that harness*, she had once told Eddie in the voice of Detta Walker, *but sometimes it be a close thing, sugar*.

"Soft, Susannah Dean, soft," the gunslinger said, smiling a little. He unbraided the network of straps which made up the harness, set the seat-piece aside, then pigtailed the straps back together. He wedded this to his last good hank of rope with an old-fashioned sheetbend knot. As he worked, he listened for the warbling of the thinny . . . as the four of them had listened for the god-drums; as he and Eddie had listened for the lobsterstrosities to begin asking their lawyerly questions ("Dad-a-cham? Did-a-chee? Dum-a-chum?") as they came tumbling out of the waves each night.

Ka is a wheel, he thought. Or, as Eddie liked to say, whatever went around came around.

When the rope was finished, he fashioned a loop at the bottom of the braided section. Jake stepped a foot into it with perfect confidence, gripped the rope with one hand, and settled Oy into the crook of his other arm. Oy looked around nervously, whined, stretched his neck, licked Jake's face.

"You're not afraid, are you?" Jake asked the bumbler.

“ 'Fraid,” Oy agreed, but he was quiet enough as Roland and Eddie lowered Jake down the side of the Barony Coach. The rope wasn't quite long enough to take him all the way down, but Jake had no trouble twisting his foot free and dropping the last four feet. He set Oy down. The bumbler trotted off, sniffing, and lifted his leg against the side of the terminal building. This was nowhere near as grand as the Cradle of Lud, but it had an old-fashioned look that Roland liked—white boards, overhanging eaves, high, narrow windows, what looked like slate shingles. It was a *Western* look. Written in gold gilt on a sign which stretched above the terminal's line of doors was this message:

ATCHISON, TOPEKA, AND SANTA FE

Towns, Roland supposed, and that last one sounded familiar to him; had there not been a Santa Fe in the Barony of Mejis? But that led back toward Susan, lovely Susan at the window with her hair unbraided and all down her back, the smell of her like jasmine and rose and honeysuckle and old sweet hay, smells of which the oracle in the mountains had been able to make only the palest mimicry. Susan lying back and looking solemnly up at him, then smiling and putting her hands behind her head so that her breasts rose, as if aching for his hands.

If you love me, Roland, then love me . . . bird and bear and hare and fish . . .

“. . . next?”

He looked around at Eddie, having to use all of his will to pull himself back from Susan Delgado's when. There were thinnies here in Topeka, all right, and of many sorts. “My mind was wandering, Eddie. Cry your pardon.”

“Susannah next? That's what I asked.”

Roland shook his head. “You next, then Susannah. I'll go last.”

“Will you be okay? With your hand and all?”

“I’ll be fine.”

Eddie nodded and stuck his foot into the loop. When Eddie had first come into Mid-World, Roland could have lowered him easily by himself, two fingers short the full complement or no, but Eddie had been without his drug for months now, and had put on ten or fifteen pounds of muscle. Roland accepted Susannah’s help gladly enough, and together they lowered him down.

“Now you, lady,” Roland said, and smiled at her. It felt more natural to smile these days.

“Yes.” But for the nonce she only stood there, biting her lower lip.

“What is it?”

Her hand went to her stomach and rubbed there, as if it ached or griped her. He thought she would speak, but she shook her head and said, “Nothing.”

“I don’t believe that. Why do you rub your belly? Are you hurt? Were you hurt when we stopped?”

She took her hand off her tunic as if the flesh just south of her navel had grown hot. “No. I’m fine.”

“Are you?”

Susannah seemed to think this over very carefully. “We’ll talk,” she said at last. “We’ll *palaver*, if you like that better. But you were right before, Roland—this isn’t the place or time.”

“All four of us, or just you and me and Eddie?”

“Just you and me, Roland,” she said, and poked the stump of her leg through the loop. “Just one hen and one rooster, at least to start with. Now lower away, if you please.”

He did, frowning down at her, hoping with all his heart that his first idea—the one that had come to mind as soon as he saw that restlessly rubbing hand—was wrong. Because she had been in the speaking ring, and the demon that denned there had had its way with her while Jake was trying to cross between the worlds. Sometimes—*often*—demonic contact changed things.

Never for the better, in Roland's experience.

He pulled his rope back up after Eddie had caught Susannah around the waist and helped her to the platform. The gunslinger walked forward to one of the piers which had torn through the train's bullet snout, fashioning the rope's end into a shake-loop as he went. He tossed this over the pier, snubbed it (being careful not to twitch the rope to the left), and then lowered himself to the platform himself, bent at the waist and leaving boot-tracks on Blaine's pink side.

"Too bad to lose the rope and harness," Eddie remarked when Roland was beside them.

"/ ain't sorry about that harness," Susannah said. "I'd rather crawl along the pavement until I got chewin-gum all the way up my arms to the elbows."

"We haven't lost anything," Roland said. He snugged his hand into the rawhide foot-loop and snapped it hard to the left. The rope slithered down from the pier, Roland gathering it in almost as fast as it came down.

"Neat trick!" Jake said.

"Eat! Rick!" Oy agreed.

"Cort?" Eddie asked.

"Cort," Roland agreed, smiling.

“The drill instructor from hell,” Eddie said. “Better you than me, Roland. Better you than me.”

4

As they walked toward the doors leading into the station, that low, liquid warbling sound began again. Roland was amused to see all three of his cohorts wrinkle their noses and pull down the corners of their mouths at the same time; it made them look like blood family as well as *ka-tet*. Susannah pointed toward the park. The signs looming over the trees were wavering slightly, the way things did in a heat-haze.

“Is that from the thinny?” Jake asked.

Roland nodded.

“Will we be able to get around it?”

“Yes. Thinnies are dangerous in much the way that swamps full of quicksand and saligs are dangerous. Do you know those things?”

“We know quicksand,” Jake said. “And if saligs are long green things with big teeth, we know them, too.”

“That’s what they are.”

Susannah turned to look back at Blaine one last time. “No silly questions and no silly games. The book was right about that.” From Blaine she turned her eyes to Roland. “What about Beryl Evans, the woman who wrote *Charlie the Choo-Choo*? Do you think she’s part of this? That we might even meet her? I’d like to thank her. Eddie figured it out, but—”

“It’s possible, I suppose,” Roland said, “but on measure, I think not. My world is like a huge ship that sank near enough shore for most of the wreckage to wash up on the beach. Much of what we find is fascinating, some of it may be useful, if *ka* allows, but all of it

is still wreckage. Senseless wreckage.” He looked around. “Like this place, I think.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it wrecked,” Eddie said. “Look at the paint on the station—it’s a little rusty from the gutters up under the eaves, but it hasn’t peeled anywhere that I can see.” He stood in front of the doors and ran his fingers down one of the glass panels. They left four clear tracks behind. “Dust and plenty of it, but no cracks. I’d say that this building has been left unmaintained at most since . . . the start of the summer, maybe?”

He looked at Roland, who shrugged and nodded. He was listening with only half an ear and paying attention with only half a mind. The rest of him was fixed upon two things: the warble of the thinny, and keeping away the memories that wanted to swamp him.

“But Lud had been going to wrack and ruin for *centuries*,” Susannah said. “This place . . . it may or may not be Topeka, but what it really looks like to me is one of those creepy little towns on *The Twilight Zone*. You boys probably don’t remember that one, but —”

“Yes, I do,” Eddie and Jake said in perfect unison, then looked at each other and laughed. Eddie stuck out his hand and Jake slapped it.

“They still show the reruns,” Jake said.

“Yeah, all the time,” Eddie added. “Usually sponsored by bankruptcy lawyers who look like shorthair terriers. And you’re right. This place *isn’t* like Lud. Why would it be? It’s not in the same *world* as Lud. I don’t know where we crossed over, but—” He pointed again at the blue Interstate 70 shield, as if that proved his case beyond a shadow of a doubt.

“If it’s Topeka, where are the people?” Susannah asked.

Eddie shrugged and raised his hands—who knows?

Jake put his forehead against the glass of the center door, cupped his hands to the sides of his face, and peered in. He looked for several seconds, then saw something that made him pull back fast. "Oh-oh," he said. "No wonder the town's so quiet."

Roland stepped up behind Jake and peered in over the boy's head, cupping his own hands to reduce his reflection. The gunslinger drew two conclusions before even looking at what Jake had seen. The first was that although this was most assuredly a *train* station, it wasn't really a *Blaine* station . . . not a cradle. The other was that the station did indeed belong to Eddie's, Jake's, and Susannah's world . . . but perhaps not to their *where*.

It's the thinny. We'll have to be careful.

Two corpses were leaning together on one of the long benches that filled most of the room; but for their hanging, wrinkled faces and black hands, they might have been revellers who had fallen asleep in the station after an arduous party and missed the last train home. On the wall behind them was a board marked DEPARTURES, with the names of cities and towns and baronies marching down it in a line. DENVER, read one. WICHITA, read another. OMAHA, read a third. Roland had once known a one-eyed gambler named Omaha; he had died with a knife in his throat at a Watch Me table. He had stepped into the clearing at the end of the path with his head thrown back, and his last breath had sprayed blood all the way up to the ceiling. Hanging down from the ceiling of this room (which Roland's stupid and laggard mind insisted on thinking of as a stage rest, as if this were a stop along some half-forgotten road like the one that had brought him to Tull) was a beautiful four-sided clock. Its hands had stopped at 4:14, and Roland supposed they would never move again. It was a sad thought . . . but this was a sad world. He could not see any other dead people, but experience suggested that where there were two dead, there were likely four more dead somewhere out of sight. Or four dozen.

"Should we go in?" Eddie asked.

“Why?” the gunslinger countered. “We have no business here; it doesn’t lie along the Path of the Beam.”

“You’d make a great tour-guide,” Eddie said sourly. “ ‘Keep up, everyone, and please don’t go wandering off into the—’ ”

Jake interrupted with a request Roland didn’t understand. “Do either of you guys have a quarter?” The boy was looking at Eddie and Susannah. Beside him was a square metal box. Written on it in blue was:

The *Topeka Capital-Journal* covers Kansas like no other!

Your hometown paper! *Read it every day!*

Eddie shook his head, amused. “Lost all my change at some point. Probably climbing a tree, just before you joined us, in an all-out effort to avoid becoming snack-food for a robot bear. Sorry.”

“Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . .” Susannah had her purse open and was rummaging through it in a way that made Roland grin broadly in spite of all his preoccupations. It was so damned *womanly*, somehow. She turned over crumpled Kleenex, shook them to make sure there was nothing caught inside, fished out a compact, looked at it, dropped it back, came up with a comb, dropped *that* back—

She was too absorbed to look up as Roland strode past her, drawing his gun from the docker’s clutch he had built her as he went. He fired a single time. Susannah let out a little scream, dropping her purse and slapping at the empty holster high up under her left breast.

“Honky, you scared the livin *Jesus* out of me!”

“Take better care of your gun, Susannah, or the next time someone takes it from you, the hole may be between your eyes

instead of in a . . . what is it, Jake? A news-telling device of some kind? Or does it hold paper?”

“Both.” Jake looked startled. Oy had withdrawn halfway down the platform and was looking at Roland mistrustfully. Jake poked his finger at the bullet-hole in the center of the newspaper box’s locking device. A little curl of smoke was drifting from it.

“Go on,” Roland said. “Open it.”

Jake pulled the handle. It resisted for a moment, then a piece of metal clunked down somewhere inside, and the door opened. The box itself was empty; the sign on the back wall read WHEN ALL PAPERS ARE GONE, PLEASE TAKE DISPLAY COPY. Jake worked it out of its wire holder, and they all gathered round.

“What in God’s name . . . ?” Susannah’s whisper was both horrified and accusing. “What does it mean? What in God’s name *happened?*”

Below the newspaper’s name, taking up most of the front page’s top half, were screaming black letters:

“CAPTAIN TRIPS” SUPERFLU RAGES UNCHECKED
Govt. Leaders May Have Fled Country Topeka Hospitals
Jammed with Sick, Dying Millions Pray for Cure

“Read it aloud,” Roland said. “The letters are in your speech, I cannot make them all out, and I would know this story very well.”

Jake looked at Eddie, who nodded impatiently.

Jake unfolded the newspaper, revealing a dot-picture (Roland had seen pictures of this type; they were called “fottergrafs”) which shocked them all: it showed a lakeside city with its skyline in flames. CLEVELAND FIRES BURN UNCHECKED, the caption beneath read.

“Read, kid!” Eddie told him. Susannah said nothing; she was already reading the story—the only one on the front page—over his shoulder. Jake cleared his throat as if it were suddenly dry, and began.

5

“The byline says John Corcoran, plus staff and AP reports. That means a lot of different people worked on it, Roland. Okay. Here goes. ‘America’s greatest crisis—and the world’s, perhaps—deepened overnight as the so-called superflu, known as Tube-Neck in the Midwest and Captain Trips in California, continues to spread.

“ ‘Although the death-toll can only be estimated, medical experts say the total at this point is horrible beyond comprehension: twenty to thirty million dead in the continental U.S. alone is the estimate given by Dr. Morris Hackford of Topeka’s St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center. Bodies are being burned from Los Angeles, California, to Boston, Massachusetts, in crematoria, factory furnaces, and at landfill sites.

“ ‘Here in Topeka, the bereaved who are still well enough and strong enough to do so are urged to take their dead to one of three sites: the disposal plant north of Oakland Billard Park; the pit area at Heartland Park Race Track; the landfill on Southeast Sixty-first Street, east of Forbes Field. Landfill users should approach by Berryton Road; California has been blocked by car wrecks and at least one downed Air Force transport plane, sources tell us.’ ”

Jake glanced up at his friends with frightened eyes, looked behind him at the silent railway station, then looked back down at the newspaper.

“ ‘Dr. April Montoya of the Stormont-Vail Regional Medical Center points out that the death-toll, horrifying as it is, constitutes only part of this terrible story. “For every person who has died so far as a result of this new flu-strain,” Montoya said, “there are another six who are lying ill in their homes, perhaps as many as a dozen. And,

so far as we have been able to determine, the recovery rate is zero.” Coughing, she then told this reporter: “Speaking personally, I’m not making any plans for the weekend.”

“ ‘In other local developments:

“ ‘All commercial flights out of Forbes and Phillip Billard have been cancelled.

“ ‘All Amtrak rail travel has been suspended, not just in Topeka but across all of Kansas. The Gage Boulevard Amtrak station has been closed until further notice.

“ ‘All Topeka schools have also been closed until further notice. This includes Districts 437, 345, 450 (Shawnee Heights), 372, and 501 (metro Topeka). Topeka Lutheran and Topeka Technical College are also closed, as is KU at Lawrence.

“ ‘Topekans must expect brownouts and perhaps blackouts in the days and weeks ahead. Kansas Power and Light has announced a “slow shutdown” of the Kaw River Nuclear Plant in Wamego. Although no one in KawNuke’s Office of Public Relations answered this newspaper’s calls, a recorded announcement cautions that there is no plant emergency, that this is a safety measure only. KawNuke will return to on-line status, the announcement concludes, “when the current crisis is past.” Any comfort afforded by this statement is in large part negated by the recorded statement’s final words, which are not “Goodbye” or “Thank you for calling” but “God will help us through our time of trial.” ’ ”

Jake paused, following the story to the next page, where there were more pictures: a burned-out panel truck overturned on the steps of the Kansas Museum of Natural History; traffic on San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge stalled bumper to bumper; piles of corpses in Times Square. One body, Susannah saw, had been hung from a lamppost, and that brought back nightmarish memories of the run for the Cradle of Lud she and Eddie had made after parting from the gunslinger; memories of Luster and Winston and Jeeves and

Maud. *When the god-drums started up this time, it was Spanker's stone what came out of the hat*, Maud had said. *We set him to dance*. Except, of course, what she'd meant was that they had set him to *hang*. As they had hung some folks, it seemed, back home in little old New York. When things got weird enough, someone always found a lynchrope, it seemed.

Echoes. Everything echoed now. They bounced back and forth from one world to the other, not fading as ordinary echoes did but growing and becoming more terrible. *Like the god-drums*, Susannah thought, and shuddered.

“ ‘In national developments,’ ” Jake read, “ ‘conviction continues to grow that, after denying the superflu's existence during its early days, when quarantine measures might still have had some effect, national leaders have fled to underground retreats which were created as brain-trust shelters in case of nuclear war. Vice-President Bush and key members of the Reagan cabinet have not been seen during the last forty-eight hours. Reagan himself has not been seen since Sunday morning, when he attended prayer services at Green Valley Methodist Church in San Simeon.

“ ‘ “They have gone to the bunkers like Hitler and the rest of the Nazi sewer-rats at the end of World War II,” said Rep. Steve Sloan. When asked if he had any objection to being quoted by name, Kansas's first-term representative, a Republican, laughed and said: “Why should I? I've got a real fine case myself. I'll be so much dust in the wind come this time next week.”

“ ‘Fires, most likely set, continue to ravage Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Terre Haute.

“ ‘A gigantic explosion centered near Cincinnati's River-front Stadium was apparently not nuclear in nature, as was first feared, but occurred as the result of a natural gas buildup caused by unsupervised . . . ’ ”

Jake let the paper drop from his hands. A gust of wind caught it and blew it the length of the platform, the few folded sheets separating as they went. Oy stretched his neck and snagged one of these as it went by. He trotted toward Jake with it in his mouth, as obedient as a dog with a stick.

“No, Oy, I don’t want it,” Jake said. He sounded ill and very young.

“At least we know where all the folks are,” Susannah said, bending and taking the paper from Oy. It was the last two pages. They were crammed with obituaries printed in the tiniest type she had ever seen. No pictures, no causes of death, no announcement of burial services. Just this one died, beloved of so-and-so, that one died, beloved of Jill-n-Joe, t’other one died, beloved of them-and-those. All in that tiny, not-quite-even type. It was the jaggedness of the type which convinced her it was all real.

But how hard they tried to honor their dead, even at the end, she thought, and a lump rose in her throat. How hard they tried.

She folded the quarto together and looked on the back—the last page of the *Capital-Journal*. It showed a picture of Jesus Christ, eyes sad, hands outstretched, forehead marked from his crown of thorns. Below it, three stark words in huge type:

PRAY FOR US

She looked up at Eddie, eyes accusing. Then she handed him the newspaper, one brown finger tapping the date at the top. It was June 24, 1986. Eddie had been drawn into the gunslinger’s world a year later.

He held it for a long time, fingers slipping back and forth across the date, as if the passage of his finger would somehow cause it to change. Then he looked up at them and shook his head. “No. I can’t explain this town, this paper, or the dead people in that station, but I

can set you straight about one thing—everything was fine in New York when I left. Wasn't it, Roland?"

The gunslinger looked a trifle sour. "Nothing in your city seemed very fine to me, but the people who lived there did not seem to be survivors of such a plague as this, no."

"There was something called Legionnaires' disease," Eddie said. "And AIDS, of course—"

"That's the sex one, right?" Susannah asked. "Transmitted by fruits and drug addicts?"

"Yes, but calling gays fruits isn't the done thing in my when," Eddie said. He tried a smile, but it felt stiff and unnatural on his face and he put it away again.

"So this . . . this never happened," Jake said, tentatively touching the face of Christ on the back page of the paper.

"But it did," Roland said. "It happened in June-sowing of the year one thousand nine hundred and eighty-six. And here we are, in the aftermath of that plague. If Eddie's right about the length of time that has gone by, the plague of this 'superflu' was this *past* June-sowing. We're in Topeka, Kansas, in the Reap of eighty-six. That's the *when* of it. As to the *where*, all we know is that it's not Eddie's. It might be yours, Susannah, or yours, Jake, because you left your world before this arrived." He tapped the date on the paper, then looked at Jake. "You said something to me once. I doubt if you remember, but I do; it's one of the most important things anyone has ever said to me: 'Go, then, there are other worlds than these.' "

"More riddles," Eddie said, scowling.

"Is it not a fact that Jake Chambers died once and now stands before us, alive and well? Or do you doubt my story of his death under the mountains? That you have doubted my honesty from time to time is something I know. And I suppose you have your reasons."

Eddie thought it over, then shook his head. “You lie when it suits your purpose, but I think that when you told us about Jake, you were too fucked up to manage anything but the truth.”

Roland was startled to find himself hurt by what Eddie had said—*You lie when it suits your purpose*—but he went on. After all, it was essentially true.

“We went back to time’s pool,” the gunslinger said, “and pulled him out before he could drown.”

“*You* pulled him out,” Eddie corrected.

“You helped, though,” Roland said, “if only by keeping me alive, you helped, but let that go for now. It’s beside the point. What’s more to it is that there are many possible worlds, and an infinity of doors leading into them. This is one of those worlds; the thinny we can hear is one of those doors . . . only one much bigger than the ones we found on the beach.”

“*How* big?” Eddie asked. “As big as a warehouse loading door, or as big as the warehouse?”

Roland shook his head and raised his hands palms to the sky—*who knows?*

“This thinny,” Susannah said. “We’re not just *near* it, are we? We came *through* it. That’s how we got here, to this version of Topeka.”

“We may have,” Roland admitted. “Did any of you feel something strange? A sensation of vertigo, or transient nausea?”

They shook their heads. Oy, who had been watching Jake closely, also shook his head this time.

“No,” Roland said, as if he had expected this. “But we were concentrating on the riddling—”

“Concentrating on not getting killed,” Eddie grunted.

“Yes. So perhaps we passed through without being aware. In any case, thinnies aren’t natural—they are sores on the skin of existence, able to exist because things are going wrong. Things in *all* worlds.”

“Because things are wrong at the Dark Tower,” Eddie said.

Roland nodded. “And even if this place—this *when*, this *where*—is not the *ka* of your world now, it might become that *ka*. This plague—or others even worse—could spread. Just as the thinnies will continue to spread, growing in size and number. I’ve seen perhaps half a dozen in my years of searching for the Tower, and heard maybe two dozen more. The first . . . the first one I ever saw was when I was still very young. Near a town called Hambry.” He rubbed his hand up his cheek again, and was not surprised to find sweat amid the bristles.

Love me, Roland. If you love me, then love me.

“Whatever happened to us, it bumped us out of your world, Roland,” Jake said. “We’ve fallen off the Beam. Look.” He pointed at the sky. The clouds were moving slowly above them, but no longer in the direction Blaine’s smashed snout was pointing. Southeast was still southeast, but the signs of the Beam which they had grown so used to following were gone.

“Does it matter?” Eddie asked. “I mean . . . the *Beam* may be gone, but the *Tower* exists in all worlds, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Roland said, “but it may not be *accessible* from all worlds.”

The year before beginning his wonderful and fulfilling career as a heroin addict, Eddie had done a brief and not-very-successful turn as a bicycle messenger. Now he remembered certain office-building elevators he’d been in while making deliveries, buildings with banks or investment firms in them, mostly. There were some floors where you couldn’t stop the car and get off unless you had a special card to swipe through the slot below the numbers. When the elevator came

to those locked-off floors, the number in the window was replaced by an X.

“I think,” Roland said, “we need to find the Beam again.”

“I’m convinced,” Eddie said. “Come on, let’s get going.” He took a couple of steps, then turned back to Roland with one eyebrow raised. “Where?”

“The way we were going,” Roland said, as if that should have been obvious, and walked past Eddie in his dusty, broken boots, headed for the park across the way.

CHAPTER V TURMPIKIN'

1

Roland walked to the end of the platform, kicking bits of pink metal out of his way as he went. At the stairs, he paused and looked back at them somberly. "More dead. Be ready."

"They're not . . . um . . . runny, are they?" Jake asked.

Roland frowned, then his face cleared as he understood what Jake meant. "No. Not runny. Dry."

"That's all right, then," Jake said, but he held his hand out to Susannah, who was being carried by Eddie for the time being. She gave him a smile and folded her fingers around his.

At the foot of the stairs leading down to the commuter parking lot at the side of the station, half a dozen corpses lay together like a collapsed cornshock. Two were women, three were men. The sixth was a child in a stroller. A summer spent dead in the sun and rain and heat (not to mention at the mercy of any stray cats, coons, or woodchucks that might be passing) had given the toddler a look of ancient wisdom and mystery, like a child mummy discovered in an Incan pyramid. Jake supposed from the faded blue outfit it was wearing that it had been a boy, but it was impossible to tell for sure. Eyeless, lipless, its skin faded to dusky gray, it made a joke of gender—why did the dead baby cross the road? Because it was stapled to the superflu.

Even so, the toddler seemed to have voyaged through Topeka's empty post-plague months better than the adults around it. They

were little more than skeletons with hair. In a scrawny bunch of skin-wrapped bones that had once been fingers, one of the men clutched the handle of a suitcase that looked like the Samsonites Jake's parents owned. As with the baby (as with *all* of them), his eyes were gone; huge dark sockets stared at Jake. Below them, a ring of discolored teeth jutted in a pugnacious grin. *What took you so long, kid?* the dead man who was still clutching his suitcase seemed to be asking. *Been waiting for you, and it's been a long hot summer!*

Where were you guys hoping to go? Jake wondered. *Just where in the crispy crap did you think might be safe enough? Des Moines? Sioux City? Fargo? The moon?*

They went down the stairs, Roland first, the others behind him, Jake still holding Susannah's hand with Oy at his heels. The long-bodied bumbler seemed to descend each step in two stages, like a double trailer taking speed-bumps.

"Slow down, Roland," Eddie said. "I want to check the crip spaces before we go on. We might get lucky."

"Crip spaces?" Susannah said. "What're those?"

Jake shrugged. He didn't know. Neither did Roland.

Susannah switched her attention to Eddie. "I only ask, sugarpie, because it sounds a little *on*-pleasant. You know, like calling Negroes 'blacks' or gay folks 'fruits.' I know I'm just a poor ignorant pickaninny from the dark ages of 1964, but—"

"There." Eddie pointed at a rank of signs marking the parking-row closest to the station. There were actually two signs to a post, the top of each pair blue and white, the bottom red and white. When they drew a little closer, Jake saw the one on top was a wheelchair symbol. The one on the bottom was a warning: \$200 FINE FOR IMPROPER USE OF HANDICAPPED PARKING SPACE. STRICTLY ENFORCED BY TOPEKA P.D.

“See there!” Susannah said triumphantly. “They shoulda done that a long time ago! Why, back in my when, you’re lucky if you can get your damn wheelchair through the doors of anything smaller than the Shop ’n Save. Hell, lucky if you can get it up over the curbs! And special parking? Forget it, sugar!”

The lot was jammed almost to capacity, but even with the end of the world at hand, only two cars that didn’t have little wheelchair symbols on their license plates were parked in the row Eddie had called “the cripp spaces.”

Jake guessed that respecting the “cripp spaces” was just one of those things that got a mysterious lifelong hold on people, like putting zip-codes on letters, parting your hair, or brushing your teeth before breakfast.

“And there it is!” Eddie cried. “Hold your cards, folks, but I think we have a Bingo!”

Still carrying Susannah on his hip—a thing he would have been incapable of doing for any extended period of time even a month ago—Eddie hurried over to a boat of a Lincoln. Strapped on the roof was a complicated-looking racing bicycle; poking out of the half-open trunk was a wheelchair. Nor was this the only one; scanning the row of “cripp spaces,” Jake saw at least four more wheelchairs, most strapped to roof-racks, some stuffed into the backs of vans or station wagons, one (it looked ancient and fearsomely bulky) thrown into the bed of a pickup truck.

Eddie set Susannah down and bent to examine the rig holding the chair in the trunk. There were a lot of crisscrossing elastic cords, plus some sort of locking bar. Eddie drew the Ruger Jake had taken from his father’s desk drawer. “Fire in the hole,” he said cheerfully, and before any of them could even think of covering their ears, he pulled the trigger and blew the lock off the security-bar. The sound went rolling into the silence, then echoed back. The warbling sound of the thinnny returned with it, as if the gunshot had snapped it awake. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn’t it?* Jake thought, and grimaced with

distaste. Half an hour ago, he wouldn't have believed that a sound could be as physically upsetting, as . . . well, the smell of rotting meat, say, but he believed it now. He looked up at the turnpike signs. From this angle he could see only their tops, but that was enough to confirm that they were shimmering again. *It throws some kind of field*, Jake thought. *The way mixers and vacuum cleaners make static on the radio or TV, or the way that cyclotron gadget made the hair on my arms stand up when Mr. Kingery brought it to class and then asked for volunteers to come up and stand next to it.*

Eddie wrenched the locking bar aside, and used Roland's knife to cut the elastic cords. Then he drew the wheelchair out of the trunk, examined it, unfolded it, and engaged the support which ran across the back at seat-level. "*Voila!*" he said.

Susannah had propped herself on one hand—Jake thought she looked a little like the woman in this Andrew Wyeth painting he liked, *Christina's World*—and was examining the chair with some wonder.

"God almighty, it looks so little 'n light!"

"Modern technology at its finest, darlin,'" Eddie said. "It's what we fought Vietnam for. Hop in." He bent to help her. She didn't resist him, but her face was set and frowning as he lowered her into the seat. Like she expected the chair to collapse under her, Jake thought. As she ran her hands over the arms of her new ride, her face gradually relaxed.

Jake wandered off a little, walking down another row of cars, running his fingers over their hoods, leaving trails of dust. Oy padded after him, pausing once to lift his leg and squirt a tire, as if he had been doing it all his life.

"Make you homesick, honey?" Susannah asked from behind Jake. "Probably thought you'd never see an honest-to-God American automobile again, am I right?"

Jake considered this and decided she was *not* right. It had never crossed his mind that he would remain in Roland's world forever; that he might never see another car. He didn't think that would bother him, actually, but he also didn't think it was in the cards. Not yet, anyway. There was a certain vacant lot in the New York when he had come from. It was on the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street. Once there had been a deli there—Tom and Gerry's, Party Platters Our Specialty—but now it was just rubble, and weeds, and broken glass, and . . .

. . . and a rose. Just a single wild rose growing in a vacant lot where a bunch of condos were scheduled to go up at some point, but Jake had an idea that there was nothing quite like it growing anywhere else on Earth. Maybe not on any of those other worlds Roland had mentioned, either. There were roses as one approached the Dark Tower; roses by the billion, according to Eddie, great bloody acres of them. He had seen them in a dream. Still, Jake suspected that his rose was different even from those . . . and that until its fate was decided, one way or the other, he was not done with the world of cars and TVs and policemen who wanted to know if you had any identification and what your parents' names were.

And speaking of parents, I may not be done with them, either, Jake thought. The idea hurried his heartbeat with a mixture of hope and alarm.

They stopped halfway down the row of cars, Jake staring blankly across a wide street (Gage Boulevard, he assumed) as he considered these things. Now Roland and Eddie caught up to them.

"This baby's gonna be great after a couple of months pushing the Iron Maiden," Eddie said with a grin. "Bet you could damn near *puff* it along." He blew a deep breath at the back of the wheelchair to demonstrate. Jake thought of telling Eddie that there were probably others back there in the "crip spaces" with motors in them, then realized what Eddie must have known right away: their batteries would be dead.

Susannah ignored him for the time being; it was Jake she was interested in. “You didn’t answer me, sug. All these cars get you homesick?”

“Nah. But I was curious about whether or not they were all cars I knew. I thought maybe . . . if this version of 1986 grew out of some other world than my 1977, there’d be a way to tell. But I *can’t* tell. Because things change so darn fast. Even in nine years . . .” He shrugged, then looked at Eddie. “*You* might be able to, though. I mean, you actually *lived* in 1986.”

Eddie grunted. “I lived through it, but I didn’t exactly *observe* it. I was fucked to the sky most of the time. Still . . . I suppose . . .”

Eddie started pushing Susannah along the smooth macadam of the parking lot again, pointing to cars as they passed them. “Ford Explorer . . . Chevrolet Caprice . . . and that one there’s an old Pontiac, you can tell because of the split grille—”

“Pontiac Bonneville,” Jake said. He was amused and a little touched by the wonder in Susannah’s eyes—most of these cars must look as futuristic to her as Buck Rogers scout-ships. That made him wonder how Roland felt about them, and Jake looked around.

The gunslinger showed no interest in the cars at all. He was gazing across the street, into the park, toward the turnpike . . . except Jake didn’t think he was actually looking at any of those things. Jake had an idea that Roland was simply looking into his own thoughts. If so, the expression on his face suggested that he wasn’t finding anything good there.

“That’s one of those little Chrysler K’s,” Eddie said, pointing, “and that’s a Subaru. Mercedes SEL 450, excellent, the car of champions . . . Mustang . . . Chrysler Imperial, good shape but must be older’n God—”

“Watch it, boy,” Susannah said, with a touch of what Jake thought was real asperity in her voice. “I recognize that one. Looks new to

me.”

“Sorry, Suze. Really. This one’s a Cougar . . . another Chevy . . . and one more . . . Topeka loves General Motors, big fuckin surprise there . . . Honda Civic . . . VW Rabbit . . . a Dodge . . . a Ford . . . a —”

Eddie stopped, looking at a little car near the end of the row, white with red trim. “A Takuro,” he said, mostly to himself. He went around to look at the trunk. “A Takuro *Spirit*, to be exact. Ever hear of that make and model, Jake of New York?”

Jake shook his head.

“Me, neither,” he said. “Me fucking neither.”

Eddie began pushing Susannah toward Gage Boulevard (Roland with them but still mostly off in his own private world, walking when they walked, stopping where they stopped). Just shy of the lot’s automated entrance (STOP TAKE TICKET), Eddie halted.

“At this rate, we’ll be old before we get to yonder park and dead before we raise the turnpike,” Susannah said.

This time Eddie didn’t apologize, didn’t seem even to hear her. He was looking at the bumper sticker on the front of a rusty old AMC Pacer. The sticker was blue and white, like the little wheelchair signs marking the “crip spaces.” Jake squatted for a better look, and when Oy dropped his head on Jake’s knee, the boy stroked him absently. With his other hand he reached out and touched the sticker, as if to verify its reality. KANSAS CITY MONARCHS, it said. The O in Monarchs was a baseball with speedlines drawn out behind it, as if it were leaving the park.

Eddie said: “Check me if I’m wrong on this, sport, because I know almost zilch about baseball west of Yankee Stadium, but shouldn’t that say Kansas City *Royals*? You know, George Brett and all that?”

Jake nodded. He knew the Royals, and he knew Brett, although he had been a young player in Jake's when and must have been a fairly old one in Eddie's.

"Kansas City *Athletics*, you mean," Susannah said, sounding bewildered. Roland ignored it all; he was still cruising in his own personal ozone layer.

"Not by '86, darlin'," Eddie said kindly. "By '86 the Athletics were in Oakland." He glanced from the bumper sticker to Jake. "Minor-league team, maybe?" he asked. "Triple A?"

"The Triple A Royals are still the Royals," Jake said. "They play in Omaha. Come on, let's go."

And although he didn't know about the others, Jake himself went on with a lighter heart. Maybe it was stupid, but he was relieved. He didn't believe that this terrible plague was waiting up ahead for his world, because there were no Kansas City Monarchs in his world. Maybe that wasn't enough information upon which to base a conclusion, but it felt true. And it was an enormous relief to be able to believe that his mother and father weren't slated to die of a germ people called Captain Trips and be burned in a . . . a landfill, or something.

Except that wasn't quite a sure thing, even if this wasn't the 1986 version of his 1977 world. Because even if this awful plague had happened in a world where there were cars called Takuro Spirits and George Brett played for the K.C. Monarchs, Roland said the trouble was spreading . . . that things like the superflu were eating through the fabric of existence like battery acid eating its way into a piece of cloth.

The gunslinger had spoken of time's pool, a phrase which had at first struck Jake as romantic and charming. But suppose the pool was growing stagnant and swampy? And suppose these Bermuda Triangle-type things Roland called thinnies, once great rarities, were becoming the rule rather than the exception? Suppose—oh, and

here was a hideous thought, one guaranteed to keep you lying awake until way past three—all of reality was sagging as the structural weaknesses of the Dark Tower grew? Suppose there came a crash, one level falling down into the next . . . and the next . . . and the next . . . until—

When Eddie grasped his shoulder and squeezed, Jake had to bite his tongue to keep from screaming.

“You’re giving yourself the hoodoos,” Eddie said.

“What do you know about it?” Jake asked. That sounded rude, but he was mad. From being scared or being seen into? He didn’t know. Didn’t much care, either.

“When it comes to the hoodoos, I’m an old hand,” Eddie said. “I don’t know exactly what’s on your mind, but whatever it is, this would be an *excellent* time to stop thinking about it.”

That, Jake decided, was probably good advice. They walked across the street together. Toward Gage Park and one of the greatest shocks of Jake’s life.

2

Passing under the wrought-iron arch with GAGE PARK written on it in old-fashioned, curlicued letters, they found themselves on a brick path leading through a garden that was half English Formal and half Ecuadoran Jungle. With no one to tend it through the hot Midwestern summer, it had run to riot; with no one to tend it this fall, it had run to seed. A sign just inside the arch proclaimed this to be the Reinisch Rose Garden, and there were roses, all right; roses everywhere. Most had gone over, but some of the wild ones still thrived, making Jake think of the rose in the vacant lot at Forty-sixth and Second with a longing so deep it was an ache.

Off to one side as they entered the park was a beautiful old-time carousel, its prancing steeds and racing stallions now still on their

posts. The carousel's very silence, its flashing lights and steamy calliope music stilled forever, gave Jake a chill. Hung over the neck of one horse, dangling from a rawhide strip, was some kid's baseball glove. Jake was barely able to look at it.

Beyond the carousel, the foliage grew even thicker, strangling the path until the travellers edged along single-file, like lost children in a fairy-tale wood. Thorns from overgrown and unpruned rosebushes tore at Jake's clothes. He had somehow gotten into the lead (probably because Roland was still deep inside his own thoughts), and that was why he saw Charlie the Choo-Choo first.

His only thought while approaching the narrow-gauge train-tracks which crossed the path—they were little more than toy tracks, really—was of the gunslinger saying that *ka* was like a wheel, always rolling around to the same place again. *We're haunted by roses and trains*, he thought. *Why? I don't know. I guess it's just another rid—*

Then he looked to his left, and “OhgoodnesstoChrist” fell out of his mouth, all in one word. The strength ran out of his legs and he sat down. His voice sounded watery and distant to his own ears. He didn't quite faint, but the color drained out of the world until the running-to-riot foliage on the west side of the park looked almost as gray as the autumn sky overhead.

“Jake! Jake, what's wrong!” It was Eddie, and Jake could hear the genuine concern in his voice, but it seemed to be coming over a bad long-distance connection. From Beirut, say, or maybe Uranus. And he could feel Roland's steadying hand on his shoulder, but it was as distant as Eddie's voice.

“Jake!” Susannah. “What's wrong, honey? What—”

Then she saw, and stopped talking at him. Eddie saw, and also stopped talking at him. Roland's hand fell away. They all stood looking . . . except for Jake, who *sat* looking. He supposed that strength and feeling would come back into his legs eventually and he would get up, but right now they felt like limp macaroni.

The train was parked fifty feet up, by a toy station that mimicked the one across the street. Hanging from its eaves was a sign which read TOPEKA. The train was Charlie the Choo-Choo, cowcatcher and all; a 402 Big Boy Steam Locomotive. And, Jake knew, if he found enough strength to get up on his feet and go over there, he would find a family of mice nested in the seat where the engineer (whose name had undoubtedly been Bob Something-or-other) had once sat. There would be another family, this one of swallows, nested in the smokestack.

And the dark, oily tears, Jake thought, looking at the tiny train waiting in front of its tiny station with his skin crawling all over his body and his balls hard and his stomach in a knot. At night it cries those dark, oily tears, and they're rusting the hell out of his fine Stratham headlight. But in your time, Charlie-boy, you pulled your share of kids, right? Around and around Gage Park you went, and the kids laughed, except some of them weren't really laughing; some of them, the ones who were wise to you, were screaming. The way I'd scream now, if I had the strength.

But his strength was coming back, and when Eddie put a hand under one of his arms and Roland put one under the other, Jake was able to get up. He staggered once, then stood steady.

“Just for the record, I don't blame you,” Eddie said. His voice was grim; so was his face. “I feel a little like falling over myself. That's the one in your book; that's it to the life.”

“So now we know where Miss Beryl Evans got the idea for *Charlie the Choo-Choo*,” Susannah said. “Either she lived here, or sometime before 1942, when the damned thing was published, she visited Topeka—”

“—and saw the kids' train that goes through Reinisch Rose Garden and around Gage Park,” Jake said. He was getting over his scare now, and he—not just an only child but for most of his life a lonely child—felt a burst of love and gratitude for his friends. They

had seen what he had seen, they had understood the source of his fright. Of course—they were *ka-tet*.

“It won’t answer silly questions, it won’t play silly games,” Roland said musingly. “Can you go on, Jake?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?” Eddie asked, and when Jake nodded, Eddie pushed Susannah across the tracks. Roland went next. Jake paused a moment, remembering a dream he’d had—he and Oy had been at a train-crossing, and the bumbler had suddenly leaped onto the tracks, barking wildly at the oncoming headlight.

Now Jake bent and scooped Oy up. He looked at the rusting train standing silently in its station, its dark headlamp like a dead eye. “I’m not afraid,” he said in a low voice. “Not afraid of you.”

The headlamp came to life and flashed at him once, brief but glare-bright, emphatic: *I know different; I know different, my dear little squint.*

Then it went out.

None of the others had seen. Jake glanced once more at the train, expecting the light to flash again—maybe expecting the cursed thing to actually start up and make a run at him—but nothing happened.

Heart thumping hard in his chest, Jake hurried after his companions.

3

The Topeka Zoo (the *World Famous Topeka Zoo*, according to the signs) was full of empty cages and dead animals. Some of the animals that had been freed were gone, but others had died near to hand. The big apes were still in the area marked Gorilla Habitat, and they appeared to have died hand-in-hand. That made Eddie feel like

crying, somehow. Since the last of the heroin had washed out of his system, his emotions always seemed on the verge of blowing up into a cyclone. His old pals would have laughed.

Beyond Gorilla Habitat, a gray wolf lay dead on the path. Oy approached it carefully, sniffed, then stretched out his long neck and began to howl.

“Make him quit that, Jake, you hear me?” Eddie said gruffly. He suddenly realized he could smell decaying animals. The aroma was faint, mostly boiled off over the hot days of the summer just passed, but what was left made him feel like upchucking. Not that he could precisely remember the last time he’d eaten.

“Oy! To me!”

Oy howled one final time, then returned to Jake. He stood on the kid’s feet, looking up at him with those spooky wedding-ring eyes of his. Jake picked him up, took him in a circle around the wolf, and then set him down again on the brick path.

The path led them to a steep set of steps (weeds had begun to push through the stonework already), and at the top Roland looked back over the zoo and the gardens. From here they could easily see the circuit the toy train-tracks made, allowing Charlie’s riders to tour the entire perimeter of Gage Park. Beyond it, fallen leaves clattered down Gage Boulevard before a rush of cold wind.

“So fell Lord Perth,” murmured Roland.

“And the countryside did shake with that thunder,” Jake finished.

Roland looked down at him with surprise, like a man awakening from a deep sleep, then smiled and put an arm around Jake’s shoulders. “I have played Lord Perth in my time,” he said.

“Have you?”

“Yes. Very soon now you shall hear.”

4

Beyond the steps was an aviary full of dead exotic birds; beyond the aviary was a snackbar advertising (perhaps heartlessly, given the location) TOPEKA’S BEST BUFFALOBURGER; beyond the snackbar was another wrought iron arch with a sign reading COME BACK TO GAGE PARK REAL SOON! Beyond this was the curving upslope of a limited-access-highway entrance ramp. Above it, the green signs they had first spotted from across the way stood clear.

“Turnpikin’ again,” Eddie said in a voice almost too low to hear. “Goddam.” Then he sighed.

“What’s turnpikin’, Eddie?”

Jake didn’t think Eddie was going to answer; when Susannah craned around to look at him as he stood with his fingers wrapped around the handles of the new wheelchair, Eddie looked away. Then he looked back, first at Susannah, then at Jake. “It’s not pretty. Not much about my life before Gary Cooper here yanked me across the Great Divide was.”

“You don’t have to—”

“It’s also no big deal. A bunch of us would get together—me, my brother Henry, Bum O’Hara, usually, ’cause he had a car, Sandra Corbitt, and maybe this friend of Henry’s we called Jimmie Polio—and we’d stick all our names in a hat. The one we drew out was the . . . the trip-guide, Henry used to call him. He—she, if it was Sandi—had to stay straight. Relatively, anyway. Everyone else got seriously goobered. Then we’d all pile into Bum’s Chrysler and go up I-95 into Connecticut or maybe take the Taconic Parkway into upstate New York . . . only we called it the Catatonic Parkway. Listen to Creedence or Marvin Gaye or maybe even *Elvis’s Greatest Hits* on the tape-player.

“It was better at night, best when the moon was full. We’d cruise for hours sometimes with our heads stuck out the windows like dogs do when they’re riding, looking up at the moon and watching for shooting stars. We called it turnpikin’.” Eddie smiled. It looked like an effort. “A charming life, folks.”

“It sounds sort of fun,” Jake said. “Not the drug part, I mean, but riding around with your pals at night, looking at the moon and listening to the music . . . that sounds excellent.”

“It was, actually,” Eddie said. “Even stuffed so full of reds we were as apt to pee on our own shoes as in the bushes, it was excellent.” He paused. “That’s the horrible part, don’t you get it?”

“Turnpikin’,” the gunslinger said. “Let’s do some.”

They left Gage Park and crossed the road to the entrance ramp.

5

Someone had spray-painted over both signs marking the ramp’s ascending curve. On the one reading ST. LOUIS 215, someone had slashed

WATCH FOR THE WALKIN DUDE

in black. On the one marked NEXT REST AREA 10 MI.,

ALL HAIL THE CRIMSON KING!

had been written in fat red letters. That scarlet was still bright enough to scream even after an entire summer. Each had been decorated with a symbol—



“Do you know what any of that truck means, Roland?” Susannah asked.

Roland shook his head, but he looked troubled, and that introspective look never left his own eyes.

They went on.

6

At the place where the ramp merged with the turnpike, the two men, the boy, and the bumbler clustered around Susannah in her new wheelchair. All of them looked east.

Eddie didn't know what the traffic situation would be like once they cleared Topeka, but here all the lanes, those headed west as well as the eastbound ones on their side, were crammed with cars and trucks. Most of the vehicles were piled high with possessions gone rusty with a season's worth of rain.

But the traffic was the least of their concerns as they stood there, looking silently eastward. For half a mile or so on either side of them, the city continued—they could see church steeples, a strip of fast food places (Arby's, Wendy's, McD's, Pizza Hut, and one Eddie had never heard of called Boing Boing Burgers), car dealerships, the roof of a bowling alley called Heartland Lanes. They could see another turnpike exit ahead, the sign by the ramp reading Topeka State Hospital and S. W. 6th. Beyond the off-ramp there hulked a massive old red brick edifice with tiny windows peering like desperate eyes out of the climbing ivy. Eddie figured a place that looked so much like Attica *had* to be a hospital, probably the kind of welfare purgatory where poor folks sat in shitty plastic chairs for hours on end, all so some doctor could look at them like they were dogshit.

Beyond the hospital, the city abruptly ended and the thinny began.

To Eddie, it looked like flat water standing in a vast marshland. It crowded up to the raised barrel of I-70 on both sides, silvery and

shimmering, making the signs and guardrails and stalled cars waver like mirages; it gave off that liquidy humming sound like a stench.

Susannah put her hands to her ears, her mouth drawn down. “I don’t know as I can stand it. Really. I don’t mean to be spleeny, but already I feel like vomiting, and I haven’t had anything to eat all day.”

Eddie felt the same way. Yet, sick as he felt he could hardly take his eyes away from the thinny. It was as if unreality had been given . . . what? A face? No. The vast and humming silver shimmer ahead of them had no face, was the very antithesis of a face, in fact, but it had a body . . . an aspect . . . a *presence*.

Yes; that last was best. It had a presence, as the demon which had come to the circle of stones while they were trying to draw Jake had had a presence.

Roland, meanwhile, was rummaging in the depths of his purse. He appeared to dig all the way to the bottom before finding what he wanted: a fistful of bullets. He plucked Susannah’s right hand off the arm of her chair, and put two of the bullets in her palm. Then he took two more and poked them, slug ends first, into his ears. Susannah looked first amazed, then amused, then doubtful. In the end, she followed his example. Almost at once an expression of blissful relief filled her face.

Eddie unshouldered the pack he wore and pulled out the half-full box of .44s that went with Jake’s Ruger. The gunslinger shook his head and held out his hand. There were still four bullets in it, two for Eddie and two for Jake.

“What’s wrong with these?” Eddie shook a couple of shells from the box that had come from behind the hanging files in Elmer Chambers’s desk drawer.

“They’re from your world and they won’t block out the sound. Don’t ask me how I know that; I just do. Try them if you want, but they won’t work.”

Eddie pointed at the bullets Roland was offering. “Those are from our world, too. The gun-shop on Seventh and Forty-ninth. Clements’, wasn’t that the name?”

“These didn’t come from there. These are mine, Eddie, reloaded often but originally brought from the green land. From Gilead.”

“You mean the *wets*?” Eddie asked incredulously. “The last of the wet shells from the beach? The ones that really got soaked?”

Roland nodded.

“You said those would never fire again! No matter how dry they got! That the powder had been . . . what did you say? ‘Flattened.’ ”

Roland nodded again.

“So why’d you save them? Why bring a bunch of useless bullets all this way?”

“What did I teach you to say after a kill, Eddie? In order to focus your mind?”

“ ‘Father, guide my hands and heart so that no part of the animal will be wasted.’ ”

Roland nodded a third time. Jake took two shells and put them in his ears. Eddie took the last two, but first he tried the ones he’d shaken from the box. They muffled the sound of the thinny, but it was still there, vibrating in the center of his forehead, making his eyes water the way they did when he had a cold, making the bridge of his nose feel like it was going to explode. He picked them out, and put the bigger slugs—the ones from Roland’s ancient revolvers—in their place. *Putting bullets in my ears*, he thought. *Ma would shit*. But that didn’t matter. The sound of the thinny was gone—or at least down to a distant drone—and that was what did. When he turned and spoke to Roland, he expected his own voice to sound muffled, the way it

did when you were wearing earplugs, but he found he could hear himself pretty well.

“Is there anything you *don't* know?” he asked Roland.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Quite a lot.”

“What about Oy?” Jake asked.

“Oy will be fine, I think,” Roland said. “Come on, let’s make some miles before dark.”

7

Oy didn’t seem bothered by the warble of the thinny, but he stuck close to Jake Chambers all that afternoon, looking mistrustfully at the stalled cars which clogged the eastbound lanes of I-70. And yet, Susannah saw, those cars did not clog the highway completely. The congestion eased as the travellers left downtown behind them, but even where the traffic had been heavy, some of the dead vehicles had been pulled to one side or the other; a number had been pushed right off the highway and onto the median strip, which was a concrete divider in the metro area and grass outside of town.

Somebody’s been at work with a wrecker, that’s my guess, Susannah thought. The idea made her happy. No one would have bothered clearing a path down the center of the highway while the plague was still raging, and if someone had done it after—if someone had been *around* to do it after—that meant the plague hadn’t gotten everyone; those crammed-together obituaries weren’t the whole story.

There were corpses in some of the cars, but they, like the ones at the foot of the station steps, were dry, not runny—mummies wearing seatbelts, for the most part. The majority of the cars were empty. A lot of the drivers and passengers caught in the traffic jams had probably tried to walk out of the plague-zone, she supposed, but she guessed that wasn’t the only reason they had taken to their feet.

Susannah knew that she herself would have to be chained to the steering wheel to keep her inside a car once she felt the symptoms of some fatal disease setting in; if she was going to die, she would want to do it in God's open air. A hill would be best, someplace with a little elevation, but even a wheatfield would do, came it to that. Anything but coughing your last while smelling the air-freshener dangling from the rearview mirror.

At one time Susannah guessed they would have been able to see many of the corpses of the fleeing dead, but not now. Because of the thinny. They approached it steadily, and she knew exactly when they entered it. A kind of tingling shudder ran through her body, making her draw her shortened legs up, and the wheelchair stopped for a moment. When she turned around she saw Roland, Eddie, and Jake holding their stomachs and grimacing. They looked as if they had all been stricken with the bellyache at the same time. Then Eddie and Roland straightened up. Jake bent to stroke Oy, who had been staring at him anxiously.

"You boys all right?" Susannah asked. The question came out in the half-querulous, half-humorous voice of Detta Walker. Using that voice was nothing she planned; sometimes it just came out.

"Yeah," Jake said. "Feels like I got a bubble in my throat, though." He was staring uneasily at the thinny. Its silvery blankness was all around them now, as if the whole world had turned into a flat Norfolk fen at dawn. Nearby, trees poked out of its silver surface, casting distorted reflections that never stayed quite still or quite in focus. A little farther away, Susannah could see a grain-storage tower, seeming to float. The words GADDISH FEEDS were written on the side in pink letters which might have been red under normal conditions.

"Feels to me like I got a bubble in my *mind*," Eddie said. "Man, look at that shit shimmer."

"Can you still hear it?" Susannah asked.

"Yeah. But faint. I can live with it. Can you?"

“Uh-huh. Let’s go.”

It was like riding in an open-cockpit plane through broken clouds, Susannah decided. They’d go for what felt like miles through that humming brightness that was not quite fog and not quite water, sometimes seeing shapes (a barn, a tractor, a Stuckey’s billboard) loom out of it, then losing everything but the road, which ran consistently above the thinny’s bright but somehow indistinct surface.

Then, all at once, they would run into the clear. The humming would fall away to a faint drone; you could even unplug your ears and not be too bothered, at least until you got near the other side of the break. Once again there were vistas . . .

Well, no, that was too grand, Kansas didn’t exactly *have* vistas, but there were open fields and the occasional copse of autumn-bright trees marking a spring or cow-pond. No Grand Canyon or surf crashing on Portland Headlight, but at least you could see a by-God *horizon* off in the distance, and lose some of that unpleasant feeling of entombment. Then, back into the goop you went. Jake came closest to describing it, she thought, when he said that being in the thinny was like finally reaching the shining water-mirage you could often see far up the highway on hot days.

Whatever it was and however you described it, being inside it was claustrophobic, purgatorial, all the world gone except for the twin barrels of the turnpike and the hulks of the cars, like derelict ships abandoned on a frozen ocean.

Please help us get out of this, Susannah prayed to a God in whom she no longer precisely believed—she still believed in *something*, but since awakening to Roland’s world on the beach of the Western Sea, her concept of the invisible world had changed considerably. *Please help us find the Beam again. Please help us escape this world of silence and death.*

They ran into the biggest clear space they had yet come to near a road sign which read BIG SPRINGS 2 MI. Behind them, in the west, the setting sun shone through a brief rift in the clouds, skipping scarlet splinters across the top of the thinny and lighting the windows and taillights of the stalled cars in tones of fire. On either side of them empty fields stretched away. *Full Earth come and gone*, Susannah thought. *Reaping come and gone, too. This is what Roland calls closing the year.* The thought made her shiver.

“We’ll camp here for the night,” Roland said soon after they had passed the Big Springs exit ramp. Up ahead they could see the thinny encroaching on the highway again, but that was miles farther on—you could see a damn long way in eastern Kansas, Susannah was discovering. “We can get firewood without going too near the thinny, and the sound won’t be too bad. We may even be able to sleep without bullets stuffed into our ears.”

Eddie and Jake climbed over the guardrails, descended the bank, and foraged for wood along a dry creekbed, staying together as Roland admonished them to do. When they came back, the clouds had gulped the sun again, and an ashy, uninteresting twilight had begun to creep over the world.

The gunslinger stripped twigs for kindling, then laid his fuel around them in his usual fashion, building a kind of wooden chimney in the breakdown lane. As he did it, Eddie strolled across to the median strip and stood there, hands in pockets, looking east. After a few moments, Jake and Oy joined him.

Roland produced his flint and steel, scraped fire into the shaft of his chimney, and soon the little campfire was burning.

“Roland!” Eddie called. “Suze! Come over here! Look at this!”

Susannah started rolling her chair toward Eddie, then Roland—after a final check of his campfire—took hold of the handles and pushed her.

“Look at what?” Susannah asked.

Eddie pointed. At first Susannah saw nothing, although the turnpike was perfectly visible even beyond the point where the thinny closed in again, perhaps three miles ahead. Then . . . yes, she might see something. Maybe. A kind of shape, at the farthest edge of vision. If not for the fading daylight . . .

“Is it a building?” Jake asked. “Cripes, it looks like it’s built right across the highway!”

“What about it, Roland?” Eddie asked. “You’ve got the best eyes in the universe.”

For a time the gunslinger said nothing, only looked up the median strip with his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. At last he said, “We’ll see it better when we get closer.”

“Oh, come on!” Eddie said. “I mean, holy shit! Do you know what it is or not?”

“We’ll see it better when we get closer,” the gunslinger repeated . . . which was, of course, no answer at all. He moseyed back across the eastbound lanes to check on his campfire, bootheels clicking on the pavement. Susannah looked at Jake and Eddie. She shrugged. They shrugged back . . . and then Jake burst into bright peals of laughter. Usually, Susannah thought, the kid acted more like an eighteen-year-old than a boy of eleven, but that laughter made him sound about nine-going-on-ten, and she didn’t mind a bit.

She looked down at Oy, who was looking at them earnestly and rolling his shoulders in an effort to shrug.

8

They ate the leaf-wrapped delicacies Eddie called gunslinger burritos, drawing closer to the fire and feeding it more wood as the

dark drew down. Somewhere south a bird cried out—it was just about the loneliest sound he had ever heard in his life, Eddie reckoned. None of them talked much, and it occurred to him that, at this time of their day, hardly anyone ever did. As if the time when the earth swapped day for dark was special, a time that somehow closed them off from the powerful fellowship Roland called *ka-tet*.

Jake fed Oy small scraps of dried deermeat from his last burrito; Susannah sat on her bedroll, legs crossed beneath her hide smock, looking dreamily into the fire; Roland lay back on his elbows, looking up at the sky, where the clouds had begun to melt away from the stars. Looking up himself, Eddie saw that Old Star and Old Mother were gone, their places taken by Polaris and the Big Dipper. This might not be his world—Takuro automobiles, the Kansas City Monarchs, and a food franchise called Boing Boing Burgers all suggested it wasn't—but Eddie thought it was too close for comfort. *Maybe*, he thought, *the world next door*.

When the bird cried in the distance again, he roused himself and looked at Roland. “You had something you were going to tell us,” he said. “A thrilling tale of your youth, I believe. Susan—that was her name, wasn't it?”

For a moment longer the gunslinger continued to look up at the sky—now it was Roland who must find himself adrift in the constellations, Eddie realized—and then he shifted his gaze to his friends. He looked strangely apologetic, strangely uneasy. “Would you think I was cozening,” he said, “if I asked for one more day to think of these things? Or perhaps it's a night to dream of them that I really want. They are old things, dead things, perhaps, but I . . .” He raised his hands in a kind of distracted gesture. “Some things don't rest easy even when they're dead. Their bones cry out from the ground.”

“There are ghosts,” Jake said, and in his eyes Eddie saw a shadow of the horror he must have felt inside the house in Dutch Hill. The horror he must have felt when the Doorkeeper came out of the

wall and reached for him. “Sometimes there are ghosts, and sometimes they come back.”

“Yes,” Roland said. “Sometimes there are, and sometimes they do.”

“Maybe it’s better not to brood,” Susannah said. “Sometimes—especially when you know a thing’s going to be hard—it’s better just to get on your horse and ride.”

Roland thought this over carefully, then raised his eyes to look at her. “At tomorrow night’s fire I will tell you of Susan,” he said. “This I promise on my father’s name.”

“Do we need to hear?” Eddie asked abruptly. He was almost astounded to hear this question coming out of his mouth; no one had been more curious about the gunslinger’s past than Eddie himself. “I mean, if it really hurts, Roland . . . hurts big-time . . . maybe . . .”

“I’m not sure you need to hear, but I think I need to tell. Our future is the Tower, and to go toward it with a whole heart, I must put my past to rest as best I may. There’s no way I could tell you all of it—in my world even the past is in motion, rearranging itself in many vital ways—but this one story may stand for all the rest.”

“Is it a Western?” Jake asked suddenly.

Roland looked at him, puzzled. “I don’t take your meaning, Jake. Gilead is a Barony of the Western World, yes, and Mejis as well, but —”

“It’ll be a Western,” Eddie said. “All Roland’s stories are Westerns, when you get right down to it.” He lay back and pulled his blanket over him. Faintly, from both east and west, he could hear the warble of the thimny. He checked in his pocket for the bullets Roland had given him, and nodded with satisfaction when he felt them. He reckoned he could sleep without them tonight, but he would want them again tomorrow. They weren’t done turnpikin’ just yet.

Susannah leaned over him, kissed the tip of his nose. “Done for the day, sugar?”

“Yep,” Eddie said, and laced his hands together behind his head. “It’s not every day that I hook a ride on the world’s fastest train, destroy the world’s smartest computer, and then discover that everyone’s been scragged by the flu. All before dinner, too. Shit like that makes a man tired.” Eddie smiled and closed his eyes. He was still smiling when sleep took him.

9

In his dream, they were all standing on the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street, looking over the short board fence and into the weedy vacant lot behind it. They were wearing their Mid-World clothes—a motley combination of deerskin and old shirts, mostly held together with spit and shoelaces—but none of the pedestrians hurrying by on Second seemed to notice. No one noticed the billy-bumbler in Jake’s arms or the artillery they were packing, either.

Because we’re ghosts, Eddie thought. We’re ghosts and we don’t rest easy.

On the fence there were handbills—one for the Sex Pistols (a reunion tour, according to the poster, and Eddie thought that was pretty funny—the Pistols was one group that was *never* going to get back together), one for a comic, Adam Sandler, that Eddie had never heard of, one for a movie called *The Craft*, about teenage witches. Beyond that one, written in letters the dusky pink of summer roses, was this:

See the BEAR of fearsome size!
All the WORLD’S within his eyes.
TIME grows thin, the past’s a riddle;
The TOWER awaits you in the middle.

“*There,*” Jake said, pointing. “*The rose. See how it awaits us, there in the middle of the lot.*”

“Yes, it’s very beautiful,” Susannah said. Then she pointed to the sign standing near the rose and facing Second Avenue. Her voice and her eyes were troubled. *“But what about that?”*

According to the sign, two outfits—Mills Construction and Sombra Real Estate—were going to combine on something called Turtle Bay Condominiums, said condos to be erected on this very spot. When? COMING SOON was all the sign had to say in that regard.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Jake said. *“That sign was here before. It’s probably old as the hi—”*

At that moment the revving sound of an engine tore into the air. From beyond the fence, on the Forty-sixth Street side of the lot, chugs of dirty brown exhaust ascended like bad-news smoke signals. Suddenly the boards on that side burst open, and a huge red bulldozer lunged through. Even the blade was red, although the words slashed across its scoop—ALL HAIL THE CRIMSON KING—were written in a yellow as bright as panic. Sitting in the peak-seat, his rotting face leering at them from above the controls, was the man who had kidnapped Jake from the bridge over the River Send—their old pal Gasher. On the front of his cocked-back hardhat, the words LAMERK FOUNDRY stood out in black. Above them, a single staring eye had been painted.

Gasher lowered the ’dozer’s blade. It tore across the lot on a diagonal, smashing brick, pulverizing beer and soda bottles to glittering powder, striking sparks from the rocks. Directly in its path, the rose nodded its delicate head.

“Let’s see you ask some of yer silly questions now!” this unwelcome apparition cried. *“Ask all yer wants, my dear little culls, why not? Wery fond of riddles is yer old pal Gasher! Just so you understand that, no matter what yer ask, I’m gointer run that nasty thing over, mash it flat, aye, so I will! Then back over it I’ll go! Root and branch, my dear little culls! Aye, root and branch!”*

Susannah shrieked as the scarlet bulldozer blade bore down on the rose, and Eddie grabbed for the fence. He would vault over it, throw himself on the rose, try to protect it . . .

. . . except it was too late. And he knew it.

He looked back up at the cackling thing in the bulldozer's peak-seat and saw that Gasher was gone. Now the man at the controls was Engineer Bob, from *Charlie the Choo-Choo*.

"Stop!" Eddie screamed. *"For Christ's sake, stop!"*

"I can't, Eddie. The world has moved on, and I can't stop. I must move on with it."

And as the shadow of the 'dozer fell over the rose, as the blade tore through one of the posts holding up the sign (Eddie saw COMING SOON had changed to COMING NOW), he realized that the man at the controls wasn't Engineer Bob, either.

It was Roland.

10

Eddie sat up in the breakdown lane of the turnpike, gasping breath he could see in the air and with sweat already chilling on his hot skin. He was sure he had screamed, *must* have screamed, but Susannah still slept beside him with only the top of her head poking out of the bedroll they shared, and Jake was snoring softly off to the left, one arm out of his own blankets and curled around Oy. The bumbler was also sleeping.

Roland wasn't. Roland sat calmly on the far side of the dead campfire, cleaning his guns by starlight and looking at Eddie.

"Bad dreams." Not a question.

"Yeah."

“A visit from your brother?”

Eddie shook his head.

“The Tower, then? The field of roses and the Tower?” Roland’s face remained impassive, but Eddie could hear the subtle eagerness which always came into his voice when the subject was the Dark Tower. Eddie had once called the gunslinger a Tower junkie, and Roland hadn’t denied it.

“Not this time.”

“What, then?”

Eddie shivered. “Cold.”

“Yes. Thank your gods there’s no rain, at least. Autumn rain’s an evil to be avoided whenever one may. What was your dream?”

Still Eddie hesitated. “You’d never betray us, would you, Roland?”

“No man can say that for sure, Eddie, and I have already played the betrayer more than once. To my shame. But . . . I think those days are over. We are one, *ka-tet*. If I betray any one of you—even Jake’s furry friend, perhaps—I betray myself. Why do you ask?”

“And you’d never betray your quest.”

“Renounce the Tower? No, Eddie. Not that, not ever. Tell me your dream.”

Eddie did, omitting nothing. When he had finished, Roland looked down at his guns, frowning. They seemed to have reassembled themselves while Eddie was talking.

“So what does it mean, that I saw you driving that ’dozer at the end? That I still don’t trust you? That subconsciously—”

“Is this ology-of-the-psyche? The cabala I have heard you and Susannah speak of?”

“Yes, I guess it is.”

“It’s shit,” Roland said dismissively. “Mudpies of the mind. Dreams either mean nothing or everything—and when they mean everything, they almost always come as messages from . . . well, from other levels of the Tower.” He gazed at Eddie shrewdly. “And not all messages are sent by friends.”

“Something or someone is fucking with my head? Is that what you mean?”

“I think it possible. But you must watch me all the same. I bear watching, as you well know.”

“I trust you,” Eddie said, and the very awkwardness with which he spoke lent his words sincerity. Roland looked touched, almost shaken, and Eddie wondered how he ever could have thought this man an emotionless robot. Roland might be a little short on imagination, but he had feelings, all right.

“One thing about your dream concerns me very much, Eddie.”

“The bulldozer?”

“The machine, yes. The threat to the rose.”

“Jake saw the rose, Roland. It was fine.”

Roland nodded. “In his when, the when of that particular day, the rose was thriving. But that doesn’t mean it will continue to do so. If the construction the sign spoke of comes . . . if the *bulldozer* comes . . .”

“There are other worlds than these,” Eddie said. “Remember?”

“Some things may exist only in one. In one *where*, in one *when*.” Roland lay down and looked up at the stars. “We must protect that rose,” he said. “We must protect it at all costs.”

“You think it’s another door, don’t you? One that opens on the Dark Tower.”

The gunslinger looked at him from eyes that ran with starshine. “I think it may *be* the Tower,” he said. “And if it’s destroyed—”

His eyes closed. He said no more.

Eddie lay awake late.

11

The new day dawned clear and bright and cold. In the strong morning sunlight, the thing Eddie had spotted the evening before was more clearly visible . . . but he still couldn’t tell what it was. Another riddle, and he was getting damned sick of them.

He stood squinting at it, shading his eyes from the sun, with Susannah on one side of him and Jake on the other. Roland was back by the campfire, packing what he called their *gunna*, a word which seemed to mean all their worldly goods. He appeared not to be concerned with the thing up ahead, or to know what it was.

How far away? Thirty miles? Fifty? The answer seemed to depend on how far could you see in all this flat land, and Eddie didn’t know the answer. One thing he felt quite sure of was that Jake had been right on at least two counts—it was some kind of building, and it sprawled across all four lanes of the highway. It must; how else could they see it? It would have been lost in the thinny . . . wouldn’t it?

Maybe it’s standing in one of those open patches—what Suze calls “the holes in the clouds.” Or maybe the thinny ends before we get that far. Or maybe it’s a goddam hallucination. In any case, you

might as well put it out of your mind for the time being. Got a little more turnpikin' to do.

Still, the building held him. It looked like an airy Arabian Nights confection of blue and gold . . . except Eddie had an idea that the blue was stolen from the sky and the gold from the newly risen sun.

“Roland, come here a second!”

At first he didn't think the gunslinger would, but then Roland cinched a rawhide lace on Susannah's pack, rose, put his hands in the small of his back, stretched, and walked over to them.

“Gods, one would think no one in this band has the wit to housekeep but me,” Roland said.

“We'll pitch in,” Eddie said, “we always do, don't we? But look at that thing first.”

Roland did, but only with a quick glance, as if he did not even want to acknowledge it.

“It's glass, isn't it?” Eddie asked.

Roland took another brief look. “I wot,” he said, a phrase which seemed to mean *Reckon so, partner*.

“We've got lots of glass buildings where I come from, but most of them are office buildings. That thing up ahead looks more like something from Disney World. Do you know what it is?”

“No.”

“Then why don't you want to look at it?” Susannah asked.

Roland *did* take another look at the distant blaze of light on glass, but once again it was quick—little more than a peek.

“Because it’s trouble,” Roland said, “and it’s in our road. We’ll get there in time. No need to live in trouble until trouble comes.”

“Will we get there today?” Jake asked.

Roland shrugged, his face still closed. “There’ll be water if God wills it,” he said.

“Christ, you could have made a fortune writing fortune cookies,” Eddie said. He hoped for a smile, at least, but got none. Roland simply walked back across the road, dropped to one knee, shouldered his purse and his pack, and waited for the others. When they were ready, the pilgrims resumed their walk east along Interstate 70. The gunslinger led, walking with his head down and his eyes on the toes of his boots.

12

Roland was quiet all day, and as the building ahead of them neared (*trouble, and in our road*, he had said), Susannah came to realize it wasn’t grumpiness they were seeing, or worry about anything which lay any farther ahead of them than tonight. It was the story he’d promised to tell them that Roland was thinking about, and he was a lot more than worried.

By the time they stopped for their noon meal, they could clearly see the building ahead—a many-turreted palace which appeared to be made entirely of reflective glass. The thinny lay close around it, but the palace rose serenely above all, its turrets trying for the sky. Madly strange here in the flat countryside of eastern Kansas, of course it was, but Susannah thought it the most beautiful building she had ever seen in her life; even more beautiful than the Chrysler Building, and that was going some.

As they drew closer, she found it more and more difficult to look elsewhere. Watching the reflections of the puffy clouds sailing across the glass castle’s blue-sky wains and walls was like watching some splendid illusion . . . yet there was a solidity to it, as well. An

inarguability. Some of that was probably just the shadow it threw—mirages did not, so far as she knew, create shadows—but not all. It just *was*. She had no idea what such a fabulosity was doing out here in the land of Stuckey's and Hardee's (not to mention Boing Boing Burgers), but there it was. She reckoned that time would tell the rest.

13

They made camp in silence, watched Roland build the wooden chimney that would be their fire in silence, then sat before it in silence, watching the sunset turn the huge glass edifice ahead of them into a castle of fire. Its towers and battlements glowed first a fierce red, then orange, then a gold which cooled rapidly to ocher as Old Star appeared in the firmament above them—

No, she thought in Detta's voice. Ain't dat one, girl. Not 'tall. That's the North Star. Same one you seen back home, sittin on yo' daddy's lap.

But it was Old Star she wanted, she discovered; Old Star and Old Mother. She was astounded to find herself homesick for Roland's world, and then wondered why she should be so surprised. It was a world, after all, where no one had called her a nigger bitch (at least not yet), a world where she had found someone to love . . . and made good friends as well. That last made her feel a little bit like crying, and she hugged Jake to her. He let himself be hugged, smiling, his eyes half-closed. At some distance, unpleasant but bearable even without bullet earplugs, the thinny warbled its moaning song.

When the last traces of yellow began to fade from the castle up the road, Roland left them to sit in the turnpike travel lane and returned to his fire. He cooked more leaf-wrapped deermeat, and handed the food around. They ate in silence (Roland actually ate almost nothing, Susannah observed). By the time they were finished, they could see the Milky Way scattered across the walls of the castle ahead of them, fierce points of reflection that burned like fire in still water.

Eddie was the one who finally broke the silence. “You don’t have to,” he said. “You’re excused. Or absolved. Or whatever the hell it is you need to take that look off your face.”

Roland ignored him. He drank, tilting the waterskin up on his elbow like some hick drinking moonshine from a jug, head back, eyes on the stars. The last mouthful he spat to the roadside.

“Life for your crop,” Eddie said. He did not smile.

Roland said nothing, but his cheek went pale, as if he had seen a ghost. Or heard one.

14

The gunslinger turned to Jake, who looked back at him seriously. “I went through the trial of manhood at the age of fourteen, the youngest of my *ka-tel*—of my class, you would say—and perhaps the youngest ever. I told you some of that, Jake. Do you remember?”

You told all of us some of that, Susannah thought, but kept her mouth shut, and warned Eddie with her eyes to do the same. Roland hadn’t been himself during that telling; with Jake both dead and alive within his head, the man had been fighting madness.

“You mean when we were chasing Walter,” Jake said. “After the way station but before I . . . I took my fall.”

“That’s right.”

“I remember a little, but that’s all. The way you remember the stuff you dream about.”

Roland nodded. “Listen, then. I would tell you more this time, Jake, because you are older. I suppose we all are.”

Susannah was no less fascinated with the story the second time: how the boy Roland had chanced to discover Marten, his father’s

advisor (his father's *wizard*) in his mother's apartment. Only none of it had been by chance, of course; the boy would have passed her door with no more than a glance had Marten not opened it and invited him in. Marten had told Roland that his mother wanted to see him, but one look at her rueful smile and downcast eyes as she sat in her low-back chair told the boy he was the last person in the world Gabrielle Deschain wanted to see just then.

The flush on her cheek and the love-bite on the side of her neck told him everything else.

Thus had he been goaded by Marten into an early trial of manhood, and by employing a weapon his teacher had not expected—his hawk, David—Roland had defeated Cort, taken his stick . . . and made the enemy of his life in Marten Broadcloak.

Beaten badly, face swelling into something that looked like a child's goblin mask, slipping toward a coma, Cort had fought back unconsciousness long enough to offer his newest apprentice gunslinger counsel: stay away from Marten yet awhile, Cort had said.

"He told me to let the story of our battle grow into a legend," the gunslinger told Eddie, Susannah, and Jake. "To wait until my shadow had grown hair on its face and haunted Marten in his dreams."

"Did you take his advice?" Susannah asked.

"I never got a chance," Roland said. His face cracked in a rueful, painful smile. "I meant to think about it, and seriously, but before I even got started on my thinking, things . . . changed."

"They have a way of doing that, don't they?" Eddie said. "My goodness, yes."

"I buried my hawk, the first weapon I ever wielded, and perhaps the finest. Then—and this part I'm sure I didn't tell you before, Jake—I went into the lower town. That summer's heat broke in storms full

of thunder and hail, and in a room above one of the brothels where Cort had been wont to roister, I lay with a woman for the first time.”

He poked a stick thoughtfully into the fire, seemed to become aware of the unconscious symbolism in what he was doing, and threw it away with a lopsided grin. It landed, smoldering, near the tire of an abandoned Dodge Aspen and went out.

“It was good. The sex was good. Not the great thing I and my friends had thought about and whispered about and wondered about, of course—”

“I think store-bought pussy tends to be overrated by the young, sugar,” Susannah said.

“I fell asleep listening to the sots downstairs singing along with the piano and to the sound of hail on the window. I awoke the next morning in . . . well . . . let’s just say I awoke in a way I never would have expected to awake in such a place.”

Jake fed fresh fuel to the fire. It flared up, painting highlights on Roland’s cheeks, brushing crescents of shadow beneath his brows and below his lower lip. And as he talked, Susannah found she could almost see what had happened on that long-ago morning that must have smelled of wet cobblestones and rain-sweetened summer air; what had happened in a whore’s crib above a drinking-dive in the lower town of Gilead, Barony seat of New Canaan, one small mote of land located in the western regions of Mid-World.

One boy, still aching from his battle of the day before and newly educated in the mysteries of sex. One boy, now looking twelve instead of fourteen, his lashes dusting down thick upon his cheeks, the lids shuttering those extraordinary blue eyes; one boy with his hand loosely cupping a whore’s breast, his hawk-scarred wrist lying tanned upon the counterpane. One boy in the final instants of his life’s last good sleep, one boy who will shortly be in motion, who will be falling as a dislodged pebble falls on a steep and broken slope of scree; a falling pebble that strikes another, and another, and another,

those pebbles striking yet more, until the whole slope is in motion and the earth shakes with the sound of the landslide.

One boy, one pebble on a slope loose and ready to slide.

A knot exploded in the fire. Somewhere in this dream of Kansas, an animal yipped. Susannah watched sparks swirl up past Roland's incredibly ancient face and saw in that face the sleeping boy of a summer's morn, lying in a bawd's bed. And then she saw the door crash open, ending Gilead's last troubled dream.

15

The man who strode in, crossing the room to the bed before Roland could open his eyes (and before the woman beside him had even begun to register the sound), was tall, slim, dressed in faded jeans and a dusty shirt of blue chambray. On his head was a dark gray hat with a snakeskin band. Lying low on his hips were two old leather holsters. Jutting from them were the sandalwood grips of the pistols the boy would someday bear to lands of which this scowling man with the furious blue eyes would never dream.

Roland was in motion even before he was able to unseal his eyes, rolling to the left, groping beneath the bed for what was there. He was fast, so fast it was scary, but—and Susannah saw this, too, saw it clearly—the man in the faded jeans was faster yet. He grabbed the boy's shoulder and yanked, turning him naked out of bed and onto the floor. The boy sprawled there, reaching again for what was beneath the bed, lightning-quick. The man in the jeans stamped down on his fingers before they could grasp.

“Bastard!” the boy gasped. “Oh, you bas—”

But now his eyes were open, he looked up, and saw that the invading bastard was his father.

The whore was sitting up now, her eyes puffy, her face slack and petulant. “Here!” she cried. “Here, here! You can't just be a-comin in

like that, so you can't! Why, if I was to raise my voice—”

Ignoring her, the man reached beneath the bed and dragged out two gunbelts. Near the end of each was a holstered revolver. They were large, and amazing in this largely gunless world, but they were not so large as those worn by Roland's father, and the grips were eroded metal plates rather than inlaid wood. When the whore saw the guns on the invader's hips and the ones in his hands—the ones her young customer of the night before had been wearing until she had taken him upstairs and divested him of all weapons save for the one with which she was most familiar—the expression of sleepy petulance left her face. What replaced it was the foxlike look of a born survivor. She was up, out of bed, across the floor, and out the door before her bare bum had more than a brief moment to twinkle in the morning sun.

Neither the father standing by the bed nor the son lying naked upon the floor at his feet so much as looked at her. The man in the jeans held out the gunbelts which Roland had taken from the fuzer beneath the apprentices' barracks on the previous afternoon, using Cort's key to open the arsenal door. The man shook the belts under Roland's very nose, as one might hold a torn garment beneath the nose of a feckless puppy that has chewed. He shook them so hard that one of the guns tumbled free. Despite his stupefaction, Roland caught it in midair.

“I thought you were in the west,” Roland said. “In Cressia. After Farson and his—”

Roland's father slapped him hard enough to send the boy tumbling across the room and into a corner with blood pouring from one corner of his mouth. Roland's first, appalling instinct was to raise the gun he still held.

Steven Deschain looked at him, hands on hips, reading this thought even before it was fully formed. His lips pulled back in a singularly mirthless grin, one that showed all of his teeth and most of his gums.

“Shoot me if you will. Why not? Make this abortion complete. Ah, gods, I’d welcome it!”

Roland laid the gun on the floor and pushed it away, using the back of his hand to do it. All at once he wanted his fingers nowhere near the trigger of a gun. They were no longer fully under his control, those fingers. He had discovered that yesterday, right around the time he had broken Cort’s nose.

“Father, I was tested yesterday. I took Cort’s stick. I won. I’m a man.”

“You’re a fool,” his father said. His grin was gone now; he looked haggard and old. He sat down heavily on the whore’s bed, looked at the gunbelts he still held, and dropped them between his feet. “You’re a fourteen-year-old fool, and that’s the worst, most desperate kind.” He looked up, angry all over again, but Roland didn’t mind; anger was better than that look of weariness. That look of age. “I’ve known since you toddled that you were no genius, but I never believed until yestereve that you were an idiot. To let him drive you like a cow in a chute! Gods! You have forgotten the face of your father! Say it!”

And that sparked the boy’s own anger. Everything he had done the day before he had done with his father’s face firmly fixed in his mind.

“That’s not true!” he shouted from where he now sat with his bare butt on the splintery boards of the whore’s crib and his back against the wall, the sun shining through the window and touching the fuzz on his fair, unscarred cheek.

“It *is* true, you whelp! Foolish whelp! Say your atonement or I’ll strip the hide from your very—”

“They were together!” he burst out. “Your wife and your minister—your magician! I saw the mark of his mouth on her neck! *On my mother’s neck!*” He reached for the gun and picked it up, but even in his shame and fury was still careful not to let his fingers stray near

the trigger; he held the apprentice's revolver only by the plain, undecorated metal of its barrel. "Today I end his treacherous, seducer's life with this, and if you aren't man enough to help me, at least you can stand aside and let m—"

One of the revolvers on Steven's hip was out of its holster and in his hand before Roland's eyes saw any move. There was a single shot, deafening as thunder in the little room; it was a full minute before Roland was able to hear the babble of questions and commotion from below. The 'prentice-gun, meanwhile, was long gone, blown out of his hand and leaving nothing behind but a kind of buzzing tingle. It flew out the window, down and gone, its grip a smashed ruin of metal and its short turn in the gunslinger's long tale at an end.

Roland looked at his father, shocked and amazed. Steven looked back, saying nothing for a long time. But now he wore the face Roland remembered from earliest childhood: calm and sure. The weariness and the look of half-distracted fury had passed away like last night's thunderstorms.

At last his father spoke. "I was wrong in what I said, and I apologize. You did not forget my face, Roland. But still you were foolish—you allowed yourself to be driven by one far slyer than you will ever be in your life. It's only by the grace of the gods and the working of *ka* that you have not been sent west, one more true gunslinger out of Marten's road . . . out of John Farson's road . . . and out of the road which leads to the creature that rules them." He stood and held out his arms. "If I had lost you, Roland, I should have died."

Roland got to his feet and went naked to his father, who embraced him fiercely. When Steven Deschain kissed him first on one cheek and then the other, Roland began to weep. Then, in Roland's ear, Steven Deschain whispered six words.

“What?” Susannah asked. “What six words?”

“ ‘I have known for two years,’ ” Roland said. “That was what he whispered.”

“Holy Christ,” Eddie said.

“He told me I couldn’t go back to the palace. If I did, I’d be dead by nightfall. He said, ‘You have been born to your destiny in spite of all Marten could do; yet he has sworn to kill you before you can grow to be a problem to him. It seems that, winner in the test or no, you must leave Gilead anyway. For only awhile, though, and you’ll go east instead of west. I’d not send you alone, either, or without a purpose.’ Then, almost as an afterthought, he added: ‘Or with a pair of sorry ’prentice revolvers.’ ”

“What purpose?” Jake asked. He had clearly been captivated by the story; his eyes shone nearly as bright as Oy’s. “And which friends?”

“These things you must now hear,” Roland said, “and how you judge me will come in time.”

He fetched a sigh—the deep sigh of a man who contemplates some arduous piece of work—and then tossed fresh wood on the fire. As the flames flared up, driving the shadows back a little way, he began to talk. All that queerly long night he talked, not finishing the story of Susan Delgado until the sun was rising in the east and painting the glass castle yonder with all the bright hues of a fresh day, and a strange green cast of light which was its own true color.

PART TWO
SUSAN



CHAPTER I BENEATH THE KISSING MOON

1

A perfect disc of silver—the Kissing Moon, as it was called in Full Earth—hung above the ragged hill five miles east of Hambry and ten miles south of Eyebolt Canyon. Below the hill the late summer heat still held, suffocating even two hours after sundown, but atop the Cöos, it was as if Reap had already come, with its strong breezes and frost-pinchd air. For the woman who lived here with no company but a snake and one old mutie cat, it was to be a long night.

Never mind, though; never mind, my dear. Busy hands are happy hands. So they are.

She waited until the hoofbeats of her visitors' horses had faded, sitting quietly by the window in the hut's large room (there was only one other, a bedroom little bigger than a closet). Musty, the six-legged cat, was on her shoulder. Her lap was full of moonlight.

Three horses, bearing away three men. The Big Coffin Hunters, they called themselves.

She snorted. Men were funny, aye, so they were, and the most amusing thing about them was how little they knew it. Men, with their swaggering, belt-hitching names for themselves. Men, so proud of their muscles, their drinking capacities, their eating capacities; so everlastingly proud of their pricks. Yes, even in these times, when a good many of them could shoot nothing but strange, bent seed that produced children fit only to be drowned in the nearest well. Ah, but it was never their fault, was it, dear? No, always it was the woman—

her womb, her fault. Men were such cowards. Such grinning cowards. These three had been no different from the general run. The old one with the limp might bear watching—aye, so he might, a clear and overly curious pair of eyes had looked out at her from his head—but she saw nothing in them she could not deal with, came it to that.

Men! She could not understand why so many women feared them. Hadn't the gods made them with the most vulnerable part of their guts hanging right out of their bodies, like a misplaced bit of bowel? Kick them there and they curled up like snails. Caress them there and their brains melted. Anyone who doubted that second bit of wisdom need only look at her night's second bit of business, the one which still lay ahead. Thorin! Mayor of Hambry! Chief Guard o' Barony! No fool like an old fool!

Yet none of these thoughts had any real power over her or any real malice to them, at least not now; the three men who called themselves the Big Coffin Hunters had brought her a marvel, and she would look at it; aye, fill up her eyes with it, so she would.

The gimp, Jonas, had insisted she put it away—he had been told she had a place for such things, not that he wanted to see it himself, not *any* of her secret places, gods forbid (at this sally Depape and Reynolds had laughed like trolls)—and so she had, but the hoofbeats of their horses had been swallowed by the wind now, and she would do as she liked. The girl whose tits had stolen what little there was of Hart Thorin's mind would not be here for another hour, at least (the old woman had insisted that the girl walk from town, citing the purification value of such a moonlit heel-and-toe, actually just wanting to put a safe bumper of time between her two appointments), and during that hour she would do as she liked.

“Oh, it's beautiful, I'm sure 'tis,” she whispered, and did she feel a certain heat in that place where her ancient bowlegs came together? A certain moisture in the dry creek which hid there? Gods!

“Aye, even through the box where they hid it I felt its glam. So beautiful, Musty, like you.” She took the cat from her shoulder and held it in front of her eyes. The old tom purred and stretched out its pug of a face toward hers. She kissed its nose. The cat closed its milky gray-green eyes in ecstasy. “So beautiful, like you—so y’are, so y’are! Hee!”

She put the cat down. It walked slowly toward the hearth, where a late fire lazed, desultorily eating at a single log. Musty’s tail, split at the tip so it looked like the forked tail of a devil in an old drawing, switched back and forth in the room’s dim orange air. Its extra legs, dangling from its sides, twitched dreamily. The shadow which trailed across the floor and grew up the wall was a horror: a thing that looked like a cat crossed with a spider.

The old woman rose and went into her sleeping closet, where she had taken the thing Jonas had given her.

“Lose that and you’ll lose your head,” he’d said.

“Never fear me, my good friend,” she’d replied, directing a cringing, servile smile back over her shoulder, all the while thinking: Men! Foolish strutting creatures they were!

Now she went to the foot of her bed, knelt, and passed one hand over the earth floor there. Lines appeared in the sour dirt as she did. They formed a square. She pushed her fingers into one of these lines; it gave before her touch. She lifted the hidden panel (hidden in such a way that no one without the touch would ever be able to uncover it), revealing a compartment perhaps a foot square and two feet deep. Within it was an ironwood box. Curled atop the box was a slim green snake. When she touched its back, its head came up. Its mouth yawned in a silent hiss, displaying four pairs of fangs—two on top, two on the bottom.

She took the snake up, crooning to it. As she brought its flat face close to her own, its mouth yawned wider and its hissing became audible. She opened her own mouth; from between her wrinkled

gray lips she poked the yellowish, bad-smelling mat of her tongue. Two drops of poison—enough to kill an entire dinner-party, if mixed in the punch—fell on it. She swallowed, feeling her mouth and throat and chest burn, as if with strong liquor. For a moment the room swam out of focus, and she could hear voices murmuring in the stenchy air of the hut—the voices of those she called “the unseen friends.” Her eyes ran sticky water down the trenches time had drawn in her cheeks. Then she blew out a breath and the room steadied. The voices faded.

She kissed Ermot between his lidless eyes (*time o’ the Kissing Moon, all right*, she thought) and then set him aside. The snake slipped beneath her bed, curled itself in a circle, and watched as she passed her palms over the top of the ironwood box. She could feel the muscles in her upper arms quivering, and that heat in her loins was more pronounced. Years it had been since she had felt the call of her sex, but she felt it now, so she did, and it was not the doing of the Kissing Moon, or not much.

The box was locked and Jonas had given her no key, but that was nothing to her, who had lived long and studied much and trafficked with creatures that most men, for all their bold talk and strutting ways, would run from as if on fire had they caught even the smallest glimpse of them. She stretched one hand toward the lock, on which was inlaid the shape of an eye and a motto in the High Speech (I SEE WHO OPENS ME), and then withdrew it. All at once she could smell what her nose no longer noticed under ordinary circumstances: must and dust and a dirty mattress and the crumbs of food that had been consumed in bed; the mingled stench of ashes and ancient incense; the odor of an old woman with wet eyes and (ordinarily, at least) a dry pussy. She would not open this box and look at the wonder it contained in here; she would go outside, where the air was clean and the only smells were sage and mesquite.

She would look by the light of the Kissing Moon.

Rhea of Cöos Hill pulled the box from its hole with a grunt, rose to her feet with another grunt (this one from her nether regions), tucked

the box under her arm, and left the room.

2

The hut was far enough below the brow of the hill to block off the bitterest gusts of the winter wind which blew almost constantly in these highlands from Reaping until the end of Wide Earth. A path led to the hill's highest vantage; beneath the full moon it was a ditch of silver. The old woman toiled up it, puffing, her white hair standing out around her head in dirty clumps, her old dugs swaying from side to side under her black dress. The cat followed in her shadow, still giving off its rusty purr like a stink.

At the top of the hill, the wind lifted her hair away from her ravaged face and brought her the moaning whisper of the thinny which had eaten its way into the far end of Eyebolt Canyon. It was a sound few cared for, she knew, but she herself loved it; to Rhea of the Cöos, it sounded like a lullabye. Overhead rode the moon, the shadows on its bright skin sketching the faces of lovers kissing . . . if you believed the ordinary fools below, that was. The ordinary fools below saw a different face or set of faces in each full moon, but the hag knew there was only one—the face of the Demon. The face of death.

She herself, however, had never felt more alive.

“Oh, my beauty,” she whispered, and touched the lock with her gnarled fingers. A faint glimmer of red light showed between her bunched knuckles, and there was a click. Breathing hard, like a woman who has run a race, she put the box down and opened it.

Rose-colored light, dimmer than that thrown by the Kissing Moon but infinitely more beautiful, spilled out. It touched the ruined face hanging above the box, and for a moment made it the face of a young girl again.

Musty sniffed, head stretched forward, ears laid back, old eyes rimmed with that rose light. Rhea was instantly jealous.

“Get away, foolish, ’tis not for the likes of you!”

She swatted the cat. Musty shied back, hissing like a kettle, and stalked in dudgeon to the hummock which marked the very tip of Cöos Hill. There he sat, affecting disdain and licking one paw as the wind combed ceaselessly through his fur.

Within the box, peeping out of a velvet drawstring bag, was a glass globe. It was filled with that rosy light; it flowed in gentle pulses, like the beat of a satisfied heart.

“Oh, my lovely one,” she murmured, lifting it out. She held it up before her; let its pulsing radiance run down her wrinkled face like rain. “Oh, ye live, so ye do!”

Suddenly the color within the globe darkened toward scarlet. She felt it thrum in her hands like an immensely powerful motor, and again she felt that amazing wetness between her legs, that tidal tug she believed had been left behind long ago.

Then the thrumming died, and the light in the globe seemed to furl up like petals. Where it had been there was now a pinkish gloom . . . and three riders coming out of it. At first she thought it was the men who had brought her the globe—Jonas and the others. But no, these were younger, even younger than Depape, who was about twenty-five. The one on the left of the trio appeared to have a bird’s skull mounted on the pommel of his saddle—strange but true.

Then that one and the one on the right were gone, darkened away somehow by the power of the glass, leaving only the one in the middle. She took in the jeans and boots he wore, the flat-brimmed hat that hid the upper half of his face, the easy way he sat his horse, and her first alarmed thought was *Gunslinger! Come east from the Inner Baronies, aye, perhaps from Gilead itself!* But she did not have to see the upper half of the rider’s face to know he was little more than a child, and there were no guns on his hips. Yet she didn’t think the youth came unarmed. If only she could see a little better . . .

She brought the glass almost to the tip of her nose and whispered, “Closer, lovie! Closer still!”

She didn’t know what to expect—nothing at all seemed most likely—but within the dark circle of the glass, the figure did come closer. *Swam* closer, almost, like a horse and rider underwater, and she saw there was a quiver of arrows on his back. Before him, on the pommel of his saddle, was not a skull but a shortbow. And to the right side of the saddle, where a gunslinger might have carried a rifle in a scabbard, there was the feather-fluffed shaft of a lance. He was not one of the Old People, his face had none of that look . . . yet she did not think he was of the Outer Arc, either.

“But who *are* ye, cully?” she breathed. “And how shall I know ye? Ye’ve got yer hat pulled down so far I can’t see your God-pounding eyes, so ye do! By yer horse, mayhap . . . or p’raps by yer . . . get away, Musty! Why do yer trouble me so? Arrrr!”

The cat had come back from its lookout point and was twining back and forth between her swollen old ankles, *waowing* up at her in a voice even more rusty than its purr. When the old woman kicked out at him, Musty dodged agilely away . . . then immediately came back and started in again, looking up at her with moonstruck eyes and making those soft yowls.

Rhea kicked out at it again, this one just as ineffectual as the first one, then looked into the glass once more. The horse and its interesting young rider were gone. The rose light was gone, as well. It was now just a dead glass ball she held, its only light a reflection borrowed from the moon.

The wind gusted, pressing her dress against the ruination that was her body. Musty, undaunted by the feeble kicks of his mistress, darted forward and began to twine about her ankles again, crying up at her the whole time.

“There, do ye see what you’ve done, ye nasty bag of fleas and disease? The light’s gone out of it, gone out just when I—”

Then she heard a sound from the cart track which led up to her hut, and understood why Musty had been acting out. It was singing she heard. It was the *girl* she heard. The girl was early.

Grimacing horribly—she loathed being caught by surprise, and the little miss down there would pay for doing it—she bent and put the glass back in its box. The inside was lined with padded silk, and the ball fit as neatly as the breakfast egg in His Lordship’s cup. And still from down the hill (the cursed wind was wrong or she would have heard it sooner), the sound of the girl singing, now closer than ever:

*“Love, o love, o careless love,
Can’t you see what careless love has done?”*

“I’ll give’ee careless love, ye virgin bitch,” the old woman said. She could smell the sour reek of sweat from under her arms, but that other moisture had dried up again. “I’ll give ye payday for walking in early on old Rhea, so I will!”

She passed her fingers over the lock on the front of the box, but it wouldn’t fasten. She supposed she had been overeager to have it open, and had broken something inside it when she used the touch. The eye and the motto seemed to mock her: I SEE WHO OPENS ME. It could be put right, and in a jiffy, but right now even a jiffy was more than she had.

“Pestering cunt!” she whined, lifting her head briefly toward the approaching voice (almost here now, by the gods, and forty-five minutes before her time!). Then she closed the lid of the box. It gave her a pang to do it, because the glass was coming to life again, filling with that rosy glow, but there was no time for looking or dreaming now. Later, perhaps, after the object of Thorin’s unseemly late-life prickishness had gone.

And you must restrain yourself from doing anything too awful to the girl, she cautioned herself. Remember she’s here because of him, and at least ain’t one of those green girls with a bun in the oven and a boyfriend acting reluctant about the cries o’ marriage. It’s

Thorin's doing, this one's what he thinks about after his ugly old crow of a wife is asleep and he takes himself in his hand and commences the evening milking; it's Thorin's doing, he has the old law on his side, and he has power. Furthermore, what's in that box is his man's business, and if Jonas found out ye looked at it . . . that ye used it . . .

Aye, but no fear of that. And in the meantime, possession were nine-tenths of the law, were it not?

She hoisted the box under one arm, hoisted her skirts with her free hand, and ran back along the path to the hut. She could still run when she had to, aye, though few there were who'd believe it.

Musty ran at her heels, bounding along with his cloven tail held high and his extra legs flopping up and down in the moonlight.

CHAPTER II

PROVING HONESTY

1

Rhea darted into her hut, crossed in front of the guttering fire, then stood in the doorway to her tiny bedroom, swiping a hand through her hair in a distracted gesture. The bitch hadn't seen her outside the hut—she surely would have stopped caterwauling, or at least faltered in it if she had—and that was good, but the cursed hidey-hole had sealed itself up again, and that was bad. There was no time to open it again, either. Rhea hurried to the bed, knelt, and pushed the box far back into the shadows beneath.

Ay, that would do; until Susy Greengown was gone, it would do very well. Smiling on the right side of her mouth (the left was mostly frozen), Rhea got up, brushed her dress, and went to meet her second appointment of the night.

2

Behind her, the unlocked lid of the box clicked open. It came up less than an inch, but that was enough to allow a sliver of pulsing rose-colored light to shine out.

3

Susan Delgado stopped about forty yards from the witch's hut, the sweat chilling on her arms and the nape of her neck. Had she just spied an old woman (surely the one she had come to see) dart down that last bit of path leading from the top of the hill? She thought she had.

Don't stop singing—when an old lady hurries like that, she doesn't want to be seen. If you stop singing, she'll likely know she was.

For a moment Susan thought she'd stop anyway—that her memory would close up like a startled hand and deny her another verse of the old song which she had been singing since youngest childhood. But the next verse came to her, and she continued on (with feet as well as voice):

*“Once my cares were far away,
Yes, once my cares were far away,
Now my love has gone from me
And misery is in my heart to stay.”*

A bad song for a night such as this, mayhap, but her heart went its own way without much interest in what her head thought or wanted; always had. She was frightened to be out by moonlight, when werewolves were said to walk, she was frightened of her errand, and she was frightened by what that errand portended. Yet when she had gained the Great Road out of Hambry and her heart had demanded she run, she had run—under the light of the Kissing Moon and with her skirt held above her knees she had galloped like a pony, with her shadow galloping right beside her. For a mile or more she had run, until every muscle in her body tingled and the air she pulled down her throat tasted like some sweet heated liquid. And when she reached the upland track leading to this high sinister, she had sung. Because her heart demanded it. And, she supposed, it really hadn't been such a bad idea; if nothing else, it had kept the worst of her megrims away. Singing was good for that much, anyway.

Now she walked to the end of the path, singing the chorus of “Careless Love.” As she stepped into the scant light which fell through the open door and onto the stoop, a harsh raincrow voice spoke from the shadows: “Stop yer howling, missy—it catches in my brains like a fishhook!”

Susan, who had been told all her life that she had a fair singing voice, a gift from her grandma, no doubt, fell silent at once, abashed.

She stood on the stoop with her hands clasped in front of her apron. Beneath the apron she wore her second-best dress (she only had two). Beneath it, her heart was thumping very hard.

A cat—a hideous thing with two extra legs sticking out of its sides like toasting forks—came into the doorway first. It looked up at her, seemed to measure her, then screwed its face up in a look that was eerily human: contempt. It hissed at her, then flashed away into the night.

Well, good evening to you, too, Susan thought.

The old woman she had been sent to see stepped into the doorway. She looked Susan up and down with that same expression of flat-eyed contempt, then stood back. “Come in. And mind ye clap the door tight. The wind has a way of blowin it open, as ye see!”

Susan stepped inside. She didn’t want to close herself into this bad-smelling room with the old woman, but when there was no choice, hesitation was ever a fault. So her father had said, whether the matter under discussion was sums and subtractions or how to deal with boys at barn-dances when their hands became overly adventurous. She pulled the door firmly to, and heard it latch.

“And here y’are,” the old woman said, and offered a grotesque smile of welcome. It was a smile guaranteed to make even a brave girl think of stories told in the nursery—Winter’s tales of old women with snaggle teeth and bubbling cauldrons full of toad-green liquid. There was no cauldron over the fire in this room (nor was the fire itself much of a shake, in Susan’s opinion), but the girl guessed there had been, betimes, and things in it of which it might be better not to think. That this woman was a real witch and not just an old lady posing as one was something Susan had felt sure of from the moment she had seen Rhea darting back inside her hut with the malformed cat at her heels. It was something you could almost smell, like the reeky aroma rising off the hag’s skin.

“Yes,” she said, smiling. She tried to make it a good one, bright and unafraid. “Here I am.”

“And it’s early y’are, my little sweeting. Early y’are! Hee!”

“I ran partway. The moon got into my blood, I suppose. That’s what my da would have said.”

The old woman’s horrible smile widened into something that made Susan think of the way eels sometimes seemed to grin, after death and just before the pot. “Aye, but dead he is, dead these five years, Pat Delgado of the red hair and beard, the life mashed out of ’im by ’is own horse, aye, and went into the clearing at the end of the path with the music of his own snapping bones in his ears, so he did!”

The nervous smile slipped from Susan’s face as if slapped away. She felt tears, always close at the mere mention of her da’s name, burn at the back of her eyes. But she would not let them fall. Not in this heartless old crow’s sight, she wouldn’t.

“Let our business be quick and be done,” she said in a dry voice that was far from her usual one; that voice was usually cheery and merry and ready for fun. But she was Pat Delgado’s child, daughter of the best drover ever to work the Western Drop, and she remembered his face very well; she could rise to a stronger nature if required, as it now clearly was. The old woman had meant to reach out and scratch as deep as she could, and the more she saw that her efforts were succeeding, the more she would redouble them.

The hag, meanwhile, was watching Susan shrewdly, her bunch-knuckled hands planted on her hips while her cat twined around her ankles. Her eyes were rheumy, but Susan saw enough of them to realize they were the same gray-green shade as the cat’s eyes, and to wonder what sort of fell magic that might be. She felt an urge—a strong one—to drop her eyes, and would not. It was all right to feel fear, but sometimes a very bad idea to show it.

“You look at me pert, missy,” Rhea said at last. Her smile was dissolving slowly into a petulant frown.

“Nay, old mother,” Susan replied evenly. “Only as one who wishes to do the business she came for and be gone. I have come here at the wish of My Lord Mayor of Mejis, and at that of my Aunt Cordelia, sister of my father. My *dear* father, of whom I would hear no ill spoken.”

“I speak as I do,” the old woman said. The words were dismissive, yet there was a trace of fawning servility in the hag’s voice. Susan set no importance on that; it was a tone such a thing as this had probably adopted her whole life, and came as automatically as breath. “I’ve lived alone a long time, with no mistress but myself, and once it begins, my tongue goes where it will.”

“Then sometimes it might be best not to let it begin at all.”

The old woman’s eyes flashed uglily. “Curb your own, stripling girl, lest you find it dead in your mouth, where it will rot and make the Mayor think twice about kissing you when he smells its stink, aye, even under such a moon as this!”

Susan’s heart filled with misery and bewilderment. She’d come up here intent on only one thing: getting the business done as quickly as possible, a barely explained rite that was apt to be painful and sure to be shameful. Now this old woman was looking at her with flat and naked hatred. How could things have gone wrong with such suddenness? Or was it always this way with witches?

“We have begun badly, mistress—can we start over?” Susan asked suddenly, and held out her hand.

The hag looked startled, although she did reach out and make brief contact, the wrinkled tips of her fingers touching the short-nailed fingers of the sixteen-year-old girl who stood before her with her clear-skinned face shining and her long hair braided down her back. Susan had to make a real effort not to grimace at the touch, brief as

it was. The old woman's fingers were as chilly as those of a corpse, but Susan had touched chilly fingers before ("Cold hands, warm heart," Aunt Cord sometimes said). The real unpleasantness was in the *texture*, the feel of cold flesh spongy and loose on the bones, as if the woman to whom they were attached had drowned and lain long in some pool.

"Nay, nay, there's no starting over," the old woman said, "yet mayhap we'll go on better than we've begun. Ye've a powerful friend in the Mayor, and I'd not have him for my enemy."

She's honest, at least, Susan thought, then had to laugh at herself. This woman would be honest only when she absolutely had to be; left to her own devices and desires, she'd lie about everything—the weather, the crops, the flights of birds come Reaping.

"Ye came before I expected ye, and it's put me out of temper, so it has. Have ye brought me something, missy? Ye have, I'll warrant!" Her eyes were glittering once more, this time not with anger.

Susan reached beneath her apron (so stupid, wearing an apron for an errand on the backside of nowhere, but it was what custom demanded) and into her pocket. There, tied to a string so it could not be easily lost (by young girls suddenly moved to run in the moonlight, perchance), was a cloth bag. Susan broke the binding string and brought the bag out. She put it in the outstretched hand before her, the palm so worn that the lines marking it were now little more than ghosts. She was careful not to touch Rhea again . . . although the old woman would be touching *her* again, and soon.

"Is it the sound o' the wind makes ye shiver?" Rhea asked, although Susan could tell her mind was mostly fixed on the little bag; her fingers were busy tugging out the knot in the drawstring.

"Yes, the wind."

"And so it should. 'Tis the voices of the dead you hear in the wind, and when they scream so, 'tis because they regret—ah!"

The knot gave. She loosened the drawstring and tumbled two gold coins into her hand. They were unevenly milled and crude—no one had made such for generations—but they were heavy, and the eagles engraved upon them had a certain power. Rhea lifted one to her mouth, pulled back her lips to reveal a few gruesome teeth, and bit down. The hag looked at the faint indentations her teeth had left in the gold. For several seconds she gazed, rapt, then closed her fingers over them tightly.

While Rhea's attention was distracted by the coins, Susan happened to look through the open door to her left and into what she assumed was the witch's bedchamber. And here she saw an odd and disquieting thing: a light under the bed. A pink, pulsing light. It seemed to be coming from some kind of box, although she could not quite . . .

The witch looked up, and Susan hastily moved her eyes to a corner of the room, where a net containing three or four strange white fruits hung from a hook. Then, as the old woman moved and her huge shadow danced ponderously away from that part of the wall, Susan saw they were not fruits at all, but skulls. She felt a sickish drop in her stomach.

"The fire needs building up, missy. Go round to the side of the house and bring back an armload of wood. Good-sized sticks are what's wanted, and never mind whining ye can't lug 'em. Ye're of a strappin good size, so ye are!"

Susan, who had quit whining about chores around the time she had quit pissing into her clouts, said nothing . . . although it *did* cross her mind to ask Rhea if everyone who brought her gold was invited to lug her wood. In truth, she didn't mind; the air outside would taste like wine after the stench of the hut.

She had almost reached the door when her foot struck something hot and yielding. The cat yowled. Susan stumbled and almost fell. From behind her, the old woman issued a series of gasping, choking sounds which Susan eventually recognized as laughter.

“Watch Musty, my little sweet one! Tricksy, he is! And *tripsy* as well, betimes, so he is! Hee!” And off she went, in another gale.

The cat looked up at Susan, its ears laid back, its gray-green eyes wide. It hissed at her. And Susan, unaware she was going to do it until it was done, hissed back. Like its expression of contempt, Musty’s look of surprise was eerily—and, in this case, comically—human. It turned and fled for Rhea’s bedroom, its split tail lashing. Susan opened the door and went outside to get the wood. Already she felt as if she had been here a thousand years, and that it might be a thousand more before she could go home.

4

The air was as sweet as she had hoped, perhaps even sweeter, and for a moment she only stood on the stoop, breathing it in, trying to cleanse her lungs . . . and her mind.

After five good breaths, she got herself in motion. Around the side of the house she went . . . but it was the wrong side, it seemed, for there was no woodpile here. There was a narrow excuse for a window, however, half-buried in some tough and unlovely creeper. It was toward the back of the hut, and must look in on the old woman’s sleeping closet.

Don’t look in there, whatever she’s got under her bed isn’t your business, and if she were to catch you . . .

She went to the window despite these admonitions, and peeked in.

It was unlikely that Rhea would have seen Susan’s face through the dense overgrowth of pig ivy even if the old besom had been looking in that direction, and she wasn’t. She was on her knees, the drawstring bag caught in her teeth, reaching under the bed.

She brought out a box and opened its lid, which was already ajar. Her face was flooded with soft pink radiance, and Susan gasped. For

one moment it was the face of a young girl—but one filled with cruelty as well as youth, the face of a self-willed child determined to learn all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons. The face of the girl this hag once had been, mayhap. The light appeared to be coming from some sort of glass ball.

The old woman looked at it for several moments, her eyes wide and fascinated. Her lips moved as if she were speaking to it or perhaps even singing to it; the little bag Susan had brought from town, its string still clamped in the hag's mouth, bobbed up and down as she spoke. Then, with what appeared to be great effort of will, she closed the box, cutting off the rosy light. Susan found herself relieved—there was something about it she didn't like.

The old woman cupped one hand over the silver lock in the middle of the lid, and a brief scarlet light spiked out from between her fingers. All this with the drawstring bag still hanging from her mouth. Then she put the box on the bed, knelt, and began running her hands over the dirt just beneath the bed's edge. Although she touched only with her palms, lines appeared as if she had used a drawing tool. These lines darkened, becoming what looked like grooves.

The wood, Susan! Get the wood before she wakes up to how long you've been gone! For your father's sake!

Susan pulled the skirt of her dress all the way up to her waist—she did not want the old woman to see dirt or leaves on her clothing when she came back inside, did not want to answer the questions the sight of such smuts might provoke—and crawled beneath the window with her white cotton drawers flashing in the moonlight. Once she was past, she got to her feet again and hurried quietly around to the far side of the hut. Here she found the woodpile under an old, moldy-smelling hide. She took half a dozen good-sized chunks and walked back toward the front of the house with them in her arms.

When she entered, turning sideways to get her load through the doorway without dropping any, the old woman was back in the main room, staring moodily into the fireplace, where there was now little more than embers. Of the drawstring bag there was no sign.

“Took you long enough, missy,” Rhea said. She continued to look into the fireplace, as if Susan were of no account . . . but one foot tapped below the dirty hem of her dress, and her eyebrows were drawn together.

Susan crossed the room, peering over the load of wood in her arms as well as she could while she walked. It wouldn’t surprise her a bit to spy the cat lurking near, hoping to trip her up. “I saw a spider,” she said. “I flapped my apron at it to make it run away. I hate the look of them, so I do.”

“Ye’ll see something ye like the look of even less, soon enough,” Rhea said, grinning her peculiar one-sided grin. “Out of old Thorin’s nightshirt it’ll come, stiff as a stick and as red as rhubarb! Hee! Hold a minute, girl; ye gods, ye’ve brought enough for a Fair-Day bonfire.”

Rhea took two fat logs from Susan’s pile and tossed them indifferently onto the coals. Embers spiraled up the dark and faintly roaring shaft of the chimney. *There, ye’ve scattered what’s left of yer fire, ye silly old thing, and will likely have to rekindle the whole mess,* Susan thought. Then Rhea reached into the fireplace with one splayed hand, spoke a guttural word, and the logs blazed up as if soaked in oil.

“Put the rest over there,” she said, pointing at the woodbox. “And mind ye not be a scatterbark, missy.”

What, and dirty all this neat? Susan thought. She bit the insides of her cheeks to kill the smile that wanted to rise on her mouth.

Rhea might have sensed it, however; when Susan straightened again, the old woman was looking at her with a dour, knowing expression.

“All right, mistress, let’s do our business and have it done. Do ye know why you’re here?”

“I am here at Mayor Thorin’s wish,” Susan repeated, knowing that was no real answer. She was frightened now—more frightened than when she had looked through the window and seen the old woman crooning to the glass ball. “His wife has come barren to the end of her courses. He wishes to have a son before he is also unable to—”

“Pish-tush, spare me the codswallop and pretty words. He wants tits and arse that don’t squish in his hands and a box that’ll grip what he pushes. If he’s still man enough to push it, that is. If a son come of it, aye, fine, he’ll give it over to ye to keep and raise until it’s old enough to school, and after that ye’ll see it no more. If it’s a daughter, he’ll likely take it from ye and give it to his new man, the one with the girl’s hair and the limp, to drown in the nearest cattle-wallow.”

Susan stared at her, shocked out of all measure.

The old woman saw the look and laughed. “Don’t like the sound of the truth, do yer? Few do, missy. But that’s neither here nor there; yer auntie was ever a trig one, and she’ll have done all right out of Thorin and Thorin’s treasury. What gold *you* see of it’s none o’ mine . . . and won’t be none o’ yours, either, if you don’t watch sharp! Hee! Take off that dress!”

I won’t was what rose to her lips, but what then? To be turned out of this hut (and to be turned out pretty much as she had come, and not as a lizard or a hopping toad would probably be the best luck she could hope for) and sent west as she was now, without even the two gold coins she’d brought up here? And that was only the small half of it. The large was that she had given her word. At first she had resisted, but when Aunt Cord had invoked her father’s name, she had given in. As she always did. Really, she had no choice. And when there was no choice, hesitation was ever a fault.

She brushed the front of her apron, to which small bits of bark now clung, then untied it and took it off. She folded it, laid it on a small, grimy hassock near the hearth, and unbuttoned her dress to the waist. She shivered it from her shoulders, and stepped out. She folded it and laid it atop the apron, trying not to mind the greedy way Rhea of Cöos was staring at her in the firelight. The cat came sashaying across the floor, grotesque extra legs bobbling, and sat at Rhea's feet. Outside, the wind gusted. It was warm on the hearth but Susan was cold just the same, as if that wind had gotten inside her, somehow.

“Hurry, girl, for yer father's sake!”

Susan pulled her shift over her head, folded it atop the dress, then stood in only her drawers, with her arms folded over her bosom. The fire painted warm orange highlights along her thighs; black circles of shadow in the tender folds behind her knees.

“And still she's not nekkid!” the old crow laughed. “Ain't we lahdi-dah! Aye, we are, very fine! Take off those drawers, mistress, and stand as ye slid from yer mother! Although ye had not so many goodies as to interest the likes of Hart Thorin then, did ye? Hee!”

Feeling caught in a nightmare, Susan did as she was bid. With her mound and bush uncovered, her crossed arms seemed foolish. She lowered them to her sides.

“Ah, no wonder he wants ye!” the old woman said. “'Tis beautiful ye are, and true! Is she not, Musty?”

The cat *waowed*.

“There's dirt on yer knees,” Rhea said suddenly. “How came it there?”

Susan felt a moment of awful panic. She had lifted her skirts to crawl beneath the hag's window . . . and hung herself by doing it.

Then an answer rose to her lips, and she spoke it calmly enough. “When I came in sight of your hut, I grew fearful. I knelt to pray, and raised my skirt so as not to soil it.”

“I’m touched—to want a clean dress for the likes o’ me! How good y’are! Don’t you agree, Musty?”

The cat *waowed*, then began to lick one of its forepaws.

“Get on with it,” Susan said. “You’ve been paid and I’ll obey, but stop teasing and have done.”

“You know what it is I have to do, mistress.”

“I *don’t*,” Susan said. The tears were close again, burning the backs of her eyes, but she would not let them fall. *Would not*. “I have an idea, but when I asked Aunt Cord if I was right, she said that you’d ‘take care of my education in that regard.’ ”

“Wouldn’t dirty her mouth with the words, would she? Well, that’s all right. Yer Aunt Rhea’s not too nice to say what yer Aunt Cordelia won’t. I’m to make sure that ye’re physically and spiritually intact, missy. Proving honesty is what the old ones called it, and it’s a good enough name. So it is. Step to me.”

Susan took two reluctant steps forward, so that her bare toes were almost touching the old woman’s slippers and her bare breasts were almost touching the old woman’s dress.

“If a devil or demon has polluted yer spirit, such a thing as might taint the child you’ll likely bear, it leaves a mark behind. Most often it’s a suck-mark or a lover’s bite, but there’s others . . . open yer mouth!”

Susan did, and when the old woman bent closer, the reek of her was so strong that the girl’s stomach clenched. She held her breath, praying this would be over soon.

“Run out yer tongue.”

Susan ran out her tongue.

“Now send yer breezes into my face.”

Susan exhaled her held breath. Rhea breathed it in and then, mercifully, pulled her head away a little. She had been close enough for Susan to see the lice hopping in her hair.

“Sweet enough,” the old woman said. “Aye, good’s a meal. Now turn around.”

Susan did, and felt the old witch’s fingers trail down her back and to her buttocks. Their tips were cold as mud.

“Bend over and spread yer cheeks, missy, be not shy, Rhea’s seen more than one pultry in her time!”

Face flushing—she could feel the beat of her heart in the center of her forehead and in the hollows of her temples—Susan did as told. And then she felt one of those corpselike fingers prod its way into her anus. Susan bit her lips to keep from screaming.

The invasion was mercifully short . . . but there would be another, Susan feared.

“Turn around.”

She turned. The old woman passed her hands over Susan’s breasts, flicked lightly at the nipples with her thumbs, then examined the undersides carefully. Rhea slipped a finger into the cup of the girl’s navel, then hitched up her own skirt and dropped to her knees with a grunt of effort. She passed her hands down Susan’s legs, first front, then back. She seemed to take special pains with the area just below the calves, where the tendons ran.

“Lift yer right foot, girl.”

Susan did, and uttered a nervous, screamly laugh as Rhea ran a thumbnail down her instep to her heel. The old woman parted her toes, looking between each pair.

After this process had been repeated with the other foot, the old woman—still on her knees—said: “You know what comes next.”

“Aye.” The word came out of her in a little trembling rush.

“Hold ye still, missy—all else is well, clean as a willow-strip, ye are, but now we’ve come to the cozy nook that’s all Thorin cares for; we’ve come to where honesty must really be proved. So hold ye still!”

Susan closed her eyes and thought of horses running along the Drop—nominally they were the Barony’s horse, overlooked by Rimer, Thorin’s Chancellor and the Barony’s Minister of Inventory, but the horses didn’t know that; they thought they were free, and if you were free in your mind, what else mattered?

Let me be free in my mind, as free as the horses along the Drop, and don’t let her hurt me. Please, don’t let her hurt me. And if she does, please help me to bear it in decent silence.

Cold fingers parted the downy hair below her navel; there was a pause, and then two cold fingers slipped inside her. There was pain, but only a moment of it, and not bad; she’d hurt herself worse stubbing her toe or barking her shin on the way to the privy in the middle of the night. The humiliation was the bad part, and the revulsion of Rhea’s ancient touch.

“Caulked tight, ye are!” Rhea cried. “Good as ever was! But Thorin’ll see to that, so he will! As for you, my girl, I’ll tell yer a secret yer prissy aunt with her long nose ’n tight purse ’n little goosebump tits never knew: even a girl who’s intact don’t need to lack for a shiver now ’n then, if she knows how!”

The hag's withdrawing fingers closed gently around the little nubbin of flesh at the head of Susan's cleft. For one terrible second Susan thought they would pinch that sensitive place, which sometimes made her draw in a breath if it rubbed just so against the pommel of her saddle when she was riding, but instead the fingers caressed . . . then pressed . . . and the girl was horrified to feel a heat which was far from unpleasant kindle in her belly.

"Like a little bud o' silk," the old woman crooned, and her meddling fingers moved faster. Susan felt her hips sway forward, as if with a mind and life of their own, and then she thought of the old woman's greedy, self-willed face, pink as the face of a whore by gaslight as it hung over the open box; she thought of the way the drawstring bag with the gold pieces in it had hung from the wrinkled mouth like some disgorged piece of flesh, and the heat she felt was gone. She drew back, trembling, her arms and belly and breasts breaking out in gooseflesh.

"You've finished what you were paid to do," Susan said. Her voice was dry and harsh.

Rhea's face knotted. "Ye'll not tell me aye, no, yes, or maybe, impudent stripling of a girl! *I* know when I'm done, *I*, Rhea, the Weirding of Cöos, and—"

"Be still, and be on your feet before I kick you into the fire, unnatural thing."

The old woman's lips wriggled back from her few remaining teeth in a doglike sneer, and now, Susan realized, she and the witch-woman were back where they had been at the start: ready to claw each other's eyes out.

"Raise hand or foot to me, you impudent cunt, and what leaves my house will leave handless, footless, and blind of eye."

"I do not much doubt you could do it, but Thorin should be vexed," Susan said. It was the first time in her life she had ever invoked a

man's name for protection. Realizing this made her feel ashamed . . . small, somehow. She didn't know why that should be, especially since she had agreed to sleep in his bed and bear his child, but it was.

The old woman stared, her seamed face working until it folded into a parody of a smile that was worse than her snarl. Puffing and pulling at the arm of her chair, Rhea got to her feet. As she did, Susan quickly began to dress.

"Aye, vexed he would be. Perhaps you know best after all, missy; I've had a strange night, and it's wakened parts of me better left asleep. Anything else that might have happened, take it as a compliment to yer youth 'n purity . . . and to yer beauty as well. Aye. You're a beautiful thing, and there's no doubt in it. Yer hair, now . . . when yer let it down, as ye will for Thorin, I wot, when ye lay with him . . . it glows like the sun, doesn't it?"

Susan did not want to force the old hag out of her posturing, but she didn't want to encourage these fawning compliments, either. Not when she could still see the hate in Rhea's rheumy eyes, not when she could feel the old woman's touch still crawling like beetles on her skin. She said nothing, only stepped into her dress, set it on her shoulders, and began to button up the front.

Rhea perhaps understood the run of her thoughts, for the smile dropped off her mouth and her manner grew businesslike. Susan found this a great relief.

"Well, never mind it. Ye've proved honest; ye may dress yerself and go. But not a word of what passed between us to Thorin, mind ye! Words between women need trouble no man's ear, especially one as great as he." Yet at this Rhea could not forbear a certain spasming sneer. Susan didn't know if the old woman was aware of it or not. "Are we agreed?"

Anything, anything, just as long as I can be out of here and away.

“You declare me proved?”

“Aye, Susan, daughter of Patrick. So I do. But it’s not what I say that matters. Now . . . wait . . . somewhere here . . .”

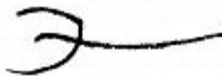
She scabbled along the mantel, pushing stubs of candles stuck on cracked saucers this way and that, lifting first a kerosene lantern and then a battery flashlight, looking fixedly for a moment at a drawing of a young boy and then putting it aside.

“Where . . . where . . . *arrrrr* . . . here!”

She snatched up a pad of paper with a sooty cover (CITGO stamped on it in ancient gold letters) and a stub of pencil. She paged almost to the end of the pad before finding a blank sheet. On it she scrawled something, then tore the sheet off the spiral of wire at the top of the pad. She held the sheet out to Susan, who took it and looked at it. Scrawled there was a word she did not understand at first:

onnest

Below it was a symbol:



“What’s this?” she asked, tapping the little drawing.

“Rhea, her mark. Known for six Baronies around, it is, and can’t be copied. Show that paper to yer aunt. Then to Thorin. If yer aunt wants to take it and show it to Thorin herself—I know her, y’see, and her bossy ways—tell her no, Rhea says no, she’s not to have the keeping of it.”

“And if Thorin wants it?”

Rhea shrugged dismissively. “Let him keep it or burn it or wipe his bum with it, for all of me. It’s nothing to you, either, for you knew you were honest all along, so you did. True?”

Susan nodded. Once, walking home after a dance, she had let a boy slip his hand inside her shirt for a moment or two, but what of that? She was honest. And in more ways than this nasty creature meant.

“But don’t lose that paper. Unless you’d see me again, that is, and go through the same business a second time.”

Gods perish even the thought, Susan thought, and managed not to shudder. She put the paper in her pocket, where the drawstring bag had been.

“Now, come to the door, missy.” She looked as if she wanted to grasp Susan’s arm, then thought better of it. The two of them walked side by side to the door, not touching in such a careful way that it made them look awkward. Once there, Rhea did grip Susan’s arm. Then, with her other hand, she pointed to the bright silver disc hanging over the top of the Cöos.

“The Kissing Moon,” Rhea said. “ ’Tis midsummer.”

“Yes.”

“Tell Thorin he’s not to have you in his bed—or in a haystack, or on the scullery floor, or anywhere else—until Demon Moon rises full in the sky.”

“Not until Reaping?” That was three months—a lifetime, it seemed to her. Susan tried not to show her delight at this reprieve. She’d thought Thorin would put an end to her virginity by moonrise the next night. She wasn’t blind to the way he looked at her.

Rhea, meanwhile, was looking at the moon, seeming to calculate. Her hand went to the long tail of Susan’s hair and stroked it. Susan

bore this as well as she could, and just when she felt she could bear it no longer, Rhea dropped her hand back to her side and nodded. “Aye, not just Reaping, but true *fin de año*—Fair-Night, tell him. Say that he may have you after the bonfire. You understand?”

“True *fin de año*, yes.” She could barely contain her joy.

“When the fire in Green Heart burns low and the last of the red-handed men are ashes,” Rhea said. “Then and not *until* then. You must tell him so.”

“I will.”

The hand came out and began to stroke her hair again. Susan bore it. After such good news, she thought, it would have been mean-spirited to do otherwise. “The time between now and Reaping you will use to meditate, and to gather your forces to produce the male child the Mayor wants . . . or mayhap just to ride along the Drop and gather the last flowers of your maidenhood. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She dropped a curtsey. “Thankee-sai.”

Rhea waved this off as if it were a flattery. “Speak not of what passed between us, mind. ’Tis no one’s affair but our own.”

“I won’t. And our business is done?”

“Well . . . mayhap there’s one more *small* thing . . .” Rhea smiled to show it was indeed small, then raised her left hand in front of Susan’s eyes with three fingers together and one apart. Glimmering in the fork between was a silver medallion, seemingly produced from nowhere. The girl’s eyes fastened on it at once. Until Rhea spoke a single guttural word, that was.

Then they closed.

Rhea looked at the girl who stood asleep on her stoop in the moonlight. As she replaced the medallion within her sleeve (her fingers were old and bunched, but they moved dextrously enough when it was required, oh, aye), the businesslike expression fell from her face, and was replaced by a look of squint-eyed fury. *Kick me into the fire, would you, you trull? Tattle to Thorin?* But her threats and impudence weren't the worst. The worst had been the expression of revulsion on her face when she had pulled back from Rhea's touch.

Too good for Rhea, she was! And thought herself too good for Thorin as well, no doubt, she with sixteen years' worth of fine blonde hair hanging down from her head, hair Thorin no doubt dreamed of plunging his hands into even as he plunged and reared and plowed down below.

She couldn't hurt the girl, much as she wanted to and much as the girl deserved it; if nothing else, Thorin might take the glass ball away from her, and Rhea couldn't bear that. Not yet, anyway. So she could not hurt the girl, but she *could* do something that would spoil his pleasure in her, at least for awhile.

Rhea leaned close to the girl, grasped the long braid which lay down her back, and began to slip it through her fist, enjoying its silky smoothness.

"Susan," she whispered. "Do'ee hear me, Susan, daughter of Patrick?"

"Yes." The eyes did not open.

"Then listen." The light of the Kissing Moon fell on Rhea's face and turned it into a silver skull. "Listen to me well, and remember. Remember in the deep cave where yer waking mind never goes."

She pulled the braid through her hand again and again. Silky and smooth. Like the little bud between her legs.

“Remember,” the girl in the doorway said.

“Aye. There’s something ye’ll do after he takes yer virginity. Ye’ll do it right away, without even thinking about it. Now listen to me, Susan, daughter of Patrick, and hear me very well.”

Still stroking the girl’s hair, Rhea put her wrinkled lips to the smooth cup of Susan’s ear and whispered in the moonlight.

CHAPTER III

A MEETING ON

THE ROAD

1

She had never in her life had such a strange night, and it was probably not surprising that she didn't hear the rider approaching from behind until he was almost upon her.

The thing that troubled her most as she made her way back toward town was her new understanding of the compact she had made. It was good to have a reprieve—months yet before she would have to live up to her end of the bargain—but a reprieve didn't change the basic fact: when the Demon Moon was full, she would lose her virginity to Mayor Thorin, a skinny, twitchy man with fluffy white hair rising like a cloud around the bald spot on top of his head. A man whose wife regarded him with a certain weary sadness that was painful to look at. Hart Thorin was a man who laughed uproariously when a company of players put on an entertainment involving head-knocking or pretend punching or rotten fruit-throwing, but who only looked puzzled at a story which was pathetic or tragical. A knuckle-cracker, a back-slapper, a dinner-table belcher, a man who had a way of looking anxiously toward his Chancellor at almost every other word, as if to make sure he hadn't offended Rimer in some way.

Susan had observed all these things often; her father had for years been in charge of the Barony's horse and had gone to Seafront often on business. Many times he had taken his much loved daughter with him. Oh, she had seen a lot of Hart Thorin over the years, and he had seen a lot of her, as well. Too much, mayhap!

For what now seemed the most important fact about him was that he was almost fifty years older than the girl who would perhaps bear his son.

She had made the bargain lightly enough—

No, not lightly, that was being unfair to herself . . . but she had lost little sleep over it, that much was true. She had thought, after listening to all Aunt Cord's arguments: *Well, it's little enough, really, to have the indenture off the lands; to finally own our little piece of the Drop in fact as well as in tradition . . . to actually have papers, one in our house and one in Rimer's files, saying it's ours. Aye, and to have horses again. Only three, 'tis true, but that's three more than we have now. And against that? To lie with him a time or two, and to bear a child, which millions of women have done before me with no harm. 'Tis not, after all, a mutant or a leper I'm being asked to partner with but just an old man with noisy knuckles. 'Tis not forever, and, as Aunt Cord says, I may still marry, if time and ka decree; I should not be the first woman to come to her husband's bed as a mother. And does it make me a whore to do such? The law says not, but never mind that; my heart's law is what matters, and my heart says that if I may gain the land that was my da's and three horses to run on it by being such, then it's a whore I'll be.*

There was something else: Aunt Cord had capitalized—rather ruthlessly, Susan now saw—on a child's innocence. It was the *baby* Aunt Cord had harped on, *the cunning little baby* she would have. Aunt Cord had known that Susan, the dolls of her childhood put aside not all that long ago, would love the idea of her own baby, a little living doll to dress and feed and sleep with in the heat of the afternoon.

What Cordelia had ignored (*perhaps she's too innocent even to have considered it*, Susan thought, but didn't quite believe) was what the hag-woman had made brutally clear to her this evening: Thorin wanted more than a child.

He wants tits and arse that don't squish in his hands and a box that'll grip what he pushes.

Just thinking of those words made her face throb as she walked through the post-moonset dark toward town (no high-spirited running this time; no singing, either). She had agreed with vague thoughts of how managed livestock mated—they were allowed to go at it “until the seed took,” then separated again. But now she knew that Thorin might want her again and again, probably *would* want her again and again, and common law going back like iron for two hundred generations said that he could continue to lie with her until she who had proved the consort honest should prove her honestly with child as well, and that child honest in and of itself . . . not, that was, a mutant aberration. Susan had made discreet enquiries and knew that this second proving usually came around the fourth month of pregnancy . . . around the time she would begin to show, even with her clothes on. It would be up to Rhea to make the judgment . . . and Rhea didn't like her.

Now that it was too late—now that she had accepted the compact formally tendered by the Chancellor, now that she had been proved honest by yon strange bitch—she rued the bargain. Mostly what she thought of was how Thorin would look with his pants off, his legs white and skinny, like the legs of a stork, and how, as they lay together, she would hear his long bones crackling: knees and back and elbows and neck.

And knuckles. Don't forget his knuckles.

Yes. Big old man's knuckles with hair growing out of them. Susan chuckled at the thought, it was that comical, but at the same time a warm tear ran unnoticed from the corner of one eye and tracked down her cheek. She wiped it away without knowing it, any more than she heard the clip-clip of approaching hoofs in the soft road-dust. Her mind was still far away, returning to the odd thing she had seen through the old woman's bedroom window—the soft but somehow unpleasant light coming from the pink globe, the hypnotized way the hag had been looking down at it . . .

When Susan at last heard the approaching horse, her first alarmed thought was that she must get into the copse of trees she was currently passing and hide. The chances of anyone aboveboard being on the road this late seemed small to her, especially now that such bad times had come to Mid-World—but it was too late for that.

The ditch, then, and sprawled flat. With the moon down, there was at least a chance that whoever it was would pass without—

But before she could even begin in that direction, the rider who had sneaked up behind her while she was thinking her long and rueful thoughts had hailed her. “Goodeven, lady, and may your days be long upon the earth.”

She turned, thinking: *What if it's one of the new men always lounging about Mayor's House or in the Travellers' Rest? Not the oldest one, the voice isn't wavery like his, but maybe one of the others . . . it could be the one they call Depape . . .*

“Goodeven,” she heard herself saying to the manshape on the tall horse. “May yours be long also.”

Her voice didn't tremble, not that she could hear. She didn't think it was Depape, or the one named Reynolds, either. The only thing she could tell about the fellow for sure was that he wore a flat-brimmed hat, the sort she associated with men of the Inner Baronies, back when travel between east and west had been more common than it was now. Back before John Farson came—the Good Man—and the blood-letting began.

As the stranger came up beside her, she forgave herself a little for not hearing him approach—there was no buckle or bell on his gear that she could see, and everything was tied down so as not to snap or flap. It was almost the rig of an outlaw or a harrier (she had the idea that Jonas, he of the wavery voice, and his two friends might have been both, in other times and other climes) or even a gunslinger. But this man bore no guns, unless they were hidden. A bow on the pommel of his saddle and what looked like a lance in a

scabbard, that was all. And there had never, she reckoned, been a gunslinger as young as this.

He clucked sidemouth at the horse just as her da had always done (and she herself, of course), and it stopped at once. As he swung one leg over his saddle, lifting it high and with unconscious grace, Susan said: "Nay, nay, don't trouble yerself, stranger, but go as ye would!"

If he heard the alarm in her voice, he paid no heed to it. He slipped off the horse, not bothering with the tied-down stirrup, and landed neatly in front of her, the dust of the road puffing about his square-toed boots. By starlight she saw that he was young indeed, close to her own age on one side or the other. His clothes were those of a working cowboy, although new.

"Will Dearborn, at your service," he said, then doffed his hat, extended a foot on one bootheel, and bowed as they did in the Inner Baronies.

Such absurd courtliness out here in the middle of nowhere, with the acrid smell of the oilpatch on the edge of town already in her nostrils, startled her out of her fear and into a laugh. She thought it would likely offend him, but he smiled instead. A good smile, honest and artless, its inner part lined with even teeth.

She dropped him a little curtsey, holding out one side of her dress. "Susan Delgado, at yours."

He tapped his throat thrice with his right hand. "Thankee-sai, Susan Delgado. We're well met, I hope. I didn't mean to startle you —"

"Ye did, a little."

"Yes, I thought I had. I'm sorry."

Yes. Not aye but yes. A young man, from the Inner Baronies, by the sound. She looked at him with new interest.

“Nay, ye need not apologize, for I was deep in my own thoughts,” she said. “I’d been to see a . . . friend . . . and hadn’t realized how much time had passed until I saw the moon was down. If ye stopped out of concern, I thankee, stranger, but ye may be on yer way as I would be on mine. It’s only to the edge of the village I go—Hambry. It’s close, now.”

“Pretty speech and lovely sentiments,” he answered with a grin, “but it’s late, you’re alone, and I think we may as well pass on together. Do you ride, sai?”

“Yes, but really—”

“Step over and meet my friend Rusher, then. He shall carry you the last two miles. He’s gelded, sai, and gentle.”

She looked at Will Dearborn with a mixture of amusement and irritation. The thought which crossed her mind was *If he calls me sai again, as though I were a schoolteacher or his dodderly old great aunt, I’m going to take off this stupid apron and swat him with it.* “I never minded a bit of temper in a horse docile enough to wear a saddle. Until his death, my father managed the Mayor’s horses . . . and the Mayor in these parts is also Guard o’ Barony. I’ve ridden my whole life.”

She thought he might apologize, perhaps even stutter, but he only nodded with a calm thoughtfulness that she rather liked. “Then step to the stirrup, my lady. I’ll walk beside and trouble you with no conversation, if you’d rather not have it. It’s late, and talk palls after moonset, some say.”

She shook her head, softening her refusal with a smile. “Nay. I thank ye for yer kindness, but it would not be well, mayhap, for me to be seen riding a strange young man’s horse at eleven o’ the clock.

Lemon-juice won't take the stain out of a lady's reputation the way it will out of a shirtwaist, you know."

"There's no one out here to see you," the young man said in a maddeningly reasonable voice. "And that you're tired, I can tell. Come, sai—"

"Please don't call me that. It makes me feel as ancient as a . . ."

She hesitated for a brief moment, rethinking the word

(witch)

that first came to her mind. ". . . as an old woman."

"Miss Delgado, then. Are you sure you won't ride?"

"Sure as can be. I'd not ride cross-saddle in a dress in any case, Mr. Dearborn—not even if you were my own brother. 'Twouldn't be proper."

He stood in the stirrup himself, reached over to the far side of his saddle (Rusher stood docilely enough at this, only flicking his ears, which Susan would have been happy to flick herself had she been Rusher—they were that beautiful), and stepped back down with a rolled garment in his hands. It was tied with a rawhide hank. She thought it was a poncho.

"You may spread this over your lap and legs like a duster," he said. "There's quite enough of it for decorum's sake—it was my father's, and he's taller than me." He looked off toward the western hills for a moment, and she saw he was handsome, in a hard sort of way that jagged against his youth. She felt a little shiver inside her, and wished for the thousandth time that the foul old woman had kept her hands strictly on her business, as unpleasant as that business had been. Susan didn't want to look at this handsome stranger and remember Rhea's touch.

“Nay,” she said gently. “Thankee again, I recognize yer kindness, but I must refuse.”

“Then I’ll walk along beside, and Rusher’ll be our chaperone,” he said cheerfully. “As far as the edge of town, at least, there’ll be no eyes to see and think ill of a perfectly proper young woman and a more-or-less proper young man. And once there, I’ll tip my hat and wish you a very good night.”

“I wish ye wouldn’t. Really.” She brushed a hand across her forehead. “Easy for you to say there are no eyes to see, but sometimes there are eyes even where there shouldn’t be. And my position is . . . a little delicate just now.”

“I’ll walk with you, however,” he repeated, and now his face was somber. “These are not good times, Miss Delgado. Here in Mejis you are far from the worst of the troubles, but sometimes trouble reaches out.”

She opened her mouth—to protest again, she supposed, perhaps to tell him that Pat Delgado’s daughter could take care of herself—and then she thought of the Mayor’s new men, and the cold way they had run their eyes over her when Thorin’s attention had been elsewhere. She had seen those three this very night as she left on her way to the witch’s hut. Then she *had* heard approaching, and in plenty of time for her to leave the road and rest behind a handy *piñon* tree (she refused to think of it as hiding, exactly). Back toward town they had gone, and she supposed they were drinking at the Travellers’ Rest right now—and would continue to until Stanley Ruiz closed the bar—but she had no way of knowing that for sure. They could come back.

“If I can’t dissuade ye, very well,” she said, sighing with a vexed resignation she didn’t really feel. “But only to the first mailbox—Mrs. Beech’s. That marks the edge of town.”

He tapped his throat again, and made another of those absurd, enchanting bows—foot stuck out as if he would trip someone, heel

planted in the dirt. “Thankee, Miss Delgado!”

At least he didn't call me sai, she thought. That's a start.

2

She thought he'd chatter away like a magpie in spite of his promise to be silent, because that was what boys did around her—she was not vain of her looks, but she thought she *was* good-looking, if only because the boys could not shut up or stop shuffling their feet when they were around her. And this one would be full of questions the town boys didn't need to ask—how old was she, had she always lived in Hambry, were her parents alive, half a hundred others just as boring—but they would all circle in on the same one: did she have a steady fellow?

But Will Dearborn of the Inner Baronies didn't ask her about her schooling or family or friends (the most common way of approaching any romantic rivals, she had found). Will Dearborn simply walked along beside her, one hand wrapped around Rusher's bridle, looking off east toward the Clean Sea. They were close enough to it now so that the teary smell of salt mingled with the tarry stench of oil, even though the wind was from the south.

They were passing Citgo now, and she was glad for Will Dearborn's presence, even if his silence was a little irritating. She had always found the oilpatch, with its skeletal forest of gantries, a little spooky. Most of those steel towers had stopped pumping long since, and there was neither the parts, the need, nor the understanding to repair them. And those which did still labor along—nineteen out of about two hundred—could not be stopped. They just pumped and pumped, the supplies of oil beneath them seemingly inexhaustible. A little was still used, but a very little—most simply ran back down into the wells beneath the dead pumping stations. The world had moved on, and this place reminded her of a strange mechanical graveyard where some of the corpses hadn't quite—

Something cold and smooth nuzzled the small of her back, and she wasn't quite able to stifle a little shriek. Will Dearborn wheeled toward her, his hands dropping toward his belt. Then he relaxed and smiled.

"Rusher's way of saying he feels ignored. I'm sorry, Miss Delgado."

She looked at the horse. Rusher looked back mildly, then dipped his head as if to say he was also sorry for having startled her.

Foolishness, girl, she thought, hearing the hearty, no-nonsense voice of her father. He wants to know why you're being so stand-offy, that's all. And so do I. 'Tisn't like you, so it's not.

"Mr. Dearborn, I've changed my mind," she said. "I'd like to ride."

3

He turned his back and stood looking out at Citgo with his hands in his pockets while Susan first laid the poncho over the cantle of the saddle (the plain black saddle of a working cowboy, without a Barony brand or even a ranch brand to mark it), and then mounted into the stirrup. She lifted her skirt and glanced around sharply, sure he would be stealing a peek, but his back was still to her. He seemed fascinated with the rusty oil derricks.

What's so interesting about them, cully? she thought, a trifle crossly—it was the lateness of the hour and the residue of her stirred-up emotions, she supposed. *Filthy old things have been there six centuries and more, and I've been smelling their stink my whole life.*

"Stand easy now, my boy," she said once she had her foot fixed in the stirrup. One hand held the top of the saddle's pommel, the other the reins. Rusher, meanwhile, flicked his ears as if to say he would stand easy all night, were that what she required.

She swung up, one long bare thigh flashing in the starlight, and felt the exhilaration of being horsed that she always felt . . . only tonight it seemed a little stronger, a little sweeter, a little sharper. Perhaps because the horse was such a beauty, perhaps because the horse was a stranger . . .

Perhaps because the horse's owner is a stranger, she thought, and fair.

That was nonsense, of course . . . and potentially dangerous nonsense. Yet it was also true. He was fair.

As she opened the poncho and spread it over her legs, Dearborn began to whistle. And she realized, with a mixture of surprise and superstitious fear, what the tune was: "Careless Love." The very lay she had been singing on her way up to Rhea's hut.

Mayhap it's ka, girl, her father's voice whispered.

No such thing, she thought right back at him. *I'll not see ka in every passing wind and shadow, like the old ladies who gather in Green Heart of a summer's evening. It's an old tune; everyone knows it.*

Mayhap better if you're right, Pat Delgado's voice returned. *For if it's ka, it'll come like a wind, and your plans will stand before it no more than my da's barn stood before the cyclone when it came.*

Not *ka*; she would not be seduced by the dark and the shadows and the grim shapes of the oil derricks into believing it was. Not *ka* but only a chance meeting with a nice young man on the lonely road back to town.

"I've made myself decent," she said in a dry voice that didn't sound much like her own. "Ye may turn back if you like, Mr. Dearborn."

He did turn and gazed at her. For a moment he said nothing, but she could see the look in his eyes well enough to know that he found

her fair as well. And although this disquieted her—perhaps because of what he'd been whistling—she was also glad. Then he said, “You look well up there. You sit well.”

“And I shall have horses of my own to sit before long,” she said. *Now the questions will come*, she thought.

But he only nodded, as though he had known this about her already, and began to walk toward town again. Feeling a little disappointed and not knowing exactly why, she clucked sidemouth at Rusher and twitched her knees at him. He got moving, catching up with his master, who gave Rusher's muzzle a companionable little caress.

“What do they call that place yonder?” he asked, pointing at the derricks.

“The oilpatch? Citgo.”

“Some of the derricks still pump?”

“Aye, and no way to stop them. Not that anyone still knows.”

“Oh,” he said, and that was all—just *oh*. But he left his place by Rusher's head for a moment when they came to the weedy track leading into Citgo, walking across to look at the old disused guard-hut. In her childhood there had been a sign on it reading AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY, but it had blown away in some windstorm or other. Will Dearborn had his look and then came ambling back to the horse, boots puffing up summer dust, easy in his new clothes.

They went toward town, a young walking man in a flat-crowned hat, a young riding woman with a poncho spread over her lap and legs. The starlight rained down on them as it has on young men and women since time's first hour, and once she looked up and saw a meteor flash overhead—a brief and brilliant orange streak across the vault of heaven. Susan thought to wish on it, and then, with

something like panic, realized she had no idea what to wish for. None at all.

4

She kept her own silence until they were a mile or so from town, and then asked the question which had been on her mind. She had planned to ask hers after he had begun asking his, and it irked her to be the one to break the silence, but in the end her curiosity was too much.

“Where do ye come from, Mr. Dearborn, and what brings ye to our little bit o’ Mid-World . . . if ye don’t mind me asking?”

“Not at all,” he said, looking up at her with a smile. “I’m glad to talk and was only trying to think how to begin. Talk’s not a specialty of mine.” *Then what is, Will Dearborn?* she wondered. Yes, she wondered very much, for in adjusting her position on the saddle, she had put her hand on the rolled blanket behind . . . and had touched something hidden inside that blanket. Something that felt like a gun. It didn’t *have* to be, of course, but she remembered the way his hands had dropped instinctively toward his belt when she had cried out in surprise.

“I come from the In-World. I’ve an idea you probably guessed that much on your own. We have our own way of talking.”

“Aye. Which Barony is yer home, might I ask?”

“New Canaan.”

She felt a flash of real excitement at that. New Canaan! Center of the Affiliation! That did not mean all it once had, of course, but still—

“Not Gilead?” she asked, detesting the hint of a girlish gush she heard in her voice. And more than just a hint, mayhap.

“No,” he said with a laugh. “Nothing so grand as Gilead. Only Hemphill, a village forty or so wheels west of there. Smaller than Hambry, I wot.”

Wheels, she thought, marvelling at the archaism. *He said wheels.*

“And what brings ye to Hambry, then? May ye tell?”

“Why not? I’ve come with two of my friends, Mr. Richard Stockworth of Pennilton, New Canaan, and Mr. Arthur Heath, a hilarious young man who actually does come from Gilead. We’re here at the order of the Affiliation, and have come as counters.”

“Counters of what?”

“Counters of anything and everything which may aid the Affiliation in the coming years,” he said, and she heard no lightness in his voice now. “The business with the Good Man has grown serious.”

“Has it? We hear little real news this far to the south and east of the hub.”

He nodded. “The Barony’s distance from the hub is the chief reason we’re here. Mejis has been ever loyal to the Affiliation, and if supplies need to be drawn from this part of the Outers, they’ll be sent. The question that needs answering is how much the Affiliation can count on.”

“How much of what?”

“Yes,” he agreed, as if she’d made a statement instead of asking a question. “And how much of what.”

“Ye speak as though the Good Man were a real threat. He’s just a bandit, surely, frosting his thefts and murders with talk of ‘democracy’ and ‘equality’?”

Dearborn shrugged, and she thought for a moment that would be his only comment on the matter, but then he said, reluctantly: “ ’Twas

once so, perhaps. Times have changed. At some point the bandit became a general, and now the general would become a ruler in the name of the people.” He paused, then added gravely, “The Northern and West’rd Baronies are in flames, lady.”

“But those are thousands of miles away, surely!” This talk was upsetting, and yet strangely exciting, too. Mostly it seemed *exotic*, after the pokey all-days-the-same world of Hambry, where someone’s dry well was good for three days of animated conversation.

“Yes,” he said. Not *aye* but *yes*—the sound was both strange and pleasing to her ear. “But the wind is blowing in this direction.” He turned to her and smiled. Once more it softened his hard good looks, and made him seem no more than a child, up too late after his bedtime. “But I don’t think we’ll see John Farson tonight, do you?”

She smiled back. “If we did, Mr. Dearborn, would ye protect me from him?”

“No doubt,” he said, still smiling, “but I should do so with greater enthusiasm, I wot, if you were to let me call you by the name your father gave you.”

“Then, in the interests of my own safety, ye may do so. And I suppose I must call ye *Will*, in those same interests.”

“ ’Tis both wise and prettily put,” he said, the smile becoming a grin, wide and engaging. “I—” Then, walking as he was with his face turned back and up to her, Susan’s new friend tripped over a rock jutting out of the road and almost fell. Rusher whinnied through his nose and reared a little. Susan laughed merrily. The poncho shifted, revealing one bare leg, and she took a moment before putting matters right again. She liked him, *aye*, so she did. And what harm could there be in it? He was only a boy, after all. When he smiled, she could see he was only a year or two removed from jumping in haystacks. (The thought that she had recently graduated from haystack-jumping herself had somehow fled her mind.)

“I’m usually not clumsy,” he said. “I hope I didn’t startle you.”

Not at all, Will; boys have been stubbing their toes around me ever since I grew my breasts.

“Not at all,” she said, and returned to the previous topic. It interested her greatly. “So ye and yer friends come at the behest of the Affiliation to count our goods, do you?”

“Yes. The reason I took particular note of yon oilpatch is because one of us will have to come back and count the working derricks—”

“I can spare ye that, Will. There are nineteen.”

He nodded. “I’m in your debt. But we’ll also need to make out—if we can—how much oil those nineteen pumps are bringing up.”

“Are there so many oil-fired machines still working in New Canaan that such news matters? And do ye have the alchemy to change the oil into the stuff yer machines can use?”

“It’s called refinery rather than alchemy in this case—at least I think so—and I believe there is one that still works. But no, we haven’t that many machines, although there are still a few working filament-lights in the Great Hall at Gilead.”

“Fancy it!” she said, delighted. She had seen pictures of filament-lights and electric flambeaux, but never the lights themselves. The last ones in Hambry (they had been called “spark-lights” in this part of the world, but she felt sure they were the same) had burned out two generations ago.

“You said your father managed the Mayor’s horses until his death,” Will Dearborn said. “Was his name Patrick Delgado? It was, wasn’t it?”

She looked down at him, badly startled and brought back to reality in an instant. “How do ye know that?”

“His name was in our lessons of calling. We’re to count cattle, sheep, pigs, oxen . . . and horses. Of all your livestock, horses are the most important. Patrick Delgado was the man we were to see in that regard. I’m sorry to hear he’s come to the clearing at the end of the path, Susan. Will you accept my condolence?”

“Aye, and with thanks.”

“Was it an accident?”

“Aye.” Hoping her voice said what she wanted it to say, which was *leave this subject, ask no more*.

“Let me be honest with you,” he said, and for the first time she thought she heard a false note there. Perhaps it was only her imagination. Certainly she had little experience of the world (Aunt Cord reminded her of this almost daily), but she had an idea that people who set on by saying *Let me be honest with you* were apt to go on by telling you straight-faced that rain fell up, money grew on trees, and babies were brought by the Grand Featherex.

“Aye, Will Dearborn,” she said, her tone just the tiniest bit dry. “They say honesty’s the best policy, so they do.”

He looked at her a bit doubtfully, and then his smile shone out again. That smile was dangerous, she thought—a quicksand smile if ever there was one. Easy to wander in; perhaps more difficult to wander back out.

“There’s not much Affiliation in the Affiliation these days. That’s part of the reason Farson’s gone on as long as he has; that’s what has allowed his ambitions to grow. He’s come a far way from the harrier who began as a stage-robber in Garlan and Desoy, and he’ll come farther yet if the Affiliation isn’t revitalized. Maybe all the way to Mejis.”

She couldn’t imagine what the Good Man could possibly want with her own sleepy little town in the Barony which lay closest to the

Clean Sea, but she kept silent.

“In any case, it wasn’t really the Affiliation that sent us,” he said. “Not all this way to count cows and oil derricks and hectares of land under cultivation.”

He paused a moment, looking down at the road (as if for more rocks in the way of his boots) and stroking Rusher’s nose with absentminded gentleness. She thought he was embarrassed, perhaps even ’shamed. “We were sent by our fathers.”

“Yer—” Then she understood. Bad boys, they were, sent out on a make-work quest that wasn’t quite exile. She guessed their real job in Hambry might be to rehabilitate their reputations. *Well, she thought, it certainly explains the quicksand smile, doesn’t it? ’Ware this one, Susan; he’s the sort to burn bridges and upset mail-carts, then go on his merry way without a single look back. Not in meanness but in plain old boy-carelessness.*

That made her think of the old song again, the one she’d been singing, the one he’d been whistling.

“Our fathers, yes.”

Susan Delgado had cut a caper or two (or perhaps it was two dozen) of her own in her time, and she felt sympathy for Will Dearborn as well as caution. And interest. Bad boys could be amusing . . . up to a point. The question was, how bad had Will and his cronies been?

“Helling?” she asked.

“Helling,” he agreed, still sounding glum but perhaps brightening just a bit about the eyes and mouth. “We were warned; yes, warned very well. There was . . . a certain amount of drinking.”

And a few girls to squeeze with the hand not busy squeezing the ale-pot? It was a question no nice girl could outright ask, but one that

couldn't help occurring to her mind.

Now the smile which had played briefly around the corners of his mouth dropped away. "We pushed it too far and the fun stopped. Fools have a way of doing that. One night there was a race. One *moonless* night. After midnight. All of us drunk. One of the horses caught his hoof in a gopher-hole and snapped a foreleg. He had to be put down."

Susan winced. It wasn't the worst thing she could think of, but bad enough. And when he opened his mouth again, it got worse.

"The horse was a thoroughbred, one of just three owned by my friend Richard's father, who is not well-to-do. There were scenes in our households which I haven't any desire to remember, let alone talk about. I'll make a long story short and say that, after much talk and many proposals for punishment, we were sent here, on this errand. It was Arthur's father's idea. I think Arthur's da has always been a bit appalled by Arthur. Certainly Arthur's ructions didn't come from George Heath's side."

Susan smiled to herself, thinking of Aunt Cordelia saying, "She certainly doesn't get it from *our* side of the family." Then the calculated pause, followed by: "She had a great-aunt on her mother's side who ran crazy . . . you didn't know? Yes! Set herself on fire and threw herself over the Drop. In the year of the comet, it was."

"Anyway," Will resumed, "Mr. Heath set us on with a saying from his own father—'One should meditate in purgatory.' And here we are."

"Hambry's far from purgatory."

He sketched his funny little bow again. "If it were, all should want to be bad enough to come here and meet the pretty denizens."

"Work on that one a bit," she said in her driest voice. "It's still rough, I fear. Perhaps—"

She fell silent as a dismaying realization occurred to her: she was going to have to hope this boy would enter into a limited conspiracy with her. Otherwise, she was apt to be embarrassed.

“Susan?”

“I was just thinking. Are you here yet, Will? Officially, I mean?”

“No,” he said, taking her meaning at once. And likely already seeing where this was going. He seemed sharp enough, in his way. “We only arrived in Barony this afternoon, and you’re the first person any of us has spoken to . . . unless, that is, Richard and Arthur have met folks. I couldn’t sleep, and so came out to ride and to think things over a little. We’re camped over there.” He pointed to the right. “On that long slope that runs toward the sea.”

“Aye, the Drop, it’s called.” She realized that Will and his mates might even be camped on what would be her own land by law before much more time had passed. The thought was amusing and exciting and a little startling.

“Tomorrow we ride into town and present our compliments to My Lord Mayor, Hart Thorin. He’s a bit of a fool, according to what we were told before leaving New Canaan.”

“Were ye indeed told so?” she asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Yes—apt to blabber, fond of strong drink, even more fond of young girls,” Will said. “Is it true, would you say?”

“I think ye must judge for yerself,” said she, stifling a smile with some effort.

“In any case, we’ll also be presenting to the Honorable Kimba Rimer, Thorin’s Chancellor, and I understand he knows his beans. And *counts* his beans, as well.”

“Thorin will have ye to dinner at Mayor’s House,” Susan said. “Perhaps not tomorrow night, but surely the night after.”

“A dinner of state in Hambry,” Will said, smiling and still stroking Rusher’s nose. “Gods, how shall I bear the agony of my anticipation?”

“Never mind yer nettlesome mouth,” she said, “but only listen, if ye’d be my friend. This is important.”

His smile dropped away, and she saw again—as she had for a moment or two before—the man he’d be before too many more years had passed. The hard face, the concentrated eyes, the merciless mouth. It was a frightening face, in a way—a frightening *prospect*—and yet, still, the place the old hag had touched felt warm and she found it difficult to take her eyes off him. What, she wondered, was his hair like under that stupid hat he wore?

“Tell me, Susan.”

“If you and yer friends come to table at Thorin’s, ye may see me. If ye see me, Will, see me for the first time. See Miss Delgado, as I shall see Mr. Dearborn. Do’ee take my meaning?”

“To the letter.” He was looking at her thoughtfully. “Do you serve? Surely, if your father was the Barony’s chief drover, you do not—”

“Never mind what I do or don’t do. Just promise that if we meet at Seafront, we meet for the first time.”

“I promise. But—”

“No more questions. We’ve nearly come to the place where we must part ways, and I want to give ye a warning—fair payment for the ride on this nice mount of yours, mayhap. If ye dine with Thorin and Rimer, ye’ll not be the only new folk at his table. There’ll likely be three others, men Thorin has hired to serve as private guards o’ the house.”

“Not as Sheriff’s deputies?”

“Nay, they answer to none but Thorin . . . or, mayhap, to Rimer. Their names are Jonas, Depape, and Reynolds. They look like hard boys to me . . . although Jonas’s boyhood is so long behind him that I imagine he’s forgot he ever had one.”

“Jonas is the leader?”

“Aye. He limps, has hair that falls to his shoulders pretty as any girl’s, and the quavery voice of an old gaffer who spends his days polishing the chimney-corner . . . but I think he’s the most dangerous of the three all the same. I’d guess these three have forgot more about helling than you and yer friends will ever learn.”

Now why had she told him all that? She didn’t know, exactly. Gratitude, perhaps. He had promised to keep the secret of this late-night meeting, and he had the look of a promise-keeper, in hack with his father or not.

“I’ll watch them. And I thank you for the advice.” They were now climbing a long, gentle slope. Overhead, Old Mother blazed relentlessly. “Bodyguards,” he mused. “Bodyguards in sleepy little Hambry. It’s strange times, Susan. Strange indeed.”

“Aye.” She had wondered about Jonas, Depape, and Reynolds herself, and could think of no good reason for them to be in town. Had they been Rimer’s doing, Rimer’s decision? It seemed likely—Thorin wasn’t the sort of man to even *think* about bodyguards, she would have said; the High Sheriff had always done well enough for him—but still . . . why?

They breasted the hill. Below them lay a nestle of buildings—the village of Hambry. Only a few lights still shone. The brightest cluster marked the Travellers’ Rest. From here, on the warm breeze, she could hear the piano beating out “Hey Jude” and a score of drunken voices gleefully murdering the chorus. Not the three men of whom she had warned Will Dearborn, though; they would be standing at

the bar, watching the room with their flat eyes. Not the singing type were those three. Each had a small blue coffin-shape tattooed on his right hand, burned into the webbing between thumb and forefinger. She thought to tell Will this, then realized he'd see for himself soon enough. Instead, she pointed a little way down the slope, at a dark shape which overhung the road on a chain. "Do ye see that?"

"Yes." He heaved a large and rather comical sigh. "Is it the object I fear beyond all others? Is it the dread shape of Mrs. Beech's mailbox?"

"Aye. And it's there we must part."

"If you say we must, we must. Yet I wish—" Just then the wind shifted, as it sometimes did in the summer, and blew a strong gust out of the west. The smell of sea-salt was gone in an instant, and so was the sound of the drunken, singing voices. What replaced them was a sound infinitely more sinister, one that never failed to produce a scutter of gooseflesh up her back: a low, atonal noise, like the warble of a siren being turned by a man without much longer to live.

Will took a step backward, eyes widening, and again she noticed his hands take a dip toward his belt, as if reaching for something not there.

"What in gods' name is that?"

"It's a thinny," she said quietly. "In Eyebolt Canyon. Have ye never heard of such?"

"Heard of, yes, but never *heard* until now. Gods, how do you stand it? It sounds *alive!*"

She had never thought of it quite like that, but now, in a way listening with his ears instead of her own, she thought he was right. It was as if some sick part of the night had gained a voice and was actually trying to sing.

She shivered. Rusher felt the momentary increased pressure of her knees and whickered softly, craning his head around to look at her.

“We don’t often hear it so clearly at this time of year,” she said. “In the fall, the men burn it to quiet.”

“I don’t understand.”

Who did? Who understood anything anymore? Gods, they couldn’t even turn off the few oil-pumps in Citgo that still worked, although half of them squealed like pigs in a slaughtering chute. These days you were usually just grateful to find things that still worked at all.

“In the summer, when there’s time, drovers and cowboys drag loads of brush to the mouth of Eyebolt,” she said. “Dead brush is all right, but live is better, for it’s smoke that’s wanted, and the heavier the better. Eyebolt’s a box canyon, very short and steep-walled. Almost like a chimney lying on its side, you see?”

“Yes.”

“The traditional time for burning is Reap Morn—the day after the fair and the feast and the fire.”

“The first day of winter.”

“Aye, although in these parts it doesn’t feel like winter so soon. In any case it’s no tradition; the brush is sometimes lit sooner, if the winds have been prankish or if the sound’s particularly strong. It upsets the livestock, you know—cows give poorly when the noise of the thinny’s strong—and it makes sleep difficult.”

“I should think it would.” Will was still looking north, and a stronger gust of wind blew his hat off. It fell to his back, the rawhide tugstring pulling against the line of his throat. The hair so revealed was a little long, and as black as a crow’s wing. She felt a sudden, greedy desire to run her hands through it, to let her fingers tell its texture—

rough or smooth or silky? And how would it smell? At this she felt another shiver of heat down low in her belly. He turned to her as though he had read her mind, and she flushed, grateful that he wouldn't be able to see the darkening of her cheek.

“How long has it been there?”

“Since before I was born,” she said, “but not before my da was born. He said that the ground shook in an earthquake just before it came. Some say the earthquake brought it, some say that's superstitious nonsense. All I know is that it's always been there. The smoke quiets it awhile, the way it will quiet a hive of bees or wasps, but the sound always comes back. The brush piled at the mouth helps to keep any wandering livestock out, too—sometimes they're drawn to it, gods know why. But if a cow or sheep *does* happen to get in—after the burning and before the next year's pile has started to grow, mayhap—it doesn't come back out. Whatever it is, it's hungry.”

She put his poncho aside, lifted her right leg over the saddle without so much as touching the horn, and slipped off Rusher—all this in a single liquid movement. It was a stunt made for pants rather than a dress, and she knew from the further widening of his eyes that he'd seen a good lot of her . . . but nothing she had to wash with the bathroom door closed, so what of that? And that quick dismount had ever been a favorite trick of hers when she was in a showoffy mood.

“Pretty!” he exclaimed.

“I learned it from my da,” she said, responding to the more innocent interpretation of his compliment. Her smile as she handed him the reins, however, suggested that she was willing to accept the compliment any way it was meant.

“Susan? Have you ever seen the thinny?”

“Aye, once or twice. From above.”

“What does it look like?”

“Ugly,” she responded at once. Until tonight, when she had observed Rhea’s smile up close and endured her twiddling, meddling fingers, she would have said it was the ugliest thing she had ever seen. “It looks a little like a slow-burning peat fire, and a little like a swamp full of scummy green water. There’s a mist that rises off it. Sometimes it looks like long, skinny arms. With hands at the end of em.”

“Is it growing?”

“Aye, they say it is, that every thinny grows, but it grows slowly. ’Twon’t escape Eyebolt Canyon in your time or mine.”

She looked up at the sky, and saw that the constellations had continued to tilt along their tracks as they spoke. She felt she could talk to him all night—about the thinny, or Citgo, or her irritating aunt, or just about anything—and the idea dismayed her. Why should this happen to her now, for the gods’ sake? After three years of dismissing the Hambry boys, why should she now meet a boy who interested her so strangely? Why was life so unfair?

Her earlier thought, the one she’d heard in her father’s voice, recurred to her: *If it’s ka, it’ll come like a wind, and your plans will stand before it no more than a barn before a cyclone.*

But no. And no. And no. So set she, with all her considerable determination, her mind against the idea. This was no barn; this was her *life*.

Susan reached out and touched the rusty tin of Mrs. Beech’s mailbox, as if to steady herself in the world. Her little hopes and daydreams didn’t mean so much, perhaps, but her father had taught her to measure herself by her ability to do the things she’d said she would do, and she would not overthrow his teachings simply because she happened to encounter a good-looking boy at a time when her body and her emotions were in a stew.

“I’ll leave ye here to either rejoin yer friends or resume yer ride,” she said. The gravity she heard in her voice made her feel a bit sad, for it was an adult gravity. “But remember yer promise, Will—if ye see me at Seafront—Mayor’s House—and if ye’d be my friend, see me there for the first time. As I’d see you.”

He nodded, and she saw her seriousness now mirrored in his own face. And the sadness, mayhap. “I’ve never asked a girl to ride out with me, or if she’d accept a visit of me. I’d ask of you, Susan, daughter of Patrick—I’d even bring you flowers to sweeten my chances—but it would do no good, I think.”

She shook her head. “Nay. ’Twouldn’t.”

“Are you promised in marriage? It’s forward of me to ask, I know, but I mean no harm.”

“I’m sure ye don’t, but I’d as soon not answer. My position is a delicate one just now, as I told ye. Besides, it’s late. Here’s where we part, Will. But stay . . . one more moment . . .”

She rummaged in the pocket of her apron and brought out half a cake wrapped in a piece of green leaf. The other half she had eaten on her way up to the Cöos . . . in what now felt like the other half of her life. She held what was left of her little evening meal out to Rusher, who sniffed it, then ate it and nuzzled her hand. She smiled, liking the velvet tickle in the cup of her palm. “Aye, thee’s a good horse, so ye are.”

She looked at Will Dearborn, who stood in the road, shuffling his dusty boots and gazing at her unhappily. The hard look was gone from his face, now; he looked her age again, or younger. “We were well met, weren’t we?” he asked.

She stepped forward, and before she could let herself think about what she was doing, she put her hands on his shoulders, stood on her toes, and kissed him on the mouth. The kiss was brief but not sisterly.

“Aye, very well met, Will.” But when he moved toward her (as thoughtlessly as a flower turning its face to follow the sun), wishing to repeat the experience, she pushed him back a step, gently but firmly.

“Nay, that was only a thank-you, and one thank-you should be enough for a gentleman. Go yer course in peace, Will.”

He took up the reins like a man in a dream, looked at them for a moment as if he didn’t know what in the world they were, and then looked back at her. She could see him working to clear his mind and emotions of the impact her kiss had made. She liked him for it. And she was very glad she had done it.

“And you yours,” he said, swinging into the saddle. “I look forward to meeting you for the first time.”

He smiled at her, and she saw both longing and wishes in that smile. Then he gighed the horse, turned him, and started back the way they’d come—to have another look at the oilpatch, mayhap. She stood where she was, by Mrs. Beech’s mailbox, willing him to turn around and wave so she could see his face once more. She felt sure he would . . . but he didn’t. Then, just as she was about to turn away and start down the hill to town, he *did* turn, and his hand lifted, fluttering for a moment in the dark like a moth.

Susan lifted her own in return and then went her way, feeling happy and unhappy at the same time. Yet—and this was perhaps the most important thing—she no longer felt soiled. When she had touched the boy’s lips, Rhea’s touch seemed to have left her skin. A small magic, perhaps, but she welcomed it.

She walked on, smiling a little and looking up at the stars more frequently than was her habit when out after dark.

CHAPTER IV LONG AFTER MOONSET

1

He rode restlessly for nearly two hours back and forth along what she called the Drop, never pushing Rusher above a trot, although what he wanted to do was gallop the big gelding under the stars until his own blood began to cool a little.

It'll cool plenty if you draw attention to yourself, he thought, and likely you won't even have to cool it yourself. Fools are the only folk on the earth who can absolutely count on getting what they deserve. That old saying made him think of the scarred and bowlegged man who had been his life's greatest teacher, and he smiled.

At last he turned his horse down the slope to the trickle of brook which ran there, and followed it a mile and a half upstream (past several gathers of horse; they looked at Rusher with a kind of sleepy, wall-eyed surprise) to a grove of willows. From the hollow within, a horse whickered softly. Rusher whickered in return, stamping one hoof and nodding his head up and down.

His rider ducked his own head as he passed through the willow fronds, and suddenly there was a narrow and inhuman white face hanging before him, its upper half all but swallowed by black, pupilless eyes.

He dipped for his guns—the third time tonight he'd done that, and for the third time there was nothing there. Not that it mattered; already he recognized what was hanging before him on a string: that idiotic rook's skull.

The young man who was currently calling himself Arthur Heath had taken it off his saddle (it amused him to call the skull so perched their lookout, “ugly as an old gammer, but perfect cheap to feed”) and hung it here as a prank greeting. Him and his jokes! Rusher’s master batted it aside hard enough to break the string and send the skull flying into the dark.

“Fie, Roland,” said a voice from the shadows. It was reproachful, but there was laughter bubbling just beneath . . . as there always was. Cuthbert was his oldest friend—the marks of their first teeth had been embedded on many of the same toys—but Roland had in some ways never understood him. Nor was it just his laughter; on the long-ago day when Hax, the palace cook, was to be hung for a traitor on Gallows Hill, Cuthbert had been in an agony of terror and remorse. He’d told Roland he couldn’t stay, couldn’t watch . . . but in the end he had done both. Because neither the stupid jokes nor the easy surface emotions were the truth of Cuthbert Allgood.

As Roland entered the hollow at the center of the grove, a dark shape stepped out from behind the tree where it had been keeping. Halfway across the clearing, it resolved itself into a tall, narrow-hipped boy who was barefooted below his jeans and barechested above them. In one hand he held an enormous antique revolver—a kind which was sometimes called a beer-barrel because of the cylinder’s size.

“Fie,” Cuthbert repeated, as if he liked the sound of this word, not archaic only in forgotten backwaters like Mejis. “That’s a fine way to treat the guard o’ the watch, smacking the poor thin-faced fellow halfway to the nearest mountain-range!”

“If I’d been wearing a gun, I likely would have blown it to smithereens and woken half the countryside.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be going about strapped,” Cuthbert answered mildly. “You’re remarkably ill-looking, Roland son of Steven, but nobody’s fool even as you approach the ancient age of fifteen.”

“I thought we agreed we’d use the names we’re travelling under. Even among ourselves.”

Cuthbert stuck out his leg, bare heel planted in the turf, and bowed with his arms outstretched and his hands strenuously bent at the wrist—an inspired imitation of the sort of man for whom court has become career. He also looked remarkably like a heron standing in a marsh, and Roland snorted laughter in spite of himself. Then he touched the inside of his left wrist to his forehead, to see if he had a fever. He felt feverish enough inside his head, gods knew, but the skin above his eyes felt cool.

“I cry your pardon, gunslinger,” Cuthbert said, his eyes and hands still turned humbly down.

The smile on Roland’s face died. “And don’t call me that again, Cuthbert. Please. Not here, not anywhere. Not if you value me.”

Cuthbert dropped his pose at once and came quickly to where Roland sat his horse. He looked honestly humbled.

“Roland—Will—I’m sorry.”

Roland clapped him on the shoulder. “No harm done. Just remember from here on out. Mejis may be at the end of the world . . . but it still *is* the world. Where’s Alain?”

“Dick, do you mean? Where do you think?” Cuthbert pointed across the clearing, to where a dark hulk was either snoring or slowly choking to death.

“That one,” Cuthbert said, “would sleep through an earthquake.”

“But you heard me coming and woke.”

“Yes,” Cuthbert said. His eyes were on Roland’s face, searching it with an intensity that made Roland feel a little uneasy. “Did something happen to you? You look different.”

“Do I?”

“Yes. Excited. Aired out, somehow.”

If he was going to tell Cuthbert about Susan, now was the time. He decided without really thinking about it (most of his decisions, certainly the best of them, were made in this same way) not to tell. If he met her at Mayor’s House, it would be the first time as far as Cuthbert and Alain knew, as well. What harm in that?

“I’ve been properly aired, all right,” he said, dismounting and bending to uncinch the girths of his saddle. “I’ve seen some interesting things, too.”

“Ah? Speak, companion of my bosom’s dearest tenant.”

“I’ll wait until tomorrow, I think, when yon hibernating bear is finally awake. Then I only have to tell once. Besides, I’m tired. I’ll share you one thing, though: there are too many horses in these parts, even for a Barony renowned for its horseflesh. Too many by far.”

Before Cuthbert could ask any questions, Roland pulled the saddle from Rusher’s back and set it down beside three small wicker cages which had been bound together with rawhide, making them into a carrier which could be secured to a horse’s back. Inside, three pigeons with white rings around their necks cooed sleepily. One took his head out from beneath his wing, had a peek at Roland, and then tucked himself away again.

“These fellows all right?” Roland asked.

“Fine. Pecking and shitting happily in their straw. As far as they’re concerned, they’re on vacation. What did you mean about—”

“Tomorrow,” Roland said, and Cuthbert, seeing that there would be no more, only nodded and went to find his lean and bony lookout.

Twenty minutes later, Rusher unloaded and rubbed down and set to forage with Buckskin and Glue Boy (Cuthbert could not even name his horse as a normal person would), Roland lay on his back in his bedroll, looking up at the late stars overhead. Cuthbert had gone back to sleep as easily as he had awakened at the sound of Rusher's hoofs, but Roland had never felt less sleepy in his life.

His mind turned back a month, to the whore's room, to his father sitting on the whore's bed and watching him dress. The words his father had spoken—*I have known for two years*—had reverberated like a struck gong in Roland's head. He suspected they might continue to do so for the rest of his life.

But his father had had much more to say. About Marten. About Roland's mother, who was, perhaps, more sinned against than sinning. About harriers who called themselves patriots. And about John Farson, who had indeed been in Cressia, and who was gone from that place now—vanished, as he had a way of doing, like smoke in a high wind. Before leaving, he and his men had burned Indrie, the Barony seat, pretty much to the ground. The slaughter had been in the hundreds, and perhaps it was no surprise that Cressia had since repudiated the Affiliation and spoken for the Good Man. The Barony Governor, the Mayor of Indrie, and the High Sheriff had all ended the early summer day which concluded Farson's visit with their heads on the wall guarding the town's entrance. That was, Steven Deschain had said, "pretty persuasive politics."

It was a game of Castles where both armies had come out from behind their Hillocks and the final moves had commenced, Roland's father had said, and as was so often the case with popular revolutions, that game was apt to be over before many in the Baronies of Mid-World had begun to realize that John Farson was a serious threat . . . or, if you were one of those who believed passionately in his vision of democracy and an end to what he called "class slavery and ancient fairy-tales," a serious agent of change.

His father and his father's small *ka-tet* of gunslingers, Roland was amazed to learn, cared little about Farson in either light; they looked

upon him as small cheese. Looked upon the Affiliation itself as small cheese, come to that.

I'm going to send you away, Steven had said, sitting there on the bed and looking somberly at his only son, the one who had lived. There is no true safe place left in Mid-World, but the Barony of Mejis on the Clean Sea is as close to true safety as any place may be these days . . . so it's there you'll go, along with at least two of your mates. Alain, I suppose, for one. Just not that laughing boy for the other, I beg of you. You'd be better off with a barking dog.

Roland, who on any other day in his life would have been overjoyed at the prospect of seeing some of the wider world, had protested hotly. If the final battles against the Good Man were at hand, he wanted to fight them at his father's side. He was a gunslinger now, after all, if only a 'prentice, and—

His father had shaken his head, slowly and emphatically. *No, Roland. You don't understand. You shall, however; as well as possible, you shall.*

Later, the two of them had walked the high battlements above Mid-World's last living city—green and gorgeous Gilead in the morning sun, with its pennons flapping and the vendors in the streets of the Old Quarter and horses trotting on the bridle paths which radiated out from the palace standing at the heart of everything. His father had told him more (not everything), and he had understood more (far from everything—nor did his father understand everything). The Dark Tower had not been mentioned by either of them, but already it hung in Roland's mind, a possibility like a storm-cloud far away on the horizon.

Was the Tower what all of this was really about? Not a jumped-up harrier with dreams of ruling Mid-World, not the wizard who had enchanted his mother, not the glass ball which Steven and his posse had hoped to find in Cressia . . . but the Dark Tower?

He hadn't asked.

He hadn't *dared* ask.

Now he shifted in his bedroll and closed his eyes. He saw the girl's face at once; he felt her lips pressed firmly against his own again, and smelled the scent of her skin. He was instantly hot from the top of his head to the base of his spine, cold from the base of his spine to the tips of his toes. Then he thought of the way her legs had flashed as she slid from Rusher's back (also the glimmer of the undergarments beneath her briefly raised dress), and his hot half and cold half changed places.

The whore had taken his virginity but wouldn't kiss him; had turned her face aside when he tried to kiss her. She'd allowed him to do whatever else he wanted, but not that. At the time he'd been bitterly disappointed. Now he was glad.

The eye of his adolescent mind, both restless and clear, considered the braid which fell down her back to her waist, the soft dimples which had formed at the corners of her mouth when she smiled, the lilt of her voice, her old-fashioned way of saying aye and nay, ye and yer and da. He thought of how her hands had felt on his shoulders as she stretched up to kiss him, and thought he would give everything he owned to feel her hands there again, so light and so firm. And her mouth on his. It was a mouth that knew only a little about kissing, he guessed, but that was a little more than he knew himself.

Be careful, Roland—don't let your feeling for this girl tip anything over. She's not free, anyway—she said as much. Not married, but spoken for in some other way.

Roland was far from the relentless creature he would eventually become, but the seeds of that relentlessness were there—small, stony things that would, in their time, grow into trees with deep roots . . . and bitter fruit. Now one of these seeds cracked open and sent up its first sharp blade.

What's been spoken for may be unspoken, and what's done may be undone. Nothing's sure, but . . . I want her.

Yes. That was the one thing he did know, and he knew it as well as he knew the face of his father: he wanted her. Not as he had wanted the whore when she lay naked on her bed with her legs spread and her half-lidded eyes looking up at him, but in the way he wanted food when he was hungry or water when he was thirsty. In the way, he supposed, that he wanted to drag Marten's dusty body behind his horse down Gilead's High Road in payment for what the wizard had done to his mother.

He wanted her; he wanted the girl Susan.

Roland turned over on his other side, closed his eyes, and fell asleep. His rest was thin and lit by the crudely poetic dreams only adolescent boys have, dreams where sexual attraction and romantic love come together and resonate more powerfully than they ever will again. In these thirsty visions Susan Delgado put her hands on Roland's shoulders over and over, kissed his mouth over and over, told him over and over to come to her for the first time, to be with her for the first time, to see her for the first time, to see her very well.

2

Five miles or so from where Roland slept and dreamed his dreams, Susan Delgado lay in her bed and looked out her window and watched Old Star begin to grow pale with the approaching dawn. Sleep was no closer now than it had been when she lay down, and there was a throb between her legs where the old woman had touched her. It was distracting but no longer unpleasant, because she now associated it with the boy she'd met on the road and impulsively kissed by starlight. Every time she shifted her legs, that throb flared into a brief sweet ache.

When she'd got home, Aunt Cord (who would have been in her own bed an hour before on any ordinary night) had been sitting in her rocking chair by the fireplace—dead and cold and swept clean of

ashes at this time of year—with a lapful of lace that looked like wave-froth against her dowdy black dress. She was edging it with a speed that seemed almost supernatural to Susan, and she hadn't looked up when the door opened and her niece came in on a swirl of breeze.

"I expected ye an hour ago," Aunt Cord said. And then, although she didn't sound it: "I was worried."

"Aye?" Susan said, and said no more. She thought that on any other night she would have offered one of her fumbling excuses which always sounded like a lie to her own ears—it was the effect Aunt Cord had had on her all her life—but this hadn't been an ordinary night. Never in her life had there been a night like this. She found she could not get Will Dearborn out of her mind.

Aunt Cord had looked up then, her close-set, rather beady eyes sharp and inquisitive above her narrow blade of a nose. Some things hadn't changed since Susan had set out for the Cöos; she had still been able to feel her aunt's eyes brushing across her face and down her body, like little whisk-brooms with sharp bristles.

"What took ye so long?" Aunt Cord had asked. "Was there trouble?"

"No trouble," Susan had replied, but for a moment she thought of how the witch had stood beside her in the doorway, pulling her braid through the gnarled tube of one loosely clenched fist. She remembered wanting to go, and she remembered asking Rhea if their business was done.

Mayhap there's one more little thing, the old woman had said . . . or so Susan thought. But what had that one more little thing been? She couldn't remember. And, really, what did it matter? She was shut of Rhea until her belly began to rise with Thorin's child . . . and if there could be no baby-making until Reap-Night, she'd not be returning to the Cöos until late winter at the soonest. An age! And it would be longer than that, were she slow to kindle . . .

“I walked slowly coming home, Aunt. That’s all.”

“Then why look ye so?” Aunt Cord had asked, scant brows knitting toward the vertical line which creased her brow.

“How so?” Susan had asked, taking off her apron and knotting the strings and hanging it on the hook just inside the kitchen door.

“Flushy. Frothy. Like milk fresh out of the cow.”

She’d almost laughed. Aunt Cord, who knew as little about men as Susan did about the stars and planets, had struck it directly. Flushy and frothy was exactly how she felt. “Only the night air, I suppose,” she had said. “I saw a meteor, Aunt. And heard the thinny. The sound’s strong tonight.”

“Aye?” her aunt asked without interest, then returned to the subject which did interest her. “Did it hurt?”

“A little.”

“Did ye cry?”

Susan shook her head.

“Good. Better not. Always better. She likes it when they cry, I’ve heard. Now, Sue—did she give you something? Did the old pussy give you something?”

“Aye.” She reached into her pocket and brought out the paper with

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written upon it. She held it out and her aunt snatched it away with a greedy look. Cordelia had been quite the sugarplum over the last month or so, but now that she had what she wanted (and now that Susan had come too far and promised too much to have a change of heart), she’d reverted to the sour, supercilious, often suspicious

woman Susan had grown up with; the one who'd been driven into almost weekly bouts of rage by her phlegmatic, life-goes-as-'twill brother. In a way, it was a relief. It had been nervewracking to have Aunt Cord playing Cybilla Good-Sprite day after day.

"Aye, aye, there's her mark, all right," her aunt had said, tracing her fingers over the bottom of the sheet. "A devil's hoof's what it means, some say, but what do we care, eh, Sue? Nasty, horrid creature that she is, she's still made it possible for two women to get on in the world a little longer. And ye'll only have to see her once more, probably around Year's End, when ye've caught proper."

"It will be later than that," Susan had told her. "I'm not to lie with him until the full of the Demon Moon. After the Reaping Fair and the bonfire."

Aunt Cord had stared, eyes wide, mouth open. "Said she so?"

Are you calling me a liar, Auntie? she had thought with a sharpness that wasn't much like her; usually her nature was more like her father's.

"Aye."

"But why? Why so *long*?" Aunt Cord was obviously upset, obviously disappointed. There had so far been eight pieces of silver and four of gold out of this; they were tucked up wherever it was that Aunt Cord squirreled her money away (and Susan suspected there was a fair amount of it, although Cordelia liked to plead poverty at every opportunity), and twice that much was still owed . . . or would be, once the bloodstained sheet went to the Mayor's House laundress. That same amount would be paid yet again when Rhea had confirmed the baby, and the baby's honesty. A lot of money, all told. A *great* lot, for a little place like this and little folk like them. And now, to have the paying of it put back so far . . .

Then came a sin Susan had prayed over (although without much enthusiasm) before getting into her bed: she had rather enjoyed the

cheated, frustrated look on Aunt Cord's face—the look of the thwarted miser.

“Why so *long*?” she repeated.

“I suppose you could go up the Cöös and ask her.”

Cordelia Delgado's lips, thin to begin with, had pressed together so tightly they almost disappeared. “Are you pert, missy? Are you pert with me?”

“No. I'm much too tired to be pert with anyone. I want to wash—I can still feel her hands on me, so I can—and go to bed.”

“Then do so. Perhaps in the morning we can discuss this in more ladylike fashion. And we must go and see Hart, of course.” She folded the paper Rhea had given Susan, looking pleased at the prospect of visiting Hart Thorin, and moved her hand toward her dress pocket.

“No,” Susan said, and her voice had been unusually sharp—enough so to freeze her aunt's hand in midair. Cordelia had looked at her, frankly startled. Susan had felt a little embarrassed by that look, but she hadn't dropped her eyes, and when she held out her own hand, it had been steady enough.

“I'm to have the keeping of that, Aunt.”

“Who tells ye to speak so?” Aunt Cord had asked, her voice almost whining with outrage—it was close to blasphemy, Susan supposed, but for a moment Aunt Cord's voice had reminded her of the sound the thinny made. “Who tells ye to speak so to the woman who raised a motherless girl? To the sister of that girl's poor dead father?”

“You know who,” Susan said. She still held her hand out. “I'm to keep it, and I'm to give it to Mayor Thorin. She said she didn't care what happened to it then, he could wipe his bum with it for all of her,”

(the flush which suffused her aunt's face at that had been very enjoyable) "but *until* then, it was to be in my keeping."

"I never heard of such a thing," Aunt Cordelia had huffed . . . but she had handed the grimy scrap of paper back. "Giving the keep of such an important document to a mere scrap of a girl."

Yet not too mere a scrap to be his gilly, am I? To lie under him and listen to his bones creak and take his seed and mayhap bear his child.

She'd dropped her eyes to her pocket as she put the paper away again, not wanting Aunt Cord to see the resentment in them.

"Go up," Aunt Cord had said, brushing the froth of lace off her lap and into her workbasket, where it lay in an unaccustomed tangle. "And when you wash, do your mouth with especial care. Cleanse it of its impudence and disrespect toward those who have given up much for love of its owner."

Susan had gone silently, biting back a thousand retorts, mounting the stairs as she had so often, throbbing with a mixture of shame and resentment.

And now here she was, in her bed and still awake as the stars paled away and the first brighter shades began to color the sky. The events of the night just past slipped through her mind in a kind of fantastical blur, like shuffled playing cards—and the one which turned up with the most persistence was the face of Will Dearborn. She thought of how that face could be hard at one moment and soften so unexpectedly at the next. And was it a handsome face? Aye, she thought so. For herself, she knew so.

I've never asked a girl to ride out with me, or if she would accept a visit of me. I would ask you, Susan, daughter of Patrick.

Why now? Why should I meet him now, when no good can come of it?

If it's ka, it'll come like a wind. Like a cyclone.

She tossed from one side of the bed to the other, then at last rolled onto her back again. There would be no sleep for her in what remained of this night, she thought. She might as well walk out on the Drop and watch the sun come up.

Yet she continued to lie in bed, feeling somehow sick and well at the same time, looking into the shadows and listening to the first cries of the morning birds, thinking of how his mouth had felt against hers, the tender grain of it and the feeling of his teeth below his lips; the smell of his skin, the rough texture of his shirt under her palms.

She now put those palms against the top of her shift and cupped her breasts with her fingers. The nipples were hard, like little pebbles. And when she touched them, the heat between her legs flared suddenly and urgently.

She *could* sleep, she thought. She could, if she took care of that heat. If she knew how.

And she did. The old woman had shown her. *Even a girl who's intact don't need to lack for a shiver now 'n then . . . Like a little bud o' silk, so it is.*

Susan shifted in bed and slipped a hand deep beneath the sheet. She forced the old woman's bright eyes and hollow cheeks out of her mind—it wasn't hard to do at all once you set your mind to it, she discovered—and replaced it with the face of the boy with the big gelding and the silly flat-crowned hat. For a moment the vision of her mind became so clear and so sweet that it was real, and all the rest of her life only a drab dream. In this vision he kissed her over and over, their mouths widening, their tongues touching; what he breathed out, she breathed in.

She burned. She burned in her bed like a torch. And when the sun finally came over the horizon some short time later, she lay deeply

asleep, with a faint smile on her lips and her unbraided hair lying across the side of her face and her pillow like loose gold.

3

In the last hour before dawn, the public room of the Travellers' Rest was as quiet as it ever became. The gaslights which turned the chandelier into a brilliant jewel until two of the clock or so on most nights were now turned down to guttering blue points, and the long, high room was shadowy and spectral.

In one corner lay a jumble of kindling—the remains of a couple of chairs smashed in a fight over a Watch Me game (the combatants were currently residing in the High Sheriff's drunk-cell). In another corner was a fairly large puddle of congealing puke. On the raised platform at the east end of the room stood a battered piano; propped against its bench was the ironwood club which belonged to Barkie, the saloon's bouncer and all-around tough man. Barkie himself, the naked mound of his scarred stomach rising above the waistband of his corduroy pants like a clot of bread dough, lay under the bench, snoring. In one hand he held a playing card: the deuce of diamonds.

At the west end of the room were the card tables. Two drunks lay with their heads on one of these, snoring and drooling on the green felt, their outstretched hands touching. Above them, on the wall, was a picture of Arthur, the Great King of Eld astride his white stallion, and a sign which read (in a curious mixture of High and Low Speech): ARGYOU NOT ABOUT THE HAND YOU ARE DELT IN CARDS OR LIFE.

Mounted behind the bar, which ran the length of the room, was a monstrous trophy: a two-headed elk with a rack of antlers like a forest grove and four glaring eyes. This beast was known to local habitues of the Travellers' as The Romp. None could have said why. Some wit had carefully drawn a pair of sow-titty condoms over the prongs of two of its antlers. Lying on the bar itself and directly beneath The Romp's disapproving gaze was Pettie the Trotter, one of the Travellers' dancers and gilly-girls . . . although Pettie's actual girlhood was well behind her now, and soon she would be reduced to

doing her business on her knees behind the Travellers' rather than upstairs in one of the tiny cribs. Her plump legs were spread, one dangling over the bar on the inside, one on the outside, the filthy tangle of her skirt frothed up between. She breathed in long snores, occasionally twitching at the feet and fat fingers. The only other sounds were the hot summer wind outside and the soft, regular snap of cards being turned one by one.

A small table stood by itself near the batwing doors which gave upon the Hambry High Street; it was here that Coral Thorin, owner of the Travellers' Rest (and the Mayor's sister), sat on the nights when she descended from her suite "to be a part of the company." When she came down, she came down early—when there were still more steaks than whiskey being served across the old scratched bar—and went back up around the time that Sheb, the piano player, sat down and began to pound his hideous instrument. The Mayor himself never came in at all, although it was well-known that he owned at least a half-interest in the Travellers'. Clan Thorin enjoyed the money the place brought in; they just didn't enjoy the look of it after midnight, when the sawdust spread on the floor began to soak up the spilled beer and the spilled blood. Yet there was a hard streak in Coral, who had twenty years before been what was called "a wild child." She was younger than her political brother, not so thin, and good-looking in a large-eyed, weasel-headed way. No one sat at her table during the saloon's operating hours—Barkie would have put a stop to anyone who tried, and double-quick—but operating hours were over now, the drunks mostly gone or passed out upstairs, Sheb curled up and fast asleep in the corner behind his piano. The softheaded boy who cleaned the place had been gone since two o' the clock or so (chased out by jeers and insults and a few flying beer-glasses, as he always was; Roy Depape in particular had no love in his heart for that particular lad). He would be back around nine or so, to begin readying the old party-palace for another night of hilarity, but until then the man sitting at Mistress Thorin's table had the place to himself.

A game of Patience was laid out before him: black on red, red on black, the partially formed Square o' Court above all, just as it was in the affairs of men. In his left hand the player held the remains of the deck. As he flipped the cards up, one by one, the tattoo on his right hand moved. It was disconcerting somehow, as if the coffin were breathing. The card-player was an oldish fellow, not as thin as the Mayor or his sister, but thin. His long white hair straggled down his back. He was deeply tanned, except for his neck, where he always burned; the flesh there hung in scant wattles. He wore a mustache so long the ragged white ends hung nearly to his jaw—a sham gunslinger's mustache, many thought it, but no one used the word "sham" to Eldred Jonas's face. He wore a white silk shirt, and a black-handled revolver hung low on his hip. His large, red-rimmed eyes looked sad on first glance. A second, closer look showed them only to be watery. Of emotion they were as dead as the eyes of The Romp.

He turned up the Ace of Wands. No place for it. "Pah, you bugger," he said in an odd, reedy voice. It quavered, as well, like the voice of a man on the verge of tears. It fit perfectly with his damp and red-rimmed eyes. He swept the cards together.

Before he could reshuffle, a door opened and closed softly upstairs. Jonas put the cards aside and dropped his hand to the butt of his gun. Then, as he recognized the sound of Reynolds's boots coming along the gallery, he let go of the gun and drew his tobacco-pouch from his belt instead. The hem of the cloak Reynolds always wore came into view, and then he was coming down the stairs, his face freshly washed and his curly red hair hanging about his ears. Vain of his looks was dear old Mr. Reynolds, and why not? He'd sent his cock on its exploring way up more damp and cozy cracks than Jonas had ever seen in his life, and Jonas was twice his age.

At the bottom of the stairs Reynolds walked along the bar, pausing to squeeze one of Pettie's plump thighs, and then crossed to where Jonas sat with his makings and his deck of cards.

"Evening, Eldred."

“Morning, Clay.” Jonas opened the sack, took out a paper, and sprinkled tobacco into it. His voice shook, but his hands were steady. “Like a smoke?”

“I could do with one.”

Reynolds pulled out a chair, turned it around, and sat with his forearms crossed on its back. When Jonas handed him the cigarette, Reynolds danced it along the backs of his fingers, an old gunslinger trick. The Big Coffin Hunters were full of old gunslinger tricks.

“Where’s Roy? With Her Nibs?” They had been in Hambry a little over a month now, and in that time Depape had conceived a passion for a fifteen-year-old whore named Deborah. Her bowlegged clumping walk and her way of squinting off into the distance led Jonas to suspect she was just another cowgirl from a long line of them, but she had high-hat ways. It was Clay who had started calling the girl Her Nibs, or Her Majesty, or sometimes (when drunk) “Roy’s Coronation Cunt.”

Reynolds now nodded. “It’s like he’s drunk on her.”

“He’ll be all right. He ain’t throwing us over for some little snuggle-bunny with pimples on her tits. Why, she’s so ignorant she can’t spell cat. Not so much as cat, no. I asked her.”

Jonas made a second cigarette, drew a sulfur match from the sack, and popped it alight with his thumbnail. He lit Reynolds’s first, then his own.

A small yellow cur came in under the batwing doors. The men watched it in silence, smoking. It crossed the room, first sniffed at the curdled vomit in the corner, then began to eat it. Its stub of a tail wagged back and forth as it dined.

Reynolds nodded toward the admonition not to argue about the cards you were dealt. “That mutt’d understand that, I’d say.”

“Not at all, not at all,” Jonas demurred. “Just a dog is all he is, a spew-eating dog. I heard a horse twenty minutes ago. First on the come, then on the go. Would it have been one of our hired watchmen?”

“You don’t miss a trick, do you?”

“Don’t pay to, no, don’t pay a bit. Was it?”

“Yep. Fellow who works for one of the small freeholders out along the east end of the Drop. He seen ’em come in. Three. Young. Babies.” Reynolds pronounced this last as they did in the North’rd Baronies: *babbies*. “Nothing to worry of.”

“Now, now, we don’t know that,” Jonas said, his quavering voice making him sound like a temporizing old man. “Young eyes see far, they say.”

“Young eyes see what they’re pointed at,” Reynolds replied. The dog trotted past him, licking its chops. Reynolds helped it on its way with a kick the cur was not quite quick enough to avoid. It scuttled back out under the batwings, uttering little *yike-yike* sounds that made Barkie snort thickly from his place of rest beneath the piano bench. His hand opened and the playing card dropped out of it.

“Maybe so, maybe not,” Jonas said. “In any case, they’re Affiliation brats, sons of big estates off in the Green Somewhere, if Rimer and that fool he works for have it straight. That means we’ll be very, very careful. Walk easy, like on eggshells. Why, we’ve got three more months here, at least! And those young’uns may be here that whole time, counting this ’n counting that and putting it all down on paper. Folks counting things ain’t good for us right now. Not for men in the resupply business.”

“Come on! It’s make-work, that’s all—a slap on the wrist for getting in trouble. Their daddies—”

“Their daddies know Farson’s in charge of the whole Southwest Edge now, and sitting on high ground. The brats may know the same—that playtime’s purt’ near over for the Affiliation and all its pukesome royalty. Can’t know, Clay. With folks like these, you can’t know which way they’ll jump. At the very least, they may try to do a half-decent job just to try and get on the good side o’ their parents again. We’ll know better when we see em, but I tell you one thing: we can’t just put guns to the backs of their heads and drop them like broke-leg hosses if they see the wrong thing. Their daddies might be mad at em alive, but I think they’d be very tender of em dead—that’s just the way daddies are. We’ll want to be trig, Clay; as trig as we can be.”

“Better leave Depape out of it, then.”

“Roy will be fine,” Jonas said in his quavery voice. He dropped the stub of his cigarette to the floor and crushed it under his bootheel. He looked up at The Romp’s glassy eyes and squinted, as if calculating. “Tonight, your friend said? They arrived tonight, these brats?”

“Yep.”

“They’ll be in to see Avery tomorrow, then, I reckon.” This was Herk Avery, High Sheriff of Mejis and Chief Constable of Hambry, a large man who was as loose as a trundle of laundry.

“Reckon so,” Clay Reynolds said. “To present their papers ’n all.”

“Yes, sir, yes indeedy. How-d’you-do, and how-d’you-do, and how-d’you-do again.”

Reynolds said nothing. He often didn’t understand Jonas, but he had been riding with him since the age of fifteen, and knew it was usually better not to ask for enlightenment. If you did, you were apt to end up listening to a cult-manni lecture about the other worlds the old buzzard had visited through what he called “the special doors.”

As far as Reynolds was concerned, there were enough ordinary doors in the world to keep him busy.

“I’ll speak to Rimer and Rimer’ll talk to the Sheriff about where they should stay,” Jonas said. “I think the bunkhouse at the old Bar K ranch. You know where I mean?”

Reynolds did. In a Barony like Mejis, you got to know the few landmarks in a hurry. The Bar K was a deserted spread of land northwest of town, not too far from that weird squalling canyon. They burned at the mouth of the canyon every fall, and once, six or seven years ago, the wind had shifted and gone back wrong and burned most of the Bar K to the ground—barns, stables, the home place. It had spared the bunkhouse, however, and that would be a good spot for three tenderfeet from the Inners. It was away from the Drop; it was also away from the oilpatch.

“Ye like it, don’t ye?” Jonas asked, putting on a hick Hambry accent. “Aye, ye like it very much, I can see ye do, my cully. Ye know what they say in Cressia? ‘If ye’d steal the silver from the dining room, first put the dog in the pantry.’ ”

Reynolds nodded. It was good advice. “And those trucks? Those what-do-you-callums, tankers?”

“Fine where they are,” Jonas said. “Not that we could move em now without attracting the wrong kind of attention, eh? You and Roy want to go out there and cover them with brush. Lay it on nice and thick. Day after tomorrow you’ll do it.”

“And where will you be while we’re flexing our muscles out at Citgo?”

“By daylight? Preparing for dinner at Mayor’s House, you clod—the dinner Thorin will be giving to introduce his guests from the Great World to the shitpicky society of the smaller one.” Jonas began making another cigarette. He gazed up at The Romp rather than at what he was doing, and still spilled barely a scrap of tobacco. “A

bath, a shave, a trim of these tangled old man's locks . . . I might even wax my mustache, Clay, what do you say to that?"

"Don't strain yourself, Eldred."

Jonas laughed, the sound shrill enough to make Barkie mutter and Pettie stir uneasily on her makeshift bar-top bed.

"So Roy and I aren't invited to this fancy do."

"You'll be invited, oh yes, you'll be invited very warmly," Jonas said, and handed Reynolds the fresh cigarette. He began making another for himself. "I'll offer your excuses. I'll do you boys proud, count on me. Strong men may weep."

"All so we can spend the day out there in the dust and stink, covering those hulks. You're too kind, Jonas."

"I'll be asking questions, as well," Jonas said dreamily. "Drifting here and there . . . looking spruce, smelling of bay-berries . . . and asking my little questions. I've known folks in our line of trade who'll go to a fat, jolly fellow to find out the gossip—a saloon-keeper or bartender, perhaps a livery stable owner or one of the chubby fellows who always hangs about the jail or the courthouse with his thumbs tucked into his vest pockets. As for myself, Clay, I find that a woman's best, and the narrower the better—one with more nose than tits sticking off her. I look for one who don't paint her lips and keeps her hair scooped back against her head."

"You have someone in mind?"

"Yar. Cordelia Delgado's her name."

"Delgado?"

"You know the name, it's on the lips of everyone in this town, I reckon. Susan Delgado, our esteemed Mayor's soon-to-be gilly. Cordelia's her auntie. Now here's a fact of human nature I've found:

folk are more apt to talk to someone like her, who plays them close, than they are to the local jolly types who'll buy you a drink. And that lady plays them close. I'm going to slip in next to her at that dinner, and I'm going to compliment her on the perfume I doubt like hell she'll be wearing, and I'm going to keep her wineglass full. Now, how sounds that for a plan?"

"A plan for what? That's what I want to know."

"For the game of Castles we may have to play," Jonas said, and all the lightness dropped out of his voice. "We're to believe that these boys have been sent here more as punishment than to do any real job of work. It sounds plausible, too. I've known rakes in my time, and it sounds plausible, indeed. I believe it each day until about three in the morning, and then a little doubt sets in. And do you know what, Clay?"

Reynolds shook his head.

"I'm *right* to doubt. Just as I was right to go with Rimer to old man Thorin and convince him that Farson's glass would be better with the witch-woman, for the nonce. She'll keep it in a place where a *gunslinger* couldn't find it, let alone a nosy lad who's yet to have his first piece of arse. These are strange times. A storm's coming. And when you know the wind is going to blow, it's best to keep your gear battened down."

He looked at the cigarette he had made. He had been dancing it along the backs of his knuckles, as Reynolds had done earlier. Jonas pushed back the fall of his hair and tucked the cigarette behind his ear.

"I don't want to smoke," he said, standing up and stretching. His back made small crackling sounds. "I'm crazy to smoke at this hour of the morning. Too many cigarettes are apt to keep an old man like me awake."

He walked toward the stairs, squeezing Pettie's bare leg as he went by, also as Reynolds had done. At the foot of the stairs he looked back.

"I don't want to kill them. Things are delicate enough without that. I'll smell quite a little wrong on them and not lift a finger, no, not a single finger of my hand. But . . . I'd like to make them clear on their place in the great scheme o' things."

"Give them a sore paw."

Jonas brightened. "Yessir, partner, maybe a sore paw's just what I'd like to give them. Make them think twice about tangling with the Big Coffin Hunters later on, when it matters. Make them swing wide around us when they see us in their road. Yessir, that's something to think about. It really is."

He started up the stairs, chuckling a little, his limp quite pronounced—it got worse late at night. It was a limp Roland's old teacher, Cort, might have recognized, for Cort had seen the blow which caused it. Cort's own father had dealt it with an ironwood club, breaking Eldred Jonas's leg in the yard behind the Great Hall of Gilead before taking the boy's weapon and sending him west, gunless, into exile.

Eventually, the man the boy had become had found a gun, of course; the exiles always did, if they looked hard enough. That such guns could never be quite the same as the big ones with the sandalwood grips might haunt them for the rest of their lives, but those who needed guns could still find them, even in this world.

Reynolds watched until he was gone, then took his seat at Coral Thorin's desk, shuffled the cards, and continued the game which Jonas had left half-finished.

Outside, the sun was coming up.

CHAPTER V WELCOME TO TOWN

1

Two nights after arriving in the Barony of Mejis, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain rode their mounts beneath an adobe arch with the words COME IN PEACE inscribed above it. Beyond was a cobblestone courtyard lit with torches. The resin which coated these had been doctored somehow so that the torches glowed different colors: green, orangey-red, a kind of sputtery pink that made Roland think of fireworks. He could hear the sound of guitars, the murmur of voices, the laughter of women. The air was redolent of those smells which would always remind him of Mejis: sea-salt, oil, and pine.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Alain muttered. He was a big boy with a mop of unruly blond hair spilling out from under his stockman’s hat. He had cleaned up well—they all had—but Alain, no social butterfly under the best of circumstances, looked scared to death. Cuthbert was doing better, but Roland guessed his old friend’s patina of insouciance didn’t go very deep. If there was to be leading done here, he would have to do it.

“You’ll be fine,” he told Alain. “Just—”

“Oh, he *looks* fine,” Cuthbert said with a nervous laugh as they crossed the courtyard. Beyond it was Mayor’s House, a sprawling, many-winged adobe hacienda that seemed to spill light and laughter from every window. “White as a sheet, ugly as a—”

“Shut up,” Roland said curtly, and the teasing smile tumbled off Cuthbert’s face at once. Roland noted this, then turned to Alain again. “Just don’t drink anything with alcohol in it. You know what to

say on that account. Remember the rest of our story, too. Smile. Be pleasant. Use what social graces you have. Remember how the Sheriff fell all over himself to make us feel welcome.”

Alain nodded at that, looking a little more confident.

“In the matter of social graces,” Cuthbert said, “they won’t have many themselves, so we should all be a step ahead.”

Roland nodded, then saw that the bird’s skull was back on the horn of Cuthbert’s saddle. “And get rid of that!”

Looking guilty, Cuthbert stuffed “the lookout” hurriedly into his saddlebag. Two men wearing white jackets, white pants, and sandals were coming forward, bowing and smiling.

“Keep your heads,” Roland said, lowering his voice. “Both of you. Remember why you’re here. And remember the faces of your fathers.” He clapped Alain, who still looked doubtful, on the shoulder. Then he turned to the hostlers. “Goodeven, gents,” he said. “May your days be long upon the earth.”

They both grinned, their teeth flashing in the extravagant torchlight. The older one bowed. “And your own as well, young masters. Welcome to Mayor’s House.”

2

The High Sheriff had welcomed them the day before every bit as happily as the hostlers.

So far *everyone* had greeted them happily, even the carters they had passed on their way into town, and that alone made Roland feel suspicious and on his guard. He told himself he was likely being foolish—of *course* the locals were friendly and helpful, that was why they had been sent here, because Mejis was both out-of-the-way and loyal to the Affiliation—and it probably was foolish, but he thought it best to be on close watch, just the same. To be a trifle

nervous. The three of them were little more than children, after all, and if they fell into trouble here, it was apt to be as a result of taking things at face value.

The combined Sheriff's office and jail o' Barony was on Hill Street, overlooking the bay. Roland didn't know for sure, but guessed that few if any hungover drunks and wife-beaters anywhere else in Mid-World woke up to such picturesque views: a line of many-colored boathouses to the south, the docks directly below, with boys and old men line-fishing while the women mended nets and sails; beyond them, Hambry's small fleet moving back and forth on the sparkling blue water of the bay, setting their nets in the morning, pulling them in the afternoon.

Most buildings on the High Street were adobe, but up here, overlooking Hambry's business section, they were as squat and bricky as any narrow lane in Gilead's Old Quarter. Well kept, too, with wrought-iron gates in front of most and tree-shaded paths. The roofs were orange tile, the shutters closed against the summer sun. It was hard to believe, riding down this street with their horses' hoofs clocking on the swept cobbles, that the northwestern side of the Affiliation—the ancient land of Eld, Arthur's kingdom—could be on fire and in danger of falling.

The jailhouse was just a larger version of the post office and land office; a smaller version of the Town Gathering Hall. Except, of course, for the bars on the windows facing down toward the small harbor.

Sheriff Herk Avery was a big-bellied man in a lawman's khaki pants and shirt. He must have been watching them approach through the spyhole in the center of the jail's iron-banded front door, because the door was thrown open before Roland could even reach for the turn-bell in the center. Sheriff Avery appeared on the stoop, his belly preceding him as a baliff may precede My Lord Judge into court. His arms were thrown wide in the most amiable of greetings.

He bowed deeply to them (Cuthbert said later he was afraid the man might overbalance and go rolling down the steps; perhaps go rolling all the way down to the harbor) and wished them repeated goodmorns, tapping away at the base of his throat like a madman the whole while. His smile was so wide it looked as if it might cut his head clean in two. Three deputies with a distinctly farmerish look about them, dressed in khaki like the Sheriff, crowded into the door behind Avery and gawked. That was what it was, all right, a gawk; there was just no other word for that sort of openly curious and totally unself-conscious stare.

Avery shook each boy by the hand, continuing to bow as he did so, and nothing Roland said could get him to stop until he was done. When he finally was, he showed them inside. The office was delightfully cool in spite of the beating mid-summer sun. That was the advantage of brick, of course. It was big as well, and cleaner than any High Sheriff's office Roland had ever been in before . . . and he had been in at least half a dozen over the last three years, accompanying his father on several short trips and one longer patrol-swing.

There was a rolltop desk in the center, a notice-board to the right of the door (the same sheets of foolscap had been scribbled on over and over; paper was a rare commodity in Mid-World), and, in the far corner, two rifles in a padlocked case. These were such ancient blunderbusses that Roland wondered if there was ammunition for them. He wondered if they would fire, come to that. To the left of the gun-case, an open door gave on the jail itself—three cells on each side of a short corridor, and a smell of strong lye soap drifting out.

They've cleaned for our coming, Roland thought. He was amused, touched, and uneasy. *Cleaned it as though we were a troop of Inner Barony horse—career soldiers who might want to stage a hard inspection instead of three lads serving punishment detail.*

But was such nervous care on the part of their hosts really so strange? They were from New Canaan, after all, and folk in this

tucked-away corner of the world might well see them as a species of visiting royalty.

Sheriff Avery introduced his deputies. Roland shook hands with all of them, not trying to memorize their names. It was Cuthbert who took care of names, and it was a rare occasion when he dropped one. The third, a bald fellow with a monocle hanging around his neck on a ribbon, actually dropped to one knee before them.

“Don’t do that, ye great idiot!” Avery cried, yanking him back up by the scruff of his neck. “What kind of a bumpkin will they think ye? Besides, you’ve embarrassed them, so ye have!”

“That’s all right,” Roland said (he was, in fact, very embarrassed, although trying not to show it). “We’re really nothing at all special, you know—”

“Nothing special!” Avery said, laughing. His belly, Roland noticed, did not shake as one might have expected it to do; it was harder than it looked. The same might be true of its owner. “Nothing special, he says! Five hundred mile or more from the In-World they’ve come, our first official visitors from the Affiliation since a gunslinger passed through on the Great Road four year ago, and yet he says they’re nothing special! Would ye sit, my boys? I’ve got *graf*, which ye won’t want so early in the day—p’raps not at all, given your ages (and if you’ll forgive me for statin so bald the obvious fact of yer youth, for youth’s not a thing to be ashamed of, so it’s not, we were all young once), and I also have white iced tea, which I recommend most hearty, as Dave’s wife makes it and she’s a dab hand with most any potable.”

Roland looked at Cuthbert and Alain, who nodded and smiled (and tried not to look all at sea), then back at Sheriff Avery. White tea would go down a treat in a dusty throat, he said.

One of the deputies went to fetch it, chairs were produced and set in a row at one side of Sheriff Avery’s rolltop, and the business of the day commenced.

“You know who ye are and where ye hail from, and I know the same,” Sheriff Avery said, sitting down in his own chair (it uttered a feeble groan beneath his bulk but held steady). “I can hear In-World in yer voices, but more important, I can see it in yer faces.

“Yet we hold to the old ways here in Hambry, sleepy and rural as we may be; aye, we hold to our course and remember the faces of our fathers as well’s we can. So, although I’d not keep yer long from yer duties, and if ye’ll forgive me for the impertinence, I’d like a look at any papers and documents of passage ye might just happen to’ve brought into town with ye.”

They just “happened” to have brought *all* of their papers into town with them, as Roland was sure Sheriff Avery well knew they would. He went through them quite slowly for a man who’d promised not to hold them from their duties, tracing the well-folded sheets (the linen content so high that the documents were perhaps closer to cloth than paper) with one pudgy finger, his lips moving. Every now and then the finger would reverse as he reread a line. The two other deputies stood behind him, looking sagely down over his large shoulders. Roland wondered if either could actually read.

William Dearborn. Drover’s son.

Richard Stockworth. Rancher’s son.

Arthur Heath. Stockline breeder’s son.

The identification document belonging to each was signed by an attestor—James Reed (of Hemphill) in the case of Dearborn, Piet Ravenhead (of Pennilton) in the case of Stockworth, Lucas Rivers (of Gilead) in the case of Heath. All in order, descriptions nicely matched. The papers were handed back with profuse thanks. Roland next handed Avery a letter which he took from his wallet with some care. Avery handled it in the same fashion, his eyes growing wide as he saw the frank at the bottom. “ ’Pon my soul, boys! ’Twas a gunslinger wrote this!”

“Aye, so it was,” Cuthbert agreed in a voice of wonder. Roland kicked his ankle—hard—without taking his respectful eyes from Avery’s face.

The letter above the frank was from one Steven Deschain of Gilead, a gunslinger (which was to say a knight, squire, peacemaker, and Baron . . . the last title having almost no meaning in the modern day, despite all John Farson’s ranting) of the twenty-ninth generation descended from Arthur of Eld, on the side line of descent (the long-descended get of one of Arthur’s many gillies, in other words). To Mayor Hartwell Thorin, Chancellor Kimba Rimer, and High Sheriff Herkimer Avery, it sent greetings and recommended to their notice the three young men who delivered this document, Masters Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath. These had been sent on special mission from the Affiliation to serve as counters of all materials which might serve the Affiliation in time of need (the word *war* was omitted from the document, but glowed between every line). Steven Deschain, on behalf of the Affiliation of Baronies, exhorted Misters Thorin, Rimer, and Avery to afford the Affiliation’s nominated counters every help in their service, and to be particularly careful in the enumerations of all livestock, all supplies of food, and all forms of transport. Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath would be in Mejis for at least three months, Deschain wrote, possibly as long as a year. The document finished by inviting any or all of the addressed public officials to “write us word of these young men and their deportment, in all detail as you shall imagine of interest to us.” And, it begged, “Do not stint in this matter, if you love us.”

Tell us if they behaved themselves, in other words. Tell us if they’ve learned their lesson.

The deputy with the monocle came back while the High Sheriff was perusing this document. He carried a tray loaded with four glasses of white tea and bent down with it like a butler. Roland murmured thanks and handed the glasses around. He took the last for himself, raised it to his lips, and saw Alain looking at him, his blue eyes bright in his stolid face.

Alain shook his glass slightly—just enough to make the ice tinkle—and Roland responded with the barest sliver of a nod. He had expected cool tea from a jug kept in a nearby springhouse, but there were actual chunks of ice in the glasses. Ice in high summer. It was interesting.

And the tea was, as promised, delicious.

Avery finished the letter and handed it back to Roland with the air of one passing on a holy relic. “Ye want to keep that safe about yer person, Will Dearborn—aye, very safe indeed!”

“Yes, sir.” He tucked the letter and his identification back into his purse. His friends “Richard” and “Arthur” were doing the same.

“This is excellent white tea, sir,” Alain said. “I’ve never had better.”

“Aye,” Avery said, sipping from his own glass. “ ’Tis the honey that makes it so fearsome. Eh, Dave?”

The deputy with the monocle smiled from his place by the notice-board. “I believe so, but Judy don’t like to say. She had the recipe from her mother.”

“Aye, we must remember the faces of our mothers, too, so we must.” Sheriff Avery looked sentimental for a moment, but Roland had an idea that the face of his mother was the furthest thing from the big man’s mind just then. He turned to Alain, and sentiment was replaced by a surprising shrewdness.

“Ye’re wondering about the ice, Master Stockworth.”

Alain started. “Well, I . . .”

“Ye expected no such amenity in a backwater like Hambry, I’ll warrant,” Avery said, and although there was a joshing quality on top of his voice, Roland thought there was something else entirely underneath.

He doesn't like us. He doesn't like what he thinks of as our "city ways." He hasn't known us long enough to know what kind of ways we have, if any at all, but already he doesn't like them. He thinks we're a trio of snotnoses; that we see him and everyone else here as country bumpkins.

"Not just Hambry," Alain said quietly. "Ice is as rare in the Inner Arc these days as anywhere else, Sheriff Avery. When I grew up, I saw it mostly as a special treat at birthday parties and such."

"There was always ice on Glowing Day," Cuthbert put in. He spoke with very un-Cuthbertian quiet. "Except for the fireworks, that's what we liked about it most."

"Is that so, is that so," Sheriff Avery said in an amazed, wonders-will-never-cess tone. Avery perhaps didn't like them riding in like this, didn't like having to take up what he would probably call "half the damn morning" with them; he didn't like their clothes, their fancy identification papers, their accents, or their youth. Least of all their youth. Roland could understand all that, but wondered if it was the whole story. If there was something else going on here, what was it?

"There's a gas-fired refrigerator and stove in the Town Gathering Hall," Avery said. "Both work. There's plenty of earth-gas out at Citgo—that's the oilpatch east of town. Yer passed it on yer way in, I wot."

They nodded.

"Stove's nobbut a curiosity these days—a history lesson for the schoolchildren—but the refrigerator comes in handy, so it does." Avery held up his glass and looked through the side. "'Specially in summer." He sipped some tea, smacked his lips, and smiled at Alain. "You see? No mystery."

"I'm surprised you haven't found use for the oil," Roland said. "No generators in town, Sheriff?"

“Aye, there be four or five,” Avery said. “The biggest is out at Francis Lengyll’s Rocking B ranch, and I recall when it useter run. It’s HONDA. Do ye kennit that name, boys? HONDA?”

“I’ve seen it once or twice,” Roland said, “on old motor-driven bicycles.”

“Aye? In any case, none of the generators will run on the oil from the Citgo patch. ’Tis too thick. Tarry goo, is all. We have no refineries here.”

“I see,” Alain said. “In any case, ice in summer’s a treat. However it comes to the glass.” He let one of the chunks slip into his mouth, and crunched it between his teeth.

Avery looked at him a moment longer, as if to make sure the subject was closed, then switched his gaze back to Roland. His fat face was once more radiant with his broad, untrustworthy smile.

“Mayor Thorin has asked me to extend ye his very best greetings, and convey his regrets for not bein here today—very busy is our Lord Mayor, very busy indeed. But he’s laid on a dinner-party at Mayor’s House tomorrow evening—seven o’ the clock for most folk, eight for you young fellows . . . so you can make a bit of an entrance, I imagine, add a touch o’ drama, like. And I need not tell such as yourselves, who’ve probably attended more such parties than I’ve had hot dinners, that it would be best to arrive pretty much on the dot.”

“Is it *fancy*-dress?” Cuthbert asked uneasily. “Because we’ve come a long way, almost four hundred wheels, and we didn’t pack formal wear and sashes, none of us.”

Avery was chuckling—more honestly this time, Roland thought, perhaps because he felt “Arthur” had displayed a streak of unsophistication and insecurity. “Nay, young master, Thorin understands ye’ve come to do a job—next door to workin cowboys, ye be! ’Ware they don’t have ye out draggin nets in the bay next!”

From the corner, Dave—the deputy with the monocle—honked unexpected laughter. Perhaps it was the sort of joke you had to be local to understand, Roland thought.

“Wear the best ye have, and ye’ll be fine. There’ll be no one there in sashes, in any case—that’s not how things are done in Hambry.” Again Roland was struck by the man’s constant smiling denigration of his town and Barony . . . and the resentment of the outsiders which lay just beneath it.

“In any case, ye’ll find yerselves working more than playing tomorrow night, I imagine. Hart’s invited all the large ranchers, stockliners, and livestock owners from this part of the Barony . . . not that there’s so many, you understand, bein as how Mejis is next door to desert once you get west o’ the Drop. But everyone whose goods and chattel you’ve been sent to count will be there, and I think you’ll find all of them loyal Affiliation men, ready and eager to help. There’s Francis Lengyll of the Rocking B . . . John Croydon of the Piano Ranch . . . Henry Wertner, who’s the Barony’s stockliner as well as a horsebreeder in his own right . . . Hash Renfrew, who owns the Lazy Susan, the biggest horse-ranch in Mejis (not that it’s much by the standards you fellows are used to, I wot) . . . and there’ll be others, as well. Rimer’ll introduce you, and get you about your business right smart.”

Ronald nodded and turned to Cuthbert. “You’ll want to be on your mettle tomorrow night.”

Cuthbert nodded. “Don’t fear me, Will, I’ll note em all.”

Avery sipped more tea, eyeing them over his glass with a roguish expression so false it made Roland want to squirm.

“Most of em’s got daughters of marriageable age, and they’ll bring em. You boys want to look out.”

Roland decided he’d had enough tea and hypocrisy for one morning. He nodded, emptied his glass, smiled (hoping his looked

more genuine than Avery's now looked to him), and got to his feet. Cuthbert and Alain took the cue and did likewise.

"Thank you for the tea, and for the welcome," Roland said. "Please send a message to Mayor Thorin, thanking him for his kindness and telling him that he'll see us tomorrow, at eight o' the clock, prompt."

"Aye. So I will."

Roland then turned to Dave. That worthy was so surprised to be noticed again that he recoiled, almost bumping his head on the notice-board. "And please thank your wife for the tea. It was wonderful."

"I will. Thankee-sai."

They went back outside, High Sheriff Avery herding them along like a genial, overweight sheepdog.

"As to where you'll locate—" he began as they descended the steps and started down the walk. As soon as they hit the sunshine, he began to sweat.

"Oh, land, I forgot to ask you about that," Roland said, knocking the heel of his hand against his forehead. "We've camped out on that long slope, lots of horses as you go down the turf, I'm sure you know where I mean—"

"The Drop, aye."

"—but without permission, because we don't yet know who to ask."

"That'd be John Croydon's land, and I'm sure he wouldn't begrudge ye, but we mean to do ye better than that. There's a spread northwest of here, the Bar K. Used to b'long to the Garber family, but they gave it up and moved on after a fire. Now it b'longs to the Horsemen's Association—that's a little local group of farmers and ranchers. I spoke to Francis Lengyll about you fellows—he's the

H.A. president just current—and he said ‘We’ll put em out to the old Garber place, why not?’ ”

“Why not?” Cuthbert agreed in a gentle, musing voice. Roland shot him a sharp glance, but Cuthbert was looking down at the harbor, where the small fishing boats skittered to and fro like waterbugs.

“Aye, just what I said, ‘Why not, indeed?’ I said. The home place burned to a cinder, but the bunkhouse still stands; so does the stable and the cook-shack next door to it. On Mayor Thorin’s orders, I’ve taken the liberty of stocking the larder and having the bunkhouse swept out and spruced up a little. Ye may see the occasional bug, but nothing that’ll bite or sting . . . and no snakes, unless there’s a few under the floor, and if there are, let em stay there’s what I say. Hey, boys? Let em stay there!”

“Let em stay there, right under the floor where they’re happy,” Cuthbert agreed, still gazing down at the harbor with his arms folded over his chest.

Avery gave him a brief, uncertain glance, his smile flickering a bit at the corners. Then he turned back to Roland, and the smile shone out strongly once more. “There’s no holes in the roof, lad, and if it rains, ye’ll be dry. What think ye of that? Does it sound well to ye?”

“Better than we deserve. I think that you’ve been very efficient and Mayor Thorin’s been far too kind.” And he *did* think that. The question was why. “But we appreciate his thoughtfulness. Don’t we, boys?”

Cuthbert and Alain made vigorous assent.

“And we accept with thanks.”

Avery nodded. “I’ll tell him. Go safely, boys.”

They had reached the hitching rail. Avery once more shook hands all around, this time saving his keenest looks for their horses.

“Until tomorrow night, then, young gents?”

“Tomorrow night,” Roland agreed.

“Will ye be able to find the Bar K on your own, do yer think?”

Again Roland was struck by the man’s unspoken contempt and unconscious condescension. Yet perhaps it was to the good. If the High Sheriff thought they were stupid, who knew what might come of it?

“We’ll find it,” Cuthbert said, mounting up. Avery was looking suspiciously at the rook’s skull on the horn of Cuthbert’s saddle. Cuthbert saw him looking, but for once managed to keep his mouth shut. Roland was both amazed and pleased by this unexpected reticence. “Fare you well, Sheriff.”

“And you, boy.”

He stood there by the hitching post, a large man in a khaki shirt with sweat-stains around the armpits and black boots that looked too shiny for a working sheriff’s feet. *And where’s the horse that could support him through a day of range-riding?* Roland thought. *I’d like to see the cut of that Cayuse.*

Avery waved to them as they went. The other deputies came down the walk, Deputy Dave in the forefront. They waved, too.

3

The moment the Affiliation brats mounted on their fathers’ expensive horseflesh were around the corner and headed downhill to the High Street, the sheriff and the deputies stopped waving. Avery turned to Dave Hollis, whose expression of slightly stupid awe had been replaced by one marginally more intelligent.

“What think ye, Dave?”

Dave lifted his monocle to his mouth and began to nibble nervously at its brass edging, a habit about which Sheriff Avery had long since ceased to nag him. Even Dave’s wife, Judy, had given up on that score, and Judy Hollis—Judy Wertner that was—was a fair engine when it came to getting her own way.

“Soft,” Dave said. “Soft as eggs just dropped out of a chicken’s ass.”

“Mayhap,” Avery said, putting his thumbs in his belt and rocking enormously back and forth, “but the one did most of the talking, him in the flathead hat, he doesn’t *think* he’s soft.”

“Don’t matter what he *thinks*,” Dave said, still nibbling at his eyeglass. “He’s in Hambry, now. He may have to change his way of thinking to our’n.”

Behind him, the other deputies laughed. Even Avery smiled. They would leave the rich boys alone if the rich boys left them alone—those were orders, straight from Mayor’s House—but Avery had to admit that he wouldn’t mind a little dust-up with them, so he wouldn’t. He would enjoy putting his boot into the balls of the one with that idiotic bird’s skull on his saddle-horn—standing there and mocking him, he’d been, thinking all the while that Herk Avery was too country-dumb to know what he was up to—but the thing he’d *really* enjoy would be beating the cool look from the eyes of the boy in the flathead preacher’s hat, seeing a hotter expression of fear rise up in them as Mr. Will Dearborn of Hemphill realized that New Canaan was far away and his rich father couldn’t help him.

“Aye,” he said, clapping Dave on the shoulder. “Mayhap he’ll have to change his way of thinking.” He smiled—one very different from any of those he had shown the Affiliation counters. “Mayhap they all will.”

The three boys rode in single file until they were past the Travellers' Rest (a young and obviously retarded man with kinky black hair looked up from scrubbing the brick stoop and waved to them; they waved back). Then they moved up abreast, Roland in the middle.

"What did you think of our new friend, the High Sheriff?" Roland asked.

"I have no opinion," Cuthbert said brightly. "No, none at all. Opinion is politics, and politics is an evil which has caused many a fellow to be hung while he's still young and pretty." He leaned forward and tapped the rook's skull with his knuckles. "The lookout didn't care for him, though. I'm sorry to say that our faithful lookout thought Sheriff Avery a fat bag of guts without a trustworthy bone in his body."

Roland turned to Alain. "And you, young Master Stockworth?"

Alain considered it for some time, as was his way, chewing a piece of grass he'd bent oversaddle to pluck from his side of the road. At last he said: "If he came upon us burning in the street, I don't think he'd piss on us to put us out."

Cuthbert laughed heartily at that. "And you, Will? How do you say, dear captain?"

"He doesn't interest me much . . . but one thing he said does. Given that the horse-meadow they call the Drop has to be at least thirty wheels long and runs five or more to the dusty desert, how do you suppose Sheriff Avery knew we were on the part of it that belongs to Croydon's Piano Ranch?"

They looked at him, first with surprise, then speculation. After a moment Cuthbert leaned forward and rapped once more on the rook's skull. "We're being watched, and you never reported it? No supper for you, sir, and it'll be the stockade the next time it happens!"

But before they had gone much farther, Roland's thoughts of Sheriff Avery gave way to more pleasant ones of Susan Delgado. He would see her the following night, of that he was sure. He wondered if her hair would be down.

He couldn't wait to find out.

5

Now here they were, at Mayor's House. *Let the game begin*, Roland thought, not clear on what that meant even as the phrase went through his mind, surely not thinking of Castles . . . not then.

The hostlers led their mounts away, and for a moment the three of them stood at the foot of the steps—huddled, almost, as horses do in unfriendly weather—their beardless faces washed by the light of the torches. From inside, the guitars played and voices were raised in a fresh eddy of laughter.

“Do we knock?” Cuthbert asked. “Or just open and march in?”

Roland was spared answering. The main door of the *haci* was thrown open and two women stepped out, both wearing long white-collared dresses that reminded all three boys of the dresses stockmen's wives wore in their own part of the world. Their hair was caught back in snoods that sparkled with some bright diamondy stuff in the light of the torches.

The plumper of the two stepped forward, smiling, and dropped them a deep curtsy. Her earrings, which looked like square-cut firedims, flashed and bobbed. “You are the young men from the Affiliation, so you are, and welcome you are, as well. Goodeven, sirs, and may your days be long upon the earth!”

They bowed in unison, boots forward, and thanked her in an unintended chorus that made her laugh and clap her hands. The tall woman beside her offered them a smile as spare as her frame.

“I am Olive Thorin,” the plump woman said, “the Mayor’s wife. This is my sister-in-law, Coral.”

Coral Thorin, still with that narrow smile (it barely creased her lips and touched her eyes not at all), dipped them a token curtsy. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain bowed again over their outstretched legs.

“I welcome you to Seafront,” Olive Thorin said, her dignity leavened and made pleasant by her artless smile, her obvious dazzlement at the appearance of her young visitors from In-World. “Come to our house with joy. I say so with all my heart, so I do.”

“And so we will, madam,” Roland said, “for your greeting has made us joyful.” He took her hand, and, with no calculation whatever, raised it to his lips and kissed it. Her delighted laughter made him smile. He liked Olive Thorin on sight, and it was perhaps well he met someone of that sort early on, for, with the problematic exception of Susan Delgado, he met no one else he liked, no one else he trusted, all that night.

6

It was warm enough even with the seabreeze, and the cloak-and-coat-collector in the foyer looked as though he’d had little or no custom. Roland wasn’t entirely surprised to see that it was Deputy Dave, his remaining bits of hair slicked back with some sort of gleaming grease and his monocle now lying on the snow-white breast of a houseman’s jacket. Roland gave him a nod. Dave, his hands clasped behind his back, returned it.

Two men—Sheriff Avery and an elderly gent as gaunt as Old Doctor Death in a cartoon—came toward them. Beyond, through a pair of double doors now open wide, a whole roomful of people stood about with crystal punch-cups in their hands, talking and taking little bits of food from the trays which were circulating.

Roland had time for just one narrow-eyed glance toward Cuthbert: *Everything. Every name, every face . . . every nuance. Especially those.*

Cuthbert raised an eyebrow—his discreet version of a nod—and then Roland was pulled, willy-nilly, into the evening, his first real evening of service as a working gunslinger. And he had rarely worked harder.

Old Doctor Death turned out to be Kimba Rimer, Thorin's Chancellor and Minister of Inventory (Roland suspected the title had been made up special for their visit). He was easily five inches taller than Roland, who was considered tall in Gilead, and his skin was pale as candlewax. Not unhealthy-looking; just pale. Wings of iron-gray hair floated away from either side of his head, gossamer as cobwebs. The top of his skull was completely bald. Balanced on his whelk of a nose was a pince-nez.

"My boys!" he said, when the introductions had been made. He had the smooth, sadly sincere voice of a politician or an undertaker. "Welcome to Mejis! To Hambry! And to Seafront, our humble Mayor's House!"

"If this is humble, I should wonder at the palace your folk might build," Roland said. It was a mild enough remark, more pleasantry than witticism (he ordinarily left the wit to Bert), but Chancellor Rimer laughed hard. So did Sheriff Avery.

"Come, boys!" Rimer said, when he apparently felt he had expressed enough amusement. "The Mayor awaits you with impatience, I'm sure."

"Aye," said a timid voice from behind them. The skinny sister-in-law, Coral, had disappeared, but Olive Thorin was still there, looking up at the newcomers with her hands decorously clasped before that area of her body which might once have been her waist. She was still smiling her hopeful, pleasant smile. "Very eager to meet you, Hart is, very eager, indeed. Shall I conduct them, Kimba, or—"

“Nay, nay, you mustn’t trouble yourself with so many other guests to attend,” Rimer said.

“I suppose you’re right.” She curtseyed to Roland and his companions a final time, and although she still smiled and although the smile looked completely genuine to Roland, he thought: *She’s unhappy about something, all the same. Desperately so, I think.*

“Gentlemen?” Rimer asked. The teeth in his smile were almost disconcertingly huge. “Will ye come?”

He led them past the grinning Sheriff and into the reception hall.

7

Roland was hardly overwhelmed by it; he had, after all, been in the Great Hall of Gilead—the Hall of the Grandfathers, it was sometimes called—and had even peeped down on the great party which was held there each year, the so-called Dance of Easterling, which marked the end of Wide Earth and the advent of Sowing. There were five chandeliers in the Great Hall instead of just one, and lit with electric bulbs rather than oil lamps. The dress of the partygoers (many of them expensive young men and women who had never done a hand’s turn of work in their lives, a fact of which John Farson spoke at every opportunity) had been richer, the music had been fuller, the company of older and nobler lines which grew closer and closer together as they stretched back toward Arthur Eld, he of the white horse and unifying sword.

Yet there was life here, and plenty of it. There was a robustness that had been missing in Gilead, and not just at Easterling, either. The texture he felt as he stepped into the Mayor’s House reception room was the sort of thing, Roland reflected, that you didn’t entirely miss when it was gone, because it slipped away quietly and painlessly. Like blood from a vein cut in a tub filled with hot water.

The room—almost but not quite grand enough to be a hall—was circular, its panelled walls decorated by paintings (most quite bad) of

previous Mayors. On a raised stand to the right of the doors leading into the dining area, four grinning guitarists in *tati* jackets and sombreros were playing something that sounded like a waltz with pepper on it. In the center of the floor was a table supporting two cut-glass punchbowls, one vast and grand, the other smaller and plainer. The white-jacketed fellow in charge of the dipping-out operations was another of Avery's deputies.

Contrary to what the High Sheriff had told them the day before, several of the men were wearing sashes of various colors, but Roland didn't feel too out of place in his white silk shirt, black string tie, and one pair of stovepipe dress trousers. For every man wearing a sash, he saw three wearing the sort of dowdy, box-tailed coats that he associated with stockmen at church, and he saw several others (younger men, for the most part) who weren't wearing coats at all. Some of the women wore jewelry (though nothing so expensive as sai Thorin's firedim earrings), and few looked as if they'd missed many meals, but they also wore clothes Roland recognized: the long, round-collared dresses, usually with the lace fringe of a colored underskirt showing below the hem, the dark shoes with low heels, the snoods (most sparkling with gem-dust, as those of Olive and Coral Thorin had been).

And then he saw one who was very different.

It was Susan Delgado, of course, shimmering and almost too beautiful to look at in a blue silk dress with a high waist and a square-cut bodice which showed the tops of her breasts. Around her neck was a sapphire pendant that made Olive Thorin's earrings look like paste. She stood next to a man wearing a sash the color of coals in a hot woodfire. That deep orange-red was the Barony's color, and Roland supposed that the man was their host, but for the moment Roland barely saw him. His eye was held by Susan Delgado: the blue dress, the tanned skin, the triangles of color, too pale and perfect to be makeup, which ran lightly up her cheeks; most of all her hair, which was unbound tonight and fell to her waist like a shimmer of palest silk. He wanted her, suddenly and completely, with a

desperate depth of feeling that felt like sickness. Everything he was and everything he had come for, it seemed, was secondary to her.

She turned a little, then, and spied him. Her eyes (they were gray, he saw) widened the tiniest bit. He thought that the color in her cheeks deepened a little. Her lips—lips that had touched his as they stood on a dark road, he thought with wonder—parted a little. Then the man standing next to Thorin (also tall, also skinny, with a mustache and long white hair lying on the dark shoulders of his coat) said something, and she turned back to him. A moment later the group around Thorin was laughing, Susan included. The man with the white hair didn't join them, but smiled thinly.

Roland, hoping his face did not give away the fact that his heart was pounding like a hammer, was led directly to this group, which stood close to the punchbowls. Distantly, he could feel Rimer's bony confederation of fingers clamped to his arm above the elbow. More clearly he could smell mingled perfumes, the oil from the lamps on the walls, the aroma of the ocean. And thought, for no reason at all, *Oh, I am dying. I am dying.*

Take hold of yourself, Roland of Gilead. Stop this foolishness, for your father's sake. Take hold!

He tried . . . to some degree succeeded . . . and knew he would be lost the next time she looked at him. It was her eyes. The other night, in the dark, he hadn't been able to see those fog-colored eyes. *I didn't know how lucky I was*, he thought wryly.

"Mayor Thorin?" Rimer asked. "May I present our guests from the Inner Baronies?"

Thorin turned away from the man with the long white hair and the woman standing next to him, his face brightening. He was shorter than his Chancellor but just as thin, and his build was peculiar: a short and narrow-shouldered upper body over impossibly long and skinny legs. He looked, Roland thought, like the sort of bird you should glimpse in a marsh at dawn, bobbing for its breakfast.

“Aye, you may!” he cried in a strong, high voice. “Indeed you may, we’ve been waiting with impatience, *great* impatience, for this moment! Well met we are, very well met! Welcome, sirs! May your evening in this house of which I am the fleeting proprietor be happy, and may your days be long upon the earth!”

Roland took the bony outstretched hand, heard the knuckles crack beneath his grip, looked for an expression of discomfort on the Mayor’s face, and was relieved to see none. He bowed low over his outstretched leg.

“William Dearborn, Mayor Thorin, at your service. Thank you for your welcome, and may your own days be long upon the earth.”

“Arthur Heath” made his manners next, then “Richard Stockworth.” Thorin’s smile widened at each deep bow. Rimer did his best to beam, but looked unused to it. The man with the long white hair took a glass of punch, passed it to his female companion, and continued to smile thinly. Roland was aware that everyone in the room—the guests numbered perhaps fifty in all—was looking at them, but what he felt most upon his skin, beating like a soft wing, was *her* regard. He could see the blue silk of her dress from the side of one eye, but did not dare look at her more directly.

“Was your trip difficult?” Thorin was asking. “Did you have adventures and experience perils? We would hear all the details at dinner, so we would, for we have few guests from the Inner Arc these days.” His eager, slightly fatuous smile faded; his tufted brows drew together. “Did ye encounter patrols of Farson?”

“No, Excellency,” Roland said. “We—”

“Nay, lad, nay—no Excellency, I won’t have it, and the fisherfolk and hoss-drovers I serve wouldn’t, even if I would. Just Mayor Thorin, if you please.”

“Thank you. We saw many strange things on our journey, Mayor Thorin, but no Good Men.”

“Good Men!” Rimer jerked out, and his upper lip lifted in a smile which made him look doglike. “Good Men, indeed!”

“We would hear it all, every word,” Thorin said. “But before I forget my manners in my eagerness, young gentlemen, let me introduce you to these close around me. Kimba you’ve met; this formidable fellow to my left is Eldred Jonas, chief of my newly installed security staff.” Thorin’s smile looked momentarily embarrassed. “I’m not convinced that I need extra security, Sheriff Avery’s always been quite enough to keep the peace in our corner of the world, but Kimba insists. And when Kimba insists, the Mayor must bow.”

“Very wise, sir,” Rimer said, and bowed himself. They all laughed, save for Jonas, who simply held onto his narrow smile.

Jonas nodded. “Pleased, gents, I’m sure.” The voice was a reedy quaver. He then wished them long days upon the earth, all three, coming to Roland last in his round of handshaking. His grip was dry and firm, utterly untouched by the tremor in his voice. And now Roland noticed the queer blue shape tattooed on the back of the man’s right hand, in the webbing between thumb and first finger. It looked like a coffin.

“Long days, pleasant nights,” Roland said with hardly a thought. It was a greeting from his childhood, and it was only later that he would realize it was one more apt to be associated with Gilead than with any such rural place as Hemphill. Just a small slip, but he was beginning to believe that their margin for such slips might be a good deal less than his father had thought when he had sent Roland here to get him out of Marten’s way.

“And to you,” Jonas said. His bright eyes measured Roland with a thoroughness that was close to insolence, still holding his hand. Then he released it and stepped back.

“Cordelia Delgado,” Mayor Thorin said, next bowing to the woman who had been speaking to Jonas. As Roland also bowed in her direction, he saw the family resemblance . . . except that what looked

generous and lovely on Susan's face looked pinched and folded on the face before him now. Not the girl's mother; Roland guessed that Cordelia Delgado was a bit too young for that.

"And our especial friend, Miss Susan Delgado," Thorin finished, sounding flustered (Roland supposed she would have that effect on any man, even an old one like the Mayor). Thorin urged her forward, bobbing his head and grinning, one of his knuckle-choked hands pressed against the small of her back, and Roland felt an instant of poisonous jealousy. Ridiculous, given this man's age and his plump, pleasant wife, but it was there, all right, and it was sharp. Sharp as a bee's ass, Cort would have said.

Then her face tilted up to his, and he was looking into her eyes again. He had heard of drowning in a woman's eyes in some poem or story, and thought it ridiculous. He still thought it ridiculous, but understood it was perfectly possible, nonetheless. And she knew it. He saw concern in her eyes, perhaps even fear.

Promise me that if we meet at Mayor's House, we meet for the first time.

The memory of those words had a sobering, clarifying effect, and seemed to widen his vision a little. Enough for him to be aware that the woman beside Jonas, the one who shared some of Susan's features, was looking at the girl with a mixture of curiosity and alarm.

He bowed low, but did little more than touch her ringless outstretched hand. Even so, he felt something like a spark jump between their fingers. From the momentary widening of those eyes, he thought that she felt it, too.

"Pleased to meet you, sai," he said. His attempt to be casual sounded tinny and false in his own ears. Still, he was begun, it felt like the whole world was watching him (*them*), and there was nothing to do but go on with it. He tapped his throat three times. "May your days be long—"

“Aye, and yours, Mr. Dearborn. Thankee-sai.”

She turned to Alain with a rapidity that was almost rude, then to Cuthbert, who bowed, tapped, then said gravely: “Might I recline briefly at your feet, miss? Your beauty has loosened my knees. I’m sure a few moments spent looking up at your profile from below, with the back of my head on these cool tiles, would put me right.”

They all laughed at that—even Jonas and Miss Cordelia. Susan blushed prettily and slapped the back of Cuthbert’s hand. For once Roland blessed his friend’s relentless sense of foolery.

Another man joined the party by the punchbowl. This newcomer was blocky and blessedly un-thin in his boxtail coat. His cheeks burned with high color that looked like windburn rather than drink, and his pale eyes lay in nets of wrinkles. A rancher; Roland had ridden often enough with his father to know the look.

“There’ll be maids a-plenty to meet you boys tonight,” the newcomer said with a friendly enough smile. “Ye’ll find y’selves drunk on perfume if ye’re not careful. But I’d like my crack at you before you meet em. Fran Lengyll, at your service.”

His grip was strong and quick; no bowing or other nonsense went with it.

“I own the Rocking B . . . or it owns me, whichever way ye want to look at it. I’m also boss of the Horsemen’s Association, at least until they fire me. The Bar K was my idea. Hope it’s all right.”

“It’s perfect, sir,” Alain said. “Clean and dry and room for twenty. Thank you. You’ve been too kind.”

“Nonsense,” Lengyll said, looking pleased all the same as he knocked back a glass of punch. “We’re all in this together, boy. John Farson’s but one bad straw in a field of wrongheadedness these days. The world’s moved on, folks say. Huh! So it has, aye, and a good piece down the road to hell is where it’s moved on to. Our job

is to hold the hay out of the furnace as well as we can, as long as we can. For the sake of our children even more than for that of our fathers.”

“Hear, hear,” Mayor Thorin said in a voice that strove for the high ground of solemnity and fell with a splash into fatuity instead. Roland noticed the scrawny old fellow was gripping one of Susan’s hands (she seemed almost unaware of it; was looking intently at Lengyll instead), and suddenly he understood: the Mayor was either her uncle or perhaps a cousin of some close degree. Lengyll ignored both, looking at the three newcomers instead, scrutinizing each in turn and finishing with Roland.

“Anything us in Mejis can do to help, lad, just ask—me, John Croydon, Hash Renfrew, Jake White, Hank Wertner, any or all. Ye’ll meet em tonight, aye, their wives and sons and daughters as well, and ye need only ask. We may be a good piece out from the hub of New Canaan here, but we’re strong for the Affiliation, all the same. Aye, very strong.”

“Well spoken,” Rimer said quietly.

“And now,” Lengyll said, “we’ll toast your arrival proper. And ye’ve had to wait too long already for a dip of punch. It’s dry as dust ye must be.”

He turned to the punchbowls and reached for the ladle in the larger and more ornate of the two, waving off the attendant, clearly wanting to honor them by serving them himself.

“Mr. Lengyll,” Roland said quietly. Yet there was a force of command in that voice; Fran Lengyll heard it and turned.

“The smaller bowl is soft punch, is it not?”

Lengyll considered this, at first not understanding. Then his eyebrow went up. For the first time he seemed to consider Roland and the others not as living symbols of the Affiliation and the Inner

Baronies, but as actual human beings. Young ones. Only boys, when you got right down to it.

“Aye?”

“Draw ours from that, if you’d be so kind.” He felt all eyes upon them now. *Her* eyes particularly. He kept his own firmly fixed on the rancher, but his peripheral vision was good, and he was very aware that Jonas’s thin smile had resurfaced. Jonas knew what this was about already. Roland supposed Thorin and Rimer did, as well. These country mice knew a lot. More than they should, and he would need to think about that carefully later. It was the least of his concerns at the current moment, however.

“We have forgotten the faces of our fathers in a matter that has some bearing on our posting to Hambry.” Roland was uncomfortably aware that he was now making a speech, like it or not. It wasn’t the whole room he was addressing—thank the gods for little blessings—but the circle of listeners had grown well beyond the original group. Yet there was nothing for it but to finish; the boat was launched. “I needn’t go into details—nor would you expect them, I know—but I should say that we promised not to indulge in spirits during our time here. As penance, you see.”

Her gaze. He could still feel it on his skin, it seemed.

For a moment there was complete quiet in the little group around the punchbowls, and then Lengyll said: “Your father would be proud to hear ye speak so frank, Will Dearborn—aye, so he would. And what boy worth his salt didn’t get up to a little noise ’n wind from time to time?” He clapped Roland on the shoulder, and although the grip of his hand was firm and his smile looked genuine, his eyes were hard to read, only gleams of speculation deep in those beds of wrinkles. “In his place, may I be proud for him?”

“Yes,” Roland said, smiling in return. “And with my thanks.”

“And mine,” Cuthbert said.

“Mine as well,” Alain said quietly, taking the offered cup of soft punch and bowing to Lengyll.

Lengyll filled more cups and handed them rapidly around. Those already holding cups found them plucked away and replaced with fresh cups of the soft punch. When each of the immediate group had one, Lengyll turned, apparently intending to offer the toast himself. Rimer tapped him on the shoulder, shook his head slightly, and cut his eyes toward the Mayor. That worthy was looking at them with his eyes rather popped and his jaw slightly dropped. To Roland he looked like an enthralled playgoer in a penny seat; all he needed was a lapful of orange-peel. Lengyll followed the Chancellor’s glance and then nodded.

Rimer next caught the eye of the guitar player standing at the center of the musicians. He stopped playing; so did the others. The guests looked that way, then back to the center of the room when Thorin began speaking. There was nothing ridiculous about his voice when he put it to use as he now did—it was carrying and pleasant.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my friends,” he said. “I would ask you to help me in welcoming three *new* friends—young men from the Inner Baronies, fine young men who have dared great distances and many perils on behalf of the Affiliation, and in the service of order and peace.”

Susan Delgado set her punch-cup aside, retrieved her hand (with some difficulty) from her uncle’s grip, and began to clap. Others joined in. The applause which swept the room was brief but warm. Eldred Jonas did not, Roland noticed, put his cup aside to join in.

Thorin turned to Roland, smiling. He raised his cup. “May I set you on with a word, Will Dearborn?”

“Aye, so you may, and with thanks,” Roland said. There was laughter and fresh applause at his usage.

Thorin raised his cup even higher. Everyone else in the room followed suit; crystal gleamed like starpoints in the light of the chandelier.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you William Dearborn of Hemphill, Richard Stockworth of Pennilton, and Arthur Heath of Gilead.”

Gasps and murmurs at that last, as if their Mayor had announced Arthur Heath of Heaven.

“Take of them well, give to them well, make their days in Mejis sweet, and their memories sweeter. Help them in their work and to advance the causes which are so dear to all of us. May their days be long upon the earth. So says your Mayor.”

“*SO SAY WE ALL!*” they thundered back.

Thorin drank; the rest followed his example. There was fresh applause. Roland turned, helpless to stop himself, and found Susan’s eyes again at once. For a moment she looked at him fully, and in her frank gaze he saw that she was nearly as shaken by his presence as he was by hers. Then the older woman who looked like her bent and murmured something into her ear. Susan turned away, her face a composed mask . . . but he had seen her regard in her eyes. And thought again that what was done might be undone, and what was spoken might be unspoken.

8

As they passed into the dining hall, which had tonight been set with four long trestle tables (so close there was barely room to move between them), Cordelia tugged her niece’s hand, pulling her back from the Mayor and Jonas, who had fallen into conversation with Fran Lengyll.

“Why looked you at him so, miss?” Cordelia whispered furiously. The vertical line had appeared on her forehead. Tonight it looked as

deep as a trench. “What ails thy pretty, stupid head?” *Thy*. Just that was enough to tell Susan that her aunt was in a fine rage.

“Looked at who? And how?” Her tone sounded right, she thought, but oh, her heart—

The hand over hers clamped down, hurting. “Play no fiddle with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty! Have ye ever seen that fine-turned row of pins before? Tell me the truth!”

“No, how could I? Aunt, you’re hurting me.”

Aunt Cord smiled balefully and clamped down harder. “Better a small hurt now than a large one later. Curb your impudence. And curb your flirtatious eyes.”

“Aunt, I don’t know what you—”

“I think you do,” Cordelia said grimly, pressing her niece close to the wood panelling to allow the guests to stream past them. When the rancher who owned the boathouse next to theirs said hello, Aunt Cord smiled pleasantly at him and wished him goodeven before turning back to Susan.

“Mind me, miss—mind me well. If I saw yer cow’s eyes, ye may be sure that half the company saw. Well, what’s done is done, but it stops now. Your time for such child-maid games is over. Do you understand?”

Susan was silent, her face setting in those stubborn lines Cordelia hated most of all; it was an expression that always made her feel like slapping her headstrong niece until her nose bled and her great gray doe’s eyes gushed tears.

“Ye’ve made a vow and a contract. Papers have been passed, the weird-woman has been consulted, money has changed hands. *And ye’ve given your promise*. If that means nothing to such as yerself, girl, remember what it’d mean to yer father.”

Tears rose in Susan's eyes again, and Cordelia was glad to see them. Her brother had been an improvident irritation, capable of producing only this far too pretty womanchild . . . but he had his uses, even dead.

"Now promise ye'll keep yer eyes to yourself, and that if ye see that boy coming, ye'll swing wide—aye, wide's you can—to stay out of his way."

"I promise, Aunt," Susan whispered. "I do."

Cordelia smiled. She was really quite pretty when she smiled. "It's well, then. Let's go in. We're being looked at. Hold my arm, child!"

Susan clasped her aunt's powdered arm. They entered the room side by side, their dresses rustling, the sapphire pendant on the swell of Susan's breast flashing, and many there were who remarked upon how alike they looked, and how well pleased poor old Pat Delgado would have been with them.

9

Roland was seated near the head of the center table, between Hash Renfrew (a rancher even bigger and blockier than Lengyll) and Thorin's rather morose sister, Coral. Renfrew had been handy with the punch; now, as the soup was brought to table, he set about proving himself equally adept with the ale.

He talked about the fishing trade ("not what it useter be, boy, although it's less muties they pull up in their nets these days, 'n that's a blessin"), the farming trade ("folks round here can grow most anythin, long's it's corn or beans"), and finally about those things clearly closest to his heart: horsin, coursin, and ranchin. Those businesses went on as always, aye, so they did, although times had been hard in the grass-and-seacoast Baronies for forty year or more.

Weren't the bloodlines clarifying? Roland asked. For they had begun to do so where he came from.

Aye, Renfrew agreed, ignoring his potato soup and gobbling barbecued beef-strips instead. These he scooped up with a bare hand and washed down with more ale. Aye, young master, bloodlines was clarifying wonderful well, indeed they were, three colts out of every five were threaded stock—in thoroughbred as well as common lines, kennit—and the fourth could be kept and worked if not bred. Only one in five these days born with extra legs or extra eyes or its guts on the outside, and that was good. But the birth-rates were way down, so they were; the stallions had as much ram as ever in their ramrods, it seemed, but not as much powder and ball.

“Beggin your pardon, ma’am,” Renfrew said, leaning briefly across Roland to Coral Thorin. She smiled her thin smile (it reminded Roland of Jonas’s), trugged her spoon through her soup, and said nothing. Renfrew emptied his ale-cup, smacked his lips heartily, and held the cup out again. As it was recharged, he turned back to Roland.

Things weren’t good, not as they once had been, but they could be worse. *Would* be worse, if that bugger Farson had his way. (This time he didn’t bother excusing himself to sai Thorin.) They all had to pull together, that was the ticket—rich and poor, great and small, while pulling could still do some good. And then he seconded Lengyll, telling Roland that whatever he and his friends wanted, whatever they needed, they had only to name it.

“Information should be enough,” Roland said. “Numbers of things.”

“Aye, can’t be a counter without numbers,” Renfrew agreed, and sprayed beery laughter. On Roland’s left hand, Coral Thorin nibbled a bit of green (the beef-strips she had not so much as touched), smiled her narrow smile, and went on boating with her spoon. Roland guessed there was nothing wrong with her ears, though, and that her brother might get a complete report of their conversation. Or possibly it would be Rimer to get the report. For, while it was too early to say for sure, Roland had an idea that Rimer might be the real force here. Along, perhaps, with sai Jonas.

“For instance,” Roland said, “how many riding horses do you think we may be able to report back to the Affiliation?”

“Tithe or total?”

“Total.”

Renfrew put his cup down and appeared to calculate. As he did, Roland looked across the table and saw Lengyll and Henry Wertner, the Barony’s stockliner, exchange a quick glance. They had heard. And he saw something else as well, when he returned his attention to his seatmate: Hash Renfrew was drunk, but likely not as drunk as he wanted young Will Dearborn to believe.

“Total, ye say—not just what we owe the Affiliation, or might be able to send along in a pinch.”

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s see, young sai. Fran must run a hundred ’n forty head; John Croydon’s got near a hundred. Hank Wertner’s got forty on his own hook, and must run sixty more out along the Drop for the Barony. Gov’mint hossflesh, Mr. Dearborn.”

Roland smiled. “I know it well. Split hoofs, low necks, no speed, bottomless bellies.”

Renfrew laughed hard at that, nodding . . . but Roland found himself wondering if the man was really amused. In Hambry, the waters on top and the waters down below seemed to run in different directions.

“As for myself, I’ve had a bad ten or twelve year—sand-eye, brain fever, cabbards. At one time there was two hundred head of running horses out there on the Drop with the Lazy Susan brand on em; now there can’t be more than eighty.”

Roland nodded. "So we're speaking of four hundred and twenty head."

"Oh, more'n that," Renfrew said with a laugh. He went to pick up his ale-cup, struck it with the side of one work- and weather-reddened hand, knocked it over, cursed, picked it up, then cursed the aleboy who came slow to refill it.

"More than that?" Roland prompted, when Renfrew was finally cocked and locked and ready to resume action.

"Ye have to remember, Mr. Dearborn, that this is hoss-country more than it's fisher-country. We josh each other, we and the fishers, but there's many a scale-scraper got a nag put away behind his house, or in the Barony stables if they have no roof of their own to keep the rain off a hoss's head. 'Twas her poor da useter keep the Barony stables."

Renfrew nodded toward Susan, who was seated across and three seats up from Roland himself—just a table's turn from the Mayor, who was, of course, seated at the head. Roland found her placement there passing peculiar, especially given the fact that the Mayor's missus had been seated almost all the way at the far end of the table, with Cuthbert on one side of her and some rancher to whom they had not yet been introduced on her other.

Roland supposed an old fellow like Thorin might like to have a pretty young relation near at hand to help draw attention to him, or to cheer up his own eye, but it still seemed odd. Almost an insult to one's wife. If he was tired of her conversation, why not put her at the head of another table?

They have their own customs, that's all, and the customs of the country aren't your concern. This man's crazy horse-count is your concern.

"How many other running horses, would you say?" he asked Renfrew. "In all?"

Renfrew gazed at him shrewdly. “An honest answer’ll not come back to haunt me, will it, sonny? I’m an Affiliation man—so I am, Affiliation to the core, they’ll carve Excalibur on my gravehead, like as not—but I’d not see Hambry and Mejis stripped of all its treasure.”

“That won’t happen, sai. How could we force you to give up what you don’t want to in any case? Such forces as we have are all committed in the north and west, against the Good Man.”

Renfrew considered this, then nodded.

“And may I not be Will to you?”

Renfrew brightened, nodded, and offered his hand a second time. He grinned broadly when Roland this time shook it in both of his, the over-and-under grip preferred by drovers and cowboys.

“These’re bad times we live in, Will, and they’ve bred bad manners. I’d guess there are probably another hundred and fifty head of horse in and about Mejis. Good ones is what I mean.”

“Big-hat stock.”

Renfrew nodded, clapped Roland on the back, ingested a goodly quaff of ale. “Big-hats, aye.”

From the top of their table there came a burst of laughter. Jonas had apparently said something funny. Susan laughed without reservation, her head tilted back and her hands clasped before the sapphire pendant. Cordelia, who sat with the girl on her left and Jonas on her right, was also laughing. Thorin was absolutely convulsed, rocking back and forth in his chair, wiping his eyes with a napkin.

“Yon’s a lovely girl,” Renfrew said. He spoke almost reverently. Roland could not quite swear that a small sound—a womanly *hmmpf*, perhaps—had come from his other side. He glanced in that

direction and saw sai Thorin still sporting with her soup. He looked back toward the head of the table.

“Is the Mayor her uncle, or perhaps her cousin?” Roland asked.

What happened next had a heightened clarity in his memory, as if someone had turned up all the colors and sounds of the world. The velvet swags behind Susan suddenly seemed a brighter red; the caw of laughter which came from Coral Thorin was the sound of a breaking branch. It was surely loud enough to make everyone in the vicinity stop their conversations and look at her, Roland thought . . . except only Renfrew and the two ranchers across the table did.

“Her *uncle!*” It was her first conversation of the evening. “Her *uncle*, that’s good. Eh, Rennie?”

Renfrew said nothing, only pushed his ale-cup away and finally began to eat his soup.

“I’m surprised at ye, young man, so I am. Ye may be from the In-World, but oh goodness, whoever tended to your education of the *real* world—the one outside of books ’n maps—stopped a mite short, I’d say. She’s his—” And then a word so thick with dialect that Roland had no idea what it was. *Seefin*, it sounded, or perhaps *sheevin*.

“I beg pardon?” He was smiling, but the smile felt cold and false on his mouth. There was a heaviness in his belly, as if the punch and the soup and the single beef-strip he had eaten for politeness’ sake had all lumped together in his stomach. *Do you serve?* he’d asked her, meaning did she serve at table. Mayhap she *did* serve, but likely she did it in a room rather more private than this. Suddenly he wanted to hear no more; had not the slightest interest in the meaning of the word the Mayor’s sister had used.

Another burst of laughter rocked the top of the table. Susan laughed with her head back, her cheeks glowing, her eyes sparkling. One strap of her dress had slipped down her arm, disclosing the

tender hollow of her shoulder. As he watched, his heart full of fear and longing, she brushed it absently back into place with the palm of her hand.

“It means ‘quiet little woman,’ ” Renfrew said, clearly uncomfortable. “It’s an old term, not used much these days—”

“Stop it, Rennie,” said Coral Thorin. Then, to Roland: “He’s just an old cowboy, and can’t quit shovelling horseshit even when he’s away from his beloved nags. *Sheevin* means side-wife. In the time of my great-grandmother, it meant whore . . . but one of a certain kind.” She looked with a pale eye at Susan, who was now sipping ale, then turned back to Roland. There was a species of baleful amusement in her gaze, an expression that Roland liked little. “The kind of whore you had to pay for in coin, the kind too fine for the trade of simple folk.”

“She’s his gilly?” Roland asked through lips which felt as if they had been iced.

“Aye,” Coral said. “Not consummated, not until the Reap—and none too happy about that is my brother, I’ll warrant—but bought and paid for just as in the old days. So she is.” Coral paused, then said, “Her father would die of shame if he could see her.” She spoke with a kind of melancholy satisfaction.

“I hardly think we should judge the Mayor too harshly,” Renfrew said in an embarrassed, pontificating voice.

Coral ignored him. She studied the line of Susan’s jaw, the soft swell of her bosom above the silken edge of her bodice, the fall of her hair. The thin humor was gone from Coral Thorin’s face. In it now was a somehow chilling species of contempt.

In spite of himself, Roland found himself imagining the Mayor’s knuckle-bunchy hands pushing down the straps of Susan’s dress, crawling over her naked shoulders, plunging like gray crabs into the cave beneath her hair. He looked away, toward the table’s lower end,

and what he saw there was no better. It was Olive Thorin that his eye found—Olive, who had been relegated to the foot of the table, Olive, looking up at the laughing folk who sat at its head. Looking up at her husband, who had replaced her with a beautiful young girl, and gifted that girl with a pendant which made her own firedim earrings look dowdy by comparison. There was none of Coral's hatred and angry contempt on her face. Looking at her might have been easier if that were so. She only gazed at her husband with eyes that were humble, hopeful, and unhappy. Now Roland understood why he had thought her sad. She had every reason to be sad.

More laughter from the Mayor's party; Rimer had leaned over from the next table, where he was presiding, to contribute some witticism. It must have been a good one. This time even Jonas was laughing. Susan put a hand to her bosom, then took her napkin and raised it to wipe a tear of laughter from the corner of her eye. Thorin covered her other hand. She looked toward Roland and met his eyes, still laughing. He thought of Olive Thorin, sitting down there at the foot of the table, with the salt and spices, an untouched bowl of soup before her and that unhappy smile on her face. Seated where the girl could see her, as well. And he thought that, had he been wearing his guns, he might well have drawn one and put a bullet in Susan Delgado's cold and whoring little heart.

And thought: *Who do you hope to fool?*

Then one of the serving boys was there, putting a plate of fish in front of him. Roland thought he had never felt less like eating in his life . . . but he *would* eat, just the same, just as he would turn his mind to the questions raised by his conversation with Hash Renfrew of the Lazy Susan Ranch. He would remember the face of his father.

Yes, I'll remember it very well, he thought. If only I could forget the one above yon sapphire.

The dinner was interminable, and there was no escape afterward. The table at the center of the reception room had been removed, and when the guests came back that way—like a tide which has surged as high as it can and now ebbs—they formed two adjacent circles at the direction of a sprightly little redhaired man whom Cuthbert later dubbed Mayor Thorin's Minister of Fun.

The boy-girl, boy-girl, boy-girl circling was accomplished with much laughter and some difficulty (Roland guessed that about three-quarters of the guests were now fairly well shottered), and then the guitarists struck up a *quesa*. This proved to be a simple sort of reel. The circles revolved in opposite directions, all holding hands, until the music stopped for a moment. Then the couple created at the place where the two circles touched danced at the center of the female partner's circle, while everyone else clapped and cheered.

The lead musician managed this old and clearly well-loved tradition with a keen eye to the ridiculous, stopping his *muchachos* in order to create the most amusing couples: tall woman-short man, fat woman-skinny man, old woman-young man (Cuthbert ended up side-kicking with a woman as old as his great-granddame, to the sai's breathless cackles and the company's general roars of approval).

Then, just when Roland was thinking this stupid dance would never end, the music stopped and he found himself facing Susan Delgado.

For a moment he could do nothing but stare at her, feeling that his eyes must burst from their sockets, feeling that he could move neither of his stupid feet. Then she raised her arms, the music began, the circle (this one included Mayor Thorin and the watchful, narrowly smiling Eldred Jonas) applauded, and he led her into the dance.

At first, as he spun her through a figure (his feet moved with all their usual grace and precision, numb or not), he felt like a man

made of glass. Then he became aware of her body touching his, and the rustle of her dress, and he was all too human again.

She moved closer for just a moment, and when she spoke, her breath tickled in his ear. He wondered if a woman could drive you mad—literally mad. He wouldn't have believed so before tonight, but tonight everything had changed.

“Thank you for your discretion and your propriety,” she whispered.

He pulled back from her a little and at the same time twirled her, his hand against the small of her back—palm resting on cool satin, fingers touching warm skin. Her feet followed his with never a pause or stutter; they moved with perfect grace, unafraid of his great and booted clod-stompers even in their flimsy silk slippers.

“I can be discreet, sai,” he said. “As for propriety? I'm amazed you even know the word.”

She looked up into his cold face, her smile fading. He saw anger come in to fill it, but before anger there was hurt, as if he had slapped her. He felt both glad and sorry at the same time.

“Why do you speak so?” she whispered.

The music stopped before he could answer . . . although how he might have answered, he had no idea. She curtseyed and he bowed, while those surrounding them clapped and whistled. They went back to their places, to their separate circles, and the guitars began again. Roland felt his hands grasped on either side and began to turn with the circle once more.

Laughing. Kicking. Clapping on the beat. Feeling her somewhere behind him, doing the same. Wondering if she wanted as badly as he did to be out of here, to be in the dark, to be alone in the dark, where he could put his false face aside before the real one beneath could grow hot enough to set it afire.

CHAPTER VI SHEEMIE

1

Around ten o' the clock, the trio of young men from the Inner Baronies made their manners to host and hostess, then slipped off into the fragrant summer night. Cordelia Delgado, who happened to be standing near Henry Wertner, the Barony's stockliner, remarked that they must be tired. Wertner laughed at this and replied in an accent so thick it was almost comic: "Nay, ma'am, byes that age're like rats explorin en woodpile after hokkut rain, so they are. It'll be hours yet before the bunks out'ta Bar K sees em."

Olive Thorin left the public rooms shortly after the boys, pleading a headache. She was pale enough to be almost believable.

By eleven, the Mayor, his Chancellor, and the chief of his newly inaugurated security staff were conversing in the Mayor's study with the last few late-staying guests (all ranchers, all members of the Horsemen's Association). The talk was brief but intense. Several of the ranchers present expressed relief that the Affiliation's emissaries were so young. Eldred Jonas said nothing to this, only looked down at his pale, long-fingered hands and smiled his narrow smile.

By midnight, Susan was at home and undressing for bed. She didn't have the sapphire to worry about, at least; that was a Barony jewel, and had been tucked back into the strongbox at Mayor's House before she left, despite what Mr. Ain't-We-Fine Will Dearborn might think about it and her. Mayor Thorin (she couldn't bring herself to call him Hart, although he had asked her to do so—not even to herself could she do it) had taken it back from her himself. In the hallway just off from the reception room, that had been, by the

tapestry showing Arthur Eld carrying his sword out of the pyramid in which it had been entombed. And he (Thorin, not the Eld) had taken the opportunity to kiss her mouth and have a quick fumble at her breasts—a part of her that had felt much too naked during that entire interminable evening. “I burn for Reaping,” he had whispered melodramatically in her ear. His breath had been redolent of brandy. “Each day of this summer seems an age.”

Now, in her room, brushing her hair with harsh, quick strokes and looking out at the waning moon, she thought she had never been so angry in her life as she was at this moment: angry at Thorin, angry at Aunt Cord, *furious* with that self-righteous prig of a Will Dearborn. Most of all, however, she was angry at herself.

“There’s three things ye can do in any situation, girl,” her father had told her once. “Ye can decide to do a thing, ye can decide *not* to do a thing . . . or ye can decide not to decide.” That last, her da had never quite come out and said (he hadn’t needed to) was the choice of weaklings and fools. She had promised herself she would never elect it herself . . . and yet she had allowed herself to drift into this ugly situation. Now all the choices seemed bad and honorless, all the roads either filled with rocks or hub-deep in mud.

In her room at Mayor’s House (she had not shared a chamber with Hart for ten years, or a bed, even briefly, for five), Olive sat in a nightdress of undecorated white cotton, also looking out at the waning moon. After closing herself into this safe and private place, she had wept . . . but not for long. Now she was dry-eyed, and felt as hollow as a dead tree.

And what was the worst? That Hart didn’t understand how humiliated she was, and not just for herself. He was too busy strutting and preening (also too busy trying to look down the front of sai Delgado’s dress at every opportunity) to know that people—his own Chancellor among them—were laughing at him behind his back. That might stop when the girl had returned to her aunt’s with a big belly, but that wouldn’t be for months yet. The witch had seen to that. It would be even longer if the girl kindled slowly. And what was the

silliest, most humiliating thing of all? That she, John Haverty's daughter Olive, still loved her husband. Hart was an overweening, vainglorious, prancing loon of a man, but she still loved him.

There was something else, something quite apart from the matter of Hart's turning into George o' Goats in his late middle age: she thought there was an intrigue of some sort going on, something dangerous and quite likely dishonorable. Hart knew a little about it, but she guessed he knew only what Kimba Rimer and that hideous limping man *wanted* him to know.

There was a time, and not so long ago, when Hart wouldn't have allowed himself to be fobbed off in such fashion by the likes of Rimer, a time when he would have taken one look at Eldred Jonas and his friends and sent them west ere they had so much as a single hot dinner in them. But that was before Hart had become besotted with sai Delgado's gray eyes, high bosom, and flat belly.

Olive turned down the lamp, blew out the flame, and crept off to bed, where she would lie wakeful until dawn.

By one o' the clock, no one was left in the public rooms of Mayor's House except for a quartet of cleaning women, who performed their chores silently (and nervously) beneath the eye of Eldred Jonas. When one of them looked up and saw him gone from the window-seat where he had been sitting and smoking, she murmured softly to her friends, and they all loosened up a little. But there was no singing, no laughter. *// spectro*, the man with the blue coffin on his hand, might only have stepped back into the shadows. He might still be watching.

By two o' the clock, even the cleaning women were gone. It was an hour at which a party in Gilead would just have been reaching its apogee of glitter and gossip, but Gilead was far away, not just in another Barony but almost in another world. This was the Outer Arc, and in the Outers, even gentry went to bed early.

There was no gentry on view at the Travellers' Rest, however, and beneath the all-encompassing gaze of The Romp, the night was still fairly young.

2

At one end of the saloon, fishermen still wearing their rolled-down boots drank and played Watch Me for small stakes. To their right was a poker table; to their left, a knot of yelling, exhorting men—cowpokes, mostly—stood along Satan's Alley, watching the dice bounce down the velvet incline. At the room's other end, Sheb McCurdy was pounding out jagged boogie, right hand flying, left hand pumping, the sweat pouring down his neck and pale cheeks. Beside and above him, standing drunk on a stool, Pettie the Trotter shook her enormous bottom and bawled out the words to the song at the top of her voice: "*Come on over, baby, we got chicken in the barn, what barn, whose barn, my barn! Come on over, baby, baby got the bull by the horns . . .*"

Sheemie stopped beside the piano, the camel bucket in one hand, grinning up at her and attempting to sing along. Pettie swatted him on his way, never missing a word, bump, or grind, and Sheemie went with his peculiar laugh, which was shrill but somehow not unpleasant.

A game of darts was in progress; in a booth near the back, a whore who styled herself Countess Jillian of Up'ard Killian (exiled royalty from distant Garlan, my dears, oh how special we are) was managing to give two handjobs at the same time while smoking a pipe. And at the bar, a whole line of assorted toughs, drifters, cowpunchers, drovers, drivers, carters, wheelwrights, stagies, carpenters, conmen, stockmen, boatmen, and gunmen drank beneath The Romp's double head.

The only *real* gunmen in the place were at the end of the bar, a pair drinking by themselves. No one attempted to join them, and not just because they wore shooting irons in holsters that were slung low and tied down gunslinger fashion. Guns were uncommon but not

unknown in Mejis at that time, and not necessarily feared, but these two had the sullen look of men who have spent a long day doing work they didn't want to do—the look of men who would pick a fight on no account at all, and be glad to end their day by sending some new widow's husband home in a hurry-up wagon.

Stanley the bartender served them whiskey after whiskey with no attempt to make conversation, not so much as a “Hot day, gents, wa'n't it?” They reeked of sweat, and their hands were pitchy with pine-gum. Not enough to keep Stanley from being able to see the blue coffin-shapes tattooed on them, though. Their friend, the old limping buzzard with the girl's hair and the gimp leg, wasn't here, at least. In Stanley's view, Jonas was easily the worst of the Big Coffin Hunters, but these two were bad enough, and he had no intention of getting aslant of them if he could help it. With luck, no one would; they looked tired enough to call it a night early.

Reynolds and Depape were tired, all right—they had spent the day out at Citgo, camouflaging a line of empty steel tankers with nonsense words (TEXACO, CITGO, SUNOCO, EXXON) printed on their sides, a billion pine-boughs they'd hauled and stacked, it seemed—but they had no consequent plans to finish their drinking early. Depape might have done so if Her Nibs had been available, but that young beauty (actual name: Gert Moggins) had a ranch-job and wouldn't be back until two nights hence. “And it'll be a week if there's hard cash on offer,” Depape said morosely. He pushed his spectacles up on his nose.

“Fuck her,” Reynolds said.

“That's just what I'd do if I could, but I can't.”

“I'm going to get me a plate of that free lunch,” Reynolds said, pointing down to the other end of the bar, where a tin bucket of steamed clams had just come out of the kitchen. “You want some?”

“Them look like hocks of snot and go down the same way. Bring me a strip of beef jerky.”

“All right, partner.” Reynolds went off down the bar. People gave him wide passage; gave even his silk-lined cloak wide passage.

Depape, more morose than ever now that he had thought of Her Nibs gobbling cowboy spareribs out there at the Piano Ranch, downed his drink, winced at the stench of pine-gum on his hand, then held his glass out in Stanley Ruiz’s direction. “Fill this up, you dog!” he shouted. A cowhand leaning with his back, butt, and elbows against the bar jerked forward at the sound of Depape’s bellow, and that was all it took to start trouble.

Sheemie was bustling toward the passthrough from which the steamers had just appeared, now holding the camel bucket out before him in both hands. Later, when the Travellers’ began to empty out, his job would be to clean up. For now, however, it was simply to circulate with the camel bucket, dumping in every unfinished drink he found. This combined elixir ended up in a jug behind the bar. The jug was labelled fairly enough—CAMEL PISS—and a double shot could be obtained for three pennies. It was a drink only for the reckless or the impecunious, but a fair number of both passed beneath the stern gaze of The Romp each night; Stanley rarely had a problem emptying the jug. And if it wasn’t empty at the end of the night, why, there was always a fresh night coming along. Not to mention a fresh supply of thirsty fools.

But on this occasion Sheemie never made it to the Camel Piss jug behind the end of the bar. He tripped over the boot of the cowboy who had jerked forward, and went to his knees with a grunt of surprise. The contents of the bucket sloshed out ahead of him, and, following Satan’s First Law of Malignity—to wit, if the worst can happen, it usually will—they drenched Roy Depape from the knees down in an eyewatering mixture of beer, *graf*, and white lightning.

Conversation at the bar stopped, and that stopped the talk of the men gathered around the dice-chute. Sheb turned, saw Sheemie kneeling before one of Jonas’s men, and stopped playing. Pettie, her eyes squeezed shut as she poured her entire soul into her singing, continued on a capella for three or four bars before registering the

silence which was spreading out like a ripple. She stopped singing and opened her eyes. That sort of silence usually meant that someone was going to be killed. If so, she didn't intend to miss it.

Depape stood perfectly still, inhaling the raw stench of alcohol as it rose. He didn't mind the smell; on the whole, it had the stink of pine-gum beat six ways to the Peddler. He didn't mind the way his pants were sticking to his knees, either. It might have been a bit of an irritation if some of that joy-juice had gotten down inside his boots, but none had.

His hand fell to the butt of his gun. Here, by god and by goddess, was something to take his mind off his sticky hands and absent whore. And good entertainment was ever worth a little wetting.

Silence blanketed the place now. Stanley stood as stiff as a soldier behind the bar, nervously plucking at one of his arm-garters. At the bar's other end, Reynolds looked back toward his partner with bright interest. He took a clam from the steaming bucket and cracked it on the edge of the bar like a boiled egg. At Depape's feet, Sheemie looked up, his eyes big and fearful beneath the wild snarl of his black hair. He was trying his best to smile.

"Wellnow, boy," Depape said. "You have wet me considerable."

"Sorry, big fella, I go trippy-trip." Sheemie jerked a hand back over his shoulder; a little spray of camel piss flew from the tips of his fingers. Somewhere someone cleared his throat nervously—*raa-aach!* The room was full of eyes, and quiet enough so that they all could hear both the wind in the eaves and the waves breaking on the rocks of Hambry Point, two miles away.

"The hell you did," said the cowpoke who had jerked. He was about twenty, and suddenly afraid he might never see his mother again. "Don't you go tryin to put your trouble off on me, you damned feeb."

“I don’t care *how* it happened,” Depape said. He was aware he was playing for an audience, and knew that what an audience mostly wants is to be entertained. Sai R. B. Depape, always a trouper, intended to oblige.

He pinched the corduroy of his pants above the knees and pulled the legs up, revealing the toes of his boots. They were shiny and wet.

“See there. Look at what you got on my boots.”

Sheemie looked up at him, grinning and terrified.

Stanley Ruiz decided he couldn’t let this happen without at least trying to stop it. He had known Dolores Sheemer, the boy’s mother; there was even a possibility that he himself was the boy’s father. In any case, he liked Sheemie. The boy was foolish, but his heart was good, he never took a drink, and he always did his work. Also, he could find a smile for you even on the coldest, foggiest winter’s day. That was a talent many people of normal intelligence did not have.

“Sai Depape,” he said, taking a step forward and speaking in a low, respectful tone. “I’m very sorry about that. I’ll be happy to buy your drinks for the rest of the evening if we can just forget this regrettable—”

Depape’s movement was a blur almost too fast to see, but that wasn’t what amazed the people who were in the Rest that night; they would have expected a man running with Jonas to be fast. What amazed them was the fact that *he never looked around to set his target*. He located Stanley by his voice alone.

Depape drew his gun and swept it to the right in a rising arc. It struck Stanley Ruiz dead in the mouth, mashing his lips and shattering three of his teeth. Blood splashed the backbar mirror; several high-flying drops decorated the tip of The Romp’s lefthand nose. Stanley screamed, clapped his hands to his face, and

staggered back against the shelf behind him. In the silence, the chattering clink of the bottles was very loud.

Down the bar, Reynolds cracked another clam and watched, fascinated. Good as a play, it was.

Depape turned his attention back to the kneeling boy. "Clean my boots," he said.

A look of muddled relief came onto Sheemie's face. Clean his boots! Yes! You bet! Right away! He pulled the rag he always kept in his back pocket. It wasn't even dirty yet. Not very, at least.

"No," Depape said patiently. Sheemie looked up at him, gaping and puzzled. "Put that nasty clout back where it come from—I don't even want to look at it."

Sheemie tucked it into his back pocket again.

"Lick em," Depape said in that same patient voice. "That's what I want. You lick my boots until they're dry again, and so clean you can see your stupid rabbit's face in em."

Sheemie hesitated, as if still not sure what was required of him. Or perhaps he was only processing the information.

"I'd do it, boy," Barkie Callahan said from what he hoped was a safe place behind Sheb's piano. "If you want to see the sun come up, I'd surely do it."

Depape had already decided the mush-brain wasn't going to see another sunrise, not in *this* world, but kept quiet. He had never had his boots licked. He wanted to see what it felt like. If it was nice—kind of sexy-like—he could maybe try Her Nibs out on it.

"Does I have to?" Sheemie's eyes were filling with tears. "Can't just I-sorry and polish em real good?"

"*Lick*, you feeble-minded donkey," Depape said.

Sheemie's hair fell across his forehead. His tongue poked tentatively out between his lips, and as he bent his head toward Depape's boots, the first of his tears fell.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," a voice said. It was shocking in the silence—not because it was sudden, and certainly not because it was angry. It was shocking because it was amused. "I simply can't allow that. Nope. I would if I could, but I can't. Unsanitary, you see. Who knows what disease might be spread in such fashion? The mind quails! Ab-so-lutely *cuh-wails!*"

Standing just inside the batwing doors was the purveyor of this idiotic and potentially fatal screed: a young man of middling height, his flat-crowned hat pushed back to reveal a tumbled comma of brown hair. Except *young man* didn't really cover him, Depape realized; *young man* was drawing it heavy. He was only a kid. Around his neck, gods knew why, he wore a bird's skull like an enormous comical pendant. It was hung on a chain that ran through the eyeholes. And in his hands was not a gun (*where would an unwhiskered dribble like him get a gun in the first place?* Depape wondered) but a goddam slingshot. Depape burst out laughing.

The kid laughed as well, nodding as if he understood how ridiculous the whole thing looked, how ridiculous the whole thing *was*. His laughter was infectious; Pettie, still up on her stool, tittered herself before clapping her hands over her mouth.

"This is no place for a boy such as you," Depape said. His revolver, an old five-shooter, was still out; it lay in his fist on the bar, with Stanley Ruiz's blood dripping off the gunsight. Depape, without raising it from the ironwood, waggled it slightly. "Boys who come to places like this learn bad habits, kid. Dying is apt to be one of them. So I give you this one chance. Get out of here."

"Thank you, sir, I appreciate my one chance," the boy said. He spoke with great and winning sincerity . . . but didn't move. Still he stood just inside the batwing doors, with the wide elastic strap of his

sling pulled back. Depape couldn't quite make out what was in the cup, but it glittered in the gaslight. A metal ball of some sort.

"Well, then?" Depape snarled. This was getting old, and fast.

"I know I'm being a pain in the neck, sir—not to mention an ache in the ass and a milky drip from the tip of a sore dick—but if it's all the same to you, my dear friend, I'd like to give my chance to the young fellow on his knees before you. Let him apologize, let him polish your boots with his clout until you are entirely satisfied, and let him go on living his life."

There was an unfocused murmur of approval at this from the area where the card-players were watching. Depape didn't like the sound of it at all, and he made a sudden decision. The boy would die as well, executed for the crime of impertinence. The swabby who had spilled the bucket of dregs on him was clearly retarded. Yon brat had not even that excuse. He just thought he was funny.

From the corner of his eye, Depape saw Reynolds moving to flank the boy, smooth as oiled silk. Depape appreciated the thought, but didn't believe he'd need much help with the slingshot specialist.

"Boy, I think you've made a mistake," he said in a kindly voice. "I really believe—" The cup of the slingshot dipped a little . . . or Depape fancied it did. He made his move.

3

They talked about it in Hambry for years to come; three decades after the fall of Gilead and the end of the Affiliation, they were still talking. By that time there were better than five hundred old gaffers (and a few old gammers) claiming that they were drinking a beer in the Rest that night, and saw it all.

Depape was young, and had the speed of a snake. Nevertheless, he never came close to getting a shot off at Cuthbert Allgood. There was a *thip-TWANG!* as the elastic was released, a steel gleam that

drew itself across the saloon's smoky air like a line on a slateboard, and then Depape screamed. His revolver tumbled to the floor, and a foot spun it away from him across the sawdust (no one would claim that foot while the Big Coffin Hunters were still in Hambry; hundreds claimed it after they were gone). Still screaming—he could not bear pain—Depape raised his bleeding hand and looked at it with agonized, unbelieving eyes. Actually, he had been lucky. Cuthbert's ball had smashed the tip of the second finger and torn off the nail. Lower, and Depape would have been able to blow smoke-rings through his own palm.

Cuthbert, meanwhile, had already reloaded the cup of his slingshot and drawn the elastic back again. "Now," he said, "if I have your attention, good sir—"

"I can't speak for his," Reynolds said from behind him, "but you got mine, partner. I don't know if you're good with that thing or just shitass lucky, but either way, you're done with it now. Relax the draw on it and put it down. That table in front of you's the place I want to see it."

"I've been blindsided," Cuthbert said sadly. "Betrayed once more by my own callow youth."

"I don't know nothing about your callow youth, brother, but you've been blindsided, all right," Reynolds agreed. He stood behind and slightly to the left of Cuthbert, and now he moved his gun forward until the boy could feel the muzzle against the back of his head. Reynolds thumbed the hammer. In the pool of silence which the Travellers' Rest had become, the sound was very loud. "Now put that twanger down."

"I think, good sir, that I must offer my regrets and decline."

"What?"

"You see, I've got my trusty sling aimed at your pleasant friend's head—" Cuthbert began, and when Depape shifted uneasily against

the bar, Cuthbert's voice rose in a whipcrack that did not sound callow in the least. "*Stand still! Move again and you're a dead man!*"

Depape subsided, holding his bloody hand against his pine-tacky shirt. For the first time he looked frightened, and for the first time that night—for the first time since hooking up with Jonas, in fact—Reynolds felt mastery of a situation on the verge of slipping away . . . except how could it be? How could it be when he'd been able to circle around this smart-talking squint and get the drop on him? This should be *over*.

Lowering his voice to its former conversational—not to say playful—pitch, Cuthbert said: "If you shoot me, the ball flies and your friend dies, too."

"I don't believe that," Reynolds said, but he didn't like what he heard in his own voice. It sounded like doubt. "No man could make a shot like that."

"Why don't we let your friend decide?" Cuthbert raised his voice in a good-humored hail. "Hi-ho, there, Mr. Spectacles! Would you like your pal to shoot me?"

"No!" Depape's cry was shrill, verging on panic. "No, Clay! Don't shoot!"

"So it's a standoff," Reynolds said, bemused. And then bemusement changed to horror as he felt the blade of a very large knife slip against his throat. It pressed the tender skin just over his adam's apple.

"No, it's not," Alain said softly. "Put the gun down, my friend, or I'll cut your throat."

4

Standing outside the batwing doors, having arrived by simple good fortune in time for this Pinch and Jilly show, Jonas watched with

amazement, contempt, and something close to horror. First one of the Affiliation brats gets the drop on Depape, and when Reynolds covers that one, the big kid with the round face and the plowboy's shoulders puts a knife to Reynolds's throat. Neither of the brats a day over fifteen, and neither with a gun. Marvelous. He would have thought it better than a travelling circus, if not for the problems that would follow if this were not put right. What sort of work could they do in Hambry if it got around that the boogeymen were afraid of the children, instead of vice-versa?

There's time to stop this before there's killing, mayhap. If you want to. Do you?

Jonas decided he did; that they could walk out winners if they played it just right. He also decided the Affiliation brats would not, unless they were very lucky indeed, be leaving Mejis Barony alive.

Where's the other one? Dearborn?

A good question. An *important* question. Embarrassment would become outright humiliation if he found himself trumped in the same fashion as Roy and Clay.

Dearborn wasn't in the bar, and that was sure. Jonas turned on his heels, scanning the South High Street in both directions. It was almost day-bright under a Kissing Moon only two nights past the full. No one there, not in the street, not on the far side, where Hambry's mercantile store stood. The mercantile had a porch, but there was nothing on it save for a line of carved totems illustrating Guardians of the Beam: Bear, Turtle, Fish, Eagle, Lion, Bat, and Wolf. Seven of twelve, bright as marble in the moonlight, and no doubt great favorites of the kiddies. No men over there, though. Good. Lovely.

Jonas peered hard into the thread of alley between the mercantile and the butcher's, glimpsed a shadow behind a tumble of cast-off boxes, tensed, then relaxed as he saw a cat's shining green eyes. He nodded and turned to the business at hand, pushing back the lefthand batwing and stepping into the Travellers' Rest. Alain heard

the squeak of a hinge, but Jonas's gun was at his temple before he could even begin to turn.

"Sonny, unless you're a barber, I think you'd better put that pigsticker down. You don't get a second warning."

"No," Alain said.

Jonas, who had expected nothing but compliance and had been prepared for nothing else, was thunderstruck. "*What?*"

"You heard me," Alain said. "I said no."

5

After making their manners and excusing themselves from Seafront, Roland had left his friends to their own amusements—they would finish up at the Travellers' Rest, he supposed, but wouldn't stay long or get into much trouble when they had no money for cards and could drink nothing more exciting than cold tea. He had ridden into town another way, tethered his mount at a public post in the lower of the two town squares (Rusher had offered a single puzzled nicker at this treatment, but no more), and had since been tramping the empty, sleeping streets with his hat yanked low over his eyes and his hands clasped into an aching knot at the small of his back.

His mind was full of questions—things were wrong here, very wrong. At first he'd thought that was just his imagination, the childish part of him finding make-believe troubles and storybook intrigue because he had been removed from the heart of the real action. But after his talk with "Rennie" Renfrew, he knew better. There were questions, outright mysteries, and the most hellish thing of all was that he couldn't concentrate on them, let alone go any distance toward making sense of them. Every time he tried, Susan Delgado's face intruded . . . her face, or the sweep of her hair, or even the pretty, fearless way her silk-slipped feet had followed his boots in the dance, never lagging or hesitating. Again and again he heard the last thing he had said to her, speaking in the stilted, priggish voice of

a boy preacher. He would have given almost anything to take back both the tone and the words themselves. She'd be on Thorin's pillow come Reaptide, and kindle him a child before the first snow flew, perhaps a male heir, and what of it? Rich men, famous men, and well-blooded men had taken gilly-girls since the beginning of time; Arthur Eld had had better than forty himself, according to the tales. So, really, what was it to him?

I think I've gone and fallen in love with her. That's what it is to me.

A dismaying idea, but not a dismissable one; he knew the landscape of his own heart too well. He loved her, very likely it was so, but part of him also hated her, and held to the shocking thought he'd had at dinner: that he could have shot Susan Delgado through the heart if he'd come armed. Some of this was jealousy, but not all; perhaps not even the greater part. He had made some indefinable but powerful connection between Olive Thorin—her sad but game little smile from the foot of the table—and his own mother. Hadn't some of that same woeful, rueful look been in his mother's eyes on the day when he had come upon her and his father's advisor? Marten in an open-throated shirt, Gabrielle Deschain in a sacque that had slipped off one shoulder, the whole room reeking of what they had been up to that hot morning?

His mind, tough as it already was, shrank from the image, horrified. It returned instead to that of Susan Delgado—her gray eyes and shining hair. He saw her laughing, chin uptilted, hands clasped before the sapphire Thorin had given her.

Roland could forgive her the gilly business, he supposed. What he could not forgive, in spite of his attraction to Susan, was that awful smile on Olive Thorin's face as she watched the girl sitting in what should have been her place. Sitting in her place and laughing.

These were the things that chased through his head as he paced off acres of moonlight. He had no business with such thoughts, Susan Delgado was not the reason he was here, nor was the ridiculous knuckle-cracking Mayor and his pitiable country-Mary of a

wife . . . yet he couldn't put them away and get to what *was* his business. He had forgotten the face of his father, and walked in the moonlight, hoping to find it again.

In such fashion he came along the sleeping, silver-gilded High Street, walking north to south, thinking vaguely that he would perhaps stand Cuthbert and Alain to a taste of something wet and toss the dice down Satan's Alley a time or two before going back to get Rusher and call it a night. And so it was that he happened to spy Jonas—the man's gaunt figure and fall of long white hair were impossible to mistake—standing outside the batwings of the Travellers' Rest and peering in. Jonas did this with one hand on the butt of his gun and a tense set of body that put everything else from Roland's mind at once. Something was going on, and if Bert and Alain were in there, it might involve them. They were the strangers in town, after all, and it was possible—even likely—that not everyone in Hambry loved the Affiliation with the fervor that had been professed at tonight's dinner. Or perhaps it was Jonas's friends who were in trouble. *Something* was brewing, in any case.

With no clear thought as to why he was doing it, Roland went softly up the steps to the mercantile's porch. There was a line of carved animals there (and probably spiked firmly to the boards, so that drunken wags from the saloon across the street couldn't carry them away, chanting the nursery rhymes of their childhood as they went). Roland stepped behind the last one in line—it was the Bear—and bent his knees so that the crown of his hat wouldn't show. Then he went as still as the carving. He could see Jonas turn, look across the street, then look to his left, peering at something—

Very low, a sound: *Waow! Waow!*

It's a cat. In the alley.

Jonas looked a moment longer, then stepped into the Rest. Roland was out from behind the carved bear, down the steps, and into the street at once. He hadn't Alain's gift of the touch, but he had

intuitions that were sometimes very strong. This one was telling him he must hurry.

Overhead, the Kissing Moon drifted behind a cloud.

6

Pettie the Trotter still stood on her stool, but she no longer felt drunk and singing was the last thing on her mind. She could hardly believe what she was seeing: Jonas had the drop on a boy who had the drop on Reynolds who had the drop on *another* boy (this last one wearing a bird's skull around his neck on a chain) who had the drop on Roy Depape. Who had, in fact, drawn some of Roy Depape's blood. And when Jonas had told the big boy to put down the knife he was holding to Reynolds's throat, *the big boy had refused*.

You can blow my lights out and send me to the clearing at the end of the path, thought Pettie, *for now I've seen it all, so I have*. She supposed she should get off the stool—there was apt to be shooting any second now, and likely a great lot of it—but sometimes you just had to take your chances.

Because some things were just too good to miss.

7

"We're in this town on Affiliation business," Alain said. He had one hand buried deep in Reynolds's sweaty hair; the other maintained a steady pressure on the knife at Reynolds's throat. Not quite enough to break the skin. "If you harm us, the Affiliation will take note. So will our fathers. You'll be hunted like dogs and hung upside down, like as not, when you're caught."

"Sonny, there's not an Affiliation patrol within two hundred wheels of here, probably three hundred," Jonas said, "and I wouldn't care a fart in a windstorm if there was one just over yon hill. Nor do your fathers mean a squitter to me. Put that knife down or I'll blow your fucking brains out."

“No.”

“Future developments in this matter should be quite wonderful,” Cuthbert said cheerily . . . although there was now a beat of nerves under his prattle. Not fear, perhaps not even nervous-ness, just nerves. The good kind, more likely than not, Jonas thought sourly. He had underestimated these boys at meat; if nothing else was clear, that was. “You shoot Richard, and Richard cuts Mr. Cloak’s throat just as Mr. Cloak shoots me; my poor dying fingers release my sling’s elastic and put a steel ball in what passes for Mr. Spectacles’s brain. *You’ll* walk away, at least, and I suppose that will be a great comfort to your dead friends.”

“Call it a draw,” Alain said to the man with the gun at his temple. “We all stand back and walk away.”

“No, sonny,” Jonas said. His voice was patient, and he didn’t think his anger showed, but it was rising. Gods, to be outfaced like this, even temporarily! “No one does like that to the Big Coffin Hunters. This is your last chance to—”

Something hard and cold and very much to the point pressed against the back of Jonas’s shirt, dead center between the shoulderblades. He knew what it was and who held it at once, understood the game was lost, but couldn’t understand how such a ludicrous, maddening turn of events could have happened.

“Holster the gun,” the voice behind the sharp tip of metal said. It was empty, somehow—not just calm, but emotionless. “Do it now, or this goes in your heart. No more talk. Talking’s done. Do it or die.”

Jonas heard two things in that voice: youth and truth. He holstered his gun.

“You with the black hair. Take your gun out of my friend’s ear and put it back in your holster. Now.”

Clay Reynolds didn't have to be invited twice, and he uttered a long, shaky sigh when Alain took the blade off his throat and stood back. Cuthbert did not look around, only stood with the elastic of his slingshot pulled and his elbow cocked.

"You at the bar," Roland said. "Holster up."

Depape did so, grimacing with pain as he bumped his hurt finger against his gunbelt. Only when this gun was put away did Cuthbert relax his hold on his sling and drop the ball from the cup into the palm of his hand.

The cause of all this had been forgotten as the effects played themselves out. Now Sheemie got to his feet and pelted across the room. His cheeks were wet with tears. He grasped one of Cuthbert's hands, kissed it several times (loud smacking noises that would have been comic under other circumstances), and held the hand to his cheek for a moment. Then he dodged past Reynolds, pushed open the righthand batwing, and flew right into the arms of a sleepy-eyed and still half-drunk Sheriff. Avery had been fetched by Sheb from the jailhouse, where the Sheriff o' Barony had been sleeping off the Mayor's ceremonial dinner in one of his own cells.

8

"This is a nice mess, isn't it?"

Avery speaking. No one answering. He hadn't expected they would, not if they knew what was good for them.

The office area of the jail was too small to hold three men, three strapping not-quite-men, and one extra-large Sheriff comfortably, so Avery had herded them into the nearby Town Gathering Hall, which echoed to the soft flutter of the pigeons in the rafters and the steady beat-beat-beat of the grandfather clock behind the podium.

It was a plain room, but an inspired choice all the same. It was where the townsfolk and Barony landowners had come for hundreds

of years to make their decisions, pass their laws, and occasionally send some especially troublesome person west. There was a feeling of seriousness in its moon-glimmered darkness, and Roland thought even the old man, Jonas, felt a little of it. Certainly it invested Sheriff Herk Avery with an authority he might not otherwise have been able to project.

The room was filled with what were in that place and time called “bareback benches”—oaken pews with no cushions for either butt *or* back. There were sixty in all, thirty on each side of a wide center aisle. Jonas, Depape, and Reynolds sat on the front bench to the left of the aisle. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain sat across from them on the right. Reynolds and Depape looked sullen and embarrassed; Jonas looked remote and composed. Will Dearborn’s little crew was quiet. Roland had given Cuthbert a look which he hoped the boy could read: *One smart remark and I’ll rip the tongue right out of your head.* He thought the message had been received. Bert had stowed his idiotic “lookout” somewhere, which was a good sign.

“A nice mess,” Avery repeated, and blew liquor-scented wind at them in a deep sigh. He was sitting on the edge of the stage with his short legs hanging down, looking at them with a kind of disgusted wonder.

The side door opened and in came Deputy Dave, his white service jacket laid aside, his monocle tucked into the pocket of his more usual khaki shirt. In one hand he carried a mug; in the other a folded scrap of what looked to Roland like birch-bark.

“Did ye boil the first half, David?” Avery asked. He now wore a put-upon expression.

“Aye.”

“Boiled it twice?”

“Aye, twice.”

“For that was the directions.”

“Aye,” Dave repeated in a resigned voice. He handed Avery the cup and dumped the remaining contents of the birch-bark scrap in when the Sheriff held the cup out for them.

Avery swirled the liquid, peered in with a doubtful, resigned expression, then drank. He grimaced. “Oh, foul!” he cried. “What’s so nasty as this?”

“What is it?” Jonas asked.

“Headache powder. *Hangover* powder, ye might say. From the old witch. The one who lives up the Cöos. Know where I mean?” Avery gave Jonas a knowing look. The old gunny pretended not to see it, but Roland thought he had. And what did it mean? Another mystery.

Depape looked up at the word Cöos, then went back to sucking his wounded finger. Beyond Depape, Reynolds sat with his cloak drawn about him, looking grimly down at his lap.

“Does it work?” Roland asked.

“Aye, boy, but ye pay a price for witch’s medicine. Remember that: ye always pay. This ’un takes away the headache if ye drink too much of Mayor Thorin’s damned punch, but it gripes the bowels somethin fierce, so it does. And the farts—!” He waved a hand in front of his face to demonstrate, took another sip from the cup, then set it aside. He returned to his former gravity, but the mood in the room had lightened just a little; they all felt it. “Now what are we to do about this business?”

Herk Avery swept them slowly with his eyes, from Reynolds on his far right to Alain—“Richard Stockworth”—on his far left. “Eh, boys? We’ve got the Mayor’s men on one side and the Affiliation’s . . . men . . . on the other, six fellows at the point of murder, and over what? A halfwit and a spilled bucket of slops.” He pointed first at the Big Coffin Hunters, then to the Affiliation’s counters. “Two

powderkegs and one fat sheriff in the middle. So what's yer thoughts on't? Speak up, don't be shy, you wasn't shy in Coral's whoreden down the road, don't be shy in here!"

No one said anything. Avery sipped some more of his foul drink, then set it down and looked at them decisively. What he said next didn't surprise Roland much; it was exactly what he would have expected of a man like Avery, right down to the tone which implied that he considered himself a man who could make the hard decisions when he had to, by the gods.

"I'll tell yer what we're going to do: We're going to forget it."

He now assumed the air of one who expects an uproar and is prepared to handle it. When no one spoke or even shuffled a foot, he looked discomfited. Yet he had a job to do, and the night was growing old. He squared his shoulders and pushed on.

"I'll not spend the next three or four months waiting to see who among you's killed who. Nay! Nor will I be put in a position where I might have to take the punishment for your stupid quarrel over that halfwit Sheemie.

"I appeal to your practical natures, boys, when I point out that I may be either your friend or your enemy during your time here . . . but I'd be wrong if I didn't also appeal to your more noble natures, which I am sure are both large and sensitive."

The Sheriff now tried on an exalted expression, which was not, in Roland's estimation, notably successful. Avery turned his attention to Jonas.

"Sai, I can't believe ye'll want to be causin trouble for three young men from the Affiliation—the Affiliation that's been like mother's milk and father's shelterin hand since aye or oh fifty generations back; ye'd not be so disrespectful as all that, would ye?"

Jonas shook his head, smiling his thin smile.

Avery nodded again. Things were going along well, that nod said. “Ye’ve all yer own cakes to bake and oats to roll, and none of ye wants something like this to get in the way of doin yer jobs, do yer?”

They all shook their heads this time.

“So what I want you to do is to stand up, face each other, shake hands, and cry each other’s pardon. If ye don’t do that, ye can all ride west out of town by sunrise, far as I’m concerned.”

He picked up the mug and took a bigger drink this time. Roland saw that the man’s hand was trembling the tiniest bit, and wasn’t surprised. It was all bluff and blow, of course. The Sheriff would have understood that Jonas, Reynolds, and Depape were beyond his authority as soon as he saw the small blue coffins on their hands; after tonight, he must feel the same way about Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath. He could only hope that all would see where their self-interest lay. Roland did. So, apparently, did Jonas, for even as Roland got up, Jonas did the same.

Avery recoiled a little bit, as if expecting Jonas to go for his gun and Dearborn for the knife in his belt, the one he’d been holding against Jonas’s back when Avery came puffing up to the saloon.

There was no gun or knife drawn, however. Jonas turned toward Roland and held out his hand.

“He’s right, lad,” Jonas said in his reedy, quavering voice.

“Yes.”

“Will you shake with an old man, and vow to start over?”

“Yes.” Roland held out his hand.

Jonas took it. “I cry your pardon.”

“I cry your own, Mr. Jonas.” Roland tapped left-hand at his throat, as was proper when addressing an elder in such fashion.

As the two of them sat down, Alain and Reynolds rose, as neatly as men in a prerehearsed ceremony. Last of all, Cuthbert and Depape rose. Roland was all but positive that Cuthbert's foolishness would pop out like Jack from his box—the idiot would simply not be able to help himself, although he must surely realize that Depape was no man to make sport of tonight.

“Cry your pardon,” Bert said, with an admirable lack of laughter in his voice.

“Cryerown,” Depape mumbled, and held out his blood-streaked hand. Roland had a nightmare vision of Bert squeezing down on it as hard as he could, making the redhead yowl like an owl on a hot stove, but Bert's grip was as restrained as his voice.

Avery sat on the edge of the stage with his pudgy legs hanging down, watching it all with avuncular good cheer. Even Deputy Dave was smiling.

“Now I propose to shake hands with yer all myself, 'n then send yer on yer ways, for the hour's late, so it is, and such as me needs my beauty rest.” He chuckled, and again looked uncomfortable when no one joined in. But he slipped off the stage and began to shake hands, doing so with the enthusiasm of a minister who has finally succeeded in marrying a headstrong couple after a long and stormy courtship.

9

When they stepped outside, the moon was down and the first lightening in the sky had begun to show at the far edge of the Clean Sea.

“Mayhap we'll meet again, sai,” Jonas said.

“Mayhap we will,” Roland said, and swung up into his saddle.

10

The Big Coffin Hunters were staying in the watchman's house about a mile south of Seafront—five miles out of town, this was.

Halfway there, Jonas stopped at a turnout beside the road. From here the land made a steep, rocky descent to the brightening sea.

“Get down, mister,” he said. It was Depape he was looking at.

“Jonas . . . Jonas, I . . .”

“Get down.”

Biting his lip nervously, Depape got down.

“Take off your spectacles.”

“Jonas, what's this about? I don't—”

“Or if you want em broke, leave em on. It's all the same to me.”

Biting his lip harder now, Depape took off his gold-rimmed spectacles. They were barely in his hand before Jonas had fetched him a terrific clip on the side of the head. Depape cried out and reeled toward the drop. Jonas drove forward, moving as fast as he had struck, and seized him by the shirt just before he went tumbling over the edge. Jonas twisted his hand into the shirt material and yanked Depape toward him. He breathed deep, inhaling the scent of pine-tar and Depape's sweat.

“I ought to toss you right over the edge,” he breathed. “Do you know how much harm you've done?”

“I . . . Jonas, I never meant . . . just a little fun is all I . . . how was we supposed to know they . . .”

Slowly, Jonas's hand relaxed. That last bit of babble had gone home. How was they supposed to know, that was ungrammatical but right. And if not for tonight, they might *not* have known. If you looked at it that way, Depape had actually done them a favor. The devil you

knew was always preferable to the devil you didn't. Still, word would get around, and people would laugh. Maybe even that was all right, though. The laughter would stop in due time.

"Jonas, I cry your pardon."

"Shut up," Jonas said. In the east, the sun would shortly heave itself over the horizon, casting its first gleams on a new day in this world of toil and sorrow. "I ain't going to toss you over, because then I'd have to toss Clay over and follow along myself. They got the drop on us the same as you, right?"

Depape wanted to agree, but thought it might be dangerous to do so. He was prudently silent.

"Get down here, Clay."

Clay slid off his mount.

"Now hunker."

The three of them hunkered on their bootsoles, heels up. Jonas plucked a shoot of grass and put it between his lips. "Affiliation brats is what we were told, and we had no reason not to believe it," he said. "The bad boys are sent all the way to Mejis, a sleepy Barony on the Clean Sea, on a make-work detail that's two parts penance and three parts punishment. Ain't that what we were told?"

They nodded.

"Either of you believe it after tonight?"

Depape shook his head. So did Clay.

"They may be rich boys, but that's not all they are," Depape said. "The way they were tonight . . . they were like . . ." He trailed off, not quite willing to finish the thought. It was too absurd.

Jonas was willing. "They acted like gunslingers."

Neither Jonas nor Reynolds replied at first. Then Clay Reynolds said, "They're too young, Eldred. Too young by *years*."

"Not too young to be 'prentices, mayhap. In any case, we're going to find out." He turned to Depape. "You've got some riding to do, cully."

"Aww, Jonas—!"

"None of us exactly covered ourselves with glory, but you were the fool that started the pot boiling." He looked at Depape, but Depape only looked down at the ground between them. "You're going to ride their backtrail, Roy, and you're going to ask questions until you've got the answers you think will satisfy my curiosity. Clay and I are mostly going to wait. And watch. Play Castles with em, if you like. When I feel like enough time's gone by for us to be able to do a little snooping without being trigged, mayhap we'll do it."

He bit on the piece of grass in his mouth. The larger piece tumbled out and lay between his boots.

"Do you know why I shook his hand? That boy Dearborn's damned hand? Because we can't rock the boat, boys. Not just when it's edging in toward harbor. Latigo and the folks we've been waiting for will be moving toward us very soon, now. Until they get into these parts, it's in our interest to keep the peace. But I tell you this: no one puts a knife to Eldred Jonas's back and lives. Now listen, Roy. Don't make me tell you any of this twice."

Jonas began to speak, leaning forward over his knees toward Depape as he did. After awhile, Depape began to nod. He might like a little trip, actually. After the recent comedy in the Travellers' Rest, a change of air might be just the ticket.

11

The boys were almost back to the Bar K and the sun was coming over the horizon before Cuthbert broke the silence. "Well! That was

an amusing and instructive evening, was it not?" Neither Roland nor Alain replied, so Cuthbert leaned over to the rook's skull, which he had returned to its former place on the horn of his saddle. "What say *you*, old friend? Did we enjoy our evening? Dinner, a circle-dance, and almost killed to top things off. Did you enjoy?"

The lookout only stared ahead of Cuthbert's horse with its great dark eyes.

"He says he's too tired for talk," Cuthbert said, then yawned. "So'm I, actually." He looked at Roland. "I got a good look into Mr. Jonas's eyes after he shook hands with you, Will. He means to kill you."

Roland nodded.

"They mean to kill all of us," Alain said.

Roland nodded again. "We'll make it hard for them, but they know more about us now than they did at dinner. We'll not get behind them that way again."

He stopped, just as Jonas had stopped not three miles from where they now were. Only instead of looking directly out over the Clean Sea, Roland and his friends were looking down the long slope of the Drop. A herd of horses was moving from west to east, barely more than shadows in this light.

"What do you see, Roland?" Alain asked, almost timidly.

"Trouble," Roland said, "and in our road." Then he gighed his horse and rode on. Before they got back to the Bar K bunkhouse, he was thinking about Susan again. Five minutes after he dropped his head on his flat burlap pillow, he was dreaming of her.

CHAPTER VII ON THE DROP

1

Three weeks had passed since the welcoming dinner at Mayor's House and the incident at the Travellers' Rest. There had been no more trouble between Roland's *ka-tet* and Jonas's. In the night sky, Kissing Moon had waned and Peddler's Moon had made its first thin appearance. The days were bright and warm; even the oldtimers admitted it was one of the most beautiful summers in memory.

On a mid-morning as beautiful as any that summer, Susan Delgado galloped a two-year-old *rosillo* named Pylon north along the Drop. The wind dried the tears on her cheeks and yanked her unbound hair out behind her as she went. She urged Pylon to go faster yet, lightly thumping his sides with her spurless boots. Pylon turned it up a notch at once, ears flattening, tail flagging. Susan, dressed in jeans and the faded, oversized khaki shirt (one of her da's) that had caused all the trouble, leaned over the light practice saddle, holding to the horn with one hand and rubbing the other down the side of the horse's strong, silky neck.

"More!" she whispered. "More and faster! Go on, boy!"

Pylon let it out yet another notch. That he had at least one more in him she knew; that he had even one more beyond that she suspected.

They sped along the Drop's highest ridge, and she barely saw the magnificent slope of land below her, all green and gold, or the way it faded into the blue haze of the Clean Sea. On any other day the view and the cool, salt-smelling breeze would have uplifted her.

Today she only wanted to hear the steady low thunder of Pylon's hoofs and feel the flex of his muscles beneath her; today she wanted to outrun her own thoughts.

And all because she had come downstairs this morning dressed for riding in one of her father's old shirts.

2

Aunt Cord had been at the stove, wrapped in her dressing gown and with her hair still netted. She dished herself up a bowl of oatmeal and brought it to the table. Susan had known things weren't good as soon as her aunt turned toward her, bowl in hand; she could see the discontented twitch of Aunt Cord's lips, and the disapproving glance she shot at the orange Susan was peeling. Her aunt was still rankled by the silver and gold she had expected to have in hand by now, coins which would be withheld yet awhile due to the witch's prankish decree that Susan should remain a virgin until autumn.

But that wasn't the main thing, and Susan knew it. Quite simply put, the two of them had had enough of each other. The money was only one of Aunt Cord's disappointed expectations; she had counted on having the house at the edge of the Drop to herself this summer . . . except, perhaps, for the occasional visit from Mr. Eldred Jonas, with whom Cordelia seemed quite taken. Instead, here they still were, one woman growing toward the end of her courses, thin, disapproving lips in a thin, disapproving face, tiny apple-breasts under her high-necked dresses with their choker collars (The Neck, she frequently told Susan, is the First Thing to Go), her hair losing its former chestnut shine and showing wire-threads of gray; the other young, intelligent, agile, and rounding toward the peak of her physical beauty. They grated against each other, each word seeming to produce a spark, and that was not surprising. The man who had loved them both enough to make them love each other was gone.

"Are ye going out on that horse?" Aunt Cord had said, putting her bowl down and sitting in a shaft of early sun. It was a bad location, one she never would have allowed herself to be caught in had Mr.

Jonas been in attendance. The strong light made her face look like a carved mask. There was a cold-sore growing at one corner of her mouth; she always got them when she was not sleeping well.

“Aye,” Susan said.

“Ye should eat more’n that, then. ’Twon’t keep ye til nine o’ the clock, girl.”

“It’ll keep me fine,” Susan had replied, eating the sections of orange faster. She could see where this was tending, could see the look of dislike and disapproval in her aunt’s eyes, and wanted to get away from the table before trouble could begin.

“Why not let me get ye a dish of this?” Aunt Cord asked, and plopped her spoon into her oatmeal. To Susan it sounded like a horse’s hoof stamping down in mud—or shit—and her stomach clenched. “It’ll hold ye to lunch, if ye plan to ride so long. I suppose a fine young lady such as yerself can’t be bothered with chores—”

“They’re done.” *And you know they’re done*, she did not add. *I did em while you were sitting before your glass, poking at that sore on your mouth.*

Aunt Cord dropped a chunk of creamery butter into her muck—Susan had no idea how the woman stayed so thin, really she didn’t—and watched it begin to melt. For a moment it seemed that breakfast might end on a reasonably civilized note, after all.

Then the shirt business had begun.

“Before ye go out, Susan, I want ye to take off that rag you’re wearing and put on one of the new riding blouses Thorin sent ye week before last. It’s the least ye can do to show yer—”

Anything her aunt might have said past that point would have been lost in anger even if Susan hadn’t interrupted. She passed a hand

down the sleeve of her shirt, loving its texture—it was almost velvety from so many washings. “This *rag* belonged to my father!”

“Aye, Pat’s.” Aunt Cord sniffed. “It’s too big for ye, and worn out, and not proper, in any case. When you were young it was mayhap all right to wear a man’s button-shirt, but now that ye have a woman’s bustline . . .”

The riding blouses were on hangers in the corner; they had come four days ago and Susan hadn’t even deigned to take them up to her room. There were three of them, one red, one green, one blue, all silk, all undoubtedly worth a small fortune. She loathed their pretension, and the overblown, blushy-frilly look of them: full sleeves to flutter artistically in the wind, great floppy foolish collars . . . and, of course, the low-scooped fronts which were probably all Thorin would see if she appeared before him dressed in one. As she wouldn’t, if she could possibly help it.

“My ‘woman’s bust-line,’ as you call it, is of no interest to me and can’t possibly be of any interest to anyone else when I’m out riding,” Susan said.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. If one of the Barony’s drovers should see you—even Rennie, he’s out that way all the time, as ye well know—it wouldn’t hurt for him to mention to Hart that he saw ye wearing one of the *camisas* that he so kindly gave to ye. Now would it? Why do ye have to be such a stiff-kins, girl? Why always so unwilling, so unfair?”

“What does it matter to ye, one way or t’other?” Susan had asked. “Ye have the money, don’t ye? And ye’ll have more yet. After he fucks me.”

Aunt Cord, her face white and shocked and furious, had leaned across the table and slapped her. “How dare thee use that word in my house, ye *malhablada*? How *dare* ye?”

That was when her tears began to flow—at hearing her call it her house. “It was my *father’s* house! His and mine! Ye were all on yer own with no real place to go, except perhaps to the Quarters, and he took ye in! *He took ye in, Aunt!*”

The last two orange sections were still in her hand. She threw them into her aunt’s face, then pushed herself back from the table so violently that her chair tottered, tipped, and spilled her to the floor. Her aunt’s shadow fell over her. Susan crawled frantically out of it, her hair hanging, her slapped cheek throbbing, her eyes burning with tears, her throat swelled and hot. At last she found her feet.

“Ye ungrateful girl,” her aunt said. Her voice was soft and so full of venom it was almost caressing. “After all I have done for thee, and all Hart Thorin has done for thee. Why, the very nag ye mean to ride this morning was Hart’s gift of respect to—”

“*PYLON WAS OURS!*” she shrieked, almost maddened with fury at this deliberate blurring of the truth. “*ALL OF THEM WERE! THE HORSES, THE LAND—THEY WERE OURS!*”

“Lower thy voice,” Aunt Cord said.

Susan took a deep breath and tried to find some control. She swept her hair back from her face, revealing the red print of Aunt Cord’s hand on her cheek. Cordelia flinched a little at the sight of it.

“My father never would have allowed this,” Susan said. “He never would have allowed me to go as Hart Thorin’s gilly. Whatever he might have felt about Hart as the Mayor . . . or as his *patrono* . . . he never would have allowed this. And ye know it. *Thee* knows it.”

Aunt Cord rolled her eyes, then twirled a finger around her ear as if Susan had gone mad. “Thee agreed to it yerself, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. Aye, so ye did. And if yer girlish megrims now cause ye to want to cry off what’s been done—”

“Aye,” Susan agreed. “I agreed to the bargain, so I did. After ye’d dunned me about it day and night, after ye’d come to me in tears—”

“I never did!” Cordelia cried, stung.

“Have ye forgotten so quick, Aunt? Aye, I suppose. As by tonight ye’ll have forgotten slapping me at breakfast. Well, *I* haven’t forgotten. Thee cried, all right, cried and told me ye feared we might be turned off the land, since we had no more legal right to it, that we’d be on the road, thee wept and said—”

“*Stop calling me that!*” Aunt Cord shouted. Nothing on earth maddened her so much as having her own thees and thous turned back at her. “Thee has no more right to the old tongue than thee has to thy stupid sheep’s complaints! Go on! Get out!”

But Susan went on. Her rage was at the flood and would not be turned aside.

“Thee wept and said we’d be turned out, turned west, that we’d never see my da’s homestead or Hambry again . . . and then, when I was frightened enough, ye talked of the cunning little baby I’d have. The land that was ours to begin with given back again. The horses that were ours likewise given back. As a sign of the Mayor’s honesty, I have a horse *I myself helped to foal*. And what have I done to deserve these things that would have been mine in any case, but for the loss of a single paper? What have I done so that he should give ye money? What have I done save promise to fuck him while his wife of forty year sleeps down the hall?”

“Is it the money ye want, then?” Aunt Cord asked, smiling furiously. “Do ye and do ye and aye? Ye shall have it, then. Take it, keep it, lose it, feed it to the swine, I care not!”

She turned to her purse, which hung on a post by the stove. She began to fumble in it, but her motions quickly lost speed and conviction. There was an oval of mirror mounted to the left of the kitchen doorway, and in it Susan caught sight of her aunt’s face.

What she saw there—a mixture of hatred, dismay, and greed—made her heart sink.

“Never mind, Aunt. I see thee’s loath to give it up, and I wouldn’t have it, anyway. It’s whore’s money.”

Aunt Cord turned back to her, face shocked, her purse conveniently forgotten. “ ’Tis not whoring, ye stupid get! Why, some of the greatest women in history have been gillys, and some of the greatest men have been born *of* gillys. *’Tis not whoring!*”

Susan ripped the red silk blouse from where it hung and held it up. The shirt moulded itself to her breasts as if it had been longing all the while to touch them. “Then why does he send me these whore’s clothes?”

“Susan!” Tears stood in Aunt Cord’s eyes.

Susan flung the shirt at her as she had the orange slices. It landed on her shoes. “Pick it up and put it on yerself, if ye fancy. *You* spread yer legs for him, if ye fancy.”

She turned and hurled herself out the door. Her aunt’s half-hysterical shriek had followed her: “Don’t thee go off thinking foolish thoughts, Susan! Foolish thoughts lead to foolish deeds, and it’s too late for either! Thee’s agreed!”

She knew that. And however fast she rode Pylon along the Drop, she could not outrace her knowing. She had agreed, and no matter how horrified Pat Delgado might have been at the fix she had gotten herself into, he would have seen one thing clear—she had made a promise, and promises must be kept. Hell awaited those who would not do so.

3

She eased the *rosillo* back while he still had plenty of wind. She looked behind her, saw that she had come nearly a mile, and

brought him down further—to a canter, a trot, a fast walk. She took a deep breath and let it out. For the first time that morning she registered the day's bright beauty—gulls circling in the hazy air off to the west, high grasses all around her, and flowers in every shaded cranny: cornflowers and lupin and phlox and her favorites, the delicate blue silkflowers. From everywhere came the somnolent buzz of bees. The sound soothed her, and with the high surge of her emotions subsiding a little, she was able to admit something to herself . . . admit it, and then voice it aloud.

“Will Dearborn,” she said, and shivered at the sound of his name on her lips, even though there was no one to hear it but Pylon and the bees. So she said it again, and when the words were out she abruptly turned her own wrist inward to her mouth and kissed it where the blood beat close to the surface. The action shocked her because she hadn't known she was going to do it, and shocked her more because the taste of her own skin and sweat aroused her immediately. She felt an urge to cool herself off as she had in her bed after meeting him. The way she felt, it would be short work.

Instead, she growled her father's favorite cuss—“Oh, bite it!”—and spat past her boot. Will Dearborn had been responsible for all too much upset in her life these last three weeks; Will Dearborn with his unsettling blue eyes, his dark tumble of hair, and his stiff-necked, judgmental attitude. *I can be discreet, madam. As for propriety? I'm amazed you even know the word.*

Every time she thought of that, her blood sang with anger and shame. Mostly anger. How dare he presume to make judgments? He who had grown up possessing every luxury, no doubt with servants to tend his every whim and so much gold that he likely didn't even need it—he would be given the things he wanted free, as a way of currying favor. What would a boy like that—for that was all he was, really, just a boy—know about the hard choices she had made? For that matter, how could such as Mr. Will Dearborn of Hemphill understand that she hadn't really made those choices at all? That

she had been carried to them the way a mother cat carries a wayward kitten back to the nesting-box, by the scruff of the neck?

Still, he wouldn't leave her mind; she knew, even if Aunt Cord didn't, that there had been an unseen third present at their quarrel this morning.

She knew something else as well, something that would have upset her aunt to no end.

Will Dearborn hadn't forgotten her, either.

4

About a week after the welcoming dinner and Dearborn's disastrous, hurtful remark to her, the retarded slops-fella from the Travellers' Rest—Sheemie, folks called him—had appeared at the house Susan and her aunt shared. In his hands he held a large bouquet, mostly made up of the wildflowers that grew out on the Drop, but with a scattering of dusky wild roses, as well. They looked like pink punctuation marks. On the boy's face there had been a wide, sunny grin as he swung the gate open, not waiting for an invitation.

Susan had been sweeping the front walk at the time; Aunt Cord had been out back, in the garden. That was fortunate, but not very surprising; these days the two of them got on best when they kept apart as much as they could.

Susan had watched Sheemie come up the walk, his grin beaming out from behind his upheld freight of flowers, with a mixture of fascination and horror.

"G'day, Susan Delgado, daughter of Pat," Sheemie said cheerfully. "I come to you on an errand and cry yer pardon at any troubleation I be, oh aye, for I am a problem for folks, and know it same as them. These be for you. Here."

He thrust them out, and she saw a small, folded envelope tucked amongst them.

“Susan?” Aunt Cord’s voice, from around the side of the house . . . and getting closer. “Susan, did I hear the gate?”

“Yes, Aunt!” she called back. Curse the woman’s sharp ears! Susan nimbly plucked the envelope from its place among the phlox and daisies. Into her dress pocket it went.

“They from my third-best friend,” Sheemie said. “I got three different friends now. This many.” He held up two fingers, frowned, added two more, and then grinned splendidly. “Arthur Heath my first-best friend, Dick Stockworth my second-best friend. My third-best friend—”

“Hush!” Susan said in a low, fierce voice that made Sheemie’s smile fade. “Not a word about your three friends.”

A funny little flush, almost like a pocket fever, raced across her skin—it seemed to run down her neck from her cheeks, then slip all the way to her feet. There had been a lot of talk in Hambry about Sheemie’s new friends during the past week—talk about little else, it seemed. The stories she had heard were outlandish, but if they weren’t true, why did the versions told by so many different witnesses sound so much alike?

Susan was still trying to get herself back under control when Aunt Cord swept around the corner. Sheemie fell back a step at the sight of her, puzzlement becoming outright dismay. Her aunt was allergic to beestings, and was presently swaddled from the top of her straw *'brera* to the hem of her faded garden dress in gauzy stuff that made her look peculiar in strong light and downright eerie in shade. Adding a final touch to her costume, she carried a pair of dirt-streaked garden shears in one gloved hand.

She saw the bouquet and bore down on it, shears raised. When she reached her niece, she slid the scissors into a loop on her belt

(almost reluctantly, it seemed to the niece herself) and parted the veil on her face. “Who sent ye those?”

“I don’t know, Aunt,” Susan said, much more calmly than she felt. “This is the young man from the inn—”

“Inn!” Aunt Cord snorted.

“He doesn’t seem to know who sent him,” Susan carried on. If only she could get him out of here! “He’s, well, I suppose you’d say he’s —”

“He’s a fool, yes, I know that.” Aunt Cord cast Susan a brief, irritated look, then bent her attention on Sheemie. Talking with her gloved hands upon her knees, shouting directly into his face, she asked: *“WHO . . . SENT . . . THESE . . . FLOWERS . . . YOUNG . . . MAN?”*

The wings of her face-veil, which had been pushed aside, now fell back into place. Sheemie took another step backward. He looked frightened.

“WAS IT . . . PERHAPS . . . SOMEONE FROM . . . SEAFRONT? . . . FROM . . . MAYOR . . . THORIN? . . . TELL . . . ME . . . AND . . . I’LL . . . GIVE . . . YOU . . . A PENNY.”

Susan’s heart sank, sure he would tell—he’d not have the wit to understand he’d be getting her into trouble. Will, too, likely.

But Sheemie only shook his head. “Don’t ’member. I got a empty head, sai, so I do. Stanley says I a bugwit.”

His grin shone out again, a splendid thing full of white, even teeth. Aunt Cord answered it with a grimace. “Oh, foo! Be gone, then. Straight back to town, too—don’t be hanging around hoping for a goose-feather. For a boy who can’t remember deserves not so much as a penny! And don’t you come back here again, no matter who wants you to carry flowers for the young sai. Do you hear me?”

Sheemie had nodded energetically. Then: “Sai?”

Aunt Cord glowered at him. The vertical line on her forehead had been very prominent that day.

“Why you all wropped up in cobwebbies, sai?”

“Get out of here, ye impudent cull!” Aunt Cord cried. She had a good loud voice when she wanted to use it, and Sheemie jumped back from her in alarm. When she was sure he was headed back down the High Street toward town and had no intention of returning to their gate and hanging about in hopes of a tip, Aunt Cord had turned to Susan.

“Get those in some water before they wilt, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, and don’t go mooning about, wondering who yer secret admirer might be.”

Then Aunt Cord had smiled. A *real* smile. What hurt Susan the most, confused her the most, was that her aunt was no cradle-story ogre, no witch like Rhea of the Cöös. There was no monster here, only a maiden lady with some few social pretensions, a love of gold and silver, and a fear of being turned out, penniless, into the world.

“For folks such as us, Susie-pie,” she said, speaking with a terrible heavy kindness, “ ’tis best to stick to our housework and leave dreams to them as can afford them.”

5

She had been sure the flowers were from Will, and she was right. His note was written in a hand which was clear and passing fair.

Dear Susan Delgado,

I spoke out of turn the other night, and cry your pardon. May I see you and speak to you? It must be private. *This is a matter of*

importance. If you will see me, get a message to the boy who brings this. He is safe.

Will Dearborn

A matter of importance. Underlined. She felt a strong desire to know what was so important to him, and cautioned herself against doing anything foolish. Perhaps he was smitten with her . . . and if so, whose fault was that? Who had talked to him, ridden his horse, showed him her legs in a flashy carnival dismount? Who had put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him?

Her cheeks and forehead burned at the thought of that, and another hot ring seemed to go slipping down her body. She wasn't sure she regretted the kiss, but it had been a mistake, regrets or no regrets. Seeing him again now would be a worse one.

Yet she wanted to see him, and knew in her deepest heart that she was ready to set her anger at him aside. But there was the promise she had made.

The wretched promise.

That night she lay sleepless, tossing about in her bed, first thinking it would be better, more dignified, just to keep her silence, then composing mental notes anyway—some haughty, some cold, some with a lace-edge of flirtation.

When she heard the midnight bell ring, passing the old day out and calling the new one in, she decided enough was enough. She'd thrown herself from her bed, gone to her door, opened it, and thrust her head out into the hall. When she heard Aunt Cord's flutelike snores, she had closed her door again, crossed to her little desk by the window, and lit her lamp. She took one of her sheets of parchment paper from the top drawer, tore it in half (in Hambry, the only crime greater than wasting paper was wasting threaded stockline), and then wrote quickly, sensing that the slightest

hesitation might condemn her to more hours of indecision. With no salutation and no signature, her response took only a breath to write:

I may not see you. 'Twould not be proper.

She had folded it small, blew out her lamp, and returned to bed with the note safely tucked under her pillow. She was asleep in two minutes. The following day, when the marketing took her to town, she had gone by the Travellers' Rest, which, at eleven in the morning, had all the charm of something which has died badly at the side of the road.

The saloon's dooryard was a beaten dirt square bisected by a long hitching rail with a watering trough beneath. Sheemie was trundling a wheelbarrow along the rail, picking up last night's horse-droppings with a shovel. He was wearing a comical pink *sombrero* and singing "Golden Slippers." Susan doubted if many of the Rest's patrons would wake up feeling as well as Sheemie obviously did this morning . . . so who, when you came right down to it, was more soft-headed?

She looked around to make sure no one was paying heed to her, then went over to Sheemie and tapped him on the shoulder. He looked frightened at first, and Susan didn't blame him—according to the stories she'd been hearing, Jonas's friend Depape had almost killed the poor kid for spilling a drink on his boots.

Then Sheemie recognized her. "Hello, Susan Delgado from out there by the edge of town," he said companionably. "It's a good day I wish you, sai."

He bowed—an amusing imitation of the Inner Baronies bow favored by his three new friends. Smiling, she dropped him a bit of curtsy (wearing jeans, she had to pretend at the skirt-holding part, but women in Mejis got used to curtseying in pretend skirts).

"See my flowers, sai?" he asked, and pointed toward the unpainted side of the Rest. What she saw touched her deeply: a line

of mixed blue and white silkflowers growing along the base of the building. They looked both brave and pathetic, flurrying there in the faint morning breeze with the bald, turd-littered yard before them and the splintery public house behind them.

“Did you grow those, Sheemie?”

“Aye, so I did. And Mr. Arthur Heath of Gilead has promised me yellow ones.”

“I’ve never seen yellow silkflowers.”

“Noey-no, me neither, but Mr. Arthur Heath says they have them in Gilead.” He looked at Susan solemnly, the shovel held in his hands as a soldier would hold a gun or spear at port arms. “Mr. Arthur Heath saved my life. I’d do anything for him.”

“Would you, Sheemie?” she asked, touched.

“Also, he has a lookout! It’s a bird’s head! And when he talks to it, tendy-pretend, do I laugh? Aye, fit to split!”

She looked around again to make sure no one was watching (save for the carved totems across the street), then removed her note, folded small, from her jeans pocket.

“Would you give this to Mr. Dearborn for me? He’s also your friend, is he not?”

“Will? Aye!” He took the note and put it carefully into his own pocket.

“And tell no one.”

“Shhhhh!” he agreed, and put a finger to his lips. His eyes had been amusingly round beneath the ridiculous pink lady’s straw he wore. “Like when I brought you the flowers. Hushaboo!”

“That’s right, hushaboo. Fare ye well, Sheemie.”

“And you, Susan Delgado.”

He went back to his cleanup operations. Susan had stood watching him for a moment, feeling uneasy and out of sorts with herself. Now that the note was successfully passed, she felt an urge to ask Sheemie to give it back, to scratch out what she had written, and promise to meet him. If only to see his steady blue eyes again, looking into her face.

Then Jonas’s other friend, the one with the cloak, came sauntering out of the mercantile. She was sure he didn’t see her—his head was down and he was rolling a cigarette—but she had no intention of pressing her luck. Reynolds talked to Jonas, and Jonas talked—all too much!—to Aunt Cord. If Aunt Cord heard she had been passing the time of day with the boy who had brought her the flowers, there were apt to be questions. Ones she didn’t want to answer.

6

All that’s history now, Susan—water under the bridge. Best to get your thoughts out of the past.

She brought Pylon to a stop and looked down the length of the Drop at the horses that moved and grazed there. Quite a surprising number of them this morning.

It wasn’t working. Her mind kept turning back to Will Dearborn.

What bad luck meeting him had been! If not for that chance encounter on her way back down from the Cöos, she might well have made peace with her situation by now—she was a practical girl, after all, and a promise was a promise. She certainly never would have expected herself to get all goosy-gushy over losing her maidenhead, and the prospect of carrying and bearing a child actually excited her.

But Will Dearborn had changed things; had gotten into her head and now lodged there, a tenant who defied eviction. His remark to

her as they danced stayed with her like a song you can't stop humming, even though you hate it. It had been cruel and stupidly self-righteous, that remark . . . but was there not also a grain of truth in it? Rhea had been right about Hart Thorin, of that much Susan no longer had any doubt. She supposed that witches were right about men's lusts even when they were wrong about everything else. Not a happy thought, but likely a true one.

It was Will Be Damned to You Dearborn who had made it difficult for her to accept what needed accepting, who had goaded her into arguments in which she could hardly recognize her own shrill and desperate voice, who came to her in her dreams—dreams where he put his arms around her waist and kissed her, kissed her, kissed her.

She dismounted and walked downhill a little way with the reins looped in her fist. Pylon followed willingly enough, and when she stopped to look off into the blue haze to the southwest, he lowered his head and began to crop again.

She thought she needed to see Will Dearborn once more, if only to give her innate practicality a chance to reassert itself. She needed to see him at his right size, instead of the one her mind had created for him in her warm thoughts and warmer dreams. Once that was done, she could get on with her life and do what needed doing. Perhaps that was why she had taken this path—the same one she'd ridden yesterday, and the day before yesterday, and the day before that. He rode this part of the Drop; that much she had heard in the lower market.

She turned away from the Drop, suddenly knowing he would be there, as if her thought had called him—or her *ka*.

She saw only blue sky and low ridgeline hills that curved gently like the line of a woman's thigh and hip and waist as she lies on her side in bed. Susan felt a bitter disappointment fill her. She could almost taste it in her mouth, like wet tea leaves.

She started back to Pylon, meaning to return to the house and take care of the apology she reckoned she must make. The sooner she did it, the sooner it would be done. She reached for her left stirrup, which was twisted a little, and as she did, a rider came over the horizon, breaking against the sky at the place which looked to her like a woman's hip. He sat there, only a silhouette on horseback, but she knew who it was at once.

Run! she told herself in a sudden panic. *Mount and gallop! Get out of here! Quickly! Before something terrible happens . . . before it really is ka, come like a wind to take you and all your plans over the sky and far away!*

She didn't run. She stood with Pylon's reins in one hand, and murmured to him when the *rosillo* looked up and nickered a greeting to the big bay-colored gelding coming down the hill.

Then Will was there, first above her and looking down, then dismounted in an easy, liquid motion she didn't think she could have matched, for all her years of horsemanship. This time there was no kicked-out leg and planted heel, no hat swept over a comically solemn bow; this time the gaze he gave her was steady and serious and disquietingly adult.

They looked at each other in the Drop's big silence, Roland of Gilead and Susan of Mejis, and in her heart she felt a wind begin to blow. She feared it and welcomed it in equal measure.

7

"Goodmorn, Susan," he said. "I'm glad to see you again."

She said nothing, waiting and watching. Could he hear her heart beating as clearly as she could? Of course not; that was so much romantic twaddle. Yet it still seemed to her that everything within a fifty-yard radius should be able to hear that thumping.

Will took a step forward. She took a step back, looking at him mistrustfully. He lowered his head for a moment, then looked up again, his lips set.

“I cry your pardon,” he said.

“Do you?” Her voice was cool.

“What I said that night was unwarranted.”

At that she felt a spark of real anger. “I care not that it was unwarranted; I care that it was unfair. That it hurt me.”

A tear overbrimmed her left eye and slipped down her cheek. She wasn’t all cried out after all, it seemed.

She thought what she said would perhaps shame him, but although faint color came into his cheeks, his eyes remained firmly on hers.

“I fell in love with you,” he said. “That’s why I said it. It happened even before you kissed me, I think.”

She laughed at that . . . but the simplicity with which he had spoken made her laughter sound false in her own ears. Tinny. “Mr. Dearborn—”

“Will. Please.”

“Mr. Dearborn,” she said, patiently as a teacher working with a dull student, “the idea is ridiculous. On the basis of one single meeting? One single kiss? A *sister’s* kiss?” Now she was the one who was blushing, but she hurried on. “Such things happen in stories, but in real life? I think not.”

But his eyes never left hers, and in them she saw some of Roland’s truth: the deep romance of his nature, buried like a fabulous streak of alien metal in the granite of his practicality. He

accepted love as a fact rather than a flower, and it rendered her genial contempt powerless over both of them.

“I cry your pardon,” he repeated. There was a kind of brute stubbornness in him. It exasperated her, amused her, and appalled her, all at the same time. “I don’t ask you to return my love, that’s not why I spoke. You told me your affairs were complicated . . .” Now his eyes did leave hers, and he looked off toward the Drop. He even laughed a little. “I called him a bit of a fool, didn’t I? To your face. So who’s the fool, after all?”

She smiled; couldn’t help it. “Ye also said ye’d heard he was fond of strong drink and berry-girls.”

Roland hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. If his friend Arthur Heath had done that, she would have taken it as a deliberate, comic gesture. Not with Will. She had an idea he wasn’t much for comedy.

Silence between them again, this time not so uncomfortable. The two horses, Rusher and Pylon, cropping contentedly, side by side. *If we were horses, all this would be much easier*, she thought, and almost giggled.

“Mr. Dearborn, ye understand that I have agreed to an arrangement?”

“Aye.” He smiled when she raised her eyebrows in surprise. “It’s not mockery but the dialect. It just . . . seeps in.”

“Who told ye of my business?”

“The Mayor’s sister.”

“Coral.” She wrinkled her nose and decided she wasn’t surprised. And she supposed there were others who could have explained her situation even more crudely. Eldred Jonas, for one. Rhea of the Cöos, for another. Best to leave it. “So if ye understand, and if ye

don't ask me to return your . . . whatever it is ye think ye feel . . . why are we talking? Why do ye seek me out? I think it makes ye passing uncomfortable—”

“Yes,” he said, and then, as if stating a simple fact: “It makes me uncomfortable, all right. I can barely look at you and keep my head.”

“Then mayhap it'd be best not to look, not to speak, not to think!” Her voice was both sharp and a little shaky. How could he have the courage to say such things, to just state them straight out and starey-eyed like that? “Why did ye send me the bouquet and that note? Are ye not aware of the trouble ye could've gotten me into? If y'knew my aunt . . . ! She's already spoken to me about ye, and if she knew about the note . . . or saw us together out here . . .”

She looked around, verifying that they were still unobserved. They were, at least as best she could tell. He reached out, touched her shoulder. She looked at him, and he pulled his fingers back as if he had put them on something hot.

“I said what I did so you'd understand,” he said. “That's all. I feel how I feel, and you're not responsible for that.”

But I am, she thought. I kissed you. I think I'm more than a little responsible for how we both feel, Will.

“What I said while we were dancing I regret with all my heart. Won't you give me your pardon?”

“Aye,” she said, and if he had taken her in his arms at that moment, she would have let him, and damn the consequences. But he only took off his hat and made her a charming little bow, and the wind died.

“Thankee-sai.”

“Don't call me that. I hate it. My name is Susan.”

“Will you call me Will?”

She nodded.

“Good. Susan, I want to ask you something—not as the fellow who insulted you and hurt you because he was jealous. This is something else entirely. May I?”

“Aye, I suppose,” she said warily.

“Are you for the Affiliation?”

She looked at him, flabbergasted. It was the last question in the world she had expected . . . but he was looking at her seriously.

“I’d expected ye and yer friends to count cows and guns and spears and boats and who knows what else,” she said, “but I didn’t think thee would also count Affiliation supporters.”

She saw his look of surprise, and a little smile at the corners of his mouth. This time the smile made him look older than he could possibly be. Susan thought back across what she’d just said, realized what must have struck him, and gave a small, embarrassed laugh. “My aunt has a way of lapsing into thee and thou. My father did, too. It’s from a sect of the Old People who called themselves Friends.”

“I know. We have the Friendly Folk in my part of the world still.”

“Do you?”

“Yes . . . or aye, if you like the sound of that better; I’m coming to. And I like the way the Friends talk. It has a lovely sound.”

“Not when my aunt uses it,” Susan said, thinking back to the argument over the shirt. “To answer your question, aye—I’m for the Affiliation, I suppose. Because my da was. If ye ask am I *strong* for the Affiliation, I suppose not. We see and hear little enough of them,

these days. Mostly rumors and stories carried by drifters and far-travelling drummers. Now that there's no railway . . ." She shrugged.

"Most of the ordinary day-to-day folk I've spoken to seem to feel the same. And yet your Mayor Thorin—"

"He's not *my* Mayor Thorin," she said, more sharply than she had intended.

"And yet the *Barony's* Mayor Thorin has given us every help we've asked for, and some we haven't. I have only to snap my fingers, and Kimba Rimer stands before me."

"Then don't snap them," she said, looking around in spite of herself. She tried to smile and show it was a joke, but didn't make much success of it.

"The townsfolk, the fisherfolk, the farmers, the cowboys . . . they all speak well of the Affiliation, but distantly. Yet the Mayor, his Chancellor, and the members of the Horsemen's Association, Lengyll and Garber and that lot—"

"I know them," she said shortly.

"They're absolutely enthusiastic in their support. Mention the Affiliation to Sheriff Avery and he all but dances. In every ranch parlor we're offered a drink from an Eld commemorative cup, it seems."

"A drink of what?" she asked, a trifle roguishly. "Beer? Ale? *Graf*?"

"Also wine, whiskey, and pettibone," he said, not responding to her smile. "It's almost as if they wish us to break our vow. Does that strike you as strange?"

"Aye, a little; or just as Hambry hospitality. In these parts, when someone—especially a young man—says he's taken the pledge, folks tend to think him coy, not serious."

“And this joyful support of the Affiliation amongst the movers and the shakers? How does *that* strike you?”

“Queer.”

And it did. Pat Delgado’s work had brought him in almost daily contact with these landowners and horsebreeders, and so she, who had tagged after her da any time he would let her, had seen plenty of them. She thought them a cold bunch, by and large. She couldn’t imagine John Croydon or Jake White waving an Arthur Eld stein in a sentimental toast . . . especially not in the middle of the day, when there was stock to be run and sold.

Will’s eyes were full upon her, as if he were reading these thoughts.

“But you probably don’t see as much of the big fellas as you once did,” he said. “Before your father passed, I mean.”

“Perhaps not . . . but do bumlbers learn to speak backward?”

No cautious smile this time; this time he outright grinned. It lit his whole face. Gods, how handsome he was! “I suppose not. No more than cats change their spots, as we say. And Mayor Thorin doesn’t speak of such as us—me and my friends—to you when you two are alone? Or is that question beyond what I have a right to ask? I suppose it is.”

“I care not about that,” she said, tossing her head pertly enough to make her long braid swing. “I understand little of propriety, as some have been good enough to point out.” But she didn’t care as much for his downcast look and flush of embarrassment as she had expected. She knew girls who liked to tease as well as flirt—and to tease hard, some of them—but it seemed she had no taste for it. Certainly she had no desire to set her claws in him, and when she went on, she spoke gently. “I’m not alone with him, in any case.”

And oh how ye do lie, she thought mournfully, remembering how Thorin had embraced her in the hall on the night of the party, groping at her breasts like a child trying to get his hand into a candy-jar; telling her that he burned for her. *Oh ye great liar*.

“In any case, Will, Hart’s opinion of you and yer friends can hardly concern ye, can it? Ye have a job to do, that’s all. If he helps ye, why not just accept and be grateful?”

“Because something’s wrong here,” he said, and the serious, almost somber quality of his voice frightened her a little.

“Wrong? With the Mayor? With the Horsemen’s Association? What are ye talking about?”

He looked at her steadily, then seemed to decide something. “I’m going to trust you, Susan.”

“I’m not sure I want thy trust any more than I want thy love,” she said.

He nodded. “And yet, to do the job I was sent to do, I have to trust *someone*. Can you understand that?”

She looked into his eyes, then nodded.

He stepped next to her, so close she fancied she could feel the warmth of his skin. “Look down there. Tell me what you see.”

She looked, then shrugged. “The Drop. Same as always.” She smiled a little. “And as beautiful. This has always been my favorite place in all the world.”

“Aye, it’s beautiful, all right. What else do you see?”

“Horses, of courses.” She smiled to show this was a joke (an old one of her da’s, in fact), but he didn’t smile back. Fair to look at, and courageous, if the stories they were already telling about town were true—quick in both thought and movement, too. Really not much

sense of humor, though. Well, there were worse failings. Grabbing a girl's bosom when she wasn't expecting it might be one of them.

"Horses. Yes. But does it look like the right *number* of them? You've been seeing horses on the Drop all your life, and surely no one who's not in the Horsemen's Association is better qualified to say."

"And ye don't trust them?"

"They've given us everything we've asked for, and they're as friendly as dogs under the dinner-table, but no—I don't think I do."

"Yet ye'd trust me."

He looked at her steadily with his beautiful and frightening eyes—a darker blue than they would later be, not yet faded out by the suns of ten thousand drifting days. "I have to trust someone," he repeated.

She looked down, almost as though he had rebuked her. He reached out, put gentle fingers beneath her chin, and tipped her face up again. "Does it seem the right number? Think carefully!"

But now that he'd brought it to her attention, she hardly needed to think about it at all. She had been aware of the change for some time, she supposed, but it had been gradual, easy to overlook.

"No," she said at last. "It's not right."

"Too few or too many? Which?"

She paused for a moment. Drew in breath. Let it out in a long sigh. "Too many. Far too many."

Will Dearborn raised his clenched fists to shoulder-height and gave them a single hard shake. His blue eyes blazed like the spark-lights of which her grand-da had told her. "I knew it," he said. "I *knew* it."

“How many horses are down there?” he asked.

“Below us? Or on the whole Drop?”

“Just below us.”

She looked carefully, making no attempt to actually count. That didn't work; it only confused you. She saw four good-sized groups of about twenty horses each, moving about on the green almost exactly as birds moved about in the blue above them. There were perhaps nine smaller groups, ranging from octets to quartets . . . several pairs (they reminded her of lovers, but everything did today, it seemed) . . . a few galloping loners—young stallions, mostly . . .

“A hundred and sixty?” he asked in a low, almost hesitant voice.

She looked at him, surprised. “Aye. A hundred sixty's the number I had in mind. To a pin.”

“And how much of the Drop are we looking at? A quarter? A third?”

“Much less.” She tilted him a small smile. “As I think thee knows. A sixth of the total open graze, perhaps.”

“If there are a hundred and sixty horses free-grazing on each sixth, that comes to . . .”

She waited for him to come up with nine hundred and sixty. When he did, she nodded. He looked down a moment longer, and grunted with surprise when Rusher nosed him in the small of the back. Susan put a curled hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh. From the impatient way he pushed the horse's muzzle away, she guessed he still saw little that was funny.

“How many more are stabled or training or working, do you reckon?” he asked.

“One for every three down there. At a guess.”

“So we’d be talking twelve hundred head of horses. All threaded stock, no muties.”

She looked at him with faint surprise. “Aye. There’s almost no mutie stock here in Mejis . . . in *any* of the Outer Baronies, for that matter.”

“You true-breed more than three out of every five?”

“We breed em *all*! Of course every now and then we get a freak that has to be put down, but—”

“Not one freak out of every five livebirths? One out of five born with—” How had Renfrew put it? “With extra legs or its guts on the outside?”

Her shocked look was enough answer. “Who’s been telling ye such?”

“Renfrew. He also told me that there was about five hundred and seventy head of threaded stock here in Mejis.”

“That’s just . . .” She gave a bewildered little laugh. “Just crazy! If my da was here—”

“But he’s not,” Roland said, his tone as dry as a snapping twig. “He’s dead.”

For a moment she seemed not to register the change in that tone. Then, as if an eclipse had begun to happen somewhere inside her head, her entire aspect darkened. “My da had an accident. Do you understand that, Will Dearborn? An *accident*. It was terribly sad, but the sort of thing that happens, sometimes. A horse rolled on him. Ocean Foam. Fran says Foam saw a snake in the grass.”

“Fran Lengyll?”

“Aye.” Her skin was pale, except for two wild roses—pink, like those in the bouquet he’d sent her by way of Sheemie—glowing high up on her cheekbones. “Fran rode many miles with my father. They weren’t great friends—they were of different classes, for one thing—but they rode together. I’ve a cap put away somewhere that Fran’s first wife made for my christening. They rode the trail together. I can’t believe Fran Lengyll would lie about how my da died, let alone that he had . . . anything to do with it.”

Yet she looked doubtfully down at the running horses. So many. Too many. Her da would have seen. And her da would have wondered what she was wondering now: whose brands were on the extras?

“It so happens Fran Lengyll and my friend Stockworth had a discussion about horses,” Will said. His voice sounded almost casual, but there was nothing casual on his face. “Over glasses of spring water, after beer had been offered and refused. They spoke of them much as I did with Renfrew at Mayor Thorin’s welcoming dinner. When Richard asked sai Lengyll to estimate riding horses, he said perhaps four hundred.”

“Insane.”

“It would seem so,” Will agreed.

“Do they not kennit the horses are out here where ye can see em?”

“They know we’ve barely gotten started,” he said, “and that we’ve begun with the fisherfolk. We’ll be a month yet, I’m sure they think, before we start to concern ourselves with the horseflesh hereabouts. And in the meantime, they have an attitude about us of . . . how shall I put it? Well, never mind how I’d put it. I’m not very good with words, but my friend Arthur calls it ‘genial contempt.’ They leave the horses out in front of our eyes, I think, because they don’t believe we’ll know

what we're looking at. Or because they think we won't believe what we're seeing. I'm very glad I found you out here."

Just so I could give you a more accurate horse-count? Is that the only reason?

"But ye *will* get around to counting the horses. Eventually. I mean, that must surely be one of the Affiliation's main needs."

He gave her an odd look, as if she had missed something that should have been obvious. It made her feel self-conscious.

"What? What is it?"

"Perhaps they expect the extra horses to be gone by the time we get around to this side of the Barony's business."

"Gone *where*?"

"I don't know. But I don't like this. Susan, you will keep this just between the two of us, won't you?"

She nodded. *She'd* be insane to tell anyone she had been with Will Dearborn, unchaperoned except by Rusher and Pylon, out on the Drop.

"It may all turn out to be nothing, but if it doesn't, knowing could be dangerous."

Which led back to her da again. Lengyll had told her and Aunt Cord that Pat had been thrown, and that Ocean Foam had then rolled upon him. Neither of them had had any reason to doubt the man's story. But Fran Lengyll had also told Will's friend that there were only four hundred head of riding stock in Mejis, and that was a bald lie.

Will turned to his horse, and she was glad.

Part of her wanted him to stay—to stand close to her while the clouds sent their long shadows flying across the grassland—but they had been together out here too long already. There was no reason to think anyone would come along and see them, but instead of comforting her, that idea for some reason made her more nervous than ever.

He straightened the stirrup hanging beside the scabbarded shaft of his lance (Rusher whickered way back in his throat, as if to say *About time we got going*), then turned to her again. She felt actually faint as his gaze fell upon her, and now the idea of *ka* was almost too strong to deny. She tried to tell herself it was just the dim—that feeling of having lived a thing before—but it wasn't the dim; it was a sense of finding a road one had been searching for all along.

“There's something else I want to say. I don't like returning to where we started, but I must.”

“No,” she said faintly. “That's closed, surely.”

“I told you that I loved you, and that I was jealous,” he said, and for the first time his voice had come unanchored a little, wavering in his throat. She was alarmed to see that there were tears standing in his eyes. “There was more. Something more.”

“Will, I don't want to—” She turned blindly for her horse. He took her shoulder and turned her back. It wasn't a harsh touch, but there was an inexorability to it that was dreadful. She looked helplessly up into his face, saw that he was young and far from home, and suddenly understood she could not stand against him for long. She wanted him so badly that she ached with it. She would have given a year of her life just to be able to put her palms on his cheeks and feel his skin.

“You miss your father, Susan?”

“Aye,” she whispered. “With all my heart I do.”

“I miss my mother the same way.” He held her by both shoulders now. One eye overbrimmed; one tear drew a silver line down his cheek.

“Is she dead?”

“No, but something happened. About her. To her. *Shit!* How can I talk about it when I don’t even know how to *think* about it? In a way, she *did* die. For me.”

“Will, that’s terrible.”

He nodded. “The last time I saw her, she looked at me in a way that will haunt me to my grave. Shame and love and hope, all of them bound up together. Shame at what I’d seen and knew about her, hope, maybe, that I’d understand and forgive . . .” He took a deep breath. “The night of the party, toward the end of the meal, Rimer said something funny. You all laughed—”

“If I did, it was only because it would have looked strange if I was the only one who didn’t,” Susan said. “I don’t like him. I think he’s a schemer and a conniver.”

“You all laughed, and I happened to look down toward the end of the table. Toward Olive Thorin. And for a moment—only a moment—I thought she was my mother. The expression was the same, you see. The same one I saw on the morning when I opened the wrong door at the wrong time and came upon my mother and her—”

“Stop it!” she cried, pulling back from his hands. Inside her, everything was suddenly in motion, all the mooring-lines and buckles and clamps she’d been using to hold herself together seeming to melt at once. “Stop it, just stop it, I can’t listen to you talk about her!”

She groped out for Pylon, but now the whole world was wet prisms. She began to sob. She felt his hands on her shoulders, turning her again, and she did not resist them.

“I’m so ashamed,” she said. “I’m so ashamed and so frightened and I’m sorry. I’ve forgotten my father’s face and . . . and . . .”

And I’ll never be able to find it again, she wanted to say, but she didn’t have to say anything. He stopped her mouth with his kisses. At first she just let herself be kissed . . . and then she was kissing him back, kissing him almost furiously. She wiped the wetness from beneath his eyes with soft little sweeps of her thumbs, then slipped her palms up his cheeks as she had longed to do. The feeling was exquisite; even the soft rasp of the stubble close to the skin was exquisite. She slid her arms around his neck, her open mouth on his, holding him and kissing him as hard as she could, kissing him there between the horses, who simply looked at each other and then went back to cropping grass.

9

They were the best kisses of his whole life, and never forgotten: the yielding pliancy of her lips and the strong shape of her teeth under them, urgent and not shy in the least; the fragrance of her breath, the sweet line of her body pressed against his. He slipped a hand up to her left breast, squeezed it gently, and felt her heart speeding under it. His other hand went to her hair and combed along the side of it, silk at her temple. He never forgot its texture.

Then she was standing away from him, her face flaming with blush and passion, one hand going to her lips, which he had kissed until they were swollen. A little trickle of blood ran from the corner of the lower one. Her eyes, wide on his. Her bosom rising and falling as if she had just run a race. And between them a current that was like nothing he had ever felt in his life. It ran like a river and shook like a fever.

“No more,” she said in a trembling voice. “No more, please. If you really do love me, don’t let me dishonor myself. I’ve made a promise. Anything might come later, after that promise was fulfilled, I suppose . . . if you still wanted me . . .”

“I would wait forever,” he said calmly, “and do anything for you but stand away and watch you go with another man.”

“Then if you love me, go away from me. Please, Will!”

“Another kiss.”

She stepped forward at once, raising her face trustingly up to his, and he understood he could do whatever he wanted with her. She was, at least for the moment, no longer her own mistress; she might consequently be his. He could do to her what Marten had done to his own mother, if that was his fancy.

The thought broke his passion apart, turned it to coals that fell in a bright shower, winking out one by one in a dark bewilderment. His father’s acceptance (*I have known for two years*)

was in many ways the worst part of what had happened to him this year; how could he fall in love with this girl—any girl—in a world where such evils of the heart seemed necessary, and might even be repeated?

Yet he did love her.

Instead of the passionate kiss he wanted, he placed his lips lightly on the corner of her mouth where the little rill of blood flowed. He kissed, tasting salt like the taste of his own tears. He closed his eyes and shivered when her hand stroked the hair at the nape of his neck.

“I’d not hurt Olive Thorin for the world,” she whispered in his ear. “No more than I’d hurt thee, Will. I didn’t understand, and now ’tis too late to be put right. But thank you for not . . . not taking what you could. And I’ll remember you always. How it was to be kissed by you. It’s the best thing that ever happened to me, I think. Like heaven and earth all wrapped up together, aye.”

“I’ll remember, too.” He watched her swing up into the saddle, and remembered how her bare legs had flashed in the dark on the night

he had met her. And suddenly he couldn't let her go. He reached forward, touched her boot.

"Susan—"

"No," she said. "Please."

He stood back. Somehow.

"This is our secret," she said. "Yes?"

"Aye."

She smiled at that . . . but it was a sad smile. "Stay away from me from now on, Will. Please. And I'll stay away from you."

He thought about it. "If we can."

"We must, Will. We must."

She rode away fast. Roland stood beside Rusher's stirrup, watching her go. And when she was out of sight over the horizon, still he watched.

10

Sheriff Avery, Deputy Dave, and Deputy George Riggins were sitting on the porch in front of the Sheriff's office and jail when Mr. Stockworth and Mr. Heath (the latter with that idiotic bird's skull still mounted on the horn of his saddle) went past at a steady walk. The bell o' noon had rung fifteen minutes before, and Sheriff Avery reckoned they were on their way to lunch, perhaps at The Millbank, or perhaps at the Rest, which put on a fair noon meal. Popkins and such. Avery liked something a little more filling; half a chicken or a haunch of beef suited him just fine.

Mr. Heath gave them a wave and a grin. "Good day, gents! Long life! Gentle breezes! Happy siestas!"

They waved and smiled back. When they were out of sight, Dave said: "They spent all mornin down there on the piers, countin nets. *Nets!* Do you believe it?"

"Yessir," Sheriff Avery said, lifting one massive cheek a bit out of his rocker and letting off a noisy pre-luncheon fart. "Yessir, I do. Aye."

George said: "If not for them facing off Jonas's boys the way they done, I'd think they was a pack of fools."

"Nor would they likely mind," Avery said. He looked at Dave, who was twirling his monocle on the end of its ribbon and looking off in the direction the boys had taken. There were folks in town who had begun calling the Affiliation brats Little Coffin Hunters. Avery wasn't sure what to make of that. He'd soothed it down between them and Thorin's hard boys, and had gotten both a commendation and a piece of gold from Rimer for his efforts, but still . . . what to make of them?

"The day they came in," he said to Dave, "ye thought they were soft. How do ye say now?"

"Now?" Dave twirled his monocle a final time, then popped it in his eye and stared at the Sheriff through it. "Now I think they might have been a little harder than I thought, after all."

Yes indeed, Avery thought. But hard don't mean smart, thank the gods. Aye, thank the gods for that.

"I'm hungry as a bull, so I am," he said, getting up. He bent, put his hands on his knees, and ripped off another loud fart. Dave and George looked at each other. George fanned a hand in front of his face. Sheriff Herkimer Avery, Barony Sheriff, straightened up, looking both relieved and anticipatory. "More room out than there is in," he said. "Come on, boys. Let's go downstreet and tuck into a little."

Not even sunset could do much to improve the view from the porch of the Bar K bunkhouse. The building—except for the cook-shack and the stable, the only one still standing on what had been the home acre—was L-shaped, and the porch was built on the inside of the short arm. Left for them on it had been just the right number of seats: two splintery rockers and a wooden crate to which an unstable board back had been nailed.

On this evening, Alain sat in one of the rockers and Cuthbert sat on the box-seat, which he seemed to fancy. On the rail, peering across the beaten dirt of the dooryard and toward the burned-out hulk of the Garber home place, was the lookout.

Alain was bone-tired, and although both of them had bathed in the stream near the west end of the home acre, he thought he still smelled fish and seaweed on himself. They had spent the day counting nets. He was not averse to hard work, even when it was monotonous, but he didn't like pointless work. Which this was. Hambry came in two parts: the fishers and the horse-breeders. There was nothing for them among the fishers, and after three weeks all three of them knew it. Their answers were out on the Drop, at which they had so far done no more than look. At Roland's order.

The wind gusted, and for a moment they could hear the low, grumbling, squealing sound of the thinny.

"I hate that sound," Alain said.

Cuthbert, unusually silent and introspective tonight, nodded and said only "Aye." They were all saying that now, not to mention *So you do* and *So I am* and *So it is*. Alain suspected the three of them would have Hambry on their tongues long after they had wiped its dust from their boots.

From behind them, inside the bunkhouse door, came a less unpleasant sound—the cooing of pigeons. And then, from around the side of the bunkhouse, a third, for which he and Cuthbert had

unconsciously been listening as they sat watching the sun go down: horse's hoofs. Rusher's.

Roland came around the corner, riding easy, and as he did, something happened that struck Alain as oddly portentous . . . a kind of omen. There was a flurry-flutter of wings, a dark shape in the air, and suddenly a bird was roosting on Roland's shoulder.

He didn't jump; barely looked around. He rode up to the hitching rail and sat there, holding out his hand. "Hile," he said softly, and the pigeon stepped into his palm. Bound to one of its legs was a capsule. Roland removed it, opened it, and took out a tiny strip of paper, which had been rolled tight. In his other hand he held the pigeon out.

"Hile," Alain said, holding out his own hand. The pigeon flew to it. As Roland dismounted, Alain took the pigeon into the bunkhouse, where the cages had been placed beneath an open window. He ungated the center one and held out his hand. The pigeon which had just arrived hopped in; the pigeon in the cage hopped out and into his palm. Alain shut the cage door, latched it, crossed the room, and turned up the pillow of Bert's bunk. Beneath it was a linen envelope containing a number of blank paper strips and a tiny storage-pen. He took one of the strips and the pen, which held its own small reservoir of ink and did not have to be dipped. He went back out on the porch. Roland and Cuthbert were studying the unrolled strip of paper the pigeon had delivered from Gilead. On it was a line of tiny geometric shapes:

□△△○△◁▷◁▷◁▷○□□◁

"What does it say?" Alain asked. The code was simple enough, but he could not get it by heart or read it on sight, as Roland and Bert had been able to, almost immediately. Alain's talents—his ability to track, his easy access to the touch—lay in other directions.

“ ‘Farson moves east,’ ” Cuthbert read. “ ‘Forces split, one big, one small. Do you see anything unusual.’ ” He looked at Roland, almost offended. “Anything unusual, what does that mean?”

Roland shook his head. He didn’t know. He doubted if the men who had sent the message—of whom his own father was almost surely one—did, either.

Alain handed Cuthbert the strip and the pen. With one finger Bert stroked the head of the softly cooing pigeon. It ruffled its wings as if already anxious to be off to the west.

“What shall I write?” Cuthbert asked. “The same?”

Roland nodded.

“But we *have* seen things that are unusual!” Alain said. “And we know things are wrong here! The horses . . . and at that small ranch way south . . . I can’t remember the name . . .”

Cuthbert could. “The Rocking H.”

“Aye, the Rocking H. There are *oxen* there. *Oxen!* My gods, I’ve never seen them, except for pictures in a book!”

Roland looked alarmed. “Does anyone know you saw?”

Alain shrugged impatiently. “I don’t think so. There were drovers about—three, maybe four—”

“Four, aye,” Cuthbert said quietly.

“—but they paid no attention to us. Even when we see things, they think we don’t.”

“And that’s the way it must stay.” Roland’s eyes swept them, but there was a kind of absence in his face, as if his thoughts were far away. He turned to look toward the sunset, and Alain saw something on the collar of his shirt. He plucked it, a move made so quickly and

nimbly that not even Roland felt it. *Bert couldn't have done that*, Alain thought with some pride.

“Aye, but—”

“Same message,” Roland said. He sat down on the top step and looked off toward the evening redness in the west. “Patience, Mr. Richard Stockworth and Mr. Arthur Heath. We know certain things and we believe certain other things. But would John Farson come all this way simply to resupply horses? I don’t think so. I’m not sure, horses are valuable, aye, so they are . . . but I’m not sure. So we wait.”

“All right, all right, same message.” Cuthbert smoothed the scrap of paper flat on the porch rail, then made a small series of symbols on it. Alain could read this message; he had seen the same sequence several times since they had come to Hambry. “Message received. We are fine. Nothing to report at this time.”

The message was put in the capsule and attached to the pigeon’s leg. Alain went down the steps, stood beside Rusher (still waiting patiently to be unsaddled), and held the bird up toward the fading sunset. “Hile!”

It was up and gone in a flutter of wings. For a moment only they saw it, a dark shape against the deepening sky.

Roland sat looking after. The dreamy expression was still on his face. Alain found himself wondering if Roland had made the right decision this evening. He had never in his life had such a thought. Nor expected to have one.

“Roland?”

“Hmmm?” Like a man half-awakened from some deep sleep.

“I’ll unsaddle him, if you want.” He nodded at Rusher. “And rub him down.”

No answer for a long time. Alain was about to ask again when Roland said, "No. I'll do it. In a minute or two." And went back to looking at the sunset.

Alain climbed the porch steps and sat down in his rocker. Bert had resumed his place on the box-seat. They were behind Roland now, and Cuthbert looked at Alain with his eyebrows raised. He pointed to Roland and then looked at Alain again.

Alain passed over what he had plucked from Roland's collar. Although it was almost too fine to be seen in this light, Cuthbert's eyes were gunslinger's eyes, and he took it easily, with no fumbling.

It was a long strand of hair, the color of spun gold. He could see from Bert's face that Bert knew whose head it had come from. Since arriving in Hambry, they'd met only one girl with long blonde hair. The two boys' eyes met. In Bert's Alain saw dismay and laughter in equal measure.

Cuthbert Allgood raised his forefinger to his temple and mimed pulling the trigger.

Alain nodded.

Sitting on the steps with his back to them, Roland looked toward the dying sunset with dreaming eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

BENEATH THE PEDDLER'S MOON

1

The town of Ritzy, nearly four hundred miles west of Mejis, was anything but. Roy Depape reached it three nights before the Peddler's Moon—called Late-summer's Moon by some—came full, and left it a day later.

Ritzy was, in fact, a miserable little mining village on the eastern slope of the Vi Castis Mountains, about fifty miles from Vi Castis Cut. The town had but one street; it was engraved with iron-hard wheelruts now, and would become a lake of mud roughly three days after the storms of autumn set in. There was the Bear and Turtle Mercantile & Sundrie Items, where miners were forbidden by the Vi Castis Company to shop, and a company store where no one but grubbies *would* shop; there was a combined jailhouse and Town Gathering Hall with a windmill-cum-gallows out front; there were six roaring barrooms, each more sordid, desperate, and dangerous than the last.

Ritzy was like an ugly lowered head between a pair of huge shrugged shoulders—the foothills. Above town to the south were the clapped-out shacks where the Company housed its miners; each puff of breeze brought the stench of their unlimed communal privies. To the north were the mines themselves: dangerous, undershored scratch drifts that went down fifty feet or so and then spread like fingers clutching for gold and silver and copper and the occasional nest of firedims. From the outside they were just holes punched into the bare and rocky earth, holes like staring eyes, each with its own pile of till and scrapings beside the adit.

Once there had been freehold mines up there, but they were all gone, regulated out by the Vi Castis Company. Depape knew all about it, because the Big Coffin Hunters had been a part of that little spin and raree. Just after he'd hooked up with Jonas and Reynolds, that had been. Why, they had gotten those coffins tattooed on their hands not fifty miles from here, in the town of Wind, a mudpen even less ritzy than Ritzy. How long ago? He couldn't rightly say, although it seemed to him that he should be able to. But when it came to reckoning times past, Depape often felt lost. It was hard even to remember how old he was. Because the world had moved on, and time was different, now. *Softer.*

One thing he had no trouble remembering at all—his recollection was refreshed by the miserable flare of pain he suffered each time he bumped his wounded finger. That one thing was a promise to himself that he would see Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath laid out dead in a row, hand to outstretched hand like a little girl's paper dolls. He intended to unlimber the part of him which had longed so bootlessly for Her Nibs these last three weeks and use it to hose down their dead faces. The majority of his squirt would be saved for Arthur Heath of Gilead, New Canaan. That laughing chatterbox motherfucker had a *serious* hosing-down coming.

Depape rode out the sunrise end of Ritzy's only street, trotted his horse up the flank of the first hill, and paused at the top for a single look back. Last night, when he'd been talking to the old bastard behind Hattigan's, Ritzy had been roaring. This morning at seven, it looked as ghostly as the Peddler's Moon, which still hung in the sky above the rim of the plundered hills. He could hear the mines tink-tonking away, though. You bet. Those babies tink-tonked away seven days a week. No rest for the wicked . . . and he supposed that included him. He dragged his horse's head around with his usual unthinking and ham-handed force, booted its flanks, and headed east, thinking of the old bastard as he went. He had treated the old bastard passing fair, he reckoned. A reward had been promised, and had been paid for information given.

“Yar,” Depape said, his glasses flashing in the new sun (it was a rare morning when he had no hangover, and he felt quite cheerful), “I reckon the old bugger can’t complain.”

Depape had had no trouble following the young culls’ backtrail; they had come east on the Great Road the whole way from New Canaan, it appeared, and at every town where they had stopped, they had been marked. In most they were marked if they did no more than pass through. And why not? Young men on good horses, no scars on their faces, no regulator tattoos on their hands, good clothes on their backs, expensive hats on their heads. They were remembered especially well at the inns and saloons, where they had stopped to refresh themselves but had drunk no hard liquor. No beer or *graf*, either, for that matter. Yes, they were remembered. Boys on the road, boys that seemed almost to shine. As if they had come from an earlier, better time.

Piss in their faces, Depape thought as he rode. *One by one. Mr. Arthur “Ha-Ha” Heath last. I’ll save enough so it’d drown you, were you not already at the end of the path and into the clearing.*

They had been noticed, all right, but that wasn’t good enough—if he went back to Hambry with no more than that, Jonas would likely shoot his nose off. And he would deserve it. *They may be rich boys, but that’s not all they are.* Depape had said that himself. The question was, what else were they? And finally, in the shit-and-sulfur stench of Ritzy, he had found out. Not everything, perhaps, but enough to allow him to turn his horse around before he found himself all the way back in fucking New Canaan.

He had hit two other saloons, sipping watered beer in each, before rolling into Hattigan’s. He ordered yet another watered beer, and prepared to engage the bartender in conversation. Before he even began to shake the tree, however, the apple he wanted fell off and dropped into his hand, neat as you please.

It was an old man’s voice (an old *bastard’s* voice), speaking with the shrill, head-hurting intensity which is the sole province of old

bastards in their cups. He was talking about the old days, as old bastards always did, and about how the world had moved on, and how things had been ever so much better when he was a boy. Then he had said something which caused Depape's ears to prick up: something about how the old days might be coming again, for hadn't he seen three young lords not two months a-gone, mayhap less, and even bought one of them a drink, even if 'twas only sasparrilly soda?

"You wouldn't know a young lord from a young turd," said a miss who appeared to have all of four teeth left in her charming young head.

There was general laughter at this. The old bastard looked around, offended. "I know, all right," he said. "I've forgot more than you'll ever learn, so I have. One of them at least came from the Eld line, for I saw his father in his face . . . just as clear as I see your saggy tits, Jolene." And then the old bastard had done something Depape rather admired—yanked out the front of the saloon-whore's blouse and poured the remainder of his beer down it. Even the roars of laughter and heavy applause which greeted this couldn't entirely drown the girl's caw of rage, or the old man's cries when she began to slap and punch him about the head and shoulders. These latter cries were only indignant at first, but when the girl grabbed the old bastard's own beer-stein and shattered it against the side of his head, they became screams of pain. Blood—mixed with a few watery dregs of beer—began to run down the old bastard's face.

"Get out of here!" she yelled, and gave him a shove toward the door. Several healthy kicks from the miners in attendance (who had changed sides as easily as the wind changes directions) helped him along. "And don't come back! I can smell the weed on your breath, you old cocksucker! Get out and take your gods-cussed stories of old days and young lords with you!"

The old bastard was in such manner conveyed across the room, past the tootling trumpet-player who served as entertainment for the patrons of Hattigan's (that young bowler-hatted worthy added his own kick in the seat of the old bastard's dusty trousers without ever

missing so much as a single note of “Play, Ladies, Play”), and out through the batwing doors, where he collapsed face-first into the street.

Depape had sauntered after him and helped him up. As he did so, he smelled an acrid odor—not beer—on the old man’s breath, and saw the telltale greenish-gray discolorations at the corners of his lips. Weed, all right. The old bastard was probably just getting started on it (and for the usual reason: devil-grass was free in the hills, unlike the beer and whiskey that was sold in town), but once they started, the finish came quick.

“They got no respect,” the old bastard said thickly. “Nor understanding, either.”

“Aye, so they don’t,” said Depape, who had not yet gotten the accents of the seacoast and the Drop out of his speech.

The old bastard stood swaying, looking up at him, wiping ineffectually at the blood which ran down his wrinkled cheeks from his lacerated scalp. “Son, do you have the price of a drink? Remember the face of your father and give an old soul the price of a drink!”

“I’m not much for charity, old-timer,” Depape said, “but mayhap you could earn yourself the price of a drink. Step on over here, into my office, and let’s us see.”

He’d led the old bastard out of the street and back to the boardwalk, angling well to the left of the black batwings with their golden shafts of light spilling out above and below. He waited for a trio of miners to go by, singing at the top of their lungs (“*Woman I love . . . is long and tall . . . she moves her body . . . like a cannonball . . .*”), and then, still holding the old bastard by the elbow, had guided him into the alley between Hattigan’s and the undertaking establishment next door. For some people, Depape mused, a visit to Ritzy could damn near amount to one-stop shopping: get your drink, get your bullet, get laid out next door.

“Yer office,” the old bastard cackled as Depape led him down the alley toward the board fence and the heaps of rubbish at the far end. The wind blew, stinging Depape’s nose with odors of sulfur and carbolic from the mines. From their right, the sounds of drunken revelry pounded through the side of Hattigan’s. “Your office, that’s good.”

“Aye, my office.”

The old man gazed at him in the light of the moon, which rode the slot of sky above the alley. “Are you from Mejis? Or Tepachi?”

“Maybe one, maybe t’other, maybe neither.”

“Do I know you?” The old bastard was looking at him even more closely, standing on tiptoe as if hoping for a kiss. Ugh.

Depape pushed him away. “Not so close, dad.” Yet he felt marginally encouraged. He and Jonas and Reynolds *had* been here before, and if the old man remembered his face, likely he wasn’t talking through his hat about fellows he’d seen much more recently.

“Tell me about the three young lords, old dad.” Depape rapped on the wall of Hattigan’s. “Them in there may not be interested, but I am.”

The old bastard looked at him with a bleary, calculating eye. “Might there be a bit o’ metal in it for me?”

“Yar,” Depape said. “If you tell me what I want to hear, I’ll give you metal.”

“Gold?”

“Tell me, and we’ll see.”

“No, sir. Dicker first, tell second.”

Depape seized him by the arm, whirled him around, and yanked a wrist which felt like a bundle of sticks up to the old bastard's scrawny shoulderblades. "Fuck with me, dad, and we'll start by breaking your arm."

"Let go!" the old bastard screamed breathlessly. "Let go, I'll trust to your generosity, young sir, for you have a generous face! Yes! Yes indeed!"

Depape let him go. The old bastard eyed him warily, rubbing his shoulder. In the moonlight the blood drying on his cheeks looked black.

"Three of them, there were," he said. "Fine-born lads."

"Lads or lords? Which is it, dad?"

The old bastard had taken the question thoughtfully. The whack on the head, the night air, and having his arm twisted seemed to have sobered him up, at least temporarily.

"Both, I do believe," he said at last. "One was a lord for sure, whether them in there believe it or not. For I saw his father, and his father bore the guns. Not such poor things such as you wear—beggin your pardon, I know they're the best to be had these days—but *real* guns, such as were seen when my own dad was a boy. The big ones with the sandalwood grips."

Depape had stared at the old man, feeling a rise of excitement . . . and a species of reluctant awe, as well. *They acted like gunslingers*, Jonas had said. When Reynolds protested they were too young, Jonas had said they might be apprentices, and now it seemed the boss had likely been right.

"*Sandalwood* grips?" he had asked. "*Sandalwood* grips, old dad?"

"Yep." The old man saw his excitement, and his belief. He expanded visibly.

“A gunslinger, you mean. This one young fellow’s father carried the big irons.”

“Yep, a gunslinger. One of the last lords. Their line is passing, now, but my dad knew him well enough. Steven Deschain, of Gilead. Steven, son of Henry.”

“And this one you saw not long ago—”

“His son, Henry the Tall’s grandson. The others looked well-born, as if they might also come from the line of lords, but the one I saw come down all the way from Arthur Eld, by one line or another. Sure as you walk on two legs. Have I earned my metal yet?”

Depape thought to say yes, then realized he didn’t know which of the three culls this old bastard was talking about.

“Three young men,” he mused. “Three high-borns. And did they have guns?”

“Not out where the drift-diggers of *this* town could see em,” the old bastard said, and laughed nastily. “But they had em, all right. Probably hid in their bedrolls. I’d set my watch and warrant on it.”

“Aye,” Depape said. “I suppose you would. Three young men, one the son of a lord. Of a *gunslinger*, you think. Steven of Gilead.” And the name was familiar to him, aye, it was.

“Steven Deschain of Gilead, that’s it.”

“And what name did he give, this young lord?”

The old bastard had screwed his face up alarmingly in an effort to remember. “Deerfield? Deerstine? I don’t quite remember—”

“That’s all right, I know it. And you’ve earned your metal.”

“Have I?” the old bastard had edged close again, his breath gagging-sweet with the weed. “Gold or silver? Which is it, my

friend?”

“Lead,” Depape replied, then hauled leather and shot the old man twice in the chest. Doing him a favor, really.

Now he rode back toward Mejis—it would be a faster trip without having to stop in every dipshit little town and ask questions.

There was a flurry of wings close above his head. A pigeon—dark gray, it was, with a white ring around its neck—fluttered down on a rock just ahead of him, as if to rest. An interesting-looking bird. Not, Depape thought, a wild pigeon. Someone’s escaped pet? He couldn’t imagine anyone in this desolate quarter of the world keeping anything but a half-wild dog to bite the squash off any would-be robber (although what these folks might have worth robbing was another question he couldn’t answer), but he supposed anything was possible. In any case, roast pigeon would go down a treat when he stopped for the night.

Depape drew his gun, but before he could cock the hammer, the pigeon was off and flying east. Depape took a shot after it, anyway. Sometimes you got lucky, but apparently not this time; the pigeon dipped a little, then straightened out and disappeared in the direction Depape himself was going. He sat astride his horse for a moment, not much put out of countenance; he thought Jonas was going to be very pleased with what he had found out.

After a bit, he booted his horse in the sides and began to canter east along the Barony Sea Road, back toward Mejis, where the boys who had embarrassed him were waiting to be dealt with. Lords they might be, sons of gunslingers they might be, but in these latter days, even such as those could die. As the old bastard himself would undoubtedly have pointed out, the world had moved on.

2

On a late afternoon three days after Roy Depape left Ritzy and headed his horse toward Hambry again, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain

rode north and west of town, first down the long swell of the Drop, then into the freeland Hambry folk called the Bad Grass, then into deserty waste lands. Ahead of them and clearly visible once they were back in the open were crumbled and eroded bluffs. In the center of these was a dark, almost vaginal cleft, its edges so splintered it looked as if it had been whacked into reality by an ill-tempered god wielding a hatchet.

The distance between the end of the Drop and the bluffs was perhaps six miles. Three quarters of the way across, they passed the flatlands' only real geographic feature: a jutting upthrust of rock that looked like a finger bent at the first knuckle. Below it was a small, boomerang-shaped greensward, and when Cuthbert gave a ululating yell to hear his voice bounce back at him from the bluffs ahead, a pack of chattering billy-bumblers broke from this greenplace and went racing back southeast, toward the Drop.

“That’s Hanging Rock,” Roland said. “There’s a spring at the base of it—only one in these parts, they say.”

It was all the talk that passed between them on the ride out, but a look of unmistakable relief passed between Cuthbert and Alain behind Roland’s back. For the last three weeks they had pretty much marched in place as summer rolled around them and past them. It was all well for Roland to say they must wait, they must pay greatest attention to the things that didn’t matter and count the things which did from the corners of their eyes, but neither of them quite trusted the dreamy, disconnected air which Roland wore these days like his own special version of Clay Reynolds’s cloak. They didn’t talk about this between themselves; they didn’t have to. Both knew that if Roland began courting the pretty girl whom Mayor Thorin meant for his gilly (and who else could that long blonde hair have belonged to?), they would be in very bad trouble. But Roland showed no courting plumage, neither of them spied any more blonde hairs on his shirt-collars, and tonight he seemed more himself, as if he had put that cloak of abstraction aside. Temporarily, mayhap.

Permanently, if they were lucky. They could only wait and see. In the end, *ka* would tell, as it always did.

A mile or so from the bluffs, the strong sea breeze which had been at their backs for the whole ride suddenly dropped, and they heard the low, atonal squalling from the cleft that was Eyebolt Canyon. Alain pulled up, grimacing like a man who has bitten into a fruit of extravagant sourness. All he could think of was a handful of sharp pebbles, squeezed and ground together in a strong hand. Buzzards circled above the canyon as if drawn to the sound.

“The lookout don’t like it, Will,” Cuthbert said, knocking his knuckles on the skull. “I don’t like it much, either. What are we out here for?”

“To count,” Roland said. “We were sent to count everything and see everything, and this is something to count and see.”

“Oh, aye,” Cuthbert said. He held his horse in with some effort; the low, grinding wail of the thinny had made it skittish. “Sixteen hundred and fourteen fishing nets, seven hundred and ten boats small, two hundred and fourteen boats large, seventy oxen that nobody will admit to, and, on the north of town, one thinny. Whatever the hell *that* is.”

“We’re going to find out,” Roland said.

They rode into the sound, and although none of them liked it, no one suggested they go back. They had come all the way out here, and Roland was right—this was their job. Besides, they were curious.

The mouth of the canyon had been pretty well stopped up with brush, as Susan had told Roland it would be. Come fall, most of it would probably be dead, but now the stacked branches still bore leaves and made it hard to see into the canyon. A path led through the center of the brushpile, but it was narrow for the horses (who

might have balked at going through, anyway), and in the failing light Roland could make out hardly anything.

“Are we going in?” Cuthbert asked. “Let the Recording Angel note that I’m against, although I’ll offer no mutiny.”

Roland had no intention of taking them through the brush and toward the source of that sound. Not when he had only the vaguest idea of what a thinny was. He had asked a few questions about it over the last few weeks, and gotten little useful response. “I’d stay away,” was the extent of Sheriff Avery’s advice. So far his best information was still what he had gotten from Susan on the night he met her.

“Sit easy, Bert. We’re not going in.”

“Good,” Alain said softly, and Roland smiled.

There was a path up the canyon’s west side, steep and narrow, but passable if they were careful. They went single file, stopping once to clear a rockfall, pitching splintered chunks of shale and hornfels into the groaning trench to their right. When this was done and just as the three of them were preparing to mount up again, a large bird of some sort—perhaps a grouse, perhaps a prairie chicken—rose above the lip of the canyon in an explosive whir of feathers. Roland dipped for his guns, and saw both Cuthbert and Alain doing the same. Quite funny, considering that their firearms were wrapped in protective oilcloth and secreted beneath the floorboards of the Bar K bunkhouse.

They looked at each other, said nothing (except with their eyes, which said plenty), and went on. Roland found that the effect of being this close to the thinny was cumulative—it wasn’t a sound you could get used to. Quite the contrary, in fact: the longer you were in the immediate vicinity of Eyebolt Canyon, the more that sound scraped away at your brain. It got into your teeth as well as your ears; it vibrated in the knot of nerves below the breastbone and seemed to eat at the damp and delicate tissue behind the eyes. Most

of all, though, it got into your head, telling you that everything you had ever been afraid of was just behind the next curve of the trail or yonder pile of tumbled rock, waiting to snake out of its place and get you.

Once they got to the flat and barren ground at the top of the path and the sky opened out above them again it was a little better, but by then the light was almost gone, and when they dismounted and walked to the canyon's crumbling edge, they could see little but shadows.

"No good," Cuthbert said disgustedly. "We should have left earlier, Roland . . . Will, I mean. What dummies we are!"

"I can be Roland to you out here, if you like. And we'll see what we came to see and count what we came to count—one thinny, just as you said. Only wait."

They waited, and not twenty minutes later the Peddler's Moon rose above the horizon—a perfect summer moon, huge and orange. It loomed in the darkening violet swim of the sky like a crashing planet. On its face, as clear as anyone had ever seen it, was the Peddler, he who came out of Nones with his sackful of squealing souls. A hunched figure made of smudged shadows with a pack clearly visible over one cringing shoulder. Behind it, the orange light seemed to flame like hellfire.

"Ugh," Cuthbert said. "That's an ill sight to see with that sound coming up from below."

Yet they held their ground (and their horses, which periodically yanked back on their reins as if to tell them they should already be gone from this place), and the moon rose in the sky, shrinking a little as it went and turning silver. Eventually it rose enough to cast its bony light into Eyebolt Canyon. The three boys stood looking down. None of them spoke. Roland didn't know about his friends, but he didn't think he himself could have spoken even if called on to do so.

A box canyon, very short and steep-sided, Susan had said, and the description was perfectly accurate. She'd also said Eyebolt looked like a chimney lying on its side, and Roland supposed that was also true, if you allowed that a falling chimney might break up a little on impact, and lie with one crooked place in its middle.

Up to that crook, the canyon floor looked ordinary enough; even the litter of bones the moon showed them was not extraordinary. Many animals which wandered into box canyons hadn't the wit to find their way back out again, and with Eyebolt the possibility of escape was further reduced by the choke of brush piled at the canyon's mouth. The sides were much too steep to climb except maybe for one place, just before that crooked little jog. There Roland saw a kind of groove running up the canyon wall, with enough jutting spurs inside it to—maybe!—provide handholds. There was no real reason for him to note this; he just did, as he would go on noting potential escape-routes his entire life.

Beyond the jag in the canyon floor was something none of them had ever seen before . . . and when they got back to the bunkhouse several hours later, they all agreed that they weren't sure exactly what they *had* seen. The latter part of Eyebolt Canyon was obscured by a sullen, silvery liquescence from which snakes of smoke or mist were rising in streamers. The liquid seemed to move sluggishly, lapping at the walls which held it in. Later, they would discover that both liquid and mist were a light green; it was only the moonlight that had made them look silver.

As they watched, a dark flying shape—perhaps it was the same one that had frightened them before—skimmed down toward the surface of the thinny. It snatched something out of the air—a bug? another, smaller, bird?—and then began to rise again. Before it could, a silvery arm of liquid rose from the canyon's floor. For a moment that soupy, grinding grumble rose a notch, and became almost a voice. It snatched the bird out of the air and dragged it down. Greenish light, brief and unfocused, flashed across the surface of the thinny like electricity, and was gone.

The three boys stared at each other with frightened eyes.

Jump in, gunslinger, a voice suddenly called. It was the voice of the thinny; it was the voice of his father; it was also the voice of Marten the enchanter, Marten the seducer. Most terrible of all, it was his own voice.

Jump in and let all these cares cease. There is no love of girls to worry you here, and no mourning of lost mothers to weigh your child's heart. Only the hum of the growing cavity at the center of the universe; only the punky sweetness of rotting flesh.

Come, gunslinger. Be a part of the thinny.

Dreamy-faced and blank-eyed, Alain began walking along the edge of the drop, his right boot so close to it that the heel puffed little clouds of dust over the chasm and sent clusters of pebbles down into it. Before he could get more than five steps, Roland grabbed him by the belt and yanked him roughly back.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Alain looked at him with sleepwalker's eyes. They began to clear, but slowly. "I don't . . . know, Roland."

Below them, the thinny hummed and growled and sang. There was a sound, as well: an oozing, sludgy mutter.

"I know," Cuthbert said. "I know where we're all going. Back to the Bar K. Come on, let's get out of here." He looked pleadingly at Roland. "Please. It's awful."

"All right."

But before he led them back to the path, he stepped to the edge and looked down at the smoky silver ooze below him. "Counting," he said with a kind of clear defiance. "Counting one thinny." Then, lowering his voice: "And be damned to you."

Their composure returned as they rode back—the sea-breeze in their faces was wonderfully restorative after the dead and somehow *baked* smell of the canyon and the thinny.

As they rode up the Drop (on a long diagonal, so as to save the horses a little), Alain said: “What do we do next, Roland? Do you know?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I don’t.”

“Supper would be a start,” Cuthbert said brightly, and tapped the lookout’s hollow skull for emphasis.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” Cuthbert agreed. “And I’ll tell you something, Roland—”

“Will, please. Now that we’re back on the Drop, let me be Will.”

“Aye, fine. I’ll tell you something, Will: we can’t go on counting nets and boats and looms and wheel-irons much longer. We’re running out of things that don’t matter. I believe that looking stupid will become a good deal harder once we move to the horse-breeding side of life as it’s lived in Hambry.”

“Aye,” Roland said. He stopped Rusher and looked back the way they had come. He was momentarily enchanted by the sight of horses, apparently infected with a kind of moon-madness, frolicking and racing across the silvery grass. “But I tell you both again, *this is not just about horses*. Does Farson need them? Aye, mayhap. So does the Affiliation. Oxen as well. But there are horses everywhere—perhaps not as good as these, I’ll admit, but any port does in a storm, so they say. So, if it’s not horses, what is it? Until we know, or decide we’ll *never* know, we go on as we are.”

Part of the answer was waiting for them back at the Bar K. It was perched on the hitching rail and flicking its tail saucily. When the pigeon hopped into Roland's hand, he saw that one of its wings was oddly frayed. Some animal—likely a cat—had crept up on it close enough to pounce, he reckoned.

The note curled against the pigeon's leg was short, but it explained a good deal of what they hadn't understood.

I'll have to see her again, Roland thought after reading it, and felt a surge of gladness. His pulse quickened, and in the cold silver light of the Peddler's Moon, he smiled.

CHAPTER IX

CITGO

1

The Peddler's Moon began to wane; it would take the hottest, fairest part of the summer with it when it went. On an afternoon four days past the full, the old *mozo* from Mayor's House (Miguel had been there long before Hart Thorin's time and would likely be there long after Thorin had gone back to his ranch) showed up at the house Susan shared with her aunt. He was leading a beautiful chestnut mare by a hack'. It was the second of the three promised horses, and Susan recognized Felicia at once. The mare had been one of her childhood's favorites.

Susan embraced Miguel and covered his bearded cheeks with kisses. The old man's wide grin would have showed every tooth in his head, if he'd had any left to show. "*Gracias, gracias*, a thousand thanks, old father," she told him.

"*Da nada*," he replied, and handed her the bridle. "It is the Mayor's earnest gift."

She watched him away, the smile slowly fading from her lips. Felicia stood docilely beside her, her dark brown coat shining like a dream in the summer sunlight. But this was no dream. It had seemed like one at first—that sense of unreality had been another inducement to walk into the trap, she now understood—but it was no dream. She had been proved honest; now she found herself the recipient of "earnest gifts" from a rich man. The phrase was a sop to conventionality, of course . . . or a bitter joke, depending on one's mood and outlook. Felicia was no more a gift than Pylon had been—they were step-by-step fulfillments of the contract into which she had

entered. Aunt Cord could express shock, but Susan knew the truth: what lay directly ahead was whoring, pure and simple.

Aunt Cord was in the kitchen window as Susan walked her gift (which was really just returned property, in her view) to the stable. She called out something passing cheery about how the horse was a good thing, that caring for it would give Susan less time for her megrims. Susan felt a hot reply rise to her lips and held it back. There had been a wary truce between the two of them since the shouting match about the shirts, and Susan didn't want to be the one to break it. There was too much on her mind and heart. She thought that one more argument with her aunt and she might simply snap like a dry twig under a boot. *Because often silence is best*, her father had told her when, at age ten or so, she had asked him why he was always so quiet. The answer had puzzled her then, but now she understood better.

She stabled Felicia next to Pylon, rubbed her down, fed her. While the mare munched oats, Susan examined her hooves. She didn't care much for the look of the iron the mare was wearing—that was Seafront for you—and so she took her father's shoebag from its nail beside the stable door, slung the strap over her head and shoulder so the bag hung on her hip, and walked the two miles to Hookey's Stable and Fancy Livery. Feeling the leather bag bang against her hip brought back her father in a way so fresh and clear that grief pricked her again and made her feel like crying. She thought he would have been appalled at her current situation, perhaps even disgusted. And he would have liked Will Dearborn, of that she was sure—liked him and approved of him for her. It was the final miserable touch.

2

She had known how to shoe most of her life, and even enjoyed it, when her mood was right; it was dusty, elemental work, with always the possibility of a healthy kick in the slats to relieve the boredom and bring a girl back to reality. But of *making* shoes she knew nothing, nor wished to. Brian Hookey made them at the forge behind

his barn and hostelry, however; Susan easily picked out four new ones of the right size, enjoying the smell of horseflesh and fresh hay as she did. Fresh paint, too. Hookey's Stable & Smithy looked very well, indeed. Glancing up, she saw not so much as a single hole in the barn roof. Times had been good for Hookey, it seemed.

He wrote the new shoes up on a beam, still wearing his blacksmith's apron and squinting horribly out of one eye at his own figures. When Susan began to speak haltingly to him about payment, he laughed, told her he knew she'd settle her accounts as soon as she could, gods bless her, yes. 'Sides, they weren't any of them going anywhere, were they? Nawp, nawp. All the time gently propelling her through the fragrant smells of hay and horses toward the door. He would not have treated even so small a matter as four iron shoes in such a carefree manner a year ago, but now she was Mayor Thorin's good friend, and things had changed.

The afternoon sunlight was dazzling after the dimness of Hookey's barn, and she was momentarily blinded, groping forward toward the street with the leather bag bouncing on her hip and the shoes clashing softly inside. She had just a moment to register a shape looming in the brightness, and then it thumped into her hard enough to rattle her teeth and make Felicia's new shoes clang. She would have fallen, but for strong hands that quickly reached out and grasped her shoulders. By then her eyes were adjusting and she saw with dismay and amusement that the young man who had almost knocked her sprawling into the dirt was one of Will's friends—Richard Stockworth.

"Oh, sai, your pardon!" he said, brushing the arms of her dress as if he *had* knocked her over. "Are you well? Are you quite well?"

"Quite well," she said, smiling. "Please don't apologize." She felt a sudden wild impulse to stand on tiptoe and kiss his mouth and say, *Give that to Will and tell him to never mind what I said! Tell him there are a thousand more where that came from! Tell him to come and get every one!*

Instead, she fixed on a comic image: this Richard Stockworth smacking Will full on the mouth and saying it was from Susan Delgado. She began to giggle. She put her hands to her mouth, but it did no good. Sai Stockworth smiled back at her . . . tentatively, cautiously. *He probably thinks I'm mad . . . and I am! I am!*

“Good day, Mr. Stockworth,” she said, and passed on before she could embarrass herself further.

“Good day, Susan Delgado,” he called in return.

She looked back once, when she was fifty yards or so farther up the street, but he was already gone. Not into Hookey's, though; of that she was quite sure. She wondered what Mr. Stockworth had been doing at that end of town to begin with.

Half an hour later, as she took the new iron from her da's shoebag, she found out. There was a folded scrap of paper tucked between two of the shoes, and even before she unfolded it, she understood that her collision with Mr. Stockworth hadn't been an accident.

She recognized Will's handwriting at once from the note in the bouquet.

Susan,

Can you meet me at Citgo this evening or tomorrow evening?
Very important. Has to do with what we discussed before.
Please.

W.

P.S. Best you burn this note.

She burned it at once, and as she watched the flames first flash up and then die down, she murmured over and over the one word in it

which had struck her the hardest: *Please*.

3

She and Aunt Cord ate a simple, silent evening meal—bread and soup—and when it was done, Susan rode Felicia out to the Drop and watched the sun go down. She would not be meeting him this evening, no. She already owed too much sorrow to impulsive, unthinking behavior. But tomorrow?

Why Citgo?

Has to do with what we discussed before.

Yes, probably. She did not doubt his honor, although she had much come to wonder if he and his friends were who they said they were. He probably did want to see her for some reason which bore on his mission (although how the oilpatch could have anything to do with too many horses on the Drop she did not know), but there was something between them now, something sweet and dangerous. They might start off talking but would likely end up kissing . . . and kissing would just be the start. Knowing didn't change feeling, though; she wanted to see him. *Needed* to see him.

So she sat astride her new horse—another of Hart Thorin's payments-in-advance on her virginity—and watched the sun swell and turn red in the west. She listened to the faint grumble of the thinny, and for the first time in her sixteen years was truly torn by indecision. All she wanted stood against all she believed of honor, and her mind roared with conflict. Around all, like a rising wind around an unstable house, she felt the idea of *ka* growing. Yet to give over one's honor for that reason was so easy, wasn't it? To excuse the fall of virtue by invoking all-powerful *ka*. It was soft thinking.

Susan felt as blind as she'd been when leaving the darkness of Brian Hookey's barn for the brightness of the street. At one point she cried silently in frustration without even being aware of it, and

pervading her every effort to think clearly and rationally was her desire to kiss him again, and to feel his hand cupping her breast.

She had never been a religious girl, had little faith in the dim gods of Mid-World, so at the last of it, with the sun gone and the sky above its point of exit going from red to purple, she tried to pray to her father. And an answer came, although whether from him or from her own heart she didn't know.

Let ka mind itself, the voice in her mind said. It will, anyway; it always does. If ka should overrule your honor, so it will be; in the meantime, Susan, there's no one to mind it but yourself. Let ka go and mind the virtue of your promise, hard as that may be.

"All right," she said. In her current state she discovered that any decision—even one that would cost her another chance to see Will—was a relief. "I'll honor my promise. *Ka* can take care of itself."

In the gathering shadows, she clucked sidemouth to Felicia and turned for home.

4

The next day was Sanday, the traditional cowboys' day of rest. Roland's little band took this day off as well. "It's fair enough that we should," Cuthbert said, "since we don't know what the hell we're doing in the first place."

On this particular Sanday—their sixth since coming to Hambry—Cuthbert was in the upper market (lower market was cheaper, by and large, but too fishy-smelling for his liking), looking at brightly colored *serapes* and trying not to cry. For his mother had a *serape*, it was a great favorite of hers, and thinking of how she would ride out sometimes with it flowing back from her shoulders had filled him with homesickness so strong it was savage. "Arthur Heath," Roland's *ka-mai*, missing his mama so badly his eyes were wet! It was a joke worthy of . . . well, worthy of Cuthbert Allgood.

As he stood so, looking at the *serapes* and a hanging rack of *dolina* blankets with his hands clasped behind his back like a patron in an art gallery (and blinking back tears all the while), there came a light tap on his shoulder. He turned, and there was the girl with the blonde hair.

Cuthbert wasn't surprised that Roland was smitten with her. She was nothing short of breathtaking, even dressed in jeans and a farmshirt. Her hair was tied back with a series of rough rawhide hanks, and she had eyes of the brightest gray Cuthbert had ever seen. Cuthbert thought it was a wonder that Roland had been able to continue with any other aspect of his life at all, even down to the washing of his teeth. Certainly she came with a cure for Cuthbert; sentimental thoughts of his mother disappeared in an instant.

"Sai," he said. It was all he could manage, at least to start with.

She nodded and held out what the folk of Mejis called a *corvette*—"little packet" was the literal definition; "little purse" was the practical one. These small leather accessories, big enough for a few coins but not much more, were more often carried by ladies than gentlemen, although that was not a hard-and-fast rule of fashion.

"Ye dropped this, cully," she said.

"Nay, thankee-sai." This one well might have been the property of a man—plain black leather, and unadorned by foofraws—but he had never seen it before. Never carried a *corvette*, for that matter.

"It's yours," she said, and her eyes were now so intense that her gaze felt hot on his skin. He should have understood at once, but he had been blinded by her unexpected appearance. Also, he admitted, by her cleverness. You somehow didn't expect cleverness from a girl this beautiful; beautiful girls did not, as a rule, have to be clever. So far as Bert could tell, all beautiful girls had to do was wake up in the morning. "It *is*."

“Oh, aye,” he said, almost snatching the little purse from her. He could feel a foolish grin overspreading his face. “Now that you mention it, sai—”

“Susan.” Her eyes were grave and watchful above her smile. “Let me be Susan to you, I pray.”

“With pleasure. I cry your pardon, Susan, it’s just that my mind and memory, realizing it’s Sanday, have joined hands and gone off on holiday together—eloped, you might say—and left me temporarily without a brain in my head.”

He might well have rattled on like that for another hour (he had before; to that both Roland and Alain could testify), but she stopped him with the easy briskness of an older sister. “I can easily believe ye have no control over yer mind, Mr. Heath—or the tongue hung below it—but perhaps ye’ll take better care of yer purse in the future. Good day.” She was gone before he could get another word out.

5

Bert found Roland where he so often was these days: out on the part of the Drop that was called Town Lookout by many of the locals. It gave a fair view of Hambry, dreaming away its Sanday afternoon in a blue haze, but Cuthbert rather doubted the Hambry view was what drew his oldest friend back here time after time. He thought that its view of the Delgado house was the more likely reason.

This day Roland was with Alain, neither of them saying a word. Cuthbert had no trouble *accepting* the idea that some people could go long periods of time without talking to each other, but he did not think he would ever *understand* it.

He came riding up to them at a gallop, reached inside his shirt, and pulled out the *corvette*. “From Susan Delgado. She gave it to me in the upper market. She’s beautiful, and she’s also as wily as a snake. I say that with utmost admiration.”

Roland's face filled with light and life. When Cuthbert tossed him the *corvette*, he caught it one-handed and pulled the lace-tie with his teeth. Inside, where a travelling man would have kept his few scraps of money, there was a single folded piece of paper. Roland read this quickly, the light going out of his eyes, the smile fading off his mouth.

"What does it say?" Alain asked.

Roland handed it to him and then went back to looking out at the Drop. It wasn't until he saw the very real desolation in his friend's eyes that Cuthbert fully realized how far into Roland's life—and hence into all their lives—Susan Delgado had come.

Alain handed him the note. It was only a single line, two sentences:

It's best we don't meet. I'm sorry.

Cuthbert read it twice, as if rereading might change it, then handed it back to Roland. Roland put the note back into the *corvette*, tied the lace, and then tucked the little purse into his own shirt.

Cuthbert hated silence worse than danger (it *was* danger, to his mind), but every conversational opening he tried in his mind seemed callow and unfeeling, given the look on his friend's face. It was as if Roland had been poisoned. Cuthbert was disgusted at the thought of that lovely young girl bumping hips with the long and bony Mayor of Hambry, but the look on Roland's face now called up stronger emotions. For that he could hate her.

At last Alain spoke up, almost timidly. "And now, Roland? Shall we have a hunt out there at the oilpatch without her?"

Cuthbert admired that. Upon first meeting him, many people dismissed Alain Johns as something of a dullard. That was very far from the truth. Now, in a diplomatic way Cuthbert could never have matched, he had pointed out that Roland's unhappy first experience with love did not change their responsibilities.

And Roland responded, raising himself off the saddle-horn and sitting up straight. The strong golden light of that summer's afternoon lit his face in harsh contrasts, and for a moment that face was haunted by the ghost of the man he would become. Cuthbert saw that ghost and shivered—not knowing what he saw, only knowing that it was awful.

“The Big Coffin Hunters,” he said. “Did you see them in town?”

“Jonas and Reynolds,” Cuthbert answered. “Still no sign of Depape. I think Jonas must have choked him and thrown him over the sea cliffs in a fit of pique after that night in the bar.”

Roland shook his head. “Jonas needs the men he trusts too much to waste them—he’s as far out on thin ice as we are. No, Depape’s just been sent off for awhile.”

“Sent where?” Alain asked.

“Where he’ll have to shit in the bushes and sleep in the rain if the weather’s bad.” Roland laughed shortly, without much humor. “Jonas has got Depape running our backtrail, more likely than not.”

Alain grunted softly, in surprise that wasn't really surprise. Roland sat easily astride Rusher, looking out over the dreamy depths of land, at the grazing horses. With one hand he unconsciously rubbed the *corvette* he had tucked into his shirt. At last he looked around at them again.

“We’ll wait a bit longer,” he said. “Perhaps she’ll change her mind.”

“Roland—” Alain began, and his tone was deadly in its gentleness.

Roland raised his hands before Alain could go on. “Doubt me not, Alain—I speak as my father’s son.”

“All right.” Alain reached out and briefly gripped Roland’s shoulder. As for Cuthbert, he reserved judgment. Roland might or might not be

acting as his father's son; Cuthbert guessed that at this point Roland hardly knew his own mind at all.

"Do you remember what Cort used to say was the primary weakness of maggots such as us?" Roland asked with a trace of a smile.

" 'You run without consideration and fall in a hole,' " Alain quoted in a gruff imitation that made Cuthbert laugh aloud.

Roland's smile broadened a touch. "Aye. They're words I mean to remember, boys. I'll not upset this cart in order to see what's in it . . . not unless there's no other choice. Susan may come around yet, given time to think. I believe she would have agreed to meet me already, if not for . . . other matters between us."

He paused, and for a little while there was quiet among them.

"I wish our fathers hadn't sent us," Alain said at last . . . although it was *Roland's* father who had sent them, and all three knew it. "We're too young for matters such as these. Too young by years."

"We did all right that night in the Rest," Cuthbert said.

"That was training, not guile—and they didn't take us seriously. That won't happen again."

"They wouldn't have sent us—not my father, not yours—if they'd known what we'd find," Roland said. "But now we've found it, and now we're for it. Yes?"

Alain and Cuthbert nodded. They were for it, all right—there no longer seemed any doubt of that.

"In any case, it's too late to worry about it now. We'll wait and hope for Susan. I'd rather not go near Citgo without someone from Hambry who knows the lay of the place . . . but if Depape comes back, we'll have to take our chance. God knows what he may find

out, or what stories he may invent to please Jonas, or what Jonas may do after they palaver. There may be shooting.”

“After all this creeping around, I’d almost welcome it,” Cuthbert said.

“Will you send her another note, Will Dearborn?” Alain asked.

Roland thought about it. Cuthbert laid an interior bet with himself on which way Roland would go. And lost.

“No,” he said at last. “We’ll have to give her time, hard as that is. And hope her curiosity will bring her around.”

With that he turned Rusher toward the abandoned bunkhouse which now served them as home. Cuthbert and Alain followed.

6

Susan worked herself hard the rest of that Sanday, mucking out the stables, carrying water, washing down all the steps. Aunt Cord watched all this in silence, her expression one of mingled doubt and amazement. Susan cared not a bit for how her aunt looked—she wanted only to exhaust herself and avoid another sleepless night. It was over. Will would know it as well now, and that was to the good. Let done be done.

“Are ye daft, girl?” was all Aunt Cord asked her as Susan dumped her last pail of dirty rinse-water behind the kitchen. “It’s Sanday!”

“Not daft a bit,” she replied shortly, without looking around.

She accomplished the first half of her aim, going to bed just after moonrise with tired arms, aching legs, and a throbbing back—but sleep still did not come. She lay in bed wide-eyed and unhappy. The hours passed, the moon set, and still Susan couldn’t sleep. She looked into the dark and wondered if there was any possibility, even

the slightest, that her father had been murdered. To stop his mouth, to close his eyes.

Finally she reached the conclusion Roland had already come to: if there had been no attraction for her in those eyes of his, or the touch of his hands and lips, she would have agreed in a flash to the meeting he wanted. If only to set her troubled mind to rest.

At this realization, relief overspread her and she was able to sleep.

7

Late the next afternoon, while Roland and his friends were at fives in the Travellers' Rest (cold beef sandwiches and gallons of white iced tea—not as good as that made by Deputy Dave's wife, but not bad), Sheemie came in from outside, where he had been watering his flowers. He was wearing his pink *sombrero* and a wide grin. In one hand he held a little packet.

"Hello, there, you Little Coffin Hunters!" he cried cheerfully, and made a bow which was an amusingly good imitation of their own. Cuthbert particularly enjoyed seeing such a bow done in gardening sandals. "How be you? Well, I'm hoping, so I do!"

"Right as rainbarrels," Cuthbert said, "but none of us enjoys being called Little Coffin Hunters, so maybe you could just play soft on that, all right?"

"Aye," Sheemie said, as cheerful as ever. "Aye, Mr. Arthur Heath, good fella who saved my life!" He paused and looked puzzled for a moment, as if unable to remember why he had approached them in the first place. Then his eyes cleared, his grin shone out, and he held the packet out to Roland. "For you, Will Dearborn!"

"Really? What is it?"

"Seeds! So they are!"

“From you, Sheemie?”

“Oh, no.”

Roland took the packet—just an envelope which had been folded over and sealed. There was nothing written on the front or back, and the tips of his fingers felt no seeds within.

“Who from, then?”

“Can’t remember,” said Sheemie, who then cast his eyes aside. His brains had been stirred just enough, Roland reflected, so that he would never be unhappy for long, and would never be able to lie at all. Then his eyes, hopeful and timid, came back to Roland’s. “I remember what I was supposed to say to you, though.”

“Aye? Then say it, Sheemie.”

Speaking as one who recites a painfully memorized line, both proud and nervous, he said: “These are the seeds you scattered on the Drop.”

Roland’s eyes blazed so fiercely that Sheemie stumbled back a step. He gave his *sombrero* a quick tug, turned, and hurried back to the safety of his flowers. He liked Will Dearborn and Will’s friends (especially Mr. Arthur Heath, who sometimes said things that made Sheemie laugh fit to split), but in that moment he saw something in Will-sai’s eyes that frightened him badly. In that instant he understood that Will was as much a killer as the one in the cloak, or the one who had wanted Sheemie to lick his boots clean, or old white-haired Jonas with the trembly voice.

As bad as them, or even worse.

8

Roland slipped the “seed-packet” into his shirt and didn’t open it until the three of them were back on the porch of the Bar K. In the

distance, the thinny grumbled, making their horses twitch their ears nervously.

“Well?” Cuthbert asked at last, unable to restrain himself any longer.

Roland took the envelope from inside his shirt, and tore it open. As he did, he reflected that Susan had known exactly what to say. To a nicety.

The others bent in, Alain from his left and Cuthbert from his right, as he unfolded the single scrap of paper. Again he saw her simple, neatly made writing, the message not much longer than the previous one. Very different in content, however.

There is an orange grove a mile off the road on the town side of Citgo. Meet me there at moonrise. Come alone. S.

And below that, printed in emphatic little letters: BURN THIS.

“We’ll keep a lookout,” Alain said.

Roland nodded. “Aye. But from a distance.”

Then he burned the note.

9

The orange grove was a neatly kept rectangle of about a dozen rows at the end of a partly overgrown cart-track. Roland arrived there after dark but still a good half hour before the rapidly thinning Peddler would haul himself over the horizon once more.

As the boy wandered along one of the rows, listening to the somehow skeletal sounds from the oilpatch to the north (squealing pistons, grinding gears, thudding driveshafts), he was struck by deep homesickness. It was the fragile fragrance of orange-blossoms—a bright runner laid over the darker stench of oil—that brought it on.

This toy grove was nothing like the great apple orchards of New Canaan . . . except somehow it was. There was the same feeling of dignity and civilization here, of much time devoted to something not strictly necessary. And in this case, he suspected, not very useful, either. Oranges grown this far north of the warm latitudes were probably almost as sour as lemons. Still, when the breeze stirred the trees, the smell made him think of Gilead with bitter longing, and for the first time he considered the possibility that he might never see home again—that he had become as much a wanderer as old Peddler Moon in the sky.

He heard her, but not until she was almost on top of him—if she'd been an enemy instead of a friend, he might still have had time to draw and fire, but it would have been close. He was filled with admiration, and as he saw her face in the starlight, he felt his heart gladden.

She halted when he turned and merely looked at him, her hands linked before her at her waist in a way that was sweetly and unconsciously childlike. He took a step toward her and they came up in what he took for alarm. He stopped, confused. But he had misread her gesture in the chancy light. She could have stopped then, but chose not to. She stepped toward him deliberately, a tall young woman in a split riding skirt and plain black boots. Her *sombrero* hung down on her back, against the bound rope of her hair.

“Will Dearborn, we are met both fair and ill,” she said in a trembling voice, and then he was kissing her; they burned against one another as the Peddler rose in the famine of its last quarter.

10

Inside her lonely hut high on the Cöos, Rhea sat at her kitchen table, bent over the glass the Big Coffin Hunters had brought her a month and a half ago. Her face was bathed in its pink glow, and no one would have mistaken it for the face of a girl any longer. She had extraordinary vitality, and it had carried her for many years (only the longest-lived residents of Hambry had any idea of how old Rhea of

the Cöos actually was, and they only the vaguest), but the glass was finally sapping it—sucking it out of her as a vampire sucks blood. Behind her, the hut's larger room was even dingier and more cluttered than usual. These days she had no time for even a pretense of cleaning; the glass ball took up all her time. When she wasn't looking into it, she was *thinking* of looking into it . . . and, oh! Such things she had seen!

Ermot twined around one of her scrawny legs, hissing with agitation, but she barely noticed him. Instead she bent even closer into the ball's poison pink glow, enchanted by what she saw there.

It was the girl who had come to her to be proved honest, and the young man she had seen the first time she'd looked into the ball. The one she had mistaken for a gunslinger, until she had realized his youth.

The foolish girl, who had come to Rhea singing and left in a more proper silence, had proved honest, and might well be honest yet (certainly she kissed and touched the boy with a virgin's mingled greed and timidity), but she wouldn't be honest much longer if they kept on the way they were going. And wouldn't Hart Thorin be in for a surprise when he took his supposedly pure young gilly to bed? There were ways to fool men about that (men practically *begged* to be fooled about that), a thimble of pig's blood would serve nicely, but *she* wouldn't know that. Oh, this was too good! And to think she could watch Miss Haughty brought low, right here, in this wonderful glass! Oh, it was too good! Too wonderful!

She leaned closer still, the deep sockets of her eyes filling with pink fire. Ermot, sensing that she remained immune to his blandishments, crawled disconsolately away across the floor, in search of bugs. Musty pranced away from him, spitting feline curses, his six-legged shadow huge and misshapen on the firestruck wall.

Roland sensed the moment rushing at them. Somehow he managed to step away from her, and she stepped back from him, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushed—he could see that flush even in the light of the newly risen moon. His balls were throbbing. His groin felt full of liquid lead.

She half-turned away from him, and Roland saw that her *sombrero* had gone askew on her back. He reached out one trembling hand and straightened it. She clasped his fingers in a brief but strong grip, then bent to pick up her riding gloves, which she had stripped off in her need to touch him skin to skin. When she stood again, the wash of blood abruptly left her face, and she reeled. But for his hands on her shoulders, steadying her, she might have fallen. She turned toward him, eyes rueful.

“What are we to do? Oh, Will, what are we to do?”

“The best we can,” he said. “As we both always have. As our fathers taught us.”

“This is mad.”

Roland, who had never felt anything so sane in his life—even the deep ache in his groin felt sane and right—said nothing.

“Do ye know how dangerous ’tis?” she asked, and went on before he could reply. “Aye, ye do. I can see ye do. If we were seen together at all, ’twould be serious. To be seen as we just were—”

She shivered. He reached for her and she stepped back. “Best ye don’t, Will. If ye do, won’t be nothing done between us but spooning. Unless that was your intention?”

“You know it wasn’t.”

She nodded. “Have ye set your friends to watch?”

“Aye,” he said, and then his face opened in that unexpected smile she loved so well. “But not where they can watch *us*.”

“Thank the gods for that,” she said, and laughed rather distractedly. Then she stepped closer to him, so close that he was hard put not to take her in his arms again. She looked curiously up into his face. “Who are you, really, Will?”

“Almost who I say I am. That’s the joke of this, Susan. My friends and I weren’t sent here because we were drunk and helling, but we weren’t sent here to uncover any fell plot or secret conspiracy, either. We were just boys to be put out of the way in a time of danger. All that’s happened since—” He shook his head to show how helpless he felt, and Susan thought again of her father saying *ka* was like a wind—when it came it might take your chickens, your house, your barn. Even your life.

“And is Will Dearborn your real name?”

He shrugged. “One name’s as good as another, I wot, if the heart that answers to it is true. Susan, you were at Mayor’s House today, for my friend Richard saw you ride up—”

“Aye, fittings,” she said. “For I am to be this year’s Reaping Girl—it’s Hart’s choice, nothing I ever would have had on my own, mark I say it. A lot of foolishness, and hard on Olive as well, I warrant.”

“You will make the most beautiful Reap-Girl that ever was,” he said, and the clear sincerity in his voice made her tingle with pleasure; her cheeks grew warm again. There were five changes of costume for the Reaping Girl between the noon feast and the bonfire at dusk, each more elaborate than the last (in Gilead there would have been nine; in that way, Susan didn’t know how lucky she was), and she would have worn all five happily for Will, had he been the Reaping Lad. (This year’s Lad was Jamie McCann, a pallid and whey-faced stand-in for Hart Thorin, who was approximately forty years too old and gray for the job.) Even more happily would she have worn the sixth—a silvery shift with wisp-thin straps and a hem

that stopped high on her thighs. This was a costume no one but Maria, her maid, Conchetta, her seamstress, and Hart Thorin would ever see. It was the one she would be wearing when she went to the old man's couch as his gilly, after the feast was over.

"When you were up there, did you see the ones who call themselves the Big Coffin Hunters?"

"I saw Jonas and the one with the cloak, standing together in the courtyard and talking," she said.

"Not Depape? The redhead?"

She shook her head.

"Do you know the game Castles, Susan?"

"Aye. My father showed me when I was small."

"Then you know how the red pieces stand at one end of the board and the white at the other. How they come around the Hillocks and creep toward each other, setting screens for cover. What's going on here in Hambry is very like that. And, as in the game, it has now become a question of who will break cover first. Do you understand?"

She nodded at once. "In the game, the first one around his Hillock is vulnerable."

"In life, too. Always. But sometimes even staying in cover is difficult. My friends and I have counted nearly everything we dare count. To count the rest—"

"The horses on the Drop, for instance."

"Aye, just so. To count them would be to break cover. Or the oxen we know about—"

Her eyebrows shot up. “There are no oxen in Hambry. Ye must be mistaken about that.”

“No mistake.”

“Where?”

“The Rocking H.”

Now her eyebrows drew back down, and knitted in a thoughtful frown. “That’s Laslo Rimer’s place.”

“Aye—Kimba’s brother. Nor are those the only treasures hidden away in Hambry these days. There are extra wagons, extra tack hidden in barns belonging to members of the Horsemen’s Association, extra caches of feed—”

“Will, *no!*”

“Yes. All that and more. But to count them—to be *seen* counting them—is to break cover. To risk being Castled. Our recent days have been pretty nightmarish—we try to look profitably busy without moving over to the Drop side of Hambry, where most of the danger lies. It’s harder and harder to do. Then we received a message—”

“A message? How? From whom?”

“Best you not know those things, I think. But it’s led us to believe that some of the answers we’re looking for may be at Citgo.”

“Will, d’ye think that what’s out here may help me to know more about what happened to my da?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible, I suppose, but not likely. All I know for sure is that I finally have a chance to count something that matters and not be seen doing it.” His blood had cooled enough for him to hold out his hand to her; Susan’s had cooled enough for her to take it in good confidence. She had put her glove back on again, however. Better safe than sorry.

“Come on,” she said. “I know a path.”

12

In the moon’s pale half-light, Susan led him out of the orange grove and toward the thump and squeak of the oilpatch. Those sounds made Roland’s back prickle; made him wish for one of the guns hidden under the bunkhouse floorboards back at the Bar K.

“Ye can trust me, Will, but that doesn’t mean I’ll be much help to ye,” she said in a voice just a notch above a whisper. “I’ve been within hearing distance of Citgo my whole life, but I could count the number of times I’ve actually been in it on the fingers of both hands, so I could. The first two or three were on dares from my friends.”

“And then?”

“With my da. He were always interested in the Old People, and my Aunt Cord always said he’d come to a bad end, meddling in their leavings.” She swallowed hard. “And he did come to a bad end, although I doubt it were the Old People responsible. Poor Da.”

They had reached a smoothwire fence. Beyond it, the gantries of the oil wells stood against the sky like sentinels the size of Lord Perth. How many had she said were still working? Nineteen, he thought. The sound of them was ghastly—the sound of monsters being choked to death. Of course it was the kind of place that kids dared each other to go into; a kind of open-air haunted house.

He held two of the wires apart so she could slip between them, and she did the same for him. As he passed through, he saw a line of white porcelain cylinders marching down the post closest to him. A fencewire went through each.

“You understand what these are? Were?” he asked Susan, tapping one of the cylinders.

“Aye. When there was electricity, some went through here.” She paused, then added shyly: “It’s how I feel when you touch me.”

He kissed her cheek just below her ear. She shivered and pressed a hand briefly against his cheek before drawing away.

“I hope your friends will watch well.”

“They will.”

“Is there a signal?”

“The whistle of the nighthawk. Let’s hope we don’t hear it.”

“Aye, be it so.” She took his hand and drew him into the oilpatch.

13

The first time the gas-jet flared ahead of them, Will spat a curse under his breath (an obscenely energetic one she hadn’t heard since her father died) and dropped the hand not holding hers to his belt.

“Be easy! It’s only the candle! The gas-pipe!”

He relaxed slowly. “That they use, don’t they?”

“Aye. To run a few machines—little more than toys, they are. To make ice, mostly.”

“I had some the day we met the Sheriff.”

When the flare licked out again—bright yellow with a bluish core—he didn’t jump. He glanced at the three gas-storage tanks behind what Hambry-folk called “the candle” without much interest. Nearby was a stack of rusty canisters in which the gas could be bottled and carried.

“You’ve seen such before?” she asked.

He nodded.

“The Inner Baronies must be very strange and wonderful,” Susan said.

“I’m beginning to think they’re no stranger than those of the Outer Arc,” he said, turning slowly. He pointed. “What’s yon building down there? Left over from the Old People?”

“Aye.”

To the east of Citgo, the ground dropped sharply down a thickly wooded slope with a lane cut through the middle of it—this lane was as clear in the moonlight as a part in hair. Not far from the bottom of the slope was a crumbling building surrounded by rubble. The tumble-and-strew was the detritus of many fallen smokestacks—that much could be extrapolated from the one which still stood. Whatever else the Old People had done, they had made lots of smoke.

“There were useful things in there when my da was a child,” she said. “Paper and such—even a few ink-writers that would still work . . . for a little while, at least. If you shook them hard.” She pointed to the left of the building, where there was a vast square of crumbled paving, and a few rusting hulks that had been the Old People’s weird, horseless mode of travel. “Once there were things over there that looked like the gas-storage tanks, only much, much larger. Like huge silver cans, they were. They didn’t rust like those that are left. I can’t think what became of them, unless someone hauled them off for water storage. I never would. ’Twould be unlucky, even if they weren’t contaminated.”

She turned her face up to his, and he kissed her mouth in the moonlight.

“Oh, Will. What a pity this is for you.”

“What a pity for both of us,” he said, and then passed between them one of those long and aching looks of which only teenagers are

capable. They looked away at last and walked on again, hand-in-hand.

She couldn't decide which frightened her more—the few derricks that were still pumping or those dozens which had fallen silent. One thing she knew for sure was that no power on the face of the earth could have gotten her within the fence of this place without a friend close beside her. The pumps wheezed; every now and then a cylinder screamed like someone being stabbed; at periodic intervals “the candle” would fire off with a sound like dragon's breath, throwing their shadows out long in front of them. Susan kept her ears pitched for the nighthawk's piercing two-note whistle, and heard nothing.

They came to a wide lane—what had once undoubtedly been a maintenance road—that split the oilpatch in two. Running down the center was a steel pipe with rusting joints. It lay in a deep concrete trough, with the upper arc of its rusty circumference protruding above ground level.

“What's this?” he asked.

“The pipe that took the oil to yon building, I reckon. It means nothing, 'tis been dry for years.”

He dropped to one knee, slid his hand carefully into the space between the concrete sleeve and the pipe's rusty side. She watched him nervously, biting her lip to keep herself from saying something which would surely come out sounding weak or womanish: What if there were biting spiders down there in the forgotten dark? Or what if his hand got stuck? What would they do then?

Of that latter there had been no chance, she saw when he pulled his hand free. It was slick and black with oil.

“Dry for years?” he asked with a little smile.

She could only shake her head, bewildered.

They followed the pipe toward a place where a rotten gate barred the road. The pipe (she could now see oil bleeding out of its old joints, even in the weak moonlight) ducked under the gate; they went over it. She thought his hands rather too intimate for polite company in their helping, and rejoiced at each touch. *If he doesn't stop, the top of my head will explode like "the candle,"* she thought, and laughed.

"Susan?"

" 'Tis nothing, Will, only nerves."

Another of those long glances passed between them as they stood on the far side of the gate, and then they went down the hill together. As they walked, she noticed an odd thing: many of the pines had been stripped of their lower branches. The hatchet marks and scabs of pine resin were clear in the moonlight, and looked new. She pointed this out to Will, who nodded but said nothing.

At the bottom of the hill, the pipe rose out of the ground and, supported on a series of rusty steel cradles, ran about seventy yards toward the abandoned building before stopping with the ragged suddenness of a battlefield amputation. Below this stopping point was what looked like a shallow lake of drying, tacky oil. That it had been there for awhile Susan could tell from the numerous corpses of birds she could see scattered across it—they had come down to investigate, become stuck, and stayed to die in what must have been an unpleasantly leisurely fashion.

She stared at this with wide, uncomprehending eyes until Will tapped her on the leg. He had hunkered down. She joined him knee-to-knee and followed the sweeping movement of his finger with growing disbelief and confusion. There were tracks here. Very big ones. Only one thing could have made them.

"Oxen," she said.

“Aye. They came from there.” He pointed at the place where the pipe ended. “And they go—” He turned on the soles of his boots, still hunkered, and pointed back toward the slope where the woods started. Now that he pointed them out, she easily saw what she should have seen at once, horseman’s daughter that she was. A perfunctory effort had been made to hide the tracks and the churned-up ground where something heavy had been dragged or rolled. Time had smoothed away more of the mess, but the marks were still clear. She even thought she knew what the oxen had been dragging, and she could see that Will knew, as well.

The tracks split off from the end of the pipe in two arcs. Susan and “Will Dearborn” followed the right-hand one. She wasn’t surprised to see ruts mingled in with the tracks of the oxen. They were shallow—it had been a dry summer, by and large, and the ground was nearly as hard as concrete—but they were there. To still be able to see them at all meant that some goodly amount of weight had been moved. And aye, of course; why else would oxen be needed?

“Look,” Will said as they neared the hem of forest at the foot of the slope. She finally saw what had caught his attention, but she had to get down on her hands and knees to do it—how sharp his eyes were! Almost supernaturally so. There were boot-tracks here. Not fresh, but they were a lot newer than the tracks of the oxen and the wheelruts.

“This was the one with the cape,” he said, indicating a clear pair of tracks. “Reynolds.”

“Will! Thee can’t know it!”

He looked surprised, then laughed. “Sure I can. He walks with one foot turned in a little—the left foot. And here it is.” He stirred the air over the tracks with the tip of his finger, then laughed again at the way she was looking at him. “ ’Tisn’t sorcery, Susan daughter of Patrick; only trailcraft.”

“How do ye know so much, so young?” she asked. “Who are ye, Will?”

He stood up and looked down into her eyes. He didn't have to look far; she was tall for a girl. “My name's not Will but Roland,” he said. “And now I've put my life in your hands. That I don't mind, but mayhap I've put your own life at risk, as well. You must keep it a dead secret.”

“Roland,” she said wonderingly. Tasting it.

“Aye. Which do you like better?”

“Your real one,” she said at once. “ 'Tis a noble name, so it is.”

He grinned, relieved, and this was the grin that made him look young again.

She raised herself on her toes and put her lips on his. The kiss, which was chaste and close-mouthed to begin with, bloomed like a flower: became open and slow and humid. She felt his tongue touch her lower lip and met it, shyly at first, with her own. His hands covered her back, then slipped around to her front. He touched her breasts, also shy to begin with, then slid his palms up their lower slopes to their tips. He uttered a small, moaning sigh directly into her mouth. And as he drew her closer and began to trail kisses down her neck, she felt the stone hardness of him below the buckle of his belt, a slim, warm length which exactly matched the melting she felt in the same place; those two places were meant for each other, as she was for him and he for her. It was *ka*, after all—*ka* like the wind, and she would go with it willingly, leaving all honor and promises behind.

She opened her mouth to tell him so, and then a queer but utterly persuasive sensation enfolded her: they were being watched. It was ridiculous, but it was there; she even felt she knew who was watching. She stepped back from Roland, her booted heels rocking unsteadily on the half-eroded oxen tracks. “Get out, ye old bitch,”

she breathed. “If ye be spying on us in some way, I know not how, *get thee gone!*”

15

On the hill of the Cöos, Rhea drew back from the glass, spitting curses in a voice so low and harsh that she sounded like her own snake. She didn't know what Susan had said—no sound came through the glass, only sight—but she knew that the girl had sensed her. And when she did, all sight had been wiped out. The glass had flashed a brilliant pink, then had gone dark, and none of the passes she made over it would serve to brighten it again.

“Aye, fine, let it be so,” she said at last, giving up. She remembered the wretched, prissy girl (not so prissy with the young man, though, was she?) standing hypnotized in her doorway, remembered what she had told the girl to do after she had lost her maidenhead, and began to grin, all her good humor restored. For if she lost her maidenhead to this wandering boy instead of to Hart Thorin, Lord High Mayor of Mejis, the comedy would be even greater, would it not?

Rhea sat in the shadows of her stinking hut and began to cackle.

16

Roland stared at her, wide-eyed, and as Susan explained about Rhea a little more fully (she left out the humiliating final examinations which lay at the heart of “proving honesty”), his desire cooled just enough for him to reassert control. It had nothing to do with jeopardizing the position he and his friends were trying to maintain in Hambry (or so he told himself) and everything to do with maintaining Susan's—her position was important, her honor even more so.

“I imagine it was your imagination,” he said when she had finished.

“I think not.” With a touch of coolness.

“Or conscience, even?”

At that she lowered her eyes and said nothing.

“Susan, I would not hurt you for the world.”

“And ye love me?” Still without looking up.

“Aye, I do.”

“Then it’s best you kiss and touch me no more—not tonight. I can’t stand it if ye do.”

He nodded without speaking and held out his hand. She took it, and they walked on in the direction they had been going when they had been so sweetly distracted.

While they were still ten yards from the hem of the forest, both saw the glimmer of metal despite the dense foliage—*too dense*, she thought. *Too dense by far.*

It was the pine-boughs, of course; the ones which had been whacked from the trees on the slope. What they had been interlaced to camouflage were the big silver cans now missing from the paved area. The silver storage containers had been dragged over here—by the oxen, presumably—and then concealed. But why?

Roland inspected along the line of tangled pine branches, then stopped and plucked several aside. This created an opening like a doorway, and he gestured her to go through. “Be sharp in your looks,” he said. “I doubt if they’ve bothered to set traps or tripwires, but ’tis always best to be careful.”

Behind the camouflaging boughs, the tankers had been as neatly lined up as toy soldiers at the end of the day, and Susan at once saw one reason why they had been hidden: they had been re-equipped with wheels, well-made ones of solid oak which came as high as her chest. Each had been rimmed with a thin iron strip. The wheels were

new, so were the strips, and the hubs had been custom-made. Susan knew only one blacksmith in Barony capable of such fine work: Brian Hookey, to whom she had gone for Felicia's new shoes. Brian Hookey, who had smiled and clapped her on the shoulder like a *compadre* when she had come in with her da's shoebag hanging on her hip. Brian Hookey, who had been one of Pat Delgado's best friends.

She recalled looking around and thinking that times had been good for sai Hookey, and of course she had been right. Work in the blacksmithing line had been plentiful. Hookey had been making lots of wheels and rims, for one thing, and someone must have been paying him to do it. Eldred Jonas was one possibility; Kimba Rimer an even better one. Hart? She simply couldn't believe that. Hart had his mind—what little there was of it—fixed on other matters this summer.

There was a kind of rough path behind the tankers. Roland walked slowly along it, pacing like a preacher with his hands clasped at the small of his back, reading the incomprehensible words writ upon the tankers' rear decks: CITGO. SUNOCO. EXXON. CONOCO. He paused once and read aloud, haltingly: "Cleaner fuel for a better tomorrow." He snorted softly. "Rot! *This* is tomorrow."

"Roland—Will, I mean—what are they *for*?"

He didn't answer at first, but turned and walked back down the line of bright steel cans. Fourteen on this side of the mysteriously reactivated oil-supply pipe, and, she assumed, a like number on the other. As he walked, he rapped his fist on the side of each. The sound was dull and clunky. They were full of oil from the Citgo oilpatch.

"They were trigged quite some time ago, I imagine," he said. "I doubt if the Big Coffin Hunters did it all themselves, but they no doubt oversaw it . . . first the fitting of the new wheels to replace the old rotten rubber ones, then the filling. They used the oxen to line them up here, at the base of the hill, because it was convenient. As

it's convenient to let the extra horses run free out on the Drop. Then, when we came, it seemed prudent to take the precaution of covering these up. Stupid babies we might be, but perhaps smart enough to wonder about twenty-eight loaded oil-carts with new wheels. So they came out here and covered them."

"Jonas, Reynolds, and Depape."

"Aye."

"But why?" She took him by the arm and asked her question again. "What are they *for*?"

"For Farson," Roland said with a calm he didn't feel. "For the Good Man. The Affiliation knows he's found a number of war-machines; they come either from the Old People or from some other where. Yet the Affiliation fears them not, because they don't work. They're silent. Some feel Farson has gone mad to put his trust in such broken things, but . . ."

"But mayhap they're not broken. Mayhap they only need this stuff. And mayhap Farson knows it."

Roland nodded.

She touched the side of one of the tankers. Her fingers came away oily. She rubbed the tips together, smelled them, then bent and picked up a swatch of grass to wipe her hands. "This doesn't work in our machines. It's been tried. It clogs them."

Roland nodded again. "My fa—my folk in the Inner Crescent know that as well. And count on it. But if Farson has gone to this trouble—*and* split aside a troop of men to come and get these tankers, as we have word he has done—he either knows a way to thin it to usefulness, or he thinks he does. If he's able to lure the forces of the Affiliation into a battle in some close location where rapid retreat is impossible, and if he can use machine-weapons like the ones that go

on treads, he could win more than a battle. He could slaughter ten thousand horse-mounted fighting men and win the war.”

“But surely yer fathers know this . . . ?”

Roland shook his head in frustration. How much their fathers knew was one question. What they made of what they knew was another. What forces drove them—necessity, fear, the fantastic pride which had also been handed down, father to son, along the line of Arthur Eld—was yet a third. He could only tell her his clearest surmise.

“I think they daren’t wait much longer to strike Farson a mortal blow. If they do, the Affiliation will simply rot out from the inside. And if that happens, a good deal of Mid-World will go with it.”

“But . . .” She paused, biting her lip, shaking her head. “Surely even Farson must know . . . understand . . .” She looked up at him with wide eyes. “The ways of the Old People are the ways of death. Everyone knows that, so they do.”

Roland of Gilead found himself remembering a cook named Hax, dangling at the end of a rope while the rooks pecked up scattered breadcrumbs from beneath the dead man’s feet. Hax had died for Farson. But before that, he had poisoned children for Farson.

“Death,” he said, “is what John Farson’s all about.”

17

In the orchard again.

It seemed to the lovers (for so they now were, in all but the most physical sense) that hours had passed, but it had been no more than forty-five minutes. Summer’s last moon, diminished but still bright, continued to shine above them.

She led him down one of the lanes to where she had tied her horse. Pylon nodded his head and whickered softly at Roland. He

saw the horse had been rigged for silence—every buckle padded, and the stirrups themselves wrapped in felt.

Then he turned to Susan.

Who can remember the pangs and sweetness of those early years? We remember our first real love no more clearly than the illusions that caused us to rave during a high fever. On that night and beneath that fading moon, Roland Deschain and Susan Delgado were nearly torn apart by their desire for each other; they floundered for what was right and ached with feelings that were both desperate and deep.

All of which is to say that they stepped toward each other, stepped back, looked into each other's eyes with a kind of helpless fascination, stepped forward again, and stopped. She remembered what he had said with a kind of horror: that he would do anything for her but share her with another man. She would not—perhaps *could* not—break her promise to Mayor Thorin, and it seemed that Roland would not (or *could* not) break it for her. And here was the most horrible thing of all: strong as the wind of *ka* might be, it appeared that honor and the promises they had made would prove stronger.

“What will ye do now?” she asked through dry lips.

“I don't know. I must think, and I must speak with my friends. Will you have trouble with your aunt when you go home? Will she want to know where you've been and what you've been doing?”

“Is it me you're concerned about or yourself and yer plans, Willy?”

He didn't respond, only looked at her. After a moment, Susan dropped her eyes.

“I'm sorry, that was cruel. No, she'll not tax me. I often ride at night, although not often so far from the house.”

“She won't know how far you've ridden?”

“Nay. And these days we tread carefully around each other. It’s like having two powder magazines in the same house.” She reached out her hands. She had tucked her gloves into her belt, and the fingers which grasped his fingers were cold. “This’ll have no good end,” she said in a whisper.

“Don’t say that, Susan.”

“Aye, I do. I must. But whatever comes, I love thee, Roland.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her. When he released her lips, she put them to his ear and whispered, “If you love me, then love me. Make me break my promise.”

For a long moment when her heart didn’t beat, there was no response from him, and she allowed herself to hope. Then he shook his head—only the one time, but firmly. “Susan, I cannot.”

“Is yer honor so much greater than yer professed love for me, then? Aye? Then let it be so.” She pulled out of his arms, beginning to cry, ignoring his hand on her boot as she swung up into the saddle—his low call to wait, as well. She yanked free the slipknot with which Pylon had been tethered and turned him with one spurless foot. Roland was still calling to her, louder now, but she flung Pylon into a gallop and away from him before her brief flare of rage could go out. He would not take her used, and her promise to Thorin had been made before she knew Roland walked the face of the earth. That being so, how dare he insist that the loss of honor and consequent shame be hers alone? Later, lying in her sleepless bed, she would realize he had insisted nothing. And she was not even clear of the orange grove before raising her left hand to the side of her face, feeling the wetness there, and realizing that he had been crying, too.

Roland rode the lanes outside town until well past moonset, trying to get his roaring emotions under some kind of control. He would

wonder for awhile what he was going to do about their discovery at Citgo, and then his thoughts would shift to Susan again. Was he a fool for not taking her when she wanted to be taken? For not sharing what she wanted to share? *If you love me, then love me.* Those words had nearly torn him open. Yet in the deep rooms of his heart—rooms where the clearest voice was that of his father—he felt he had not been wrong. Nor was it just a matter of honor, whatever she might think. But let her think that if she would; better she should hate him a little, perhaps, than realize how deep the danger was for both of them.

Around three o' the clock, as he was about to turn for the Bar K, he heard the rapid drumming of hoofbeats on the main road, approaching from the west. Without thinking about why it seemed so important to do so, Roland swung back in that direction, then brought Rusher to a stop behind a high line of run-to-riot hedges. For nearly ten minutes the sound of the hoofbeats continued to swell—sound carried far in the deep quiet of early morning—and that was quite enough time for Roland to feel he knew who was riding toward Hambry hell-for-leather just two hours before dawn. Nor was he mistaken. The moon was down, but he had no trouble, even through the brambly interstices of the hedge, recognizing Roy Depape. By dawn the Big Coffin Hunters would be three again.

Roland turned Rusher back the way he had been heading, and rode to rejoin his own friends.

CHAPTER X BIRD AND BEAR AND HARE AND FISH

1

The most important day of Susan Delgado's life—the day upon which her life turned like a stone upon a pivot—came about two weeks after her moonlit tour of the oilpatch with Roland. Since then she had seen him only half a dozen times, always at a distance, and they had raised their hands as passing acquaintances do when their errands bring them briefly into sight of one another. Each time this happened, she felt a pain as sharp as a knife twisting in her . . . and though it was no doubt cruel, she hoped he felt the same twist of the knife. If there was anything good about those two miserable weeks, it was only that her great fear—that gossip might begin about herself and the young man who called himself Will Dearborn—subsided, and she found herself actually sorry to feel it ebb. Gossip? There was nothing to gossip *about*.

Then, on a day between the passing of the Peddler's Moon and the rise of the Huntress, *ka* finally came and blew her away—house and barn and all. It began with someone at the door.

2

She had been finishing the washing—a light enough chore with only two women to do it for—when the knock came.

“If it's the ragman, send him away, ye mind!” Aunt Cord called from the other room, where she was turning bed-linen.

But it wasn't the ragman. It was Maria, her maid from Seafront, looking woeful. The second dress Susan was to wear on Reaping

Day—the silk meant for luncheon at Mayor’s House and the Conversational afterward—was ruined, Maria said, and she was in hack because of it. Would be sent back to Onnie’s Ford if she wasn’t lucky, and she the only support of her mother and father—oh, it was hard, much too hard, so it was. Could Susan come? Please?

Susan was happy to come—was always happy to get out of the house these days, and away from her aunt’s shrewish, nagging voice. The closer Reaping came, the less she and Aunt Cord could abide each other, it seemed.

They took Pylon, who was happy enough to carry two girls riding double through the morning cool, and Maria’s story was quickly told. Susan understood almost at once that Maria’s position at Seafront wasn’t really in much jeopardy; the little dark-haired maid had simply been using her innate (and rather charming) penchant for creating drama out of what was really not very dramatic at all.

The second Reaping dress (which Susan thought of as Blue Dress With Beads; the first, her breakfast dress, was White Dress With High Waist and Puffed Sleeves) had been kept apart from the others—it needed a bit of work yet—and something had gotten into the first-floor sewing room and gnawed it pretty much to rags. If this had been the costume she was to wear to the bonfire-lighting, or the one she was to wear to the ballroom dance after the bonfire had been lit, the matter would indeed have been serious. But Blue Dress With Beads was essentially just a fancified day receiving dress, and could easily be replaced in the two months between now and the Reap. Only two! Once—on the night the old witch had granted her her reprieve—it had seemed like eons before she would have to begin her bed-service to Mayor Thorin. And now it was only two months! She twisted in a kind of involuntary protest at the thought.

“Mum?” Maria asked. Susan wouldn’t allow the girl to call her sai, and Maria, who seemed incapable of calling her mistress by her given name, had settled on this compromise. Susan found the term amusing, given the fact that she was only sixteen, and Maria herself probably just two or three years older. “Mum, are you all right?”

“Just a crick in my back, Maria, that’s all.”

“Aye, I get those. Fair bad, they are. I’ve had three aunts who’ve died of the wasting disease, and when I get those twinges, I’m always afeard that—”

“What kind of animal chewed up Blue Dress? Do ye know?”

Maria leaned forward so she could speak confidentially into her mistress’s ear, as if they were in a crowded marketplace alley instead of on the road to Seafront. “It’s put about that a raccoon got in through a window that ’us opened during the heat of the day and was then forgot at day’s end, but I had a good sniff of that room, and Kimba Rimer did, too, when he came down to inspect. Just before he sent me after you, that was.”

“What did you smell?”

Maria leaned close again, and this time she actually whispered, although there was no one on the road to overhear: “Dog farts.”

There was a moment of thunderstruck silence, and then Susan began to laugh. She laughed until her stomach hurt and tears went streaming down her cheeks.

“Are ye saying that W-W-Wolf . . . the Mayor’s own *d-d-dog* . . . got into the downstairs seamstress’s closet and chewed up my Conversational d-d—” But she couldn’t finish. She was simply laughing too hard.

“Aye,” Maria said stoutly. She seemed to find nothing unusual about Susan’s laughter . . . which was one of the things Susan loved about her. “But he’s not to be blamed, so I say, for a dog will follow his natural instincts, if the way is open for him to do so. The downstairs maids—” She broke off. “You’d not tell the Mayor or Kimba Rimer this, I suppose, Mum?”

“Maria, I’m shocked at you—ye play me cheap.”

“No, Mum, I play ye dear, so I do, but it’s always best to be safe. All I meant to say was that, on hot days, the downstairs maids sometimes go into that sewing closet for their fives. It lies directly in the shadow of the watchtower, ye know, and is the coolest room in the house—even cooler than the main receiving rooms.”

“I’ll remember that,” Susan said. She thought of holding the Luncheon and Conversational in the seamstress’s beck beyond the kitchen when the great day came, and began to giggle again. “Go on.”

“No more to say, Mum,” Maria told her, as if all else were too obvious for conversation. “The maids eat their cakes and leave the crumbs. I reckon Wolf smelled em and this time the door was left open. When the crumbs was gone, he tried the dress. For a second course, like.”

This time they laughed together.

3

But she wasn’t laughing when she came home.

Cordelia Delgado, who thought the happiest day of her life would be the one when she finally saw her troublesome niece out the door and the annoying business of her defloration finally over, bolted out of her chair and hurried to the kitchen window when she heard the gallop of approaching hoofs about two hours after Susan had left with that little scrap of a maid to have one of her dresses refitted. She never doubted that it was Susan returning, and she never doubted it was trouble. In ordinary circumstances, the silly twist would never gallop one of her beloved horses on a hot day.

She watched, nervously dry-washing her hands, as Susan pulled Pylon up in a very unDelgado-like scrunch, then dismounted in an unladylike leap. Her braid had come half undone, spraying that damned blonde hair that was her vanity (and her curse) in all directions. Her skin was pale, except for twin patches of color flaring

high on her cheekbones. Cordelia didn't like the look of those at all. Pat had always flared in that same place when he was scared or angry.

She stood at the sink, now biting her lips as well as working her hands. Oh, 'twould be so good to see the back of that troublesome she. "Ye haven't made trouble, have ye?" she whispered as Susan pulled the saddle from Pylon's back and then led him toward the barn. "You better not have, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. Not at this late date. You better not have."

4

When Susan came in twenty minutes later, there was no sign of her aunt's strain and rage; Cordelia had put them away as one might store a dangerous weapon—a gun, say—on a high closet shelf. She was back in her rocker, knitting, and the face she turned to Susan's entry had a surface serenity. She watched the girl go to the sink, pump cold water into the basin, and then splash it on her face. Instead of reaching for a towel to pat herself dry, Susan only looked out the window with an expression that frightened Cordelia badly. The girl no doubt fancied that look haunted and desperate; to Cordelia, it looked only childishly willful.

"All right, Susan," she said in a calm, modulated voice. The girl would never know what a strain it was to achieve that tone, let alone maintain it. Unless she was faced with a willful teenager of her own one day, that was. "What's fashed thee so?"

Susan turned to her—Cordelia Delgado, just sitting there in her rocker, calm as a stone. In that moment Susan felt she could fly at her aunt and claw her thin, self-righteous face to strings, screaming *This is your fault! Yours! All yours!* She felt soiled—no, that wasn't strong enough; she felt *filthy*, and nothing had really happened. In a way, that was the horror of it. Nothing had really happened *yet*.

"It shows?" was all she said.

“Of course it does,” Cordelia replied. “Now tell me, girl. Has he been on thee?”

“Yes. . .no. . .no.”

Aunt Cord sat in her chair, knitting in her lap, eyebrows raised, waiting for more.

At last Susan told her what had happened, speaking in a tone that was mostly flat—a little tremble intruded toward the end, but that was all. Aunt Cord began to feel a cautious sort of relief. Perhaps more goose-girl nerves was all it came down to, after all!

The substitute gown, like all the substitutes, hadn't been finished off; there was too much else to do. Maria had therefore turned Susan over to blade-faced Conchetta Morgen-stern, the chief seamstress, who had led Susan into the downstairs sewing room without saying anything—if saved words were gold, Susan had sometimes reflected, Conchetta would be as rich as the Mayor's sister was reputed to be.

Blue Dress With Beads was draped over a headless dressmaker's dummy crouched beneath one low eave, and although Susan could see ragged places on the hem and one small hole around to the back, it was by no means the tattered ruin she had been expecting.

“Can it not be saved?” she asked, rather timidly.

“No,” Conchetta said curtly. “Get out of those trousers, girl. Shirt, too.”

Susan did as she was bid, standing barefoot in the cool little room with her arms crossed over her bosom . . . not that Conchetta had ever shown the slightest interest in what she had, back or front, above or below.

Blue Dress With Beads was to be replaced by Pink Dress With Appliqué, it seemed. Susan stepped into it, raised the straps, and

stood patiently while Conchetta bent and measured and muttered, sometimes using a bit of chalk to write numbers on a wall-stone, sometimes grabbing a swag of material and pulling it tighter against Susan's hip or waist, checking the look in the full-length mirror on the far wall. As always during this process, Susan slipped away mentally, allowing her mind to go where it wanted. Where it wanted to go most frequently these days was into a daydream of riding along the Drop with Roland, the two of them side by side, finally stopping in a willow grove she knew that overlooked Hambry Creek.

“Stand there still as you can,” Conchetta said curtly. “I be back.”

Susan was hardly aware she was gone; was hardly aware she was in Mayor's House at all. The part of her that really mattered *wasn't* there. That part was in the willow grove with Roland. She could smell the faint half-sweet, half-acrid perfume of the trees and hear the quiet gossip of the stream as they lay down together forehead to forehead. He traced the shape of her face with the palm of his hand before taking her in his arms . . .

This daydream was so strong that at first Susan responded to the arms which curled around her waist from behind, arching her back as they first caressed her stomach and then rose to cup her breasts. Then she heard a kind of plowing, snorting breath in her ear, smelled tobacco, and understood what was happening. Not Roland touching her breasts, but Hart Thorin's long and skinny fingers. She looked in the mirror and saw him looming over her left shoulder like an incubus. His eyes were bulging, there were big drops of sweat on his forehead in spite of the room's coolness, and his tongue was actually hanging out, like a dog's on a hot day. Revulsion rose in her throat like the taste of rotten food. She tried to pull away and his hands tightened their hold, pulling her against him. His knuckles cracked obscenely, and now she could feel the hard lump at the center of him.

At times over the last few weeks, Susan had allowed herself to hope that, when the time came, Thorin would be incapable—that he would be able to make no iron at the forge. She had heard this often

happened to men when they got older. The hard, throbbing column which lay against her bottom disabused her of that wistful notion in a hurry.

She had managed at least a degree of diplomacy by simply putting her hands over his and attempting to draw them off her breasts instead of pulling away from him again (Cordelia, impassive, not showing the great relief she felt at this).

“Mayor Thorin—Hart—you mustn’t—this is hardly the place and not yet the time—Rhea said—”

“Balls to her and all witches!” His cultured politician’s tones had been replaced by an accent as thick as that in the voice of any back-country farmhand from Onnie’s Ford. “I must have something, a bonbon, aye, so I must. Balls to the witch, I say! Owlshit to ’er!” The smell of tobacco a thick reek around her head. She thought that she would vomit if she had to smell it much longer. “Just stand still, girl. Stand still, my temptation. Mind me well!”

Somehow she did. There was even some distant part of her mind, a part totally dedicated to self-preservation, that hoped he would mistake her shudders of revulsion for maidenly excitement. He had drawn her tight against him, hands working energetically on her breasts, his respiration a stinky steam-engine in her ear. She stood back to him, her eyes closed, tears squeezing out from beneath the lids and through the fringes of her lashes.

It didn’t take him long. He rocked back and forth against her, moaning like a man with stomach cramps. At one point he licked the lobe of her ear, and Susan thought her skin would crawl right off her body in its revulsion. Finally, thankfully, she felt him begin to spasm against her.

“Oh, aye, get out, ye damned poison!” he said in a voice that was almost a squeal. He pushed so hard she had to brace her hands against the wall to keep from being driven face-first into it. Then he at last stepped back.

For a moment Susan only stood as she was, with her palms against the rough cold stone of the sewing room wall. She could see Thorin in the mirror, and in his image she saw the ordinary doom that was rushing at her, the ordinary doom of which this was but a foretaste: the end of girlhood, the end of romance, the end of dreams where she and Roland lay together in the willow grove with their foreheads touching. The man in the mirror looked oddly like a boy himself, one who's been up to something he wouldn't tell his mother about. Just a tall and gangly lad with strange gray hair and narrow twitching shoulders and a wet spot on the front of his trousers. Hart Thorin looked as if he didn't quite know where he was. In that moment the lust was flushed out of his face, but what replaced it was no better—that vacant confusion. It was as if he were a bucket with a hole in the bottom: no matter what you put in it, or how much, it always ran out before long.

He'll do it again, she thought, and felt an immense tiredness creep over her. *Now that he's done it once, he'll do it every chance he gets, likely. From now on coming up here is going to be like . . . well . . .*

Like Castles. Like playing at Castles.

Thorin looked at her a moment longer. Slowly, like a man in a dream, he pulled the tail of his billowy white shirt out of his pants and let it drop around him like a skirt, covering the wet spot. His chin gleamed; he had drooled in his excitement. He seemed to feel this and wiped the wetness away with the heel of one hand, looking at her with those empty eyes all the while. Then some expression at last came into them, and without another word he turned and left the room.

There was a little scuffling thud in the hall as he collided with someone out there. Susan heard him mutter "Sorry! Sorry!" under his breath (it was more apology than he'd given her, muttered or not), and then Conchetta stepped back into the room. The swatch of cloth she'd gone after was draped around her shoulders like a stole. She took in Susan's pale face and tearstained cheeks at once. *She'll say nothing*, Susan thought. *None of them will, just as none of them will*

lift a finger to help me off this stick I've run myself on. "Ye sharpened it yourself, gilly," they'd say if I called for help, and that'll be their excuse for leaving me to wriggle.

But Conchetta had surprised her. "Life's hard, missy, so it is. Best get used to it."

5

Susan's voice—dry, by now pretty much stripped of emotion—at last ceased. Aunt Cord put her knitting aside, got up, and put the kettle on for tea.

"Ye dramatize, Susan." She spoke in a voice that strove to be both kind and wise, and succeeded at neither. "It's a trait ye get from your Manchester side—half of them fancied themselves poets, t'other half fancied themselves painters, and almost all of them spent their nights too drunk to tap-dance. He grabbed yer titties and gave yer a dry-hump, that's all. Nothing to be so upset over. Certainly nothing to lose sleep over."

"How would you know?" Susan asked. It was disrespectful, but she was beyond caring. She thought she'd reached a point where she could bear anything from her aunt except that patronizing worldly-wise tone of voice. It stung like a fresh scrape.

Cordelia raised an eyebrow and spoke without rancor. "How ye do love to throw that up to me! Aunt Cord, the dry old stick. Aunt Cord the spinster. Aunt Cord the graying virgin. Aye? Well, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, virgin I *might* be, but I had a lover or two back when I was young . . . before the world moved on, ye might say. Mayhap one was the great Fran Lengyll."

And mayhap not, Susan thought; Fran Lengyll was her aunt's senior by at least fifteen years, perhaps as many as twenty-five.

"I've felt old Tom's goat on my backside a time or two, Susan. Aye, and on my frontside as well."

“And were any of these lovers sixty, with bad breath and knuckles that cracked when they squeezed your titties, Aunt? Did any of them try to push you through the nearest wall when old Tom began to wag his beard and say baa-baa-baa?”

The rage she expected did not come. What did was worse—an expression close to the look of emptiness she had seen on Thorin’s face in the mirror. “Deed’s done, Susan.” A smile, short-lived and awful, flickered like an eyelid on her aunt’s narrow face. “Deed’s done, aye.”

In a kind of terror Susan cried: “My father would have hated this! *Hated* it! And hated you for allowing it to happen! For *encouraging* it to happen!”

“Mayhap,” Aunt Cord said, and the awful smile winked at her again. “Mayhap so. And the only thing he’d hate more? The dishonor of a broken promise, the shame of a faithless child. He would want thee to go on with it, Susan. If thee would remember his face, thee *must* go on with it.”

Susan looked at her, mouth drawn down in a trembling arc, eyes filling with tears again. *I’ve met someone I love!* That was what she would have told her if she could. *Don’t you understand how that changes things? I’ve met someone I love!* But if Aunt Cord had been the sort of person to whom she could have said such a thing, Susan would likely never have been impaled on this stick to begin with. So she turned and stumbled from the house without saying anything, her streaming eyes blurring her vision and filling the late summer world with rueful color.

6

She rode with no conscious idea of where she was going, yet some part of her must have had a very specific destination in mind, because forty minutes after leaving her house, she found herself approaching the very grove of willows she had been daydreaming

about when Thorin had crept up behind her like some bad elf out of a gammer's story.

It was blessedly cool in the willows. Susan tied Felicia (whom she had ridden out bareback) to a branch, then walked slowly across the little clearing which lay at the heart of the grove. Here the stream passed, and here she sat on the springy moss which carpeted the clearing. Of course she had come here; it was where she had brought all her secret griefs and joys since she had discovered the clearing at the age of eight or nine. It was here she had come, time and time again, in the nearly endless days after her father's death, when it had seemed to her that the very world—her version of it, at least—had ended with Pat Delgado. It was only this clearing that had heard the full and painful measure of her grief; to the stream she had spoken it, and the stream had carried it away.

Now a fresh spate of tears took her. She put her head on her knees and sobbed—loud, unladylike sounds like the caw of squabbling crows. In that moment she thought she would have given anything—*everything*—to have her father back for one minute, to ask him if she must go on with this.

She wept above the brook, and when she heard the sound of a snapping branch, she started and looked back over her shoulder in terror and chagrin. This was her secret place and she didn't want to be found here, especially not when she was bawling like a kiddie who has fallen and bumped her head. Another branch snapped. Someone was here, all right, invading her secret place at the worst possible time.

"Go away!" she screamed in a tear-clotted voice she barely recognized. "Go away, whoever ye are, be decent and leave me alone!"

But the figure—she could now see it—kept coming. When she saw who it was, she at first thought that Will Dearborn (*Roland*, she thought, *his real name is Roland*) must be a figment of her overstrained imagination. She wasn't entirely sure he was real until

he knelt and put his arms around her. Then she hugged him with panicky tightness. “How did you know I was—”

“Saw you riding across the Drop. I was at a place where I go to think sometimes, and I saw you. I wouldn’t have followed, except I saw that you were riding bareback. I thought something might be wrong.”

“Everything’s wrong.”

Deliberately, with his eyes wide open and serious, he began kissing her cheeks. He had done it several times on both sides of her face before she realized he was kissing her tears away. Then he took her by the shoulders and held her back from him so he could look into her eyes.

“Say it again and I will, Susan. I don’t know if that’s a promise or a warning or both at the same time, but . . . say it again and I will.”

There was no need to ask him what he meant. She seemed to feel the ground move beneath her, and later she would think that for the first and only time in her life she had actually felt *ka*, a wind that came not from the sky but from the earth. *It has come to me, after all*, she thought. *My ka, for good or ill.*

“Roland!”

“Yes, Susan.”

She dropped her hand below his belt-buckle and grasped what was there, her eyes never leaving his.

“If you love me, then love me.”

“Aye, lady. I will.”

He unbuttoned his shirt, made in a part of Mid-World she would never see, and took her in his arms.

Ka:

They helped each other with their clothes; they lay naked in each other's arms on summer moss as soft as the finest goosedown. They lay with their foreheads touching, as in her daydream, and when he found his way into her, she felt pain melt into sweetness like some wild and exotic herb that may only be tasted once in each lifetime. She held that taste as long as she could, until at last the sweetness overcame it and she gave in to that, moaning deep in her throat and rubbing her forearms against the sides of his neck. They made love in the willow grove, questions of honor put aside, promises broken without so much as a look back, and at the end of it Susan discovered there was more than sweetness; there was a kind of delirious clinching of the nerves that began in the part of her that had opened before him like a flower; it began there and then filled her entire body. She cried out again and again, thinking there could not be so much pleasure in the mortal world; she would die of it. Roland added his voice to hers, and the sound of water rushing over stones wrapped around both. As she pulled him closer to her, locking her ankles together behind his knees and covering his face with fierce kisses, his going out rushed after hers as if trying to catch up. So were lovers joined in the Barony of Mejis, near the end of the last great age, and the green moss beneath the place where her thighs joined turned a pretty red as her virginity passed; so were they joined and so were they doomed.

Ka.

They lay together in each other's arms, sharing afterglow kisses beneath Felicia's mild gaze, and Roland felt himself drowsing. This was understandable—the strain on him that summer had been enormous, and he had been sleeping badly. Although he didn't know it then, he would sleep badly for the rest of his life.

“Roland?” Her voice, distant. Sweet, as well.

“Yes?”

“Will thee take care of me?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t go to him when the time comes. I can bear his touching, and his little thefts—if I have you, I can—but I can’t go to him on Reap Night. I don’t know if I’ve forgotten the face of my father or not, but I cannot go to Hart Thorin’s bed. There are ways the loss of a girl’s virginity can be concealed, I think, but I won’t use them. I simply cannot go to his bed.”

“All right,” he said, “good.” And then, as her eyes widened in startlement, he looked around. No one was there. He looked back at Susan, fully awake now. “What? What is it?”

“I might already be carrying your child,” she said. “Has thee thought of that?”

He hadn’t. Now he did. A child. Another link in the chain stretching back into the dimness where Arthur Eld had led his gunslingers into battle with the great sword Excalibur raised above his head and the crown of All-World on his brow. But never mind that; what would his father think? Or Gabrielle, to know she had become a grandmother?

A little smile had formed at the corners of his mouth, but the thought of his mother drove it away. He thought of the mark on her neck. When his mother came to his mind these days, he *always* thought of the mark he’d seen on her neck when he came unexpected into her apartment. And the small, rueful smile on her face.

“If you carry my child, such is my good fortune,” he said.

“And mine.” It was her turn to smile, but it had a sad look to it all the same, that smile. “We’re too young, I suppose. Little more than kiddies ourselves.”

He rolled onto his back and looked up at the blue sky. What she said might be true, but it didn’t matter. Truth was sometimes not the same as reality—this was one of the certainties that lived in the hollow, cavey place at the center of his divided nature. That he could rise above both and willingly embrace the insanity of romance was a gift from his mother. All else in his nature was humorless . . . and, perhaps more important, without metaphor. That they were too young to be parents? What of that? If he had planted a seed, it would grow.

“Whatever comes, we’ll do as we must. And I’ll always love you, no matter what comes.”

She smiled. He said it as a man would state any dry fact: sky is up, earth is down, water flows south.

“Roland, how old *are* you?” She was sometimes troubled by the idea that, young as she herself was, Roland was even younger. When he was concentrating on something, he could look so hard he frightened her. When he smiled, he looked not like a lover but a kid brother.

“Older than I was when I came here,” he said. “Older by far. And if I have to stay in sight of Jonas and his men another six months, I’ll be hobbling and needing a boost in the arse to get aboard my horse.”

She grinned at that, and he kissed her nose.

“And thee’ll take care of me?”

“Aye,” he said, and grinned back at her. Susan nodded, then also turned on her back. They lay that way, hip to hip, looking up at the sky. She took his hand and placed it on her breast. As he stroked the

nipple with his thumb, it raised its head, grew hard, and began to tingle. This sensation slipped quickly down her body to the place that was still throbbing between her legs. She squeezed her thighs together and was both delighted and dismayed to find that doing so only made matters worse.

“Ye *must* take care of me,” she said in a low voice. “I’ve pinned everything on you. All else is cast aside.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said. “Never doubt it. But for now, Susan, you must go on as you have been. There’s more time yet to pass; I know that because Depape is back and will have told his tale, but they still haven’t moved in any way against us. Whatever he found out, Jonas still thinks it’s in his interest to wait. That’s apt to make him more dangerous when he *does* move, but for now it’s still Castles.”

“But after the Reaping Bonfire—Thorin—”

“You’ll never go to his bed. That you can count on. I set my warrant on it.”

A little shocked at her own boldness, she reached below his waist. “Here’s a warrant ye can set on me, if ye would,” she said.

He would. Could. And did.

When it was over (for Roland it had been even sweeter than the first time, if that was possible), he asked her: “That feeling you had out at Citgo, Susan—of being watched. Did you have it this time?”

She looked at him long and thoughtfully. “I don’t know. My mind was in other places, ye ken.” She touched him gently, then laughed as he jumped—the nerves in the half-hard, half-soft place where her palm stroked were still very lively, it seemed.

She took her hand away and looked up at the circle of sky above the grove. “So beautiful here,” she murmured, and her eyes drifted closed.

Roland also felt himself drifting. It was ironic, he thought. This time she hadn't had that sensation of being watched . . . but the second time, he had. Yet he would have sworn there was no one near this grove.

No matter. The feeling, megrim or reality, was gone now. He took Susan's hand, and felt her fingers slip naturally through his, entwining.

He closed his eyes.

9

All of this Rhea saw in the glass, and very interesting viewing it made, aye, very interesting, indeed. But she'd seen shagging before—sometimes with three or four or even more doing it all at the same time (sometimes with partners who were not precisely alive)—and the hokey-pokey wasn't very interesting to her at her advanced age. What she was interested in was what would come *after* the hokey-pokey.

Is our business done? the girl had asked.

Mayhap there's one more little thing, Rhea had responded, and then she told the impudent trull what to do.

Aye, she'd given the girl very clear instructions as the two of them stood in the hut doorway, the Kissing Moon shining down on them as Susan Delgado slept the strange sleep and Rhea stroked her braid and whispered instructions in her ear. Now would come the fulfillment of that interlude . . . and that was what she wanted to see, not two babbies shagging each other like they were the first two on earth to discover how 'twas done.

Twice they did it with hardly a pause to natter in between (she would have given a good deal to hear that natter, too). Rhea wasn't surprised; at his young age, she supposed the brat had enough spunkum in his sack to give her a week's worth of doubles, and from

the way the little slut acted, that might be to her taste. Some of them discovered it and never wanted aught else; this was one, Rhea thought.

But let's see how sexy you feel in a few minutes, you snippy bitch, she thought, and leaned deeper into the pulsing pink light thrown from the glass. She could sometimes feel that light aching in the very bones of her face . . . but it was a *good* ache. Aye, very good indeed.

They were at last done . . . for the time being, at least. They clasped hands and drifted off to sleep.

“Now,” Rhea murmured. “Now, my little one. Be a good girl and do as ye were told.”

As if hearing her, Susan's eyes opened—but there was nothing in them. They woke and slept at the same time. Rhea saw her gently pull her hand free of the boy's. She sat up, bare breasts against bare thighs, and looked around. She got to her feet—

That was when Musty, the six-legged cat, jumped into Rhea's lap, *waowing* for either food or affection. The old woman shrieked with surprise, and the wizard's glass at once went dark—puffed out like a candleflame in a gust of wind.

Rhea shrieked again, this time with rage, and seized the cat before it could flee. She hurled it across the room, into the fireplace. That was as dead a hole as only a summer fireplace can be, but when Rhea cast a bony, misshapen hand at it, a yellow gust of flame rose from the single half-charred log lying in there. Musty screamed and fled from the hearth with his eyes wide and his split tail smoking like an indifferently butted cigar.

“Run, aye!” Rhea spat after him. “Begone, ye vile cusk!”

She turned back to the glass and spread her hands over it, thumb to thumb. But although she concentrated with all her might, willed

until her heart was beating with a sick fury in her chest, she could do no more than bring back the ball's natural pink glow. No images appeared. This was bitterly disappointing, but there was nothing to be done. And in time she would be able to see the results with her own two natural eyes, if she cared to go to town and do so.

Everybody would be able to see.

Her good humor restored, Rhea returned the ball to its hiding place.

10

Only moments before he would have sunk too deep in sleep to have heard it, a warning bell went off in Roland's mind. Perhaps it was the faint realization that her hand was no longer entwined with his; perhaps it was raw intuition. He could have ignored that faint bell, and almost did, but in the end his training was too strong. He came up from the threshold of real sleep, fighting his way back to clarity as a diver kicks for the surface of a quarry. It was hard at first, but became easier; as he neared wakefulness, his alarm grew.

He opened his eyes and looked to his left. Susan was no longer there. He sat up, looked to his right, and saw nothing above the cut of the stream . . . yet he felt that she was in that direction, all the same.

"Susan?"

No response. He got up, looked at his pants, and Cort—a visitor he never would have expected in such a romantic bower as this—spoke up gruffly in his mind. *No time, maggot.*

He walked naked to the bank and looked down. Susan was there, all right, also naked, her back to him. She had unbraided her hair. It hung, loose gold, almost all the way to the lyre of her hips. The chill air rising from the surface of the stream shivered the tips of it like mist.

She was down on one knee at the edge of the running water. One arm was plunged into it almost to the elbow; she searched for something, it seemed.

“Susan!”

No answer. And now a cold thought came to him: *She’s been infested by a demon. While I slept, heedless, beside her, she’s been infested by a demon.* Yet he did not think he really believed that. If there had been a demon near this clearing, he would have felt it. Likely both of them would have felt it; the horses, too. But *something* was wrong with her.

She brought an object up from the streambed and held it before her eyes in her dripping hand. A stone. She examined it, then tossed it back—*plunk*. She reached in again, head bent, two sheafs of her hair now actually floating on the water, the stream prankishly tugging them in the direction it flowed.

“Susan!”

No response. She plucked another stone out of the stream. This one was a triangular white quartz, shattered into a shape that was almost like the head of a spear. Susan tilted her head to the left and took a sheaf of her hair in her hand, like a woman who means to comb out a nest of tangles. But there was no comb, only the rock with its sharp edge, and for a moment longer Roland remained on the bank, frozen with horror, sure that she meant to cut her own throat out of shame and guilt over what they’d done. In the weeks to come, he was haunted by a clear knowledge: if it *had* been her throat she’d intended, he wouldn’t have been in time to stop her.

Then the paralysis broke and he hurled himself down the bank, unmindful of the sharp stones that gouged the soles of his feet. Before he reached her, she had already used the edge of the quartz to cut off part of the golden tress she held.

Roland seized her wrist and pulled it back. He could see her face clearly now. What could have been mistaken for serenity from the top of the bank now looked like what it really was: vacuity, emptiness.

When he took hold of her, the smoothness of her face was replaced by a dim and fretful smile; her mouth quivered as if she felt distant pain, and an almost formless sound of negation came from her mouth: “Nnnnnnnnn—”

Some of the hair she had cut off lay on her thigh like gold wire; most had fallen into the stream and been carried away. Susan pulled against Roland’s hand, trying to get the sharp edge back to her hair, wanting to continue her mad barbering. The two of them strove together like arm-wrestlers in a barroom contest. And Susan was winning. He was physically the stronger, but not stronger than the enchantment which held her. Little by little the white triangle of quartz moved back toward her hanging hair. That frightening sound—*Nnnnnnnnn*—kept drifting from her mouth.

“Susan! Stop it! Wake up!”

“Nnnnnnnnn—”

Her bare arm quivering visibly in the air, the muscles bunched like hard little rocks. And the quartz moving closer and closer to her hair, her cheek, the socket of her eye.

Without thinking about it—it was the way he always acted most successfully—Roland moved his face close to the side of hers, giving up another four inches to the fist holding the stone in order to do it. He put his lips against the cup of her ear and then clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Clucked sidemouth, in fact.

Susan jerked back from that sound, which must have gone through her head like a spear. Her eyelids fluttered rapidly, and the pressure she was exerting against Roland’s grip eased a little. He took the chance and twisted her wrist.

“Ow! Owwww!”

The stone flew out of her opening hand and splashed into the water. Susan gazed at him, now fully awake, her eyes filled with tears and bewilderment. She was rubbing her wrist . . . which, Roland thought, was likely to swell.

“Ye hurt me, Roland! Why did ye hurt m . . .”

She trailed off, looking around. Now not just her face but the whole set of her body expressed bewilderment. She moved to cover herself with her hands, then realized they were still alone and dropped them to her sides. She glanced over her shoulder at the footprints—all of them bare—leading down the bank.

“How did I get down here?” she asked. “Did thee carry me, after I fell asleep? And why did thee hurt me? Oh, Roland, I love thee—why did ye hurt me?”

He picked up the strands of hair that still lay on her thigh and held them in front of her. “You had a stone with a sharp edge. You were trying to cut yourself with it, and you didn’t want to stop. I hurt you because I was scared. I’m just glad I didn’t break your wrist . . . at least, I don’t think I did.”

Roland took it and rotated it gently in either direction, listening for the grate of small bones.

He heard nothing, and the wrist turned freely. As Susan watched, stunned and confused, he raised it to his lips and kissed the inner part, above the delicate tracery of veins.

11

Roland had tied Rusher just far enough into the willows so the big gelding could not be seen by anyone who happened to come riding along the Drop.

“Be easy,” Roland said, approaching. “Be easy a little longer, goodheart.”

Rusher stamped and whickered, as if to say he could be easy until the end of the age, if that was what were required.

Roland flipped open his saddlebag and took out the steel utensil that served as either a pot or a frypan, depending on his needs. He started away, then turned back. His bedroll was tied behind Rusher’s saddle—he had planned to spend the night camped out on the Drop, thinking. There had been a lot to think about, and now there was even more.

He pulled one of the rawhide ties, reached inside the blankets, and pulled out a small metal box. This he opened with a tiny key he drew from around his neck. Inside the box was a small square locket on a fine silver chain (inside the locket was a line-drawing of his mother), and a handful of extra shells—not quite a dozen. He took one, closed it in his fist, and went back to Susan. She looked at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“I don’t remember anything after we made love the second time,” she said. “Only looking up at the sky and thinking how good I felt and going to sleep. Oh, Roland, how bad does it look?”

“Not bad, I should think, but you’ll know better than I. Here.”

He dipped his cooker full of water and set it on the bank. Susan bent over it apprehensively, laying the hair on the left side of her head across her forearm, then moving the arm slowly outward, extending the tress in a band of bright gold. She saw the ragged cut at once. She examined it carefully, then let it drop with a sigh more relieved than rueful.

“I can hide it,” she said. “When it’s braided, no one will know. And after all, ’tis only hair—no more than woman’s vanity. My aunt has told me so often enough, certainly. But Roland, *why?* Why did I do it?”

Roland had an idea. If hair was a woman's vanity, then hair-chopping would likely be a woman's bit of nastiness—a man would hardly think of it at all. The Mayor's wife, had it been her? He thought not. It seemed more likely that Rhea, up there on her height of land looking north toward the Bad Grass, Hanging Rock, and Eyebolt Canyon, had set this ugly trap. Mayor Thorin had been meant to wake up on the morning after the Reap with a hangover and a bald-headed gilly.

"Susan, can I try something?"

She gave him a smile. "Something ye didn't try already up yonder? Aye, what ye will."

"Nothing like that." He opened the hand he had held closed, showing the shell. "I want to try and find out who did this to you, and why." And other things, too. He just didn't know what they were yet.

She looked at the shell. Roland began to move it along the back of his hand, dancing it back and forth in a dexterous weaving. His knuckles rose and fell like the heddles of a loom. She watched this with a child's fascinated delight. "Where did ye learn that?"

"At home. It doesn't matter."

"Ye'd hypnotize me?"

"Aye . . . and I don't think it would be for the first time." He made the shell dance a bit faster—now east along his rippling knuckles, now west. "May I?"

"Aye," she said. "If you can."

12

He could, all right; the speed with which she went under confirmed that this had happened to Susan before, and recently. Yet he couldn't get what he wanted from her. She was perfectly cooperative (*some*

sleep eager, Cort would have said), but beyond a certain point she would not go. It wasn't decorum or modesty, either—as she slept open-eyed before the stream, she told him in a far-off but calm voice about the old woman's examination, and the way Rhea had tried to “fiddle her up.” (At this Roland's fists clenched so tightly his nails bit into his palms.) But there came a point where she could no longer remember.

She and Rhea had gone to the door of the hut, Susan said, and there they had stood with the Kissing Moon shining down on their faces. The old woman had been touching her hair, Susan remembered that much. The touch revolted her, especially after the witch's previous touches, but Susan had been unable to do anything about it. Arms too heavy to raise; tongue too heavy to speak. She could only stand there while the witch whispered in her ear.

“What?” Roland asked. “What did she whisper?”

“I don't know,” Susan said. “The rest is pink.”

“*Pink?* What do you mean?”

“Pink,” she repeated. She sounded almost amused, as if she believed Roland was being deliberately dense. “She says, ‘Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are,’ then everything's pink. Pink and bright.”

“Bright.”

“Aye, like the moon. And then . . .” She paused. “Then I think it *becomes* the moon. The Kissing Moon, mayhap. A bright pink Kissing Moon, as round and full as a grapefruit.”

He tried other ways into her memory with no success—every path he tried ended in that bright pinkness, first obscuring her recollection and then coalescing into a full moon. It meant nothing to Roland; he'd heard of blue moons, but never pink ones. The only thing of

which he was sure was that the old woman had given Susan a powerful command to forget.

He considered taking her deeper—she would go—but didn't dare. Most of his experience came from hypnotizing his friends—classroom exercises that were larky and occasionally spooky. Always there had been Cort or Vannay present to make things right if they went off-track. Now there were no teachers to step in; for better or worse, the students had been left in charge of the school. What if he took her deep and couldn't get her back up again? And he had been told there were demons in the below-mind as well. If you went down to where they were, they sometimes swam out of their caves to meet you . . .

All other considerations aside, it was getting late. It wouldn't be prudent to stay here much longer.

“Susan, do you hear me?”

“Aye, Roland, I hear you very well.”

“Good. I'm going to say a rhyme. You'll wake up as I say it. When I'm done, you'll be wide awake and remember everything we've said. Do you understand?”

“Aye.”

“Listen: Bird and bear and hare and fish, Give my love her fondest wish.”

Her smile as she rose to consciousness was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. She stretched, then put her arms around his neck and covered his face with kisses. “You, you, you, you,” she said. “You're my fondest wish, Roland. You're my *only* wish. You and you, forever and ever.”

They made love again there on the bank, beside the babbling stream, holding each other as tightly as they could, breathing into

each other's mouths and living on each other's breath. *You, you, you, you.*

13

Twenty minutes later, he boosted her onto Felicia's back. Susan leaned down, took his face in her hands, and kissed him soundly.

"When will I see ye again?" she asked.

"Soon. But we must be careful."

"Aye. Careful as two lovers ever were, I think. Thank God thee's clever."

"We can use Sheemie, if we don't use him too often."

"Aye. And, Roland—do ye know the pavillion in Green Heart? Close to where they serve tea and cakes and things when the weather's fair?"

Roland did. Fifty yards or so up Hill Street from the jail and the Town Gathering Hall, Green Heart was one of the most pleasant places in town, with its quaint paths, umbrella-shaded tables, grassy dancing pavillion, and menagerie.

"There's a rock wall at the back," she said. "Between the pavillion and the menagerie. If you need me badly—"

"I'll always need you badly," he said.

She smiled at his gravity. "There's a stone on one of the lower courses—a reddish one. You'll see it. My friend Amy and I used to leave messages there for each other when we were little girls. I'll look there when I can. Ye do the same."

"Aye." Sheemie would work for awhile, if they were careful. The red rock might also work for awhile, if they were careful. But no matter how careful they were, they would slip eventually, because

the Big Coffin Hunters now probably knew more about Roland and his friends than Roland ever would have wished. But he had to see her, no matter what the risks. If he didn't, he felt he might die. And he only had to look at her to know she felt the same.

“Watch special for Jonas and the other two,” he said.

“I will. Another kiss, if ye favor?”

He kissed her gladly, and would just as gladly have pulled her off the mare's back for a fourth go-round . . . but it was time to stop being delirious and start being careful.

“Fare you well, Susan. I love y—” He paused, then smiled. “I love thee.”

“And I thee, Roland. What heart I have is yours.”

She had a great heart, he thought as she slipped through the willows, and already he felt its burden on his own. He waited until he felt sure she must be well away. Then he went to Rusher and rode off in the opposite direction, knowing that a new and dangerous phase of the game had begun.

14

Not too long after Susan and Roland had parted, Cordelia Delgado stepped out of the Hambry Mercantile with a box of groceries and a troubled mind. The troubled mind was caused by Susan, of course, always Susan, and Cordelia's fear that the girl would do something stupid before Reaping finally came around.

These thoughts were snatched out of her mind just as hands—strong ones—snatched the box of groceries from her arms. Cordelia cawed in surprise, shaded her eyes against the sun, and saw Eldred Jonas standing there between the Bear and Turtle totems, smiling at her. His hair, long and white (and beautiful, in her opinion), lay over his shoulders. Cordelia felt her heart beat a little faster. She had

always been partial to men like Jonas, who could smile and banter their way to the edge of risquéness . . . but who carried their bodies like blades.

“I startled you. I cry your pardon, Cordelia.”

“Nay,” she said, sounding a little breathless to her own ears. “It’s just the sun—so bright at this time of day—”

“I’d help you a bit on your way, if you give me leave. I’m only going up High as far as the corner, then I turn up the Hill, but may I help you that far?”

“With thanks,” she said. They walked down the steps and up the board sidewalk, Cordelia looking around in little pecking glances to see who was observing them—she beside the handsome sai Jonas, who just happened to be carrying her goods. There was a satisfying number of onlookers. She saw Millicent Ortega, for one, looking out of Ann’s Dresses with a satisfying O of surprise on her stupid cow’s puss.

“I hope you don’t mind me calling you Cordelia.” Jonas shifted the box, which she’d needed two hands to carry, casually under one arm. “I feel, since the welcoming dinner at Mayor Thorin’s house, that I know you.”

“Cordelia’s fine.”

“And may I be Eldred to you?”

“I think ‘Mr. Jonas’ will do a bit longer,” she said, then favored him with what she hoped was a coquettish smile. Her heart beat faster yet. (It did not occur to her that perhaps Susan was not the only silly goose in the Delgado family.)

“So be it,” Jonas said, with a look of disappointment so comic that she laughed. “And your niece? Is she well?”

“Quite well, thank ye for asking. A bit of a trial, sometimes—”

“Was there ever a girl of sixteen who wasn’t?”

“I suppose not.”

“Yet you have additional burdens regarding her this fall. I doubt if *she* realizes that, though.”

Cordelia said nothing—’twouldn’t be discreet—but gave him a meaningful look that said much.

“Give her my best, please.”

“I will.” But she wouldn’t. Susan had conceived a great (and irrational, in Cordelia’s view) dislike for Mayor Thorin’s regulators. Trying to talk her out of these feelings would likely do no good; young girls thought they knew everything. She glanced at the star peeking unobtrusively out from beneath the flap of Jonas’s vest. “I understand ye’ve taken on an additional responsibility in our undeserving town, sai Jonas.”

“Aye, I’m helping out Sheriff Avery,” he agreed. His voice had a reedy little tremble which Cordelia found quite endearing, somehow. “One of his deputies—Claypool, his name is—”

“Frank Claypool, aye.”

“—fell out of his boat and broke his leg. How do you fall out of a boat and break your leg, Cordelia?”

She laughed merrily (the idea that everyone in Hambry was watching them was surely wrong . . . but it felt that way, and the feeling was not unpleasant) and said she didn’t know.

He stopped on the corner of High and Camino Vega, looking regretful. “Here’s where I turn.” He handed the box back to her. “Are you sure you can carry that? I suppose I could go on with you to your house—”

“No need, no need. Thank you. Thank you, *Eldred*.” The blush which crept up her neck and cheeks felt as hot as fire, but his smile was worth every degree of heat. He tipped her a little salute with two fingers and sauntered up the hill toward the Sheriff’s office.

Cordelia walked on home. The box, which had seemed such a burden when she stepped out of the mercantile, now seemed to weigh next to nothing. This feeling lasted for half a mile or so, but by the time her house came into view, she was once again aware of the sweat trickling down her sides, and the ache in her arms. Thank the gods summer was almost over . . . and wasn’t that Susan, just leading her mare in through the gate?

“Susan!” she called, now enough returned to earth for her former irritation with the girl to sound clear in her voice. “Come and help me, ’fore I drop this and break the eggs!”

Susan came, leaving Felicia to crop grass in the front yard. Ten minutes earlier, Cordelia would have noticed nothing of how the girl looked—her thoughts had been too wrapped up in Eldred Jonas to admit of much else. But the hot sun had taken some of the romance out of her head and returned her feet to earth. And as Susan took the box from her (handling it almost as easily as Jonas had done), Cordelia thought she didn’t much care for the girl’s appearance. Her temper had changed, for one thing—from the half-hysterical confusion in which she’d left to a pleasant and happy-eyed calmness. That was the Susan of previous years to the sleeve and seam . . . but not this year’s moaning, moody breast-beater. There was nothing else Cordelia could put her finger on, except—

But there was, actually. One thing. She reached out and grasped the girl’s braid, which looked uncharacteristically sloppy this afternoon. Of course Susan had been riding; that could explain the mess. But it didn’t explain how dark her hair was, as if that bright mass of gold had begun to tarnish. And she jumped, almost guiltily, when she felt Cordelia’s touch. Why, pray tell, was that?

“Yer hair’s damp, Susan,” she said. “Have ye been swimming somewhere?”

“Nay! I stopped and ducked my head at the pump outside Hookey’s barn. He doesn’t mind—’tis a deep well he has. It’s so hot. Perhaps there’ll be a shower later. I hope so. I gave Felicia to drink as well.”

The girl’s eyes were as direct and as candid as ever, but Cordelia thought there was something off in them, just the same. She couldn’t say what. The idea that Susan might be hiding something large and serious did not immediately cross Cordelia’s mind; she would have said her niece was incapable of keeping a secret any greater than a birthday present or a surprise party . . . and not even such secrets as those for more than a day or two. And yet something *was* off here. Cordelia dropped her fingers to the collar of the girl’s riding shirt.

“Yet this is dry.”

“I was careful,” she said, looking at her aunt with a puzzled eye. “Dirt sticks worse to a wet shirt. You taught me that, Aunt.”

“Ye flinched when I touched yer hair, Susan.”

“Aye,” Susan said, “so I did. The weird-woman touched it just that same way. I haven’t liked it since. Now may I take these groceries in and get my horse out of the hot sun?”

“Don’t be pert, Susan.” Yet the edginess in her niece’s voice actually eased her in some strange way. That feeling that Susan had changed, somehow—that feeling of *offness*—began to subside.

“Then don’t be tiresome.”

“Susan! Apologize to me!”

Susan took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. “Yes, Aunt. I do. But it’s hot.”

“Aye. Put those in the pantry. And thankee.”

Susan went on toward the house with the box in her arms. When the girl had enough of a lead so they wouldn't have to walk together, Cordelia followed. It was all foolishness on her part, no doubt—suspicions brought on by her flirtation with Eldred—but the girl was at a dangerous age, and much depended on her good behavior over the next seven weeks. After that she would be Thorin's problem, but until then she was Cordelia's. Cordelia thought that, in the end, Susan would be true to her promise, but until Reaping Fair she would bear close watching. About such matters as a girl's virginity, it was best to be vigilant.

INTERLUDE
KANSAS, SOMEWHERE, SOMEWHEN

Eddie stirred. Around them the thinnies still whined like an unpleasant mother-in-law; above them the stars gleamed as bright as new hopes . . . or bad intentions. He looked at Susannah, sitting with the stumps of her legs curled beneath her; he looked at Jake, who was eating a burrito; he looked at Oy, whose snout rested on Jake's ankle and who was looking up at the boy with an expression of calm adoration.

The fire was low, but still it burned. The same was true of Demon Moon, far in the west.

"Roland." His voice sounded old and rusty to his own ears.

The gunslinger, who had paused for a sip of water, looked at him with his eyebrows raised.

"How can you know every corner of this story?"

Roland seemed amused. "I don't think that's what you really want to know, Eddie."

He was right about that—old long, tall, and ugly made a habit of being right. It was, as far as Eddie was concerned, one of his most irritating characteristics. "All right. How long have you been talking? *That's* what I really want to know."

"Are you uncomfortable? Want to go to bed?"

He's making fun of me, Eddie thought . . . but even as the idea occurred to him, he knew it wasn't true. And no, he *wasn't* uncomfortable. There was no stiffness in his joints, although he had been sitting cross-legged ever since Roland had begun by telling them about Rhea and the glass ball, and he didn't need to go to the toilet. Nor was he hungry. Jake was munching the single leftover burrito, but probably for the same reason folks climbed Mount Everest . . . because it was there. And why *should* he be hungry or

sleepy or stiff? Why, when the fire still burned and the moon was not yet down?

He looked at Roland's amused eyes and saw the gunslinger was reading his thoughts.

"No, I don't want to go to bed. You know I don't. But, Roland . . . you've been talking a *long* time." He paused, looked down at his hands, then looked up again, smiling uneasily. "Days, I would have said."

"But time is different here. I've told you that; now you see for yourself. Not all nights are the same length just recently. Days, either . . . but we notice time more at night, don't we? Yes, I think we do."

"Is the thinny stretching time?" And now that he had mentioned it, Eddie could hear it in all its creepy glory—a sound like vibrating metal, or maybe the world's biggest mosquito.

"It might be helping, but mostly it's just how things are in my world."

Susannah stirred like a woman who rises partway from a dream that holds her like sweet quicksand. She gave Eddie a look that was both distant and impatient. "Let the man talk, Eddie."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Let the man talk."

And Oy, without raising his snout from Jake's ankle: "An. Awk."

"All right," Eddie said. "No problem."

Roland swept them with his eyes. "Are you sure? The rest is . . ." He didn't seem able to finish, and Eddie realized that Roland was scared.

"Go on," Eddie told him quietly. "Let the rest be what it is. What it was." He looked around. Kansas, they were in Kansas. Somewhere,

somewhen. Except he felt that Mejis and those people he had never seen—Cordelia and Jonas and Brian Hookey and Sheemie and Pettie the Trotter and Cuthbert Allgood—were very close now. That Roland's lost Susan was very close now. Because reality was thin here—as thin as the seat in an old pair of bluejeans—and the dark would hold for as long as Roland needed it to hold. Eddie doubted if Roland even noticed the dark, particularly. Why would he? Eddie thought it had been night inside of Roland's mind for a long, long time . . . and dawn was still nowhere near.

He reached out and touched one of those callused killer's hands. Gently he touched it, and with love.

“Go on, Roland. Tell your tale. All the way to the end.”

“All the way to the end,” Susannah said dreamily. “Cut the vein.” Her eyes were full of moonlight.

“All the way to the end,” Jake said.

“End,” Oy whispered.

Roland held Eddie's hand for a moment, then let it go. He looked into the guttering fire without immediately speaking, and Eddie sensed him trying to find the way. Trying doors, one after another, until he found one that opened. What he saw behind it made him smile and look up at Eddie.

“True love is boring,” he said.

“Say *what?*”

“True love is boring,” Roland repeated. “As boring as any other strong and addicting drug. And, as with any other strong drug . . .”

PART THREE
COME, REAP



CHAPTER I BENEATH THE HUNTRESS MOON

1

True love, like any other strong and addicting drug, is boring—once the tale of encounter and discovery is told, kisses quickly grow stale and caresses tiresome . . . except, of course, to those who share the kisses, who give and take the caresses while every sound and color of the world seems to deepen and brighten around them. As with any other strong drug, true first love is really only interesting to those who have become its prisoners.

And, as is true of any other strong and addicting drug, true first love is dangerous.

2

Some called the Huntress the last moon of summer; some called it the first of fall. Whichever it was, it signalled a change in the life of the Barony. Men put out into the bay wearing sweaters beneath their oilskins as the winds began to turn more and more firmly into autumn's east-west alley, and to sharpen as they turned. In the great Barony orchards north of Hambry (and in smaller orchards owned by John Croydon, Henry Wertner, Jake White, and the morose but wealthy Coral Thorin), the pickers began to appear in the rows, carrying their odd, off-kilter ladders; they were followed by horse-drawn carts full of empty barrels. Downwind of the cider-houses—especially downwind of the great Barony cider-mansion a mile north of Seafront—the breezy air was filled with the sweet tang of blems being pressed by the basketload. Away from the shore of the Clean Sea, the days remained warm as the Huntress waxed, skies were clear day and night, but summer's real heat had departed with the

Peddler. The last cutting of hay began and was finished in the run of a week—that last one was always scant, and ranchers and freeholders alike would curse it, scratching their heads and asking themselves why they even bothered . . . but come rainy, blowsy old March, with the barn lofts and bins rapidly emptying, they always knew. In the Barony's gardens—the great ones of the ranchers, the smaller ones of the freeholders, and the tiny backyard plots of the townsfolk—men and women and children appeared in their old clothes and boots, their *sombreros* and *sombreras*. They came with the legs of their pants tied down firmly at the ankles, for in the time of the Huntress, snakes and scorpions in plentiful numbers wandered east from the desert. By the time old Demon Moon began to fatten, a line of rattlers would hang from the hitching posts of both the Travellers' Rest and the mercantile across the street. Other businesses would similarly decorate their hitching posts, but when the prize for the most skins was given on Reaping Day, it was always the inn or the market that won it. In the fields and gardens, baskets to pick into were cast along the rows by women with their hair tied up in kerchiefs and reap-charms hidden in their bosoms. The last of the tomatoes were picked, the last of the cucumbers, the last of the corn, the last of the parey and mingo. Waiting behind them, as the days sharpened and the autumn storms began to near, would come squash, sharproot, pumpkins, and potatoes. In Mejis the time of reaping had begun, while overhead, clearer and clearer on each starry night, the Huntress pulled her bow and looked east over those strange, watery leagues no man or woman of Mid-World had ever seen.

3

Those in the grip of a strong drug—heroin, devil grass, true love—often find themselves trying to maintain a precarious balance between secrecy and ecstasy as they walk the tightrope of their lives. Keeping one's balance on a tightrope is difficult under the soberest circumstances; doing so while in a state of delirium is all but impossible. *Completely* impossible, in the long run.

Roland and Susan were delirious, but at least had the thin advantage of knowing it. And the secret would not have to be kept forever, but only until Reaping Day Fair, at the very longest. Things might end even sooner than that, if the Big Coffin Hunters broke cover. The actual first move might be made by one of the other players, Roland thought, but no matter who moved first, Jonas and his men would be there, a part of it. The part apt to be most dangerous to the three boys.

Roland and Susan were careful—as careful as delirious people could be, at any rate. They never met in the same place twice in a row, they never met at the same time twice in a row, they never skulked on their way to their trysts. In Hambry, riders were common but skulkers were noticed. Susan never tried to cover her “riding out” by enlisting the help of a friend (although she had friends who would have done her this service); people who needed alibis were people keeping secrets. She had a sense that Aunt Cord was growing increasingly uneasy about her rides—particularly the ones she took in the early evenings—but so far she accepted Susan’s oft-repeated reason for them: she needed time to be solitary, to meditate on her promise and to accept her responsibility. Ironically, these suggestions had originally come from the witch of the Cöos.

They met in the willow grove, in several of the abandoned boathouses which stood crumbling at the northern hook of the bay, in a herder’s hut far out in the desolation of the Cöos, in an abandoned squatter’s shack hidden in the Bad Grass. The settings were, by and large, as sordid as any of those in which addicts come together to practice their vice, but Susan and Roland didn’t see the rotting walls of the shack or the holes in the roof of the hut or smell the mouldering nets in the corners of the old soaked boathouses. They were drugged, stone in love, and to them, every scar on the face of the world was a beauty-mark.

Twice, early on in those delirious weeks, they used the red rock in the wall at the back of the pavillion to arrange meetings, and then some deep voice spoke inside Roland’s head, telling him there must

be no more of it—the rock might have been just the thing for children playing at secrets, but he and his love were no longer children; if they were discovered, banishment would be the luckiest punishment they could hope for. The red rock was too conspicuous, and writing things down—even messages that were unsigned and deliberately vague—was horribly dangerous.

Using Sheemie felt safer to both of them. Beneath his smiling light-mindedness there was a surprising depth of . . . well, discretion. Roland had thought long and hard before settling on that word, and it was the right word: an ability to keep silent that was more dignified than mere cunning. Cunning was out of Sheemie's reach in any case, and always would be—a man who couldn't tell a lie without shifting his eyes away from yours was a man who would never be considered cunning.

They used Sheemie half a dozen times over the five weeks when their physical love burned at its hottest—three of those times were to make meetings, two were to change meeting-places, and one was to cancel a tryst when Susan spied riders from the Piano Ranch sweeping for strays near the shack in the Bad Grass.

That deep, warning voice never spoke to Roland about Sheemie as it had about the dangers of the red rock . . . but his conscience spoke to him, and when he finally mentioned this to Susan (the two of them wrapped in a saddle-blanket and lying naked in each other's arms), he found that her conscience had been troubling her, as well. It wasn't fair to put the boy in the way of their possible trouble. After coming to that conclusion, Roland and Susan arranged their meetings strictly between the two of them. If she could not meet him, Susan said, she would hang a red shirt over the sill of her window, as if to dry. If he could not meet her, he was to leave a white stone in the northeast corner of the yard, diagonally across the road from Hookey's Livery, where the town pump stood. As a last resort, they would use the red rock in the pavillion, risky or not, rather than bringing Sheemie into their affairs—their *affair*—again.

Cuthbert and Alain watched Roland's descent into addiction first with disbelief, envy, and uneasy amusement, then with a species of silent horror. They had been sent to what was supposed to have been safety and had discovered a place of conspiracy, instead; they had come to take census in a Barony where most of the aristocracy had apparently switched its allegiance to the Affiliation's bitterest enemy; they had made personal enemies of three hard men who had probably killed enough folks to populate a fair-sized graveyard. Yet they had felt equal to the situation, because they had come here under the leadership of their friend, who had attained near-mythic status in their minds by besting Cort—with a hawk as his weapon!—and becoming a gunslinger at the unheard-of age of fourteen. That they had been given guns themselves for this mission had meant a great deal to them when they set out from Gilead, and nothing at all by the time they began to realize the scope of what was going on in Hambrytown and the Barony of which it was a part. When that realization came, Roland was the weapon they counted on. And now —

“He's like a revolver cast into water!” Cuthbert exclaimed one evening, not long after Roland had ridden away to meet Susan. Beyond the bunkhouse porch, Huntress rose in her first quarter. “Gods know if it'll ever fire again, even if it's fished out and dried off.”

“Hush, wait,” Alain said, and looked toward the porch rail. Hoping to jolly Cuthbert out of his bad temper (a task that was quite easy under ordinary circumstances), Alain said: “Where's the lookout? Gone to bed early for once, has he?”

This only irritated Cuthbert more. He hadn't seen the rook's skull in days—he couldn't exactly say how many—and he took its loss as an ill omen. “Gone, but not to bed,” he replied, then looked balefully to the west, where Roland had disappeared aboard his big old galoot of a horse. “Lost, I reckon. Like a certain fellow's mind and heart and good sense.”

“He'll be all right,” Alain said awkwardly. “You know him as well as I do, Bert—known him our whole lives, we have. He'll be all right.”

Quietly, without even a trace of his normal good humor, Cuthbert said: "I don't feel I know him now."

They had both tried to talk to Roland in their different ways; both received a similar response, which was no real response at all. The dreamy (and perhaps slightly troubled) look of abstraction in Roland's eyes during these one-sided discussions would have been familiar to anyone who has ever tried to talk sense to a drug addict. It was a look that said Roland's mind was occupied by the shape of Susan's face, the smell of Susan's skin, the feel of Susan's body. And *occupied* was a silly word for it, one that fell short. It wasn't an occupation but an obsession.

"I hate her a little for what she's done," Cuthbert said, and there was a note in his voice Alain had never heard before—a mixture of jealousy, frustration, and fear. "Perhaps more than a little."

"You mustn't!" Alain tried not to sound shocked, but couldn't help it. "She isn't responsible for—"

"Is she not? She went out to Citgo with him. She saw what he saw. God knows how much else he's told her after they've finished making the beast with two backs. And she's all the way around the world from stupid. Just the way she's managed her side of their affair shows that." Bert was thinking, Alain guessed, of her tidy little trick with the *corvette*. "She must know she's become part of the problem herself. She must *know* that!"

Now his bitterness was frighteningly clear. *He's jealous of her for stealing his best friend*, Alain thought, *but it doesn't stop there. He's jealous of his best friend, as well, because his best friend has won the most beautiful girl any of us have ever seen.*

Alain leaned over and grasped Cuthbert's shoulder. When Bert turned away from his morose examination of the dooryard to look at his friend, he was startled by the grimness on Alain's face. "It's *ka*," Alain said.

Cuthbert almost sneered. “If I had a hot dinner for every time someone blamed theft or lust or some other stupidity on *ka*—”

Alain’s grip tightened until it became painful. Cuthbert could have pulled away but didn’t. He watched Alain closely. The joker was, temporarily, at least, gone. “Blame is exactly what we two can’t afford,” Alain said. “Don’t you see that? And if it’s *ka* that’s swept them away, we needn’t blame. We *can’t* blame. We must rise above it. We need him. And we may need her, too.”

Cuthbert looked into Alain’s eyes for what seemed to be a very long time. Alain saw Bert’s anger at war with his good sense. At last (and perhaps only for the time being), good sense won out.

“All right, fine. It’s *ka*, everybody’s favorite whipping-boy. That’s what the great unseen world’s for, after all, isn’t it? So we don’t have to take the blame for our acts of stupidity? Now let go of me, Al, before you break my shoulder.”

Alain let go and sat back in his chair, relieved. “Now if we only knew what to do about the Drop. If we don’t start counting there soon —”

“I’ve had an idea about that, actually,” Cuthbert said. “It just needs a little working out. I’m sure Roland could help . . . if either of us can get his attention for a few minutes, that is.”

They sat for awhile without speaking, looking out at the dooryard. Inside the bunkhouse, the pigeons—another bone of contention between Roland and Bert these days—cooed. Alain rolled himself a smoke. It was slow work, and the finished product looked rather comical, but it held together when he lit it.

“Your father would stripe you raw if he saw that in your hand,” Cuthbert remarked, but he spoke with a certain admiration. By the time the following year’s Huntress came around, all three of them would be confirmed smokers, tanned young men with most of the boyhood slapped out of their eyes.

Alain nodded. The strong Outer Crescent tobacco made him swimmy in the head and raw in the throat, but a cigarette had a way of calming his nerves, and right now his nerves could use some calming. He didn't know about Bert, but these days he smelled blood on the wind. Possibly some of it would be their own. He wasn't exactly frightened—not yet, at least—but he was very, very worried.

4

Although they had been honed like hawks toward the guns since early childhood, Cuthbert and Alain still carried an erroneous belief common to many boys their age: that their elders were also their betters, at least in such matters as planning and wit; they actually believed that grownups knew what they were doing. Roland knew better, even in his lovesickness, but his friends had forgotten that in the game of Castles, *both* sides wear the blindfold. They would have been surprised to find that at least two of the Big Coffin Hunters had grown extremely nervous about the three young men from In-World, and extremely tired of the waiting game both sides had been playing.

One early morning, as the Huntress neared the half, Reynolds and Depape came downstairs together from the second floor of the Travellers' Rest. The main public room was silent except for various snores and phlegmy wheezings. In Hambry's busiest bar, the party was over for another night.

Jonas, accompanied by a silent guest, sat playing Chancellors' Patience at Coral's table to the left of the batwing doors. Tonight he was wearing his duster, and his breath smoked faintly as he bent over his cards. It wasn't cold enough to frost—not quite yet—but the frost would come soon. The chill in the air left no doubt of that.

The breath of his guest also smoked. Kimba Rimer's skeletal frame was all but buried in a gray *serape* lit with faint bands of orange. The two of them had been on the edge of getting down to business when Roy and Clay (*Pinch and Jilly*, Rimer thought) showed up, their plowing and planting in the second-floor cribs also apparently over for another night.

“Eldred,” Reynolds said, and then: “Sai Rimer.”

Rimer nodded back, looking from Reynolds to Depape with thin distaste. “Long days and pleasant nights, gentlemen.” Of course the world had moved on, he thought. To find such low culls as these two in positions of importance proved it. Jonas himself was only a little better.

“Might we have a word with you, Eldred?” Clay Reynolds asked. “We’ve been talking, Roy and I—”

“Unwise,” Jonas remarked in his wavery voice. Rimer wouldn’t be surprised to find, at the end of his life, that the Death Angel had such a voice. “Talking can lead to thinking, and thinking’s dangerous for such as you boys. Like picking your nose with bullet-heads.”

Depape donkeyed his damned hee-haw laughter, as if he didn’t realize the joke was on him.

“Jonas, listen,” Reynolds began, and then looked uncertainly at Rimer.

“You can talk in front of sai Rimer,” Jonas said, laying out a fresh line of cards. “He is, after all, our chief employer. I play at Chancellors’ Patience in his honor, so I do.”

Reynolds looked surprised. “I thought . . . that is to say, I believed that Mayor Thorin was . . .”

“Hart Thorin wants to know none of the details of our arrangement with the Good Man,” Rimer said. “A share of the profits is all he requires in that line, Mr. Reynolds. The Mayor’s chief concern right now is that the Reaping Day Fair go smoothly, and that his arrangements with the young lady be . . . smoothly consummated.”

“Aye, that’s a diplomatic turn o’ speech for ye,” Jonas said in a broad Mejis accent. “But since Roy looks a little perplexed, I’ll translate. Mayor Thorin spends most of his time in the jakes these

days, yanking his willy-pink and dreaming his fist is Susan Delgado's box. I'm betting that when the shell's finally opened and her pearl lies before him, he'll never pluck it—his heart'll explode from excitement, and he'll drop dead atop her, so he will. Yar!"

More donkey laughter from Depape. He elbowed Reynolds. "He's got it down, don't he, Clay? Sounds just like em!"

Reynolds grinned, but his eyes were still worried. Rimer managed a smile as thin as a scum of November ice, and pointed at the seven which had just popped out of the pack. "Red on black, my dear Jonas."

"I ain't your dear anything," Jonas said, putting the seven of diamonds on an eight of shadows, "and you'd do well to remember that." Then, to Reynolds and Depape: "Now what do you boys want? Rimer 'n me was just going to have us a little palaver."

"Perhaps we could *all* put our heads together," Reynolds said, putting a hand on the back of a chair. "Kind of see if our thinking matches up."

"I think not," Jonas said, sweeping his cards together. He looked irritated, and Clay Reynolds took his hand off the back of the chair in a hurry. "Say your say and be done with it. It's late."

"We was thinking it's time to go on out there to the Bar K," Depape said. "Have a look around. See if there's anything to back up what the old fella in Ritzy said."

"And see what else they've got out there," Reynolds put in. "It's gettin close now, Eldred, and we can't afford to take chances. They might have—"

"Aye? Guns? Electric lights? Fairy-women in bottles? Who knows? I'll think about it, Clay."

"But—"

“I said I’ll think about it. Now go on upstairs, the both of you, back to your own fairy-women.”

Reynolds and Depape looked at him, looked at each other, then backed away from the table. Rimer watched them with his thin smile.

At the foot of the stairs, Reynolds turned back. Jonas paused in the act of shuffling his cards and looked at him, tufted eyebrows raised.

“We underestimated em once and they made us look like monkeys. I don’t want it to happen again. That’s all.”

“Your ass is still sore over that, isn’t it? Well, so is mine. And I tell you again, they’ll pay for what they did. I have the bill ready, and when the time comes, I’ll present it to them, with all interest duly noted. In the meantime, they aren’t going to spook me into making the first move. Time is on *our* side, not theirs. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

“Will you try to remember it?”

“Yes,” Reynolds repeated. He seemed satisfied.

“Roy? Do you trust me?”

“Aye, Eldred. To the end.” Jonas had praised him for the work he had done in Ritzy, and Depape had rolled in it the way a male dog rolls in the scent of a bitch.

“Then go on up, the both of you, and let me palaver with the boss and be done with it. I’m too old for these late nights.”

When they were gone, Jonas dealt out a fresh line of cards, then looked around the room. There were perhaps a dozen folks, including Sheb the piano-player and Barkie the bouncer, sleeping it off. No one was close enough to listen to the low-voiced

conversation of the two men by the door, even if one of the snoring drunkards was for some reason only shamming sleep. Jonas put a red queen on a black knight, then looked up at Rimer. "Say your say."

"Those two said it for me, actually. Sai Depape will never be embarrassed by a surplus of brains, but Reynolds is fairly smart for a gunny, isn't he?"

"Clay's trig when the moon's right and he's had a shave," Jonas agreed. "Are you saying you came all the way from Seafront to tell me those three babbies need a closer looking at?"

Rimer shrugged.

"Perhaps they do, and I'm the man to do it, if so—right enough. But what's there to find?"

"That's to be seen," Rimer said, and tapped one of Jonas's cards. "There's a Chancellor."

"Aye. Near as ugly as the one I'm sitting with." Jonas put the Chancellor—it was Paul—above his run of cards. The next draw uncovered Luke, whom he put next to Paul. That left Peter and Matthew still lurking in the bush. Jonas looked at Rimer shrewdly. "You hide it better than my pals, but you're as nervous as they are, underneath. You want to know what's out at that bunkhouse? I'll tell you: extra boots, pictures of their mummies, socks that stink to high heaven, stiff sheets from boys who've been taught it's low-class to chase after the sheep . . . and guns hidden somewhere. Under the floorboards, like enough."

"You really think they have guns?"

"Aye, Roy got the straight of that, all right. They're from Gilead, they're likely from the line of Eld or from folk who like to think they're from it, and they're likely 'prentices to the trade who've been sent on with guns they haven't earned yet. I wonder a bit about the tall one

with the I-don't-give-a-shit look in his eyes—he *might* already be a gunslinger, I suppose—but is it likely? I don't think so. Even if he is, I could take him in a fair go. I know it, and he does, too.”

“Then why have they been sent here?”

“Not because those from the Inner Baronies suspect your treason, sai Rimer—be easy on that score.”

Rimer's head poked out of his *serape* as he sat up straight, and his face stiffened. “How dare you call me a traitor? How *dare* you?”

Eldred Jonas favored Hambry's Minister of Inventory with an unpleasant smile. It made the white-haired man look like a wolverine. “I've called things by their right names my whole life, and I won't stop now. All that needs matter to you is that I've never double-crossed an employer.”

“If I didn't believe in the cause of—”

“To hell with what you believe! It's late and I want to go to bed. The folk in New Canaan and Gilead haven't the foggiest idea of what does or doesn't go on out here on the Crescent; there aren't many of em who've ever been here, I'd wager. Them are too busy trying to keep everything from falling down around their ears to do much travelling these days. No, what they know is all from the picturebooks they was read out of when they 'us babbies themselves: happy cowboys galloping after stock, happy fishermen pulling whoppers into their boats, folks clogging at barn-raisings and drinking big pots o' *graf* in Green Heart pavillion. For the sake of the Man Jesus, Rimer, don't go dense on me—I deal with that day in and day out.”

“They see Mejis as a place of quiet and safety.”

“Aye, bucolic splendor, just so, no doubt about it. They know that their whole way o' life—all that nobility and chivalry and ancestor-worship—is on fire. The final battle may take place as much as two

hundred wheels northwest of their borders, but when Farson uses his fire-carriages and robots to wipe out their army, trouble will come south fast. There are those from the Inner Baronies who've smelled this coming for twenty years or more. They didn't send these brats here to discover your secrets, Rimer; folks such as these don't send their babbies into danger on purpose. They sent em here to get em out of the way, that's all. That doesn't make em blind or stupid, but for the sake of the gods, let's be sane. They're *kiddies*."

"What else might you find, should you go out there?"

"Some way of sending messages, mayhap. A heliograph's the most likely. And out beyond Eyebolt, a shepherd or maybe a freeholder susceptible to a bribe—someone they've trained to catch the message and either flash it on or carry it afoot. But before long it'll be too late for messages to do any good, won't it?"

"Perhaps, but it's not too late yet. And you're right. Kiddies or not, they worry me."

"You've no cause, I tell you. Soon enough, I'll be wealthy and you'll be downright rich. Mayor yourself, if you want. Who'd stand to stop you? Thorin? He's a joke. Coral? She'd help you string him up, I wot. Or perhaps you'd like to be a Baron, if such offices be revived?" He saw a momentary gleam in Rimer's eyes and laughed. Matthew came out of the deck, and Jonas put him up with the other Chancellors. "Yar, I see that's what you've got your heart set on. Gems is nice, and for gold that goes twice, but there's nothing like having folk bow and scrape before ye, is there?"

Rimer said, "They should have been on the cowboy side by now."

Jonas's hands stopped above the layout of cards. It was a thought that had crossed his own mind more than once, especially over the last two weeks or so.

"How long do you think it takes to count our nets and boats and chart out the fish-hauls?" Rimer asked. "They should be over on the

Drop, counting cows and horses, looking through barns, studying the foal-charts. They should have been there two weeks ago, in fact. Unless they already know what they'd find."

Jonas understood what Rimer was implying, but couldn't believe it. *Wouldn't* believe it. Not such a depth of slyness from boys who only had to shave once a week.

"No," he said. "That's your own guilty heart talking to you. They're just so determined to do it right that they're creeping along like old folks with bad eyes. They'll be over on the Drop soon enough, and counting their little hearts out."

"And if they're not?"

A good question. Get rid of them somehow, Jonas supposed. An ambush, perhaps. Three shots from cover, no more babbies. There'd be ill feeling afterward—the boys were well liked in town—but Rimer could handle that until Fair Day, and after the Reap it wouldn't matter. Still—

"I'll have a look around out at the Bar K," Jonas said at last. "By myself—I won't have Clay and Roy tramping along behind me."

"That sounds fine."

"Perhaps you'd like to come and lend a hand."

Kimba Rimer smiled his icy smile. "I think not."

Jonas nodded, and began to deal again. Going out to the Bar K would be a bit risky, but he didn't expect any real problem—especially if he went alone. They were only *boys*, after all, and gone for much of each day.

"When may I expect a report, sai Jonas?"

"When I'm ready to make it. Don't crowd me."

Rimer lifted his thin hands and held them, palms out, to Jonas. “Cry your pardon, sai,” he said.

Jonas nodded, slightly mollified. He flipped up another card. It was Peter, Chancellor of Keys. He put the card in the top row and then stared at it, combing his fingers through his long white hair as he did. He looked from the card to Rimer, who looked back, eyebrows raised.

“You smile,” Rimer said.

“Yar!” Jonas said, and began to deal again. “I’m happy! All the Chancellors are out. I think I’m going to win this game.”

5

For Rhea, the time of the Huntress had been a time of frustration and unsatisfied craving. Her plans had gone awry, and thanks to her cat’s hideously mistimed leap, she didn’t know how or why. The young cull who’d taken Susan Delgado’s cherry had likely stopped her from chopping her scurf . . . but how? And who was he really? She wondered that more and more, but her curiosity was secondary to her fury. Rhea of the Cöos wasn’t used to being balked.

She looked across the room to where Musty crouched and watched her carefully. Ordinarily he would have relaxed in the fireplace (he seemed to like the cool drafts that swirled down the chimney), but since she had singed his fur, Musty preferred the woodpile. Given Rhea’s mood, that was probably wise. “You’re lucky I let ye live, ye warlock,” the old woman grumbled.

She turned back to the ball and began to make passes above it, but the glass only continued to swirl with bright pink light—not a single image appeared. Rhea got up at last, went to the door, threw it open, and looked out on the night sky. Now the moon had waxed a little past the half, and the Huntress was coming clear on its bright face. Rhea directed the stream of foul language she didn’t quite dare to direct at the glass (who knew what entity might lurk inside it,

waiting to take offense at such talk?) up at the woman in the moon. Twice she slammed her bony old fist into the door-lintel as she cursed, dredging up every dirty word she could think of, even the potty-mouth words children throw at each other in the dust of the play yard. Never had she been so angry. She had given the girl a command, and the girl, for whatever reasons, had disobeyed. For standing against Rhea of the Cöos, the bitch deserved to die.

“But not right away,” the old woman whispered. “First she should be rolled in the dirt, then pissed on until the dirt’s mud and her fine blonde hair’s full of it. Humiliated . . . hurt . . . spat on . . .”

She slammed her fist against the door’s side again, and this time blood flew from the knuckles. It wasn’t just the girl’s failure to obey the hypnotic command. There was another matter, related but much more serious: Rhea herself was now too upset to use the glass, except for brief and unpredictable periods of time. The hand-passes she made over it and the incantations she muttered to it were, she knew, useless; the words and gestures were just the way she focused her will. That was what the glass responded to—will and concentrated thought. Now, thanks to the trollop of a girl and her boy lover, Rhea was too angry to summon the smooth concentration needed to part the pink fog which swirled inside the ball. She was, in fact, too angry to see.

“How can I make it like it was?” Rhea asked the half-glimpsed woman in the moon. “Tell me! *Tell me!*” But the Huntress told her nothing, and at last Rhea went back inside, sucking at her bleeding knuckles.

Musty saw her coming and squeezed into the cobwebby space between the woodpile and the chimney.

CHAPTER II
THE GIRL AT
THE WINDOW

1

Now the Huntress “filled her belly,” as the old-timers said—even at noon she could be glimpsed in the sky, a pallid vampire woman caught in bright autumn sunlight. In front of businesses such as the Travellers’ Rest and on the porches of such large ranch houses as Lengyll’s Rocking B and Renfrew’s Lazy Susan, stuffy-guys with heads full of straw above their old overalls began to appear. Each wore his *sombrero*; each held a basket of produce cradled in his arms; each looked out at the emptying world with stitched white-cross eyes.

Wagons filled with squashes clogged the roads; bright orange drifts of pumpkins and bright magenta drifts of sharproot lay against the sides of barns. In the fields, the potato-carts rolled and the pickers followed behind. In front of the Hambry Mercantile, reap-charms appeared like magic, hanging from the carved Guardians like wind-chimes.

All over Mejis, girls sewed their Reaping Night costumes (and sometimes wept over them, if the work went badly) as they dreamed of the boys they would dance with in the Green Heart pavillion. Their little brothers began to have trouble sleeping as they thought of the rides and the games and the prizes they might win at the carnival. Even their elders sometimes lay awake in spite of their sore hands and aching backs, thinking about the pleasures of the Reap.

Summer had slipped away with a final flirt of her greengown; harvest-time had arrived.

Rhea cared not a fig for Reaping dances or carnival games, but she could no more sleep than those who did. Most nights she lay on her stinking pallet until dawn, her skull thudding with rage. On a night not long after Jonas's conversation with Chancellor Rimer, she determined to drink herself into oblivion. Her mood was not improved when she found that her *graf* barrel was almost empty; she blistered the air with her curses.

She was drawing in breath for a fresh string of them when an idea struck her. A wonderful idea. A *brilliant* idea. She had wanted Susan Delgado to cut off her hair. That hadn't worked, and she didn't know why . . . but she did know *something* about the girl, didn't she? Something interesting, aye, so it was, wery interesting, indeed.

Rhea had no desire to go to Thorin with what she knew; she had a fond (and foolish, likely) hope that the Mayor had forgotten about his wonderful glass ball. But the girl's aunt, now . . . suppose Cordelia Delgado were to discover that not only was her niece's virginity lost, the girl was well on her way to becoming a practiced trollop? Rhea didn't think Cordelia would go to the Mayor, either—the woman was a prig but not a fool—yet it would set the cat among the pigeons just the same, wouldn't it?

“*Waow!*”

Thinking of cats, there was Musty, standing on the stoop in the moonlight, looking at her with a mixture of hope and mistrust. Rhea, grinning hideously, opened her arms. “Come to me, my precious! Come, my sweet one!”

Musty, understanding all was forgiven, rushed into his mistress's arms and began to purr loudly as Rhea licked along his sides with her old and yellowing tongue. That night the Cöos slept soundly for the first time in a week, and when she took the glass ball into her arms the following morning, its mists cleared for her at once. She spent the day in thrall to it, spying on people she detested, drinking

little and eating nothing. Around sunset, she came out of her trance enough to realize she had as yet done nothing about the saucy little jade. But that was all right; she saw how it *could* be done . . . and she could watch all the results in the glass! All the protests, all the shouting and recriminations! She would see Susan's tears. That would be the best, to see her tears.

"A little harvest of my own," she said to Ermot, who now came slithering up her leg toward the place where she liked him best. There weren't many men who could do you like Ermot could do you, no indeed. Sitting there with a lapful of snake, Rhea began to laugh.

3

"Remember your promise," Alain said nervously as they heard the approaching beat of Rusher's hoofs. "Keep your temper."

"I will," Cuthbert said, but he had his doubts. As Roland rode around the long wing of the bunkhouse and into the yard, his shadow trailing out in the sunset light, Cuthbert clenched his hands nervously. He willed them to open, and they did. Then, as he watched Roland dismount, they rolled themselves closed again, the nails digging into his palms.

Another go-round, Cuthbert thought. Gods, but I'm sick of them. Sick to death.

Last night's had been about the pigeons—again. Cuthbert wanted to use one to send a message back west about the oil tankers; Roland still did not. So they had argued. Except (here was another thing which infuriated him, that rubbed against his nerves like the sound of the thinny) Roland did not argue. These days Roland did not *deign* to argue. His eyes always kept that distant look, as if only his body was here. The rest of him—mind, soul, spirit, *ka*—was with Susan Delgado.

"No," he had said simply. "It's too late for such."

“You can’t know that,” Cuthbert had argued. “And even if it’s too late for *help* to come from Gilead, it’s not too late for *advice* to come from Gilead. Are you so blind you can’t see that?”

“What advice can they send us?” Roland hadn’t seemed to hear the rawness in Cuthbert’s voice. His own voice was calm. Reasonable. And utterly disconnected, Cuthbert thought, from the urgency of the situation.

“If we knew that,” he had replied, “we wouldn’t have to ask, Roland, would we?”

“We can only wait and stop them when they make their move. It’s comfort you’re looking for, Cuthbert, not advice.”

You mean wait while you fuck her in as many ways and in as many places as you can imagine, Cuthbert thought. *Inside, outside, rightside up and upside down.*

“You’re not thinking clearly about this,” Cuthbert had said coldly. He’d heard Alain’s gasp. Neither of them had ever said such a thing to Roland in their lives, and once it was out, he’d waited uneasily for whatever explosion might follow.

None did. “Yes,” Roland replied, “I am.” And he had gone into the bunkhouse without another word.

Now, watching Roland uncinch Rusher’s girths and pull the saddle from his back, Cuthbert thought: *You’re not, you know. But you better think clearly about this. By all the gods, you’d better.*

“Hile,” he said as Roland carried the saddle over to the porch and set it on the step. “Busy afternoon?” He felt Alain kick his ankle and ignored it.

“I’ve been with Susan,” Roland said. No defense, no demur, no excuse. And for a moment Cuthbert had a vision of shocking clarity: he saw the two of them in a hut somewhere, the late afternoon sun

shining through holes in the roof and dappling their bodies. She was on top, riding him. Cuthbert saw her knees on the old, spongy boards, and the tension in her long thighs. He saw how tanned her arms were, how white her belly. He saw how Roland's hands cupped the globes of her breasts, squeezing them as she rocked back and forth above him, and he saw how the sun lit her hair, turning it into a fine-spun net.

Why do you always have to be first? he cried at Roland in his mind. *Why does it always have to be you? Gods damn you, Roland! Gods damn you!*

"We were on the docks," Cuthbert said, his tone a thin imitation of his usual brightness. "Counting boots and marine tools and what are called clam-drags. What an amusing time of it we've had, eh, Al?"

"Did you need me to help you do that?" Roland asked. He went back to Rusher, and took off the saddle-blanket. "Is that why you sound angry?"

"If I sound angry, it's because most of the fishermen are laughing at us behind our backs. We keep coming back and coming back. Roland, they think we're fools."

Roland nodded. "All to the good," he said.

"Perhaps," Alain said quietly, "but Rimer doesn't think we're fools—it's in the way he looks at us when we pass. Nor does Jonas. And if they don't think we're fools, Roland, what *do* they think?"

Roland stood on the second step, the saddle-blanket hanging forgotten over his arm. For once they actually seemed to have his attention, Cuthbert thought. Glory be and will wonders never cease.

"They think we're avoiding the Drop because we already know what's there," Roland said. "And if they don't think it, they soon will."

"Cuthbert has a plan."

Roland's gaze—mild, interested, already starting to be not there again—shifted to Cuthbert. Cuthbert the joker. Cuthbert the 'prentice, who had in no way earned the gun he'd carried east to the Outer Crescent. Cuthbert the virgin and eternal second. *Gods, I don't want to hate him. I don't, but now it's so easy.*

"We two should go and see Sheriff Avery tomorrow," Cuthbert said. "We will present it as a courtesy visit. We have already established ourselves as three courteous, if slightly stupid, young fellows, have we not?"

"To a fault," Roland agreed, smiling.

"We'll say that we've finally finished with the seacoast side of Hambry, and we hope to be every bit as meticulous on the farm and cowboy side. But we certainly don't want to cause trouble or be in anyone's way. It is, after all, the busiest time of year—for ranchers as well as farmers—and even citified fools such as ourselves will be aware of that. So we'll give the good Sheriff a list—"

Roland's eyes lit up. He tossed the blanket over the porch rail, grabbed Cuthbert around the shoulders, and gave him a rough hug. Cuthbert could smell a lilac scent around Roland's collar and felt an insane but powerful urge to clamp his hands around Roland's throat and try to strangle him. Instead, he gave him a perfunctory clap on the back in return.

Roland drew away, grinning widely. "A list of the ranches we'll be visiting," he said. "Aye! And with forewarning, they can move any stock they'd like us not to see on to the next ranch, or the last one. The same for tack, feed, equipment . . . it's masterful, Cuthbert! You're a genius!"

"Far from that," Cuthbert said. "I've just spared a little time to think about a problem that concerns us all. That concerns the entire Affiliation, mayhap. We *need* to think. Wouldn't you say?"

Alain winced, but Roland didn't seem to notice. He was still grinning. Even at fourteen, such an expression on his face was troubling. The truth was that when Roland grinned, he looked slightly mad. "Do you know, they may even move in a fair number of muties for us to look at, just so we'll continue to believe the lies they've already told about the impurity of their stocklines." He paused, seeming to think, and then said: "Why don't you and Alain go and see the Sheriff, Bert? That would do very well, I think."

At this point Cuthbert nearly threw himself at Roland, wanting to scream *Yes, why not? Then you could spend tomorrow morning pronging her as well as tomorrow afternoon! You idiot! You thoughtless lovestruck idiot!*

It was Al who saved him—saved them all, perhaps.

"Don't be a fool," he said sharply, and Roland wheeled toward him, looking surprised. He wasn't used to sharpness from that quarter. "You're our leader, Roland—seen that way by Thorin, by Avery, by the townsfolk. Seen that way by us as well."

"No one appointed me—"

"No one needed to!" Cuthbert shouted. "You won your guns! These folk would hardly believe it—I hardly believe it myself just lately—but *you are a gunslinger*. You have to go! Plain as the nose on your face! It doesn't matter which of us accompanies you, but you have to go!" He could say more, much more, but if he did, where would it end? With their fellowship broken beyond repair, likely. So he clamped his mouth shut—no need for Alain to kick him this time—and once again waited for the explosion. Once again, none came.

"All right," Roland said in his new way—that mild it-doesn't-much-matter way that made Cuthbert feel like biting him to wake him up. "Tomorrow morning. You and I, Bert. Will eight suit you?"

"Down to the ground," Cuthbert said. Now that the discussion was over and the decision made, Bert's heart was beating wildly and the

muscles in his upper thighs felt like rubber. It was the way he'd felt after their confrontation with the Big Coffin Hunters.

"We'll be at our prettiest," Roland said. "Nice boys from the Inners with good intentions but not many brains. Fine." And he went inside, no longer grinning (which was a relief) but smiling gently.

Cuthbert and Alain looked at each other and let out their breath in a mutual rush. Cuthbert cocked his head toward the yard, and went down the steps. Alain followed, and the two boys stood in the center of the dirt rectangle with the bunkhouse at their backs. To the east, the rising full moon was hidden behind a scrim of clouds.

"She's tranced him," Cuthbert said. "Whether she means to or not, she'll kill us all in the end. Wait and see if she don't."

"You shouldn't say such, even in jest."

"All right, she'll crown us with the jewels of Eld and we'll live forever."

"You have to stop being angry at him, Bert. You *have* to."

Cuthbert looked at him bleakly. "I can't."

4

The great storms of autumn were still a month or more distant, but the following morning dawned drizzly and gray. Roland and Cuthbert wrapped themselves in *serapes* and headed for town, leaving Alain to the few home place chores. Tucked in Roland's belt was the schedule of farms and ranches—beginning with the three small spreads owned by the Barony—the three of them had worked out the previous evening. The pace this schedule suggested was almost ludicrously slow—it would keep them on the Drop and in the orchards almost until Year's End Fair—but it conformed to the pace they had already set on the docks.

Now the two of them rode silently toward town, both lost in their own thoughts. Their way took them past the Delgado house. Roland looked up and saw Susan sitting in her window, a bright vision in the gray light of that fall morning. His heart leaped up and although he didn't know it then, it was how he would remember her most clearly forever after—lovely Susan, the girl at the window. So do we pass the ghosts that haunt us later in our lives; they sit undramatically by the roadside like poor beggars, and we see them only from the corners of our eyes, if we see them at all. The idea that they have been waiting there for us rarely if ever crosses our minds. Yet they do wait, and when we have passed, they gather up their bundles of memory and fall in behind, treading in our footsteps and catching up, little by little.

Roland raised a hand to her. It went toward his mouth at first, wanting to send her a kiss, but that would be madness. He lifted the hand before it could touch his lips and ticked a finger off his forehead instead, offering a saucy little salute.

Susan smiled and returned it in kind. None saw Cordelia, who had gone out in the drizzle to check on the last of her squash and sharproot. That lady stood where she was, a *sombrero* yanked down on her head almost to the eyeline, half-hidden by the stuffy-guy guarding the pumpkin patch. She watched Roland and Cuthbert pass (Cuthbert she barely saw; her interest was in the other one). From the boy on horseback she looked up to Susan, sitting there in her window, humming as blithely as a bird in a gilded cage.

A sharp splinter of suspicion whispered its way into Cordelia's heart. Susan's change of temperament—from alternating bouts of sorrow and fearful anger to a kind of dazed but mainly cheerful acceptance—had been so sudden. Mayhap it wasn't acceptance at all.

"Ye're mad," she whispered to herself, but her hand remained tight on the haft of the machete she held. She dropped to her knees in the muddy garden and abruptly began chopping sharproot vines, tossing the roots themselves toward the side of the house with quick,

accurate throws. “There’s nothing between em. I’d know. Children of such an age have no more discretion than . . . than the drunks in the Rest.”

But the way they had smiled. The way they had smiled at *each other*.

“Perfectly normal,” she whispered, chopping and throwing. She cut a sharproot nearly in half, ruining it, not noticing. The whispering was a habit she’d picked up only recently, as Reap Day neared and the stresses of coping with her brother’s troublesome daughter mounted. “Folks smile at each other, that’s all.”

The same for the salute and Susan’s returning wave. Below, the handsome cavalier, acknowledging the pretty maid; above, the maid herself, pleased to be acknowledged by such as he. It was youth calling to youth, that was all. And yet . . .

The look in his eyes . . . and the look in hers.

Nonsense, of course. But—

But you saw something else.

Yes, perhaps. For a moment it had seemed to her that the young man was going to blow Susan a kiss . . . then had remembered himself at the last moment and turned it into a salute, instead.

Even if ye did see such a thing, it means nothing. Young cavaliers are saucy, especially when out from beneath the gaze of their fathers. And these three already have a history, as ye well know.

All true enough, but none of it removed that chilly splinter from her heart.

Jonas answered Roland's knock and let the two boys into the Sheriff's office. He was wearing a Deputy's star on his shirt, and looked at them with expressionless eyes. "Boys," he said. "Come in out of the wet."

He stepped back to allow them entrance. His limp was more pronounced than Roland had ever seen it; the wet weather was playing it up, he supposed.

Roland and Cuthbert stepped in. There was a gas heater in the corner—filled from "the candle" at Citgo, no doubt—and the big room, which had been cool on the day they had first come here, was stuporously hot. The three cells held five woeful-looking drunks, two pairs of men and a woman in the center cell by herself, sitting on the bunk with her legs spread wide, displaying a broad expanse of red drawers. Roland feared that if she got her finger any farther up her nose, she might never retrieve it. Clay Reynolds was leaning against the notice-board, picking his teeth with a broomstraw. Sitting at the rolltop desk was Deputy Dave, stroking his chin and frowning through his monocle at the board which had been set up there. Roland wasn't at all surprised to see that he and Bert had interrupted a game of Castles.

"Well, look here, Eldred!" Reynolds said. "It's two of the In-World boys! Do your mummies know you're out, fellas?"

"They do," Cuthbert said brightly. "And you're looking very well, sai Reynolds. The wet weather's soothed your pox, has it?"

Without looking at Bert or losing his pleasant little smile, Roland shot an elbow into his friend's shoulder. "Pardon my friend, sai. His humor regularly transgresses the bounds of good taste; he doesn't seem able to help it. There's no need for us to scratch at one another—we've agreed to let bygones be bygones, haven't we?"

"Aye, certainly, all a misunderstanding," Jonas said. He limped back across to the desk and the game-board. As he sat down on his side of it, his smile turned to a sour little grimace. "I'm worse than an

old dog,” he said. “Someone ought to put me down, so they should. Earth’s cold but painless, eh, boys?”

He looked back at the board and moved a man around to the side of his Hillock. He had begun to Castle, and was thus vulnerable . . . although not very, in this case, Roland thought; Deputy Dave didn’t look like much in the way of competition.

“I see you’re working for the Barony salt now,” Roland said, nodding at the star on Jonas’s shirt.

“Salt’s what it amounts to,” Jonas said, companionably enough. “A fellow went leg-broke. I’m helping out, that’s all.”

“And sai Reynolds? Sai Depape? Are they helping out as well?”

“Yar, I reckon,” Jonas said. “How goes your work among the fisherfolk? Slow, I hear.”

“Done at last. The work wasn’t so slow as we were. But coming here in disgrace was enough for us—we have no intention of leaving that way. Slow and steady wins the race, they say.”

“So they do,” Jonas agreed. “Whoever ‘they’ are.”

From somewhere deeper in the building there came the whoosh of a water-stool flushing. *All the comforts of home in the Hambry Sheriff’s*, Roland thought. The flush was soon followed by heavy footsteps descending a staircase, and a few moments later, Herk Avery appeared. With one hand he was buckling his belt; with the other he mopped his broad and sweaty forehead. Roland admired the man’s dexterity.

“Whew!” the Sheriff exclaimed. “Them beans I ate last night took the shortcut, I tell ye.” He looked from Roland to Cuthbert and then back to Roland. “Why, boys! Too wet for net-counting, is it?”

“Sai Dearborn was just saying that their net-counting days are at an end,” Jonas said. He combed back his long hair with the tips of his fingers. Beyond him, Clay Reynolds had resumed his slouch against the notice-board, looking at Roland and Cuthbert with open dislike.

“Aye? Well, that’s fine, that’s fine. What’s next, youngsters? And is there any way we here can help ye? For that’s what we like to do best, lend a hand where a hand’s needed. So it is.”

“Actually, you *could* help us,” Roland said. He reached into his belt and pulled out the list. “We have to move on to the Drop, but we don’t want to inconvenience anyone.”

Grinning hugely, Deputy Dave slid his Squire all the way around his own Hillock. Jonas Castled at once, ripping open Dave’s entire left flank. The grin faded from Dave’s face, leaving a puzzled emptiness. “How’d ye manage that?”

“Easy.” Jonas smiled, then pushed back from the desk to include the others in his regard. “You want to remember, Dave, that I play to win. I can’t help it; it’s just my nature.” He turned his full attention to Roland. His smile broadened. “Like the scorpion said to the maiden as she lay dying, ‘You knowed I was poison when you picked me up.’ ”

6

When Susan came in from feeding the livestock, she went directly to the cold-pantry for the juice, which was her habit. She didn’t see her aunt standing in the chimney corner and watching her, and when Cordelia spoke, Susan was startled badly. It wasn’t just the unexpectedness of the voice; it was the coldness of it.

“Do ye know him?”

The juice-jug slipped in her fingers, and Susan put a steady hand beneath it. Orange juice was too precious to waste, especially

this late in the year. She turned and saw her aunt by the woodbox. Cordelia had hung her *sombrero* on a hook in the entryway, but she still wore her *serape* and muddy boots. Her *cuchillo* lay on top of the stacked wood, with green strands of sharproot vine still trailing from its edge. Her tone was cold, but her eyes were hot with suspicion.

A sudden clarity filled Susan's mind and all of her senses. *If you say "No," you're damned*, she thought. *If you even ask who, you may be damned. You must say—*

"I know them both," she replied in offhand fashion. "I met them at the party. So did you. Ye frightened me, Aunt."

"Why did he salute ye so?"

"How can I know? Perhaps he just felt like it."

Her aunt bolted forward, slipped in her muddy boots, regained her balance, and seized Susan by the arms. Now her eyes were blazing. "Be'n't insolent with me, girl! Be'n't haughty with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, or I'll—"

Susan pulled backward so hard that Cordelia staggered and might have fallen again, if the table had not been handy to grab. Behind her, muddy foot-tracks stood out on the clean kitchen floor like accusations. "Call me that again and I'll . . . I'll slap thee!" Susan cried. "So I will!"

Cordelia's lips drew back from her teeth in a dry, ferocious smile. "Ye'd slap your father's only living blood kin? Would ye be so bad?"

"Why not? Do ye not slap me, Aunt?"

Some of the heat went out of her aunt's eyes, and the smile left her mouth. "Susan! Hardly ever! Not half a dozen times since ye were a toddler who would grab anything her hands could reach, even a pot of boiling water on the—"

“It’s with thy mouth thee mostly hits nowadays,” Susan said. “I’ve put up with it—more fool me—but am done with it now. I’ll have no more. If I’m old enough to be sent to a man’s bed for money, I’m old enough for ye to keep a civil tongue when ye speak to me.”

Cordelia opened her mouth to defend herself—the girl’s anger had startled her, and so had her accusations—and then she realized how cleverly she was being led away from the subject of the boys. Of the *boy*.

“Ye only know him from the party, Susan? It’s Dearborn I mean.”
As I think ye well know.

“I’ve seen him about town,” Susan said. She met her aunt’s eyes steadily, although it cost her an effort; lies would follow half-truths as dark followed dusk. “I’ve seen all three of them about town. Are ye satisfied?”

No, Susan saw with mounting dismay, she was not.

“Do ye swear to me, Susan—on your father’s name—that ye’ve not been meeting this boy Dearborn?”

All the rides in the late afternoon, Susan thought. All the excuses. All the care that no one should see us. And it all comes down to a careless wave on a rainy morning. That easily all’s put at risk. Did we think it could be otherwise? Were we that foolish?

Yes . . . and no. The truth was they had been mad. And still were.

Susan kept remembering the look of her father’s eyes on the few occasions when he had caught her in a fib. That look of half-curious disappointment. The sense that her fibs, innocuous as they might be, had hurt him like the scratch of a thorn.

“I will swear to nothing,” she said. “Ye’ve no right to ask it of me.”

“Swear!” Cordelia cried shrilly. She groped out for the table again and grasped it, as if for balance. “Swear it! Swear it! This is no game of jacks or tag or Johnny-jump-my-pony! Thee’s not a child any longer! Swear to me! Swear that thee’re still pure!”

“No,” Susan said, and turned to leave. Her heart was beating madly, but still that awful clarity informed the world. Roland would have known it for what it was: she was seeing with gunslinger’s eyes. There was a glass window in the kitchen, looking out toward the Drop, and in it she saw the ghostly reflection of Aunt Cord coming toward her, one arm raised, the hand at the end of it knotted into a fist. Without turning, Susan put up her own hand in a halting gesture. “Raise that not to me,” she said. “Raise it not, ye bitch.”

She saw the reflection’s ghost-eyes widen in shock and dismay. She saw the ghost-fist relax, become a hand again, fall to the ghost-woman’s side.

“Susan,” Cordelia said in a small, hurt voice. “How can ye call me so? What’s so coarsened your tongue and your regard for me?”

Susan went out without replying. She crossed the yard and entered the barn. Here the smells she had known since childhood—horses, lumber, hay—filled her head and drove the awful clarity away. She was tumbled back into childhood, lost in the shadows of her confusion again. Pylon turned to look at her and whickered. Susan put her head against his neck and cried.

7

“There!” Sheriff Avery said when sais Dearborn and Heath were gone. “It’s as ye said—just slow is all they are; just creeping careful.” He held the meticulously printed list up, studied it a moment, then cackled happily. “And look at this! What a beauty! Har! We can move anything we don’t want em to see days in advance, so we can.”

“They’re fools,” Reynolds said . . . but he pined for another chance at them, just the same. If Dearborn really thought bygoness were

bygones over that little business in the Travellers' Rest, he was way past foolishness and dwelling in the land of idiocy.

Deputy Dave said nothing. He was looking disconsolately through his monocle at the Castles board, where his white army had been laid waste in six quick moves. Jonas's forces had poured around Red Hillock like water, and Dave's hopes had been swept away in the flood.

"I'm tempted to wrap myself up dry and go over to Seafront with this," Avery said. He was still gloating over the paper, with its neat list of farms and ranches and proposed dates of inspection. Up to Year's End and beyond it ran. Gods!

"Why don't ye do that?" Jonas said, and got to his feet. Pain ran up his leg like bitter lightning.

"Another game, sai Jonas?" Dave asked, beginning to reset the pieces.

"I'd rather play a weed-eating dog," Jonas said, and took malicious pleasure at the flush that crept up Dave's neck and stained his guileless fool's face. He limped across to the door, opened it, and went out on the porch. The drizzle had become a soft, steady rain. Hill Street was deserted, the cobbles gleaming wetly.

Reynolds had followed him out. "Eldred—"

"Get away," Jonas said without turning.

Clay hesitated a moment, then went back inside and closed the door.

What the hell's wrong with you? Jonas asked himself.

He should have been pleased at the two young pups and their list—as pleased as Avery was, as pleased as Rimer would be when he heard about this morning's visit. After all, hadn't he told Rimer not

three days ago that the boys would soon be over on the Drop, counting their little hearts out? Yes. So why did he feel so unsettled? So fucking jittery? Because there still hadn't been any contact from Farson's man, Latigo? Because Reynolds came back empty from Hanging Rock on one day and Depape came back empty the next? Surely not. Latigo would come, along with a goodly troop of men, but it was still too soon for them, and Jonas knew it. Reaping was still almost a month away.

So is it just the bad weather working on your leg, stirring up that old wound and making you ugly?

No. The pain was bad, but it had been worse before. The trouble was his head. Jonas leaned against a post beneath the overhang, listened to the rain plinking on the tiles, and thought how, sometimes in a game of Castles, a clever player would peek around his Hillock for just a moment, then duck back. That was what this felt like—it was so right it smelled wrong. Crazy idea, but somehow not crazy at all.

“Are you trying to play Castles with me, sprat?” Jonas murmured. “If so, you'll soon wish you'd stayed home with your mommy. So you will.”

8

Roland and Cuthbert headed back to the Bar K along the Drop—there would be no counting done today. At first, in spite of the rain and the gray skies, Cuthbert's good humor was almost entirely restored.

“Did you see them?” he asked with a laugh. “Did you see them, Roland . . . Will, I mean? They bought it, didn't they? Swallowed that honey whole, they did!”

“Yes.”

“What do we do next? What's our next move?”

Roland looked at him blankly for a moment, as if startled out of a doze. “The next move is theirs. We count. And we wait.”

Cuthbert’s good cheer collapsed in a puff, and he once more found himself having to restrain a flood of recrimination, all whirling around two basic ideas: that Roland was shirking his duty so he could continue to wallow in the undeniable charms of a certain young lady, and—more important—that Roland had lost his wits when all of Mid-World needed them the most.

Except what duty was Roland shirking? And what made him so sure Roland was wrong? Logic? Intuition? Or just shitty old catbox jealousy? Cuthbert found himself thinking of the effortless way Jonas had ripped up Deputy Dave’s army when Deputy Dave had moved too soon. But life was not like Castles . . . was it? He didn’t know. But he thought he had at least one valid intuition: Roland was heading for disaster. And so they all were.

Wake up, Cuthbert thought. Please, Roland, wake up before it’s too late.

CHAPTER III

PLAYING CASTLES

1

There followed a week of the sort of weather that makes folk apt to crawl back into bed after lunch, take long naps, and wake feeling stupid and disoriented. It was far from flood-weather, but it made the final phase of the apple-picking dangerous (there were several broken legs, and in Seven-Mile Orchard a young woman fell from the top of her ladder, breaking her back), and the potato-fields became difficult to work; almost as much time was spent freeing wagons stuck in the gluey rows as was spent actually picking. In Green Heart, what decorations had been done for the Reaping Fair grew sodden and had to be pulled down. The work volunteers waited with increasing nervousness for the weather to break so they could begin again.

It was bad weather for young men whose job it was to take inventory, although they were at least able to begin visiting barns and counting stock. It was good weather for a young man and young woman who had discovered the joys of physical love, you would have said, but Roland and Susan met only twice during the run of gray weather. The danger of what they were doing was now almost palpable.

The first time was in an abandoned boathouse on the Seacoast Road. The second was in the far end of the crumbling building below and to the east of Citgo—they made love with furious intensity on one of Roland's saddle-blankets, which was spread on the floor of what had once been the oil refinery's cafeteria. As Susan climaxed, she shrieked his name over and over. Startled pigeons filled the old, shadowy rooms and crumbling hallways with their soft thunder.

Just as it seemed that the drizzle would never end and the grinding sound of the thinny in the still air would drive everyone in Hambry insane, a strong wind—almost a gale—blew in off the ocean and puffed the clouds away. The town awoke one day to a sky as bright as blue steel and a sun that turned the bay to gold in the morning and white fire in the afternoon. That sense of lethargy was gone. In the potato-fields the carts rolled with new vigor. In Green Heart an army of women began once more to bedeck with flowers the podium where Jamie McCann and Susan Delgado would be acclaimed this year's Reaping Lad and Girl.

Out on the part of the Drop closest to Mayor's House, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain rode with renewed purpose, counting the horses which ran with the Barony brand on their flanks. The bright skies and brisk winds filled them with energy and good cheer, and for a course of days—three, or perhaps four—they galloped together in a whooping, shouting, laughing line, their old good fellowship restored.

On one of these brisk and sunny days, Eldred Jonas stepped out of the Sheriff's office and walked up Hill Street toward Green Heart. He was free of both Depape and Reynolds this morning—they had ridden out to Hanging Rock together, looking for Latigo's outriders, who must come soon, now—and Jonas's plan was simple: to have a glass of beer in the pavillion, and watch the preparations that were going on there: the digging of the roasting-pits, the laying of faggots for the bonfire, the arguments over how to set the mortars that would shoot off the fireworks, the ladies flowering the stage where this year's Lad and Girl would be offered for the town's adulation. Perhaps, Jonas thought, he might take a likely-looking flower-girl off for an hour or two of recreation. The maintenance of the saloon whores he left strictly to Roy and Clay, but a fresh young flower-girl of seventeen or so was a different matter.

The pain in his hip had faded with the damp weather; the painful, lurching stride with which he had moved for the last week or so had become a mere limp again. Perhaps just a beer or two in the open

air would be enough, but the thought of a girl wouldn't quite leave his head. Young, clear-skinned, high-breasted. Fresh, sweet breath. Fresh, sweet lips—

“Mr. Jonas? Eldred?”

He turned, smiling, to the owner of the voice. No dewy-complexioned flower-girl with wide eyes and moist, parted lips stood there, but a skinny woman edging into late middle age—flat chest, flat bum, tight pale lips, hair scooped so tight against her skull that it fair screamed. Only the wide eyes corresponded with his daydream. *I believe I've made a conquest*, Jonas thought sardonically.

“Why, Cordelia!” he said, reaching out and taking one of her hands in both of his. “How lovely you look this morning!”

Thin color came up in her cheeks and she laughed a little. For a moment she looked forty-five instead of sixty. *And she's not sixty*, Jonas thought. *The lines around her mouth and the shadows under her eyes . . . those are new.*

“You're very kind,” she said, “but I know better. I haven't been sleeping, and when women my age don't sleep, they grow old rapidly.”

“I'm sorry to hear you're sleeping badly,” he said. “But now that the weather's changed, perhaps—”

“It's not the weather. Might I speak to you, Eldred? I've thought and thought, and you're the only one I dare turn to for advice.”

His smile widened. He placed her hand through his arm, then covered it with his own. Now her blush was like fire. With all that blood in her head, she might talk for hours. And Jonas had an idea that every word would be interesting.

With women of a certain age and temperament, tea was more effective than wine when it came to loosening the tongue. Jonas gave up his plans for a lager (and, perhaps, a flower-girl) without so much as a second thought. He seated sai Delgado in a sunny corner of the Green Heart pavillion (it was not far from a red rock Roland and Susan knew well), and ordered a large pot of tea; cakes, too. They watched the Reaping Fair preparations go forward as they waited for the food and drink. The sunswept park was full of hammering and sawing and shouts and bursts of laughter.

“All Fair-Days are pleasant, but Reaping turns us all into children again, don’t you find?” Cordelia asked.

“Yes, indeed,” said Jonas, who hadn’t felt like a child even when he had been one.

“What I still like best is the bonfire,” she said, looking toward the great pile of sticks and boards that was being constructed at the far end of the park, cater-corner from the stage. It looked like a large wooden tepee. “I love it when the townsfolk bring their stuffy-guys and throw them on. Barbaric, but it always gives me *such* a pleasant shiver.”

“Aye,” Jonas said, and wondered if it would give her a pleasant shiver to know that three of the stuffy-guys thrown onto the Reap Night bonfire this year were apt to smell like pork and scream like harpies as they burned. If his luck was in, the one that screamed the longest would be the one with the pale blue eyes.

The tea and cakes came, and Jonas didn’t so much as glance at the girl’s full bosom when she bent to serve. He had eyes only for the fascinating sai Delgado, with her nervous little shifting movements and odd, desperate look.

When the girl was gone, he poured out, put the teapot back on its trivet, then covered her hand with his. “Now, Cordelia,” he said in his warmest tone. “I can see something troubles you. Out with it. Confide in your friend Eldred.”

Her lips pressed so tightly together that they almost disappeared, but not even that effort could stop their trembling. Her eyes filled with tears; swam with them; overspilled. He took his napkin and, leaning across the table, wiped the tears away.

“Tell me,” he said tenderly.

“I will. I must tell somebody or go mad. But you must make one promise, Eldred.”

“Of course, molly.” He saw her blush more furiously than ever at this harmless endearment, and squeezed her hand. “Anything.”

“You mustn’t tell Hart. That disgusting spider of a Chancellor, either, but especially not the Mayor. If I’m right in what I suspect and he found out, he could send her west!” She almost moaned this, as if comprehending it as a real fact for the first time. “He could send us *both* west!”

Maintaining his sympathetic smile, he said: “Not a word to Mayor Thorin, not a word to Kimba Rimer. Promise.”

For a moment he thought that she wouldn’t take the plunge . . . or perhaps couldn’t. Then, in a low, gaspy voice that sounded like ripping cloth, she said a single word. “Dearborn.”

He felt his heart take a bump as the name that had been so much in his mind now passed her lips, and although he continued to smile, he could not forbear a single hard squeeze of her fingers that made her wince.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just that you startled me a little. Dearborn . . . a well-spoken enough lad, but I wonder if he’s entirely trustworthy.”

“I fear he’s been with my Susan.” Now it was her turn to squeeze, but Jonas didn’t mind. He hardly felt it, in fact. He continued to smile,

hoping he did not look as flabbergasted as he felt. “I fear he’s been with her . . . as a man is with a woman. Oh, how horrible this is!”

She wept with a silent bitterness, taking little pecking peeks around as she did to make sure they were not being observed. Jonas had seen coyotes and wild dogs look around from their stinking dinners in just that fashion. He let her get as much of it out of her system as he could—he wanted her calm; incoherencies wouldn’t help him—and when he saw her tears slackening, he held out a cup of tea. “Drink this.”

“Yes. Thank you.” The tea was still hot enough to steam, but she drank it down greedily. *Her old throat must be lined with slate*, Jonas thought. She set the cup down, and while he poured out fresh, she used her frilly *pañuelo* to scrub the tears almost viciously from her face.

“I don’t like him,” she said. “Don’t like him, don’t trust him, none of those three with their fancy In-World bows and insolent eyes and strange ways of talking, but him in particular. Yet if anything’s gone on betwixt the two of em (and I’m so afraid it has), it comes back to her, doesn’t it? It’s the woman, after all, who must refuse the bestial impulses.”

He leaned over the table, looking at her with warm sympathy. “Tell me everything, Cordelia.”

She did.

4

Rhea loved everything about the glass ball, but what she especially loved was the way it unfailingly showed her people at their vilest. Never in its pink reaches did she see one child comforting another after a fall at play, or a tired husband with his head in his wife’s lap, or old people supping peacefully together at the end of the day; these things held no more interest for the glass, it seemed, than they did for her.

Instead she had seen acts of incest, mothers beating children, husbands beating wives. She had seen a gang of boys out west'rds of town (it would have amused Rhea to know these swaggering eight-year-olds called themselves the Big Coffin Hunters) go about enticing stray dogs with a bone and then cutting off their tails for a lark. She had seen robberies, and at least one murder: a wandering man who had stabbed his companion with a pitchfork after some sort of trivial argument. That had been on the first drizzly night. The body still lay mouldering in a ditch beside the Great Road West, covered with a layer of straw and weeds. It might be discovered before the autumn storms came to drown another year; it might not.

She also glimpsed Cordelia Delgado and that hard gun, Jonas, sitting in Green Heart at one of the outside tables and talking about . . . well, of course she didn't know, did she? But she could see the look in the spinster bitch's eyes. Infatuated with him, she was, all pink in the face. Gone all hot and sweet over a backshooter and failed gunslinger. It was comical, aye, and Rhea thought she would keep an eye on them, from time to time. Wery entertaining, it would likely be.

After showing her Cordelia and Jonas, the glass veiled itself once more. Rhea put it back in the box with the eye on the lock. Seeing Cordelia in the glass had reminded the old woman that she had unfinished business regarding Cordelia's sluttish niece. That Rhea still hadn't done that business was ironic but understandable—as soon as she had seen how to fix the young sai's wagon, Rhea's mind and emotions had settled again, the images in the ball had reappeared, and in her fascination with them Rhea had temporarily forgotten that Susan Delgado was alive. Now, however, she remembered her plan. Set the cat among the pigeons. And speaking of cats—

“Musty! Yoo-hoo, Musty, where are ye?”

The cat came oiling out of the woodpile, eyes glowing in the dirty dimness of the hut (when the weather turned fine again, Rhea had pulled her shutters to), forked tail waving. He jumped into her lap.

“I’ve an errand for ye,” she said, bending over to lick the cat. The entrancing taste of Musty’s fur filled her mouth and throat.

Musty purred and arched his back against her lips. For a six-legged mutie cat, life was good.

5

Jonas got rid of Cordelia as soon as he could—although not as soon as he would have liked, because he had to keep the scrawny bint sweetened up. She might come in handy another time. In the end he had kissed her on the corner of her mouth (which caused her to turn so violently red he feared she might have a brain-storm) and told her that he would check into the matter which so concerned her.

“But discreetly!” she said, alarmed.

Yes, he said, walking her home, he would be discreet; discretion was his middle name. He knew Cordelia wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—be eased until she knew for sure, but he guessed it would turn out to be nothing but vapor. Teenagers loved to dramatize, didn’t they? And if the young lass saw that her aunt was afraid of something, she might well feed auntie’s fears instead of allaying them.

Cordelia had stopped by the white picket fence that divided her garden-plot from the road, an expression of sublime relief coming over her face. Jonas thought she looked like a mule having its back scratched with a stiff brush.

“Why, I never thought of that . . . yet it’s likely, isn’t it?”

“Likely enough,” Jonas had said, “but I’ll still check into it most carefully. Better safe than sorry.” He kissed the corner of her mouth again. “And not a word to the fellows at Seafront. Not a hint.”

“Thank’ee, Eldred! Oh, thank’ee!” And she had hugged him before hurrying in, her tiny breasts pressing like stones against the front of his shirt. “Mayhap I’ll sleep tonight, after all!”

She might, but Jonas wondered if he would.

He walked toward Hookey's stable, where he kept his horse, with his head down and his hands locked behind his back. A gaggle of boys came racing up the other side of the street; two of them were waving severed dog's tails with blood clotted at the ends.

"Coffin Hunters! We're Big Coffin Hunters just like you!" one called impudently across to him.

Jonas drew his gun and pointed it at them—it was done in a flash, and for a moment the terrified boys saw him as he really was: with his eyes blazing and his lips peeled back from his teeth, Jonas looked like a white-haired wolf in man's clothes.

"Get on, you little bastards!" he snarled. "Get on before I blow you loose of your shoes and give your fathers cause to celebrate!"

For a moment they were frozen, and then they fled in a howling pack. One had left his trophy behind; the dog's tail lay on the board sidewalk like a grisly fan. Jonas grimaced at the sight of it, holstered his gun, locked his hands behind him again, and walked on, looking like a parson meditating on the nature of the gods. And what in gods' name was he doing, pulling iron on a bunch of young hellions like that?

Being upset, he thought. *Being worried*.

He was worried, all right. The titless old biddy's suspicions had upset him greatly. Not on Thorin's account—as far as Jonas was concerned, Dearborn could fuck the girl in the town square at high noon of Reaping Fair Day—but because it suggested that Dearborn might have fooled him about other things.

Crept up behind you once, he did, and you swore it'd never happen again. But if he's been diddling that girl, it has happened again. Hasn't it?

Aye, as they said in these parts. If the boy had had the impertinence to begin an affair with the Mayor's gilly-in-waiting, and the incredible slyness to get away with it, what did that do to Jonas's picture of three In-World brats who could barely find their own behinds with both hands and a candle?

We underestimated em once and they made us look like monkeys, Clay had said. *I don't want it to happen again.*

Had it happened again? How much, really, did Dearborn and his friends know? How much had they found out? And who had they told? If Dearborn had been able to get away with pronging the Mayor's chosen . . . to put something *that* large over on Eldred Jonas . . . on everyone . . .

"Good day, sai Jonas," Brian Hookey said. He was grinning widely, all but kowtowing before Jonas with his *sombrero* crushed against his broad blacksmith's chest. "Would ye care for fresh *graf*, sai? I've just gotten the new pressing, and—"

"All I want is my horse," Jonas said curtly. "Bring it quick and stop your quacking."

"Aye, so I will, happy to oblige, thankee-sai." He hurried off on the errand, taking one nervous, grinning look back over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't going to be shot out of hand.

Ten minutes later Jonas was headed west on the Great Road. He felt a ridiculous but nevertheless strong desire to simply kick his horse into a gallop and leave all this foolishness behind him: Thorin the graying goat-boy, Roland and Susan with their no-doubt mawkish teenage love, Roy and Clay with their fast hands and slow wits, Rimer with his ambitions, Cordelia Delgado with her ghastly visions of the two of them in some bosky dell, him likely reciting poetry while she wove a garland of flowers for his brow.

He had ridden away from things before, when intuition whispered; plenty of things. But there would be no riding away this time. He had

vowed vengeance on the brats, and while he had broken a bushel of promises made to others, he'd never broken one made to himself.

And there was John Farson to consider. Jonas had never spoken to the Good Man himself (and never wanted to; Farson was reputed to be whimsically, dangerously insane), but he had had dealings with George Latigo, who would probably be leading the troop of Farson's men that would arrive any day now. It was Latigo who had hired the Big Coffin Hunters in the first place, paying a huge cash advance (which Jonas hadn't yet shared with Reynolds and Depape) and promising an even larger piece of war-spoil if the Affiliation's major forces were wiped out in or around the Shavéd Mountains.

Latigo was a good-sized bug, all right, but nothing to the size of the bug trundling along behind him. And besides, no large reward was ever achieved without risk. If they delivered the horses, oxen, wagons of fresh vegetables, the tack, the oil, the glass—most of all the wizard's glass—all would be well. If they failed, it was very likely that their heads would end up being whacked about by Farson and his aides in their nightly polo games. It could happen, and Jonas knew it. No doubt someday it *would* happen. But when his head finally parted company from his shoulders, the divorce wouldn't be caused by any such smarms as Dearborn and his friends, no matter *whose* bloodline they had descended from.

But if he's been having an affair with Thorin's autumn treat . . . if he's been able to keep such a secret as that, what others has he been keeping? Perhaps he is playing Castles with you.

If so, he wouldn't play for long. The first time young Mr. Dearborn poked his nose around his Hillock, Jonas would be there to shoot it off for him.

The question for the present was where to go first. Out to the Bar K, to take a long overdue look at the boys' living quarters? He could; they would be counting Barony horses on the Drop, all three of them. But it wasn't over horses that he might lose his head, was it? No, the

horses were just a small added attraction, as far as the Good Man was concerned.

Jonas rode for Citgo instead.

6

First he checked the tankers. They were just as had been and should be—lined up in a neat row with their new wheels ready to roll when the time came, and hidden behind their new camouflage. Some of the screening pine branches were turning yellow at the tips, but the recent spell of rain had kept most admirably fresh. There had been no tampering that Jonas could see.

Next he climbed the hill, walking beside the pipeline and pausing more and more frequently to rest; by the time he reached the rotting gate between the slope and the oilpatch, his bad leg was paining him severely. He studied the gate, frowning over the smudges he saw on the top rung. They might mean nothing, but Jonas thought someone might have climbed over the gate rather than risk opening it and having it fall off its hinges.

He spent the next hour strolling around the derricks, paying especially close attention to those that still worked, looking for sign. He found plenty of tracks, but it was impossible (especially after a week of wet weather) to read them with any degree of accuracy. The In-World boys might have been out here; that ugly little band of brats from town might have been out here; Arthur Eld and the whole company of his knights might have been out here. The ambiguity put Jonas in a foul temper, as ambiguity (other than on a Castles board) always did.

He started back the way he'd come, meaning to descend the slope to his horse and ride back to town. His leg was aching like fury, and he wanted a stiff drink to quiet it down. The bunkhouse at the Bar K could wait another day.

He got halfway to the gate, saw the weedy spur track tying Citgo to the Great Road, and sighed. There would be nothing on that little strip of road to see, but now that he'd come all the way out here, he supposed he should finish the job.

Bugger finishing the job, I want a damned drink.

But Roland wasn't the only one who sometimes found his wishes overruled by training. Jonas sighed, rubbed at his leg, then walked back to the weedy twin ruts. Where, it seemed, there was something to find after all.

It lay in the grassy ditch less than a dozen paces from the place where the old road joined the Great Road. At first he saw only a smooth white shape in the weeds and thought it was a stone. Then he saw a black roundness that could only be an eyehole. Not a stone, then; a skull.

Grunting, Jonas knelt and fished it out while the few living derricks continued to squeal and thump behind him. A rook's skull. He had seen it before. Hell, he suspected most of the town had. It belonged to the showoff, Arthur Heath . . . who, like all showoffs, needed his little props.

"He called it the lookout," Jonas murmured. "Put it on the horn of his saddle sometimes, didn't he? And sometimes wore it around his neck like a pendant." Yes. The youngster had been wearing it so that night in the Travellers' Rest, when—

Jonas turned the bird's skull. Something rattled inside like a last lonely thought. Jonas tilted it, shook it over his open palm, and a fragment of gold chain dropped out. That was how the boy had been wearing it. At some point the chain had broken, the skull had fallen in the ditch, and sai Heath had never troubled to go looking for it. The thought that someone might find it had probably never crossed his mind. Boys were careless. It was a wonder any ever grew up to be men.

Jonas's face remained calm as he knelt there examining the bird's skull, but behind the unlined brow he was as furious as he had ever been in his life. They had been out here, all right—it was another thing he would have scoffed at just yesterday. He had to assume they had seen the tankers, camouflage or no camouflage, and if not for the chance of finding this skull, he never would have known for sure, one way or the other.

“When I finish with em, their eyesockets'll be as empty as yours, Sir Rook. I'll gouge em clean myself.”

He started to throw the skull away, then changed his mind. It might come in handy. Carrying it in one hand, he started back to where he'd left his horse.

7

Coral Thorin walked down High Street toward the Travellers' Rest, her head thumping rustily and her heart sour in her breast. She had been up only an hour, but her hangover was so miserable it felt like a day already. She was drinking too much of late and she knew it—almost every night now—but she was very careful not to take more than one or two (and always light ones) where folks could see. So far, she thought no one suspected. And as long as no one suspected, she supposed she would keep on. How else to bear her idiotic brother? This idiotic town? And, of course, the knowledge that all of the ranchers in the Horsemen's Association and at least half of the large landowners were traitors? “Fuck the Affiliation,” she whispered. “Better a bird in the hand.”

But did she really have a bird in the hand? Did any of them? Would Farson keep his promises—promises made by a man named Latigo and passed on by their own inimitable Kimba Rimer? Coral had her doubts; despots had such a convenient way of forgetting their promises, and birds in the hand such an irritating way of pecking your fingers, shitting in your palm, and then flying away. Not that it mattered now; she had made her bed. Besides, folks would

always want to drink and gamble and rut, regardless of who they bowed their knees to or in whose name their taxes were collected.

Still, when the voice of old demon conscience whispered, a few drinks helped to still its lips.

She paused outside Craven's Undertaking Parlor, looking upstreet at the laughing boys on their ladders, hanging paper lanterns from high poles and building eaves. These gay lamps would be lit on the night of the Reap Fair, filling Hambry's main street with a hundred shades of soft, conflicting light.

For a moment Coral remembered the child she had been, looking at the colored paper lanterns with wonder, listening to the shouts and the rattle of fireworks, listening to the dance-music coming from Green Heart as her father held her hand . . . and, on his other side, her big brother Hart's hand. In this memory, Hart was proudly wearing his first pair of long trousers.

Nostalgia swept her, sweet at first, then bitter. The child had grown into a sallow woman who owned a saloon and whorehouse (not to mention a great deal of land along the Drop), a woman whose only sexual partner of late was her brother's Chancellor, a woman whose chief goal upon arising these days was getting to the hair of the dog that bit her as soon as possible. How, exactly, had things turned out so? This woman whose eyes she used was the last woman the child she had been would have expected to become.

"Where did I go wrong?" she asked herself, and laughed. "Oh dear Man Jesus, where did this straying sinner-child go wrong? Can you say hallelujah." She sounded so much like the wandering preacher-woman that had come through town the year before—Pittston, her name had been, Sylvia Pittston—that she laughed again, this time almost naturally. She walked on toward the Rest with a better will.

Sheemie was outside, tending to the remains of his silkflowers. He waved to her and called a greeting. She waved back and called something in return. A good enough lad, Sheemie, and although she

could have found another easily enough, she supposed she was glad Depape hadn't killed him.

The bar was almost empty but brilliantly lit, all the gas-jets flaring. It was clean, as well. Sheemie would have emptied the spittoons, but Coral guessed it was the plump woman behind the bar who had done all the rest. The makeup couldn't hide the sallowness of that woman's cheeks, the hollowness of her eyes, or the way her neck had started to go all crepey (seeing that sort of lizardy skin on a woman's neck always made Coral shiver inside).

It was Pettie the Trotter tending bar beneath The Romp's stern glass gaze, and if allowed to do so, she would continue until Stanley appeared and banished her. Pettie had said nothing out loud to Coral—she knew better—but had made her wants clear enough just the same. Her whoring days were almost at an end. She desperately desired to go to work tending bar. There was precedent for it, Coral knew—a female bartender at Forest Trees in Pass o' the River, and there had been another at Glencove, up the coast in Tavares, until she had died of the pox. What Pettie refused to see was that Stanley Ruiz was younger by fifteen years and in far better health. He would be pouring drinks under The Romp long after Pettie was rotting (instead of Trotting) in a pauper's grave.

“Good even, sai Thorin,” Pettie said. And before Coral could so much as open her mouth, the whore had put a shot glass on the bar and filled it full of whiskey. Coral looked at it with dismay. Did they all know, then?

“I don't want that,” she snapped. “Why in Eld's name would I? Sun isn't even down! Pour it back into the bottle, for yer father's sake, and then get the hell out of here. Who d'ye think yer serving at five o' the clock, anyway? Ghosts?”

Pettie's face fell a foot; the heavy coat of her makeup actually seemed to crack apart. She took the funnel from under the bar, stuck it in the neck of the bottle, and poured the shot of whiskey back in. Some went onto the bar in spite of the funnel; her plump hands (now

ringless; her rings had been traded for food at the mercantile across the street long since) were shaking. "I'm sorry, sai. So I am. I was only—"

"I don't care what ye was only," Coral said, then turned a bloodshot eye on Sheb, who had been sitting on his piano-bench and leafing through old sheet-music. Now he was staring toward the bar with his mouth hung open. "And what are *you* looking at, ye frog?"

"Nothing, sai Thorin. I—"

"Then go look at it somewhere else. Take this pig with'ee. Give her a bounce, why don't ye? It'll be good for her skin. It might even be good for yer own."

"I—"

"Get out! Are ye deaf? Both of ye!"

Pettie and Sheb went away toward the kitchen instead of the cribs upstairs, but it was all the same to Coral. They could go to hell as far as she was concerned. Anywhere, as long as they were out of her aching face.

She went behind the bar and looked around. Two men playing cards over in the far corner. That hardcase Reynolds was watching them and sipping a beer. There was another man at the far end of the bar, but he was staring off into space, lost in his own world. No one was paying any especial attention to sai Coral Thorin, and what did it matter if they were? If Pettie knew, they all knew.

She ran her finger through the puddle of whiskey on the bar, sucked it, ran it through again, sucked it again. She grasped the bottle, but before she could pour, a spidery monstrosity with gray-green eyes leaped, hissing, onto the bar. Coral shrieked and stepped back, dropping the whiskey bottle between her feet . . . where, for a wonder, it didn't break. For a moment she thought her head would

break, instead—that her swelling, throbbing brain would simply split her skull like a rotten eggshell. There was a crash as the card-players overturned their table getting up. Reynolds had drawn his gun.

“Nay,” she said in a quavering voice she could hardly recognize. Her eyeballs were pulsing and her heart was racing. People *could* die of fright, she realized that now. “Nay, gentlemen, all’s well.”

The six-legged freak standing on the bar opened its mouth, bared its needle fangs, and hissed again.

Coral bent down (and as her head passed below the level of her waist, she was once more sure it was going to explode), picked up the bottle, saw that it was still a quarter full, and drank directly from the neck, no longer caring who saw her do it or what they thought.

As if hearing her thought, Musty hissed again. He was wearing a red collar this afternoon—on him it looked baleful rather than jaunty. Beneath it was tucked a white scrap of paper.

“Want me to shoot it?” a voice drawled. “I will if you like. One slug and won’t be nothing left but claws.” It was Jonas, standing just inside the batwings, and although he looked not a whole lot better than she felt, Coral had no doubt he could do it.

“Nay. The old bitch’ll turn us all into locusts, or something like, if ye kill her familiar.”

“What bitch?” Jonas asked, crossing the room.

“Rhea Dubativo. Rhea of the Cöos, she’s called.”

“Ah! Not the bitch but the witch.”

“She’s both.”

Jonas stroked the cat’s back. It allowed itself to be petted, even arching against his hand, but he only gave it the single caress. Its fur

had an unpleasant damp feel.

“Would you consider sharing that?” he asked, nodding toward the bottle. “It’s early, but my leg hurts like a devil sick of sin.”

“Your leg, my head, early or late. On the house.”

Jonas raised his white eyebrows.

“Count yer blessings and have at it, cully.”

She reached toward Musty. He hissed again, but allowed her to draw the note out from under his collar. She opened it and read the five words that were printed there:

I'm dry, send the boy

“Might I see?” Jonas asked. With the first drink down and warming his belly, the world looked better.

“Why not?” She handed him the note. Jonas looked, then handed it back. He had almost forgotten Rhea, and that wouldn’t have done at all. Ah, but it was hard to remember everything, wasn’t it? Just lately Jonas felt less like a hired gun than a cook trying to make all nine courses of a state dinner come out at the same time. Luckily, the old hag had reminded him of her presence herself. Gods bless her thirst. And his own, since it had landed him here at the right time.

“Sheemie!” Coral bawled. She could also feel the whiskey working; she felt almost human again. She even wondered if Eldred Jonas might be interested in a dirty evening with the Mayor’s sister . . . who knew what might speed the hours?

Sheemie came in through the batwings, hands grimy, pink *sombrero* bouncing on his back at the end of its *cuerda*. “Aye, Coral Thorin! Here I be!”

She looked past him, calculating the sky. Not tonight, not even for Rhea; she wouldn't send Sheemie up there after dark, and that was the end of it.

"Nothing," she said in a voice that was gentler than usual. "Go back to yer flowers, and see that ye cover them well. It bids frosty."

She turned over Rhea's note and scrawled a single word on it:

tomorrow

This she folded and handed to Jonas. "Stick it under that stink's collar for me, will ye? I don't want to touch him."

Jonas did as he was asked. The cat favored them with a final wild green look, then leaped from the bar and vanished beneath the batwings.

"Time is short," Coral said. She hadn't the slightest idea what she meant, but Jonas nodded in what appeared to be perfect understanding. "Would you care to go upstairs with a closet drunk? I'm not much in the looks department, but I can still spread em all the way to the edge of the bed, and I don't just lie there."

He considered, then nodded. His eyes were gleaming. This one was as thin as Cordelia Delgado . . . but what a difference, eh? What a difference! "All right."

"I've been known to say some nasty things—fair warning."

"Dear lady, I shall be all ears."

She smiled. Her headache was gone. "Aye. I'll just bet ye will."

"Give me a minute. Don't move a step." He walked across to where Reynolds sat.

"Drag up a chair, Eldred."

“I think not. There’s a lady waiting.”

Reynolds’s gaze flicked briefly toward the bar. “You’re joking.”

“I never joke about women, Clay. Now mark me.”

Reynolds sat forward, eyes intent. Jonas was grateful this wasn’t Depape. Roy would do what you asked, and usually well enough, but only after you’d explained it to him half a dozen times.

“Go to Lengyll,” he said. “Tell him we want to put about a dozen men—no less than ten—out at yon oilpatch. Good men who can get their heads down and keep them down and not snap the trap too soon on an ambush, if ambushing’s required. Tell him Brian Hookey’s to be in charge. He’s got a level head, which is more than can be said for most of these poor things.”

Reynolds’s eyes were hot and happy. “You expect the brats?”

“They’ve been out there once, mayhap they’ll be out again. If so, they’re to be crossfired and knocked down dead. At once and with no warning. You understand?”

“Yar! And the tale after?”

“Why, that the oil and the tankers must have been their business,” Jonas said with a crooked smile. “To be taken to Farson, at their command and by confederates unknown. We’ll be carried through the streets on the town’s shoulders, come Reap. Hailed as the men who rooted out the traitors. Where’s Roy?”

“Gone back to Hanging Rock. I saw him at noon. He says they’re coming, Eldred; says when the wind swings into the east, he can hear approaching horse.”

“Maybe he only hears what he wants to hear.” But he suspected Depape was right. Jonas’s mood, at rock bottom when he stepped into the Travellers’ Rest, was now very much on the rebound.

“We’ll start moving the tankers soon, whether the brats come or not. At night, and two by two, like the animals going on board Old Pa’s Ark.” He laughed at this. “But we’ll leave some, eh? Like cheese in a trap.”

“Suppose the mice don’t come?”

Jonas shrugged. “If not one way, another. I intend to press them a little more tomorrow. I want them angry, and I want them confused. Now go on about your business. I have yon lady waiting.”

“Better you than me, Eldred.”

Jonas nodded. He guessed that half an hour from now, he would have forgotten all about his aching leg. “That’s right,” he said. “You she’d eat like fudge.”

He walked back to the bar, where Coral stood with her arms folded. Now she unfolded them and took his hands. The right she put on her left breast. The nipple was hard and erect under his fingers. The forefinger of his left hand she put in her mouth, and bit down lightly.

“Shall we bring the bottle?” Jonas asked.

“Why not?” said Coral Thorin.

8

If she’d gone to sleep as drunk as had been her habit over the last few months, the creak of the bedsprings wouldn’t have awakened her—a bomb-blast wouldn’t have awakened her. But although they’d brought the bottle, it still stood on the night-table of the bedroom she maintained at the Rest (it was as big as any three of the whores’ cribs put together), the level of the whiskey unchanged. She felt sore all over her body, but her head was clear; sex was good for that much, anyway.

Jonas was at the window, looking out at the first gray traces of daylight and pulling his pants up. His bare back was covered with crisscrossed scars. She thought to ask him who had administered such a savage flogging and how he'd survived it, then decided she'd do better to keep quiet.

"Where are ye off to?" she asked.

"I believe I'm going to start by finding some paint—any shade will do—and a street-mutt still in possession of its tail. After that, sai, I don't think you want to know."

"Very well." She lay down and pulled the covers up to her chin. She felt she could sleep for a week.

Jonas yanked on his boots and went to the door, buckling his gunbelt. He paused with his hand on the knob. She looked at him, grayish eyes already half-filled with sleep again.

"I've never had better," Jonas said.

Coral smiled. "No, cully," she said. "Nor I."

CHAPTER IV ROLAND AND CUTHBERT

1

Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain came out onto the porch of the Bar K bunkhouse almost two hours after Jonas had left Coral's room at the Travellers' Rest. By then the sun was well up over the horizon. They weren't late risers by nature, but as Cuthbert put it, "We have a certain In-World image to maintain. Not laziness but *lounginess*."

Roland stretched, arms spread toward the sky in a wide Y, then bent and grasped the toes of his boots. This caused his back to crackle.

"I hate that noise," Alain said. He sounded morose and sleepy. In fact, he had been troubled by odd dreams and premonitions all night—things which, of the three of them, only he was prey to. Because of the touch, perhaps—with him it had always been strong.

"That's why he does it," Cuthbert said, then clapped Alain on the shoulder. "Cheer up, old boy. You're too handsome to be downhearted."

Roland straightened, and they walked across the dusty yard toward the stables. Halfway there, he came to a stop so sudden that Alain almost ran into his back. Roland was looking east. "Oh," he said in a funny, bemused voice. He even smiled a little.

"Oh?" Cuthbert echoed. "Oh what, great leader? Oh joy, I shall see the perfumed lady anon, or oh rats, I must work with my smelly male companions all the livelong day?"

Alain looked down at his boots, new and uncomfortable when they had left Gilead, now sprung, trailworn, a little down at the heels, and as comfortable as workboots ever got. Looking at them was better than looking at his friends, for the time being. There was always an edge to Cuthbert's teasing these days; the old sense of fun had been replaced by something that was mean and unpleasant. Alain kept expecting Roland to flash up at one of Cuthbert's jibes, like steel that has been struck by sharp flint, and knock Bert sprawling. In a way, Alain almost wished for it. It might clear the air.

But not the air of this morning.

"Just oh," Roland said mildly, and walked on.

"Cry your pardon, for I know you'll not want to hear it, but I'd speak a further word about the pigeons," Cuthbert said as they saddled their mounts. "I still believe that a message—"

"I'll make you a promise," Roland said, smiling.

Cuthbert looked at him with some mistrust. "Aye?"

"If you still want to send by flight tomorrow morning, we'll do so. The one you choose shall be sent west to Gilead with a message of your devising banded to its leg. What do you say, Arthur Heath? Is it fair?"

Cuthbert looked at him for a moment with a suspicion that hurt Alain's heart. Then he also smiled. "Fair," he said. "Thank you."

And then Roland said something which struck Alain as odd and made that prescient part of him quiver with disquiet. "Don't thank me yet."

2

"I don't want to go up there, sai Thorin," Sheemie said. An unusual expression had creased his normally smooth face—a troubled and

fearful frown. “She’s a scary lady. Scary as a beary, she is. Got a wart on her nose, right here.” He thumbed the tip of his own nose, which was small and smooth and well molded.

Coral, who might have bitten his head off for such hesitation only yesterday, was unusually patient today. “So true,” she said. “But Sheemie, she asked for ye special, and she tips. Ye know she does, and well.”

“Won’t help if she turns me into a beetle,” Sheemie said morosely. “Beetles can’t spend coppers.”

Nevertheless, he let himself be led to where Caprichoso, the inn’s pack-mule, was tied. Barkie had loaded two small tuns over the mule’s back. One, filled with sand, was just there for balance. The other held a fresh pressing of the *graf* Rhea had a taste for.

“Fair-Day’s coming,” Coral said brightly. “Why, it’s not three weeks now.”

“Aye.” Sheemie looked happier at this. He loved Fair-Days passionately—the lights, the firecrackers, the dancing, the games, the laughter. When Fair-Day came, everyone was happy and no one spoke mean.

“A young man with coppers in his pocket is sure to have a good time at the Fair,” Coral said.

“That’s true, sai Thorin.” Sheemie looked like someone who has just discovered one of life’s great principles. “Aye, truey-true, so it is.”

Coral put Caprichoso’s rope halter into Sheemie’s palm and closed the fingers over it. “Have a nice trip, lad. Be polite to the old crow, bow yer best bow . . . and make sure ye’re back down the hill before dark.”

“Long before, aye,” Sheemie said, shivering at the very thought of still being up in the Cöos after nightfall. “Long before, sure as loaves

'n fishes.”

“Good lad.” Coral watched him off, his pink *sombrera* now clapped on his head, leading the grumpy old pack-mule by its rope. And, as he disappeared over the brow of the first mild hill, she said it again: “Good lad.”

3

Jonas waited on the flank of a ridge, belly-down in the tall grass, until the brats were an hour gone from the Bar K. He then rode to the ridgetop and picked them out, three dots four miles away on the brown slope. Off to do their daily duty. No sign they suspected anything. They were smarter than he had at first given them credit for . . . but nowhere near as smart as they thought they were.

He rode to within a quarter mile of the Bar K—except for the bunkhouse and stable, a burned-out hulk in the bright sunlight of this early autumn day—and tethered his horse in a copse of cottonwoods that grew around the ranch house spring. Here the boys had left some washing to dry. Jonas stripped the pants and shirts off the low branches upon which they had been hung, made a pile of them, pissed on them, and then went back to his horse.

The animal stamped the ground emphatically when Jonas pulled the dog’s tail from one of his saddlebags, as if saying he was glad to be rid of it. Jonas would be glad to be rid of it, too. It had begun giving off an unmistakable aroma. From the other saddlebag he took a small glass jar of red paint, and a brush. These he had obtained from Brian Hookey’s eldest son, who was minding the livery stable today. Sai Hookey himself would be out to Citgo by now, no doubt.

Jonas walked to the bunkhouse with no effort at concealment . . . not that there was much in the way of concealment to be had out here. And no one to hide from, anyway, now that the boys were gone.

One of them had left an actual book—Mercer’s *Homilies and Meditations*—on the seat of a rocking chair on the porch. Books were things of exquisite rarity in Mid-World, especially as one travelled out from the center. This was the first one, except for the few kept in Seafront, that Jonas had seen since coming to Mejis. He opened it. In a firm woman’s hand he read: *To my dearest son, from his loving MOTHER*. Jonas tore this page out, opened his jar of paint, and dipped the tips of his last two fingers inside. He blotted out the word MOTHER with the pad of his third finger, then, using the nail of his pinky as a makeshift pen, printed CUNT above MOTHER. He poked this sheet on a rusty nailhead where it was sure to be seen, then tore the book up and stamped on the pieces. Which boy had it belonged to? He hoped it was Dearborn’s, but it didn’t really matter.

The first thing Jonas noticed when he went inside was the pigeons, cooing in their cages. He had thought they might be using a helio to send their messages, but pigeons! My! That was ever so much more trig!

“I’ll get to you in a few minutes,” he said. “Be patient, darlings; peck and shit while you still can.”

He looked around with some curiosity, the soft coo of the pigeons soothing in his ears. Lads or lords? Roy had asked the old man in Ritzzy. The old man had said maybe both. Neat lads, at the very least, from the way they kept their quarters, Jonas thought. Well trained. Three bunks, all made. Three piles of goods at the foot of each, stacked up just as neat. In each pile he found a picture of a mother—oh, such good fellows they were—and in one he found a picture of both parents. He had hoped for names, possibly documents of some kind (even love letters from the girl, mayhap), but there was nothing like that. Lads or lords, they were careful enough. Jonas removed the pictures from their frames and shredded them. The goods he scattered to all points of the compass, destroying as much as he could in the limited time he had. When he found a linen handkerchief in the pocket of a pair of dress pants, he blew his nose on it and then

spread it carefully on the toes of the boy's dress boots, so that the green splat would show to good advantage. What could be more aggravating—more *unsettling*—than to come home after a hard day spent tallying stock and find some stranger's snot on one of your personals?

The pigeons were upset now; they were incapable of scolding like jays or rooks, but they tried to flutter away from him when he opened their cages. It did no good, of course. He caught them one by one and twisted their heads off. That much accomplished, Jonas popped one bird beneath the strawtick pillow of each boy.

Beneath one of these pillows he found a small bonus: paper strips and a storage-pen, undoubtedly kept for the composition of messages. He broke the pen and flung it across the room. The strips he put in his own pocket. Paper always came in handy.

With the pigeons seen to, he could hear better. He began walking slowly back and forth on the board floor, head cocked, listening.

4

When Alain came riding up to him at a gallop, Roland ignored the boy's strained white face and burning, frightened eyes. "I make it thirty-one on my side," he said, "all with the Barony brand, crown and shield. You?"

"We have to go back," Alain said. "Something's wrong. It's the touch. I've never felt it so clear."

"Your count?" Roland asked again. There were times, such as now, when he found Alain's ability to use the touch more annoying than helpful.

"Forty. Or forty-one, I forget. And what does it matter? They've moved what they don't want us to count. Roland, didn't you hear me? We have to go back! Something's wrong! *Something's wrong at our place!*"

Roland glanced toward Bert, riding peaceably some five hundred yards away. Then he looked back at Alain, his eyebrows raised in a silent question.

“Bert? He’s numb to the touch and always has been—you know it. I’m not. You know I’m not! Roland, please! Whoever it is will see the pigeons! Maybe find our *guns!*” The normally phlegmatic Alain was nearly crying in his excitement and dismay. “If you won’t go back with me, give me leave to go back by myself! Give me leave, Roland, for your father’s sake!”

“For *your* father’s sake, I give you none,” Roland said. “My count is thirty-one. Yours is forty. Yes, we’ll say forty. Forty’s a good number—good as any, I wot. Now we’ll change sides and count again.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Alain almost whispered. He was looking at Roland as if Roland had gone mad.

“Nothing.”

“You *knew!* You knew when we left this morning!”

“Oh, I might have seen something,” Roland said. “A reflection, perhaps, but . . . do you trust me, Al? That’s what matters, I think. Do you trust me, or do you think I lost my wits when I lost my heart? As he does?” He jerked his head in Cuthbert’s direction. Roland was looking at Alain with a faint smile on his lips, but his eyes were ruthless and distant—it was Roland’s over-the-horizon look. Alain wondered if Susan Delgado had seen that expression yet, and if she had, what she made of it.

“I trust you.” By now Alain was so confused that he didn’t know for sure if that was a lie or the truth.

“Good. Then switch sides with me. My count is thirty-one, mind.”

“Thirty-one,” Alain agreed. He raised his hands, then dropped them back to his thighs with a slap so sharp his normally stolid

mount laid his ears back and jiggled a bit under him. “Thirty-one.”

“I think we may go back early today, if that’s any satisfaction to you,” Roland said, and rode away. Alain watched him. He’d always wondered what went on in Roland’s head, but never more than now.

5

Creak. Creak-creak.

Here was what he’d been listening for, and just as Jonas was about to give up the hunt. He had expected to find their hidey-hole a little closer to their beds, but they were trig, all right.

He went to one knee and used the blade of his knife to pry up the board which had creaked. Under it were three bundles, each swaddled in dark strips of cotton cloth. These strips were damp to the touch and smelled fragrantly of gun-oil. Jonas took the bundles out and unwrapped each, curious to see what sort of calibers the youngsters had brought. The answer turned out to be serviceable but undistinguished. Two of the bundles contained single five-shot revolvers of a type then called (for no reason I know) “carvers.” The third contained two guns, six-shooters of higher quality than the carvers. In fact, for one heart-stopping moment, Jonas thought he had found the big revolvers of a gunslinger—true-blue steel barrels, sandalwood grips, bores like mineshafts. Such guns he could not have left, no matter what the cost to his plans. Seeing the plain grips was thus something of a relief. Disappointment was never a thing you looked for, but it had a wonderful way of clearing the mind.

He rewrapped the guns and put them back, put the board back as well. A gang of ne’er-do-well clots from town might possibly come out here, and might possibly vandalize the unguarded bunkhouse, scattering what they didn’t tear up, but find a hiding place such as this? No, my son. Not likely.

Do you really think they’ll believe it was hooligans from town that did this?

They might; just because he had underestimated them to start with didn't mean he should turn about-face and begin overestimating them now. And he had the luxury of not needing to care. Either way, it would make them angry. Angry enough to rush full-tilt around their Hillock, perhaps. To throw caution to the wind . . . and reap the whirlwind.

Jonas poked the end of the severed dog's tail into one of the pigeon-cages, so it stuck up like a huge, mocking feather. He used the paint to write such charmingly boyish slogans as

SUCK MY PRICK!

and

SO BONE YOU RITCH FUCKERS

on the walls. Then he left, standing on the porch for a moment to verify he still had the Bar K to himself. Of course he did. Yet for a blink or two, there at the end, he'd felt uneasy—almost as though he'd been scented. By some sort of In-World telepathy, mayhap.

There is such; you know it. The touch, it's called.

Aye, but that was the tool of gunslingers, artists, and lunatics. Not of boys, be they lords or just lads.

Jonas went back to his horse at a near-trot nevertheless, mounted, and rode toward town. Things were reaching the boil, and there would be a lot to do before Demon Moon rose full in the sky.

6

Rhea's hut, its stone walls and the cracked *guijarros* of its roof slimed with moss, huddled on the last hill of the Cöos. Beyond it was a magnificent view northwest—the Bad Grass, the desert, Hanging

Rock, Eyebolt Canyon—but scenic vistas were the last thing on Sheemie’s mind as he led Caprichoso cautiously into Rhea’s yard not long after noon. He’d been hungry for the last hour or so, but now the pangs were gone. He hated this place worse than any other in Barony, even more than Citgo with its big towers always going creakedy-creak and clangety-clang.

“Sai?” he called, leading the mule into the yard. Capi balked as they neared the hut, planting his feet and lowering his neck, but when Sheemie tugged the halter, he came on again. Sheemie was almost sorry.

“Ma’am? Nice old lady that wouldn’t hurt a fly? You therey-air? It’s good old Sheemie with your *graf*.” He smiled and held out his free hand, palm up, to demonstrate his exquisite harmlessness, but from the hut there was still no response. Sheemie felt his guts first coil, then cramp. For a moment he thought he was going to shit in his pants just like a babby; then he passed wind and felt a little better. In his bowels, at least.

He walked on, liking this less at every step. The yard was rocky and the straggling weeds yellowish, as if the hut’s resident had blighted the very earth with her touch. There was a garden, and Sheemie saw that the vegetables still in it—pumpkins and sharproot, mostly—were muties. Then he noticed the garden’s stuffy-guy. It was also a mutie, a nasty thing with two straw heads instead of one and what appeared to be a stuffed hand in a woman’s satin glove poking out of the chest area.

Sai Thorin’ll never talk me up here again, he thought. Not for all the pennies in the world.

The hut’s door stood open. To Sheemie it looked like a gaping mouth. A sickish dank smell drifted out.

Sheemie stopped about fifteen paces from the house, and when Capi nuzzled his bottom (as if to ask what was keeping them), the boy uttered a brief screech. The sound of it almost set him running,

and it was only by exercising all his willpower that he was able to stand his ground. The day was bright, but up here on this hill, the sun seemed meaningless. This wasn't his first trip up here, and Rhea's hill had never been pleasant, but it was somehow worse now. It made him feel the way the sound of the thinny made him feel when he woke and heard it in the middle of the night. As if something awful was sliding toward him—something that was all insane eyes and red, reaching claws.

“S-S-Sai? Is anyone here? Is—”

“Come closer.” The voice drifted out of the open door. “Come to where I can see you, idiot boy.”

Trying not to moan or cry, Sheemie did as the voice said. He had an idea that he was never going back down the hill again. Caprichoso, perhaps, but not him. Poor old Sheemie was going to end up in the cookpot—hot dinner tonight, soup tomorrow, cold snacks until Year's End. That's what he would be.

He made his reluctant way to Rhea's stoop on rubbery legs—if his knees had been closer together, they would have knocked like castanets. She didn't even *sound* the same.

“S-Sai? I'm afraid. So I a-a-am.”

“So ye should be,” the voice said. It drifted and drifted, slipping out into the sunlight like a sick puff of smoke. “Never mind, though—just do as I say. Come closer, Sheemie, son of Stanley.”

Sheemie did so, although terror dragged at every step he took. The mule followed, head down. Capi had honked like a goose all the way up here—honked ceaselessly—but now he had fallen silent.

“So here ye be,” the voice buried in those shadows whispered. “Here ye be, indeed.”

She stepped into the sunlight falling through the open door, wincing for a moment as it dazzled her eyes. Clasped in her arms was the empty *graf* barrel. Coiled around her throat like a necklace was Ermot.

Sheemie had seen the snake before, and on previous occasions had never failed to wonder what sort of agonies he might suffer before he died if he happened to be bitten by such. Today he had no such thoughts. Compared to Rhea, Ermot looked normal. The old woman's face had sunken at the cheeks, giving the rest of her head the look of a skull. Brown spots swarmed out of her thin hair and over her bulging brow like an army of invading insects. Below her left eye was an open sore, and her grin showed only a few remaining teeth.

"Don't like the way I look, do'ee?" she asked. "Makes yer heart cold, don't it?"

"N-No," Sheemie said, and then, because that didn't sound right: "I mean yes!" But gods, that sounded even worse. "You're beautiful, sai!" he blurted.

She chuffed nearly soundless laughter and thrust the empty tun into his arms almost hard enough to knock him on his ass. The touch of her fingers was brief, but long enough to make his flesh crawl.

"Well-a-day. They say handsome is as handsome does, don't they? And that suits me. Aye, right down to the ground. Bring me my *graf*, idiot child."

"Y-yes, sai! Right away, sai!" He took the empty tun back to the mule, set it down, then fumbled loose the cordage holding the little barrel of *graf*. He was very aware of her watching him, and it made him clumsy, but finally he got the barrel loose. It almost slid through his grasp, and there was a nightmarish moment when he thought it would fall to the stony ground and smash, but he caught his grip again at the last second. He took it to her, had just a second to realize she was no longer wearing the snake, then felt it crawling on

his boots. Ermot looked up at him, hissing and baring a double set of fangs in an eerie grin.

“Don’t move too fast, my boy. ’Twouldn’t be wise—Ermot’s grumpy today. Set the barrel just inside the door, here. It’s too heavy for me. Missed a few meals of late, I have.”

Sheemie bent from the waist (*bow yer best bow*, Sai Thorin had said, and here he was, doing just that), grimacing, not daring to ease the pressure on his back by moving his feet because the snake was still on them. When he straightened, Rhea was holding out an old and stained envelope. The flap had been sealed with a blob of red wax. Sheemie dreaded to think what might have been rendered down to make wax such as that.

“Take this and give it to Cordelia Delgado. Do ye know her?”

“A-Aye,” Sheemie managed. “Susan-sai’s auntie.”

“That’s right.” Sheemie reached tentatively for the envelope, but she held it back a moment. “Can’t read, can ye, idiot boy?”

“Nay. Words ’n letters go right out of my head.”

“Good. Mind ye show this to no one who can, or some night ye’ll find Ermot waiting under yer pillow. I see far, Sheemie, d’ye mark me? *I see far.*”

It was just an envelope, but it felt heavy and somehow dreadful in Sheemie’s fingers, as if it were made out of human skin instead of paper. And what sort of letter could Rhea be sending Cordelia Delgado, anyway? Sheemie thought back to the day he’d seen sai Delgado’s face all covered with cobwebbies, and shivered. The horrid creature lurking before him in the doorway of her hut could have been the very creature who’d spun those webs.

“Lose it and I’ll know,” Rhea whispered. “Show my business to another, and I’ll know. Remember, son of Stanley, I see far.”

“I’ll be careful, sai.” It might be better if he *did* lose the envelope, but he wouldn’t. Sheemie was dim in the head, everyone said so, but not so dim that he didn’t understand why he had been called up here: not to deliver a barrel of *graf*, but to receive this letter and pass it on.

“Would ye care to come in for a bit?” she whispered, and then pointed a finger at his crotch. “If I give ye a little bit of mushroom to eat—special to me, it is—I can look like anyone ye fancy.”

“Oh, I can’t,” he said, clutching his trousers and smiling a huge broad smile that felt like a scream trying to get out of his skin. “That pesky thing fell off last week, that did.”

For a moment Rhea only gawped at him, genuinely surprised for one of the few times in her life, and then she once more broke out in chuffing bursts of laughter. She held her stomach in her waxy hands and rocked back and forth with glee. Ermot, startled, streaked into the house on his lengthy green belly. From somewhere in its depths, her cat hissed at it.

“Go on,” Rhea said, still laughing. She leaned forward and dropped three or four pennies into his shirt pocket. “Get out of here, ye great galoophus! Don’t ye linger, either, looking at flowers!”

“No, sai—”

Before he could say more, the door clapped to so hard that dust puffed out of the cracks between the boards.

7

Roland surprised Cuthbert by suggesting at two o’ the clock that they go back to the Bar K. When Bert asked why, Roland only shrugged and would say nothing more. Bert looked at Alain and saw a queer, musing expression on the boy’s face.

As they drew closer to the bunkhouse, a sense of foreboding filled Cuthbert. They topped a rise, and looked down at the Bar K. The bunkhouse door stood open.

“Roland!” Alain cried. He was pointing to the cottonwood grove where the ranch’s spring was. Their clothes, neatly hung to dry when they left, were now scattered hell-to-breakfast.

Cuthbert dismounted and ran to them. Picked up a shirt, sniffed it, flung it away. “Pissed on!” he cried indignantly.

“Come on,” Roland said. “Let’s look at the damage.”

8

There was a lot of damage to look at. *As you expected*, Cuthbert thought, gazing at Roland. Then he turned to Alain, who appeared gloomy but not really surprised. *As you both expected*.

Roland bent toward one of the dead pigeons, and plucked at something so fine Cuthbert at first couldn’t see what it was. Then he straightened up and held it out to his friends. A single hair. Very long, very white. He opened the pinch of his thumb and forefinger and let it waft to the floor. There it lay amid the shredded remains of Cuthbert Allgood’s mother and father.

“If you knew that old corbie was here, why didn’t we come back and end his breath?” Cuthbert heard himself ask.

“Because the time was wrong,” Roland said mildly.

“*He* would have done it, had it been one of us in his place, destroying his things.”

“We’re not like him,” Roland said mildly.

“I’m going to find him and blow his teeth out the back of his head.”

“Not at all,” Roland said mildly.

If Bert had to listen to one more mild word from Roland's mouth, he would run mad. All thoughts of fellowship and *ka-tet* left his mind, which sank back into his body and was at once obliterated by simple red fury. Jonas had been here. Jonas had pissed on their clothes, called Alain's mother a cunt, torn up their most treasured pictures, painted childish obscenities on their walls, killed their pigeons. Roland had known . . . done nothing . . . intended to *continue* doing nothing. Except fuck his gilly-girl. He would do plenty of that, aye, because now that was all he cared about.

But she won't like the look of your face the next time you climb into the saddle, Cuthbert thought. *I'll see to that.*

He drew back his fist. Alain caught his wrist. Roland turned away and began picking up scattered blankets, as if Cuthbert's furious face and cocked fist were simply of no account to him.

Cuthbert balled up his other fist, meaning to make Alain let go of him, one way or the other, but the sight of his friend's round and honest face, so guileless and dismayed, quieted his rage a little. His argument wasn't with Alain. Cuthbert was sure the other boy had known something bad was happening here, but he was also sure that Roland had insisted Alain do nothing until Jonas was gone.

"Come with me," Alain muttered, slinging an arm around Bert's shoulders. "Outside. For your father's sake, come. You have to cool off. This is no time to be fighting among ourselves."

"It's no time for our leader's brains to drain down into his prick, either," Cuthbert said, making no effort to lower his voice. But the second time Alain tugged him, Bert allowed himself to be led toward the door.

I'll stay my rage at him this one last time, he thought, *but I think—I know—that is all I can manage. I'll have Alain tell him so.*

The idea of using Alain as a go-between to his best friend—of knowing that things had come to such a pass—filled Cuthbert with

an angry, despairing rage, and at the door to the porch he turned back to Roland. *"She has made you a coward,"* he said in the High Speech. Beside him, Alain drew in his breath sharply.

Roland stopped as if suddenly turned to stone, his back to them, his arms full of blankets. In that moment Cuthbert was sure Roland would turn and rush toward him. They would fight, likely until one of them was dead or blind or unconscious. Likely that one would be him, but he no longer cared.

But Roland never turned. Instead, in the same speech, he said: *"He came to steal our guile and our caution. With you, he has succeeded."*

"No," Cuthbert said, lapsing back into the low speech. "I know that part of you really believes that, but it's not so. The truth is, you've lost your compass. You've called your carelessness love and made a virtue of irresponsibility. I—"

"For gods' sake, *come!*" Alain nearly snarled, and yanked him out the door.

9

With Roland out of sight, Cuthbert felt his rage veering toward Alain in spite of himself; it turned like a weathervane when the wind shifts. The two of them stood facing each other in the sunshiny dooryard, Alain looking unhappy and distracted, Cuthbert with his hands knotted into fists so tight they trembled at his sides.

"Why do you always excuse him? Why?"

"Out on the Drop, he asked if I trusted him. I said I did. And I do."

"Then you're a fool."

"And he's a gunslinger. If he says we must wait longer, we must."

“He’s a gunslinger by accident! A freak! A mutie!”

Alain stared at him in silent shock.

“Come with me, Alain. It’s time to end this mad game. We’ll find Jonas and kill him. Our *ka-tet* is broken. We’ll make a new one, you and I.”

“It’s not broken. If it does break, it’ll be you responsible. And for that I’ll never forgive you.”

Now it was Cuthbert’s turn to be silent.

“Go for a ride, why don’t you? A long one. Give yourself time to cool off. So much depends on our fellowship—”

“Tell *him* that!”

“No, I’m telling *you*. Jonas wrote a foul word about my mother. Don’t you think I’d go with you just to avenge that, if I didn’t think that Roland was right? That it’s what Jonas wants? For us to lose our wits and come charging blindly around our Hillock?”

“That’s right, but it’s wrong, too,” Cuthbert said. Yet his hands were slowly unrolling, fists becoming fingers again. “You don’t see and I don’t have the words to explain. If I say that Susan has poisoned the well of our *ka-tet*, you would call me jealous. Yet I think she has, all unknowing and unmeaning. She’s poisoned his mind, and the door to hell has opened. Roland feels the heat from that open door and thinks it’s only his feeling for her . . . but we must do better, Al. We must *think* better. For him as well as for ourselves and our fathers.”

“Are you calling her our enemy?”

“No! It would be easier if she was.” He took a deep breath, let it out, took another, let it out, took a third and let it out. With each one he felt a little saner, a little more himself. “Never mind. There’s no

more to say on't for now. Your advice is good—I think I will take a ride. A long one.”

Bert started toward his horse, then turned back.

“Tell him he’s wrong. Tell him that even if he’s right about waiting, he’s right for the wrong reasons, and that makes him all the way wrong.” He hesitated. “Tell him what I said about the door to hell. Say that’s *my* piece of the touch. Will you tell him?”

“Yes. Stay away from Jonas, Bert.”

Cuthbert mounted up. “I promise nothing.”

“You’re not a man.” Alain sounded sorrowful; on the point of tears, in fact. “None of us are men.”

“You better be wrong about that,” Cuthbert said, “because men’s work is coming.”

He turned his mount and rode away at a gallop.

10

He went far up the Seacoast Road, to begin with trying not to think at all. He’d found that sometimes unexpected things wandered into your head if you left the door open for them. Useful things, often.

This afternoon that didn’t happen. Confused, miserable, and without a fresh idea in his head (or even the hope of one), Bert at last turned back to Hambry. He rode the High Street from end to end, waving or speaking to people who hiled him. The three of them had met a lot of good people here. Some he counted as friends, and he rather felt the common folk of Hambrytown had adopted them— young fellows who were far from their own homes and families. And the more Bert knew and saw of these common folk, the less he suspected that they were a part of Rimer’s and Jonas’s nasty little

game. Why else had the Good Man chosen Hambry in the first place, if not because it provided such excellent cover?

There were plenty of folk out today. The farmers' market was booming, the street-stalls were crowded, children were laughing at a Pinch and Jilly show (Jilly was currently chasing Pinch back and forth and bashing the poor old longsuffering fellow with her broom), and the Reaping Fair decorations were going forward at speed. Yet Cuthbert felt only a little joy and anticipation at the thought of the Fair. Because it wasn't his own, wasn't Gilead Reaping? Perhaps . . . but mostly just because his mind and heart were so heavy. If this was what growing up was like, he thought he could have skipped the experience.

He rode on out of town, the ocean now at his back, the sun full in his face, his shadow growing ever longer behind him. He thought he'd soon veer off the Great Road and ride across the Drop to the Bar K. But before he could, here came his old friend, Sheemie, leading a mule. Sheemie's head was down, his shoulders slumped, his pink *'brera* askew, his boots dusty. To Cuthbert he looked as though he had walked all the way from the tip of the earth.

"Sheemie!" Cuthbert cried, already anticipating the boy's cheery grin and loony patter. "Long days and pleasant nights! How are y—"

Sheemie lifted his head, and as the brim of his *sombrera* came up, Cuthbert fell silent. He saw the dreadful fear on the boy's face—the pale cheeks, the haunted eyes, the trembling mouth.

11

Sheemie could have been at the Delgado place two hours ago, if he'd wanted, but he had trudged along at a turtle's pace, the letter inside his shirt seeming to drag at his every step. It was awful, so awful. He couldn't even think about it, because his thinker was mostly broken, so it was.

Cuthbert was off his horse in a flash, and hurrying to Sheemie. He put his hands on the boy's shoulders. "What's wrong? Tell your old pal. He won't laugh, not a bit."

At the sound of "Arthur Heath's" kind voice and the sight of his concerned face, Sheemie began to weep. Rhea's strict command that he should tell no one flew out of his head. Still sobbing, he recounted everything that had happened since that morning. Twice Cuthbert had to ask him to slow down, and when Bert led the boy to a tree in whose shade the two of them sat together, Sheemie was finally able to do so. Cuthbert listened with growing unease. At the end of his tale, Sheemie produced an envelope from inside his shirt.

Cuthbert broke the seal and read what was inside, his eyes growing large.

12

Roy Depape was waiting for him at the Travellers' Rest when Jonas returned in good spirits from his trip to the Bar K. An outrider had finally shown up, Depape announced, and Jonas's spirits rose another notch. Only Roy didn't look as happy about it as Jonas would have expected. Not happy at all.

"Fellow's gone on to Seafront, where I guess he's expected," Depape said. "He wants you right away. I wouldn't linger here to eat, not even a popkin, if I were you. I wouldn't take a drink, either. You'll want a clear head to deal with this one."

"Free with your advice today, ain't you, Roy?" Jonas said. He spoke in a heavily sarcastic tone, but when Pettie brought him a tot of whiskey, he sent it back and asked for water instead. Roy had a bit of a look to him, Jonas decided. Too pale by half, was good old Roy. And when Sheb sat down at his piano-bench and struck a chord, Depape jerked in that direction, one hand dropping to the butt of his gun. Interesting. And a little disquieting.

"Spill it, son—what's got your back hair up?"

Roy shook his head sullenly. “Don’t rightly know.”

“What’s this fellow’s name?”

“I didn’t ask, he didn’t say. He showed me Farson’s *sigul*, though. You know.” Depape lowered his voice a little. “The eye.”

Jonas knew, all right. He hated that wide-open staring eye, couldn’t imagine what had possessed Farson to pick it in the first place. Why not a mailed fist? Crossed swords? Or a bird? A falcon, for instance—a falcon would have made a fine *sigul*. But that eye—

“All right,” he said, finishing the glass of water. It went down better than whiskey would have done, anyway—dry as a bone, he’d been. “I’ll find out the rest for myself, shall I?”

As he reached the batwing doors and pushed them open, Depape called his name. Jonas turned back.

“He looks like other people,” Depape said.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t hardly know.” Depape looked embarrassed and bewildered . . . but dogged, too. Sticking to his guns. “We only talked five minutes in all, but once I looked at him and thought it was the old bastard from Ritzy—the one I shot. Little bit later I th’ow him a glance and think, ‘Hellfire, it’s my old pa standin there.’ Then that went by, too, and he looked like himself again.”

“And how’s that?”

“You’ll see for yourself, I reckon. I don’t know if you’ll like it much, though.”

Jonas stood with one batwing pushed open, thinking. “Roy, ’twasn’t Farson himself, was it? The Good Man in some sort of disguise?”

Depape hesitated, frowning, and then shook his head. “No.”

“Are you sure? We only saw him the once, remember, and not close-to.” Latigo had pointed him out. Sixteen months ago that had been, give or take.

“I’m sure. You remember how big he was?”

Jonas nodded. Farson was no Lord Perth, but he was six feet or more, and broad across at both brace and basket.

“This man’s Clay’s height, or less. And he stays the same height no matter who he looks like.” Depape hesitated a moment and said: “He laughs like a dead person. I could barely stand to hear him do it.”

“What do you mean, like a dead person?”

Roy Depape shook his head. “Can’t rightly say.”

13

Twenty minutes later, Eldred Jonas was riding beneath COME IN PEACE and into the courtyard of Seafront, uneasy because he had expected Latigo . . . and unless Roy was very much mistaken, it wasn’t Latigo he was getting.

Miguel shuffled forward, grinning his gummy old grin, and took the reins of Jonas’s horse.

“Reconocimiento.”

“Por nada, jefe.”

Jonas went in, saw Olive Thorin sitting in the front parlor like a forlorn ghost, and nodded to her. She nodded back, and managed a wan smile.

“Sai Jonas, how well you look. If you see Hart—”

“Cry your pardon, lady, but it’s the Chancellor I’ve come to see,” Jonas said. He went on quickly upstairs toward the Chancellor’s suite of rooms, then down a narrow stone hall lit (and not too well) with gas-jets.

When he reached the end of the corridor, he rapped on the door waiting there—a massive thing of oak and brass set in its own arch. Rimer didn’t care for such as Susan Delgado, but he loved the trappings of power; that was what took the curve out of his noodle and made it straight. Jonas rapped.

“Come in, my friend,” a voice—not Rimer’s—called. It was followed by a tittery laugh that made Jonas’s flesh creep. *He laughs like a dead person*, Roy had said.

Jonas pushed open the door and stepped in. Rimer cared for incense no more than he cared for the hips and lips of women, but there was incense burning in here now—a woody smell that made Jonas think of court at Gilead, and functions of state in the Great Hall. The gas-jets were turned high. The draperies—purple velvet, the color of royalty, Rimer’s absolute favorite—trembled minutely in the breath of sea breeze coming in through the open windows. Of Rimer there was no sign. Or of anyone else, come to that. There was a little balcony, but the doors giving on it were open, and no one was out there.

Jonas stepped a little farther into the room, glancing into a gilt-framed mirror on the far side to check behind him without turning his head. No one there, either. Ahead and to the left was a table with places set for two and a cold supper in place, but no one in either chair. Yet someone had spoken to him. Someone who’d been directly on the other side of the door, from the sound. Jonas drew his gun.

“Come, now,” said the voice which had bid him enter. It came from directly behind Jonas’s left shoulder. “No need for that, we’re all friends here. All on the same side, you know.”

Jonas whirled on his heels, suddenly feeling old and slow. Standing there was a man of medium height, powerfully built from the look of him, with bright blue eyes and the rosy cheeks of either good health or good wine. His parted, smiling lips revealed cunning little teeth which must have been filed to points—surely such points couldn't be natural. He wore a black robe, like the robe of a holy man, with the hood pushed back. Jonas's first thought, that the fellow was bald, had been wrong, he saw. The hair was simply cropped so stringently that it was nothing but fuzz.

“Put the beanshooter away,” the man in black said. “We're friends here, I tell you—absolutely palsy-walsy. We'll break bread and speak of many things—oxen and oil-tankers and whether or not Frank Sinatra really *was* a better crooner than Der Bingle.”

“Who? A better *what*?”

“No one you know; nothing that matters.” The man in black tittered again. It was, Jonas thought, the sort of sound one might expect to hear drifting through the barred windows of a lunatic asylum.

He turned. Looked into the mirror again. This time he saw the man in black standing there and smiling at him, big as life. Gods, had he been there all along?

Yes, but you couldn't see him until he was ready to be seen. I don't know if he's a wizard, but he's a glamor-man, all right. Mayhap even Farson's sorcerer.

He turned back. The man in the priest's robe was still smiling. No pointed teeth now. But they *had* been pointed. Jonas would lay his watch and warrant on it.

“Where's Rimer?”

“I sent him away to work with young sai Delgado on her Reaping Day catechisms,” the man in black said. He slung a chummy arm

around Jonas's shoulders and began leading him toward the table. "Best we palaver alone, I think."

Jonas didn't want to offend Farson's man, but he couldn't bear the touch of that arm. He couldn't say why, but it was unbearable. Pestilential. He shrugged it off and went on to one of the chairs, trying not to shiver. No wonder Depape had come back from Hanging Rock looking pale. No damned wonder.

Instead of being offended, the man in black tittered again (Yes, Jonas thought, *he does laugh like the dead, very like, so he does*). For one moment Jonas thought it was Fardo, Cort's father, in this room with him—that it was the man who had sent him west all those years ago—and he reached for his gun again. Then it was just the man in black, smiling at him in an unpleasantly knowing way, those blue eyes dancing like the flame from the gas-jets.

"See something interesting, sai Jonas?"

"Aye," Jonas said, sitting down. "Eats." He took a piece of bread and popped it into his mouth. The bread stuck to his dry tongue, but he chewed determinedly all the same.

"Good boy." The other also sat, and poured wine, filling Jonas's glass first. "Now, my friend, tell me everything you've done since the three troublesome boys arrived, and everything you know, and everything you have planned. I would not have you leave out a single jot."

"First show me your *sigul*."

"Of course. How prudent you are."

The man in black reached inside his robe and brought out a square of metal—silver, Jonas guessed. He tossed it onto the table, and it clattered across to Jonas's plate. Engraved on it was what he had expected—that hideous staring eye.

“Satisfied?”

Jonas nodded.

“Slide it back to me.”

Jonas reached for it, but for once his normally steady hand resembled his reedy, unstable voice. He watched the fingers tremble for a moment, then lowered the hand quickly to the table.

“I . . . I don’t want to.”

No. He didn’t want to. Suddenly he knew that if he touched it, the engraved silver eye would roll . . . and look directly at him.

The man in black tittered and made a come-along gesture with the fingers of his right hand. The silver buckle (that was what it looked like to Jonas) slid back to him . . . and up the sleeve of his homespun robe.

“Abracadabra! Bool! The end! Now,” the man in black went on, sipping his wine delicately, “if we have finished the tiresome formalities . . .”

“One more,” Jonas said. “You know my name; I would know yours.”

“Call me Walter,” the man in black said, and the smile suddenly fell off his lips. “Good old Walter, that’s me. Now let us see where we are, and where we’re going. Let us, in short, palaver.”

14

When Cuthbert came back into the bunkhouse, night had fallen. Roland and Alain were playing cards. They had cleaned the place up so that it looked almost as it had (thanks to turpentine found in a closet of the old foreman’s office, even the slogans written on the walls were just pink ghosts of their former selves), and now were

deeply involved in a game of *Casa Fuerte*, or Hotpatch, as it was known in their own part of the world. Either way, it was basically a two-man version of Watch Me, the card-game which had been played in barrooms and bunkhouses and around campfires since the world was young.

Roland looked up at once, trying to read Bert's emotional weather. Outwardly, Roland was as impassive as ever, had even played Alain to a draw across four difficult hands, but inwardly he was in a turmoil of pain and indecision. Alain had told him what Cuthbert had said while the two of them stood talking in the yard, and they were terrible things to hear from a friend, even when they came at second hand. Yet what haunted him more was what Bert had said just before leaving: *You've called your carelessness love and made a virtue of irresponsibility.* Was there even a *chance* he had done such a thing? Over and over he told himself no—that the course he had ordered them to follow was hard but sensible, the only course that made sense. Cuthbert's shouting was just so much angry wind, brought on by nerves . . . and his fury at having their private place defiled so outrageously. Still . . .

Tell him he's right for the wrong reasons, and that makes him all the way wrong.

That couldn't be.

Could it?

Cuthbert was smiling and his color was high, as if he had galloped most of the way back. He looked young, handsome, and vital. He looked happy, in fact, almost like the Cuthbert of old—the one who'd been capable of babbling happy nonsense to a rook's skull until someone told him to please, *please* shut up.

But Roland didn't trust what he saw. There was something wrong with the smile, the color in Bert's cheeks could have been anger rather than good health, and the sparkle in his eyes looked like fever instead of humor. Roland showed nothing on his own face, but his

heart sank. He'd hoped the storm would blow itself out, given a little time, but he didn't think it had. He shot a glance at Alain, and saw that Alain felt the same.

Cuthbert, it will be over in three weeks. If only I could tell you that.

The thought which returned was stunning in its simplicity:

Why can't you?

He realized he didn't know. Why had he been holding back, keeping his own counsel? For what *purpose*? *Had* he been blind? Gods, *had* he?

"Hello, Bert," he said, "did you have a nice r—"

"Yes, very nice, a very nice ride, an *instructive* ride. Come outside. I want to show you something."

Roland liked the thin glaze of hilarity in Bert's eyes less and less, but he laid his cards in a neat facedown fan on the table and got up.

Alain pulled at his sleeve. "No!" His voice was low and panicky. "Do you not see how he looks?"

"I see," Roland said. And felt dismay in his heart.

For the first time, as he walked slowly toward the friend who no longer looked like a friend, it occurred to Roland that he had been making decisions in a state close akin to drunkenness. Or had he been making decisions at all? He was no longer sure.

"What is it you'd show me, Bert?"

"Something wonderful," Bert said, and laughed. There was hate in the sound. Perhaps murder. "You'll want a good close look at this. I know you will."

"Bert, what's wrong with you?" Alain asked.

“Wrong with me? Nothing wrong with *me*, Al—I’m as happy as a dart at sunrise, a bee in a flower, a fish in the ocean.” And as he turned away to go back through the door, he laughed again.

“Don’t go out there,” Alain said. “He’s lost his wits.”

“If our fellowship is broken, any chance we might have of getting out of Mejis alive is gone,” Roland said. “That being the case, I’d rather die at the hands of a friend than an enemy.”

He went out. After a moment of hesitation, Alain followed. On his face was a look of purest misery.

15

Huntress had gone and Demon had not yet begun to show his face, but the sky was powdered with stars, and they threw enough light to see by. Cuthbert’s horse, still saddled, was tied to the hitching rail. Beyond it, the square of dusty dooryard gleamed like a canopy of tarnished silver.

“What is it?” Roland asked. They weren’t wearing guns, any of them. That was to be grateful for, at least. “What would you show me?”

“It’s here.” Cuthbert stopped at a point midway between the bunkhouse and the charred remains of the home place. He pointed with great assurance, but Roland could see nothing out of the ordinary. He walked over to Cuthbert and looked down.

“I don’t see—”

Brilliant light—starshine times a thousand—exploded in his head as Cuthbert’s fist drove against the point of his chin. It was the first time, except in play (and as very small boys), that Bert had ever struck him. Roland didn’t lose consciousness, but he *did* lose control over his arms and legs. They were there, but seemingly in another country, flailing like the limbs of a rag doll. He went down on his

back. Dust puffed up around him. The stars seemed strangely in motion, running in arcs and leaving milky trails behind them. There was a high ringing in his ears.

From a great distance he heard Alain scream: “Oh, you fool! You stupid *fool!*”

By making a tremendous effort, Roland was able to turn his head. He saw Alain start toward him and saw Cuthbert, no longer smiling, push him away. “This is between us, Al. You stay out of it.”

“You sucker-punched him, you bastard!” Alain, slow to anger, was now building toward a rage Cuthbert might well regret. *I have to get up, Roland thought. I have to get between them before something even worse happens.* His arms and legs began to swim weakly in the dust.

“Yes—that’s how he’s played us,” Cuthbert said. “I only returned the favor.” He looked down. “That’s what I wanted to show you, Roland. That particular piece of ground. That particular puff of dust in which you are now lying. Get a good taste of it. Mayhap it’ll wake you up.”

Now Roland’s own anger began to rise. He felt the coldness that was seeping into his thoughts, fought it, and realized he was losing. Jonas ceased to matter; the tankers at Citgo ceased to matter; the supply conspiracy they had uncovered ceased to matter. Soon the Affiliation and the *ka-tet* he had been at such pains to preserve would cease to matter as well.

The surface numbness was leaving his feet and legs, and he pushed himself to a sitting position. He looked up calmly at Bert, his tented hands on the ground, his face set. Starshine swam in his eyes.

“I love you, Cuthbert, but I’ll have no more insubordination and jealous tantrums. If I paid you back for all, I reckon you’d finish in

pieces, so I'm only going to pay you for hitting me when I didn't know it was coming."

"And I've no doubt ye can, cully," Cuthbert said, falling effortlessly into the Hambry patois. "But first ye might want to have a peek at this." Almost contemptuously, he tossed a folded sheet of paper. It hit Roland's chest and bounced into his lap.

Roland picked it up, feeling the fine point of his developing rage lose its edge. "What is it?"

"Open and see. There's enough starlight to read by."

Slowly, with reluctant fingers, Roland unfolded the sheet of paper and read what was printed there.

pure no more! he's had every hole
of her has will Deatborn! HOW DO
YE LIKE IT?

He read it twice. The second time was actually harder, because his hands had begun to tremble. He saw every place he and Susan had met—the boathouse, the hut, the shack—and now he saw them in a new light, knowing someone else had seen them, too. How clever he had believed they were being. How confident of their secrecy and their discretion. And yet someone had been watching all the time. Susan had been right. Someone had seen.

I've put everything at risk. Her life as well as our lives.

Tell him what I said about the doorway to hell.

And Susan's voice, too: *Ka like a wind . . . if you love me, then love me.*

So he had done, believing in his youthful arrogance that everything would turn out all right for no other reason—yes, at

bottom he had believed this—than that *he* was *he*, and *ka* must serve his love.

“I’ve been a fool,” he said. His voice trembled like his hands.

“Yes, indeed,” Cuthbert said. “So you have.” He dropped to his knees in the dust, facing Roland. “Now if you want to hit me, hit away. Hard as you want and as many as you can manage. I’ll not hit back. I’ve done all I can to wake you up to your responsibilities. If you still sleep, so be it. Either way, I still love you.” Bert put his hands on Roland’s shoulders and briefly kissed his friend’s cheek.

Roland began to cry. They were partly tears of gratitude, but mostly those of mingled shame and confusion; there was even a small, dark part of him that hated Cuthbert and always would. That part hated Cuthbert more on account of the kiss than because of the unexpected punch on the jaw; more for the forgiveness than the awakening.

He got to his feet, still holding the letter in one dusty hand, the other ineffectually brushing his cheeks and leaving damp smears there. When he staggered and Cuthbert put out a hand to steady him, Roland pushed him so hard that Cuthbert himself would have fallen, if Alain hadn’t caught hold of his shoulders.

Then, slowly, Roland went back down again—this time in front of Cuthbert with his hands up and his head down.

“Roland, no!” Cuthbert cried.

“Yes,” Roland said. “I have forgotten the face of my father, and cry your pardon.”

“Yes, all right, for gods’ sake, *yes!*” Cuthbert now sounded as if he were crying himself. “Just . . . please get up! It breaks my heart to see you so!”

And mine to be so, Roland thought. To be humbled so. But I brought it on myself, didn't I? This dark yard, with my head throbbing and my heart full of shame and fear. This is mine, bought and paid for.

They helped him up and Roland let himself be helped. "That's quite a left, Bert," he said in a voice that almost passed for normal.

"Only when it's going toward someone who doesn't know it's coming," Cuthbert replied.

"This letter—how did you come by it?"

Cuthbert told of meeting Sheemie, who had been dithering along in his own misery, as if waiting for *ka* to intervene . . . and, in the person of "Arthur Heath," *ka* had.

"From the witch," Roland mused. "Yes, but how did *she* know? For she never leaves the Cöos, or so Susan has told me."

"I can't say. Nor do I much care. What I'm most concerned about right now is making sure that Sheemie isn't hurt because of what he told me and gave me. After that, I'm concerned that what old witch Rhea has tried to tell once she doesn't try to tell again."

"I've made at least one terrible mistake," Roland said, "but I don't count loving Susan as another. That was beyond me to change. As it was beyond her. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," Alain said at once, and after a moment, almost reluctantly, Cuthbert said, "Aye, Roland."

"I've been arrogant and stupid. If this note had reached her aunt, she could have been sent into exile."

"And we to the devil, by way of hangropes," Cuthbert added dryly. "Although I know that's a minor matter to you by comparison."

"What about the witch?" Alain asked. "What do we do about her?"

Roland smiled a little, and turned toward the northwest. “Rhea,” he said. “Whatever else she is, she’s a first-class troublemaker, is she not? And troublemakers must be put on notice.”

He started back toward the bunkhouse, trudging with his head down. Cuthbert looked at Alain, and saw that Al was also a little teary-eyed. Bert put out his hand. For a moment Alain only looked at it. Then he nodded—to himself rather than to Cuthbert, it seemed—and shook it.

“You did what you had to,” Alain said. “I had my doubts at first, but not now.”

Cuthbert let out his breath. “And I did it the way I had to. If I hadn’t surprised him—”

“—he would have beaten you black and blue.”

“So many more colors than that,” Cuthbert said. “I would have looked like a rainbow.”

“The Wizard’s Rainbow, even,” Alain said. “Extra colors for your penny.”

That made Cuthbert laugh. The two of them walked back toward the bunkhouse, where Roland was unsaddling Bert’s horse.

Cuthbert turned in that direction to help, but Alain held him back. “Leave him alone for a little while,” he said. “It’s best you do.”

They went on ahead, and when Roland came in ten minutes later, he found Cuthbert playing his hand. And winning with it.

“Bert,” he said.

Cuthbert looked up.

“We have a spot of business tomorrow, you and I. Up on the Cöos.”

“Are we going to kill her?”

Roland thought, and thought hard. At last he looked up, biting his lip. “We should.”

“Aye. We should. But are we going to?”

“Not unless we have to, I reckon.” Later he would regret this decision—if it was a decision—bitterly, but there never came a time when he did not understand it. He had been a boy not much older than Jake Chambers during that Mejis fall, and the decision to kill does not come easily or naturally to most boys. “Not unless she makes us.”

“Perhaps it would be best if she did,” Cuthbert said. It was hard gunslinger talk, but he looked troubled as he said it.

“Yes. Perhaps it would. It’s not likely, though, not in one as sly as her. Be ready to get up early.”

“All right. Do you want your hand back?”

“When you’re on the verge of knocking him out? Not at all.”

Roland went past them to his bunk. There he sat, looking at his folded hands in his lap. He might have been praying; he might only have been thinking hard. Cuthbert looked at him for a moment, then turned back to his cards.

16

The sun was just over the horizon when Roland and Cuthbert left the next morning. The Drop, still drenched with morning dew, seemed to burn with orange fire in the early light. Their breath and that of their horses puffed frosty in the air. It was a morning neither of them ever forgot. For the first time in their lives they went forth wearing holstered revolvers; for the first time in their lives they went into the world as gunslingers.

Cuthbert said not a word—he knew that if he started, he’d do nothing but babble great streams of his usual nonsense—and Roland was quiet by nature. There was only one exchange between them, and it was brief.

“I said I made at least one very bad mistake,” Roland told him. “One that this note”—he touched his breast pocket—“brought home to me. Do you know what that mistake was?”

“Not loving her—not that,” Cuthbert said. “You called that *ka*, and I call it the same.” It was a relief to be able to say this, and a greater one to believe it. Cuthbert thought he could even accept Susan herself now, not as his best friend’s lover, a girl he had wanted himself the first time he saw her, but as a part of their entwined fate.

“No,” Roland said. “Not loving her, but thinking that love could somehow be apart from everything else. That I could live two lives—one with you and Al and our job here, one with her. I thought that love could lift me above *ka*, the way a bird’s wings can take it above all the things that would kill it and eat it, otherwise. Do you understand?”

“It made you blind.” Cuthbert spoke with a gentleness quite foreign to the young man who had suffered through the last two months.

“Yes,” Roland said sadly. “It made me blind . . . but now I see. Come on, a little faster, if you please. I want to get this over.”

17

They rode up the ruddy cart-track along which Susan (a Susan who had known a good deal less about the ways of the world) had come singing “Careless Love” beneath the light of the Kissing Moon. Where the track opened into Rhea’s yard, they stopped.

“Wonderful view,” Roland murmured. “You can see the whole sweep of the desert from here.”

“Not much to say about the view right here in front of us, though.”

That was true. The garden was full of unpicked mutie vegetables, the stuffy-guy presiding over them either a bad joke or a bad omen. The yard supported just one tree, now moulting sickly-looking fall leaves like an old vulture shedding its feathers. Beyond the tree was the hut itself, made of rough stone and topped by a single sooty pot of a chimney with a hex-sign painted on it in sneering yellow. At the rear corner, beyond one overgrown window, was a woodpile.

Roland had seen plenty of huts like it—the three of them had passed any number on their way here from Gilead—but never one that felt as powerfully *wrong* as this. He saw nothing untoward, yet there was a feeling, too strong to be denied, of a presence. One that watched and waited.

Cuthbert felt it, too. “Do we have to go closer?” He swallowed. “Do we have to go in? Because . . . Roland, the door is open. Do you see?”

He saw. As if she expected them. As if she was inviting them in, wanting them to sit down with her to some unspeakable breakfast.

“Stay here.” Roland gigged Rusher forward.

“No! I’m coming!”

“No, cover my back. If I need to go inside, I’ll call you to join me . . . but if I need to go inside, the old woman who lives here will breathe no more. As you said, that might be for the best.”

At every slow step Rusher took, the feeling of wrongness grew in Roland’s heart and mind. There was a stench to the place, a smell like rotten meat and hot putrefied tomatoes. It came from the hut, he supposed, but it also seemed to come wafting out of the very ground. And at every step, the whine of the thinny seemed louder, as if the atmosphere of this place somehow magnified it.

Susan came up here alone, and in the dark, he thought. Gods, I'm not sure I could have come up here in the dark with my friends for company.

He stopped beneath the tree, looking through the open door twenty paces away. He saw what could have been a kitchen: the legs of a table, the back of a chair, a filthy hearthstone. No sign of the lady of the house. But she was there. Roland could feel her eyes crawling on him like loathsome bugs.

I can't see her because she's used her art to make herself dim . . . but she's there.

And just perhaps he *did* see her. The air had a strange shimmer just inside the door to the right, as if it had been heated. Roland had been told that you could see someone who was *dim* by turning your head and looking from the corner of your eye. He did that now.

"Roland?" Cuthbert called from behind him.

"Fine so far, Bert." Barely paying attention to the words he was saying, because . . . yes! That shimmer was clearer now, and it had almost the shape of a woman. It could be his imagination, of course, but . . .

But at that moment, as if understanding he'd seen her, the shimmer moved farther back into the shadows. Roland glimpsed the swinging hem of an old black dress, there and then gone.

No matter. He had not come to see her but only to give her her single warning . . . which was one more than any of their fathers would have given her, no doubt.

"Rhea!" His voice rolled in the harsh tones of old, stern and commanding. Two yellow leaves fell from the tree, as if shivered loose by that voice, and one fell in his black hair. From the hut came only a waiting, listening silence . . . and then the discordant, jeering yowl of a cat.

“Rhea, daughter of none! I’ve brought something back to you, woman! Something you must have lost!” From his shirt he took the folded letter and tossed it to the stony ground. “Today I’ve been your friend, Rhea—if this had gone where you had intended it to go, you would have paid with your life.”

He paused. Another leaf drifted down from the tree. This one landed in Rusher’s mane.

“Hear me well, Rhea, daughter of none, and understand me well. I have come here under the name of Will Dearborn, but Dearborn is not my name and it is the Affiliation I serve. More, ’tis all which lies behind the Affiliation—’tis the power of the White. You have crossed the way of our *ka*, and I warn you only this once: *do not cross it again*. Do you understand?”

Only that waiting silence.

“Do not touch a single hair on the head of the boy who carried your bad-natured mischief hence, or you’ll die. Speak not another word of those things you know or think you know to anyone—not to Cordelia Delgado, nor to Jonas, nor to Rimer, nor to Thorin—or you’ll die. Keep your peace and we will keep ours. Break it, and we’ll still you. Do you understand?”

More silence. Dirty windows peering at him like eyes. A puff of breeze sent more leaves showering down around him, and caused the stuffy-guy to creak nastily on his pole. Roland thought briefly of the cook, Hax, twisting at the end of his rope.

“Do you understand?”

No reply. Not even a shimmer could he see through the open door now.

“Very well,” Roland said. “Silence gives consent.” He gigged his horse around. As he did, his head came up a little, and he saw

something green shift above him among the yellow leaves. There was a low hissing sound.

“Roland look out! Snake!” Cuthbert screamed, but before the second word had left his mouth, Roland had drawn one of his guns.

He fell sideways in the saddle, holding with his left leg and heel as Rusher jiggled and pranced. He fired three times, the thunder of the big gun smashing through the still air and then rolling back from the nearby hills. With each shot the snake flipped upward again, its blood dotting red across a background of blue sky and yellow leaves. The last bullet tore off its head, and when the snake fell for good, it hit the ground in two pieces. From within the hut came a wail of grief and rage so awful that Roland’s spine turned to a cord of ice.

“You bastard!” screamed a woman’s voice from the shadows. *“Oh, you murdering cull! My friend! My friend!”*

“If it was your friend, you oughtn’t to have set it on me,” Roland said. “Remember, Rhea, daughter of none.”

The voice uttered one more shriek and fell silent.

Roland rode back to Cuthbert, holstering his gun. Bert’s eyes were round and amazed. “Roland, what shooting! Gods, what shooting!”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“But we still don’t know how she knew!”

“Do you think she’d tell?” There was a small but minute shake in Roland’s voice. The way the snake had come out of the tree like that, right at him . . . he could still barely believe he wasn’t dead. Thank gods for his hand, which had taken matters over.

“We could make her talk,” Cuthbert said, but Roland could tell from his voice that Bert had no taste for such. Maybe later, maybe after

years of trail-riding and gunslinging, but now he had no more stomach for torture than for killing outright.

“Even if we could, we couldn’t make her tell the truth. Such as her lies as other folks breathe. If we’ve convinced her to keep quiet, we’ve done enough for today. Come on. I hate this place.”

18

As they rode back toward town, Roland said: “We’ve got to meet.”

“The four of us. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I want to tell everything I know and surmise. I want to tell you my plan, such as it is. What we’ve been waiting *for*.”

“That would be very good indeed.”

“Susan can help us.” Roland seemed to be speaking to himself. Cuthbert was amused to see that the lone, crownlike leaf was still caught in his dark hair. “Susan was *meant* to help us. Why didn’t I see that?”

“Because love is blind,” Cuthbert said. He snorted laughter and clapped Roland on the shoulder. “Love is blind, old son.”

19

When she was sure the boys were gone, Rhea crept out of her door and into the hateful sunshine. She hobbled across to the tree and fell on her knees by the tattered length of her snake, weeping loudly.

“Ermot, Ermot!” she cried. “See what’s become of ye!”

There was his head, the mouth frozen open, the double fangs still dripping poison—clear drops that shone like prisms in the day’s strengthening light. The glazing eyes glared. She picked Ermot up, kissed the scaly mouth, licked the last of the venom from the exposed needles, crooning and weeping all the while.

Next she picked up the long and tattered body with her other hand, moaning at the holes which had been torn into Ermot's satiny hide; the holes and the ripped red flesh beneath. Twice she put the head against the body and spoke incantations, but nothing happened. Of course not. Ermot had gone beyond the aid of her spells. Poor Ermot.

She held his head to one flattened old dug, and his body to the other. Then, with the last of his blood wetting the bodice of her dress, she looked in the direction the hateful boys had gone.

"I'll pay ye back," she whispered. "By all the gods that ever were, I'll pay ye back. When ye least expect it, there Rhea will be, and your screams will break your throats. Do you hear me? *Your screams will break your throats!*"

She knelt a moment longer, then got up and shuffled back toward her hut, holding Ermot to her bosom.

CHAPTER V WIZARD'S RAINBOW

1

On an afternoon three days after Roland's and Cuthbert's visit to the Cöos, Roy Depape and Clay Reynolds walked along the upstairs hallway of the Travellers' Rest to the spacious bedroom Coral Thorin kept there. Clay knocked. Jonas called for them to come in, it was open.

The first thing Depape saw upon entering was sai Thorin herself, in a rocker by the window. She wore a foamy nightdress of white silk and a red *bufanda* on her head. She had a lapful of knitting. Depape looked at her in surprise. She offered him and Reynolds an enigmatic smile, said "Hello, gents," and returned to her needlework. Outside there was a rattle of firecrackers (young folks could never wait until the big day; if they had crackers in their hands, they had to set match to them), the nervous whinny of a horse, and the raucous laughter of boys.

Depape turned to Reynolds, who shrugged and then crossed his arms to hold the sides of his cloak. In this way he expressed doubt or disapproval or both.

"Problem?"

Jonas was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, wiping shaving soap from his face with the end of the towel laid over his shoulder. He was bare to the waist. Depape had seen him that way plenty of times, but the old white crisscrossings of scars always made him feel a little sick to his stomach.

“Well . . . I knew we was using the lady’s room, I just didn’t know the lady came with it.”

“She does.” Jonas tossed the towel into the bathroom, crossed to the bed, and took his shirt from where it hung on one of the footposts. Beyond him, Coral glanced up, gave his naked back a single greedy look, then went back to her work once more. Jonas slipped into his shirt. “How are things at Citgo, Clay?”

“Quiet. But it’ll get noisy if certain young *vagabundos* poke their nosy noses in.”

“How many are out there, and how do they set?”

“Ten in the days. A dozen at night. Roy or I are out once every shift, but like I say, it’s been quiet.”

Jonas nodded, but he wasn’t happy. He’d hoped to draw the boys out to Citgo before now, just as he’d hoped to draw them into a confrontation by vandalizing their place and killing their pigeons. Yet so far they still hid behind their damned Hillock. He felt like a man in a field with three young bulls. He’s got a red rag, this would-be *torero*, and he’s flapping it for all he’s worth, and still the *toros* refuse to charge. Why?

“The moving operation? How goes that?”

“Like clockwork,” Reynolds said. “Four tankers a night, in pairs, the last four nights. Renfrew’s in charge, him of the Lazy Susan. Do you still want to leave half a dozen as bait?”

“Yar,” Jonas said, and there was a knock at the door.

Depape jumped. “Is that—”

“No,” Jonas said. “Our friend in the black robe has decamped. Perhaps he goes to offer comfort to the Good Man’s troops before battle.”

Depape barked laughter at that. By the window, the woman in the nightgown looked down at her knitting and said nothing.

“It’s open!” Jonas called.

The man who stepped in was wearing the *sombrero*, *serape*, and *sandalias* of a farmer or *vaquero*, but the face was pale and the lock of hair peeking out from beneath the *sombrero*’s brim was blond. It was Latigo. A hard man and no mistake, but a great improvement over the laughing man in the black robe, just the same.

“Good to see you, gentlemen,” he said, coming in and closing the door. His face—dour, frowning—was that of a man who hasn’t seen anything good in years. Maybe since birth. “Jonas? Are you well? Do things march?”

“I am and they do,” Jonas said. He offered his hand. Latigo gave it a quick, dry shake. He didn’t do the same for Depape or Reynolds, but glanced at Coral instead.

“Long days and pleasant nights, lady.”

“And may you have twice the number, sai Latigo,” she said without looking up from her knitting.

Latigo sat on the end of the bed, produced a sack of tobacco from beneath his *serape*, and began rolling a cigarette.

“I won’t stay long,” he said. He spoke in the abrupt, clipped tones of northern In-World, where—or so Depape had heard—reindeer-fucking was still considered the chief sport. If you ran slower than your sister, that was. “It wouldn’t be wise. I don’t quite fit in, if one looks closely.”

“No,” Reynolds said, sounding amused. “You don’t.”

Latigo gave him a sharp glance, then returned his attention to Jonas. “Most of my party is camped thirty wheels from here, in the

forest west of Eyebolt Canyon . . . what *is* that wretched noise inside the canyon, by the way? It frightens the horses.”

“A thinny,” Jonas said.

“It scares the men, too, if they get too close,” Reynolds said. “Best to stay away, cap’n.”

“How many are you?” Jonas asked.

“A hundred. And well armed.”

“So, it’s said, were Lord Perth’s men.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

“Have they seen any fighting?”

“Enough to know what it is,” Latigo said, and Jonas knew he was lying. Farson had kept his veterans in their mountain boltholes. Here was a little expeditionary force where no doubt only the sergeants were able to do more with their cocks than run water through them.

“There are a dozen at Hanging Rock, guarding the tankers your men have brought so far,” Latigo said.

“More than needed, likely.”

“I didn’t risk coming into this godforsaken shitsplat of a town in order to discuss my arrangements with you, Jonas.”

“Cry your pardon, sai,” Jonas replied, but perfunctorily. He sat on the floor next to Coral’s rocker and began to roll a smoke of his own. She put her knitting aside and began to stroke his hair. Depape didn’t know what there was about her that Eldred found so fascinating—when he himself looked he saw only an ugly bitch with a big nose and mosquito-bump titties.

“As to the three young men,” Latigo said with the air of a fellow going directly to the heart of the matter. “The Good Man was extremely disturbed to learn there were visitors from In-World in Mejis. And now you tell me they aren’t what they claim to be. So, just what *are* they?”

Jonas brushed Coral’s hand away from his hair as though it were a troublesome insect. Undisturbed, she returned to her knitting. “They’re not young men but mere boys, and if their coming here is *ka*—about which I know Farson concerns himself deeply—then it may be our *ka* rather than the Affiliation’s.”

“Unfortunately, we’ll have to forgo enlightening the Good Man with your theological conclusions,” Latigo said. “We’ve brought radios, but they’re either broken or can’t work at this distance. No one knows which. I hate all such toys, anyway. The gods laugh at them. We’re on our own, my friend. For good or ill.”

“No need for Farson to worry unnecessarily,” Jonas said.

“The Good Man wants these lads treated as a threat to his plans. I expect Walter told you the same thing.”

“Aye. And I haven’t forgotten a word. Sai Walter is an unforgettable sort of man.”

“Yes,” Latigo agreed. “He’s the Good Man’s underliner. The chief reason he came to you was to underline these boys.”

“And so he did. Roy, tell sai Latigo about your visit to the Sheriff day before yesterday.”

Depape cleared his throat nervously. “The sheriff . . . Avery—”

“I know him, fat as a pig in Full Earth, he is,” Latigo said. “Go on.”

“One of Avery’s deputies carried a message to the three boys as they counted horse on the Drop.”

“What message?”

“Stay out of town on Reaping Day; stay off the Drop on Reaping Day; best to stay close to your quarters on Reaping Day, as Barony folk don’t enjoy seeing outlanders, even those they like, when they keep their festivals.”

“And how did they take it?”

“They agreed straight away to keep to themselves on Reaping,” Depape said. “That’s been their habit all along, to be just as agreeable as pie when something’s asked of em. They know better, course they do—there’s no more a custom here against outlanders on Reaping than there is anyplace else. In fact, it’s quite usual to make strangers a part of the merrymaking, as I’m sure the boys know. The idea—”

“—is to make them believe we plan to move on Fair-Day itself, yes, yes,” Latigo finished impatiently. “What I want to know is *are* they convinced? Can you take them on the day *before* Reaping, as you’ve promised, or will they be waiting?”

Depape and Reynolds looked at Jonas. Jonas reached behind him and put his hand on Coral’s narrow but not uninteresting thigh. Here it was, he thought. He would be held to what he said next, and without grace. If he was right, the Big Coffin Hunters would be thanked and paid . . . perhaps bonused, as well. If he was wrong, they would likely be hung so high and hard that their heads would pop off when they hit the end of the rope.

“We’ll take them easy as birds on the ground,” Jonas said. “Treason the charge. Three young men, all high-born, in the pay of John Farson. Shocking stuff. What could be more indicative of the evil days we live in?”

“One cry of treason and the mob appears?”

Jonas favored Latigo with a wintry smile. “As a concept, treason might be a bit of a reach for the common folk, even when the mob’s drunk and the core’s been bought and paid for by the Horsemen’s Association. Murder, though . . . especially that of a much loved Mayor—”

Depape’s startled eyes flew to the Mayor’s sister.

“What a pity it will be,” that lady said, and sighed. “I may be moved to lead the rabble myself.”

Depape thought he finally understood Eldred’s attraction: here was a woman every bit as cold-blooded as Jonas himself.

“One other matter,” Latigo said. “A piece of the Good Man’s property was sent with you for safekeeping. A certain glass ball?”

Jonas nodded. “Yes, indeed. A pretty trifle.”

“I understand you left it with the local *bruja*.”

“Yes.”

“You should take it back. Soon.”

“Don’t teach your grandpa to suck eggs,” Jonas said, a bit testily. “I’m waiting until the brats are juggled.”

Reynolds murmured curiously, “Have you seen it yourself, sai Latigo?”

“Not close up, but I’ve seen men who have.” Latigo paused. “One such ran mad and had to be shot. The only other time I saw anyone in such condition was thirty years ago, on the edge of the big desert. ’Twas a hut-dweller who’d been bitten by a rabid coyote.”

“Bless the Turtle,” Reynolds muttered, and tapped his throat three times. He was terrified of rabies.

“You won’t bless anything if the Wizard’s Rainbow gets hold of you,” Latigo said grimly, and swung his attention back to Jonas. “You’ll want to be even more careful taking it back than you were in giving it over. The old witch-woman’s likely under its glam by now.”

“I intend to send Rimer and Avery. Avery ain’t much of a shake, but Rimer’s a trig boy.”

“I’m afraid that won’t do,” Latigo said.

“Won’t it?” Jonas said. His hand tightened on Coral’s leg and he smiled unpleasantly at Latigo. “Perhaps you could tell your ’umble servant *why* it won’t do?”

It was Coral who answered. “Because,” said she, “when the piece of the Wizard’s Rainbow Rhea holds is taken back into custody, the Chancellor will be busy accompanying my brother to his final resting place.”

“What’s she talking about, Eldred?” Depape asked.

“That Rimer dies, too,” Jonas said. He began to grin. “Another foul crime to lay at the feet of John Farson’s filthy spyboys.”

Coral smiled in sweet agreement, put her hands over Jonas’s, moved it higher on her thigh, and then picked up her knitting again.

2

The girl, although young, was married.

The boy, although fair, was unstable.

She met him one night in a remote place to tell him their affair, sweet as it had been, must end. He replied that it would never end, it was written in the stars. She told him that might be, but at some point the constellations had changed. Perhaps he began to weep. Perhaps she laughed—out of nervousness, very likely. Whatever the

cause, such laughter was disastrously timed. He picked up a stone and dashed out her brains with it. Then, coming to his senses and realizing what he had done, he sat down with his back against a granite slab, drew her poor battered head into his lap, and cut his own throat as an owl looked on from a nearby tree. He died covering her face with kisses, and when they were found, their lips were sealed together with his life's blood and with hers.

An old story. Every town has its version. The site is usually the local lovers' lane, or a secluded stretch of riverbank, or the town graveyard. Once the details of what actually happened have been distorted enough to please the morbidly romantic, songs are made. These are usually sung by yearning virgins who play guitar or mando badly and cannot quite stay on key. Choruses tend to include such lachrymose refrains as

My-di-l-de-l-de-o, There they died together-o.

The Hambry version of this quaint tale featured lovers named Robert and Francesca, and had happened in the old days, before the world had moved on. The site of the supposed murder-suicide was the Hambry cemetery, the stone with which Francesca's brains had been dashed out was a slate marker, and the granite wall against which Robert had been leaning when he clipped his blowpipe had been the Thorin mausoleum. (It was doubtful there had been any Thorins in Hambry or Mejis five generations back, but folk-tales are, at best, generally no more than lies set in rhyme.)

True or untrue, the graveyard was considered haunted by the ghosts of the lovers, who could be seen (it was said) walking hand-in-hand among the markers, covered with blood and looking wistful. It was thus seldom visited at night, and was a logical spot for Roland, Cuthbert, Alain, and Susan to meet.

By the time the meeting took place, Roland had begun to feel increasingly worried . . . even desperate. Susan was the problem—or, more properly put, Susan's aunt. Even without Rhea's poisonous letter to help the process along, Cordelia's suspicions of Susan and

Roland had hardened into a near certainty. On a day less than a week before the meeting in the cemetery, Cordelia had begun shrieking at Susan almost as soon as she stepped through the house door with her basket over her arm.

“Ye’ve been with him! Ye have, ye bad girl, it’s written all over yer face!”

Susan, who had that day been nowhere near Roland, could at first only gape at her aunt. “Been with who?”

“Oh, be not coy with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty! Be not coy, I pray! Who does all but wiggle his tongue at ye when he passes our door? Dearborn, that’s who! Dearborn! Dearborn! I’ll say it a thousand times! Oh, shame on ye! Shame! Look at yer trousers! Green from the grass the two of ye have been rolling in, they are! I’m surprised they’re not torn open at the crutch as well!” By then Aunt Cord had been nearly shrieking. The veins in her neck stood out like rope.

Susan, bemused, had looked down at the old khaki pants she was wearing.

“Aunt, it’s paint—don’t you see it is? Chetta and I’ve been making Fair-Day decorations up at Mayor’s House. What’s on my bottom got there when Hart Thorin—not Dearborn but *Thorin*—came upon me in the shed where the decorations and fireworks are stored. He decided it was as good a time and place as any to have another little wrestle. He got on top of me, shot his squirt into his pants again, and went off happy. Humming, he was.” She wrinkled her nose, although the most she felt for Thorin these days was a kind of sad distaste. Her fear of him had passed.

Aunt Cord, meanwhile, had been looking at her with glittery eyes. For the first time, Susan found herself wondering consciously about Cordelia’s sanity.

“A likely story,” Cordelia whispered at last. There were little beads of perspiration above her eyebrows, and the nestles of blue veins at her temples ticked like clocks. She even had a smell, these days, no matter if she bathed or not—a rancid, acrid one. “Did ye work it out together as ye cuddled afterward, thee and him?”

Susan had stepped forward, grabbed her aunt’s bony wrist, and clapped it to the stain on one of her knees. Cordelia cried out and tried to pull away, but Susan held fast. She then raised the hand to her aunt’s face, holding it there until she knew Cordelia had smelled what was on her palm.

“Does thee smell it, Aunt? Paint! We used it on rice-paper for colored lanterns!”

The tension had slowly gone out of the wrist in Susan’s hand. The eyes looking into hers regained a measure of clarity. “Aye,” she had said at last. “Paint.” A pause. “This time.”

Since then, Susan had all too often turned her head to see a narrow-hipped figure gliding after her in the street, or one of her aunt’s many friends marking her course with suspicious eyes. When she rode on the Drop, she now always had the sensation of being watched. Twice before the four of them came together in the graveyard, she had agreed to meet Roland and his friends. Both times she had been forced to break off, the second at the very last moment. On that occasion she had seen Brian Hookey’s eldest son watching her in an odd, intent way. It had only been intuition . . . but *strong* intuition.

What made matters worse for her was that she was as frantic for a meeting as Roland himself, and not just for palaver. She needed to see his face, and to clasp one of his hands between both of hers. The rest, sweet as it was, could wait, but she needed to see him and touch him; needed to make sure he wasn’t just a dream spun by a lonely, frightened girl to comfort herself.

In the end, Maria had helped her—gods bless the little maid, who perhaps understood more than Susan could ever guess. It was Maria who had gone to Cordelia with a note saying that Susan would be spending the night in the guest wing at Seafront. The note was from Olive Thorin, and in spite of all her suspicions, Cordelia could not quite believe it a forgery. As it was not. Olive had written it, listlessly and without questions, when Susan asked.

“What’s wrong with my niece?” Cordelia had snapped.

“She tired, sai. And with the *dolor de garganta*.”

“Sore throat? So close before Fair-Day? Ridiculous! I don’t believe it! Susan’s never sick!”

“*Dolor de garganta*,” Maria repeated, impassive as only a peasant woman can be in the face of disbelief, and with that Cordelia had to be satisfied. Maria herself had no idea what Susan was up to, and that was just the way Susan liked it.

She’d gone over the balcony, moving nimbly down the fifteen feet of tangled vines growing up the north side of the building, and through the rear servants’ door in the wall. There Roland had been waiting, and after two warm minutes with which we need not concern ourselves, they rode double on Rusher to the graveyard, where Cuthbert and Alain waited, full of expectation and nervous hope.

3

Susan looked first at the placid blond one with the round face, whose name was not Richard Stockworth but Alain Johns. Then at the other one—he from whom she had sensed such doubt of her and perhaps even anger at her. Cuthbert Allgood was his name.

They sat side by side on a fallen gravestone which had been overrun with ivy, their feet in a little brook of mist. Susan slid from Rusher’s back and approached them slowly. They stood up. Alain

made an In-World bow, leg out, knee locked, heel stiffly planted. “Lady,” he said. “Long days—”

Now the other was beside him—thin and dark, with a face that would have been handsome had it not seemed so restless. His dark eyes were really quite beautiful.

“—and pleasant nights,” Cuthbert finished, doubling Alain’s bow. The two of them looked so like comic courtiers in a Fair-Day sketch that Susan laughed. She couldn’t help herself. Then she curtseyed to them deeply, spreading her arms to mime the skirts she wasn’t wearing. “And may you have twice the number, gentlemen.”

Then they simply looked at each other, three young people who were uncertain exactly how to proceed. Roland didn’t help; he sat astride Rusher and only watched carefully.

Susan took a tentative step forward, not laughing now. There were still dimples at the corners of her lips, but her eyes were anxious.

“I hope you don’t hate me,” she said. “I’d understand it if you did—I’ve come into your plans . . . and between the three of you, as well—but I couldn’t help it.” Her hands were still out at her sides. Now she raised them to Alain and Cuthbert, palms up. “I love him.”

“We don’t hate you,” Alain said. “Do we, Bert?”

For a terrible moment Cuthbert was silent, looking over Susan’s shoulder, seeming to study the waxing Demon Moon. She felt her heart stop. Then his gaze returned to her and he gave a smile of such sweetness that a confused but brilliant thought (*If I’d met this one first—*, it began) shot through her mind like a comet.

“Roland’s love is my love,” Cuthbert said. He reached out, took her hands, and drew her forward so she stood between him and Alain like a sister with her two brothers. “For we have been friends since we wore cradle-clothes, and we’ll continue as friends until one of us leaves the path and enters the clearing.” Then he grinned like a kid.

“Mayhap we’ll all find the end of the path together, the way things are going.”

“And soon,” Alain added.

“Just so long,” Susan Delgado finished, “as my Aunt Cordelia doesn’t come along as our chaperone.”

4

“We are *ka-tet*,” Roland said. “We are one from many.”

He looked at each in turn, and saw no disagreement in their eyes. They had repaired to the mausoleum, and their breath smoked from their mouths and noses. Roland squatted on his hunkers, looking at the other three, who sat in a line on a stone meditation bench flanked by skeletal bouquets in stone pots. The floor was scattered with the petals of dead roses. Cuthbert and Alain, on either side of Susan, had their arms around her in quite unself-conscious fashion. Again Roland thought of one sister and two protective brothers.

“We’re greater than we were,” Alain said. “I feel that very strongly.”

“I do, too,” Cuthbert said. He looked around. “And a fine meeting-place, as well. Especially for such a *ka-tet* as ours.”

Roland didn’t smile; repartee had never been his strong suit. “Let’s talk about what’s going on in Hambry,” he said, “and then we’ll talk about the immediate future.”

“We weren’t sent here on a mission, you know,” Alain said to Susan. “We were sent by our fathers to get us out of the way, that’s all. Roland excited the enmity of a man who is likely a cohort of John Farson’s—”

“ ‘Excited the enmity of,’ ” Cuthbert said. “That’s a good phrase. Round. I intend to remember it and use it at every opportunity.”

“Control yourself,” Roland said. “I’ve no desire to be here all night.”

“Cry your pardon, O great one,” Cuthbert said, but his eyes danced in a decidedly unrepentant way.

“We came with carrier pigeons for the sending and receiving of messages,” Alain went on, “but I think the pigeons were laid on so our parents could be sure we were all right.”

“Yes,” Cuthbert said. “What Alain’s trying to say is that we’ve been caught by surprise. Roland and I have had . . . disagreements . . . about how to go on. He wanted to wait. I didn’t. I now believe he was right.”

“But for the wrong reasons,” Roland said in a dry tone. “In any case, we’ve settled our differences.”

Susan was looking back and forth between them with something like alarm. What her gaze settled upon was the bruise on Roland’s lower left jaw, clearly visible even in the faint light which crept through the half-open *sepultura* door. “Settled them how?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Roland said. “Farson intends a battle, or perhaps a series of them, in the Shavéd Mountains, to the northwest of Gilead. To the forces of the Affiliation moving toward him, he will seem trapped. In a more ordinary course of things, that might even have been true. Farson intends to engage them, trap them, and destroy them with the weapons of the Old People. These he will drive with oil from Citgo. The oil in the tankers we saw, Susan.”

“Where will it be refined so Farson can use it?”

“Someplace west of here along his route,” Cuthbert said. “We think very likely the Vi Castis. Do you know it? It’s mining country.”

“I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never actually been out of Hambry in my life.” She looked levelly at Roland. “I think that’s to change soon.”

“There’s a good deal of machinery left over from the days of the Old People in those mountains,” Alain said. “Most is up in the draws and canyons, they say. Robots and killer lights—razor-beams, such are called, because they’ll cut you clean in half if you run into them. The gods know what else. Some of it’s undoubtedly just legend, but where there’s smoke, there’s often fire. In any case, it seems the most likely spot for refining.”

“And then they’d take it on to where Farson’s waiting,” Cuthbert said. “Not that that part matters to us; we’ve got all we can handle right here in Mejis.”

“I’ve been waiting in order to get it all,” Roland said. “Every bit of their damned plunder.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, our friend is just a wee nubbin ambitious,” Cuthbert said, and winked.

Roland paid no attention. He was looking in the direction of Eyebolt Canyon. There was no noise from there this night; the wind had shifted onto its autumn course and away from town. “If we can fire the oil, the rest will go up with it . . . and the oil is the most important thing, anyway. I want to destroy it, then I want to get the hell out of here. The four of us.”

“They mean to move on Reaping Day, don’t they?” Susan asked.

“Oh yes, it seems so,” Cuthbert said, then laughed. It was a rich, infectious sound—the laughter of a child—and as he did it, he rocked back and forth and held his stomach as a child would.

Susan looked puzzled. “What? What is it?”

“I can’t tell,” he said, chortling. “It’s too rich for me. I’ll laugh all the way through it, and Roland will be annoyed. You do it, Al. Tell Susan about our visit from Deputy Dave.”

“He came out to see us at the Bar K,” Alain said, smiling himself. “Talked to us like an uncle. Told us Hambry-folk don’t care for outsiders at their Fairs, and we’d best keep right to our place on the day of the full moon.”

“That’s insane!” Susan spoke indignantly, as one is apt to when one hears one’s hometown unjustly maligned. “We *welcome* strangers to our fairs, so we do, and always have! We’re not a bunch of . . . of savages!”

“Soft, soft,” Cuthbert said, giggling. “We know that, but Deputy Dave don’t know we know, do he? He knows his wife makes the best white tea for miles around, and after that Dave’s pretty much at sea. Sheriff Herk knows a *leetle* more, I sh’d judge, but not much.”

“The pains they’ve taken to warn us off means two things,” Roland said. “The first is that they intend to move on Reaping Fair-Day, just as you said, Susan. The second is that they think they can steal Farson’s goods right out from under our noses.”

“And then perhaps blame us for it afterward,” Alain said.

She looked curiously from one to the other, then said: “What have you planned, then?”

“To destroy what they’ve left at Citgo as bait of our own and then to strike them where they gather,” Roland said quietly. “That’s Hanging Rock. At least half the tankers they mean to take west are there already. They’ll have a force of men. As many as two hundred, perhaps, although I think it will turn out to be less. I intend that all these men should die.”

“If they don’t, we will,” Alain said.

“How can the four of us kill two hundred soldiers?”

“We can’t. But if we can start one or two of the clustered tankers burning, we think there’ll be an explosion—mayhap a fearful one.

The surviving soldiers will be terrified, and the surviving leaders infuriated. They'll see us, because we'll let ourselves be seen . . ."

Alain and Cuthbert were watching him breathlessly. The rest they had either been told or had guessed, but this part was the counsel Roland had, until now, kept to himself.

"What then?" she asked, frightened. "*What then?*"

"I think we can lead them into Eyebolt Canyon," Roland said. "I think we can lead them into the thinny."

5

Thunderstruck silence greeted this. Then, not without respect, Susan said: "You're mad."

"No," Cuthbert said thoughtfully. "He's not. You're thinking about that little cut in the canyon wall, aren't you, Roland? The one just before the jog in the canyon floor."

Roland nodded. "Four could scramble up that way without too much trouble. At the top, we'll pile a fair amount of rock. Enough to start a landslide down on any that should try following us."

"That's horrible," Susan said.

"It's survival," Alain replied. "If they're allowed to have the oil and put it to use, they'll slaughter every Affiliation man that gets in range of their weapons. The Good Man takes no prisoners."

"I didn't say wrong, only horrible."

They were silent for a moment, four children contemplating the murders of two hundred men. Except they wouldn't all be men; many (perhaps even most) would be boys roughly their own ages.

At last she said, "Those not caught in your rockslide will only ride back out of the canyon again."

“No, they won’t.” Alain had seen the lay of the land and now understood the matter almost completely. Roland was nodding, and there was a trace of a smile on his mouth.

“Why not?”

“The brush at the front of the canyon. We’re going to set it on fire, aren’t we, Roland? And if the prevailing winds are prevailing that day . . . the smoke . . .”

“It’ll drive them the rest of the way in,” Roland agreed. “Into the thinny.”

“How will you set the brush-pile alight?” Susan asked. “I know it’s dry, but surely you won’t have time to use a sulfur match or your flint and steel.”

“You can help us there,” Roland said, “just as you can help us set the tankers alight. We can’t count on touching off the oil with just our guns, you know; crude oil is a lot less volatile than people might think. And Sheemie’s going to help you, I hope.”

“Tell me what you want.”

6

They talked another twenty minutes, refining the plan surprisingly little—all of them seemed to understand that if they planned too much and things changed suddenly, they might freeze. *Ka* had swept them into this; it was perhaps best that they count on *ka*—and their own courage—to sweep them back out again.

Cuthbert was reluctant to involve Sheemie, but finally went along—the boy’s part would be minimal, if not exactly low-risk, and Roland agreed that they could take him with them when they left Mejis for good. A party of five was as fine as a party of four, he said.

“All right,” Cuthbert said at last, then turned to Susan. “It ought to be you or me who talks to him.”

“I will.”

“Make sure he understands not to tell Coral Thorin so much as a word,” Cuthbert said. “It isn’t that the Mayor’s her brother; I just don’t trust that bitch.”

“I can give ye a better reason than Hart not to trust her,” Susan said. “My aunt says she’s taken up with Eldred Jonas. Poor Aunt Cord! She’s had the worst summer of her life. Nor will the fall be much better, I wot. Folk will call her the aunt of a traitor.”

“Some will know better,” Alain said. “Some always do.”

“Mayhap, but my Aunt Cordelia’s the sort of woman who never hears good gossip. No more does she speak it. She fancied Jonas herself, ye ken.”

Cuthbert was thunderstruck. “Fancied Jonas! By all the fiddling gods! Can you imagine it! Why, if they hung folk for bad taste in love, your auntie would go early, wouldn’t she?”

Susan giggled, hugged her knees, and nodded.

“It’s time we left,” Roland said. “If something chances that Susan needs to know right away, we’ll use the red stone in the rock wall at Green Heart.”

“Good,” Cuthbert said. “Let’s get out of here. The cold in this place eats into the bones.”

Roland stirred, stretching life back into his legs. “The important thing is that they’ve decided to leave us free while they round up and run. That’s our edge, and it’s a good one. And now—”

Alain’s quiet voice stopped him. “There’s another matter. Very important.”

Roland sank back down on his hunkers, looking at Alain curiously.

“The witch.”

Susan started, but Roland only barked an impatient laugh. “She doesn’t figure in our business, Al—I can’t see how she could. I don’t believe she’s a part of Jonas’s conspiracy—”

“Neither do I,” Alain said.

“—and Cuthbert and I persuaded her to keep her mouth shut about Susan and me. If we hadn’t, her aunt would have raised the roof by now.”

“But don’t you see?” Alain asked. “Who Rhea might have told isn’t really the question. The question is *how she knew in the first place.*”

“It’s pink,” Susan said abruptly. Her hand was on her hair, fingers touching the place where the cut ends had begun to grow out.

“What’s pink?” Alain asked.

“The moon,” she said, and then shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m talking about. Brainless as Pinch and Jilly, I am . . . Roland? What’s wrong? What ails thee?”

For Roland was no longer hunkering; he had collapsed into a loose sitting position on the petal-strewn stone floor. He looked like a young man trying not to faint. Outside the mausoleum there was a bony rattle of fall leaves and the cry of a nightjar.

“Dear gods,” he said in a low voice. “It can’t be. *It can’t be true.*” His eyes met Cuthbert’s.

All the humor had washed out of the latter young man’s face, leaving a ruthless and calculating bedrock his own mother might not have recognized . . . or might not have wanted to.

“Pink,” Cuthbert said. “Isn’t that interesting—the same word your father happened to mention just before we left, Roland, wasn’t it? He warned us about the pink one. We thought it was a joke. *Almost.*”

“Oh!” Alain’s eyes flew wide open. “Oh, *fuck!*” he blurted. He realized what he had said while sitting leg-to-leg with his best friend’s lover and clapped his hands over his mouth. His cheeks flamed red.

Susan barely noticed. She was staring at Roland in growing fear and confusion. “What?” she asked. “What is it ye know? Tell me! *Tell me!*”

“I’d like to hypnotize you again, as I did that day in the willow grove,” Roland said. “I want to do it right now, before we talk of this more and drag mud across what you remember.”

Roland had reached into his pocket while she was speaking. Now he took out a shell, and it began to dance across the back of his hand once more. Her eyes went to it at once, like steel drawn to a magnet.

“May I?” he asked. “By your leave, dear.”

“Aye, as ye will.” Her eyes were widening and growing glassy. “I don’t know why ye think this time should be any different, but . . .” She stopped talking, her eyes continuing to follow the dance of the shell across Roland’s hand. When he stopped moving it and clasped it in his fist, her eyes closed. Her breath was soft and regular.

“Gods, she went like a stone,” Cuthbert whispered, amazed.

“She’s been hypnotized before. By Rhea, I think.” Roland paused. Then: “Susan, do you hear me?”

“Aye, Roland, I hear ye very well.”

“I want you to hear another voice, too.”

“Whose?”

Roland beckoned to Alain. If anyone could break through the block in Susan's mind (or find a way around it), it would be him.

"Mine, Susan," Alain said, coming to Roland's side. "Do you know it?"

She smiled with her eyes closed. "Aye, you're Alain. Richard Stockworth that was."

"That's right." He looked at Roland with nervous, questioning eyes—*What shall I ask her?*—but for a moment Roland didn't reply. He was in two other places, both at the same time, and hearing two different voices.

Susan, by the stream in the willow grove: *She says, "Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are," then everything's pink.*

His father, in the yard behind the Great Hall: *It's the grapefruit. By which I mean it's the pink one.*

The pink one.

7

Their horses were saddled and loaded; the three boys stood before them, outwardly stolid, inwardly feverish to be gone. The road, and the mysteries that lie along it, calls out to none as it calls to the young.

They were in the courtyard which lay east of the Great Hall, not far from where Roland had bested Cort, setting all these things in motion. It was early morning, the sun not yet risen, the mist lying over the green fields in gray ribbons. At a distance of about twenty paces, Cuthbert's and Alain's fathers stood sentry with their legs apart and their hands on the butts of their guns. It was unlikely that Marten (who had for the time being absented himself from the palace, and, so far as any knew, from Gilead itself) would mount any

sort of attack on them—not here—but it wasn't entirely out of the question, either.

So it was that only Roland's father spoke to them as they mounted up to begin their ride east to Mejis and the Outer Arc.

"One last thing," he said as they adjusted their saddle girths. "I doubt you'll see anything that touches on our interests—not in Mejis—but I'd have you keep an eye out for a color of the rainbow. The Wizard's Rainbow, that is." He chuckled, then added: "It's the grapefruit. By which I mean it's the pink one."

"Wizard's Rainbow is just a fairy-tale," Cuthbert said, smiling in response to Steven's smile. Then—perhaps it was something in Steven Deschain's eyes—Cuthbert's smile faltered. "Isn't it?"

"Not all the old stories are true, but I think that of Maerlyn's Rainbow is," Steven replied. "It's said that once there were thirteen glass balls in it—one for each of the Twelve Guardians, and one representing the nexus-point of the Beams."

"One for the Tower," Roland said in a low voice, feeling gooseflesh. "One for the Dark Tower."

"Aye, Thirteen it was called when I was a boy. We'd tell stories about the black ball around the fire sometimes, and scare ourselves silly . . . unless our fathers caught us at it. My own da said it wasn't wise to talk about Thirteen, for it might hear its name called and roll your way. But Black Thirteen doesn't matter to you three . . . not now, at least. No, it's the pink one. Maerlyn's Grapefruit."

It was impossible to tell how serious he was . . . or if he was serious at all.

"If the other balls in the Wizard's Rainbow *did* exist, most are broken now. Such things never stay in one place or one pair of hands for long, you know, and even enchanted glass has a way of breaking. Yet at least three or four bends o' the Rainbow may still be

rolling around this sad world of ours. The blue, almost certainly. A desert tribe of slow mutants—the Total Hogs, they called themselves—had that one less than fifty years ago, although it’s slipped from sight again since. The green and the orange are reputed to be in Lud and Dis, respectively. And, just maybe, the pink one.”

“What exactly do they do?” Roland asked. “What are they good for?”

“For seeing. Some colors of the Wizard’s Rainbow are reputed to look into the future. Others look into the other worlds—those where the demons live, those where the Old People are supposed to have gone when they left our world. These may also show the location of the secret doors which pass between the worlds. Other colors, they say, can look far in our own world, and see things people would as soon keep secret. They never see the good; only the ill. How much of this is true and how much is myth no one knows for sure.”

He looked at them, his smile fading.

“But this we do know: John Farson is said to have a talisman, something that glows in his tent late at night . . . sometimes before battles, sometimes before large movements of troop and horse, sometimes before momentous decisions are announced. And it glows pink.”

“Maybe he has an electric light and puts a pink scarf over it when he prays,” Cuthbert said. He looked around at his friends, a little defensively. “I’m not joking; there are people who do that.”

“Perhaps,” Roland’s father said. “Perhaps that’s all it is, or something like. But perhaps it’s a good deal more. All I can say of my own knowledge is that he keeps beating us, he keeps slipping away from us, and he keeps turning up where he’s least expected. If the magic is in him and not in some talisman he owns, gods help the Affiliation.”

“We’ll keep an eye out, if you like,” Roland said, “but Farson’s in the north or west. We’re going east.” As if his father did not know this.

“If it’s a bend o’ the Rainbow,” Steven replied, “it could be anywhere—east or south’s as likely as west. He can’t keep it with him all the time, you see. No matter how much it would ease his mind and heart to do so. No one can.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re alive, and hungry,” Steven said. “One begins using em; one ends being used *by* em. If Farson has a piece of the Rainbow, he’ll send it away and call it back only when he needs it. He understands the risk of losing it, but he also understands the risk of keeping it too long.”

There was a question which the other two, constrained by politeness, couldn’t ask. Roland could, and did. “You *are* serious about this, Dad? It’s not just a leg-pull, is it?”

“I’m sending you away at an age when many boys still don’t sleep well if their mothers don’t kiss them goodnight,” Steven said. “I expect to see all three of you again, alive and well—Mejis is a lovely, quiet place, or was when I was a boy—but I can’t be sure of it. As things are these days, no one can be sure of anything. I wouldn’t send you away with a joke and a laugh. I’m surprised you think it.”

“Cry your pardon,” Roland said. An uneasy peace had descended between him and his father, and he would not rupture it. Still, he was wild to be off. Rusher jiggled beneath him, as if seconding that.

“I don’t expect you boys to see Maerlyn’s glass . . . but I didn’t expect to be seeing you off at fourteen with revolvers tucked in your bedrolls, either. *Ka*’s at work here, and where *ka* works, anything is possible.”

Slowly, slowly, Steven took off his hat, stepped back, and swept them a bow. “Go in peace, boys. And return in health.”

“Long days and pleasant nights, sai,” Alain said.

“Good fortune,” Cuthbert said.

“I love you,” Roland said.

Steven nodded. “Thankee-sai—I love you, too. My blessings, boys.” He said this last in a loud voice, and the other two men—Robert Allgood and Christopher Johns, who had been known in the days of his savage youth as Burning Chris—added their own blessings.

So the three of them rode toward their end of the Great Road, while summer lay all about them, breathless as a gasp. Roland looked up and saw something that made him forget all about the Wizard’s Rainbow. It was his mother, leaning out of her apartment’s bedroom window: the oval of her face surrounded by the timeless gray stone of the castle’s west wing. There were tears coursing down her cheeks, but she smiled and lifted one hand in a wide wave. Of the three of them, only Roland saw her.

He didn’t wave back.

8

“*Roland!*” An elbow struck him in the ribs, hard enough to dispel these memories, brilliant as they were, and return him to the present. It was Cuthbert. “Do something, if you mean to! Get us out of this deadhouse before I shiver the skin right off my bones!”

Roland put his mouth close by Alain’s ear. “Be ready to help me.”

Alain nodded.

Roland turned to Susan. "After the first time we were together *an-tet*, you went to the stream in the grove."

"Aye."

"You cut some of your hair."

"Aye." That same dreaming voice. "So I did."

"Would you have cut it all?"

"Aye, every lick and lock."

"Do you know who told you to cut it?"

A long pause. Roland was about to turn to Alain when she said, "Rhea." Another pause. "She wanted to fiddle me up."

"Yes, but what happened later? What happened while you stood in the doorway?"

"Oh, and something else happened before."

"What?"

"I fetched her wood," said she, and said no more.

Roland looked at Cuthbert, who shrugged. Alain spread his hands. Roland thought of asking the latter boy to step forward, and judged it still wasn't quite time.

"Never mind the wood for now," he said, "or all that came before. We'll talk of that later, mayhap, but not just yet. What happened as you were leaving? What did she say to you about your hair?"

"Whispered in my ear. And she had a Jesus-man."

"Whispered what?"

“I don’t know. That part is pink.”

Here it was. He nodded to Alain. Alain bit his lip and stepped forward. He looked frightened, but as he took Susan’s hands in his own and spoke to her, his voice was calm and soothing.

“Susan? It’s Alain Johns. Do you know me?”

“Aye—Richard Stockworth that was.”

“What did Rhea whisper in your ear?”

A frown, faint as a shadow on an overcast day, creased her brow. “I can’t see. It’s pink.”

“You don’t need to see,” Alain said. “Seeing’s not what we want right now. Close your eyes so you can’t do it at all.”

“They *are* closed,” she said, a trifle pettishly. *She’s frightened*, Roland thought. He felt an urge to tell Alain to stop, to wake her up, and restrained it.

“The ones inside,” Alain said. “The ones that look out from memory. Close those, Susan. Close them for your father’s sake, and tell me not what you see but what you *hear*. Tell me what she *said*.”

Chillingly, unexpectedly, the eyes in her face opened as she closed those in her mind. She stared at Roland, and through him, with the eyes of an ancient statue. Roland bit back a scream.

“You were in the doorway, Susan?” Alain asked.

“Aye. So we both were.”

“Be there again.”

“Aye.” A dreaming voice. Faint but clear. “Even with my eyes closed I can see the moon’s light. ’Tis as big as a grapefruit.”

It's the grapefruit, Roland thought. By which I mean, it's the pink one.

"And what do you hear? What does she say?"

"No, *I* say." The faintly petulant voice of a little girl. "First *I* say, Alain. I say 'And is our business done?' and she says 'Mayhap there's one more little thing,' and then . . . then . . ."

Alain squeezed gently down on her hands, using whatever it was he had in his own, his touch, sending it into her. She tried feebly to pull back, but he wouldn't let her. "Then what? What next?"

"She has a little silver medal."

"Yes?"

"She leans close and asks if I hear her. I can smell her breath. It reeks o' garlic. And other things, even worse." Susan's face wrinkled in distaste. "I say I hear her. Now I can see. I see the medal she has."

"Very well, Susan," Alain said. "What else do you see?"

"Rhea. She looks like a skull in the moonlight. A skull with hair."

"Gods," Cuthbert muttered, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"She says I should listen. I say I will listen. She says I should obey. I say I will obey. She says 'Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are.' She's stroking my hair. All the time. My braid." Susan raised a dreaming, drowning hand, pale in the shadows of the crypt, to her blonde hair. "And then she says there's something I'm to do when my virginity's over. 'Wait,' she says, 'until he's asleep beside ye, then cut yer hair off yer head. Every strand. Right down to yer very skull.' "

The boys looked at her in mounting horror as her voice *became* Rhea's—the growling, whining cadences of the old woman of the

Cöos. Even the face—except for the coldly dreaming eyes—had become a hag’s face.

“ ‘Cut it all, girl, every whore’s strand of it, aye, and go back to him as bald as ye came from yer mother! See how he likes ye then!’ ”

She fell silent. Alain turned his pallid face to Roland. His lips were trembling, but still he held her hands.

“Why is the moon pink?” Roland asked. “Why is the moon pink when you try to remember?”

“It’s her glam.” Susan seemed almost surprised, almost gay. Confiding. “She keeps it under her bed, so she does. She doesn’t know I saw it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Aye,” Susan said, then added simply: “She would have killed me if she knew.” She giggled, shocking them all. “Rhea has the moon in a box under her bed.” She lilted this in the singsong voice of a small child.

“A pink moon,” Roland said.

“Aye.”

“Under her bed.”

“Aye.” This time she did pull her hands free of Alain’s. She made a circle with them in the air, and as she looked up at it, a dreadful expression of greed passed over her face like a cramp. “I should like to have it, Roland. So I should. Lovely moon! I saw it when she sent me for the wood. Through her window. She looked . . . young.” Then, once again: “I sh’d like to have such a thing.”

“No—you wouldn’t. But it’s under her bed?”

“Aye, in a magic place she makes with passes.”

“She has a piece of Maerlyn’s Rainbow,” Cuthbert said in a wondering voice. “The old bitch has what your da told us about—no wonder she knows all she does!”

“Is there more we need?” Alain asked. “Her hands have gotten very cold. I don’t like having her this deep. She’s done well, but . . .”

“I think we’re done.”

“Shall I tell her to forget?”

Roland shook his head at once—they were *ka-tet*, for good or ill. He took hold of her fingers, and yes, they *were* cold.

“Susan?”

“Aye, dear.”

“I’m going to say a rhyme. When I finish, you’ll remember everything, as you did before. All right?”

She smiled and closed her eyes again. “Bird and bear and hare and fish . . .”

Smiling, Roland finished, “Give my love her fondest wish.”

Her eyes opened. She smiled. “You,” she said again, and kissed him. “Still you, Roland. Still you, my love.”

Unable to help himself, Roland put his arms around her.

Cuthbert looked away. Alain looked down at his boots and cleared his throat.

9

As they rode back toward Seafront, Susan with her arms around Roland’s waist, she asked: “Will you take the glass from her?”

“Best leave it where it is for now. It was left in her safekeeping by Jonas, on behalf of Farson, I have no doubt. It’s to be sent west with the rest of the plunder; I’ve no doubt of that, either. We’ll deal with it when we deal with the tankers and Farson’s men.”

“Ye’d take it with us?”

“Take it or break it. I suppose I’d rather take it back to my father, but that has its own risks. We’ll have to be careful. It’s a powerful glam.”

“Suppose she sees our plans? Suppose she warns Jonas or Kimba Rimer?”

“If she doesn’t see us coming to take away her precious toy, I don’t think she’ll mind our plans one way or the other. I think we’ve put a scare into her, and if the ball has really gotten a hold on her, watching in it’s what she’ll mostly want to do with her time now.”

“And hold onto it. She’ll want to do that, too.”

“Aye.”

Rusher was walking along a path through the seacliff woods. Through the thinning branches they could glimpse the ivied gray wall surrounding Mayor’s House and hear the rhythmic roar of waves breaking on the shingle below.

“You can get in safe, Susan?”

“No fear.”

“And you know what you and Sheemie are to do?”

“Aye. I feel better than I have in ages. It’s as if my mind is finally clear of some old shadow.”

“If so, it’s Alain you have to thank. I couldn’t have done it on my own.”

“There’s magic in his hands.”

“Yes.” They had reached the servants’ door. Susan dismounted with fluid ease. He stepped down himself and stood beside her with an arm around her waist. She was looking up at the moon.

“Look, it’s fattened enough so you can see the beginning of the Demon’s face. Does thee see it?”

A blade of nose, a bone of grin. No eye yet, but yes, he saw it.

“It used to terrify me when I was little.” Susan was whispering now, mindful of the house behind the wall. “I’d pull the blind when the Demon was full. I was afraid that if he could see me, he’d reach down and take me up to where he was and eat me.” Her lips were trembling. “Children are silly, aren’t they?”

“Sometimes.” He hadn’t been afraid of Demon Moon himself as a small child, but he was afraid of this one. The future seemed so dark, and the way through to the light so slim. “I love thee, Susan. With all my heart, I do.”

“I know. And I love thee.” She kissed his mouth with gentle open lips. Put his hand on her breast for a moment, then kissed the warm palm. He held her, and she looked past him at the ripening moon.

“A week until the Reap,” she said. “*Fin de año* is what the *vaqueros* and *labradores* call it. Do they call it so in your land?”

“Near enough,” Roland said. “It’s called closing the year. Women go about giving preserves and kisses.”

She laughed softly against his shoulder. “Perhaps I’ll not find things so different, after all.”

“You must save all your best kisses for me.”

“I will.”

“Whatever comes, we’ll be together,” he said, but above them, Demon Moon grinned into the starry dark above the Clean Sea, as if he knew a different future.

CHAPTER VI CLOSING THE YEAR

1

So now comes to Mejis *fin de año*, known in toward the center of Mid-World as closing the year. It comes as it has a thousand times before . . . or ten thousand, or a hundred thousand. No one can tell for sure; the world has moved on and time has grown strange. In Mejis their saying is “Time is a face on the water.”

In the fields, the last of the potatoes are being picked by men and women who wear gloves and their heaviest *serapes*, for now the wind has turned firmly, blowing east to west, blowing hard, and always there’s the smell of salt in the chilly air—a smell like tears. *Los campesinos* harvest the final rows cheerfully enough, talking of the things they’ll do and the capers they’ll cut at Reaping Fair, but they feel all of autumn’s old sadness in the wind; the going of the year. It runs away from them like water in a stream, and although none speak of it, all know it very well.

In the orchards, the last and highest of the apples are picked by laughing young men (in these not-quite-gales, the final days of picking belong only to them) who bob up and down like crow’s nest lookouts. Above them, in skies which hold a brilliant, cloudless blue, squadrons of geese fly south, calling their rusty *adieux*.

The small fishing boats are pulled from the water; their hulls are scraped and painted by singing owners who mostly work stripped to the waist in spite of the chill in the air. They sing the old songs as they work—

I am a man of the bright blue sea,

*All I see, all I see,
I am a man of the Barony,
All I see is mine-o!*

*I am a man of the bright blue bay,
All I say, all I say,
Until my nets are full I stay
All I say is fine-o!*

—and sometimes a little cask of *graf* is tossed from dock to dock. On the bay itself only the large boats now remain, pacing about the big circles which mark their dropped nets as a working dog may pace around a flock of sheep. At noon the bay is a rippling sheet of autumn fire and the men on the boats sit cross-legged, eating their lunches, and know that all they see is theirs-o . . . at least until the gray gales of autumn come swarming over the horizon, coughing out their gusts of sleet and snow.

Closing, closing the year.

Along the streets of Hambry, the Reap-lights now burn at night, and the hands of the stuffy-guys are painted red. Reap-charms hang everywhere, and although women often kiss and are kissed in the streets and in both marketplaces—often by men they do not know—sexual intercourse has come to an almost complete halt. It will resume (with a bang, you might say) on Reap-Night. There will be the usual crop of Full Earth babies the following year as a result.

On the Drop, the horses gallop wildly, as if understanding (very likely they do) that their time of freedom is coming to an end. They swoop and then stand with their faces pointing west when the wind

gusts, showing their asses to winter. On the ranches, porch-nets are taken down and shutters rehung. In the huge ranch kitchens and smaller farmhouse kitchens, no one is stealing Reap-kisses, and no one is even thinking about sex. This is the time of putting up and laying by, and the kitchens fume with steam and pulse with heat from before dawn until long after dark. There is the smell of apples and beets and beans and sharproot and curing strips of meat. Women work ceaselessly all day and then sleepwalk to bed, where they lie like corpses until the next dark morning calls them back to their kitchens.

Leaves are burned in town yards, and as the week goes on and Old Demon's face shows ever more clearly, red-handed stuffy-guys are thrown on the pyres more and more frequently. In the fields, cornshocks flare like torches, and often stuffies burn with them, their red hands and white-cross eyes rippling in the heat. Men stand around these fires, not speaking, their faces solemn. No one will say what terrible old ways and unspeakable old gods are being propitiated by the burning of the stuffy-guys, but they all know well enough. From time to time one of these men will whisper two words under his breath: *charyou tree*.

They are closing, closing, closing the year.

The streets rattle with firecrackers—and sometimes with a heftier “big-bang” that makes even placid carthorses rear in their traces—and echo with the laughter of children. On the porch of the mercantile and across the street at the Travellers' Rest, kisses—sometimes humidly open and with much sweet lashing of tongues—are exchanged, but Coral Thorin's whores (“cotton-gillies” is what the airy-fairy ones like Gert Moggins like to call themselves) are bored. They will have little custom this week.

This is not Year's End, when the winterlogs will burn and Mejis will be barn-dances from one end to the other . . . and yet it is. This is the *real* year's end, *charyou tree*, and everyone, from Stanley Ruiz standing at the bar beneath The Romp to the farthest of Fran Lengyll's *vaqueros* out on the edge of the Bad Grass, knows it.

There is a kind of echo in the bright air, a yearning for other places in the blood, a loneliness in the heart that sings like the wind.

But this year there's something else, as well: a sense of wrongness that no one can quite voice. Folks who never had a nightmare in their lives will awake screaming with them during the week of *fin de año*; men who consider themselves peaceful will find themselves not only in fistfights but instigating them; discontented boys who would only have dreamed of running away in other years will this year actually do it, and most will not come back after the first night spent sleeping raw.

There is a sense—inarticulate but very much there—that things have gone amiss this season. It is the closing of the year; it is also the closing of the peace. For it is here, in the sleepy Out-World Barony of Mejis, that Mid-World's last great conflict will shortly begin; it is from here that the blood will begin to flow. In two years, no more, the world as it has been will be swept away. It starts here. From its field of roses, the Dark Tower cries out in its beast's voice. Time is a face on the water.

2

Coral Thorin was coming down the High Street from the Bayview Hotel when she spied Sheemie, leading Caprichoso and heading in the opposite direction. The boy was singing "Careless Love" in a voice both high and sweet. His progress was slow; the barrels slung over Capi's back were half again as large as the ones he had carried up to the Cöos not long before.

Coral hailed her boy-of-all-work cheerily enough. She had reason to be cheery; Eldred Jonas had no use for *fin de año* abstinence. And for a man with a bad leg, he could be very inventive.

"Sheemie!" she called. "Where go ye? Seafront?"

"Aye," Sheemie said. "I've got the *graf* them asked for. All parties come Reaping Fair, aye, tons of em. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, drink

graf to cool off a lot! How pretty you look, sai Thorin, cheeks all pinky-pink, so they are.”

“Oh, law! How kind of you to say, Sheemie!” She favored him with a dazzling smile. “Go on, now, you flatterer—don’t linger.”

“Noey-no, off I go.”

Coral stood watching after him and smiling. *Dance a lot, get hot a lot*, Sheemie had said. About the dancing Coral didn’t know, but she was sure this year’s Reaping would be hot, all right. Very hot indeed.

3

Miguel met Sheemie at Seafront’s archway, gave him the look of lofty contempt he reserved for the lower orders, then pulled the cork from first one barrel and then the other. With the first, he only sniffed from the bung; at the second, he stuck his thumb in and then sucked it thoughtfully. With his wrinkled cheeks hollowed inward and his toothless old mouth working, he looked like an ancient bearded baby.

“Tasty, ain’t it?” Sheemie asked. “Tasty as a pasty, ain’t it, good old Miguel, been here a thousand years?”

Miguel, still sucking his thumb, favored Sheemie with a sour look. “*Andale. Andale, simplon.*”

Sheemie led his mule around the house to the kitchen. Here the breeze off the ocean was sharp and shiversome. He waved to the women in the kitchen, but not a one waved back; likely they didn’t even see him. A pot boiled on every trink of the enormous stove, and the women—working in loose long-sleeved cotton garments like shifts and wearing their hair tied up in brightly colored clouts—moved about like phantoms glimpsed in fog.

Sheemie took first one barrel from Capi’s back, then the other. Grunting, he carried them to the huge oak tank by the back door. He

opened the tank's lid, bent over it, and then backed away from the eye-wateringly strong smell of elderly *graf*.

"Whew!" he said, hoisting the first barrel. "Ye could get drunk just on the smell o' that lot!"

He emptied in the fresh *graf*, careful not to spill. When he was finished, the tank was pretty well topped up. That was good, for on Reaping Night, apple-beer would flow out of the kitchen taps like water.

He slipped the empty barrels into their carriers, looked into the kitchen once more to be sure he wasn't being observed (he wasn't; Coral's simple-minded tavern-boy was the last thing on anyone's minds that morning), and then led Capi not back the way they'd come but along a path which led to Seafront's storage sheds.

There were three of them in a row, each with its own red-handed stuffy-guy sitting in front. The guys appeared to be watching Sheemie, and that gave him the shivers. Then he remembered his trip to crazy old bitch-lady Rhea's house. *She* had been scary. These were just old duds stuffed full of straw.

"Susan?" he called, low. "Are ye here?"

The door of the center shed was ajar. Now it trundled open a little. "Come in!" she called, also low. "Bring the mule! Hurry!"

He led Capi into a shed which smelled of straw and beans and tack . . . and something else. Something sharper. *Fireworks*, he thought. *Shooting-powder, too.*

Susan, who had spent the morning enduring final fittings, was dressed in a thin silk wrapper and large leather boots. Her hair was done up in curling papers of bright blue and red.

Sheemie tittered. "You look quite amusing, Susan, daughter of Pat. Quite a chuckle for me, I think."

“Yes, I’m a picture for an artist to paint, all right,” Susan said, looking distracted. “We have to hurry. I have twenty minutes before I’m missed. I’ll be missed before, if that randy old goat is looking for me . . . let’s be quick!”

They lifted the barrels from Capi’s back. Susan took a broken horse-bit from the pocket of her wrapper and used the sharp end to pry off one of the tops. She tossed the bit to Sheemie, who pried off the other. The apple-tart smell of *graf* filled the shed.

“Here!” She tossed Sheemie a soft cloth. “Dry it out as well as you can. Doesn’t have to be perfect, they’re wrapped, but it’s best to be safe.”

They wiped the insides of the barrels, Susan stealing nervous glances at the door every few seconds. “All right,” she said. “Good. Now . . . there’s two kinds. I’m sure they won’t be missed; there’s enough stuff back there to blow up half the world.” She hurried back into the dimness of the shed, holding the hem of her wrapper up with one hand, her boots clomping. When she came back, her arms were full of wrapped packages.

“These are the bigger ones,” she said.

He stored them in one of the casks. There were a dozen packages in all, and Sheemie could feel round things inside, each about the size of a child’s fist. Big-bangers. By the time he had finished packing and putting the top back on the barrel, she had returned with an armload of smaller packages. These he stored in the other barrel. They were the little ’uns, from the feel, the ones that not only banged but flashed colored fire.

She helped him resling the barrels on Capi’s back, still shooting those little glances at the shed door. When the barrels were secured to Caprichoso’s sides, Susan sighed with relief and brushed her sweaty forehead with the backs of her hands. “Thank the gods that part’s over,” she said. “Now ye know where ye’re to take them?”

“Aye, Susan daughter of Pat. To the Bar K. My friend Arthur Heath will put em safe.”

“And if anyone asks what ye’re doing out that way?”

“Taking sweet *graf* to the In-World boys, ’cause they’ve decided not to come to town for the Fair . . . why won’t they, Susan? Don’t they like Fairs?”

“Ye’ll know soon enough. Don’t mind it now, Sheemie. Go on—best be on your way.”

Yet he lingered.

“What?” she asked, trying not to be impatient. “Sheemie, what is it?”

“I’d like to take a *fin de año* kiss from ye, so I would.” Sheemie’s face had gone an alarming shade of red.

Susan laughed in spite of herself, then stood on her toes and kissed the corner of his mouth. With that, Sheemie floated out to the Bar K with his load of fire.

4

Reynolds rode out to Citgo the following day, galloping with a scarf wrapped around his face so only his eyes peered out. He would be very glad to get out of this damned place that couldn’t decide if it was ranchland or seacoast. The temperature wasn’t all that low, but after coming in over the water, the wind cut like a razor. Nor was that all—there was a brooding quality to Hambry and all of Mejis as the days wound down toward the Reap; a haunted feeling he didn’t care for a bit. Roy felt it, too. Reynolds could see it in his eyes.

No, he’d be glad to have those three baby knights so much ash in the wind and this place just a memory.

He dismounted in the crumbling refinery parking lot, tied his horse to the bumper of a rusty old hulk with the mystery-word CHEVROLET barely readable on its tailboard, then walked toward the oilpatch. The wind blew hard, chilling him even through the ranch-style sheepskin coat he wore, and twice he had to yank his hat down around his ears to keep it from blowing off. On the whole, he was glad he couldn't see himself; he probably looked like a fucking farmer.

The place seemed fine, though . . . which was to say, deserted. The wind made a lonely souging sound as it combed through the firs on either side of the pipe. You'd never guess that there were a dozen pairs of eyes looking out at you as you strolled.

"Hai!" he called. "Come on out here, pard, and let's have some palaver."

For a moment there was no response; then Hiram Quint of the Piano Ranch and Barkie Callahan of the Travellers' Rest came ducking their way out through the trees. *Holy shit*, Reynolds thought, somewhere between awe and amusement.

There ain't that much beef in a butcher shop.

There was a wretched old musketoon stuck into the waistband of Quint's pants; Reynolds hadn't seen one in years. He thought that if Quint was lucky, it would only misfire when he pulled the trigger. If he was unlucky, it would blow up in his face and blind him.

"All quiet?" he asked.

Quint replied in Mejis bibble-babble. Barkie listened, then said: "All well, sai. He say he and his men grow impatient." Smiling cheerfully, his face giving no indication of what he was saying, Barkie added: "If brains was blackpowder, this ijit couldn't blow his nose."

"But he's a trustworthy idiot?"

Barkie shrugged. It might have been assent.

They went through the trees. Where Roland and Susan had seen almost thirty tankers, there were now only half a dozen, and of those six, only two actually had oil in them. Men sat on the ground or snoozed with their *sombreros* over their faces. Most had guns that looked about as trustworthy as the one in Quint's waistband. A few of the poorer *vags* had *bolos*. On the whole, Reynolds guessed they would be more effective.

"Tell Lord Perth here that if the boys come, it's got to be an ambush, and they'll only have one chance to do the job right," Reynolds said to Barkie.

Barkie spoke to Quint. Quint's lips parted in a grin, revealing a scarifying picket of black and yellow fangs. He spoke briefly, then put his hands out in front of them and closed them into huge, scarred fists, one above the other, as if wringing the neck of an invisible enemy. When Barkie began to translate, Clay Reynolds waved it away. He had caught only one word, but it was enough: *muerto*.

5

All that pre-Fair week, Rhea sat in front of the glass, peering into its depths. She had taken time to sew Ermot's head back onto his body with clumsy stitches of black thread, and she sat with the decaying snake around her neck as she watched and dreamed, not noticing the stench that began to arise from the reptile as time passed. Twice Musty came nigh, mewing for food, and each time Rhea batted the troublesome thing away without so much as a glance. She herself grew more and more gaunt, her eyes now looking like the sockets of the skulls stored in the net by the door to her bedroom. She dozed occasionally as she sat with the ball in her lap and the stinking snakeskin looped about her throat, her head down, the sharp point of her chin digging at her chest, runners of drool hanging from the loose puckers of her lips, but she never really slept. There was too much to see, far too much to see.

And it was hers for the seeing. These days she didn't even have to pass her hands above the glass to open its pink mists. All the

Barony's meanness, all its petty (and not so petty) cruelties, all its cozening and lying lay before her. Most of what she saw was small and demeaning stuff—masturbating boys peeking through knotholes at their undressed sisters, wives going through husbands' pockets, looking for extra money or tobacco, Sheb the piano-player licking the seat of the chair where his favorite whore had sat for awhile, a maid at Seafront spitting into Kimba Rimer's pillowcase after the Chancellor had kicked her for being slow in getting out of his way.

These were all things which confirmed her opinion of the society she had left behind. Sometimes she laughed wildly; sometimes she spoke to the people she saw in the glass ball, as if they could hear her. By the third day of the week before Reaping, she had ceased her trips to the privy, even though she could carry the ball with her when she went, and the sour stench of urine began to rise from her.

By the fourth day, Musty had ceased coming near her.

Rhea dreamed in the ball and lost herself in her dreams, as others had done before her; deep in the petty pleasures of far-seeing, she was unaware that the pink ball was stealing the wrinkled remains of her *anima*. She likely would have considered it a fair trade if she had known. She saw all the things people did in the shadows, and they were the only things she cared for, and for them she almost certainly would have considered her life's force a fair trade.

6

"Here," the boy said, "let *me* light it, gods damn you." Jonas would have recognized the speaker; he was the lad who had waved a severed dog's tail across the street at Jonas and called, *We're Big Coffin Hunters just like you!*

The boy to whom this charming child had spoken tried to hold onto the piece of liver they had copped from the knacker's behind the Low Market. The first boy seized his ear and twisted. The second boy howled and held the chunk of liver out, dark blood running down his grimy knuckles as he did.

“That’s better,” the first boy said, taking it. “You want to remember who the *capataz* is, round here.”

They were behind a bakery stall in the Low Market. Nearby, drawn by the smell of hot fresh bread, was a mangy mutt with one blind eye. He stared at them with hungry hope.

There was a slit in the chunk of raw meat. Poking out of it was a green big-bang fuse. Below the fuse, the liver bulged like the stomach of a pregnant woman. The first boy took a sulfur match, stuck it between his protruding front teeth, and lit it.

“He won’t never!” said a third boy, in an agony of hope and anticipation.

“Thin as he is?” the first boy said. “Oh yes he will. Bet ye my deck of cards against yer hosstail.”

The third boy thought it over and shook his head.

The first boy grinned. “It’s a wise child ye are,” he said, and lit the big-bang’s fuse. “Hey, cully!” he called to the dog. “Want a bite o’ sumpin good? Here ye go!”

He threw the chunk of raw liver. The scrawny dog never hesitated at the hissing fuse, but lunged forward with its one good eye fixed on the first decent food it had seen in days. As it snatched the liver out of the air, the big-bang the boys had slipped into it went off. There was a roar and a flash. The dog’s head disintegrated from the jaws down. For a moment it continued to stand there, dripping, staring at them with its one good eye, and then it collapsed.

“Toadjer!” the first boy jeered. “Toadjer he’d take it! Happy Reap to us, eh?”

“What are you boys doing?” a woman’s voice called sharply. “Get out of there, ye ravens!”

The boys fled, cackling, into the bright afternoon. They did sound like ravens.

7

Cuthbert and Alain sat their horses at the mouth of Eyebolt. Even with the wind blowing the sound of the thinny away from them, it got inside your head and buzzed there, rattling your teeth.

“I hate it,” Cuthbert said through clenched teeth. “Gods, let’s be quick.”

“Aye,” Alain said. They dismounted, bulky in their ranch-coats, and tied their horses to the brush which lay across the front of the canyon. Ordinarily, tethering wouldn’t have been necessary, but both boys could see the horses hated the whining, grinding sound as much as they did. Cuthbert seemed to hear the thinny in his mind, speaking words of invitation in a groaning, horribly persuasive voice.

Come on, Bert. Leave all this foolishness behind: the drums, the pride, the fear of death, the loneliness you laugh at because laughing’s all you can think to do. And the girl, leave her, too. You love her, don’t you? And even if you don’t, you want her. It’s sad that she loves your friend instead of you, but if you come to me, all that will stop bothering you very soon. So come on. What are you waiting for?

“What am I waiting for?” he muttered.

“Huh?”

“I said, what are we waiting for? Let’s get this done and get the holy hell out of here.”

From their saddlebags they each took a small cotton bag. These contained gunpowder extracted from the smaller firecrackers Sheemie had brought them two days before. Alain dropped to his

knees, pulled his knife, and began to crawl backward, digging a trench as far under the roll of brush as he could.

“Dig it deep,” Cuthbert said. “We don’t want the wind to blow it away.”

Alain gave him a look which was remarkably hot. “Do you want to do it? Just so you can make sure it’s done right?”

It’s the thinny, Cuthbert thought. *It’s working on him, too.*

“No, Al,” he said humbly. “You’re doing fine for someone who’s both blind and soft in the head. Go on.”

Alain looked at him fiercely a moment longer, then grinned and resumed the trench under the brush. “You’ll die young, Bert.”

“Aye, likely.” Cuthbert dropped to his own knees and began to crawl after Alain, sprinkling gunpowder into the trench and trying to ignore the buzzy, cajoling voice of the thinny. No, the gunpowder probably wouldn’t blow away, not unless there was a full gale. But if it rained, even the rolls of brush wouldn’t be much protection. If it rained—

Don’t think of that, he told himself. *That’s ka.*

They finished loading gunpowder trenches under both sides of the brush barrier in only ten minutes, but it felt longer. To the horses as well, it seemed; they were stamping impatiently at the far end of their tethers, their ears laid back and their eyes rolling. Cuthbert and Alain untied them and mounted up. Cuthbert’s horse actually bucked twice . . . except it felt more to Cuthbert as if the poor old thing were shuddering.

In the middle distance, bright sunshine twanged off bright steel. The tankers at Hanging Rock. They had been pulled in as tight to the sandstone outcrop as possible, but when the sun was high, most of the shadow disappeared, and concealment disappeared with it.

“I really can’t believe it,” Alain said as they started back. It would be a long ride, including a wide swing around Hanging Rock to make sure they weren’t seen. “They must think we’re blind.”

“It’s stupid they think we are,” Cuthbert said, “but I suppose it comes to the same.” Now that Eyebolt Canyon was falling behind them, he felt almost giddy with relief. Were they going in there a few days from now? Actually *going in*, riding to within mere yards of where that cursed puddle started? He couldn’t believe it . . . and he made himself stop thinking about it before he could *start* believing it.

“More riders heading out to Hanging Rock,” Alain said, pointing back toward the woods beyond the canyon. “Do you see them?”

They were small as ants from this distance, but Bert saw them very well. “Changing the guard. The important thing is that they don’t see us—you don’t think they can, do you?”

“Over here? Not likely.”

Cuthbert didn’t think so, either.

“They’ll *all* be down come Reap, won’t they?” Alain asked. “It won’t do us much good to only catch a few.”

“Yes—I’m pretty sure they all will.”

“Jonas and his pals?”

“Them, too.”

Ahead of them, the Bad Grass grew closer. The wind blew hard in their faces, making their eyes water, but Cuthbert didn’t mind. The sound of the thinny was down to a faint drone behind him, and would soon be gone completely. Right now that was all he needed to make him happy.

“Do you think we’ll get away with it, Bert?”

“Dunno,” Cuthbert said. Then he thought of the gunpowder trenches lying beneath the dry rolls of brush, and grinned. “But I’ll tell you one thing, Al: they’ll know we were here.”

8

In Mejis, as in every other Barony of Mid-World, the week before a Fair-Day was a political week. Important people came in from the farther corners of the Barony, and there were a good many Conversationals leading up to the main Conversational on Reaping Day. Susan was expected to be present at these—mostly as a decorative testimony to the Mayor’s continuing puissance. Olive was also present, and, in a cruelly comic dumbshow that only the women truly appreciated, they sat on either side of the aging cockatoo, Susan pouring the coffee, Olive passing the cake, both of them gracefully accepting compliments on food and drink they’d had no hand in preparing.

Susan found it almost impossible to look at Olive’s smiling, unhappy face. Her husband would never lie with Pat Delgado’s daughter . . . but sai Thorin didn’t know that, and Susan couldn’t tell her. She had only to glimpse the Mayor’s wife from the corner of her eye to remember what Roland had said that day on the Drop: *For a moment I thought she was my mother.* But that was the problem, wasn’t it? Olive Thorin was nobody’s mother. That was what had opened the door to this horrible situation in the first place.

There had been something much on Susan’s mind to do, but with the round of activities at Mayor’s House, it was but three days to Reaping before she got the chance. Finally, following this latest Conversational, she was able to slip out of Pink Dress with Appliqué (how she hated it! how she hated them all!) and jump back into jeans, a plain riding shirt, and a ranch-coat. There was no time to braid her hair, as she was expected back for Mayor’s Tea, but Maria tied it back for her and off she had gone to the house she would shortly be leaving forever.

Her business was in the back room of the stable—the room her father had used as an office—but she went into the house first and heard what she'd hoped to hear: her aunt's ladylike, whistling snores. Lovely.

Susan got a slice of bread and honey and took it out to the barn-stable, protecting it as best she could from the clouds of dust that blew across the yard in the wind. Her aunt's stuffy-guy rattled on his post in the garden.

She ducked into the sweet-smelling shadows of the barn. Pylon and Felicia nickered hello, and she divided what she hadn't eaten between them. They seemed pleased enough to get it. She made especially of Felicia, whom she would soon be leaving behind.

She had avoided the little office since her father died, afraid of exactly the sort of pang that struck her when she lifted the latch and went in. The narrow windows were now covered with cobwebs, but they still let in autumn's bright light, more than enough for her to be able to see the pipe in the ashtray—the red one, his favorite, the one he called his thinking-pipe—and a bit of tack laid over the back of his desk chair. He had probably been mending it by gaslight, had put it by thinking to finish the next day . . . then the snake had done its dance under Foam's hoofs and there had never been a next day. Not for Pat Delgado.

"Oh, Da," she said in a small and broken voice. "How I do miss thee."

She crossed to the desk and ran her fingers along its surface, leaving trails of dust. She sat down in his chair, listened to it creak under her as it had always creaked under him, and that pushed her over the edge. For the next five minutes she sat there and wept, screwing her fists into her eyes as she had as a wee shim. Only now, of course, there was no Big Pat to come upon her and jolly her out of it, taking her on his lap and kissing her in that sensitive place under her chin (especially sensitive to the bristles on his upper lip, it had

been) until her tears turned to giggles. Time was a face on the water, and this time it was the face of her father.

At last her tears tapered to sniffles. She opened the desk drawers, one after another, finding more pipes (many rendered useless by his constant stem-chewing), a hat, one of her own dolls (it had a broken arm Pat had apparently never gotten around to putting right), quillpens, a little flask—empty but with a faint smell of whiskey still present around its neck. The only item of interest was in the bottom drawer: a pair of spurs. One still had its star rowel, but the other had been broken off. These were, she was almost positive, the spurs he had been wearing on the day he died.

If my da was here, she had begun that day on the Drop. But he's not, Roland had said. He's dead.

A pair of spurs, a broken-off rowel.

She bounced them in her hand, in her mind's eye seeing Ocean Foam rear, spilling her father (one spur catches in a stirrup; the rowel breaks free), then stumbling sideways and falling atop him. She saw this clearly, but she didn't see the snake Fran Lengyll had told them about. That she didn't see at all.

She put the spurs back where she had found them, got up, and looked at the shelf to the right of the desk, handy to Pat Delgado's smart hand. Here was a line of leather-bound ledgers, a priceless trove of books in a society that had forgotten how to make paper. Her father had been the man in charge of the Barony's horse for almost thirty years, and here were his stockline books to prove it.

Susan took down the last one and began to page through it. This time she almost welcomed the pang that struck her as she saw her father's familiar hand—the labored script, the steep and somehow more confident numbers.

Born of HENRIETTA, (2) foals both well Stillborn of DELIA, a roan (MUTANT) Born of YOLANDA, a THOROUGHBRED, a

GOOD MALE COLT

And, following each, the date. So neat, he had been. So thorough. So . . .

She stopped suddenly, aware that she had found what she was looking for even without any clear knowledge of what she was doing in here. The last dozen pages of her da's final stockline book had been torn out.

Who had done it? Not her father; a largely self-taught man, he revered paper the way some people revered gods or gold.

And why had it been done?

That she thought she knew: horses, of courses. There were too many on the Drop. And the ranchers—Lengyll, Croydon, Renfrew—were lying about the threaded quality of the stockline. So was Henry Wertner, the man who had succeeded to her father's job.

If my da was here—

But he's not. He's dead.

She had told Roland she couldn't believe Fran Lengyll would lie about her father's death . . . but she could believe it now.

Gods help her, she could believe it now.

"What are ye doing in here?"

She gave a little scream, dropped the book, and whirled around. Cordelia stood there in one of her rusty black dresses. The top three buttons were undone, and Susan could see her aunt's collarbones sticking out above the plain white cotton of her shift. It was only on seeing those protruding bones that Susan realized how much weight Aunt Cord had lost over the last three months or so. She could see the red imprint of the pillow on her aunt's left cheek, like the mark of a slap. Her eyes glittered from dark, bruised-looking hollows of flesh.

“Aunt Cord! You startled me! You—”

“What are ye doing in here?” Aunt Cord repeated.

Susan bent and picked up the book. “I came to remember my father,” she said, and put the book back on the shelf. Who had torn those pages out? Lengyll? Rimer? She doubted it. She thought it more likely that the woman standing before her right now had done it. Perhaps for as little as a single piece of red gold. *Nothing asked, nothing told, so all is well*, she would have thought, popping the coin into her money-box, after first biting its edge to make sure it was true.

“Remember him? It’s ask his forgiveness, ye should do. For ye’ve forgotten his face, so ye have. Most grievous have ye forgotten it, Sue.”

Susan only looked at her.

“Have ye been with *him* today?” Cordelia asked in a brittle, laughing voice. Her hand went to the red pillow-mark on her cheek and began rubbing it. She had been getting bad by degrees, Susan realized, but had become ever so much worse since the gossip about Jonas and Coral Thorin had started. “Have ye been with sai Dearborn? Is yer crack still dewy from his spend? Here, let me see for myself!”

Her aunt glided forward—spectral in her black dress, her bodice open, her slippered feet peeping—and Susan pushed her back. In her fright and disgust, she pushed hard. Cordelia struck the wall beside the cobwebbed window.

“Ye should ask forgiveness yerself,” Susan said. “To speak to his daughter so in this place. *In this place*.” She let her eyes turn to the shelf of ledgers, then return to her aunt. The look of frightened calculation she saw on Cordelia Delgado’s face told her all she wanted or needed to know. She hadn’t been a party to her brother’s

murder, that Susan could not believe, but she had known something of it. Yes, something.

“Ye faithless bitch,” Cordelia whispered.

“No,” Susan said, “I have been true.”

And so, she realized, she had been. A great weight seemed to slip off her shoulders at the thought. She walked to the door of the office and turned back to her aunt. “I’ve slept my last night here,” she said. “I’ll not listen to more such as this. Nor look at ye as ye are now. It hurts my heart and steals the love I’ve kept for ye since I was little, when ye did the best ye could to be my ma.”

Cordelia clapped her hands over her face, as if looking at Susan hurt her.

“Get out, then!” she screamed. *“Go back to Seafront or wherever it is thee rolls with that boy! If I never see thy trollop’s face again, I’ll count my life good!”*

Susan led Pylon from the stable. When she got him into the yard, she was sobbing almost too hard to mount up. Yet mount she did, and she couldn’t deny that there was relief in her heart as well as sorrow. When she turned onto the High Street and booted Pylon into a gallop, she didn’t look back.

9

In a dark hour of the following morning, Olive Thorin crept from the room where she now slept to the one she had shared for almost forty years with her husband. The floor was cold under her bare feet and she was shivering by the time she reached the bed . . . but the chilly floor wasn’t the only reason she was shivering. She slid in beside the gaunt, snoring man in the nightcap, and when he turned away from her (his knees and back crackling loudly as he did), she pressed against him and hugged him tightly. There was no passion in this, but only a need to share a bit of his warmth. His chest—narrow but

almost as well-known to her as her own plump one—rose and fell under her hands, and she began to quiet a little. He stirred, and she thought for a moment he would wake and find her sharing his bed for the first time in gods knew how long.

Yes, *wake*, she thought, *do*. She didn't dare wake him of her own—all her courage had been exhausted just getting here, creeping through the dark following one of the worst dreams she had ever had in her life—but if he woke, she would take it as a sign and tell him she had dreamed of a vast bird, a cruel golden-eyed roc that flew above the Barony on wings that dripped blood.

Wherever its shadow fell, there was blood, she would tell him, and its shadow fell everywhere. The Barony ran with it, from Hambry all the way out to Eyebolt. And I smelled big fire in the wind. I ran to tell you and you were dead in your study, sitting by the hearth with your eyes gouged out and a skull in your lap.

But instead of waking, in his sleep he took her hand, as he had used to do before he had begun to look at the young girls—even the serving-wenches—when they passed, and Olive decided she would only lie here and be still and let him hold her hand. Let it be like the old days for a bit, when everything had been right between them.

She slept a little herself. When she woke, dawn's first gray light was creeping in through the windows. He had dropped her hand—had, in fact, scooted away from her entirely, to his edge of the bed. It wouldn't do for him to wake and find her here, she decided, and the urgency of her nightmare was gone. She turned back the covers, swung her feet out, then looked at him once more. His nightcap had come askew. She put it right, her hands smoothing the cloth and the bony brow beneath. He stirred again. Olive waited until he had quieted, then got up. She slipped back to her own room like a phantom.

The midway booths opened in Green Heart two days before Reaping-Fair, and the first folks came to try their luck at the spinning wheel and the bottle-toss and the basket-ring. There was also a pony-train—a cart filled with laughing children, pulled along a figure-eight of narrow-gauge rails.

“Was the pony named Charlie?” Eddie Dean asked Roland.

“I think not,” Roland said. “We have a rather unpleasant word that sounds like that in the High Speech.”

“What word?” Jake asked.

“The one,” said the gunslinger, “that means death.”)

Roy Depape stood watching the pony plod its appointed rounds for a couple of turns, remembering with some nostalgia his own rides in such a cart as a child. Of course, most of his had been stolen.

When he had looked his fill, Depape sauntered on down to the Sheriff’s office and went in. Herk Avery, Dave, and Frank Claypool were cleaning an odd and fantastical assortment of guns. Avery nodded at Depape and went back to what he was doing. There was something strange about the man, and after a moment or two Depape realized what it was: the Sheriff wasn’t eating. It was the first time he’d ever come in here that the Sheriff didn’t have a plate of grub close at hand.

“All ready for tomorrow?” Depape asked.

Avery gave him a half-irritated, half-smiling look. “What the hell kind of question is that?”

“One that Jonas sent me to ask,” Depape said, and at that Avery’s queer, nervy smile faltered a little.

“Aye, we’re ready.” Avery swept a meaty arm over the guns. “Don’t ye see we are?”

Depape could have quoted the old saying about how the proof of the pudding was in the eating, but what was the point? Things would work out if the three boys were as fooled as Jonas thought they were; if they weren't fooled, they would likely carve Herk Avery's fat butt off the top of his legs and feed it to the handiest pack of wolverines. It didn't make much nevermind to Roy Depape one way or the other.

"Jonas also ast me to remind you it's early."

"Aye, aye, we'll be there early," Avery agreed. "These two and six more good men. Fran Lengyll's asked to go along, and he's got a machine-gun." Avery spoke this last with ringing pride, as if he himself had invented the machine-gun. Then he looked at Depape slyly. "What about you, coffin-hand? Want to go along? Won't take me more'n an eyeblink to deputize ye."

"I have another chore. Reynolds, too." Depape smiled. "There's plenty of work for all of us, Sheriff—after all, it's Reaping."

11

That afternoon, Susan and Roland met at the hut in the Bad Grass. She told him about the book with the torn-out pages, and Roland showed her what he'd left in the hut's north corner, secreted beneath a mouldering pile of skins.

She looked first at this, then at him with wide and frightened eyes. "What's wrong? What does thee *suspect* is wrong?"

He shook his head. *Nothing* was wrong . . . not that he could tell, anyway. And yet he had felt a strong need to do what he'd done, to leave what he'd left. It wasn't the touch, nothing like it, but only intuition.

"I think everything is all right . . . or as right as things can be when the odds may turn out fifty of them for each of us. Susan, our only chance is to take them by surprise. You're not going to risk that, are

you? Not planning to go to Lengyll, waving your father's stockline book around?"

She shook her head. If Lengyll had done what she now suspected, he'd get his payback two days from now. There would be reaping, all right. Reaping aplenty. But this . . . this frightened her, and she said so.

"Listen." Roland took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "I'm only trying to be careful. If things go badly—and they could—you're the one most likely to get away clean. You and Sheemie. If that happens, Susan, you—*thee*—must come here and take my guns. Take them west to Gilead. Find my father. He'll know thee are who thee says by what thee shows. Tell him what happened here. That's all."

"If anything happens to thee, Roland, I won't be able to do anything. Except die."

His hands were still on her face. Now he used them to make her head shake slowly, from side to side. "You won't die," he said. There was a coldness in his voice and eyes that struck her not with fear but awe. She thought of his blood—of how old it must be, and how cold it must sometimes flow. "Not with this job undone. Promise me."

"I . . . I promise, Roland. I do."

"Tell me aloud what you promise."

"I'll come here. Get yer guns. Take them to yer da. Tell him what happened."

He nodded and let go of her face. The shapes of his hands were printed faintly on her cheeks.

"Ye frightened me," Susan said, and then shook her head. That wasn't right. "Ye *do* frighten me."

“I can’t help what I am.”

“And I wouldn’t change it.” She kissed his left cheek, his right cheek, his mouth. She put her hand inside his shirt and caressed his nipple. It grew instantly hard beneath the tip of her finger. “Bird and bear and hare and fish,” she said, now making soft butterfly kisses all over his face. “Give your love her fondest wish.”

After, they lay beneath a bearskin Roland had brought along and listened to the wind sough through the grass.

“I love that sound,” she said. “It always makes me wish I could be part of the wind . . . go where it goes, see what it sees.”

“This year, if *ka* allows, you will.”

“Aye. And with thee.” She turned to him, up on one elbow. Light fell through the ruined roof and dappled her face. “Roland, I love thee.” She kissed him . . . and then began to cry.

He held her, concerned. “What is it? Sue, what troubles thee?”

“I don’t know,” she said, crying harder. “All I know is that there’s a shadow on my heart.” She looked at him with tears still flowing from her eyes. “Thee’d not leave me, would ye, dear? Thee’d not go without Sue, would ye?”

“No.”

“For I’ve given all I have to ye, so I have. And my virginity’s the very least of it, thee knows.”

“I’d never leave you.” But he felt cold in spite of the bearskin, and the wind outside—so comforting a moment ago—sounded like beast’s breath. “Never, I swear.”

“I’m frightened, though. Indeed I am.”

“You needn’t be,” he said, speaking slowly and carefully . . . for suddenly all the wrong words wanted to come tumbling out of his mouth. *We’ll leave this, Susan—not day after tomorrow, on Reaping, but now, this minute. Dress and we’ll go crosswise to the wind; it’s south we’ll ride and never look back. We’ll be—*

—haunted.

That’s what they would be. Haunted by the faces of Alain and Cuthbert; haunted by the faces of all the men who might die in the Shavéd Mountains, massacred by weapons torn from the armory-crypts where they should have been left. Haunted most of all by the faces of their fathers, for all the rest of their lives. Not even the South Pole would be far enough to escape those faces.

“All you need do day after tomorrow is claim indisposition at lunch.” They had gone over all this before, but now, in his sudden, pointless fright, it was all he could think of to say. “Go to your room, then leave as you did on the night we met in the graveyard. Hide up a little. Then, when it’s three o’ the clock, ride here, and look under the skins in yon corner. If my guns are gone—and they will be, I swear they will—then everything’s all right. You’ll ride to meet us. Come to the place above the canyon, the one we told you of. We’ll —”

“Aye, I know all that, but something’s wrong.” She looked at him, touched the side of his face. “I fear for thee and me, Roland, and know not why.”

“All will work out,” he said. “*Ka—*”

“Speak not to me of *ka!*” she cried. “Oh please don’t! *Ka* like a wind, my father said, it takes what it will and minds the plea of no man or woman. Greedy old *ka*, how I hate it!”

“Susan—”

“No, say no more.” She lay back and pushed the bearskin down to her knees, exposing a body that far greater men than Hart Thorin might have given away kingdoms for. Beads of sunlight ran over her bare skin like rain. She held her arms out to him. Never had she looked more beautiful to Roland than she did then, with her hair spread about her and that haunted look on her face. He would think later: *She knew. Some part of her knew.*

“No more talking,” she said. “Talking’s done. If you love me, then love me.”

And for the last time, Roland did. They rocked together, skin to skin and breath to breath, and outside the wind roared into the west like a tidal wave.

12

That evening, as the grinning Demon rose in the sky, Cordelia left her house and walked slowly across the lawn to her garden, detouring around the pile of leaves she had raked that afternoon. In her arms was a bundle of clothes. She dropped them in front of the pole to which her stuffy-guy was bound, then looked raptly up at the rising moon: the knowing wink of the eye, the ghoul’s grin; silver as bone was that moon, a white button against violet silk.

It grinned at Cordelia; Cordelia grinned back. Finally, with the air of a woman awakening from a trance, she stepped forward and pulled the stuffy-guy off its pole. His head lolled limply against her shoulder, like the head of a man who has found himself too drunk to dance. His red hands dangled.

She stripped off the guy’s clothes, uncovering a bulging, vaguely humanoid shape in a pair of her dead brother’s long-handles. She took one of the things she had brought from the house and held it up to the moonlight. A red silk riding shirt, one of Mayor Thorin’s presents to Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. One of those she wouldn’t wear. Whore’s clothes, she had called them. And what did that make Cordelia Delgado, who had taken care of her even after her

bullheaded da had decided he must stand against the likes of Fran Lengyll and John Croydon? It made her a whorehouse madam, she supposed.

This thought led to an image of Eldred Jonas and Coral Thorin, naked and striving while a honky-tonk piano planked out “Red Dirt Boogie” below them, and Cordelia moaned like a dog.

She yanked the silk shirt over the stuffy’s head. Next came one of Susan’s split riding skirts. After the skirt, a pair of her slippers. And last, replacing the *sombrero*, one of Susan’s spring bonnets.

Presto! The stuffy-guy was now a stuffy-gal.

“And caught red-handed ye are,” she whispered. “I know. Oh yes, I know. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

She carried the stuffy from the garden to the pile of leaves on the lawn. She laid it close by the leaves, then scooped some up and pushed them into the bodice of the riding shirt, making rudimentary breasts. That done, she took a match from her pocket and struck it alight.

The wind, as if eager to cooperate, dropped. Cordelia touched the match to the dry leaves. Soon the whole pile was blazing. She picked the stuffy-gal up in her arms and stood with it in front of the fire. She didn’t hear the rattling firecrackers from town, or the wheeze of the steam-organ in Green Heart, or the mariachi band playing in the Low Market; when a burning leaf rose and swirled past her hair, threatening to set it alight, she didn’t seem to notice. Her eyes were wide and blank.

When the fire was at its height, she stepped to its edge and threw the stuffy on. Flame whumped up around it in bright orange gusts; sparks and burning leaves swirled skyward in a funnel.

“So let it be done!” Cordelia cried. The firelight on her face turned her tears to blood. “*Charyou tree! Aye, just so!*”

The thing in the riding clothes caught fire, its face charring, its red hands blazing, its white-cross eyes turning black. Its bonnet flared; the face began to burn.

Cordelia stood and watched, fists clenching and unclenching, heedless of the sparks that lit on her skin, heedless of the blazing leaves that swirled toward the house. Had the house caught fire, she would likely have ignored that as well.

She watched until the stuffy dressed in her niece's clothes was nothing but ashes lying atop more ashes. Then, as slowly as a robot with rust in its works, she walked back to the house, lay down on the sofa, and slept like the dead.

13

It was three-thirty in the morning of the day before Reaping, and Stanley Ruiz thought he was finally done for the night. The last music had quit twenty minutes ago—Sheb had outlasted the mariachis by an hour or so, and now lay snoring with his face in the sawdust. Sai Thorin was upstairs, and there had been no sign of the Big Coffin Hunters; Stanley had an idea those were up to Seafront tonight. He also had an idea there was black work on offer, although he didn't know that for sure. He looked up at the glassy, two-headed gaze of The Romp. "Nor want to, old pal," he said. "All I want is about nine hours of sleep—tomorrow comes the real party, and they won't leave till dawn. So—"

A shrill scream rose from somewhere behind the building. Stanley jerked backward, thumping into the bar. Beside the piano, Sheb raised his head briefly, muttered "Wuzzat?" and dropped it back with a thump.

Stanley had absolutely no urge to investigate the source of the scream, but he supposed he would, just the same. It had sounded like that sad old bitch Pettie the Trotter. "I'd like to trot your saggy old ass right out of town," he muttered, then bent down to look under the bar. There were two stout ashwood clubs here, The Calmer and The

Killer. The Calmer was smooth burl wood, guaranteed to put out the lights for two hours any time you tapped some boisterous cull's head in the right place with it.

Stanley consulted his feelings and took the other club. It was shorter than The Calmer, wider at the top. And the business end of The Killer was studded with nails.

Stanley went down to the end of the bar, through the door, and across a dim supply-room stacked with barrels smelling of *graf* and whiskey. At the rear was a door giving on the back yard. Stanley approached it, took a deep breath, and unlocked it. He kept expecting Pettie to voice another head-bursting scream, but none came. There was only the sound of the wind.

Maybe you got lucky and she's kilt, Stanley thought. He opened the door, stepping back and raising the nail-studded club at the same time.

Pettie wasn't kilt. Dressed in a stained shift (a Pettie-skirt, one might say), the whore was standing on the path which led to the back privy, her hands clutched together above the swell of her bosom and below the drooping turkey-wattles of her neck. She was looking up at the sky.

"What is it?" Stanley asked, hurrying down to her. "Near scared ten years off my life, ye did."

"The moon, Stanley!" she whispered. "Oh, look at the moon, would ye!"

He looked up, and what he saw set his heart thumping, but he tried to speak reasonably and calmly. "Come now, Pettie, it's dust, that's all. Be reasonable, dear, ye know how the wind's blown these last few days, and no rain to knock down what it carries; it's dust, that's all."

Yet it didn't look like dust.

“I know what I see,” whispered Pettie.

Above them, Demon Moon grinned and winked one eye through what appeared to be a shifting scrim of blood.

CHAPTER VII

TAKING THE BALL

1

While a certain whore and certain bartender were still gaping up at the bloody moon, Kimba Rimer awoke sneezing.

Damn, a cold for Reaping, he thought. As much as I have to be out over the next two days, I'll be lucky if it doesn't turn into—

Something fluffed the end of his nose, and he sneezed again. Coming out of his narrow chest and dry slot of a mouth, it sounded like a small-caliber pistol-shot in the black room.

“Who’s there?” he cried.

No answer. Rimer suddenly imagined a bird, something nasty and bad-tempered, that had gotten in here in daylight and was now flying around in the dark, fluttering against his face as he slept. His skin crawled—birds, bugs, bats, he hated them all—and he fumbled so energetically for the gas-lamp on the table by his bed that he almost knocked it off onto the floor.

As he drew it toward him, that flutter came again. This time puffing at his cheek. Rimer screamed and recoiled against the pillows, clutching the lamp to his chest. He turned the switch on the side, heard the hiss of gas, then pushed the spark. The lamp lit, and in the thin circle of its radiance, he saw not a fluttering bird but Clay Reynolds sitting on the edge of the bed. In one hand Reynolds held the feather with which he had been tickling Mejis’s Chancellor. His other was hidden in his cloak, which lay in his lap.

Reynolds had disliked Rimer from their first meeting in the woods far west of town—those same woods, beyond Eyebolt Canyon, where Farson’s man Latigo now quartered the main contingent of his troops. It had been a windy night, and as he and the other Coffin Hunters entered the little glade where Rimer, accompanied by Lengyll and Croydon, were sitting by a small fire, Reynolds’s cloak swirled around him. “*Sai Manto*,” Rimer had said, and the other two had laughed. It had been meant as a harmless joke, but it hadn’t seemed harmless to Reynolds. In many of the lands where he had travelled, *manto* meant not “cloak” but “leaner” or “bender.” It was, in fact, a slang term for homosexual. That Rimer (a provincial man under his veneer of cynical sophistication) didn’t know this never crossed Reynolds’s mind. He knew when people were making small of him, and if he could make such a person pay, he did so.

For Kimba Rimer, payday had come.

“Reynolds? What are you doing? How did you get in h—”

“You got to be thinking of the wrong cowboy,” the man sitting on the bed replied. “No Reynolds here. Just *Señor Manto*.” He took out the hand which had been under his cloak. In it was a keenly honed *cuchillo*. Reynolds had purchased it in Low Market with this chore in mind. He raised it now and drove the twelve-inch blade into Rimer’s chest. It went all the way through, pinning him like a bug. *A bedbug*, Reynolds thought.

The lamp fell out of Rimer’s hands and rolled off the bed. It landed on the foot-runner, but did not break. On the far wall was Kimba Rimer’s distorted, struggling shadow. The shadow of the other man bent over it like a hungry vulture.

Reynolds lifted the hand which had held the knife. He turned it so the small blue tattooed coffin between thumb and forefinger was in front of Rimer’s eyes. He wanted it to be the last thing Rimer saw on this side of the clearing.

“Let’s hear you make fun of me now,” Reynolds said. He smiled. “Come on. Let’s just hear you.”

2

Shortly before five o’clock, Mayor Thorin woke from a terrible dream. In it, a bird with pink eyes had been cruising slowly back and forth above the Barony. Wherever its shadow fell, the grass turned yellow, the leaves fell shocked from the trees, and the crops died. The shadow was turning his green and pleasant Barony into a waste land. *It may be my Barony, but it’s my bird, too*, he thought just before awakening, huddled into a shuddery ball on one side of his bed. *My bird, I brought it here, I let it out of its cage.*

There would be no more sleep for him this night, and Thorin knew it. He poured himself a glass of water, drank it, then walked into his study, absently picking his nightgown from the cleft of his bony old ass as he went. The puff on the end of his nightcap bobbed between his shoulderblades; his knees cracked at every step.

As for the guilty feelings expressed by the dream . . . well, what was done was done. Jonas and his friends would have what they’d come for (and paid so handsomely for) in another day; a day after that, they’d be gone. Fly away, bird with the pink eyes and pestilent shadow; fly away to wherever you came from and take the Big Coffin Boys with you. He had an idea that by Year’s End he’d be too busy dipping his wick to think much about such things. Or to dream such dreams.

Besides, dreams without visible sign were just dreams, not omens.

The visible sign might have been the boots beneath the study drapes—just the scuffed tips of them showing—but Thorin never looked in that direction. His eyes were fixed on the bottle beside his favorite chair. Drinking claret at five in the morning was no sort of habit to get into, but this once wouldn’t hurt. He’d had a terrible dream, for gods’ sake, and after all—

“Tomorrow’s Reaping,” he said, sitting in the wing-chair on the edge of the hearth. “I guess a man can jump a fence or two, come Reap.”

He poured himself a drink, the last he’d ever take in this world, and coughed as the fire hit his belly and then climbed back up his throat, warming it. Better, aye, much. No giant birds now, no plaguey shadows. He stretched out his arms, laced his long and bony fingers together, and cracked them viciously.

“I *hate* it when you do that, you scrawny git,” spoke a voice directly into Thorin’s left ear.

Thorin jumped. His heart took its own tremendous leap in his chest. The empty glass flew from his hand, and there was no foot-runner to cushion its landing. It smashed on the hearth.

Before Thorin could scream, Roy Depape brushed off the mayoral nightcap, seized the gauzy remains of the mayoral mane, and yanked the mayoral head back. The knife Depape held in his other hand was much humbler than the one Reynolds had used, but it cut the old man’s throat efficiently enough. Blood sprayed scarlet in the dim room. Depape let go of Thorin’s hair, went back to the drapes he had been hiding behind, and picked something up off the floor. It was Cuthbert’s lookout. Depape brought it back to the chair and put it in the dying Mayor’s lap.

“Bird . . .” Thorin gargled through a mouthful of blood. “Bird!”

“Yar, old fella, and trig o’ you to notice at a time like this, I will say.” Depape pulled Thorin’s head back again and took the old man’s eyes out with two quick flips of his knife. One went into the dead fireplace; the other hit the wall and slid down behind the fire-tools. Thorin’s right foot trembled briefly and was still.

One more job to do.

Depape looked around, saw Thorin's nightcap, and decided the ball on the end would serve. He picked it up, dipped it in the puddle of blood in the Mayor's lap, and drew the Good Man's *sigul*—



—on the wall.

“There,” he murmured, standing back. “If that don't finish em, nothing on earth will.”

True enough. The only question left unanswered was whether or not Roland's *ka-tet* could be taken alive.

3

Jonas had told Fran Lengyll exactly where to place his men, two inside the stable and six more out, three of these latter gents hidden behind rusty old implements, two hidden in the burnt-out remains of the home place, one—Dave Hollis—crouched on top of the stable itself, spying over the roofpeak. Lengyll was glad to see that the men in the posse took their job seriously. They were only boys, it was true, but boys who had on one occasion come off ahead of the Big Coffin Hunters.

Sheriff Avery gave a fair impression of being in charge of things until they got within a good shout of the Bar K. Then Lengyll, machine-gun slung over one shoulder (and as straight-backed in the saddle as he had been at twenty), took command. Avery, who looked nervous and sounded out of breath, seemed relieved rather than offended.

“I'll tell ye where to go as was told to me, for it's a good plan, and I've no quarrel with it,” Lengyll had told his posse. In the dark, their faces were little more than dim blurs. “Only one thing I'll say to ye on my own hook. We don't need em alive, but it's best we have em so—it's the Barony we want to put paid to em, the common folk, and so

put paid to this whole business, as well. Shut the door on it, if ye will. So I say this: if there's cause to shoot, shoot. But I'll flay the skin off the face of any man who shoots without cause. Do ye understand?"

No response. It seemed they did.

"All right," Lengyll had said. His face was stony. "I'll give ye a minute to make sure your gear's muffled, and then on we go. Not another word from here on out."

4

Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain came out of the bunkhouse at quarter past six that morning, and stood a-row on the porch. Alain was finishing his coffee. Cuthbert was yawning and stretching. Roland was buttoning his shirt and looking southwest, toward the Bad Grass. He was thinking not of ambushes but of Susan. Her tears. *Greedy old ka, how I hate it*, she had said.

His instincts did not awake; Alain's touch, which had sensed Jonas on the day Jonas had killed the pigeons, did not so much as quiver. As for Cuthbert—

"One more day of quiet!" that worthy exclaimed to the dawning sky. "One more day of grace! One more day of silence, broken only by the lover's sigh and the tattoo of horses' hoofs!"

"One more day of your bullshit," Alain said. "Come on."

They set off across the dooryard, sensing the eight pairs of eyes on them not at all. They walked into the stable past the two men flanking the door, one hidden behind an ancient harrow, the other tucked behind an untidy stack of hay, both with guns drawn.

Only Rusher sensed something was wrong. He stamped his feet, rolled his eyes, and, as Roland backed him out of his stall, tried to rear.

“Hey, boy,” he said, and looked around. “Spiders, I reckon. He hates them.”

Outside, Lengyll stood up and waved both hands forward. Men moved silently toward the front of the stable. On the roof, Dave Hollis stood with his gun drawn. His monocle was tucked away in his vest pocket, so it should blink no badly timed reflection.

Cuthbert led his mount out of the stable. Alain followed. Roland came last, short-leading the nervous, prancy gelding.

“Look,” Cuthbert said cheerily, still unaware of the men standing directly behind him and his friends. He was pointing north. “A cloud in the shape of a bear! Good luck for—”

“Don’t move, cullies,” Fran Lengyll called. “Don’t so much as shuffle yer god-pounding feet.”

Alain *did* begin to turn—in startlement more than anything else—and there was a ripple of small clicking sounds, like many dry twigs all snapping at once. The sound of cocking pistols and musketoons.

“No, Al!” Roland said. “Don’t move! Don’t!” In his throat despair rose like poison, and tears of rage stung at the corners of his eyes . . . yet he stood quiet. Cuthbert and Alain must stand quiet, too. If they moved, they’d be killed. “Don’t move!” he called again. “Either of you!”

“Wise, cully.” Lengyll’s voice was closer now, and accompanied by several pairs of footfalls. “Put yer hands behind ye.”

Two shadows flanked Roland, long in the first light. Judging by the bulk of the one on his left, he guessed it was being thrown by Sheriff Avery. He probably wouldn’t be offering them any white tea this day. Lengyll would belong to the other shadow.

“Hurry up, Dearborn, or whatever yer name may be. Get em behind ye. Small of yer back. There’s guns pointed at your pards,

and if we end up taking in only two of yer instead of three, life'll go on."

Not taking any chances with us, Roland thought, and felt a moment of perverse pride. With it came a taste of something that was almost amusement. Bitter, though; that taste continued very bitter.

"Roland!" It was Cuthbert, and there was agony in his voice. "Roland, don't!"

But there was no choice. Roland put his hands behind his back. Rusher uttered a small, reproving whinny—as if to say all this was *highly* improper—and trotted away to stand beside the bunkhouse porch.

"You're going to feel metal on your wrists," Lengyll said.

"Esposas."

Two cold circles slipped over Roland's hands. There was a click and suddenly the arcs of the handcuffs were tight against his wrists.

"All right," said another voice. "Now you, son."

"Be damned if I will!" Cuthbert's voice wavered on the edge of hysteria.

There was a thud and a muffled cry of pain. Roland turned around and saw Alain down on one knee, the heel of his left hand pressed against his forehead. Blood ran down his face.

"Ye want me to deal him another 'un?" Jake White asked. He had an old pistol in his hand, reversed so the butt was forward. "I can, you know; my arm is feeling wery limber for this early in the day."

"No!" Cuthbert was twitching with horror and something like grief. Ranged behind him were three armed men, looking on with nervous avidity.

“Then be a good boy an’ get yer hands behind yer.”

Cuthbert, still fighting tears, did as he was told. *Esposas* were put on him by Deputy Bridger. The other two men yanked Alain to his feet. He reeled a little, then stood firm as he was handcuffed. His eyes met Roland’s, and Al tried to smile. In some ways it was the worst moment of that terrible ambush morning. Roland nodded back and made himself a promise: he would never be taken like this again, not if he lived to be a thousand years old.

Lengyll was wearing a trailscarf instead of a string tie this morning, but Roland thought he was inside the same box-tail coat he’d worn to the Mayor’s welcoming party, all those weeks ago. Standing beside him, puffing with excitement, anxiety, and self-importance, was Sheriff Avery.

“Boys,” the Sheriff said, “ye’re arrested for transgressing the Barony. The specific charges are treason and murder.”

“Who did we murder?” Alain asked mildly, and one of the posse uttered a laugh either shocked or cynical, Roland couldn’t tell which.

“The Mayor and his Chancellor, as ye know quite well,” Avery said. “Now—”

“How can you do this?” Roland asked curiously. It was Lengyll to whom he spoke. “Mejis is your home place; I’ve seen the line of your fathers in the town cemetery. How can you do this to your home place, sai Lengyll?”

“I’ve no intention of standing out here and making palaver with ye,” Lengyll said. He glanced over Roland’s shoulder. “Alvarez! Get his horse! Boys as trig as this bunch should have no problem riding with their hands behind their—”

“No, tell me,” Roland interposed. “Don’t hold back, sai Lengyll—these are your friends you’ve come with, and not a one who isn’t

inside your circle. How can you do it? Would you rape your own mother if you came upon her sleeping with her dress up?”

Lengyll’s mouth twitched—not with shame or embarrassment but momentary prudish distaste, and then the old rancher looked at Avery. “They teach em to talk pretty in Gilead, don’t they?”

Avery had a rifle. Now he stepped toward the handcuffed gunslinger with the butt raised. “I’ll teach ’im how to talk proper to a man of the gentry, so I will! Knock the teef straight out of his head, if you say aye, Fran!”

Lengyll held him back, looking tired. “Don’t be a fool. I don’t want to bring him back laying over a saddle unless he’s dead.”

Avery lowered his gun. Lengyll turned to Roland.

“Ye’re not going to live long enough to profit from advice, Dearborn,” he said, “but I’ll give’ee some, anyway: stick with the winners in this world. And know how the wind blows, so ye can tell when it changes direction.”

“You’ve forgotten the face of your father, you scurrying little maggot,” Cuthbert said clearly.

This got to Lengyll in a way Roland’s remark about his mother had not—it showed in the sudden bloom of color in his weathered cheeks.

“Get em mounted!” he said. “I want em locked up tight within the hour!”

5

Roland was boosted into Rusher’s saddle so hard he almost flew off on the other side—would have, if Dave Hollis had not been there to steady him and then to wedge Roland’s boot into the stirrup. Dave offered the gunslinger a nervous, half-embarrassed smile.

“I’m sorry to see you here,” Roland said gravely.

“It’s sorry I am to be here,” the deputy said. “If murder was your business, I wish you’d gotten to it sooner. And your friend shouldn’t have been so arrogant as to leave his calling-card.” He nodded toward Cuthbert.

Roland hadn’t the slightest idea what Deputy Dave was referring to, but it didn’t matter. It was just part of the frame, and none of these men believed much of it, Dave likely included. Although, Roland supposed, they would come to believe it in later years and tell it to their children and grandchildren as gospel. The glorious day they’d ridden with the posse and taken down the traitors.

The gunslinger used his knees to turn Rusher . . . and there, standing by the gate between the Bar K’s dooryard and the lane leading to the Great Road, was Jonas himself. He sat astride a deep-chested bay, wearing a green felt drover’s hat and an old gray duster. There was a rifle in the scabbard beside his right knee. The left side of the duster was pulled back to expose the butt of his revolver. Jonas’s white hair, untied today, lay over his shoulders.

He doffed his hat and held it out to Roland in courtly greeting. “A good game,” he said. “You played very well for someone who was taking his milk out of a tit not so long ago.”

“Old man,” Roland said, “you’ve lived too long.”

Jonas smiled. “You’d remedy that if you could, wouldn’t you? Yar, I reckon.” He flicked his eyes at Lengyll. “Get their toys, Fran. Look specially sharp for knives. They’ve got guns, but not with em. Yet I know a bit more about those shooting irons than they might think. And funny boy’s slingshot. Don’t forget that, for gods’ sake. He like to take Roy’s head off with it not so long ago.”

“Are you talking about the carrot-top?” Cuthbert asked. His horse was dancing under him; Bert swayed back and forth and from side to

side like a circus rider to keep from tumbling off. “He never would have missed his head. His balls, maybe, but not his head.”

“Probably true,” Jonas agreed, watching as the spears and Roland’s shortbow were taken into custody. The slingshot was on the back of Cuthbert’s belt, tucked into a holster he had made for it himself. It was very well for Roy Depape that he hadn’t tried Bert, Roland knew—Bert could take a bird on the wing at sixty yards. A pouch holding steel shot hung at the boy’s left side. Bridger took it, as well.

While this was going on, Jonas fixed Roland with an amiable smile. “What’s your real name, brat? Fess up—no harm in telling now; you’re going to ride the handsome, and we both know it.”

Roland said nothing. Lengyll looked at Jonas, eyebrows raised. Jonas shrugged, then jerked his head in the direction of town. Lengyll nodded and poked Roland with one hard, chapped finger. “Come on, boy. Let’s ride.”

Roland squeezed Rusher’s sides; the horse trotted toward Jonas. And suddenly Roland knew something. As with all his best and truest intuitions, it came from nowhere and everywhere—absent at one second, all there and fully dressed at the next.

“Who sent you west, maggot?” he asked as he passed Jonas. “Couldn’t have been Cort—you’re too old. Was it his father?”

The look of slightly bored amusement left Jonas’s face—*flew* from his face, as if slapped away. For one amazing moment the man with the white hair was a child again: shocked, shamed, and hurt.

“Yes, Cort’s da—I see it in your eyes. And now you’re here, on the Clean Sea . . . except you’re really in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west.”

Jonas’s gun was out and cocked in his hand with such speed that only Roland’s extraordinary eyes were capable of marking the

movement. There was a murmur from the men behind them—partly shock, mostly awe.

“Jonas, don’t be a fool!” Lengyll snarled. “You ain’t killin em after we took the time and risk to hood em and tie their hooks, are ye?”

Jonas seemed to take no notice. His eyes were wide; the corners of his seamed mouth were trembling. “Watch your words, Will Dearborn,” he said in a low, hoarse voice. “You want to watch em ever so close. I got two pounds of pressure on a three-pound trigger right this second.”

“Fine, shoot me,” Roland said. He lifted his head and looked down at Jonas. “Shoot, exile. Shoot, worm. Shoot, you failure. You’ll still live in exile and die as you lived.”

For a moment he was sure Jonas *would* shoot, and in that moment Roland felt death would be enough, an acceptable end after the shame of being caught so easily. In that moment Susan was absent from his mind. Nothing breathed in that moment, nothing called, nothing moved. The shadows of the men watching this confrontation, both on foot and on horseback, were printed depthless on the dirt.

Then Jonas dropped the hammer of his gun and slipped it back into its holster.

“Take em to town and jug em,” he said to Lengyll. “And when I show up, I don’t want to see one hair harmed on one head. If I could keep from killing this one, you can keep from hurting the rest. Now go on.”

“Move,” Lengyll said. His voice had lost some of its bluff authority. It was now the voice of a man who realizes (too late) that he has bought chips in a game where the stakes are likely much too high.

They rode. As they did, Roland turned one last time. The contempt Jonas saw in those cool young eyes stung him worse than the whips

that had scarred his back in Garlan years ago.

6

When they were out of sight, Jonas went into the bunkhouse, pulled up the board which concealed their little armory, and found only two guns. The matched set of six-shooters with the dark handles—Dearborn's guns, surely—were gone.

You're in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west. You'll live in exile and die as you lived.

Jonas's hands went to work, disassembling the revolvers Cuthbert and Alain had brought west. Alain's had never even been worn, save on the practice-range. Outside, Jonas threw the pieces, scattering them every whichway. He threw as hard as he could, trying to rid himself of that cool blue gaze and the shock of hearing what he'd believed no man had known. Roy and Clay suspected, but even they hadn't known for sure.

Before the sun went down, everyone in Mejis would know that Eldred Jonas, the white-haired regulator with the tattooed coffin on his hand, was nothing but a failed gunslinger.

You'll live in exile and die as you lived.

"P'raps," he said, looking at the burned-out ranch house without really seeing it. "But I'll live longer than you, young Dearborn, and die long after your bones are rusting in the ground."

He mounted up and swung his horse around, sawing viciously at the reins. He rode for Citgo, where Roy and Clay would be waiting, and he rode hard, but Roland's eyes rode with him.

7

"Wake up! Wake up, sai! Wake up! Wake up!"

At first the words seemed to be coming from far away, drifting down by some magical means to the dark place where she lay. Even when the voice was joined by a rudely shaking hand and Susan knew she *must* wake up, it was a long, hard struggle.

It had been weeks since she'd gotten a decent night's sleep, and she had expected more of the same last night . . . *especially* last night. She had lain awake in her luxurious bedchamber at Seafront, tossing from side to side, possibilities—none good—crowding her mind. The nightgown she wore crept up to her hips and bunched at the small of her back. When she got up to use the commode, she took the hateful thing off, hurled it into a corner, and crawled back into bed naked.

Being out of the heavy silk nightgown had done the trick. She dropped off almost at once . . . and in this case, *dropped off* was exactly right: it was less like falling asleep than falling into some thoughtless, dreamless crack in the earth.

Now this intruding voice. This intruding arm, shaking her so hard that her head rolled from side to side on the pillow. Susan tried to slide away from it, pulling her knees up to her chest and mouthing fuzzy protests, but the arm followed. The shaking recommenced; the nagging, calling voice never stopped.

“Wake up, sai! Wake up! In the name of the Turtle and the Bear, wake up!”

Maria's voice. Susan hadn't recognized it at first because Maria was so upset. Susan had never heard her so, or expected to. Yet it *was* so; the maid sounded on the verge of hysteria.

Susan sat up. For a moment so much input—all of it wrong—crashed in on her that she was incapable of moving. The duvet beneath which she had slept tumbled into her lap, exposing her breasts, and she could do no more than pluck weakly at it with the tips of her fingers.

The first wrong thing was the light. It flooded through the windows more strongly than it ever had before . . . because, she realized, she had never been in this room so late before. Gods, it had to be ten o' the clock, perhaps later.

The second wrong thing was the sounds from below. Mayor's House was ordinarily a peaceful place in the morning; until noon one heard little but *casa vaqueros* leading the horses out for their morning exercise, the whicker-whicker-whick of Miguel sweeping the courtyard, and the constant boom and shush of the waves. This morning there were shouts, curses, galloping horses, the occasional burst of strange, jagged laughter. Somewhere outside her room—perhaps not in this wing, but close—Susan heard the running thud of booted feet.

The wrongest thing of all was Maria herself, cheeks ashy beneath her olive skin-tone, and her usually neat hair tangled and unbound. Susan would have guessed only an earthquake could make her look so, if that.

“Maria, what is it?”

“You have to go, sai. Seafront maybe not safe for you just now. Your own house maybe better. When I don't see you earlier, I think you gone there already. You chose a bad day to sleep late.”

“Go?” Susan asked. Slowly, she pulled the duvet all the way up to her nose and stared at Maria over it with wide, puffy eyes. “What do you mean, go?”

“Out the back.” Maria plucked the duvet from Susan's sleep-numbed hands again and this time stripped it all the way down to her ankles. “Like you did before. Now, missy, now! Dress and go! Those boys put away, aye, but what if they have friends? What if they come back, kill you, too?”

Susan had been getting up. Now all the strength ran out of her legs and she sat back down on the bed again. “Boys?” she

whispered. “Boys kill who? *Boys kill who?*”

This was a good distance from grammatical, but Maria took her meaning.

“Dearborn and his pinboys,” she said.

“Who are they supposed to have killed?”

“The Mayor and the Chancellor.” She looked at Susan with a kind of distracted sympathy. “Now get up, I tell you. And get gone. This place gone *loco*.”

“They didn’t do any such thing,” Susan said, and only just restrained herself from adding, *It wasn’t in the plan*.

“Sai Thorin and sai Rimer jus’ as dead, whoever did it.” There were more shouts below, and a sharp little explosion that didn’t sound like a firecracker. Maria looked in that direction, then began to throw Susan her clothes. “The Mayor’s eyes, they gouged right out of his head.”

“They couldn’t have! Maria, I know them—”

“Me, I don’t know nothing about them and care less—but I care about you. Get dressed and get out, I tell you. Quick as you can.”

“What’s happened to them?” A terrible thought came to Susan and she leaped to her feet, clothes falling all around her. She seized Maria by the shoulders. “They haven’t been killed?” Susan shook her. “Say they haven’t been killed!”

“I don’t think so. There’s been a t’ousan’ shouts and ten t’ousan’ rumors go the rounds, but I think jus’ jailed. Only . . .”

There was no need for her to finish; her eyes slipped from Susan’s, and that involuntary shift (along with the confused shouts from below) told all the rest. Not killed yet, but Hart Thorin had been

greatly liked, and from an old family. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain were strangers.

Not killed yet . . . but tomorrow was Reaping, and tomorrow night was Reaping Bonfire.

Susan began to dress as fast as she could.

8

Reynolds, who had been with Jonas longer than Depape, took one look at the figure cantering toward them through the skeletal oil derricks, and turned to his partner. “Don’t ask him any questions—he’s not in any mood for silly questions this morning.”

“How do you know?”

“Never mind. Just keep your ever-fucking gob shut.”

Jonas reined up before them. He sat slumped in his saddle, pale and thoughtful. His look prompted one question from Roy Depape in spite of Reynolds’s caution. “Eldred, are you all right?”

“Is anyone?” Jonas responded, then fell silent again. Behind them, Citgo’s few remaining pumpers squalled tiredly.

At last Jonas roused himself and sat a little straighter in the saddle. “The cubs’ll be stored supplies by now. I told Lengyll and Avery to fire a double set of pistol-shots if anything went wrong, and there hasn’t been any shooting like that.”

“We didn’t hear none, either, Eldred,” Depape said eagerly. “Nothing atall like that.”

Jonas grimaced. “You wouldn’t, would you? Not out in this noise. Fool!”

Depape bit his lip, saw something in the neighborhood of his left stirrup that needed adjusting, and bent to it.

“Were you boys seen at your business?” Jonas asked. “This morning, I mean, when you sent Rimer and Thorin off. Even a chance either of you was seen?”

Reynolds shook his head for both of them. “ ’Twas clean as could be.”

Jonas nodded as if the subject had been of only passing interest to him, then turned to regard the oilpatch and the rusty derricks. “Mayhap folks are right,” he said in a voice almost too low to hear. “Mayhap the Old People *were* devils.” He turned back to them. “Well, we’re the devils now. Ain’t we, Clay?”

“Whatever you think, Eldred,” Reynolds said.

“I said what I think. *We’re* the devils now, and by God, that’s how we’ll behave. What about Quint and that lot down there?” He cocked his head toward the forested slope where the ambush had been laid.

“Still there, pending your word,” Reynolds said.

“No need of em now.” He favored Reynolds with a dark look. “That Dearborn’s a coozey brat. I wish I was going to be in Hambry tomorrow night just so I could lay a torch between his feet. I almost left him cold and dead at the Bar K. Would’ve if not for Lengyll. Coozey little brat is what he is.”

Slumping as he spoke. Face growing blacker and blacker, like stormclouds drifting across the sun. Depape, his stirrup fixed, tossed Reynolds a nervous glance. Reynolds didn’t answer it. What point? If Eldred went crazy now (and Reynolds had seen it happen before), there was no way they could get out of his killing-zone in time.

“Eldred, we got quite a spot more to do.”

Reynolds spoke quietly, but it got through. Jonas straightened. He took off his hat, hung it on his saddle as if the horn were a coathook, and brushed absently through his hair with his fingers.

“Yar—quite a spot is right. Ride down there. Tell Quint to send for oxen to pull those last two full tankers out to Hanging Rock. He sh’d keep four men with him to hook em up and take em on to Latigo. The rest can go on ahead.”

Reynolds now judged it safe to ask a question. “When do the rest of Latigo’s men get there?”

“Men?” Jonas snorted. “Don’t we wish, cully! The rest of Latigo’s *boys’ll* ride out to Hanging Rock by moonlight, pennons no doubt flying for all the coyotes and other assorted desert-dogs to see and be awed by. They’ll be ready to do escort duty by ten tomorrow, I sh’d think . . . although if they’re the sort of lads I’m expecting, fuck-ups are apt to be the rule of the day. The good news is that we don’t much need em, anyway. Things look well in hand. Now go down there, get them about their business, and then ride back to me, just as fast’s you can.”

Jonas turned and looked toward the lumpy swell of hills to the northwest.

“We have business of our own,” he said. “Soonest begun, boys, soonest done. I want to shake the dust of fucking Mejis off my hat and boots as soon as I can. I don’t like the way it feels anymore. Not at all.”

9

The woman, Theresa Maria Dolores O’Shyven, was forty years old, plump, pretty, mother of four, husband of Peter, a *vaquero* of laughing temperament. She was also a seller of rugs and draperies in the Upper Market; many of the prettier and more delicate appointments at Seafront had passed through Theresa O’Shyven’s hands, and her family was quite well-to-do. Although her husband was a range-rider, the O’Shyven clan was what would have been called middle-class in another place and time. Her two oldest children were grown and gone, one right out o’ Barony. The third eldest was sparking and hoping to marry his heart’s delight at Year’s

End. Only the youngest suspected something was wrong with Ma, and this one had no idea how close Theresa was to complete obsessional madness.

Soon, Rhea thought, watching Theresa avidly in the ball. She'll start doing it soon, but first she's got to get rid of the brat.

There was no school at Reaptide, and the stalls opened only for a few hours in the afternoon, so Theresa sent her youngest daughter off with a pie. A Reaptide gift to a neighbor, Rhea surmised, although she couldn't hear the soundless instructions the woman gave her daughter as she pulled a knitted cap down over the girl's ears. And 'twouldn't be a neighbor too close, either; she'd want time, would Theresa Maria Dolores O'Shyven, time to be a-choring. It was a good-sized house, and there were a lot of corners in it that needed cleaning.

Rhea chuckled; the chuckle turned into a hollow gust of coughing. In the corner, Musty looked at the old woman hauntedly. Although far from the emaciated skeleton that his mistress had become, Musty didn't look good at all.

The girl was shown out with the pie under her arm; she paused to give her mother a single troubled look, and then the door was shut in her face.

"Now!" Rhea croaked. "Them corners is waitin! Down on yer knees, woman, and get to business!"

First Theresa went to the window. When she was satisfied with what she saw—her daughter out the gate and down the High Street, likely—she turned back to her kitchen. She walked to the table and stood there, looking dreamy-eyed into space.

"No, none o' that, now!" Rhea cried impatiently. She no longer saw her own filthy hut, she no longer smelled either its rank aromas or her own. She had gone into the Wizard's Rainbow. She was with

Theresa O'Shyven, whose cottage had the cleanest corners in all Mejis. Mayhap in all Mid-World.

"Hurry, woman!" Rhea half-screamed. "Get to yer housework!"

As if hearing, Theresa unbuttoned her housedress, stepped out of it, and laid it neatly over a chair. She pulled the hem of her clean, mended shift up over her knees, went to the corner, and got down on all fours.

"That's it, my *corazón!*" Rhea cried, nearly choking on a phlegmy mixture of coughing and laughter. "Do yer chores, now, and do em wery pert!"

Theresa O'Shyven poked her head forward to the full length of her neck, opened her mouth, stuck out her tongue, and began to lick the corner. She lapped it as Musty lapped his milk. Rhea watched this, slapping her knee and whooping, her face growing redder and redder as she rocked from side to side. Oh, Theresa was her favorite, aye! No doubt! For hours now she would crawl about on her hands and knees with her ass in the air, licking into the corners, praying to some obscure god—not even the Man-Jesus God—for forgiveness of who knew what as she did this, her penance. Sometimes she got splinters in her tongue and had to pause to spit blood into the kitchen basin. Up until now some sixth sense had always gotten her to her feet and back into her dress before any of her family returned, but Rhea knew that sooner or later the woman's obsession would take her too far, and she would be surprised. Perhaps today would be the day—the little girl would come back early, perhaps for a coin to spend in town, and discover her mother down on her knees and licking the corners. Oh, what a spin and raree! How Rhea wanted to see it! How she longed to—

Suddenly Theresa O'Shyven was gone. The interior of her neat little cottage was gone. *Everything* was gone, lost in curtains of shifting pink light. For the first time in weeks, the wizard's glass had gone blank.

Rhea picked the ball up in her scrawny, long-nailed fingers and shook it. “What’s wrong with you, plaguey thing? *What’s wrong?*”

The ball was heavy, and Rhea’s strength was fading. After two or three hard shakes, it slipped in her grip. She cradled it against the deflated remains of her breasts, trembling.

“No, no, lovey,” she crooned. “Come back when ye’re ready, aye, Rhea lost her temper a bit but she’s got it back now, she never meant to shake ye and she’d never *ever* drop ye, so ye just—”

She broke off and cocked her head, listening. Horses approaching. No, not approaching; *here*. Three riders, by the sound. They had crept up on her while she was distracted.

The boys? Those plaguey boys?

Rhea held the ball against her bosom, eyes wide, lips wet. Her hands were now so thin that the ball’s pink glow shone through them, faintly illuminating the dark spokes that were her bones.

“Rhea! Rhea of the Cöos!”

No, not the boys.

“Come out here, and bring what you were given!”

Worse.

“Farson wants his property! We’ve come to take it!”

Not the boys but the Big Coffin Hunters.

“Never, ye dirty old white-haired prick,” she whispered. “Ye’ll never take it.” Her eyes moved from side to side in small, shooting peeks. Scraggle-headed and tremble-mouthed, she looked like a diseased coyote driven into its final arroyo.

She looked down at the ball and a whining noise began to escape her. Now even the pink glow was gone. The sphere was as dark as a corpse's eyeball.

10

A shriek came from the hut.

Depape turned to Jonas with wide eyes, his skin prickling. The thing which had uttered that cry hardly sounded human.

"Rhea!" Jonas called again. "Bring it out here now, woman, and hand it over! I've no time to play games with you!"

The door of the hut swung open. Depape and Reynolds drew their guns as the old crone stepped out, blinking against the sunlight like something that's spent its whole life in a cave. She was holding John Farson's favorite toy high over her head. There were plenty of rocks in the dooryard she could throw it against, and even if her aim was bad and she missed them all, it might smash anyway.

This could be bad, and Jonas knew it—there were some people you just couldn't threaten. He had focused so much of his attention on the brats (who, ironically, had been taken as easy as milk) that it had never occurred to him to worry much about this part of it. And Kimba Rimer, the man who had suggested Rhea as the perfect custodian for Maerlyn's Rainbow, was dead. Couldn't lay it at Rimer's doorstep if things went wrong up here, could he?

Then, just to make things a little worse when he'd have thought they'd gone as far west as they could without dropping off the cold end of the earth, he heard the cocking sound of Depape drawing the hammer of his gun.

"Put that away, you idiot!" he snarled.

"But look at her!" Depape almost moaned. "*Look* at her, Eldred!"

He was. The thing inside the black dress appeared to be wearing the corpse of a putrefying snake around its throat for a necklace. She was so scrawny that she resembled nothing so much as a walking skeleton. Her peeling skull was only tufted with hair; the rest had fallen out. Sores clustered on her cheeks and brow, and there was a mark like a spider-bite on the left side of her mouth. Jonas thought that last might be a scurvy-bloom, but he didn't really care one way or another. What he cared about was the ball upraised in the dying woman's long and shivering claws.

11

The sunlight so dazzled Rhea's eyes that she didn't see the gun pointed at her, and when her vision cleared, Depape had put it away again. She looked at the men lined up across from her—the bespectacled redhead, the one in the cloak, and Old White-Hair Jonas—and uttered a dusty croak of laughter. Had she been afraid of them, these mighty Coffin Hunters? She supposed she had, but for gods' sake, why? They were men, that was all, just more men, and she had been beating such all her life. Oh, they thought they ruled the roost, all right—nobody in Mid-World accused anyone of forgetting the face of his *mother*—but they were poor things, at bottom, moved to tears by a sad song, utterly undone by the sight of a bare breast, and all the more capable of being manipulated simply because they were so sure they were strong and tough and wise.

The glass was dark, and as much as she hated that darkness, it had cleared her mind.

“Jonas!” she cried. “Eldred Jonas!”

“I'm here, old mother,” he said. “Long days and pleasant nights.”

“Never mind yer sops, time's too short for em.” She came four steps farther and stopped with the ball still held over her head. Near her, a gray chunk of stone jutted from the weedy ground. She looked at it, then back at Jonas. The implication was unspoken but unmistakable.

“What do you want?” Jonas asked.

“The ball’s gone dark,” she said, answering from the side. “All the time I had it in my keeping, it was lively—aye, even when it showed nothing I could make out, it was passing lively, bright and pink—but it fell dark almost at the sound of yer voice. It doesn’t want to go with ye.”

“Nevertheless, I’m under orders to take it.” Jonas’s voice became soft and conciliating. It wasn’t the tone he used when he was in bed with Coral, but it was close. “Think a minute, and you’ll see my situation. Farson wants it, and who am I to stand against the wants of a man who’ll be the most powerful in Mid-World when Demon Moon rises next year? If I come back without it and say Rhea of the Cöos refused me it, I’ll be killed.”

“If ye come back and tell him I broke it in yer ugly old face, ye’ll be killed, too,” Rhea said. She was close enough for Jonas to see how far her sickness had eaten into her. Above the few remaining tufts of her hair, the wretched ball was trembling back and forth. She wouldn’t be able to hold it much longer. A minute at most. Jonas felt a dew of sweat spring out on his forehead.

“Aye, mother. But d’you know, given a choice of deaths, I’d choose to take the cause of my problem with me. That’s you, darling.”

She croaked again—that dusty replica of laughter—and nodded appreciatively. “ ’Twon’t do Farson any good without me in any case,” she said. “It’s found its mistress, I wot—that’s why it went dark at the sound of yer voice.”

Jonas wondered how many others had believed the ball was just for them. He wanted to wipe the sweat from his brow before it ran in his eyes, but kept his hands in front of him, folded neatly on the horn of his saddle. He didn’t dare look at either Reynolds or Depape, and could only hope they would leave the play to him. She was balanced on both a physical and mental knife-edge; the smallest movement would send her tumbling off in one direction or the other.

“Found the one it wants, has it?” He thought he saw a way out of this. If he was lucky. And it might be lucky for her, as well. “What should we do about that?”

“Take me with ye.” Her face twisted into an expression of gruesome greed; she looked like a corpse that is trying to sneeze. *She doesn't realize she's dying*, Jonas thought. *Thank the gods for that.* “Take the ball, but take me, as well. I'll go with ye to Farson. I'll become his soothsayer, and nothing will stand before us, not with me to read the ball for him. Take me with ye!”

“All right,” Jonas said. It was what he had hoped for. “Although what Farson decides is none o' mine. You know that?”

“Aye.”

“Good. Now give me the ball. I'll give it back into your keeping, if you like, but I need to make sure it's whole.”

She slowly lowered it. Jonas didn't think it was entirely safe even cradled in her arms, but he breathed a little easier when it was, all the same. She shuffled toward him, and he had to control an urge to gig his horse back from her.

He bent over in the saddle, holding his hands out for the glass. She looked up at him, her old eyes still shrewd behind their crusted lids. One of them actually drew down in a conspirator's wink. “I know yer mind, Jonas. Ye think, ‘I'll take the ball, then draw my gun and kill her, what harm?’ Isn't that true? Yet there *would* be harm, and all to you and yours. Kill me and the ball will never shine for Farson again. For someone, aye, someday, mayhap; but not for him . . . and will he let ye live if ye bring his toy back and he discovers it's broken?”

Jonas had already considered this. “We have a bargain, old mother. You go west with the glass . . . unless you die beside the trail some night. You'll pardon me for saying so, but you don't look well.”

She cackled. “I’m better’n I look, oh yar! Years left ’fore this clock o’ mine runs down!”

I think you may be wrong about that, old mother, Jonas thought. But he kept his peace and only held his hands out for the ball.

For a moment longer she held it. Their arrangement was made and agreed to on both sides, but in the end she could barely bring herself to ungrasp the ball. Greed shone in her eyes like moonlight through fog.

He held his hands out patiently, saying nothing, waiting for her mind to accept reality—if she let go, there was some chance. If she held on, very likely everyone in this stony, weedy yard would end up riding the handsome before long.

With a sigh of regret, she finally put the ball in his hands. At the instant it passed from her to him, an ember of pink light pulsed deep in the depths of the glass. A throb of pain drove into Jonas’s head . . . and a shiver of lust coiled in his balls.

As from a great distance, he heard Depape and Reynolds cocking their pistols.

“Put those away,” Jonas said.

“But—” Reynolds looked confused.

“They thought’ee was going to double-cross Rhea,” the old woman said, cackling. “Good thing ye’re in charge rather than them, Jonas . . . mayhap you know summat they don’t.”

He knew something, all right—how dangerous the smooth, glassy thing in his hands was. It could take him in a blink, if it wanted. And in a month, he would be like the witch: scrawny, raddled with sores, and too obsessed to know or care.

“Put them away!” he shouted.

Reynolds and Depape exchanged a glance, then reholstered their guns.

“There was a bag for this thing,” Jonas said. “A drawstring bag laid inside the box. Get it.”

“Aye,” Rhea said, grinning unpleasantly at him. “But it won’t keep the ball from takin’ ye if it wants to. Ye needn’t think it will.” She surveyed the other two, and her eye fixed on Reynolds. “There’s a cart in my shed, and a pair of good gray goats to pull it.” She spoke to Reynolds, but her eyes kept turning back to the ball, Jonas noticed . . . and now *his* damned eyes wanted to go there, too.

“You don’t give me orders,” Reynolds said.

“No, but *I* do,” Jonas said. His eyes dropped to the ball, both wanting and fearing to see that pink spark of life deep inside. Nothing. Cold and dark. He dragged his gaze back up to Reynolds again. “Get the cart.”

12

Reynolds heard the buzzing of flies even before he slipped through the shed’s sagging door, and knew at once that Rhea’s goats had finished their days of pulling. They lay bloated and dead in their pen, legs sticking up and the sockets of their eyes squirming with maggots. It was impossible to know when Rhea had last fed and watered them, but Reynolds guessed at least a week, from the smell.

Too busy watching what goes on in that glass ball to bother, he thought. And what’s she wearing that dead snake around her neck for?

“I don’t want to know,” he muttered from behind his pulled-up neckerchief. The only thing he *did* want right now was to get the hell out of here.

He spied the cart, which was painted black and overlaid with cabalistic designs in gold. It looked like a medicine-show wagon to Reynolds; it also looked a bit like a hearse. He seized it by the handles and dragged it out of the shed as fast as he could. Depape could do the rest, by gods. Hitch his horse to the cart and haul the old woman's stinking freight to . . . where? Who knew? Eldred, maybe.

Rhea came tottering out of her hut with the drawstring bag they'd brought the ball in, but she stopped, head cocked, listening, when Reynolds asked his question.

Jonas thought it over, then said: "Seafront to begin, I guess. Yar, that'll do for her, and this glass bauble as well, I reckon, until the party's over tomorrow."

"Aye, Seafront, I've never been there," Rhea said, moving forward again. When she reached Jonas's horse (which tried to shy away from her), she opened the bag. After a moment's further consideration, Jonas dropped the ball in. It bulged round at the bottom, making a shape like a teardrop.

Rhea wore a sly smile. "Mayhap we'll meet Thorin. If so, I might have something to show him in the Good Man's toy that'd interest him ever so much."

"If you meet him," Jonas said, getting down to help hitch Depape's horse to the black cart, "it'll be in a place where no magic is needed to see far."

She looked at him, frowning, and then the sly smile slowly resurfaced. "Why, I b'lieve our Mayor's met wiv a accident!"

"Could be," Jonas agreed.

She giggled, and soon the giggle turned into a full-throated cackle. She was still cackling as they drew out of the yard, cackling and

sitting in the little black cart with its cabalistic decorations like the Queen of Black Places on her throne.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ASHES

1

Panic is highly contagious, especially in situations when nothing is known and everything is in flux. It was the sight of Miguel, the old *mozo*, that started Susan down its greased slope. He was in the middle of Seafront's courtyard, clutching his broom of twigs against his chest and looking at the riders who passed to and fro with an expression of perplexed misery. His *sombrero* was twisted around on his back, and Susan observed with something like horror that Miguel—usually brushed and clean and neat as a pin—was wearing his *serape* inside out. There were tears on his cheeks, and as he turned this way and that, following the passing riders, trying to hile those he recognized, she thought of a child she had once seen toddle out in front of an oncoming stage. The child had been pulled back in time by his father; who would pull Miguel back?

She started for him, and a *vaquero* aboard a wild-eyed spotted roan galloped so close by her that one stirrup ticked off her hip and the horse's tail flicked her forearm. She voiced a strange-sounding little chuckle. She had been worried about Miguel and had almost been run down herself! Funny!

She looked both ways this time, started forward, then drew back again as a loaded wagon came careering around the corner, tottering on two wheels at first. What it was loaded with she couldn't see—the goods in the wagonbed were covered with a tarp—but she saw Miguel move toward it, still clutching his broom. Susan thought of the child in front of the stage again and shrieked an inarticulate cry of alarm. Miguel cringed back at the last moment and the cart flew by

him, bounded and swayed across the courtyard, and disappeared out through the arch.

Miguel dropped his broom, clapped both hands to his cheeks, fell to his knees, and began to pray in a loud, lamenting voice. Susan watched him for a moment, her mouth working, and then sprinted for the stables, no longer taking care to keep against the side of the building. She had caught the disease that would grip almost all of Hambry by noon, and although she managed to do a fairly apt job of saddling Pylon (on any other day there would have been three stable-boys vying for the chance to help the pretty sai), any ability to think had left her by the time she heel-kicked the startled horse into a run outside the stable door.

When she rode past Miguel, still on his knees and praying to the bright sky with his hands upraised, she saw him no more than any other rider had before her.

2

She rode straight down the High Street, thumping her spurless heels at Pylon's sides until the big horse was fairly flying. Thoughts, questions, possible plans of action . . . none of those had a place in her head as she rode. She was but vaguely aware of the people milling in the street, allowing Pylon to weave his own path through them. The only thing she was aware of was his name—*Roland, Roland, Roland!*—ringing in her head like a scream. Everything had gone upside down. The brave little *ka-tet* they had made that night at the graveyard was broken, three of its members jailed and with not long to live (if they even *were* still alive), the last member lost and confused, as crazy with terror as a bird in a barn.

If her panic had held, things might have turned out in a much different fashion. But as she rode through the center of town and out the other side, her way took her toward the house she had shared with her father and her aunt. That lady had been watching for the very rider who now approached.

As Susan neared, the door flew open and Cordelia, dressed in black from throat to toe, rushed down the front walk to the street, shrieking with either horror or laughter. Perhaps both. The sight of her cut through the foreground haze of panic in Susan's mind . . . but not because she recognized her aunt.

"*Rhea!*" she cried, and drew back on the reins so violently that the horse skidded, reared, and almost tilted them over backward. That would likely have crushed the life out of his mistress, but Pylon managed to keep at least his back feet, pawing at the sky with his front ones and whinnying loudly. Susan slung an arm around his neck and hung on for dear life.

Cordelia Delgado, wearing her best black dress and a lace mantilla over her hair, stood in front of the horse as if in her own parlor, taking no notice of the hooves cutting the air less than two feet in front of her nose. In one gloved hand she held a wooden box.

Susan belatedly realized that this wasn't Rhea, but the mistake really wasn't that odd. Aunt Cord wasn't as thin as Rhea (not yet, anyway), and more neatly dressed (except for her dirty gloves—why her aunt was wearing gloves in the first place Susan didn't know, let alone why they looked so smudged), but the mad look in her eyes was horribly similar.

"Good day t'ye, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty!" Aunt Cord greeted her in a cracked, vivacious voice that made Susan's heart tremble. Aunt Cord curtsyed one-handed, holding the little box curled against her chest with the other. "Where go ye on this fine autumn day? Where go ye so speedy? To no lover's arms, that seems sure, for one's dead and the other ta'en!"

Cordelia laughed again, thin lips drawing back from big white teeth. Horse teeth, almost. Her eyes glared in the sunlight.

Her mind's broken, Susan thought. Poor thing. Poor old thing.

“Did thee put Dearborn up to it?” Aunt Cord asked. She crept to Pylon’s side and looked up at Susan with luminous, liquid eyes. “Thee did, didn’t thee? Aye! Perhaps thee even gave him the knife he used, after runnin yer lips o’er it for good luck. Ye’re in it together—why not admit it? At least admit thee’s lain with that boy, for I know it’s true. I saw the way he looked at ye the day ye were sitting in the window, and the way ye looked back at him!”

Susan said, “If ye’ll have truth, I’ll give it to ye. We’re lovers. And we’ll be man and wife ere Year’s End.”

Cordelia raised one dirty glove to the blue sky and waved it as if saying hello to the gods. She screamed with mingled triumph and laughter as she waved. “And t’be *wed*, she thinks! Ooooo! Ye’d no doubt drink the blood of your victims on the marriage altar, too, would ye not? Oh, wicked! It makes me weep!” But instead of weeping she laughed again, a howl of mirth into the blind blue face of the sky.

“We planned no murders,” Susan said, drawing—if only in her own mind—a line of difference between the killings at Mayor’s House and the trap they had hoped to spring on Farson’s soldiers. “And he *did* no murders. No, this is the business of your friend Jonas, I wot. His plan, his filthy work.”

Cordelia plunged her hand into the box she held, and Susan understood at once why the gloves she wore were dirty: she had been grubbing in the stove.

“I curse thee with the ashes!” Cordelia cried, flinging a black and gritty cloud of them at Susan’s leg and the hand which held Pylon’s reins. *“I curse thee to darkness, both of thee! Be ye happy together, ye faithless! Ye murderers! Ye cozeners! Ye liars! Ye fornicators! Ye lost and renounced!”*

With each cry, Cordelia Delgado threw another handful of ashes. And with each cry, Susan’s mind grew clearer, colder. She held fast and allowed her aunt to pelt her; in fact, when Pylon, feeling the

gritty rain against his side, attempted to pull away, Susan giggled him set. There were spectators now, avidly watching this old ritual of renunciation (Sheemie was among them, eyes wide and mouth quivering), but Susan barely noticed. Her mind was her own again, she had an idea of what to do, and for that alone she supposed she owed her aunt some sort of thanks.

“I forgive ye, Aunt,” she said.

The box of stove-ashes, now almost empty, tumbled from Cordelia’s hands as if Susan had slapped her. “What?” she whispered. “What does thee say?”

“For what ye did to yer brother and my father,” Susan said. “For what ye were a part of.”

She rubbed a hand on her leg and bent with the hand held out before her. Before her aunt could pull away, Susan had wiped ashes down one of her cheeks. The smudge stood out there like a wide, dark scar. “But wear that, all the same,” she said. “Wash it off if ye like, but I think ye’ll wear it in yer heart yet awhile.” She paused. “I think ye already do. Goodbye.”

“Where does thee think thee’s going?” Aunt Cord was pawing at the soot-mark on her face with one gloved hand, and when she lunged forward in an attempt to grasp Pylon’s reins, she stumbled over the box and almost fell. It was Susan, still bent over to her aunt’s side, who grasped her shoulder and held her up. Cordelia pulled back as if from the touch of an adder. “Not to him! Ye’ll not go to him now, ye mad goose!”

Susan turned her horse away. “None of yer business, Aunt. This is the end between us. But mark what I say: we’ll be married by Year’s End. Our firstborn is already conceived.”

“Thee’ll be married tomorrow night if thee goes nigh him! Joined in smoke, wedded in fire, bedded in the ashes! *Bedded in the ashes*, do ye hear me?”

The madwoman advanced on her, railing, but Susan had no more time to listen. The day was fleeting. There would be time to do the things that needed doing, but only if she moved at speed.

“Goodbye,” she said again, and then galloped away. Her aunt’s last words followed her: *In the ashes, do ye hear me?*

3

On her way out of town along the Great Road, Susan saw riders coming toward her, and got off the highway. This would not, she felt, be a good time to meet pilgrims. There was an old granary nearby; she rode Pylon behind it, stroked his neck, murmured for him to be quiet.

It took the riders longer to reach her position than she would have expected, and when they finally got there, she saw why. Rhea was with them, sitting in a black cart covered with magical symbols. The witch had been scary when Susan had seen her on the night of the Kissing Moon, but still recognizably human; what the girl saw passing before her now, rocking from side to side in the black cart and clutching a bag in her lap, was an unsexed, sore-raddled creature that looked more like a troll than a human being. With her were the Big Coffin Hunters.

“To Seafront!” the thing in the cart screamed. “Hie you on, and at full speed! I’ll sleep in Thorin’s bed tonight or know the reason why! Sleep in it and piss in it, if I take a notion! Hie you on, I say!”

Depape—it was to his horse that the cart had been harnessed—turned around and looked at her with distaste and fear. “Still your mouth.”

Her answer was a fresh burst of laughter. She rocked from side to side, holding a bag on her lap with one hand and pointing at Depape with the twisted, long-nailed index finger of the other. Looking at her made Susan feel weak with terror, and she felt the panic around her

again, like some dark fluid that would happily drown her brain if given half a chance.

She worked against the feeling as best she could, holding onto her mind, refusing to let it turn into what it had been before and would be again if she let it—a brainless bird trapped in a barn, bashing into the walls and ignoring the open window through which it had entered.

Even when the cart was gone below the next hill and there was nothing left of them but dust hanging in the air, she could hear Rhea's wild cackling.

4

She reached the hut in the Bad Grass at one o' the clock. For a moment she just sat astride Pylon, looking at it. Had she and Roland been here hardly twenty-four hours ago? Making love and making plans? It was hard to believe, but when she dismounted and went in, the wicker basket in which she had brought them a cold meal confirmed it. It still sat upon the rickety table.

Looking at the hamper, she realized she hadn't eaten since the previous evening—a miserable supper with Hart Thorin that she'd only picked at, too aware of his eyes on her body. Well, they'd done their last crawl, hadn't they? And she'd never have to walk down another Seafront hallway wondering what door he was going to come bursting out of like Jack out of his box, all grabbing hands and stiff, randy prick.

Ashes, she thought. Ashes and ashes. But not us, Roland. I swear, my darling, not us.

She was frightened and tense, trying to put everything she now must do in order—a process to be followed just as there was a process to be followed when saddling a horse—but she was also sixteen and healthy. One look at the hamper and she was ravenous.

She opened it, saw there were ants on the two remaining cold beef sandwiches, brushed them off, and gobbled the sandwiches down. The bread had gotten rather stiff, but she hardly noticed. There was a half jar of sweet cider and part of a cake, as well.

When she had finished everything, she went to the north corner of the hut and moved the hides someone had begun to cure and then lost interest in. There was a hollow beneath. Within it, wrapped in soft leather, were Roland's guns.

If things go badly, thee must come here and take them west to Gilead. Find my father.

With faint but genuine curiosity, Susan wondered if Roland had really expected she would ride blithely off to Gilead with his unborn child in her belly while he and his friends were roasted, screaming and red-handed, on the Reap-Night bonfire.

She pulled one of the guns out of its holster. It took her a moment or two to see how to get the revolver open, but then the cylinder rolled out and she saw that each chamber was loaded. She snapped it back into place and checked the other one.

She concealed them in the blanket-roll behind her saddle, just as Roland had, then mounted up and headed east again. But not toward town. Not yet. She had one more stop to make first.

5

At around two o' the clock, word that Fran Lengyll would be speaking at the Town Gathering Hall began to sweep through the town of Mejis. No one could have said where this news (it was too firm and specific to be a rumor) began, and no one much cared; they simply passed it on.

By three o' the clock, the Gathering Hall was full, and two hundred or more stood outside, listening as Lengyll's brief address was relayed back to them in whispers. Coral Thorin, who had begun

passing the news of Lengyll's impending appearance at the Travellers' Rest, was not there. She knew what Lengyll was going to say; had, in fact, supported Jonas's argument that it should be as simple and direct as possible. There was no need for rabble-rousing; the townsfolk would be a mob by sundown of Reaping Day, a mob always picked its own leaders, and it always picked the right ones.

Lengyll spoke with his hat held in one hand and a silver reap-charm hanging from the front of his vest. He was brief, he was rough, and he was convincing. Most folks in the crowd had known him all their lives, and didn't doubt a word he said.

Hart Thorin and Kimba Rimer had been murdered by Dearborn, Heath, and Stockworth, Lengyll told the crowd of men in denim and women in faded gingham. The crime had come home to them because of a certain item—a bird's skull—left in Mayor Thorin's lap.

Murmurs greeted this. Many of Lengyll's listeners had seen the skull, either mounted on the horn of Cuthbert's saddle or worn jauntily around his neck. They had laughed at his prankishness. Now they thought of how he had laughed back at them, and realized he must have been laughing at a different joke all along. Their faces darkened.

The weapon used to slit the Chancellor's throat, Lengyll continued, had belonged to Dearborn. The three young men had been taken that morning as they prepared to flee Mejis. Their motivations were not entirely clear, but they were likely after horses. If so, they would be for John Farson, who was known to pay well for good nags, and in cash. They were, in other words, traitors to their own lands and to the cause of the Affiliation.

Lengyll had planted Brian Hookey's son Rufus three rows back. Now, exactly on time, Rufus Hookey shouted out: "Has they confessed?"

"Aye," Lengyll said. "Confessed both murders, and spoke it most proud, so they did."

A louder murmur at this, almost a rumble. It ran backward like a wave to the outside, where it went from mouth to mouth: most proud, most proud, they had murdered in the dark of night and spoke it most proud.

Mouths were tucked down. Fists clenched.

“Dearborn said that Jonas and his friends had caught on to what they were doing, and took the word to Rimer. They killed Chancellor Rimer to shut him up while they finished their chores, and Thorin in case Rimer had passed word on.”

This made little sense, Latigo had argued. Jonas had smiled and nodded. *No*, he had said, *not a mite of sense, but it doesn't matter.*

Lengyll was prepared to answer questions, but none were asked. There was only the murmur, the dark looks, the muted click and clink of reap-charms as people shifted on their feet.

The boys were in jail. Lengyll made no statement concerning what would happen to them next, and once again he was not asked. He said that some of the activities scheduled for the next day—the games, the rides, the turkey-run, the pumpkin-carving contest, the pig-scramble, the riddling competition, and the dance—had been cancelled out of respect for the tragedy. The things that really mattered would go on, of course, as they always had and must: the cattle and livestock judging, the horse-pull, the sheep-shearing, the stockline meetings, and the auctions: horse, pig, cow, sheep. And the bonfire at moonrise. The bonfire and the burning of the guys. *Charyou tree* was the end of Reaping Fair-Day, and had been since time out of mind. Nothing would stop it save the end of the world.

“The bonfire will burn and the stuffy-guys will burn on it,” Eldred Jonas had told Lengyll. “That’s all you’re to say. It’s all you *need* to say.”

And he’d been right, Lengyll saw. It was on every face. Not just the determination to do right, but a kind of dirty eagerness. There were

old ways, old rites of which the red-handed stuffy-guys were one surviving remnant. There were *los ceremoniosos*: *Charyou tree*. It had been generations since they had been practiced (except, every once and again, in secret places out in the hills), but sometimes when the world moved on, it came back to where it had been.

Keep it brief, Jonas had said, and it had been fine advice, fine advice indeed. He wasn't a man Lengyll would have wanted around in more peaceful times, but a useful one in times such as these.

"Gods give you peace," he said now, stepping back and folding his arms with his hands on his shoulders to show he had finished. "Gods give us all peace."

"Long days and peaceful nights," they returned in a low, automatic chorus. And then they simply turned and left, to go wherever folks went on the afternoon before Reaping. For a good many of them, Lengyll knew, it would be the Travellers' Rest or the Bayview Hotel. He raised a hand and mopped his brow. He hated to be out in front of people, and never so much as today, but he thought it had gone well. Very well, indeed.

6

The crowd streamed away without speaking. Most, as Lengyll had foreseen, headed for the saloons. Their way took them past the jail, but few looked at it . . . and those few who did did so in tiny, furtive glances. The porch was empty (save for a plump red-handed stuffy sprawled in Sheriff Avery's rocker), and the door stood ajar, as it usually did on warm and sunny afternoons. The boys were inside, no doubt about that, but there was no sign that they were being guarded with any particular zeal.

If the men passing on their way downhill to the Rest and the Bayview had banded together into one group, they could have taken Roland and his friends with no trouble whatsoever. Instead, they went by with their heads down, walking stolidly and with no

conversation to where the drinks were waiting. Today was not the day. Nor tonight.

Tomorrow, however—

7

Not too far from the Bar K, Susan saw something on the Barony's long slope of grazing-land that made her rein up and simply sit in the saddle with her mouth open. Below her and much farther east of her position, at least three miles away, a band of a dozen cowboys had rounded up the biggest herd of Drop-runners she had ever seen: perhaps four hundred head in all. They ran lazily, going where the *vags* pointed them with no trouble.

Probably think they're going in for the winter, Susan thought.

But they weren't headed in toward the ranches running along the crest of the Drop; the herd, so large it flowed on the grass like a cloud-shadow, was headed west, toward Hanging Rock.

Susan had believed everything Roland said, but this made it true in a personal way, one she could relate directly to her dead father.

Horses, of courses.

"You bastards," she murmured. "You horse-thieving *bastards*."

She turned Pylon and rode for the burned-out ranch. To her right, her shadow was growing long. Overhead, the Demon Moon glimmered ghostly in the daylight sky.

8

She had worried that Jonas might have left men at the Bar K—although why he would've she didn't really know, and the fear turned out to be groundless in any case. The ranch was as empty as it had been for the five or six years between the fire that had put paid to it

and the arrival of the boys from In-World. She could see signs of that morning's confrontation, however, and when she went into the bunkhouse where the three of them had slept, she at once saw the gaping hole in the floorboards. Jonas had neglected to close it up again after taking Alain's and Cuthbert's guns.

She went down the aisle between the bunks, dropped to one knee, and looked into the hole. Nothing. Yet she doubted if what she had come for had been there in the first place—the hole wasn't big enough.

She paused, looking at the three cots. Which was Roland's? She supposed she could find out—her nose would tell her, she knew the smell of his hair and skin very well—but she thought she would do better to put such soft impulses behind her. What she needed now was to be hard and quick—to move without pausing or looking back.

Ashes, Aunt Cord whispered in her head, almost too faintly to hear. Susan shook her head impatiently, as if to clear that voice away, and walked out back.

There was nothing behind the bunkhouse, nothing behind the privy or to either side of it. She went around to the back of the old cook-shack next, and there she found what she'd come looking for, placed casually and with no attempt at concealment: the two small barrels she had last seen slung over Caprichoso's back.

The thought of the mule summoned the thought of Sheemie, looking down at her from his man's height and with his hopeful boy's face. *I'd like to take a fin de año kiss from ye, so I would.*

Sheemie, whose life had been saved by "Mr. Arthur Heath." Sheemie, who had risked the wrath of the witch by giving Cuthbert the note meant for her aunt. Sheemie, who had brought these barrels up here. They had been smeared with soot to partially camouflage them, and Susan got some on her hands and the sleeves of her shirt as she took off the tops—more ashes. But the

firecrackers were still inside: the round, fist-sized big-bangers and the smaller lady-fingers.

She took plenty of both, stuffing her pockets until they bulged and carrying more in her arms. She stowed them in her saddlebags, then looked up at the sky. Three-thirty. She wanted to get back to Hambry no earlier than twilight, and that meant at least an hour to wait. There was a little time to be soft, after all.

Susan went back into the bunkhouse and found the bed which had been Roland's easily enough. She knelt beside it like a child saying bedtime prayers, put her face against his pillow, and inhaled deeply.

"Roland," she said, her voice muffled. "How I love thee. How I love thee, dear."

She lay on his bed and looked toward the window, watching the light drain away. Once she raised her hands in front of her eyes, examining the barrel-soot on her fingers. She thought of going to the pump in front of the cookhouse and washing, but decided not to. Let it stay. They were *ka-tet*, one from many—strong in purpose and strong in love.

Let the ashes stay, and do their worst.

9

My Susie has 'er faults, but she's always on time, Pat Delgado used to say. Fearful punctual, that girl.

It was true on the night before Reap. She skirted her own house and rode up to the Travellers' Rest not ten minutes after the sun had finally gone behind the hills, filling the High Street with thick mauve shadows.

The street was eerily deserted, considering it was the night before Reap; the band which had played in Green Heart every night for the last week was silent; there were periodic rattles of firecrackers, but

no yelling, laughing children; only a few of the many colored lamps had been lit.

Stuffy-guys seemed to peer from every shadow-thickened porch. Susan shivered at the sight of their blank white-cross eyes.

Doings at the Rest were similarly odd. The hitching-rails were crowded (even more horses had been tied at the rails of the mercantile across the street) and light shone from every window—so many windows and so many lights that the inn looked like a vast ship on a darkened sea—but there was none of the usual riot and jubilation, all set to the jagtime tunes pouring out of Sheb's piano.

She found she could imagine the customers inside all too well—a hundred men, maybe more—simply standing around and drinking. Not talking, not laughing, not chucking the dice down Satan's Alley and cheering or groaning at the result. No bottoms stroked or pinched; no Reap-kisses stolen; no arguments started out of loose mouths and finished with hard fists. Just men drinking, not three hundred yards from where her love and his friends were locked up. The men who were here wouldn't do anything tonight but drink, though. And if she was lucky . . . brave and lucky . . .

As she drew Pylon up in front of the saloon with a murmured word, a shape rose out of the shadows. She tensed, and then the first orangey light of the rising moon caught Sheemie's face. She relaxed again—even laughed a little, mostly at herself. He was a part of their *ka-tet*; she knew he was. Was it surprising that he should know, as well?

“Susan,” he murmured, taking off his *sombrero* and holding it against his chest. “I been waiting for'ee.”

“Why?” she asked.

“ 'Cause I knew ye'd come.” He looked back over his shoulder at the Rest, a black bulk spraying crazy light toward every point of the compass. “We're going to let Arthur and them free, ain't we?”

“I hope so,” she said.

“We have to. The folks in there, they don’t talk, but they don’t *have* to talk. I knows, Susan, daughter of Pat. *I knows.*”

She supposed he did. “Is Coral inside?”

Sheemie shook his head. “Gone up to Mayor’s House. She told Stanley she was going to help lay out the bodies for the funeral day after tomorrow, but I don’t think she’ll be here for the funeral. I think the Big Coffin Hunters is going and she’ll go with ’em.” He raised a hand and swiped at his leaking eyes.

“Your mule, Sheemie—”

“All saddled, and I got the long halter.”

She looked at him, open-mouthed. “How did ye know—”

“Same way I knew ye’d be coming, Susan-sai. I just knew.” He shrugged, then pointed vaguely. “Capi’s around the back. I tied him to the cook’s pump.”

“That’s good.” She fumbled in the saddlebag where she had put the smaller firecrackers. “Here. Take some of these. Do’ee have a sulfur or two?”

“Aye.” He asked no questions, simply stuffed the firecrackers into his front pocket. She, however, who had never been through the batwing doors of the Travellers’ Rest in her whole life, had another question for him.

“What do they do with their coats and hats and *serapes* when they come in, Sheemie? They must take em off; drinking’s warm work.”

“Oh, aye. They puts em on a long table just inside the door. Some fights about whose is whose when they’re ready to go home.”

She nodded, thinking hard and fast. He stood before her, still holding his *sombrera* against his chest, letting her do what he could not . . . at least not in the conventionally understood way. At last she raised her head again.

“Sheemie, if you help me, you’re done in Hambry . . . done in Mejis . . . done in the Outer Arc. You go with us if we get away. You have to understand that. Do you?”

She saw he did; his face fairly shone with the idea. “Aye, Susan! Go with you and Will Dearborn and Richard Stockworth and my best friend, Mr. Arthur Heath! Go to In-World! We’ll see buildings and statues and women in gowns like fairy princesses and—”

“If we’re caught, we’ll be killed.”

He stopped smiling, but his eyes didn’t waver. “Aye, killed we’ll be if ta’en, most like.”

“Will you still help me?”

“Capi’s all saddled,” he repeated. Susan reckoned that was answer enough. She took hold of the hand pressing the *sombrera* to Sheemie’s chest (the hat’s crown was pretty well crushed, and not for the first time). She bent, holding Sheemie’s fingers with one hand and the horn of her saddle with the other, and kissed his cheek. He smiled up at her.

“We’ll do our best, won’t we?” she asked him.

“Aye, Susan daughter of Pat. We’ll do our best for our friends. Our very best.”

“Yes. Now listen, Sheemie. Very carefully.”

She began to talk, and Sheemie listened.

Twenty minutes later, as the bloated orange moon struggled above the buildings of the town like a pregnant woman climbing a steep hill, a lone *vaquero* led a mule along Hill Street in the direction of the Sheriff's office. This end of Hill Street was a pit of shadows. There was a little light around Green Heart, but even the park (which would have been thronged, noisy, and brilliantly lit in any other year) was mostly empty. Nearly all the booths were closed, and of those few that remained open, only the fortune-teller was doing any business. Tonight all fortunes were bad, but still they came—don't they always?

The *vaquero* was wearing a heavy serape; if this particular cowboy had the breasts of a woman, they were concealed. The *vaq* wore a large, sweat-stained *sombrero*; if this cowboy had the face of a woman, it was likewise concealed. Low, from beneath that hat's broad brim, came a voice singing "Careless Love."

The mule's small saddle was buried under the large bundle which had been roped to it—cloth or clothes of some kind, it might have been, although the deepening shadows made it impossible to say for sure. Most amusing of all was what hung around the mule's neck like some peculiar reap-charm: two *sombreros* and a drover's hat strung on a length of rope.

As the *vaq* neared the Sheriff's office, the singing ceased. The place might have been deserted if not for the single dim light shining through one window. In the porch rocker was a comical stuffy-guy wearing one of Herk Avery's embroidered vests and a tin star. There were no guards; absolutely no sign that the three most hated men in Mejis were sequestered within. And now, very faintly, the *vaquero* could hear the strum of a guitar.

It was blotted out by a thin rattle of firecrackers. The *vaq* looked over one shoulder and saw a dim figure. It waved. The *vaquero* nodded, waved back, then tied the mule to the hitching-post—the same one where Roland and his friends had tied their horses when they had come to introduce themselves to the Sheriff, on a summer day so long ago.

The door opened—no one had bothered to lock it—while Dave Hollis was trying, for about the two hundredth time, to play the bridge of “Captain Mills, You Bastard.” Across from him, Sheriff Avery sat rocked back in his desk chair with his hands laced together on his paunch. The room flickered with mild orange lamplight.

“You keep it up, Deputy Dave, and there won’t have to be any execution,” Cuthbert Allgood said. He was standing at the door of one of the cells with his hands wrapped around the bars. “We’ll kill ourselves. In self-defense.”

“Shut up, maggot,” Sheriff Avery said. He was half-dozing in the wake of a four-chop dinner, thinking of how he would tell his brother (and his brother’s wife, who was killing pretty) in the next Barony about this heroic day. He would be modest, but he would still get it across to them that he’d played a central role; that if not for him, these three young *ladrones* might have—

“Just don’t sing,” Cuthbert said to Dave. “I’ll confess to the murder of Arthur Eld himself if you just don’t sing.”

To Bert’s left, Alain was sitting cross-legged on his bunk. Roland was lying on his with his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. But at the moment the door’s latch clicked, he swung to a sitting position. As if he’d only been waiting.

“That’ll be Bridger,” Deputy Dave said, gladly putting his guitar aside. He hated this duty and couldn’t wait to be relieved. Heath’s jokes were the worst. That he could continue to joke in the face of what was going to happen to them tomorrow.

“I think it’s likely one of *them*,” Sheriff Avery said, meaning the Big Coffin Hunters.

In fact, it was neither. It was a cowboy all but buried in a *serape* that looked much too big for him (the ends actually dragged on the

boards as he clumped in and shut the door behind him), and wearing a hat that came way down over his eyes. To Herk Avery, the fellow looked like somebody's idea of a cowboy stuffy.

"Say, stranger!" he said, beginning to smile . . . for this was surely someone's joke, and Herk Avery could take a joke as well as any man. Especially after four chops and a mountain of mashed. "Howdy! What business do ye—"

The hand which hadn't closed the door had been under the *serape*. When it came out, it was clumsily holding a gun all three of the prisoners recognized at once. Avery stared at it, his smile slowly fading. His hands unlaced themselves. His feet, which had been propped up on his desk, came down to the floor.

"Whoa, partner," he said slowly. "Let's talk about it."

"Get the keys off the wall and unlock the cells," the *vaq* said in a hoarse, artificially deep voice. Outside, unnoticed by all save Roland, more firecrackers rattled in a dry, popping string.

"I can't hardly do that," Avery said, easing open the bottom drawer of his desk with his foot. There were several guns, left over from that morning, inside. "Now, I don't know if that thing's loaded, but I don't hardly think a traildog like you—"

The newcomer pointed the gun at the desk and pulled the trigger. The report was deafening in the little room, but Roland thought—hoped—that with the door shut, it would sound like just another firecracker. Bigger than some, smaller than others.

Good girl, he thought. *Oh, good girl—but be careful. For gods' sake, Sue, be careful.*

All three of them standing in a line at the cell doors now, eyes wide and mouths tight.

The bullet struck the corner of the Sheriff's rolltop and tore off a huge splinter. Avery screamed, tilted back in his chair again, and went sprawling. His foot remained hooked under the drawer-pull; the drawer shot out and overturned, spilling three ancient firearms across the board floor.

"Susan, look out!" Cuthbert shouted, and then: "No, Dave!"

At the end of his life, it was duty and not fear of the Big Coffin Hunters which propelled Dave Hollis, who had hoped to be Sheriff of Mejis himself when Avery retired (and, he sometimes told his wife, Judy, a better one than Fatso had ever dreamed of being). He forgot that he had serious questions about the way the boys had been taken as well as about what they might or might not have done. All he thought of then was that they were prisoners o' the Barony, and such would not be taken if he could help it.

He lunged for the cowboy in the too-big clothes, meaning to tear the gun out of his hands. And shoot him with it, if necessary.

12

Susan was staring at the yellow blaze of fresh wood on the corner of the Sheriff's desk, forgetting everything in her amazement—so much damage inflicted by the single twitch of a finger!—when Cuthbert's desperate shout awakened her to her position.

She shrank back against the wall, avoiding Dave's first swipe at the oversized *serape*, and, without thinking, pulled the trigger again. There was another loud explosion, and Dave Hollis—a young man only two years older than she herself—was flung backward with a smoking hole in his shirt between two points of the star he wore. His eyes were wide and unbelieving. His monocle lay by one outstretched hand on its length of black silk ribbon. One of his feet struck his guitar and knocked it to the floor with a thrum nearly as musical as the chords he had been trying to make.

"Dave," she whispered. "Oh Dave, I'm sorry, what did I do?"

Dave tried once to get up, then collapsed forward on his face. The hole going into the front of him was small, but the one she was looking at now, the one coming out the back, was huge and hideous, all black and red and charred edges of cloth . . . as if she had run him through with a blazing hot poker instead of shooting him with a gun, which was supposed to be merciful and civilized and was clearly neither one.

“Dave,” she whispered. “Dave, I . . .”

“*Susan look out!*” Roland shouted.

It was Avery. He scuttled forward on his hands and knees, seized her around the calves, and yanked her feet out from under her. She came down on her bottom with a tooth-rattling crash and was face to face with him—his frog-eyed, large-pored face, his garlic-smelling hole of a mouth.

“Gods, ye’re a *girl*,” he whispered, and reached for her. She pulled the trigger of Roland’s gun again, setting the front of her *serape* on fire and blowing a hole in the ceiling. Plaster dust drifted down. Avery’s ham-sized hands settled around her throat, cutting off her wind. Somewhere far away, Roland shrieked her name.

She had one more chance.

Maybe.

One’s enough, Sue, her father spoke inside of her head. *One’s all ye need, my dear.*

She cocked Roland’s pistol with the side of her thumb, socked the muzzle deep into the flab hanging from the underside of Sheriff Herk Avery’s head, and pulled the trigger.

The mess was considerable.

Avery's head dropped into her lap, as heavy and wet as a raw roast. Above it, she could feel growing heat. At the bottom edge of her vision was the yellow flicker of fire.

"On the desk!" Roland shouted, yanking the door of his cell so hard it rattled in its frame. "Susan, the water-pitcher! For your father's sake!"

She rolled Avery's head out of her lap, got to her feet, and staggered to the desk with the front of the *serape* burning. She could smell its charred stench and was grateful in some far corner of her mind that she'd had time, while waiting for dusk, to tie her hair behind her.

The pitcher was almost full, but not with water; she could smell the sweet-sour tang of *graf*. She doused herself with it, and there was a brisk hissing as the liquid hit the flames. She stripped the *serape* off (the oversized *sombrero* came with it) and threw it on the floor. She looked at Dave again, a boy she had grown up with, one she might even have kissed behind the door of Hookey's, once upon an antique time.

"Susan!" It was Roland's voice, harsh and urgent. "The keys! Hurry!"

Susan grabbed the keyring from the nail on the wall. She went to Roland's cell first and thrust the ring blindly through the bars. The air was thick with smells of gunsmoke, burned wool, blood. Her stomach clenched helplessly at every breath.

Roland picked the right key, reached back through the bars with it, and plunged it into the lockbox. A moment later he was out, and hugging her roughly as her tears broke. A moment after that, Cuthbert and Alain were out, as well.

"You're an angel!" Alain said, hugging her himself.

“Not I,” she said, and began to cry harder. She thrust the gun at Roland. It felt filthy in her hand; she never wanted to touch one again. “Him and me played together when we were berries. He was one of the good ones—never a braid-puller or a bully—and he grew up a good one. Now I’ve ended him, and who’ll tell his wife?”

Roland took her back into his arms and held her there for a moment. “You did what you had to. If not him, then us. Does thee not know it?”

She nodded against his chest. “Avery, him I don’t mind so much, but Dave . . .”

“Come on,” Roland said. “Someone might recognize the gunshots for what they were. Was it Sheemie throwing firecrackers?”

She nodded. “I’ve got clothes for you. Hats and *serapes*.”

Susan hurried back to the door, opened it, peeked out in either direction, then slipped into the growing dark.

Cuthbert took the charred *serape* and put it over Deputy Dave’s face. “Tough luck, partner,” he said. “You got caught in between, didn’t you? I reckon you wasn’t so bad.”

Susan came back in, burdened with the stolen gear which had been tied to Capi’s saddle. Sheemie was already off on his next errand without having to be told. If the inn-boy was a halfwit, she’d known a lot of folks in her time who were running on quarters and eighths.

“Where’d you get this stuff?” Alain asked.

“The Travellers’ Rest. And I didn’t. Sheemie did.” She held the hats out. “Come on, hurry.”

Cuthbert took the headgear and passed it out. Roland and Alain had already slipped into the *serapes*; with the hats added and pulled

well down over their faces, they could have been any Drop-vaqs in Barony.

“Where are we going?” Alain asked as they stepped out onto the porch. The street was still dark and deserted at this end; the gunshots had attracted no attention.

“Hookey’s, to start with,” Susan said. “That’s where your horses are.”

They went down the street together in a little group of four. Capi was gone; Sheemie had taken the mule along. Susan’s heart was thudding rapidly and she could feel sweat standing out on her brow, but she still felt cold. Whether or no what she had done was murder, she had ended two lives this evening, and crossed a line that could never be recrossed in the other direction. She had done it for Roland, for her love, and simply knowing she could have done no different now offered some consolation.

Be happy together, ye faithless, ye cozeners, ye murderers. I curse thee with the ashes.

Susan seized Roland’s hand, and when he squeezed, she squeezed back. And as she looked up at Demon Moon, its wicked face now draining from choleric red-orange to silver, she thought that when she had pulled the trigger on poor, earnest Dave Hollis, she had paid for her love with the dearest currency of all—had paid with her soul. If he left her now, her aunt’s curse would be fulfilled, for only ashes would remain.

CHAPTER IX REAPING

1

As they stepped into the stable, which was lit by one dim gas lamp, a shadow moved out of one of the stalls. Roland, who had belted on both guns, now drew them. Sheemie looked at him with an uncertain smile, holding a stirrup in one hand. Then the smile broadened, his eyes flashed with happiness, and he ran toward them.

Roland holstered his guns and made ready to embrace the boy, but Sheemie ran past him and threw himself into Cuthbert's arms.

"Whoa, whoa," Cuthbert said, first staggering back comically and then lifting Sheemie off his feet. "You like to knock me over, boy!"

"She got ye out!" Sheemie cried. "Knew she would, so I did! Good old Susan!" Sheemie looked around at Susan, who stood beside Roland. She was still pale, but now seemed composed. Sheemie turned back to Cuthbert and planted a kiss directly in the center of Bert's forehead.

"Whoa!" Bert said again. "What's that for?"

" 'Cause I love you, good old Arthur Heath! You saved my life!"

"Well, maybe I did," Cuthbert said, laughing in an embarrassed way (his borrowed *sombrero*, too large to begin with, now sat comically askew on his head), "but if we don't get a move on, I won't have saved it for long."

“Horses are all saddled,” Sheemie said. “Susan told me to do it and I did. I did it just right. I just have to put this stirrup on Mr. Richard Stockworth’s horse, because the one on there’s ’bout worn through.”

“That’s a job for later,” Alain said, taking the stirrup. He put it aside, then turned to Roland. “Where do we go?”

Roland’s first thought was that they should return to the Thorin mausoleum.

Sheemie reacted with instant horror. “The boneyard? And with Demon Moon at the full?” He shook his head so violently that his *sombrero* came off and his hair flew from side to side. “They’re dead in there, sai Dearborn, but if ye tease em during the time of the Demon, they’s apt to get up and walk!”

“It’s no good, anyway,” Susan said. “The women of the town’ll be lining the way from Seafront with flowers, and filling the mausoleum, too. Olive will be in charge, if she’s able, but my aunt and Coral are apt to be in the company. Those aren’t ladies we want to meet.”

“All right,” Roland said. “Let’s mount up and ride. Think about it, Susan. You too, Sheemie. We want a place where we can hide up until dawn, at least, and it should be a place we can get to in less than an hour. Off the Great Road, and in any direction from Hambry but northwest.”

“Why not northwest?” Alain asked.

“Because that’s where we’re going now. We’ve got a job to do . . . and we’re going to let them know we’re doing it. Eldred Jonas most of all.” He offered a thin blade of smile. “I want him to know the game is over. No more Castles. The *real* gunslingers are here. Let’s see if he can deal with them.”

An hour later, with the moon well above the trees, Roland's *ka-tet* arrived at the Citgo oilpatch. They rode out parallel to the Great Road for safety's sake, but, as it happened, the caution was wasted: they saw not one rider on the road, going in either direction. *It's as if Reaping's been cancelled this year*, Susan thought . . . then she thought of the red-handed stuffies, and shivered. They would have painted Roland's hands red tomorrow night, and still would, if they were caught. *Not just him, either. All of us. Sheemie, too.*

They left the horses (and Caprichoso, who had trotted ill-temperedly but nimbly behind them on a tether) tied to some long-dead pumping equipment in the southeastern corner of the patch, and then walked slowly toward the working derricks, which were clustered in the same area. They spoke in whispers when they spoke at all. Roland doubted if that was necessary, but whispers here seemed natural enough. To Roland, Citgo was far spookier than the graveyard, and while he doubted that the dead in that latter place awoke even when Old Demon was full, there were some *very* unquiet corpses here, squalling zombies that stood rusty-weird in the moonlight with their pistons going up and down like marching feet.

Roland led them into the active part of the patch, nevertheless, past a sign which read HOW'S YOUR HARDHAT? and another reading WE PRODUCE OIL, WE REFINE SAFETY. They stopped at the foot of a derrick grinding so loudly that Roland had to shout in order to be heard.

"Sheemie! Give me a couple of those big-bangers!"

Sheemie had taken a pocketful from Susan's saddlebag and now handed a pair of them over. Roland took Bert by the arm and pulled him forward. There was a square of rusty fencing around the derrick, and when the boys tried to climb it, the horizontals snapped like old bones. They looked at each other in the running shadows combined of machinery and moonlight, nervous and amused.

Susan twitched Roland's arm. *"Be careful!"* she shouted over the rhythmic *whumpa-whumpa-whumpa* of the derrick machinery. She didn't look frightened, he saw, only excited and alert.

He grinned, pulled her forward, and kissed the lobe of her ear. “Be ready to run,” he whispered. “If we do this right, there’s going to be a new candle here at Citgo. A hellacious big one.”

He and Cuthbert ducked under the lowest strut of the rusty derrick tower and stood next to the equipment, wincing at the cacophony. Roland wondered that it hadn’t torn itself apart years ago. Most of the works were housed in rusty metal blocks, but he could see a gigantic turning shaft of some kind, gleaming with oil that must be supplied by automated jets. Up this close, there was a gassy smell that reminded him of the jet that flared rhythmically on the other side of the oilpatch.

“Giant-farts!” Cuthbert shouted.

“What?”

“I said it smells like . . . aw, never mind! Let’s do it if we can . . . can we?”

Roland didn’t know. He walked toward the machinery crying out beneath metal cowls which were painted a faded, rusting green. Bert followed with some reluctance. The two of them slid into a short aisle, smelly and baking hot, that took them almost directly beneath the derrick. Ahead of them, the shaft at the end of the piston turned steadily, shedding oily teardrops down its smooth sides. Beside it was a curved pipe—almost surely an overflow pipe, Roland thought. An occasional drop of crude oil fell from its lip, and there was a black puddle on the ground beneath. He pointed at it, and Cuthbert nodded.

Shouting would do no good in here; the world was a roaring, squealing din. Roland curled one hand around his friend’s neck and pulled Cuthbert’s ear to his lips; he held a big-bang up in front of Bert’s eyes with the other.

“Light it and run,” he said. “I’ll hold it, give you as much time as I can. That’s for my benefit as much as for yours. I want a clear path

back through that machinery, do you understand?”

Cuthbert nodded against Roland’s lips, then turned the gunslinger’s head so he could speak in the same fashion. “What if there’s enough gas here to burn the air when I make a spark?”

Roland stepped back. Raised his palms in a “How-do-I-know?” gesture. Cuthbert laughed and drew out a box of sulfur matches which he had scooped off Avery’s desk before leaving. He asked with his eyebrows if Roland was ready. Roland nodded.

The wind was blowing hard, but under the derrick the surrounding machinery cut it off and the flame from the sulfur rose straight. Roland held out the big-banger, and had a momentary, painful memory of his mother: how she had hated these things, how she had always been sure that he would lose an eye or a finger to one.

Cuthbert tapped his chest above his heart and kissed his palm in the universal gesture of good luck. Then he touched the flame to the fuse. It began to sputter. Bert turned, pretended to bang off a covered block of machinery—that was Bert, Roland thought; he would joke on the gallows—and then dashed back down the short corridor they’d used to get here.

Roland held the round firework as long as he dared, then lobbed it into the overflow pipe. He winced as he turned away, half-expecting what Bert was afraid of: that the very air would explode. It didn’t. He ran down the short aisle, came into the clear, and saw Cuthbert standing just outside the broken bit of fencing. Roland flapped both hands at him—*Go, you idiot, go!*—and then the world blew up behind him.

The sound was a deep, belching thud that seemed to shove his eardrums inward and suck the breath out of his throat. The ground rolled under his feet like a wave under a boat, and a large, warm hand planted itself in the center of his back and shoved him forward. He thought he ran with it for a step—maybe even two or three steps—and then he was lifted off his feet and hurled at the fence, where

Cuthbert was no longer standing; Cuthbert was sprawled on his back, staring up at something behind Roland. The boy's eyes were wide and wondering; his mouth hung open. Roland could see all this very well, because Citgo was now as bright as in full daylight. They had lit their own Reaping bonfire, it seemed, a night early and much brighter than the one in town could ever hope to be.

He went skidding on his knees to where Cuthbert lay, and grabbed him under one arm. From behind them came a vast, ripping roar, and now chunks of metal began to fall around them. They got up and ran toward where Alain stood in front of Susan and Sheemie, trying to protect them.

Roland took a quick look back over his shoulder and saw that the remains of the derrick—about half of it still stood—were glowing blackish red, like a heated horseshoe, around a flaring yellow torch that ran perhaps a hundred and fifty feet into the sky. It was a start. He didn't know how many other derricks they could fire before folk began arriving from town, but he was determined to do as many as possible, no matter what the risks might be. Blowing up the tankers at Hanging Rock was only half the job. Farson's *source* had to be wiped out.

Further firecrackers dropped down further overflow pipes turned out not to be necessary. There was a network of inter-connected pipes under the oilpatch, most filled with natural gas that had leaked in through ancient, decaying seals. Roland and Cuthbert had no more than reached the others when there was a fresh explosion, and a fresh tower of flame erupted from a derrick to the right of the one they had set afire. A moment later, a third derrick—this one sixty full yards away from the first two—exploded with a dragon's roar. The ironwork tore free of its anchoring concrete pillars like a tooth pulled from a decayed gum. It rose on a cushion of blazing blue and yellow, attained a height of perhaps seventy feet, then heeled over and came crashing back down, spewing sparks in every direction.

Another. Another. And yet another.

The five young people stood in their corner, stunned, holding their hands up to shield their eyes from the glare. Now the oilpatch flared like a birthday cake, and the heat baking toward them was enormous.

“Gods be kind,” Alain whispered.

If they lingered here much longer, Roland realized, they would be popped like corn. There were the horses to consider, too; they were well away from the main focus of the explosions, but there was no guarantee that the focus would stay where it was; already he saw two derricks that hadn’t even been working engulfed in flames. The horses would be terrified.

Hell, *he* was terrified.

“Come on!” he shouted.

They ran for the horses through shifting yellow-orange brilliance.

3

At first Jonas thought it was going on in his own head—that the explosions were part of their lovemaking.

Lovemaking, yar. Lovemaking, horseshit. He and Coral made love no more than donkeys did sums. But it was *something*. Oh yes indeed it was.

He’d been with passionate women before, ones who took you into a kind of oven-place and then held you there, staring with greedy intensity as they pumped their hips, but until Coral he’d never been with a woman that sparked such a powerfully harmonic chord in himself. With sex, he had always been the kind of man who took it when it came and forgot it when it didn’t. But with Coral he only wanted to take it, take it, and take it some more. When they were together they made love like cats or ferrets, twisting and hissing and clawing; they bit at each other and cursed at each other, and so far

none of it was even close to enough. When he was with her, Jonas sometimes felt as if he were being fried in sweet oil.

Tonight there had been a meeting with the Horsemen's Association, which had pretty much become the Farson Association in these latter days. Jonas had brought them up to date, had answered their idiotic questions, and had made sure they understood what they'd be doing the next day. With that done, he had checked on Rhea, who had been installed in Kimba Rimer's old suite. She hadn't even noticed Jonas peering in at her. She sat in Rimer's high-ceilinged, book-lined study—behind Rimer's ironwood desk, in Rimer's upholstered chair, looking as out of place as a whore's bloomers on a church altar. On Rimer's desk was the Wizard's Rainbow. She was passing her hands back and forth above it and muttering rapidly under her breath, but the ball remained dark.

Jonas had locked her in and had gone to Coral. She had been waiting for him in the parlor where tomorrow's Conversational would have been held. There were plenty of bedrooms in that wing, but it was to her dead brother's that she had led him . . . and not by accident, either, Jonas was sure. There they made love in the canopied bed Hart Thorin would never share with his gilly.

It was fierce, as it had always been, and Jonas was approaching his orgasm when the first oil derrick blew. *Christ, she's something*, he thought. *There's never in the whole damned world been a woman like—*

Then two more explosions, in rapid succession, and Coral froze for a moment beneath him before beginning to thrust her hips again. "Citgo," she said in a hoarse, panting voice.

"Yar," he growled, and began to thrust with her. He had lost all interest in making love, but they had reached the point where it was impossible to stop, even under threat of death or dismemberment.

Two minutes later he was striding, naked, toward Thorin's little lick of a balcony, his half-erect penis wagging from side to side ahead of

him like some halfwit's idea of a magic wand. Coral was a step behind him, as naked as he was.

"Why now?" she burst out as Jonas thrust open the balcony door. "I could have come three more times!"

Jonas ignored her. The countryside looking northwest was a moon-gilded darkness . . . except where the oilpatch was. There he saw a fierce yellow core of light. It was spreading and brightening even as he watched; one thudding explosion after another hammered across the intervening miles.

He felt a curious darkening in his mind—that feeling had been there ever since the brat, Dearborn, by some febrile leap of intuition, had recognized him for who and what he was. Making love to the energetic Coral melted that feeling a little, but now, looking at the burning tangle of fire which had five minutes ago been the Good Man's oil reserves, it came back with debilitating intensity, like a swamp-fever that sometimes quits the flesh but hides in the bones and never really leaves. *You're in the west*, Dearborn had said. *The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west*. Of course it was true, and he hadn't needed any such titmonkey as Will Dearborn to tell him . . . but now that it had been said, there was a part of his mind that couldn't stop thinking about it.

Fucking Will Dearborn. Where, exactly, was he now, him and his pair of good-mannered mates? In Avery's *calabozo*? Jonas didn't think so. Not anymore.

Fresh explosions ripped the night. Down below, men who had run and shouted in the wake of the early morning's assassinations were running and shouting again.

"It's the biggest Reaping firework that ever was," Coral said in a low voice.

Before Jonas could reply, there was a hard hammering on the bedroom door. It was thrown open a second later, and Clay

Reynolds came clumping across the room, wearing a pair of blue jeans and nothing else. His hair was wild; his eyes were wilder.

“Bad news from town, Eldred,” he said. “Dearborn and the other two In-World brats—”

Three more explosions, falling almost on top of each other. From the blazing Citgo oilpatch a great red-orange fireball rose lazily into the black of night, faded, disappeared. Reynolds walked out onto the balcony and stood between them at the railing, unmindful of their nakedness. He stared at the fireball with wide, wondering eyes until it was gone. As gone as the brats. Jonas felt that curious, debilitating gloom trying to steal over him again.

“How did they get away?” he asked. “Do you know? Does Avery?”

“Avery’s dead. The deputy who was with him, too. ’Twas another deputy found em, Todd Bridger . . . Eldred, what’s going on out there? What happened?”

“Oh, that’s your boys,” Coral said. “Didn’t take em long to start their own Reaping party, did it?”

How much heart do they have? Jonas asked himself. It was a good question—maybe the only one that mattered. Were they now done making trouble . . . or just getting started?

He once more wanted to be out of here—out of Seafront, out of Hambry, out of Mejis. Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted to be miles and wheels and leagues away. He had bounded around his Hillock, it was too late to go back, and now he felt horribly exposed.

“Clay.”

“Yes, Eldred?”

But the man’s eyes—and his mind—were still on the conflagration at Citgo. Jonas took his shoulder and turned Reynolds toward him.

Jonas felt his own mind starting to pick up speed, ticking past points and details, and welcomed the feeling. That queer, dark sense of fatalism faded and disappeared.

“How many men are here?” he asked.

Reynolds frowned, thought about it. “Thirty-five,” he said. “Maybe.”

“How many armed?”

“With guns?”

“No, with pea-blowers, you damned fool.”

“Probably . . .” Reynolds pulled his lower lip, frowning more fiercely than ever. “Probably a dozen. That’s guns likely to work, you ken.”

“The big boys from the Horsemen’s Association? Still all here?”

“I think so.”

“Get Lengyll and Renfrew. At least you won’t have to wake em up; they’ll *all* be up, and most of em right down there.” Jonas jerked a thumb at the courtyard. “Tell Renfrew to put together an advance party. Armed men. I’d like eight or ten, but I’ll take five. Have that old woman’s cart harnessed to the strongest, hardiest pony this place has got. Tell that old fuck Miguel that if the pony he chooses dies in the traces between here and Hanging Rock, he’ll be using his wrinkled old balls for earplugs.”

Coral Thorin barked brief, harsh laughter. Reynolds glanced at her, did a double-take at her breasts, then looked back at Jonas with an effort.

“Where’s Roy?” Jonas asked.

Reynolds looked up. “Third floor. With some little serving maid.”

“Kick him out,” Jonas said. “It’s his job to get the old bitch ready to ride.”

“We’re going?”

“Soon as we can. You and me first, with Renfrew’s boys, and Lengyll behind, with the rest of the men. You just make sure Hash Renfrew’s with us, Clay; that man’s got sand in his craw.”

“What about the horses out on the Drop?”

“Never mind the everfucking horses.” There was another explosion at Citgo; another fireball floated into the sky. Jonas couldn’t see the dark clouds of smoke which must be rushing up, or smell the oil; the wind, out of the east and into the west, would be carrying both away from town.

“But—”

“Just do as I say.” Jonas now saw his priorities in clear, ascending order. The horses were on the bottom—Farson could find horses damned near anywhere. Above them were the tankers gathered at Hanging Rock. They were more important than ever now, because the source was gone. Lose the tankers, and the Big Coffin Hunters could forget going home.

Yet most important of all was Farson’s little piece of the Wizard’s Rainbow. It was the one truly irreplaceable item. If it was broken, let it be broken in the care of George Latigo, not that of Eldred Jonas.

“Get moving,” he told Reynolds. “Depape rides after, with Lengyll’s men. You with me. Go on. Make it happen.”

“And me?” Coral asked.

He reached out and tugged her toward him. “I ain’t forgot you, darlin,” he said.

Coral nodded and reached between his legs, oblivious of the staring Clay Reynolds. “Aye,” she said. “And I ain’t forgot you.”

4

They escaped Citgo with ringing ears and slightly singed around the edges but not really hurt, Sheemie riding double behind Cuthbert and Caprichoso clattering after, at the end of his long lead.

It was Susan who came up with the place they should go, and like most solutions, it seemed completely obvious . . . once someone had thought of it. And so, not long after Reaping Eve had become Reaping Morn, the five of them came to the hut in the Bad Grass where Susan and Roland had on several occasions met to make love.

Cuthbert and Alain unrolled blankets, then sat on them to examine the guns they had liberated from the Sheriff’s office. They had also found Bert’s slingshot.

“These’re hard calibers,” Alain said, holding one up with the cylinder sprung and peering one-eyed down the barrel. “If they don’t throw too high or wide, Roland, I think we can do some business with them.”

“I wish we had that rancher’s machine-gun,” Cuthbert said wistfully.

“You know what Cort would say about a gun like that?” Roland asked, and Cuthbert burst out laughing. So did Alain.

“Who’s Cort?” Susan asked.

“The tough man Eldred Jonas only thinks he is,” Alain said. “He was our teacher.”

Roland suggested that they catch an hour or two of sleep—the next day was apt to be difficult. That it might also be their last was

something he didn't feel he had to say.

"Alain, are you listening?"

Alain, who knew perfectly well that Roland wasn't speaking of his ears or his attention-span, nodded.

"Do you hear anything?"

"Not yet."

"Keep at it."

"I will . . . but I can't promise anything. The touch is flukey. You know that as well as I do."

"Just keep trying."

Sheemie had carefully spread two blankets in the corner next to his proclaimed best friend. "He's Roland . . . and *he's* Alain . . . who are you, good old Arthur Heath? Who are you really?"

"Cuthbert's my name." He stuck out his hand. "Cuthbert Allgood. How do y'do, and how do y'do, and how do y'do again?"

Sheemie shook the offered hand, then began giggling. It was a cheerful, unexpected sound, and made them all smile. Smiling hurt Roland a little, and he guessed that if he could see his own face, he'd observe a pretty good burn from being so close to the exploding derricks.

"Key-youth-bert," Sheemie said, giggling. "Oh my! Key-youth-bert, that's a funny name, no wonder you're such a funny fellow. Key-youth-bert, oh-aha-ha-ha, that's a pip, a real pip!"

Cuthbert smiled and nodded. "Can I kill him now, Roland, if we don't need him any longer?"

“Save him a bit, why don’t you?” Roland said, then turned to Susan, his own smile fading. “Will thee walk out with me a bit, Sue? I’d talk to thee.”

She looked up at him, trying to read his face. “All right.” She held out her hand. Roland took it, they walked into the moonlight together, and beneath its light, Susan felt dread take hold of her heart.

5

They walked out in silence, through sweet-smelling grass that tasted good to cows and horses even as it was expanding in their bellies, first bloating and then killing them. It was high—at least a foot taller than Roland’s head—and still green as summer. Children sometimes got lost in the Bad Grass and died there, but Susan had never feared to be here with Roland, even when there were no sky-markers to steer by; his sense of direction was uncannily perfect.

“Sue, thee disobeyed me in the matter of the guns,” he said at last.

She looked at him, smiling, half-amused and half-angry. “Does thee wish to be back in thy cell, then? Thee and thy friends?”

“No, of course not. Such bravery!” He held her close and kissed her. When he drew back, they were both breathing hard. He took her by the arms and looked into her eyes. “But thee mustn’t disobey me this time.”

She looked at him steadily, saying nothing.

“Thee knows,” he said. “Thee knows what I’d tell thee.”

“Aye, perhaps.”

“Say. Better you than me, maybe.”

“I’m to stay at the hut while you and the others go. Sheemie and I are to stay.”

He nodded. "Will you? Will *thee*?"

She thought of how unfamiliar and wretched Roland's gun had felt in her hand as she held it beneath the *serape*; of the wide, unbelieving look in Dave's eyes as the bullet she'd fired into his chest flung him backward; of how the first time she'd tried to shoot Sheriff Avery, the bullet had only succeeded in setting her own clothing afire, although he had been right there in front of her. They didn't have a gun for her (unless she took one of Roland's), she couldn't use one very well in any case . . . and, more important, she didn't *want* to use one. Under those circumstances, and with Sheemie to think about, too, it was best she just stay out of the way.

Roland was waiting patiently. She nodded. "Sheemie and I'll wait for thee. It's my promise."

He smiled, relieved.

"Now pay me back with honesty, Roland."

"If I can."

She looked up at the moon, shuddered at the ill-omened face she saw, and looked back at Roland. "What chance thee'll come back to me?"

He thought about this very carefully, still holding to her arms. "Far better than Jonas thinks," he said at last. "We'll wait at the edge of the Bad Grass and should be able to mark his coming well enough."

"Aye, the herd o' horses I saw—"

"He may come without the horses," Roland said, not knowing how well he had matched Jonas's thinking, "but his folk will make noise even if they come without the herd. If there's enough of them, we'll see them, as well—they'll cut a line through the grass like a part in hair."

Susan nodded. She had seen this many times from the Drop—the mysterious parting of the Bad Grass as groups of men rode through it.

“If they’re looking for thee, Roland? If Jonas sends scouts ahead?”

“I doubt he’ll bother.” Roland shrugged. “If they do, why, we’ll kill them. Silent, if we can. Killing’s what we were trained to do; we’ll do it.”

She turned her hands over, and now she was gripping his arms instead of the other way around. She looked impatient and afraid. “Thee hasn’t answered my question. What chance I’ll see thee back?”

He thought it over. “Even toss,” he said at last.

She closed her eyes as if struck, drew in a breath, let it out, opened her eyes again. “Bad,” she said, “yet maybe not as bad as I thought. And if thee doesn’t come back? Sheemie and I go west, as thee said before?”

“Aye, to Gilead. There’ll be a place of safety and respect for you there, dear, no matter what . . . but it’s especially important that you go if you *don’t* hear the tankers explode. Thee knows that, doesn’t thee?”

“To warn yer people—thy *ka-tet*.”

Roland nodded.

“I’ll warn them, no fear. And keep Sheemie safe, too. He’s as much the reason we’ve got this far as anything I’ve done.”

Roland was counting on Sheemie for more than she knew. If he and Bert and Alain *were* killed, it was Sheemie who would stabilize her, give her reason to go on.

“When does thee leave?” Susan asked. “Do we have time to make love?”

“We have time, but perhaps it’s best we don’t,” he said. “It’s going to be hard enough to leave thee again without. Unless you really want to . . .” His eyes half-pleaded with her to say yes.

“Let’s just go back and lie down a bit,” she said, and took his hand. For a moment it trembled on her lips to tell him that she was kindled with his child, but at the last moment she kept silent. There was enough for him to think about without that added, mayhap . . . and she didn’t want to pass such happy news beneath such an ugly moon. It would surely be bad luck.

They walked back through high grass that was already springing together along their path. Outside the hut, he turned her toward him, put his hands on her cheeks, and softly kissed her again.

“I will love thee forever, Susan,” he said. “Come whatever storms.”

She smiled. The upward movement of her cheeks spilled a pair of tears from her eyes. “Come whatever storms,” she agreed. She kissed him again, and they went inside.

6

The moon had begun to descend when a party of eight rode out beneath the arch with COME IN PEACE writ upon it in the Great Letters. Jonas and Reynolds were in the lead. Behind them came Rhea’s black wagon, drawn by a trotting pony that looked strong enough to go all night and half the next day. Jonas had wanted to give her a driver, but Rhea refused—“Never was an animal I didn’t get on with better than any man ever could,” she’d told him, and that seemed to be true. The reins lay limp in her lap; the pony worked smart without them. The other five men consisted of Hash Renfrew, Quint, and three of Renfrew’s best *vaqueros*.

Coral had wanted to come as well, but Jonas had different ideas. “If we’re killed, you can go on more or less as before,” he’d said. “There’ll be nothing to tie you to us.”

“Without ye, I’m not sure there’d be any reason *to* go on,” she said.

“Ar, quit that schoolgirl shit, it don’t become you. You’d find plenty of reasons to keep staggerin down the path, if you had to put your mind to it. If all goes well—as I expect it will—and you still want to be with me, ride out of here as soon as you get word of our success. There’s a town west of here in the Vi Castis Mountains. Ritzy. Go there on the fastest horse you can swing a leg over. You’ll be there ahead of us by days, no matter how smart we’re able to push along. Find a respectable inn that’ll take a woman on her own . . . if there is such a thing in Ritzy. Wait. When we get there with the tankers, you just fall into the column at my right hand. Have you got it?”

She had it. One woman in a thousand was Coral Thorin—sharp as Lord Satan, and able to fuck like Satan’s favorite harlot. Now if things only turned out to be as simple as he’d made them sound.

Jonas fell back until his horse was pacing alongside the black cart. The ball was out of its bag and lay in Rhea’s lap. “Anything?” he asked. He both hoped and dreaded to see that deep pink pulse inside it again.

“Nay. It’ll speak when it needs to, though—count on it.”

“Then what good are *you*, old woman?”

“Ye’ll know when the time comes,” Rhea said, looking at him with arrogance (and some fear as well, he was happy to see).

Jonas spurred his horse back to the head of the little column. He had decided to take the ball from Rhea at the slightest sign of trouble. In truth, it had already inserted its strange, addicting

sweetness into his head; he thought about that single pink pulse of light he'd seen far too much.

Balls, he told himself. Battlesweat's all I've got. Once this business is over, I'll be my old self again.

Nice if true, but . . .

. . . but he had, in truth, begun to wonder.

Renfrew was now riding with Clay. Jonas nudged his horse in between them. His dicky leg was aching like a bastard; another bad sign.

"Lengyll?" he asked Renfrew.

"Putting together a good bunch," Renfrew said, "don't you fear Fran Lengyll. Thirty men."

"Thirty! God Harry's body, I told you I wanted forty! Forty at least!"

Renfrew measured him with a pale-eyed glance, then winced at a particularly vicious gust of the freshening wind. He pulled his neckerchief up over his mouth and nose. The *vags* riding behind had already done so. "How afraid of these three boys are you, Jonas?"

"Afraid for both of us, I guess, since you're too stupid to know who they are or what they're capable of." He raised his own neckerchief, then forced his voice into a more reasonable timbre. It was best he do so; he needed these bumpkins yet awhile longer. Once the ball was turned over to Latigo, that might change. "Though mayhap we'll never see them."

"It's likely they're already thirty miles from here and riding west as fast as their horses'll take em," Renfrew agreed. "I'd give a crown to know how they got loose."

What does it matter, you idiot? Jonas thought, but said nothing.

“As for Lengyll’s men, they’ll be the hardest boys he can lay hands on—if it comes to a fight, those thirty will fight like sixty.”

Jonas’s eyes briefly met Clay’s. *I’ll believe it when I see it*, Clay’s brief glance said, and Jonas knew again why he had always liked this one better than Roy Depape.

“How many armed?”

“With guns? Maybe half. They’ll be no more than an hour behind us.”

“Good.” At least their back door was covered. It would have to do. And he couldn’t wait to be rid of that thrice-cursed ball.

Oh? whispered a sly, half-mad voice from a place much deeper than his heart. *Oh, can’t you?*

Jonas ignored the voice until it stilled. Half an hour later, they turned off the road and onto the Drop. Several miles ahead, moving in the wind like a silver sea, was the Bad Grass.

7

Around the time that Jonas and his party were riding down the Drop, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain were swinging up into their saddles. Susan and Sheemie stood by the doorway to the hut, holding hands and watching them solemnly.

“Thee’ll hear the explosions when the tankers go, and smell the smoke,” Roland said. “Even with the wind the wrong way, I think thee’ll smell it. Then, no more than an hour later, more smoke. There.” He pointed. “That’ll be the brush piled in front of the canyon’s mouth.”

“And if we don’t see those things?”

“Into the west. But thee will, Sue. I swear thee will.”

She stepped forward, put her hands on his thigh, and looked up at him in the latening moonlight. He bent; put his hand lightly against the back of her head; put his mouth on her mouth.

“Go thy course in safety,” Susan said as she drew back from him.

“Aye,” Sheemie added suddenly. “Stand and be true, all three.” He came forward himself and shyly touched Cuthbert’s boot.

Cuthbert reached down, took Sheemie’s hand, and shook it. “Take care of her, old boy.”

Sheemie nodded seriously. “I will.”

“Come on,” Roland said. He felt that if he looked at her solemn, upturned face again, he would cry. “Let’s go.”

They rode slowly away from the hut. Before the grass closed behind them, hiding it from view, he looked back a final time.

“Sue, I love thee.”

She smiled. It was a beautiful smile. “Bird and bear and hare and fish,” she said.

The next time Roland saw her, she was caught inside the Wizard’s glass.

8

What Roland and his friends saw west of the Bad Grass had a harsh, lonely beauty. The wind was lifting great sheets of sand across the stony desert floor; the moonlight turned these into footracing phantoms. At moments Hanging Rock was visible some two wheels distant, and the mouth of Eyebolt Canyon two wheels farther on. Sometimes both were gone, hidden by the dust. Behind them, the tall grass made a sougning, singing sound.

“How do you boys feel?” Roland asked. “All’s well?”

They nodded.

“There’s going to be a lot of shooting, I think.”

“We’ll remember the faces of our fathers,” Cuthbert said.

“Yes,” Roland agreed, almost absently. “We’ll remember them very well.” He stretched in the saddle. “The wind’s in our favor, not theirs—that’s one good thing. We’ll hear them coming. We must judge the size of the group. All right?”

They both nodded.

“If Jonas has still got his confidence, he’ll come soon, in a small party—whatever gunnies he can put together on short notice—and he’ll have the ball. In that case, we’ll ambush them, kill them all, and take the Wizard’s Rainbow.”

Alain and Cuthbert sat quiet, listening intently. The wind gusted, and Roland clapped a hand to his hat to keep it from flying off. “If he fears more trouble from us, I think he’s apt to come later on, and with a bigger party of riders. If that happens, we’ll let them pass . . . then, if the wind is our friend and keeps up, we’ll fall in behind them.”

Cuthbert began to grin. “Oh Roland,” he said. “Your father would be proud. Only fourteen, but cozy as the devil!”

“Fifteen come next moonrise,” Roland said seriously. “If we do it this way, we may have to kill their drogue riders. Watch my signals, all right?”

“We’re going to cross to Hanging Rock as part of their party?” Alain asked. He had always been a step or two behind Cuthbert, but Roland didn’t mind; sometimes reliability was better than quickness. “Is that it?”

“If the cards fall that way, yes.”

“If they’ve got the pink ball with em, you’d better hope it doesn’t give us away,” Alain said.

Cuthbert looked surprised. Roland bit his lip, thinking that sometimes Alain was plenty quick. Certainly he had come up with this unpleasant little idea ahead of Bert . . . ahead of Roland, too.

“We’ve got a lot to hope for this morning, but we’ll play our cards as they come off the top of the pack.”

They dismounted and sat by their horses there on the edge of the grass, saying little. Roland watched the silver clouds of dust racing each other across the desert floor and thought of Susan. He imagined them married, living in a freehold somewhere south of Gilead. By then Farson would have been defeated, the world’s strange decline reversed (the childish part of him simply assumed that making an end to John Farson would somehow see to that), and his gunslinging days would be over. Less than a year it had been since he had won the right to carry the six-shooters he wore on his hips—and to carry his father’s great revolvers when Steven Deschain decided to pass them on—and already he was tired of them. Susan’s kisses had softened his heart and quickened him, somehow; had made another life possible. A better one, perhaps. One with a house, and kiddies, and—

“They’re coming,” Alain said, snapping Roland out of his reverie.

The gunslinger stood up, Rusher’s reins in one fist. Cuthbert stood tensely nearby. “Large party or small? Does thee . . . do you know?”

Alain stood facing southeast, hands held out with the palms up. Beyond his shoulder, Roland saw Old Star just about to slip below the horizon. Only an hour until dawn, then.

“I can’t tell yet,” Alain said.

“Can you at least tell if the ball—”

“No. Shut up, Roland, let me listen!”

Roland and Cuthbert stood and watched Alain anxiously, at the same time straining their ears to hear the hooves of horses, the creak of wheels, or the murmur of men on the passing wind. Time spun out. The wind, rather than dropping as Old Star disappeared and dawn approached, blew more fiercely than ever. Roland looked at Cuthbert, who had taken out his slingshot and was playing nervously with the pull. Bert raised one shoulder in a shrug.

“It’s a small party,” Alain said suddenly. “Can either of you touch them?”

They shook their heads.

“No more than ten, maybe only six.”

“Gods!” Roland murmured, and pumped a fist at the sky. He couldn’t help it. “And the ball?”

“I can’t touch it,” Alain said. He sounded almost as though he were sleeping himself. “But it’s with them, don’t you think?”

Roland did. A small party of six or eight, probably travelling with the ball. It was perfect.

“Be ready, boys,” he said. “We’re going to take them.”

9

Jonas’s party made good time down the Drop and into the Bad Grass. The guide-stars were brilliant in the autumn sky, and Renfrew knew them all. He had a click-line to measure between the two he called The Twins, and he stopped the group briefly every twenty minutes or so to use it. Jonas hadn’t the slightest doubt the old cowboy would bring them out of the tall grass pointed straight at Hanging Rock.

Then, about an hour after they'd entered the Bad Grass, Quint rode up beside him. "That old lady, she want to see you, sai. She say it's important."

"Do she, now?" Jonas asked.

"Aye." Quint lowered his voice. "That ball she got on her lap all glowy."

"Is that so? I tell you what, Quint—keep my old trail-buddies company while I see what's what." He dropped back until he was pacing beside the black cart. Rhea raised her face to him, and for a moment, washed as it was in the pink light, he thought it the face of a young girl.

"So," she said. "Here y'are, big boy. I thought ye'd show up pretty smart." She cackled, and as her face broke into its sour lines of laughter, Jonas again saw her as she really was—all but sucked dry by the thing in her lap. Then he looked down at it himself . . . and was lost. He could feel that pink glow radiating into all the deepest passages and hollows of his mind, lighting them up in a way they'd never been lit up before. Even Coral, at her dirty busiest, couldn't light him up that way.

"Ye like it, don't ye?" she half-laughed, half-crooned. "Aye, so ye do, so would anyone, such a pretty glam it is! But what do ye see, sai Jonas?"

Leaning over, holding to the saddle-horn with one hand, his long hair hanging down in a sheaf, Jonas looked deeply into the ball. At first he saw only that luscious, labial pink, and then it began to draw apart. Now he saw a hut surrounded by tall grass. The sort of hut only a hermit could love. The door—it was painted a peeling but still bright red—stood open. And sitting there on the stone stoop with her hands in her lap, her blankets on the ground at her feet, and her unbound hair around her shoulders was . . .

“I’ll be damned!” Jonas whispered. He had now leaned so far out of the saddle that he looked like a trick rider in a circus show, and his eyes seemed to have disappeared; there were only sockets of pink light where they had been.

Rhea cackled delightedly. “Aye, it’s Thorin’s gilly that never was! Dearborn’s lovergirl!” Her cackling stopped abruptly. “Lovergirl of the young proddy who killed my Ermot. And he’ll pay for it, aye, so he will. Look closer, sai Jonas! Look closer!”

He did. Everything was clear now, and he thought he should have seen it earlier. Everything this girl’s aunt had feared had been true. Rhea had known, although why she hadn’t told anyone the girl had been screwing one of the In-World boys, Jonas didn’t know. And Susan had done more than just screw Will Dearborn; she’d helped him escape, him and his trail-mates, and she might well have killed two law-men for him, into the bargain.

The figure in the ball swam closer. Watching that made him feel a little dizzy, but it was a pleasant dizziness. Beyond the girl was the hut, faintly lit by a lamp which had been turned down to the barest core of flame. At first Jonas thought someone was sleeping in one corner, but on second glance he decided it was only a heap of hides that looked vaguely human.

“Do’ee spy the boys?” Rhea asked, seemingly from a great distance. “Do’ee spy em, m’lord sai?”

“No,” he said, his own voice seeming to come from that same distant place. His eyes were pinned to the ball. He could feel its light baking deeper and deeper into his brain. It was a good feeling, like a hot fire on a cold night. “She’s alone. Looks as if she’s waiting.”

“Aye.” Rhea gestured above the ball—a curt dusting-off movement of the hands—and the pink light was gone. Jonas gave a low, protesting cry, but no matter; the ball was dark again. He wanted to stretch his hands out and tell her to make the light return—to beg her, if necessary—and held himself back by pure force of will. He

was rewarded by a slow return of his wits. It helped to remind himself that Rhea's gestures were as meaningless as the puppets in a Pinch and Jilly show. The ball did what *it* wanted, not what *she* wanted.

Meanwhile, the ugly old woman was looking at him with eyes that were perversely shrewd and clear. "Waiting for what, do'ee suppose?" she asked.

There was only one thing she *could* be waiting for, Jonas thought with rising alarm. The boys. The three beardless sons of bitches from In-World. And if they weren't with her, they might well be up ahead, doing their own waiting.

Waiting for him. Possibly even waiting for—

"Listen to me," he said. "I'll only speak once, and you best answer true. Do they know about that thing? *Do those three boys know about the Rainbow?*"

Her eyes shifted away from his. It was answer enough in one way, but not in another. She had had things her way all too long up there on her hill; she had to know who was boss down here. He leaned over again and grabbed her shoulder. It was horrible—like grabbing a bare bone that somehow still lived—but he made himself hold on all the same. And squeeze. She moaned and wriggled, but he held on.

"Tell me, you old bitch! Run your fucking gob!"

"They might know of it," she whined. "The girl might've seen something the night she came to be—arr, let go, ye're killing me!"

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead." He took another longing glance at the ball, then sat up straight in the saddle, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called: "Clay! Hold up!" As Reynolds and Renfrew reined back, Jonas raised a hand to halt the *vags* behind him.

The wind whispered through the grass, bending it, rippling it, whipping up eddies of sweet smell. Jonas stared ahead into the dark, even though he knew it was fruitless to look for them. They could be anywhere, and Jonas didn't like the odds in an ambush. Not one bit.

He rode to where Clay and Renfrew were waiting. Renfrew looked impatient. "What's the problem? Dawn'll be breaking soon. We ought to get a move-on."

"Do you know the huts in the Bad Grass?"

"Aye, most. Why—"

"Do you know one with a red door?"

Renfrew nodded and pointed northish. "Old Soony's place. He had some sort of religious conversion—a dream or a vision or something. That's when he painted the door of his hut red. He's gone to the Mannifolk these last five years." He no longer asked why, at least; he had seen something on Jonas's face that had shut up his questions.

Jonas raised his hand, looked at the blue coffin tattooed there for a second, then turned and called for Quint. "You're in charge," Jonas told him.

Quint's shaggy eyebrows shot up. "*Me?*"

"Yar. But you're not going on—there's been a change of plan."

"What—"

"Listen and don't open your mouth again unless there's something you don't understand. Get that damned black cart turned around. Put your men around it and hie on back the way we came. Join up with Lengyll and his men. Tell them Jonas says wait where you find em until he and Reynolds and Renfrew come. Clear?"

Quint nodded. He looked bewildered but said nothing.

“Good. Get about it. And tell the witch to put her toy back in its bag.” Jonas passed a hand over his brow. Fingers which had rarely shaken before had now picked up a minute tremble. “It’s distracting.”

Quint started away, then looked back when Jonas called his name.

“I think those In-World boys are out here, Quint. Probably ahead of where we are now, but if they’re back the way you’re going, they’ll probably set on you.”

Quint looked nervously around at the grass, which rose higher than his head. Then his lips tightened and he returned his attention to Jonas.

“If they attack, they’ll try to take the ball,” Jonas continued. “And sai, mark me well: any man who doesn’t die protecting it will wish he had.” He lifted his chin at the *vaqs*, who sat astride their horses in a line behind the black cart. “Tell them that.”

“Aye, boss,” Quint said.

“When you reach Lengyll’s party, you’ll be safe.”

“How long should we wait for yer if ye don’t come?”

“Til hell freezes over. Now go.” As Quint left, Jonas turned to Reynolds and Renfrew. “We’re going to make a little side-trip, boys,” he said.

10

“Roland.” Alain’s voice was low and urgent. “They’ve turned around.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. There’s another group coming along behind them. A much larger one. That’s where they’re headed.”

“Safety in numbers, that’s all,” Cuthbert said.

“Do they have the ball?” Roland asked. “Can you touch it yet?”

“Yes, they have it. It makes them easy to touch even though they’re going the other way now. Once you find it, it glows like a lamp in a mineshaft.”

“Does Rhea still have the keeping of it?”

“I think so. It’s awful to touch her.”

“Jonas is afraid of us,” Roland said. “He wants more men around him when he comes. That’s what it is, what it must be.” Unaware that he was both right and badly out in his reckoning. Unaware that for one of the few times since they had left Gilead, he had lapsed into a teenager’s disastrous certainty.

“What do we do?” Alain asked.

“Sit here. Listen. Wait. They’ll bring the ball this way again if they’re going to Hanging Rock. They’ll have to.”

“Susan?” Cuthbert asked. “Susan and Sheemie? What about them? How do we know they’re all right?”

“I suppose that we don’t.” Roland sat down, cross-legged, with Ruser’s trailing reins in his lap. “But Jonas and his men will be back soon enough. And when they come, we’ll do what we must.”

11

Susan hadn’t wanted to sleep inside—the hut felt wrong to her without Roland. She had left Sheemie huddled under the old hides in the corner and taken her own blankets outside. She sat in the hut’s doorway for a little while, looking up at the stars and praying for Roland in her own fashion. When she began to feel a little better, she lay down on one blanket and pulled the other over her. It seemed an eternity since Maria had shaken her out of her heavy sleep, and the open-mouthed, glottal snores drifting out of the hut didn’t bother her

much. She slept with her head pillowed on one arm, and didn't wake when, twenty minutes later, Sheemie came to the doorway, blinked at her sleepily, and then walked off into the grass to urinate. The only one to notice him was Caprichoso, who stuck out his long muzzle and took a nip at Sheemie's butt as the boy passed him. Sheemie, still mostly asleep, reached back and pushed the muzzle away. He knew Capi's tricks well enough, so he did.

Susan dreamed of the willow grove—bird and bear and hare and fish—and what woke her wasn't Sheemie's return from his necessary but a cold circle of steel pressing into her neck. There was a loud click that she recognized at once from the Sheriff's office: a pistol being cocked. The willow grove faded from the eye of her mind.

"Shine, little sunbeam," said a voice. For a moment her bewildered, half-waking mind tried to believe it was yesterday, and Maria wanted her to get up and out of Seafront before whoever had killed Mayor Thorin and Chancellor Rimer could come back and kill her, as well.

No good. It wasn't the strong light of midmorning that her eyes opened upon, but the ash-pallid glow of five o'clock. Not a woman's voice but a man's. And not a hand shaking her shoulder but the barrel of a gun against her neck.

She looked up and saw a lined, narrow face framed by white hair. Lips no more than a scar. Eyes the same faded blue as Roland's. Eldred Jonas. The man standing behind him had bought her own da drinks once upon a happier time: Hash Renfrew. A third man, one of Jonas's *ka-tet*, ducked into the hut. Freezing terror filled her midsection—some for her, some for Sheemie. She wasn't sure the boy would even understand what was happening to them. *These are two of the three men who tried to kill him*, she thought. *He'll understand that much.*

"Here you are, Sunbeam, here you come," Jonas said companionably, watching her blink away the sleepfog. "Good! You

shouldn't be napping all the way out here on your own, not a pretty sai such as yourself. But don't worry, I'll see you get back to where you belong."

His eyes flicked up as the redhead with the cloak stepped out of the hut. Alone. "What's she got in there, Clay? Anything?"

Reynolds shook his head. "All still on the hoss, I reckon."

Sheemie, Susan thought. *Where are you, Sheemie?*

Jonas reached out and caressed one of her breasts briefly. "Nice," he said. "Tender and sweet. No wonder Dearborn likes you."

"Get yer filthy blue-marked hand off me, you bastard."

Smiling, Jonas did as she bid. He turned his head and regarded the mule. "I know this one; it belongs to my good friend Coral. Along with everything else, you've turned livestock thief! Shameful, shameful, this younger generation. Don't you agree, sai Renfrew?"

But her father's old associate said nothing. His face was carefully blank, and Susan thought he might be just the tiniest tad ashamed of his presence here.

Jonas turned back to her, his thin lips curved in the semblance of a benevolent smile. "Well, after murder I suppose stealing a mule comes easy, don't it?"

She said nothing, only watched as Jonas stroked Capi's muzzle.

"What all were they hauling, those boys, that it took a mule to put it on?"

"Shrouds," she said through numb lips. "For you and all yer friends. A fearful heavy load it made, too—near broke the poor animal's back."

“There’s a saying in the land I come from,” Jonas said, still smiling. “Clever girls go to hell. Ever heard it?” He went on stroking Capi’s nose. The mule liked it; his neck was thrust out to its full length, his stupid little eyes half-closed with pleasure. “Has it crossed your mind that fellows who unload their pack animal, split up what it was carrying, and take the goods away usually ain’t coming back?”

Susan said nothing.

“You’ve been left high and dry, Sunbeam. Fast fucked is usually fast forgot, sad to say. Do you know where they went?”

“Yes,” she said. Her voice was low, barely a whisper.

Jonas looked pleased. “If you was to tell, things might go easier for you. Would you agree, Renfrew?”

“Aye,” Renfrew said. “They’re traitors, Susan—for the Good Man. If you know where they are or what they’re up to, tell us.”

Keeping her eyes fixed on Jonas, Susan said: “Come closer.” Her numbed lips didn’t want to move and it came out sounding like *Cung gloser*, but Jonas understood and leaned forward, stretching his neck in a way that made him look absurdly like Caprichoso. When he did, Susan spat in his face.

Jonas recoiled, lips twisting in surprise and revulsion. “*Arrr! BITCH!*” he cried, and launched a full-swung, open-handed blow that drove her to the ground. She landed at full length on her side with black stars exploding across her field of vision. She could already feel her right cheek swelling like a balloon and thought, *If he’d hit an inch or two lower, he might’ve broken my neck. Mayhap that would’ve been best.* She raised her hand to her nose and wiped blood from the right nostril.

Jonas turned to Renfrew, who had taken a single step forward and then stopped himself. “Put her on her horse and tie her hands in front of her. Tight.” He looked down at Susan, then kicked her in the

shoulder hard enough to send her rolling toward the hut. “Spit on me, would you? Spit on Eldred Jonas, would you, you bitch?”

Reynolds was holding out his neckerchief. Jonas took it, wiped the spittle from his face with it, then dropped into a hunker beside her. He took a handful of her hair and carefully wiped the neckerchief with it. Then he hauled her to her feet. Tears of pain now peeped from the corners of her eyes, but she kept silent.

“I may never see your friend again, sweet Sue with the tender little titties, but I’ve got you, ain’t I? Yar. And if Dearborn gives us trouble, I’ll give you double. And make sure Dearborn knows. You may count on it.”

His smile faded, and he gave her a sudden, bitter shove that almost sent her sprawling again.

“Now get mounted, and do it before I decide to change your face a little with my knife.”

12

Sheemie watched from the grass, terrified and silently crying, as Susan spit in the bad Coffin Hunter’s face and was knocked to the ground, hit so hard the blow might have killed her. He almost rushed out then, but something—it could have been his friend Arthur’s voice in his head—told him that would only get *him* killed.

He watched as Susan mounted. One of the other men—not a Coffin Hunter but a big rancher Sheemie had seen in the Rest from time to time—tried to help, but Susan pushed him away with the sole of her boot. The man stood back with a red face.

Don’t make em mad, Susan, Sheemie thought. Oh gods, don’t do that, they’ll hit ye some more! Oh, yer poor face! And ye got a nosebleed, so you do!

“Last chance,” Jonas told her. “Where are they, and what do they mean to do?”

“Go to hell,” she said.

He smiled—a thin, hurty smile. “Likely I’ll find you there when I arrive,” he said. Then, to the other Coffin Hunter: “You checked the place careful?”

“Whatever they had, they took it,” the redhead answered. “Only thing they left was Dearborn’s punch-bunny.”

That made Jonas laugh meany-mean as he climbed on board his own horse. “Come on,” he said, “let’s ride.”

They went back into the Bad Grass. It closed around them, and it was as if they had never been there . . . except that Susan was gone, and so was Capi. The big rancher riding beside Susan had been leading the mule.

When he was sure they weren’t going to return, Sheemie walked slowly back into the clearing, doing up the button on top of his pants as he came. He looked from the way Roland and his friends had gone to the one in which Susan had been taken. Which?

A moment’s thought made him realize there was no choice. The grass out here was tough and springy. The path Roland and Alain and good old Arthur Heath (so Sheemie still thought of him, and always would) had taken was gone. The one made by Susan and her captors, on the other hand, was still clear. And perhaps, if he followed her, he could do something for her. Help her.

Walking at first, then jogging as his fear that they might double back and catch him dissipated, Sheemie went in the direction Susan had been taken. He would follow her most of that day.

Cuthbert—not the most sanguine of personalities in any situation—grew more and more impatient as the day brightened toward true dawn. *It's Reaping*, he thought. *Finally Reaping, and here we sit with our knives sharpened and not a thing in the world to cut.*

Twice he asked Alain what he “heard.” The first time Alain only grunted. The second time he asked what Bert *expected* him to hear, with someone yapping away in his ear like that.

Cuthbert, who did not consider two enquiries fifteen minutes apart as “yapping away,” wandered off and sat morosely in front of his horse. After a bit, Roland came over and sat down beside him.

“Waiting,” Cuthbert said. “That’s what most of our time in Mejis has been about, and it’s the thing I do worst.”

“You won’t have to do it much longer,” Roland said.

14

Jonas’s company reached the place where Fran Lengyll’s party had made a temporary camp about an hour after the sun had topped the horizon. Quint, Rhea, and Renfrew’s *vaqs* were already there and drinking coffee, Jonas was glad to see.

Lengyll started forward, saw Susan riding with her hands tied, and actually drew back a step, as if he wanted to find a corner to hide in. There were no corners out here, however, so he stood fast. He did not look happy about it, however.

Susan nudged her horse forward with her knees, and when Reynolds tried to grab her shoulder, she dipped it to the side, temporarily eluding him.

“Why, Francis Lengyll! Imagine meeting you here!”

“Susan, I’m sorry to see ye so,” Lengyll said. His flush crept closer and closer to his brow, like a tide approaching a seawall. “It’s bad

company ye've fallen in with, girl . . . and in the end, bad company always leaves ye to face the music alone."

Susan actually laughed. "Bad company!" she said. "Aye, ye'd know about that, wouldn't ye, Fran?"

He turned, awkward and stiff in his embarrassment. She raised one booted foot and, before anyone could stop her, kicked him squarely between the shoulderblades. He went down on his stomach, his whole face widening in shocked surprise.

"No ye don't, ye bold cunt!" Renfrew shouted, and fetched her a wallop to the side of the head—it was on the left, and at least evened things up a bit, she would think later when her mind cleared and she was capable of thinking. She swayed in the saddle, but kept her seat. And she never looked at Renfrew, only at Lengyll, who had now managed to get to his hands and knees. He wore a deeply dazed expression.

"You killed my father!" she screamed at him. *"You killed my father, you cowardly, sneaking excuse for a man!"* She looked at the party of ranchers and *vaqs*, all of them staring at her now. *"There he is, Fran Lengyll, head of the Horsemen's Association, as low a sneak as ever walked! Low as coyote shit! Low as—"*

"That's enough," Jonas said, watching with some interest as Lengyll scuttled back to his men—and yes, Susan was bitterly delighted to see, it was a full-fledged scuttle—with his shoulders hunched. Rhea was cackling, rocking from side to side and making a sound like fingernails on a piece of slate. The sound shocked Susan, but she wasn't a bit surprised by Rhea's presence in this company.

"It could never be enough," she said, looking from Jonas to Lengyll with an expression of contempt so deep it seemed bottomless. "For him it could never be enough."

"Well, perhaps, but you did quite well in the time you had, lady-sai. Few could have done better. And listen to the witch cackle! Like salt

in his wounds, I wot . . . but we'll shut her up soon enough." Then, turning his head: "Clay!"

Reynolds rode up.

"Think you can get Sunbeam back to Seafront all right?"

"I think so." Reynolds tried not to show the relief he felt at being sent back east instead of west. He had begun to have a bad feeling about Hanging Rock, Latigo, the tankers . . . about the whole show, really. God knew why. "Now?"

"Give it another minute," Jonas said. "Mayhap there's going to be a spot of killing right here. Who knows? But it's the unanswered questions that makes it worthwhile getting up in the morning, even when a man's leg aches like a tooth with a hole in it. Wouldn't you say so?"

"I don't know, Eldred."

"Sai Renfrew, watch our pretty Sunbeam a minute. I have a piece of property to take back."

His voice carried well—he had meant that it should—and Rhea's cackles cut off suddenly, as if severed out of her throat with a hooking-knife. Smiling, Jonas walked his horse toward the black cart with its jostling show of gold symbols. Reynolds rode on his left, and Jonas sensed rather than saw Depape fall in on his right. Roy was a good enough boy, really; his head was a little soft, but his heart was in the right place, and you didn't have to tell him *everything*.

For every step forward Jonas's horse took, Rhea shrank back a little in the cart. Her eyes shifted from side to side in their deep sockets, looking for a way out that wasn't there.

"Keep away from me, ye charry man!" she cried, raising a hand toward him. With the other she clutched the sack with the ball in it

ever more tightly. “Keep away, or I’ll bring the lightning and strike ye dead where ye sit yer horse! Yer harrier friends, too!”

Jonas thought Roy hesitated briefly at that, but Clay never did, nor did Jonas himself. He guessed there was a great lot she could do . . . or that there had been, at one time. But that was before the hungry glass had entered her life.

“Give it up to me,” he said. He reached the side of her wagon and held his hand out for the bag. “It’s not yours and never was. One day you’ll doubtless have the Good Man’s thanks for keeping it so well as you have, but now you must give it up.”

She screamed—a sound of such piercing intensity that several of the *vaqueros* dropped their tin coffee-cups and clapped their hands over their ears. At the same time she knotted her hand through the drawstring and raised the bag over her head. The curved shape of the ball swung back and forth at the bottom of it like a pendulum.

“I’ll not!” she howled. *“I’ll smash it on the ground before I give it up to the likes o’ you!”*

Jonas doubted if the ball would break, not hurled by her weak arms onto the trampled, springy mat of the Bad Grass, but he didn’t think he would have occasion to find out, one way or the other.

“Clay,” he said. “Draw your gun.”

He didn’t need to look at Clay to see that he’d done it; he saw the frantic way her eyes shifted to the left, where Clay sat his horse.

“I’m going to have a count,” Jonas said. “Just a short one; if I get to three and she hasn’t passed that bag over, blow her ugly head off.”

“Aye.”

“One,” Jonas said, watching the ball pendulum back and forth at the bottom of the upheld bag. It was glowing; he could see dull pink even through the cloth. “Two. Enjoy hell, Rhea, goodbye. Thr—”

“*Here!*” she screamed, thrusting it out toward him and shielding her face with the crooked hook of her free hand. “*Here, take it! And may it damn you the way it’s damned me!*”

“Thankee-sai.”

He grabbed the bag just below the draw top and yanked. Rhea screamed again as the string skinned her knuckles and tore off one of her nails. Jonas hardly heard. His mind was a white explosion of exultation. For the first time in his long professional life he forgot his job, his surroundings, and the six thousand things that could get him killed on any day. He had it; he had it; by all the graves of all the gods, he had the fucking thing!

Mine! he thought, and that was all. He somehow restrained the urge to open the bag and stick his head inside it, like a horse sticking its head into a bag of oats, and looped the drawstring over the pommel of his saddle twice instead. He took in a breath as deep as his lungs would allow, then expelled it. Better. A little.

“Roy.”

“Aye, Jonas.”

It would be good to get out of this place, Jonas thought, and not for the first time. To get away from these hicks. He was sick of *aye* and *ye* and so *it is*, sick to his bones.

“Roy, we’ll give the bitch a ten-count this time. If she isn’t out of my sight by then, you have my permission to blow her ass off. Now, let’s see if you can do the counting. I’ll be listening close, so mind you don’t skip any!”

“One,” Depape said eagerly. “Two. Three. Four.”

Spitting curses, Rhea snatched up the reins of the cart and spanked the pony's back with them. The pony laid its ears back and jerked the cart forward so vigorously that Rhea went tumbling backward off the cantboard, her feet up, her white and bony shins showing above her ankle-high black shoes and mismatched wool stockings. The *vaqueros* laughed. Jonas laughed himself. It was pretty funny, all right, seeing her on her back with her pins in the air.

"Fuh-fuh-five," Depape said, laughing so hard he was hiccupping. "Sih-sih-six!"

Rhea climbed back up, flopped onto the cantboard again with all the grace of a dying fish, and peered around at them, wall-eyed and sneering.

"I curse ye all!" she screamed. It cut through them, stilling their laughter even as the cart bounced toward the edge of the trampled clearing. *"Every last one of ye! Ye . . . and ye . . . and ye!"* Her crooked finger pointed last at Jonas. *"Thief! Miserable thief!"*

As though it was yours, Jonas marveled (although "Mine!" was the first word to occur to him, once he had taken possession of it). *As though such a wonder could ever belong to a back-country reader of rooster-guts such as you.*

The cart bounced its way into the Bad Grass, the pony pulling hard with its ears laid back; the old woman's screams served to drive it better than any whip could have done. The black slipped into the green. They saw the cart flicker like a conjurer's trick, and then it was gone. For a long time yet, however, they heard her shrieking her curses, calling death down upon them beneath the Demon Moon.

15

"Go on," Jonas told Clay Reynolds. "Take our Sunbeam back. And if you want to stop on the way and make some use of her, why, be my guest." He glanced at Susan as he said this, to see what effect it might be having, but he was disappointed—she looked dazed, as if

the last blow Renfrew had dealt her had scrambled her brains, at least temporarily. “Just make sure she gets to Coral at the end of all the fun.”

“I will. Any message for sai Thorin?”

“Tell her to keep the wench someplace safe until she hears from me. And . . . why don’t you stay with her, Clay? Coral, I mean—come tomorrow, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about this ’un anymore, but Coral . . . ride with her to Ritzy when she goes. Be her escort, like.”

Reynolds nodded. Better and better. Seafront it would be, and that was fine. He might like a little taste of the girl once he got her there, but not on the way. Not under the ghostly-full daytime Demon Moon.

“Go on, then. Get started.”

Reynolds led her across the clearing, aiming for a point well away from the bent swath of grass where Rhea had made her exit. Susan rode silently, downcast eyes fixed on her bound wrists.

Jonas turned to face his men. “The three young fellows from In-World have broken their way out of jail, with that haughty young bitch’s help,” he said, pointing at Susan’s departing back.

There was a low, growling murmur from the men. That “Will Dearborn” and his friends were free they had known; that sai Delgado had helped them escape they had not . . . and it was perhaps just as well for her that Reynolds was at that moment leading her into the Bad Grass and out of sight.

“Never mind!” Jonas shouted, pulling their attention back to him. He reached out a stealthy hand and caressed the curve at the bottom of the drawstring bag. Just touching the ball made him feel as if he could do anything, and with one hand tied behind his back, at that.

“Never mind her, and never mind them!” His eyes moved from Lengyll to Wertner to Croydon to Brian Hookey to Roy Depape. “We’re close to forty men, going to join another hundred and fifty. They’re three, and not one a day over sixteen. Are you afraid of three little boys?”

“No!” they cried.

“If we run on em, my cullies, what will we do?”

“*KILL THEM!*” The shout so loud that it sent rooks rising up into the morning sun, cawing their displeasure as they commenced the hunt for more peaceful surroundings.

Jonas was satisfied. His hand was still on the sweet curve of the ball, and he could feel it pouring strength into him. *Pink strength*, he thought, and grinned.

“Come on, boys. I want those tankers in the woods west of Eyebolt before the home folks light their Reap-Night Bonfire.”

16

Sheemie, crouched down in the grass and peering into the clearing, was nearly run over by Rhea’s black wagon; the screaming, gibbering witch passed so close to him that he could smell her sour skin and dirty hair. If she had looked down, she couldn’t have missed seeing him and undoubtedly would have turned him into a bird or a bumbler or maybe even a mosquito.

The boy saw Jonas pass custody of Susan to the one in the cloak, and began working his way around the edge of the clearing. He heard Jonas haranguing the men (many of whom Sheemie knew; it shamed him to know how many Mejis cowboys were doing that bad Coffin Hunter’s bidding), but paid no attention to what he was saying. Sheemie froze in place as they mounted up, momentarily scared they would come in his direction, but they rode the other way, west. The clearing emptied almost as if by magic . . . except it wasn’t

entirely empty. Caprichoso had been left behind, his lead trailing on the beaten grass. Capi looked after the departing riders, brayed once—as if to tell them they could all go to hell—then turned and made eye-contact with Sheemie, who was peering out into the clearing. The mule flicked his ears at the boy, then tried to graze. He lipped the Bad Grass a single time, raised his head, and brayed at Sheemie, as if to say this was all the inn-boy’s fault.

Sheemie stared thoughtfully at Caprichoso, thinking of how much easier it was to ride than to walk. Gods, yes . . . but that second bray decided him against it. The mule might give one of his disgusted cries at the wrong time and alert the man who had Susan.

“You’ll find your way home, I reckon,” Sheemie said. “So long, pal. So long, good old Capi. See you farther down the path.”

He found the path made by Susan and Reynolds, and began to trot after them once more.

17

“They’re coming again,” Alain said a moment before Roland sensed it himself—a brief flicker in his head like pink lightning. “All of them.”

Roland hunkered in front of Cuthbert. Cuthbert looked back at him without even a suggestion of his usual foolish good humor.

“Much of it’s on you,” Roland said, then tapped the slingshot. “And on that.”

“I know.”

“How much have you got in the armory?”

“Almost four dozen steel balls.” Bert held up a cotton bag which had, in more settled times, held his father’s tobacco. “Plus assorted fireworks in my saddlebag.”

“How many big-bangers?”

“Enough, Roland.” Unsmiling. With the laughter gone from them, he had the hollow eyes of just one more killer. “Enough.”

Roland ran a hand down the front of the *serape* he wore, letting his palm reacquaint itself with the rough weave. He looked at Cuthbert’s, then at Alain’s, telling himself again that it could work, yes, as long as they held their nerve and didn’t let themselves think of it in terms of three against forty or fifty, it could work.

“The ones out at Hanging Rock will hear the shooting once it starts, won’t they?” Al asked.

Roland nodded. “With the wind blowing from us to them, there’s no doubt of that.”

“We’ll have to move fast, then.”

“We’ll go as best we can.” Roland thought of standing between the tangled green hedges behind the Great Hall, David the hawk on his arm and a sweat of terror trickling down his back. *I think you die today*, he had told the hawk, and he had told it true. Yet he himself had lived, and passed his test, and walked out of the testing corridor facing east. Today it was Cuthbert and Alain’s turn to be tested—not in Gilead, in the traditional place of proving behind the Great Hall, but here in Mejis, on the edge of the Bad Grass, in the desert, and in the canyon. Eyebolt Canyon.

“Prove or die,” Alain said, as if reading the run of the gunslinger’s thoughts. “That’s what it comes down to.”

“Yes. That’s what it always comes down to, in the end. How long before they get here, do you think?”

“An hour at least, I’d say. Likely two.”

“They’ll be running a ‘watch-and-go.’ ”

Alain nodded. "I think so, yes."

"That's not good," Cuthbert said.

"Jonas is afraid of being ambushed in the grass," Roland said. "Maybe of us setting fire to it around him. They'll loosen up when they get into the clear."

"You hope," Cuthbert said.

Roland nodded gravely. "Yes. I hope."

18

At first Reynolds was content to lead the girl along the broken backtrail at a fast walk, but about thirty minutes after leaving Jonas, Lengyll, and the rest, he broke into a trot. Pylon matched Reynolds's horse easily, and just as easily when, ten minutes later, he upped their speed to a light but steady run.

Susan held to the horn of her saddle with her bound hands and rode easily at Reynolds's right, her hair streaming out behind her. She thought her face must be quite colorful; the skin of her cheeks felt raised at least two inches higher than usual, welted and tender. Even the passing wind stung a little.

At the place where the Bad Grass gave way to the Drop, Reynolds stopped to give the horses a blow. He dismounted himself, turned his back to her, and took a piss. As he did, Susan looked up along the rise of land and saw the great herd, now untended and unravelling at the edges. They had done that much, perhaps. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"Do you need to do the necessary?" Reynolds asked. "I'll help you down if you do, but don't say no now and whine about it later."

"Ye're afraid. Big brave regulator that ye are, ye're scared, ain't ye? Aye, coffin tattoo and all."

Reynolds tried a contemptuous grin. It didn't fit his face very well this morning. "You ort to leave the fortune-telling to those that are good at it, missy. Now do you need a necessary stop or not?"

"No. And ye *are* afraid. Of what?"

Reynolds, who only knew that his bad feeling hadn't left him when he left Jonas, as he'd hoped it would, bared his tobacco-stained teeth at her. "If you can't talk sensible, just shut up."

"Why don't ye let me go? Perhaps my friends will do the same for you, when they catch us up."

This time Reynolds grunted laughter which was almost genuine. He swung himself into his saddle, hawked, spat. Overhead, Demon Moon was a pale and bloated ball in the sky. "You can dream, miss'sai," he said, "dreaming's free. But you ain't never going to see those three again. They're for the worms, they are. Now let's ride."

They rode.

19

Cordelia hadn't gone to bed at all on Reaping Eve. She sat the night through in her parlor chair, and although there was sewing on her lap, she had put not a single stitch in nor picked one out. Now, as morning's light brightened toward ten o' the clock, she sat in the same chair, looking out at nothing. What was there to look at, anyway? Everything had come down with a smash—all her hopes of the fortune Thorin would settle on Susan and Susan's child, perhaps while he still lived, certainly in his dead-letter; all her hopes of ascending to her proper place in the community; all her plans for the future. Swept away by two wilful young people who couldn't keep their pants up.

She sat in her old chair with her knitting on her lap and the ashes Susan had smeared on her cheek standing out like a brand, and

thought: *They'll find me dead in this chair, someday—old, poor, and forgotten. That ungrateful child! After all I did for her!*

What roused her was a weak scratching at the window. She had no idea how long it had been going on before it finally intruded on her consciousness, but when it did, she laid her needlework aside and got up to see. A bird, perhaps. Or children playing Reaping jokes, unaware that the world had come to an end. Whatever it was, she would shoo it away.

Cordelia saw nothing at first. Then, as she was about to turn away, she spied a pony and cart at the edge of the yard. The cart was a little disquieting—black, with gold symbols overpainted—and the pony in the shafts stood with its head lowered, not grazing, looking as if it had been run half to death.

She was still frowning out at this when a twisted, filthy hand rose in the air directly in front of her and began to scratch at the glass again. Cordelia gasped and clapped both hands to her bosom as her heart took a startled leap in her chest. She backed up a step, and gave a little shriek as her calf brushed the fender of the stove.

The long, dirty nails scratched twice more, then fell away.

Cordelia stood where she was for a moment, irresolute, then went to the door, stopping at the woodbox to pick up a chunk of ash which fitted her hand. Just in case. Then she jerked the door open, went to the corner of the house, drew in a deep, steadying breath, and went around to the garden side, raising the ash-chunk as she did.

“Get out, whoever ye are! Scat before I—”

Her voice was stilled by what she saw: an incredibly old woman crawling through the frost-killed flowerbed next to the house—crawling toward her. The crone's stringy white hair (what remained of it) hung in her face. Sores festered on her cheeks and brow; her lips had split and drizzled blood down her pointed, warty chin. The

corneas of her eyes had gone a filthy gray-yellow, and she panted like a cracked bellows as she moved.

“Good woman, help me,” this specter gasped. “Help me if ye will, for I’m about done up.”

The hand holding the chunk of ash sagged. Cordelia could hardly believe what she was seeing. “Rhea?” she whispered. “Is it Rhea?”

“Aye,” Rhea whispered, crawling relentlessly through the dead silkflowers, dragging her hands through the cold earth. “Help me.”

Cordelia retreated a step, her makeshift bludgeon now hanging at her knee. “No, I . . . I can’t have such as thee in my house . . . I’m sorry to see ye so, but . . . but I have a reputation, ye ken . . . folk watch me close, so they do . . .”

She glanced at the High Street as she said this, as if expecting to see a line of townspeople outside her gate, watching eagerly, avid to fleet their wretched gossip on its lying way, but there was no one there. Hambry was quiet, its walks and byways empty, the customary joyous noise of Reaping Fair-Day stilled. She looked back at the thing which had fetched up in her dead flowers.

“Yer niece . . . did this . . .” the thing in the dirt whispered. “All . . . her fault . . .”

Cordelia dropped the chunk of wood. It clipped the side of her ankle, but she hardly noticed. Her hands curled into fists before her.

“Help me,” Rhea whispered. “I know . . . where she is . . . we . . . we have work, us two . . . women’s . . . work . . .”

Cordelia hesitated a moment, then went to the woman, knelt, got an arm around her, and somehow got her to her feet. The smell coming off her was reeky and nauseating—the smell of decomposing flesh.

Bony fingers caressed Cordelia's cheek and the side of her neck as she helped the hag into the house. Cordelia's flesh crawled, but she didn't pull away until Rhea collapsed into a chair, gasping from one end and farting from the other.

"Listen to me," the old woman hissed.

"I am." Cordelia drew a chair over and sat beside her. At death's door she might be, but once her eye fell on you, it was strangely hard to look away. Now Rhea's fingers dipped inside the bodice of her dirty dress, brought out a silver charm of some kind, and began to move it back and forth rapidly, as if telling beads. Cordelia, who hadn't felt sleepy all night, began to feel that way now.

"The others are beyond us," Rhea said, "and the ball has slipped my grasp. But *she*—! Back to Mayor's House she's been ta'en, and mayhap we could see to her—we could do that much, aye."

"You can't see to anything," Cordelia said distantly. "You're dying."

Rhea wheezed laughter and a trickle of yellowish drool. "Dying? Nay! Just done up and in need of a refreshment. Now listen to me, Cordelia daughter of Hiram and sister of Pat!"

She hooked a bony (and surprisingly strong) arm around Cordelia's neck and drew her close. At the same time she raised her other hand, twirling the silver medallion in front of Cordelia's wide eyes. The crone whispered, and after a bit Cordelia began to nod her understanding.

"Do it, then," the old woman said, letting go. She slumped back in her chair, exhausted. "Now, for I can't last much longer as I am. And I'll need a bit o' time after, mind ye. To revive, like."

Cordelia moved across the room to the kitchen area. There, on the counter beside the hand-pump, was a wooden block in which were sheathed the two sharp knives of the house. She took one and came back. Her eyes were distant and far, as Susan's had been when she

and Rhea stood in the open doorway of Rhea's hut in the light of the Kissing Moon.

"Would ye pay her back?" Rhea asked. "For that's why I've come to ye."

"Miss Oh So Young and Pretty," Cordelia murmured in a barely audible voice. The hand not holding the knife floated up to her face and touched her ash-smeared cheek. "Yes. I'd be repaid of her, so I would."

"To the death?"

"Aye. Hers or mine."

"'Twill be hers," Rhea said, "never fear it. Now refresh me, Cordelia. Give me what I need!"

Cordelia unbuttoned her dress down the front, pushing it open to reveal an ungenerous bosom and a middle which had begun to curve out in the last year or so, making a tidy little potbelly. Yet she still had the vestige of a waist, and it was here she used the knife, cutting through her shift and the top layers of flesh beneath. The white cotton began to bloom red at once along the slit.

"Aye," Rhea whispered. "Like roses. I dream of them often enough, roses in bloom, and what stands black among em at the end of the world. Come closer!" She put her hand on the small of Cordelia's back, urging her forward. She raised her eyes to Cordelia's face, then grinned and licked her lips. "Good. Good enough."

Cordelia looked blankly over the top of the old woman's head as Rhea of the Cöos buried her face against the red cut in the shift and began to drink.

Roland was at first pleased as the muted jingle of harness and buckle drew closer to the place where the three of them were hunkered down in the high grass, but as the sounds drew closer still—close enough to hear murmuring voices as well as soft-thudding hooves—he began to be afraid. For the riders to pass close was one thing, but if they were, through foul luck, to come right upon them, the three boys would likely die like a nest of moles uncovered by the blade of a passing plow.

Ka surely hadn't brought them all this way to end in such fashion, had it? In all these miles of Bad Grass, how could that party of oncoming riders possibly strike the one point where Roland and his friends had pulled up? But still they closed in, the sound of tack and buckle and men's voices growing ever sharper.

Alain looked at Roland with dismayed eyes and pointed to the left. Roland shook his head and patted his hands toward the ground, indicating they would stay put. They *had* to stay put; it was too late to move without being heard.

Roland drew his guns.

Cuthbert and Alain did the same.

In the end, the plow missed the moles by sixty feet. The boys could actually see the horses and riders flashing through the thick grass; Roland easily made out that the party was led by Jonas, Depape, and Lengyll, riding three abreast. They were followed by at least three dozen others, glimpsed as roan flashes and the bright red and green of *serapes* through the grass. They were strung out pretty well, and Roland thought he and his friends could reasonably hope they'd string out even more once they reached open desert.

The boys waited for the party to pass, holding their horses' heads in case one of them took it in mind to whicker a greeting to the nags so close by. When they were gone, Roland turned his pale and unsmiling face to his friends.

“Mount up,” he said. “Reaping’s come.”

21

They walked their horses to the edge of the Bad Grass, meeting the path of Jonas’s party where the grass gave way first to a zone of stunted bushes and then to the desert itself.

The wind howled high and lonesome, carrying big drifts of gritty dust under a cloudless dark blue sky. Demon Moon stared down from it like the filmed eye of a corpse. Two hundred yards ahead, the drogue riders backing Jonas’s party were spread out in a line of three, their *sombreros* jammed down tight on their heads, their shoulders hunched, their *serapes* blowing.

Roland moved so that Cuthbert rode in the middle of their trio. Bert had his slingshot in his hand. Now he handed Alain half a dozen steel balls, and Roland another half-dozen. Then he raised his eyebrows questioningly. Roland nodded and they began to ride.

Dust blew past them in rattling sheets, sometimes turning the drogue riders into ghosts, sometimes obscuring them completely, but the boys closed in steadily. Roland rode tense, waiting for one of the drogues to turn in his saddle and see them, but none did—none of them wanted to put his face into that cutting, grit-filled wind. Nor was there sound to warn them; there was sandy hardpack under the horses’ hooves now, and it didn’t give away much.

When they were just twenty yards behind the drogues, Cuthbert nodded—they were close enough for him to work. Alain handed him a ball. Bert, sitting ramrod straight in the saddle, dropped it into the cup of his slingshot, pulled, waited for the wind to drop, then released. The rider ahead on the left jerked as if stung, raised one hand a little, then toppled out of his saddle. Incredibly, neither of his two *compañeros* seemed to notice. Roland saw what he thought was the beginning of a reaction from the one on the right when Bert drew again, and the rider in the middle collapsed forward onto his horse’s neck. The horse, startled, reared up. The rider flopped bonelessly

backward, his *sombrero* tumbling off, and fell. The wind dropped enough for Roland to hear his knee snap as his foot caught in one of his stirrups.

The third rider now began to turn. Roland caught a glimpse of a bearded face—a dangling cigarette, unlit because of the wind, one astonished eye—and then Cuthbert's sling *thumped* again. The astonished eye was replaced by a red socket. The rider slid from his saddle, groping for the horn and missing it.

Three gone, Roland thought.

He kicked Rusher into a gallop. The others did the same, and the boys rode forward into the dust a stirrup's width apart. The horses of the ambushed drogue riders veered off to the south in a group, and that was good. Riderless horses ordinarily didn't raise eyebrows in Mejis, but when they were saddled—

More riders up ahead: a single, then two side by side, then another single.

Roland drew his knife, and rode up beside the fellow who was now drogue and didn't know it.

"What news?" he asked conversationally, and when the man turned, Roland buried his knife in his chest. The *vaq's* brown eyes widened above the bandanna he'd pulled up outlaw-style over his mouth and nose, and then he tumbled from his saddle.

Cuthbert and Alain spurred past him, and Bert, not slowing, took the two riding ahead with his slingshot. The fellow beyond them heard something in spite of the wind, and swivelled in his saddle. Alain had drawn his own knife and now held it by the tip of the blade. He threw hard, in the exaggerated full-arm motion they had been taught, and although the range was long for such work—twenty feet at least, and in windy air—his aim was true. The hilt came to rest protruding from the center of the man's bandanna. The *vaq* groped

for it, making choked gargling sounds around the knife in his throat, and then he too dropped from the saddle.

Seven now.

Like the story of the shoemaker and the flies, Roland thought. His heart was beating slow and hard in his chest as he caught up with Alain and Cuthbert. The wind gusted a lonely whine. Dust flew, swirled, then dropped with the wind. Ahead of them were three more riders, and ahead of them the main party.

Roland pointed at the next three, then mimed the slingshot. Pointed beyond them and mimed firing a revolver. Cuthbert and Alain nodded. They rode forward, once again stirrup-to-stirrup, closing in.

22

Bert got two of the three ahead of them clean, but the third jerked at the wrong moment, and the steel ball meant for the back of his head only clipped his earlobe on the way by. Roland had drawn his gun by then, however, and put a bullet in the man's temple as he turned. That made ten, a full quarter of Jonas's company before the riders even realized trouble had begun. Roland had no idea if it would be enough of an advantage, but he knew that the first part of the job was done. No more stealth; now it was a matter of raw killing.

"Hile! Hile!" he screamed in a ringing, carrying voice. *"To me, gunslingers! To me! Ride them down! No prisoners!"*

They spurred toward the main party, riding into battle for the first time, closing like wolves on sheep, shooting before the men ahead of them had any slight idea of who had gotten in behind them or what was happening. The three boys had been trained as gunslingers, and what they lacked in experience they made up for with the keen eyes and reflexes of the young. Under their guns, the desert east of Hanging Rock became a killing-floor.

Screaming, not a single thought among them above the wrists of their deadly hands, they sliced into the unprepared Mejis party like a three-sided blade, shooting as they went. Not every shot killed, but not a one went entirely wild, either. Men flew out of their saddles and were dragged by boots caught in stirrups as their horses bolted; other men, some dead, some only wounded, were trampled beneath the feet of their panicky, rearing mounts.

Roland rode with both guns drawn and firing, Rusher's reins gripped in his teeth so they wouldn't fall overside and trip the horse up. Two men dropped beneath his fire on his left, two more on the right. Ahead of them, Brian Hookey turned in his saddle, his beard-stubbly face long with amazement. Around his neck, a reap-charm in the shape of a bell swung and tinkled as he grabbed for the shotgun which hung in a scabbard over one burly blacksmith's shoulder. Before he could do more than get a hand on the gunstock, Roland blew the silver bell off his chest and exploded the heart which lay beneath it. Hookey pitched out of his saddle with a grunt.

Cuthbert caught up with Roland on the right side and shot two more men off their horses. He gave Roland a fierce and blazing grin. "*Al was right!*" he shouted. "*These are hard calibers!*"

Roland's talented fingers did their work, rolling the cylinders of the guns he held and reloading at a full gallop—doing it with a ghastly, supernatural speed—and then beginning to fire again. Now they had come almost all the way through the group, riding hard, laying men low on both sides and straight ahead as well. Alain dropped back a little and turned his horse, covering Roland and Cuthbert from behind.

Roland saw Jonas, Depape, and Lengyll reining around to face their attackers. Lengyll was clawing at his machine-gun, but the strap had gotten tangled in the wide collar of the duster he wore, and every time he grabbed for the stock, it bobbed out of his reach. Beneath his heavy gray-blond mustache, Lengyll's mouth was twisted with fury.

Now, riding between Roland and Cuthbert and these three, holding a huge blued-steel five-shot in one hand, came Hash Renfrew.

“Gods damn you!” Renfrew cried. “Oh, you rotten sister-fuckers!” He dropped his reins and laid the five-shot in the crook of one elbow to steady it. The wind gusted viciously, wrapping him in an envelope of swirling brown grit.

Roland had no thought of retreating, or perhaps jiggling to one side or the other. He had, in fact, no thoughts at all. The fever had descended over his mind and he burned with it like a torch inside a glass sleeve. Screaming through the reins caught in his teeth, he galloped toward Hash Renfrew and the three men behind him.

23

Jonas had no clear idea of what was happening until he heard Will Dearborn screaming

(Hile! To me! No prisoners!)

a battle-cry he knew of old. Then it fell into place and the rattle of gunfire made sense. He reined around, aware of Roy doing the same beside him . . . but most aware of the ball in its bag, a thing both powerful and fragile, swinging back and forth against the neck of his horse.

“It’s those *kids!*” Roy exclaimed. His total surprise made him look more stupid than ever.

“*Dearborn, you bastard!*” Hash Renfrew spat, and the gun in his hand thundered a single time.

Jonas saw Dearborn’s sombrero rise from his head, its brim chewed away. Then the kid was firing, and he was good—better than anyone Jonas had ever seen in his life. Renfrew was hammered back out of his saddle with both legs kicking, still holding onto his

monster gun, firing it twice at the dusty-blue sky before hitting the ground on his back and rolling, dead, on his side.

Lengyll's hand dropped away from the elusive wire stock of his speed-shooter and he only stared, unable to believe the apparition bearing down on him out of the dust. "Get back!" he cried. "In the name of the Horsemen's Association, I tell you—" Then a large black hole appeared in the center of his forehead, just above the place where his eyebrows tangled together. His hands flew up to his shoulders, palms out, as if he were declaring surrender. That was how he died.

"Son of a bitch, oh you little sister-fucking son of a bitch!" Depape howled. He tried to draw and his revolver got caught in his *serape*. He was still trying to pull it free when a bullet from Roland's gun opened his mouth in a red scream almost all the way down to his adam's apple.

This can't be happening, Jonas thought stupidly. It can't, there are too many of us.

But it *was* happening. The In-World boys had struck unerringly at the fracture-line; were performing what amounted to a textbook example of how gunslingers were supposed to attack when the odds were bad. And Jonas's coalition of ranchers, cowboys, and town tough-boys had shattered. Those not dead were fleeing to every point of the compass, spurring their horses as if a hundred devils paroled from hell were in pursuit. They were far from a hundred, but they *fought* like a hundred. Bodies were scattered in the dust everywhere, and as Jonas watched, he saw the one serving as their back door—Stockworth—ride down another man, bump him out of his saddle, and put a bullet in his head as he fell. *Gods of the earth, he thought, that was Croydon, him that owns the Piano Ranch!*

Except he didn't own it anymore.

And now Dearborn was bearing down on Jonas with his gun drawn.

Jonas snatched the drawstring looped around the horn of his saddle and unwound it with two fast, hard snaps of the wrist. He held the bag up in the windy air, his teeth bared and his long white hair streaming.

“Come any closer and I’ll smash it! I mean it, you damned puppy! Stay where you are!”

Roland never hesitated in his headlong gallop, never paused to think; his hands did his thinking for him now, and when he remembered all this later, it was distant and silent and queerly warped, like something seen in a flawed mirror . . . or a wizard’s glass.

Jonas thought: *Gods, it’s him! It’s Arthur Eld himself come to take me!*

And as the barrel of Roland’s gun opened in his eye like the entrance to a tunnel or a mineshaft, Jonas remembered what the brat had said to him in the dusty dooryard of that burned-out ranch: *The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west.*

I knew, Jonas thought. Even then I knew my ka had pretty well run out. But surely he won’t risk the ball . . . he can’t risk the ball, he’s the dinh of this ka-tet and he can’t risk it . . .

“To me!” Jonas screamed. “To me, boys! They’re only three, for gods’ sake! To me, you cowards!”

But he was alone—Lengyll killed with his idiotic machine-gun lying by his side, Roy a corpse glaring up at the bitter sky, Quint fled, Hookey dead, the ranchers who had ridden with them gone. Only Clay still lived, and he was miles from here.

“I’ll smash it!” he shrieked at the cold-eyed boy bearing down on him like death’s sleekest engine. “Before all the gods, I’ll—”

Roland thumbed back the hammer of his revolver and fired. The bullet struck the center of the tattooed hand holding the drawstring cord and vaporized the palm, leaving only fingers that twitched their random way out of a spongy red mass. For just a moment Roland saw the blue coffin, and then it was covered by downspilling blood.

The bag dropped. And, as Rusher collided with Jonas's horse and slewed it to the side, Roland caught the bag deftly in the crook of one arm. Jonas, screaming in dismay as the prize left him, grabbed at Roland, caught his shoulder, and almost succeeded in turning the gunslinger out of his saddle. Jonas's blood rained across Roland's face in hot drops.

"Give it back, you brat!" Jonas clawed under his *serape* and brought out another gun. *"Give it back, it's mine!"*

"Not anymore," Roland said. And, as Rusher danced around, quick and delicate for such a large animal, Roland fired two point-blank rounds into Jonas's face. Jonas's horse bolted out from under him and the man with the white hair landed spreadeagled on his back with a thump. His arms and legs spasmed, jerked, trembled, then stilled.

Roland looped the bag's drawstring over his shoulder and rode back toward Alain and Cuthbert, ready to give aid . . . but there was no need. They sat their horses side by side in the blowing dust, at the end of a scattered road of dead bodies, their eyes wide and dazed—eyes of boys who have passed through fire for the first time and can hardly believe they have not been burned. Only Alain had been wounded; a bullet had opened his left cheek, a wound that healed clean but left a scar he bore until his dying day. He could not remember who had shot him, he said later on, or at what point of the battle. He had been lost to himself during the shooting, and had only vague memories of what had happened after the charge began. Cuthbert said much the same.

"Roland," Cuthbert said now. He passed a shaky hand down his face. "Hile, gunslinger."

“Hile.”

Cuthbert’s eyes were red and irritated from the sand, as if he had been crying. He took back the unspent silver slingshot balls when Roland handed them to him without seeming to know what they were. “Roland, we’re alive.”

“Yes.”

Alain was looking around dazedly. “Where did the others go?”

“I’d say at least twenty-five of them are back there,” Roland said, gesturing at the road of dead bodies. “The rest—” He waved his hand, still with a revolver in it, in a wide half-circle. “They’ve gone. Had their fill of Mid-World’s wars, I wot.”

Roland slipped the drawstring bag off his shoulder, held it before him on the bridge of his saddle for a moment, and then opened it. For a moment the bag’s mouth was black, and then it filled with the irregular pulse of a lovely pink light.

It crept up the gunslinger’s smooth cheeks like fingers and swam in his eyes.

“Roland,” Cuthbert said, suddenly nervous, “I don’t think you should play with that. Especially not now. They’ll have heard the shooting out at Hanging Rock. If we’re going to finish what we started, we don’t have time for—”

Roland ignored him. He slipped both hands into the bag and lifted the wizard’s glass out. He held it up to his eyes, unaware that he had smeared it with droplets of Jonas’s blood. The ball did not mind; this was not the first time it had been blood-touched. It flashed and swirled formlessly for a moment, and then its pink vapors opened like curtains. Roland saw what was there, and lost himself within it.

CHAPTER X BENEATH THE DEMON MOON (II)

1

Coral's grip on Susan's arm was firm but not painful. There was nothing particularly cruel about the way she was moving Susan along the downstairs corridor, but there was a relentlessness about it that was disheartening. Susan didn't try to protest; it would have been useless. Behind the two women were a pair of *vaqueros* (armed with knives and *bolos* rather than guns; the available guns had all gone west with Jonas). Behind the *vaqs*, skulking along like a sullen ghost which lacks the necessary psychic energy to fully materialize itself, came the late Chancellor's older brother, Laslo Reynolds, his taste for a spot of journey's-end rape blunted by his growing sense of disquiet, had either remained above or gone off to town.

"I'm going to put ye in the cold pantry until I know better what to do with'ee, dear," Coral said. "Ye'll be quite safe there . . . and warm. How fortunate ye wore a *serape*. Then . . . when Jonas gets back . . ."

"Ye'll never see sai Jonas again," Susan said. "He won't ever—"

Fresh pain exploded in her sensitive face. For a moment it seemed the entire world had blown up. Susan reeled back against the dressed stone wall of the lower corridor, her vision first blurred, then slowly clearing. She could feel blood flowing down her cheek from a wound opened by the stone in Coral's ring when Coral had backhanded her. And her nose. *That* cussed thing was bleeding again, too.

Coral was looking at her in a chilly this-is-all-business-to-me fashion, but Susan believed she saw something different in the woman's eyes. Fear, mayhap.

“Don't talk to me about Eldred, missy. He's sent to catch the boys who killed my brother. The boys *you* set loose.”

“Get off it.” Susan wiped her nose, grimaced at the blood pooled in her palm, and wiped it on the leg of her pants. “I know who killed Hart as well as ye do yerself, so don't pull mine and I won't yank yer own.” She watched Coral's hand rise, ready to slap, and managed a dry laugh. “Go on. Cut my face open on the other side, if ye like. Will that change how ye sleep tonight with no man to warm the other side of the bed?”

Coral's hand came down fast and hard, but instead of slapping, it seized Susan's arm again. Hard enough to hurt, this time, but Susan barely felt it. She had been hurt by experts this day, and would suffer more hurt gladly, if that would hasten the moment when she and Roland could be together again.

Coral hauled her the rest of the way down the corridor, through the kitchen (that great room, which would have been all steam and bustle on any other Reaping Day, now stood uncannily deserted), and to the iron-bound door on the far side. This she opened. A smell of potatoes and gourds and sharproot drifted out.

“Get in there. Go smart, before I decide to kick yer winsome ass square.”

Susan looked her in the eye, smiling.

“I'd damn ye for a murderer's bed-bitch, sai Thorin, but ye've already damned yerself. Ye know it, too—'tis written in yer face, to be sure. So I'll just drop ye a curtsey”—still smiling, she suited action to the words—“and wish ye a very good day.”

“Get in and shut up yer saucy mouth!” Coral cried, and pushed Susan into the cold pantry. She slammed the door, ran the bolt, and turned her blazing eyes upon the *vaqs*, who stood prudently away from her.

“Keep her well, *muchachos*. Mind ye do.”

She brushed between them, not listening to their assurances, and went up to her late brother’s suite to wait for Jonas, or word of Jonas. The whey-faced bitch sitting down there amongst the carrots and potatoes knew nothing, but her words

(ye’ll never see sai Jonas again)

were in Coral’s head now; they echoed and would not leave.

2

Twelve o’ the clock sounded from the squat bell-tower atop the Town Gathering Hall. And if the unaccustomed silence which hung over the rest of Hambry seemed strange as that Reap morning passed into afternoon, the silence in the Travellers’ Rest was downright eerie. Better than two hundred souls were packed together beneath the dead gaze of The Romp, all of them drinking hard, yet there was hardly a sound among them save for the shuffle of feet and the impatient rap of glasses on the bar, indicating that another drink was wanted.

Sheb had tried a hesitant tune on the piano—“Big Bottle Boogie,” everyone liked that one—and a cowboy with a mutie-mark on one cheek had put the tip of a knife in his ear and told him to shut up that noise if he wanted to keep what passed for his brains on the starboard side of his eardrum. Sheb, who would be happy to go on drawing breath for another thousand years if the gods so allowed, quit his piano-bench at once, and went to the bar to help Stanley and Pettie the Trotter serve up the booze.

The mood of the drinkers was confused and sullen. Reaping Fair had been stolen from them, and they didn't know what to do about it. There would still be a bonfire, and plenty of stuffy-guys to burn on it, but there were no Reap-kisses today and would be no dancing tonight; no riddles, no races, no pig-wrestle, no jokes . . . no good cheer, dammit! No hearty farewell to the end of the year! Instead of joviality there had been murder in the dark, and the escape of the guilty, and now only the hope of retribution instead of the certainty of it. These folk, sullen-drunk and as potentially dangerous as stormclouds filled with lightning, wanted someone to focus on, someone to tell them what to do.

And, of course, someone to toss on the fire, as in the days of Eld.

It was at this point, not long after the last toll of noon had faded into the cold air, that the batwing doors opened and two women came in. A good many knew the crone in the lead, and several of them crossed their eyes with their thumbs as a ward against her evil look. A murmur ran through the room. It was the Cöos, the old witch-woman, and although her face was pocked with sores and her eyes sunk so deep in their sockets they could barely be seen, she gave off a peculiar sense of vitality. Her lips were red, as if she had been eating winterberries.

The woman behind her walked slowly and stiffly, with one hand pressed against her midsection. Her face was as white as the witch-woman's mouth was red.

Rhea advanced to the middle of the floor, passing the gawking trailhands at the Watch Me tables without so much as a glance. When she reached the center of the bar and stood directly beneath The Romp's glare, she turned to look at the silent drovers and townfolk.

"Most of ye know me!" she cried in a rusty voice which stopped just short of stridency. "Those of ye who don't have never wanted a love-potion or needed the ram put back in yer rod or gotten tired of a nagging mother-in-law's tongue. I'm Rhea, the wise-woman of the

Cöos, and this lady beside me is aunt to the girl who freed three murderers last night . . . this same girl who murdered yer town's Sheriff and a good young man—married, he was, and with a kid on the way. He stood before her with 'is defenseless hands raised, pleadin for his life on behalf of his wife and his babby to come, and still she shot 'im! Cruel, she is! Cruel and heartless!”

A mutter ran through the crowd. Rhea raised her twisted old claws and it stilled at once. She turned in a slow circle to see them all, hands still raised, looking like the world's oldest, ugliest prizefighter.

“Strangers came and ye welcomed em in!” she cried in her rusty crow's voice. “Welcomed em and gave em bread to eat, and it's ruin they've fed ye in return! The deaths of those ye loved and depended on, spoilage to the time of the harvest, and gods know what curses upon the time to follow *fin de año!*”

More murmurs, now louder. She had touched their deepest fear: that this year's evil would spread, might even snarl the newly threaded stock which had so slowly and hopefully begun to emerge along the Outer Arc.

“But they've gone and likely won't be back!” Rhea continued. “Mayhap just as well—why should their strange blood taint our ground? But there's this other . . . one raised among us . . . a young woman gone traitor to her town and rogue among her own kind.”

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper on this last phrase; her listeners strained forward to hear, faces grim, eyes big. And now Rhea pulled the pallid, skinny woman in the rusty black dress forward. She stood Cordelia in front of her like a doll or a ventriloquist's dummy, and whispered in her ear . . . but the whisper travelled, somehow; they all heard it.

“Come, dear. Tell em what ye told me.”

In a dead, carrying voice, Cordelia said: “She said she wouldn't be the Mayor's gilly. He wasn't good enough for such as her, she said.

And then she seduced Will Dearborn. The price of her body was a fine position in Gilead as his consort . . . and the murder of Hart Thorin. Dearborn paid her price. Lusty as he was for her, he paid gladly. His friends helped; they may have had the use of 'er as well, for all I know. Chancellor Rimer must have gotten in their way. Or p'rhaps they just saw him, and felt like doing him, too."

"Bastards!" Pettie cried. "Sneaking young culls!"

"Now tell em what's needed to clarify the new season before it's sp'iled, dearie," Rhea said in a crooning voice.

Cordelia Delgado raised her head and looked around at the men. She took a breath, pulling the sour, intermingled smells of *graf* and beer and smoke and whiskey deep into her spinster's lungs.

"Take her. Ye must take her. I say it in love and sorrow, so I do."

Silent. Their eyes.

"Paint her hands."

The glass gaze of the thing on the wall, looking its stuffed judgment over the waiting room.

"*Charyou tree*," Cordelia whispered.

They did not cry their agreement but sighed it, like autumn wind through stripped trees.

3

Sheemie ran after the bad Coffin Hunter and Susan-sai until he could literally run no more—his lungs were afire and the stitch which had formed in his side turned into a cramp. He pitched forward onto the grass of the Drop, his left hand clutching his right armpit, grimacing with pain.

He lay there for some time with his face deep in the fragrant grass, knowing they were getting farther and farther ahead but also knowing it would do him no good to get up and start running again until the stitch was good and gone. If he tried to hurry the process, the stitch would simply come back and lay him low again. So he lay where he was, lifting his head to look at the tracks left by Susan-sai and the bad Coffin Hunter, and he was just about ready to try his feet when Caprichoso bit him. Not a nip, mind you, but a good healthy chomp. Capi had had a difficult twenty-four hours, and he hadn't much liked to see the author of all his misery lying on the grass, apparently taking a nap.

“Yeee-OWWWW-by-damn!” Sheemie cried, and rocketed to his feet. There was nothing so magical as a good bite on the ass, a man of more philosophic bent might have reflected; it made all other concerns, no matter how heavy or sorrowful, disappear like smoke.

He whirled about. “Why did you do that, you mean old sneak of a Capi?” Sheemie was rubbing his bottom vigorously, and large tears of pain stood out in his eyes. “That hurts like . . . like a big old *sonovabitch!*”

Caprichoso extended his neck to its maximum length, bared his teeth in the satanic grin which only mules and dromedaries can command, and brayed. To Sheemie that bray sounded very like laughter.

The mule's lead still trailed back between his sharp little hoofs. Sheemie reached for it, and when Capi dipped his head to inflict another bite, the boy gave him a good hard whack across the side of his narrow head. Capi snorted and blinked.

“You had that coming, mean old Capi,” Sheemie said. “I'll have to shit from a squat for a week, so I will. Won't be able to sit on the damned jakes.” He doubled the lead over his fist and climbed aboard the mule. Capi made no attempt to buck him off, but Sheemie winced as his wounded part settled atop the ridge of the mule's spine. This was good luck just the same, though, he thought as he

kicked the animal into motion. His ass hurt, but at least he wouldn't have to walk . . . or try to run with a stitch in his side.

"Go on, stupid!" he said. "Hurry up! Fast as you can, you old sonovabitch!"

In the course of the next hour, Sheemie called Capi "you old sonovabitch" as often as possible—he had discovered, as many others had before him, that only the first cussword is really hard; after that, there's nothing quite like them for relieving one's feelings.

4

Susan's trail cut diagonally across the Drop toward the coast and the grand old adobe that rose there. When Sheemie reached Seafront, he dismounted outside the arch and only stood, wondering what to do next. That they had come here, he had no doubt—Susan's horse, Pylon, and the bad Coffin Hunter's horse were tethered side by side in the shade, occasionally dropping their heads and blowing in the pink stone trough that ran along the courtyard's ocean side.

What to do now? The riders who came and went beneath the arch (mostly white-headed *vaqs* who'd been considered too old to form a part of Lengyll's party) paid no attention to the inn-boy and his mule, but Miguel might be a different story. The old *mozo* had never liked him, acted as if he thought Sheemie would turn thief, given half a chance, and if he saw Coral's slop-and-carry-boy skulking in the courtyard, Miguel would very likely drive him away.

No, he won't, he thought grimly. Not today, today I can't let him boss me. I won't go even if he hollers.

But if the old man *did* holler and raised an alarm, what then? The bad Coffin Hunter might come and kill him. Sheemie had reached a point where he was willing to die for his friends, but not unless it served a purpose.

So he stood in the cold sunlight, shifting from foot to foot, irresolute, wishing he was smarter than he was, that he could think of a plan. An hour passed this way, then two. It was slow time, each passing moment an exercise in frustration. He sensed any opportunity to help Susan-sai slipping away, but didn't know what to do about it. Once he heard what sounded like thunder from the west . . . although a bright fall day like this didn't seem right for thunder.

He had about decided to chance the courtyard anyway—it was temporarily deserted, and he might be able to make it across to the main house—when the man he had feared came staggering out of the stables.

Miguel Torres was festooned with reap-charms and was very drunk. He approached the center of the courtyard in rolling side-to-side loops, the tugstring of his *sombrero* twisted against his scrawny throat, his long white hair flying. The front of his *chibosa* was wet, as if he had tried to take a leak without remembering that you had to unlimber your dingus first. He had a small ceramic jug in one hand. His eyes were fierce and bewildered.

“Who done this?” Miguel cried. He looked up at the afternoon sky and the Demon Moon which floated there. Little as Sheemie liked the old man, his heart cringed. It was bad luck to look directly at old Demon, so it was. “Who done this thing? I ask that you tell me, *señor! Por favor!*” A pause, then a scream so powerful that Miguel reeled on his feet and almost fell. He raised his fists, as if he would box an answer out of the winking face in the moon, then dropped them wearily. Corn liquor slopped from the neck of the jug and wet him further. “*Maricon,*” he muttered. He staggered to the wall (almost tripping over the rear legs of the bad Coffin Hunter's horse as he went), then sat down with his back against the adobe wall. He drank deeply from the jug, then pulled his *sombrero* up and settled it over his eyes. His arm twitched the jug, then settled it back, as if in the end it had proved too heavy. Sheemie waited until the old man's thumb came unhooked from the jughandle and the hand flopped

onto the cobbles. He started forward, then decided to wait even a little longer. Miguel was old and Miguel was mean, but Sheemie guessed Miguel might also be tricky. Lots of folks were, especially the mean ones.

He waited until he heard Miguel's dusty snores, then led Capi into the courtyard, wincing at every clop of the mule's hooves. Miguel never stirred, however. Sheemie tied Capi to the end of the hitching rail (wincing again as Caprichoso brayed a tuneless greeting to the horses tied there), then walked quickly across to the main door, through which he had never in his life expected to pass. He put his hand on the great iron latch, looked back once more at the old man sleeping against the wall, then opened the door and tiptoed in.

He stood for a moment in the oblong of sun the open door admitted, his shoulders hunched all the way up to his ears, expecting a hand to settle on the scruff of his neck (which bad-natured folk always seemed able to find, no matter how high you hunched your shoulders) at any moment; an angry voice would follow, asking what he thought he was doing here.

The foyer stood empty and silent. On the far wall was a tapestry depicting *vaqueros* herding horses along the Drop; against it leaned a guitar with a broken string. Sheemie's feet sent back echoes no matter how lightly he walked. He shivered. This was a house of murder now, a bad place. There were likely ghosts.

Still, Susan was here. Somewhere.

He passed through the double doors on the far side of the foyer and entered the reception hall. Beneath its high ceiling, his footfalls echoed more loudly than ever. Long-dead mayors looked down at him from the walls; most had spooky eyes that seemed to follow him as he walked, marking him as an intruder. He knew their eyes were only paint, but still . . .

One in particular troubled him: a fat man with clouds of red hair, a bulldog mouth, and a mean glare in his eye, as if he wanted to ask

what some halfwit inn-boy was doing in the Great Hall at Mayor's House.

"Quit looking at me that way, you big old sonuvabitch," Sheemie whispered, and felt a little better. For the moment, at least.

Next came the dining hall, also empty, with the long trestle tables pushed back against the wall. There was the remains of a meal on one—a single plate of cold chicken and sliced bread, half a mug of ale. Looking at those few bits of food on a table that had served dozens at various fairs and festivals—that should have served dozens this very day—brought the enormity of what had happened home to Sheemie. And the sadness of it, too. Things had changed in Hambry, and would likely never be the same again.

These long thoughts did not keep him from gobbling the leftover chicken and bread, or from chasing it with what remained in the alepot. It had been a long, foodless day.

He belched, clapped both hands over his mouth, eyes making quick and guilty side-to-side darts above his dirty fingers, and then walked on.

The door at the far end of the room was latched but unlocked. Sheemie opened it and poked his head out into the corridor which ran the length of Mayor's House. The way was lit with gas chandeliers, and was as broad as an avenue. It was empty—at least for the moment—but he could hear whispering voices from other rooms, and perhaps other floors, as well. He supposed they belonged to the maids and any other servants that might be about this afternoon, but they sounded very ghostly to him, just the same. Perhaps one belonged to Mayor Thorin, wandering the corridor right in front of him (if Sheemie could but see him . . . which he was glad he couldn't). Mayor Thorin wandering and wondering what had happened to him, what this cold jellylike stuff soaking into his nightshirt might be, who—

A hand gripped Sheemie's arm just above the elbow. He almost shrieked.

"Don't!" a woman whispered. "For your father's sake!"

Sheemie somehow managed to keep the scream in. He turned. And there, wearing jeans and a plain checked ranch-shirt, her hair tied back, her pale face set, her dark eyes blazing, stood the Mayor's widow.

"S-S-Sai Thorin. . .I. . .I. . .I. . ."

There was nothing else he could think of to say. *Now she'll call for the guards o' the watch, if there be any left*, he thought. In a way, it would be a relief.

"Have ye come for the girl? The Delgado girl?"

Grief had been good to Olive, in a terrible way—had made her face seem less plump, and oddly young. Her dark eyes never left his, and forbade any attempt at a lie. Sheemie nodded.

"Good. I can use your help, boy. She's down below, in the pantry, and she's guarded."

Sheemie gaped, not believing what he was hearing.

"Do you think I believe she had anything to do with Hart's murder?" Olive asked, as if Sheemie had objected to her idea. "I may be fat and not so speedy on my pins anymore, but I'm not a complete idiot. Come on, now. Seafront's not a good place for sai Delgado just now—too many people from town know where she is."

5

"Roland."

He will hear this voice in uneasy dreams for the rest of his life, never quite remembering what he has dreamed, only knowing that

the dreams leave him feeling ill somehow—walking restlessly, straightening pictures in loveless rooms, listening to the call to muzzein in alien town squares.

“Roland of Gilead.”

This voice, which he almost recognizes; a voice so like his own that a psychiatrist from Eddie’s or Susannah’s or Jake’s when-and-where would say it is his voice, the voice of his subconscious, but Roland knows better; Roland knows that often the voices that sound the most like our own when they speak in our heads are those of the most terrible outsiders, the most dangerous intruders.

“Roland, son of Steven.”

The ball has taken him first to Hambry and to Mayor’s House, and he would see more of what is happening there, but then it takes him away—calls him away in that strangely familiar voice, and he has to go. There is no choice because, unlike Rhea or Jonas, he is not watching the ball and the creatures who speak soundlessly within it; he is inside the ball, a part of its endless pink storm.

“Roland, come. Roland, see.”

And so the storm whirls him first up and then away. He flies across the Drop, rising and rising through stacks of air first warm and then cold, and he is not alone in the pink storm which bears him west along the Path of the Beam. Sheb flies past him, his hat cocked back on his head; he is singing “Hey Jude” at the top of his lungs as his nicotine-stained fingers plink keys that are not there—transported by his tune, Sheb doesn’t seem to realize that the storm has ripped his piano away.

“Roland, come,”

the voice says—the voice of the storm, the voice of the glass—and Roland comes. The Romp flies by him, glassy eyes blazing with pink light. A scrawny man in farmer’s overalls goes flying past, his long

red hair streaming out behind him. "Life for you, and for your crop," he says—something like that, anyway—and then he's gone. Next, spinning like a weird windmill, comes an iron chair (to Roland it looks like a torture device) equipped with wheels, and the boy gunslinger thinks The Lady of Shadows without knowing why he thinks it, or what it means.

Now the pink storm is carrying him over blasted mountains, now over a fertile green delta where a broad river runs its oxbow squiggles like a vein, reflecting a placid blue sky that turns to the pink of wild roses as the storm passes above. Ahead, Roland sees an uprushing column of darkness and his heart quails, but this is where the pink storm is taking him, and this is where he must go.

I want to get out, he thinks, but he's not stupid, he realizes the truth: he may never get out. The wizard's glass has swallowed him. He may remain in its stormy, muddled eye forever.

I'll shoot my way out, if I have to, he thinks, but no—he has no guns. He is naked in the storm, rushing bareass toward that virulent blue-black infection that has buried all the landscape beneath it.

And yet he hears singing.

Faint but beautiful—a sweet harmonic sound that makes him shiver and think of Susan: bird and bear and hare and fish.

Suddenly Sheemie's mule (Caprichoso, Roland thinks, a beautiful name) goes past, galloping on thin air with his eyes as bright as fire in the storm's lumbre fuego. Following him, wearing a sombrero and riding a broom festooned with fluttering reap-charms, comes Rhea of the Cöos. "I'll get you, my pretty!" she screams at the fleeing mule, and then, cackling, she is gone, zooming and brooming.

Roland plunges into the black, and suddenly his breath is gone. The world around him is noxious darkness; the air seems to creep on his skin like a layer of bugs. He is buffeted, boxed to and fro by

invisible fists, then driven downward in a dive so violent he fears he will be smashed against the ground: so fell Lord Perth.

Dead fields and deserted villages roll up out of the gloom; he sees blasted trees that will give no shade—oh, but all is shade here, all is death here, this is the edge of End-World, where some dark day he will come, and all is death here.

“Gunslinger, this is Thunderclap.”

“Thunderclap,” he says.

“Here are the unbreathing; the white faces.”

“The unbreathing. The white faces.”

Yes. He knows that, somehow. This is the place of slaughtered soldiers, the cloven helm, the rusty halberd; from here come the pale warriors. This is Thunderclap, where clocks run backward and the graveyards vomit out their dead.

Ahead is a tree like a crooked, clutching hand; on its topmost branch a billy-bumbler has been impaled. It should be dead, but as the pink storm carries Roland past, it raises its head and looks at him with inexpressible pain and weariness. “Oy!” it cries, and then it, too, is gone and not to be remembered for many years.

“Look ahead, Roland—see your destiny.”

Now, suddenly, he knows that voice—it is the voice of the Turtle.

He looks and sees a brilliant blue-gold glow piercing the dirty darkness of Thunderclap. Before he can do more than register it, he breaks out of the darkness and into the light like something coming out of an egg, a creature at last being born.

“Light! Let there be light!”

the voice of the Turtle cries, and Roland has to put his hands to his eyes and peek through his fingers to keep from being blinded. Below him is a field of blood—or so he thinks then, a boy of fourteen who has that day done his first real killing. This is the blood that has flowed out of Thunderclap and threatens to drown our side of the world, he thinks, and it will not be for untold years that he will finally rediscover his time inside the ball and put this memory together with Eddie's dream and tell his compadres, as they sit in the turnpike breakdown lane at the end of the night, that he was wrong, that he had been fooled by the brilliance, coming as it did, so hard on the heels of Thunderclap's shadows. "It wasn't blood but roses," he tells Eddie, Susannah, and Jake.

"Gunslinger, look—look there."

Yes, there it is, a dusty gray-black pillar rearing on the horizon: the Dark Tower, the place where all Beams, all lines of force, converge. In its spiraling windows he sees fitful electric blue fire and hears the cries of all those pent within; he senses both the strength of the place and the wrongness of it; he can feel how it is spooling error across everything, softening the divisions between the worlds, how its potential for mischief is growing stronger even as disease weakens its truth and coherence, like a body afflicted with cancer; this jutting arm of dark gray stone is the world's great mystery and last awful riddle.

It is the Tower, the Dark Tower rearing to the sky, and as Roland rushes toward it in the pink storm, he thinks: I will enter you, me and my friends, if ka wills it so; we will enter you and we will conquer the wrongness within you. It may be years yet, but I swear by bird and bear and hare and fish, by all I love that—

But now the sky fills with flaggy clouds which flow out of Thunderclap, and the world begins to go dark; the blue light from the Tower's rising windows shines like mad eyes, and Roland hears thousands of screaming, wailing voices.

"You will kill everything and everyone you love,"

says the voice of the Turtle, and now it is a cruel voice, cruel and hard.

“and still the Tower will be pent shut against you.”

The gunslinger draws in all his breath and draws together all his force; when he cries his answer to the Turtle, he does so for all the generations of his blood: “NO! IT WILL NOT STAND! WHEN I COME HERE IN MY BODY, IT WILL NOT STAND! I SWEAR ON MY FATHER’S NAME, IT WILL NOT STAND!”

“Then die,”

the voice says, and Roland is hurled at the gray-black stone flank of the Tower, to be smashed there like a bug against a rock. But before that can happen—

6

Cuthbert and Alain stood watching Roland with increasing concern. He had the piece of Maerlyn’s Rainbow raised to his face, cupped in his hands as a man might cup a ceremonial goblet before making a toast. The drawstring bag lay crumpled on the dusty toes of his boots; his cheeks and forehead were washed in a pink glow that neither boy liked. It seemed alive, somehow, and hungry.

They thought, as if with one mind: *I can’t see his eyes. Where are his eyes?*

“Roland?” Cuthbert repeated. “If we’re going to get out to Hanging Rock before they’re ready for us, you have to put that thing away.”

Roland made no move to lower the ball. He muttered something under his breath; later, when Cuthbert and Alain had a chance to compare notes, they both agreed it had been *thunderclap*.

“Roland?” Alain asked, stepping forward. As gingerly as a surgeon slipping a scalpel into the body of a patient, he slipped his right hand

between the curve of the ball and Roland's bent, studious face. There was no response. Alain pulled back and turned to Cuthbert.

"Can you touch him?" Bert asked.

Alain shook his head. "Not at all. It's like he's gone somewhere far away."

"We have to wake him up." Cuthbert's voice was dust-dry and shaky at the edges.

"Vannay told us that if you wake a person from a deep hypnotic trance too suddenly, he can go mad," Alain said. "Remember? I don't know if I dare—"

Roland stirred. The pink sockets where his eyes had been seemed to grow. His mouth flattened into the line of bitter determination they both knew well.

"No! It will not stand!" he cried in a voice that made gooseflesh ripple the skin of the other two boys; that was not Roland's voice at all, at least not as he was now; that was the voice of a man.

"No," Alain said much later, when Roland slept and he and Cuthbert sat up before the campfire. "That was the voice of a king."

Now, however, the two of them only looked at their absent, roaring friend, paralyzed with fright.

"When I come here in my body, it will not stand! I swear on my father's name, IT WILL NOT STAND!"

Then, as Roland's unnaturally pink face contorted, like the face of a man who confronts some unimaginable horror, Cuthbert and Alain lunged forward. It was no longer a question of perhaps destroying him in an effort to save him; if they didn't do something, the glass would kill him as they watched.

In the dooryard of the Bar K, it had been Cuthbert who clipped Roland; this time Alain did the honors, administering a hard right to the center of the gunslinger's forehead. Roland tumbled backward, the ball spilling out of his loosening hands and the terrible pink light leaving his face. Cuthbert caught the boy and Alain caught the ball. Its heavy pink glow was weirdly insistent, beating at his eyes and pulling at his mind, but Alain stuffed it resolutely into the drawstring bag again without looking at it . . . and as he pulled the cord, yanking the bag's mouth shut, he saw the pink light wink out, as if it knew it had lost. For the time being, at least.

He turned back, and winced at the sight of the bruise puffing up from the middle of Roland's brow. "Is he—"

"Out cold," Cuthbert said.

"He better come to soon."

Cuthbert looked at him grimly, with not a trace of his usual amiability. "Yes," he said, "you're certainly right about that."

7

Sheemie waited at the foot of the stairs which led down to the kitchen area, shifting uneasily from foot to foot and waiting for sai Thorin to come back, or to call him. He didn't know how long she'd been in the kitchen, but it felt like forever. He wanted her to come back, and more than that—more than anything—he wanted her to bring Susan-sai with her. Sheemie had a terrible feeling about this place and this day; a feeling that darkened like the sky, which was now all obscured with smoke in the west. What was happening out there, or if it had anything to do with the thundery sounds he'd heard earlier, Sheemie didn't know, but he wanted to be out of here before the smoke-hazed sun went down and the *real* Demon Moon, not its pallid day-ghost, rose in the sky.

One of the swinging doors between the corridor and the kitchen pushed open and Olive came hurrying out. She was alone.

“She’s in the pantry, all right,” Olive said. She raked her fingers through her graying hair. “I got that much out of those two *pupuras*, but no more. I knew it was going to be that way as soon as they started talking that stupid crunk of theirs.”

There was no proper word for the dialect of the Mejis *vaqueros*, but “crunk” served well enough among the Barony’s higher-born citizens. Olive knew both of the *vaqs* guarding the pantry, in the vague way of a person who has once ridden a lot and passed gossip and weather with other Drop-riders, and she knew damned well these old boys could do better than crunk. They had spoken it so they could pretend to misunderstand her, and save both them and her the embarrassment of an outright refusal. She had gone along with the deception for much the same reason, although she could have responded with crunk of her own perfectly well—and called them some names their mothers never used—had she wanted.

“I told them there were men upstairs,” she said, “and I thought maybe they meant to steal the silver. I said I wanted the *maloficios* turned out. And still they played dumb. *No habla, sai*. Shit. *Shit!*”

Sheemie thought of calling them a couple of big old sonuvabitches, and decided to keep silent. She was pacing back and forth in front of him and throwing an occasional burning look at the closed kitchen doors. At last she stopped in front of Sheemie again.

“Turn out your pockets,” she said. “Let’s see what you have for hopes and garlands.”

Sheemie did as she asked, producing a little pocketknife (a gift from Stanley Ruiz) and a half-eaten cookie from one. From the other he brought out three lady-finger firecrackers, a big-banger, and a few sulfur matches.

Olive’s eyes gleamed when she saw these. “Listen to me, Sheemie,” she said.

Cuthbert patted Roland's face with no result. Alain pushed him aside, knelt, and took the gunslinger's hands. He had never used the touch this way, but had been told it was possible—that one could reach another's mind, in at least some cases.

Roland! Roland, wake up! Please! We need you!

At first there was nothing. Then Roland stirred, muttered, and pulled his hands out of Alain's. In the moment before his eyes opened, both of the other two boys were struck by the same fear of what they might see: no eyes at all, only raving pink light.

But they were Roland's eyes, all right—those cool blue shooter's eyes.

He struggled to gain his feet, and failed the first time. He held out his hands. Cuthbert took one, Alain the other. As they pulled him up, Bert saw a strange and frightening thing: there were threads of white in Roland's hair. There had been none that morning; he would have sworn to it. The morning had been a long time ago, however.

"How long was I out?" Roland touched the bruise in the center of his forehead with the tips of his fingers and winced.

"Not long," Alain said. "Five minutes, maybe. Roland, I'm sorry I hit you, but I had to. It was . . . I thought it was killing you."

"Mayhap 'twas. Is it safe?"

Alain pointed wordlessly to the drawstring bag.

"Good. It's best one of you carry it for now. I might be . . ." He searched for the right word, and when he found it, a small, wintry smile touched the corners of his mouth—"tempted," he finished. "Let's ride for Hanging Rock. We've got work yet to finish."

"Roland . . ." Cuthbert began.

Roland turned, one hand on the horn of his horse's saddle.

Cuthbert licked his lips, and for a moment Alain didn't think he would be able to ask. *If you don't, I will*, Alain thought . . . but Bert managed, bringing the words out in a rush.

"What did you see?"

"Much," Roland said. "I saw much, but most of it is already fading out of my mind, the way dreams do when you wake up. What I do remember I'll tell you as we ride. You must know, because it changes everything. We're going back to Gilead, but not for long."

"Where after that?" Alain asked, mounting.

"West. In search of the Dark Tower. If we survive today, that is. Come on. Let's take those tankers."

9

The two *vaqs* were rolling smokes when there was a loud bang from upstairs. They both jumped and looked at each other, the tobacco from their works-in-progress sifting down to the floor in small brown flurries. A woman shrieked. The doors burst open. It was the Mayor's widow again, this time accompanied by a maid. The *vaqs* knew her well—Maria Tomas, the daughter of an old *compadre* from the Piano Ranch.

"The thieving bastards have set the place on fire!" Maria cried, speaking to them in crunk. "Come and help!"

"Maria, sai, we have orders to guard—"

"A *putina* locked in the pantry?" Maria shouted, her eyes blazing. "Come, ye stupid old donkey, before the whole place catches! Then ye can explain to Señor Lengyll why ye stood here using yer thumbs for fart-corks while Seafront burned down around yer ears!"

"Go on!" Olive snapped. "Are you cowards?"

There were several smaller bangs as, above them in the great parlor, Sheemie set off the lady-fingers. He used the same match to light the drapes.

The two *viejos* exchanged a glance. “*Andelay,*” said the older of the two, then looked back at Maria. He no longer bothered with the crunk. “Watch this door,” he said.

“Like a hawk,” she agreed.

The two old men bustled out, one gripping the cords of his *bolas*, the other pulling a long knife from the scabbard on his belt.

As soon as the women heard their footsteps on the stairs at the end of the hall, Olive nodded to Maria and they crossed the room. Maria threw the bolts; Olive pulled the door open. Susan came out at once, looking from one to the other, then smiling tentatively. Maria gasped at the sight of her mistress’s swelled face and the blood crusted around her nose.

Susan took Maria’s hand before the maid could touch her face and squeezed her fingers gently. “Do ye think Thorin would want me now?” she asked, and then seemed to realize who her other rescuer was. “Olive . . . sai Thorin . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be cruel. But ye must believe that Roland, him ye know as Will Dearborn, would never—”

“I know it well,” Olive said, “and there’s no time for this now. Come on.”

She and Maria led Susan out of the kitchen, away from the stairs ascending to the main house and toward the storage rooms at the far north end of the lower level. In the drygoods storage room, Olive told the two of them to wait. She was gone for perhaps five minutes, but to Susan and Maria it seemed an eternity.

When she came back, Olive was wearing a wildly colored *serape* much too big for her—it might have been her husband’s, but Susan

thought it looked too big for the late Mayor, as well. Olive had tucked a piece of it into the side of her jeans to keep from stumbling over it. Slung over her arm like blankets, she had two more, both smaller and lighter. "Put these on," she said. "It's going to be cold."

Leaving the drygoods store, they went down a narrow servants' passageway toward the back courtyard. There, if they were fortunate (and if Miguel was still unconscious), Sheemie would be waiting for them with mounts. Olive hoped with all her heart that they would be fortunate. She wanted Susan safely away from Hambry before the sun went down.

And before the moon rose.

10

"Susan's been taken prisoner," Roland told the others as they rode west toward Hanging Rock. "That's the first thing I saw in the glass."

He spoke with such an air of absence that Cuthbert almost reined up. This wasn't the ardent lover of the last few months. It was as if Roland had found a dream to ride through the pink air within the ball, and part of him rode it still. *Or is it riding him?* Cuthbert wondered.

"What?" Alain asked. "Susan taken? How? By whom? Is she all right?"

"Taken by Jonas. He hurt her some, but not too badly. She'll heal . . . and she'll live. I'd turn around in a second if I thought her life was in any real danger."

Ahead of them, appearing and disappearing in the dust like a mirage, was Hanging Rock. Cuthbert could see the sunlight pricking hazy sunstars on the tankers, and he could see men. A lot of them. A lot of horses, as well. He patted the neck of his own mount, then glanced across to make sure Alain had Lengyll's machine-gun. He did. Cuthbert reached around to the small of his back, making sure of the slingshot. It was there. Also his deerskin ammunition bag,

which now contained a number of the big-bangers Sheemie had stolen as well as steel shot.

He's using every ounce of his will to keep from going back, anyway, Cuthbert thought. He found the realization comforting—sometimes Roland scared him. There was something in him that went beyond steel. Something like madness. If it was there, you were glad to have it on your side . . . but often enough you wished it wasn't there at all. On *anybody's* side.

“Where is she?” Alain asked.

“Reynolds took her back to Seafront. She's locked in the pantry . . . or was locked there. I can't say which, exactly, because . . .” Roland paused, thinking. “The ball sees far, but sometimes it sees more. Sometimes it sees a future that's already happening.”

“How can the future already be happening?” Alain asked.

“I don't know, and I don't think it was always that way. I think it's more to do with the world than Maerlyn's Rainbow. Time is strange now. *We know* that, don't we? How things sometimes seem to . . . slip. It's almost as if there's a thinny everywhere, breaking things down. But Susan's safe. I know that, and that's enough for me. Sheemie is going to help her . . . or *is* helping her. Somehow Jonas missed Sheemie, and he followed Susan all the way back.”

“Good for Sheemie!” Alain said, and pumped his fist into the air. “Hurrah!” Then: “What about us? Did you see us in this future?”

“No. This part was all quick—I hardly snatched more than a glance before the ball took me away. *Flew* me away, it seemed. But . . . I saw smoke on the horizon. I remember that. It could have been the smoke of burning tankers, or the brush piled in front of Eyebolt, or both. I think we're going to succeed.”

Cuthbert was looking at his old friend in a queerly distraught way. The young man so deeply in love that Bert had needed to knock him into the dust of the courtyard in order to wake him up to his responsibilities . . . where was that young man, exactly? What had changed him, given him those disturbing strands of white hair?

“If we survive what’s ahead,” Cuthbert said, watching the gunslinger closely, “she’ll meet us on the road. Won’t she, Roland?”

He saw the pain on Roland’s face, and now understood: the lover was here, but the ball had taken away his joy and left only grief. That, and some new purpose—yes, Cuthbert felt it very well—which had yet to be stated.

“I don’t know,” Roland said. “I almost hope not, because we can never be as we were.”

“*What?*” This time Cuthbert *did* rein up.

Roland looked at him calmly enough, but now there were tears in his eyes.

“We are fools of *ka*,” the gunslinger said. “*Ka* like a wind, Susan calls it.” He looked first at Cuthbert on his left, then at Alain on his right. “The Tower is our *ka*; mine especially. But it isn’t hers, nor she mine. No more is John Farson our *ka*. We’re not going toward his men to defeat him, but only because they’re in our way.” He raised his hands, then dropped them again, as if to say, *What more do you need me to tell you?*

“There *is* no Tower, Roland,” Cuthbert said patiently. “I don’t know what you saw in that glass ball, but there *is* no Tower. Well, as a symbol, I suppose—like Arthur’s Cup, or the Cross of the man-Jesus—but not as a real thing, a real building—”

“Yes,” Roland said. “It’s real.”

They looked at him uncertainly, and saw no doubt on his face.

“It’s real, and our fathers know. Beyond the dark land—I can’t remember its name now, it’s one of the things I’ve lost—is End-World, and in End-World stands the Dark Tower. Its existence is the great secret our fathers keep; it’s what has held them together as *ka-tet* across all the years of the world’s decline. When we return to Gilead—if we return, and I now think we will—I’ll tell them what I’ve seen, and they’ll confirm what I say.”

“You saw all that in the glass?” Alain asked in an awe-hushed voice.

“I saw much.”

“But not Susan Delgado,” Cuthbert said.

“No. When we finish with yonder men and she finishes with Mejis, her part in our *ka-tet* ends. Inside the ball, I was given a choice: Susan, and my life as her husband and father of the child she now carries . . . or the Tower.” Roland wiped his face with a shaking hand. “I would choose Susan in an instant, if not for one thing: the Tower is crumbling, and if it falls, everything we know will be swept away. There will be chaos beyond our imagining. We must go . . . *and we will go.*” Above his young and unlined cheeks, below his young and unlined brow, were the ancient killer’s eyes that Eddie Dean would first glimpse in the mirror of an airliner’s bathroom. But now they swam with childish tears.

There was nothing childish in his voice, however.

“I choose the Tower. I must. Let her live a good life and long with someone else—she will, in time. As for me, I choose the Tower.”

11

Susan mounted on Pylon, which Sheemie had hastened to bring around to the rear courtyard after lighting the draperies of the great parlor on fire. Olive Thorin rode one of the Barony geldings with Sheemie double-mounted behind her and holding onto Capi’s lead.

Maria opened the back gate, wished them good luck, and the three trotted out. The sun was westering now, but the wind had pulled away most of the smoke that had risen earlier. Whatever had happened in the desert, it was over now . . . or happening on some other layer of the same present time.

Roland, be thee well, Susan thought. I'll see thee soon, dear . . . as soon as I can.

"Why are we going north?" she asked after half an hour's silent riding.

"Because Seacoast Road's best."

"But—"

"Hush! They'll find you gone and search the house first . . . if t'asn't burned flat, that is. Not finding you there, they'll send west, along the Great Road." She cast an eye on Susan that was not much like the dithery, slightly confabulated Olive Thorin that folks in Hambry knew . . . or thought they knew. "If I know that's the direction you'd choose, so will others we'd do well to avoid."

Susan was silent. She was too confused to speak, but Olive seemed to know what she was about, and Susan was grateful for that.

"By the time they get around to sniffing west, it'll be dark. Tonight we'll stay in one of the sea-cliff caves five miles or so from here. I grew up a fisherman's daughter, and I know all those caves, none better." The thought of the caves she'd played in as a girl seemed to cheer her. "Tomorrow we'll cut west, as you like. I'm afraid you're going to have a plump old widow as a chaperone for a bit. Better get used to the idea."

"Thee's too good," Susan said. "Ye should send Sheemie and I on alone, sai."

“And go back to what? Why, I can’t even get two old trailhands on kitchen-duty to follow my orders. Fran Lengyll’s boss of the shooting-match now, and I’ve no urge to wait and see how he does at it. Nor if he decides he’d be better off with me adjudged mad and put up safe in a *haci* with bars on the windows. Or shall I stay to see how Hash Renfrew does as Mayor, with his boots up on my tables?” Olive actually laughed.

“Sai, I’m sorry.”

“We shall all be sorry later on,” Olive said, sounding remarkably cheery about it. “For now, the most important thing is to reach those caves unobserved. It must seem that we vanished into thin air. Hold up.”

Olive checked her horse, stood in the stirrups, looked around to make sure of her position, nodded, then twisted in the saddle so she could speak to Sheemie.

“Young man, it’s time for ye to mount yer trusty mule and go back to Seafront. If there are riders coming after us, ye must turn em aside with a few well-chosen words. Will’ee do that?”

Sheemie looked stricken. “I don’t have any well-chosen words, sai Thorin, so I don’t. I hardly have any words at all.”

“Nonsense,” Olive said, and kissed Sheemie’s forehead. “Go back at a goodish trot. If’ee spy no one coming after us by the time the sun touches the hills, then turn north again and follow. We shall wait for ye by the signpost. Do ye know where I mean?”

Sheemie thought he did, although it marked the outmost northern boundary of his little patch of geography. “The red ’un? With the *sombrero* on it, and the arrow pointing back for town?”

“The very one. Ye won’t get that far until after dark, but there’ll be plenty of moonlight tonight. If ye don’t come right away, we’ll wait.

But ye must go back, and shift any men that might be chasing us off our track. Do ye understand?"

Sheemie did. He slid off Olive's horse, clucked Caprichoso forward, and climbed on board, wincing as the place the mule had bitten came down. "So it'll be, Olive-sai."

"Good, Sheemie. Good. Off'ee go, then."

"Sheemie?" Susan said. "Come to me a moment, please."

He did, holding his hat in front of him and looking up at her worshipfully. Susan bent and kissed him not on the forehead but firmly on the mouth. Sheemie came close to fainting.

"Thankee-sai," Susan said. "For everything."

Sheemie nodded. When he spoke, he could manage nothing above a whisper. "'Twas only *ka*," he said. "I know that . . . but I love you, Susan-sai. Go well. I'll see you soon."

"I look forward to it."

But there was no soon, and no later for them, either. Sheemie took one look back as he rode his mule south, and waved. Susan lifted her own hand in return. It was the last Sheemie ever saw of her, and in many ways, that was a blessing.

12

Latigo had set pickets a mile out from Hanging Rock, but the blond boy Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain encountered as they closed in on the tankers looked confused and unsure of himself, no danger to anyone. He had scurvy-blossoms around his mouth and nose, suggesting that the men Farson had sent on this duty had ridden hard and fast, with little in the way of fresh supplies.

When Cuthbert gave the Good Man's *sigul*—hands clasped to the chest, left above right, then both held out to the person being greeted—the blond picket did the same, and with a grateful smile.

“What spin and raree back there?” he asked, speaking with a strong In-World accent—to Roland, the boy sounded like a Nordite.

“Three boys who killed a couple of big bugs and then hied for the hills,” Cuthbert replied. He was an eerily good mimic, and gave the boy back his own accent faultlessly. “There were a fight. It be over now, but they did fight fearful.”

“What—”

“No time,” Roland said brusquely. “We have dispatches.” He crossed his hands on his chest, then held them out. “Hile! Farson!”

“Good Man!” the blond returned smartly. He gave back the salute with a smile that said he would have asked Cuthbert where he was from and who he was related to, if there had been more time. Then they were past him and inside Latigo's perimeter. As easy as that.

“Remember that it's hit-and-run,” Roland said. “Slow down for nothing. What we don't get must be left—there'll be no second pass.”

“Gods, don't even suggest such a thing,” Cuthbert said, but he was smiling. He pulled his sling out of its rudimentary holster and tested its elastic draw with a thumb. Then he licked the thumb and hoisted it to the wind. Not much problem there, if they came in as they were; the wind was strong, but at their backs.

Alain unslung Lengyll's machine-gun, looked at it doubtfully, then yanked back the slide-cock. “I don't know about this, Roland. It's loaded, and I think I see how to use it, but—”

“Then use it,” Roland said. The three of them were picking up speed now, the hooves of their horses drumming against the hardpan. The wind gusted, belling the fronts of their *serapes*. “This is

the sort of work it was meant for. If it jams, drop it and use your revolver. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Roland."

"Bert?"

"Aye," Cuthbert said in a wildly exaggerated Hambry accent, "so I am, so I am."

Ahead of them, dust puffed as groups of riders passed before and behind the tankers, readying the column for departure. Men on foot looked around at the oncomers curiously but with a fatal lack of alarm.

Roland drew both revolvers. "*Gilead!*" he cried. "*Hile! Gilead!*"

He spurred Rusher to a gallop. The other two boys did the same. Cuthbert was in the middle again, sitting on his reins, slingshot in hand, lucifer matches radiating out of his tightly pressed lips.

The gunslingers rode down on Hanging Rock like furies.

13

Twenty minutes after sending Sheemie back south, Susan and Olive came around a sharp bend and found themselves face to face with three mounted men in the road. In the late-slanting sun, she saw that the one in the middle had a blue coffin tattooed on his hand. It was Reynolds. Susan's heart sank.

The one on Reynolds's left—he wore a stained white drover's hat and had a lazily cocked eye—she didn't know, but the one on the right, who looked like a stony-hearted preacher, was Laslo Rimer. It was Rimer that Reynolds glanced at, after smiling at Susan.

"Why, Las and I couldn't even get us a drink to send his late brother, the Chancellor of Whatever You Want and the Minister of

Thank You Very Much, on with a word,” Reynolds said. “We hadn’t hardly hit town before we got persuaded out here. I wasn’t going to go, but . . . damn! That old lady’s something. Could talk a corpse into giving a blowjob, if you’ll pardon the crudity. I think your aunt may have lost a wheel or two off her cart, though, sai Delgado. She—”

“Your friends are dead,” Susan told him.

Reynolds paused, shrugged. “Wellnow. Maybe *si* and maybe *no*. Me, I think I’ve decided to travel on without em even if they ain’t. But I might hang around here one more night. This Reaping business . . . I’ve heard so much about the way folks do it in the Outers. ’Specially the bonfire part.”

The man with the cocked eye laughed phlegmily.

“Let us pass,” Olive said. “This girl has done nothing, and neither have I.”

“She helped Dearborn escape,” Rimer said, “him who murdered your own husband and my brother. I wouldn’t call that nothing.”

“The gods may restore Kimba Rimer in the clearing,” Olive said, “but the truth is he looted half of this town’s treasury, and what he didn’t give over to John Farson, he kept for himself.”

Rimer recoiled as if slapped.

“Ye didn’t know I knew? Laslo, I’d be angry at how little any of ye thought of me . . . except why would I want to be thought of by the likes of you, anyway? I knew enough to make me sick, leave it at that. I know that the man you’re sitting beside—”

“Shut up,” Rimer muttered.

“—was likely the one who cut yer brother’s black heart open; sai Reynolds was seen that early morning in that wing, so I’ve been told —”

“Shut up, you cunt!”

“—and so I believe.”

“Better do as he says, sai, and hold your tongue,” Reynolds said. Some of the lazy good humor had left his face. Susan thought: *He doesn’t like people knowing what he did. Not even when he’s the one on top and what they know can’t hurt him. And he’s less without Jonas. A lot less. He knows it, too.*

“Let us pass,” Olive said.

“No, sai, I can’t do that.”

“I’ll help ye, then, shall I?”

Her hand had crept beneath the outrageously large *serape* during the palaver, and now she brought out a huge and ancient *pistola*, its handles of yellowed ivory, its filigreed barrel of old tarnished silver. On top was a brass powder-and-spark.

Olive had no business even drawing the thing—it caught on her *serape*, and she had to fight it free. She had no business cocking it, either, a process that took both thumbs and two tries. But the three men were utterly flummoxed by the sight of the elderly blunderbuss in her hands, Reynolds as much as the other two; he sat his horse with his jaw hanging slack. Jonas would have wept.

“Get her!” a cracked old voice shrieked from behind the men blocking the road. *“What’s wrong with ye, ye stupid culls? GET HER!”*

Reynolds started at that and went for his gun. He was fast, but he had given Olive too much of a headstart and was beaten, beaten cold. Even as he cleared leather with the barrel of his revolver, the Mayor’s widow held the old gun out in both hands, and, squinching her eyes shut like a little girl who is forced to eat something nasty, pulled the trigger.

The spark flashed, but the damp powder only made a weary *floop* sound and disappeared in a puff of blue smoke. The ball—big enough to have taken Clay Reynolds’s head off from the nose on up, had it fired—stayed in the barrel.

In the next instant his own gun roared in his fist. Olive’s horse reared, whinnying. Olive went off the gelding head over boots, with a black hole in the orange stripe of her *serape*—the stripe which lay above her heart.

Susan heard herself screaming. The sound seemed to come from very far away. She might have gone on for some time, but then she heard the clop of approaching pony-hooves from behind the men in the road . . . and knew. Even before the man with the lazy eye moved aside to show her, she knew, and her screams stopped.

The galloped-out pony that had brought the witch back to Hambry had been replaced by a fresh one, but it was the same black cart, the same golden cabalistic symbols, the same driver. Rhea sat with the reins in her claws, her head ticking from side to side like the head of a rusty old robot, grinning at Susan without humor. Grinning as a corpse grins.

“Hello, my little sweeting,” she said, calling her as she had all those months ago, on the night Susan had come to her hut to be proved honest. On the night Susan had come running most of the way, out of simple high spirits. Beneath the light of the Kissing Moon she had come, her blood high from the exercise, her skin flushed; she had been singing “Careless Love.”

“Yer pallies and screw-buddies have taken my ball, ye ken,” Rhea said, clucking the pony to a stop a few paces ahead of the riders. Even Reynolds looked down on her with uneasiness. “Took my lovely glam, that’s what those bad boys did. Those bad, bad boys. But it showed me much while yet I had it, aye. It sees far, and in more ways than one. Much of it I’ve forgot . . . but not which way ye’d come, my sweeting. Not which way that precious old dead bitch laying yonder on the road would bring ye. And now ye must go to

town.” Her grin widened, became something unspeakable. “It’s time for the fair, ye ken.”

“Let me go,” Susan said. “Let me go, if ye’d not answer to Roland of Gilead.”

Rhea ignored her and spoke to Reynolds. “Bind her hands before her and stand her in the back of the cart. There’s people that’ll want to see her. A good look is what they’ll want, and a good look is just what they’ll have. If her aunt’s done a proper job, there’ll be a lot of them in town. Get her up, now, and be smart about it.”

14

Alain had time for one clear thought: *We could have gone around them—if what Roland said is true, then only the wizard’s glass matters, and we have that. We could have gone around them.*

Except, of course, that was impossible. A hundred generations of gunslinger blood argued against it. Tower or no Tower, the thieves must not be allowed to have their prize. Not if they could be stopped.

Alain leaned forward and spoke directly into his horse’s ear. “Jig or rear when I start shooting, and I’ll knock your fucking brains out.”

Roland led them in, outracing the other two on his stronger horse. The clot of men nearest by—five or six mounted, a dozen or more on foot and examining a pair of the oxen which had dragged the tankers out here—gazed at him stupidly until he began to fire, and then they scattered like quail. He got every one of the riders; their horses fled in a widening fan, trailing their reins (and, in one case, a dead soldier). Somewhere someone was shouting, “Harriers! Harriers! Mount up, you fools!”

“*Alain!*” Roland screamed as they bore down. In front of the tankers, a double handful of riders and armed men were coming together—*milling* together—in a clumsy defensive line. “*Now! Now!*”

Alain raised the machine-gun, seated its rusty wire stock in the hollow of his shoulder, and remembered what little he knew about rapid-fire weapons: aim low, swing fast and smooth.

He touched the trigger and the speed-shooter bellowed into the dusty air, recoiling against his shoulder in a series of rapid thuds, shooting bright fire from the end of its perforated barrel. Alain raked it from left to right, running the sight above the scattering, shouting defenders and across the high steel hides of the tankers.

The third tanker actually blew up on its own. The sound it made was like no explosion Alain had ever heard: a guttural, muscular ripping sound accompanied by a brilliant flash of orange-red fire. The steel shell rose in two halves. One of these spun thirty yards through the air and landed on the desert floor in a furiously burning hulk; the other rose straight up into a column of greasy black smoke. A burning wooden wheel spun across the sky like a plate and came back down trailing sparks and burning splinters.

Men fled, screaming—some on foot, others laid flat along the necks of their nags, their eyes wide and panicky.

When Alain reached the end of the line of tankers, he reversed the track of the muzzle. The machine-gun was hot in his hands now, but he kept his finger pressed to the trigger. In this world, you had to use what you could while it still worked. Beneath him, his horse ran on as if it had understood every word Alain had whispered in its ear.

Another! I want another!

But before he could blow another tanker, the gun ceased its chatter—perhaps jammed, probably empty. Alain threw it aside and drew his revolver. From beside him there came the *thuppp* of Cuthbert's slingshot, audible even over the cries of the men, the hoofbeats of the horses, the *whoosh* of the burning tanker. Alain saw a sputtering big-bang arc into the sky and come down exactly where Cuthbert had aimed: in the oil puddling around the wooden wheels of a tanker marked SUNOCO. For a moment Alain could clearly see the

line of nine or a dozen holes in the tanker's bright side—holes he had put there with sai Lengyll's speed-shooter—and then there was a crack and a flash as the big-bang exploded. A moment later, the holes running along the bright flank of the tanker began to shimmer. The oil beneath them was on fire.

"Get out!" a man in a faded campaign hat yelled. *"She's gointer blow! They're all going to b—"*

Alain shot him, exploding the side of his face and knocking him out of one old, sprung boot. A moment later the second tanker blew up. One burning steel panel shot out sideways, landed in the growing puddle of crude oil beneath a third tanker, and then that one exploded, as well. Black smoke rose in the air like the fumes of a funeral pyre; it darkened the day and drew an oily veil across the sun.

15

All six of Farson's chief lieutenants had been carefully described to Roland—to all fourteen gunslingers in training—and he recognized the man running for the *remuda* at once: George Latigo. Roland could have shot him as he ran, but that, ironically, would have made possible a getaway that was cleaner than he wanted.

Instead, he shot the man who ran to meet him.

Latigo wheeled on the heels of his boots and stared at Roland with blazing, hate-filled eyes. Then he ran again, hiling another man, shouting for the riders who were huddled together beyond the burning zone.

Two more tankers exploded, whamming at Roland's eardrums with dull iron fists, seeming to suck the air back from his lungs like a riptide. The plan had been for Alain to perforate the tankers and for Cuthbert to then shoot in a steady, arcing stream of big-bangers, lighting the spilling oil. The one big-banger he actually shot seemed to confirm that the plan had been feasible, but it was the last

slingshot-work Cuthbert did that day. The ease with which the gunslingers had gotten inside the enemy's perimeter and the confusion which greeted their original charge could have been chalked up to inexperience and exhaustion, but the placing of the tankers had been Latigo's mistake, and his alone. He had drawn them tight without even thinking about it, and now they blew tight, one after another. Once the conflagration began, there was no chance of stopping it. Even before Roland raised his left arm and circled it in the air, signalling for Alain and Cuthbert to break off, the work was done. Latigo's encampment was an oily inferno, and John Farson's plans for a motorized assault were so much black smoke being tattered apart by the *fin de año* wind.

"Ride!" Roland screamed. *"Ride, ride, ride!"*

They spurred west, toward Eyebolt Canyon. As they went, Roland felt a single bullet drone past his left ear. It was, so far as he knew, the only shot fired at any of them during the assault on the tankers.

16

Latigo was in an ecstasy of fury, a perfect brain-bursting rage, and that was probably merciful—it kept him from thinking of what the Good Man would do when he learned of this fiasco. For the time being, all Latigo cared about was catching the men who had ambushed him . . . if an ambush in desert country was even possible.

Men? No.

The *boys* who had done this.

Latigo knew who they were, all right; he didn't know how they had gotten out here, but he knew who they were, and their run would stop right here, east of the woods and rising hills.

"Hendricks!" he bawled. Hendricks had at least managed to hold his men—half a dozen of them, all mounted—near the *remuda*.

“Hendricks, to me!”

As Hendricks rode toward him, Latigo spun the other way and saw a huddle of men standing and watching the burning tankers. Their gaping mouths and stupid young sheep faces made him feel like screaming and dancing up and down, but he refused to give in to that. He held a narrow beam of concentration, one aimed directly at the raiders, who must not under any circumstances be allowed to escape.

“You!” he shouted at the men. One of them turned; the others did not. Latigo strode to them, drawing his pistol as he went. He slapped it into the hand of the man who had turned toward the sound of his voice, and pointed at random to one of those who had not. *“Shoot that fool.”*

Dazed, his face that of a man who believes he is dreaming, the soldier raised the pistol and shot the man to whom Latigo had pointed. That unlucky fellow went down in a heap of knees and elbows and twitching hands. The others turned.

“Good,” Latigo said, taking his gun back.

“Sir!” Hendricks cried. *“I see them, sir! I have the enemy in clear view!”*

Two more tankers exploded. A few whickering shards of steel flew in their direction. Some of the men ducked; Latigo did not so much as twitch. Nor did Hendricks. A good man. Thank God for at least one such in this nightmare.

“Shall I hie after them, sir?”

“I’ll take your men and hie after them myself, Hendricks. Mount these hoss-guts before us.” He swept an arm at the standing men, whose doltish attention had been diverted from the burning tankers to their dead comrade. *“Pull in as many others as you can. Do you have a bugler?”*

“Yes, sir, Raines, sir!” Hendricks looked around, beckoned, and a pimply, scared-looking boy rode forward. A dented bugle on a frayed strap hung askew on the front of his shirt.

“Raines,” Latigo said, “you’re with Hendricks.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get as many men as you can, Hendricks, but don’t linger over the job. They’re headed for that canyon, and I believe someone told me it’s a box. If so, we’re going to turn it into a shooting gallery.”

Hendricks’s lips spread in a twisted grin. “Yes, sir.”

Behind them, the tankers continued to explode.

17

Roland glanced back and was astonished by the size of the black, smoky column rising into the air. Ahead he could clearly see the brush blocking most of the canyon’s mouth. And although the wind was blowing the wrong way, he could now hear the maddening mosquito-whine of the thinny.

He patted the air with his outstretched hands, signalling for Cuthbert and Alain to slow down. While they were both still looking at him, he took off his bandanna, whipped it into a rope, and tied it so it would cover his ears. They copied him. It was better than nothing.

The gunslingers continued west, their shadows now running out behind them as long as gantries on the desert floor. Looking back, Roland could see two groups of riders streaming in pursuit. Latigo was at the head of the first, Roland thought, and he was deliberately holding his riders back a little, so that the two groups could merge and attack together.

Good, he thought.

The three of them rode toward Eyebolt in a tight line, continuing to hold their own horses in, allowing their pursuers to close the distance. Every now and then another thud smote the air and shivered through the ground as one of the remaining tankers blew up. Roland was amazed at how easy it had been—even after the battle with Jonas and Lengyll, which should have put the men out here on their mettle, it had been easy. It made him think of a Reaptide long ago, he and Cuthbert surely no more than seven years old, running along a line of stuffy-guys with sticks, knocking them over one after the other, bang-bang-bangety-bang.

The sound of the thinny was warbling its way into his brain in spite of the bandanna over his ears, making his eyes water. Behind him, he could hear the whoops and shouts of the pursuing men. It delighted him. Latigo's men had counted the odds—two dozen against three, with many more of their own force riding hard to join the battle—and their peckers were up once more.

Roland faced front and pointed Rusher at the slit in the brush marking the entrance to Eyebolt Canyon.

18

Hendricks fell in beside Latigo, breathing hard, cheeks glaring with color. "Sir! Beg to report!"

"Then do it."

"I have twenty men, and there are p'raps three times that number riding hard to join us."

Latigo ignored all of this. His eyes were bright blue flecks of ice. Under his mustache was a small, greedy smile. "Rodney," he said, speaking Hendricks's first name almost with the caress of a lover.

"Sir?"

“I think they’re going in, Rodney. Yes . . . look. I’m sure of it. Two more minutes and it’ll be too late for them to turn back.” He raised his gun, laid the muzzle across his forearm, and threw a shot at the three riders ahead, mostly in exuberance.

“Yes, sir, very good, sir.” Hendricks turned and waved viciously for his men to close up, close up.

19

“Dismount!” Roland shouted when they reached the line of tangled brush. It had a smell that was at once dry and oily, like a fire waiting to happen. He didn’t know if their failure to ride their horses into the canyon would put Latigo’s wind up or not, and he didn’t care. These were good mounts, fine Gilead stock, and over these last months, Rusher had become his friend. He would not take him or any of the horses into the canyon, where they would be caught between the fire and the thinny.

The boys were off the horses in a flash, Alain pulling the drawstring bag free of his saddle-horn and slinging it over one shoulder. Cuthbert’s and Alain’s horses ran at once, whinnying, parallel to the brush, but Rusher lingered for a moment, looking at Roland. “Go on.” Roland slapped him on the flank. “Run.”

Rusher ran, tail streaming out behind him. Cuthbert and Alain slipped through the break in the brush. Roland followed, glancing down to make sure that the powder-trail was still there. It was, and still dry—there had been not a drop of rain since the day they’d laid it.

“Cuthbert,” he said. “Matches.”

Cuthbert gave him some. He was grinning so hard it was a wonder they hadn’t fallen out of his mouth. “We warmed up their day, didn’t we, Roland? Aye!”

“We did, indeed,” Roland said, grinning himself. “Go on, now. Back to that chimney-cut.”

“Let me do it,” Cuthbert said. “Please, Roland, you go with Alain and let me stay. I’m a firebug at heart, always have been.”

“No,” Roland said. “This part of it’s mine. Don’t argue with me. Go on. And tell Alain to mind the wizard’s glass, no matter what.”

Cuthbert looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded. “Don’t wait too long.”

“I won’t.”

“May your luck rise, Roland.”

“May yours rise twice.”

Cuthbert hurried away, boots rattling on the loose stone which carpeted the floor of the canyon. He reached Alain, who lifted a hand to Roland. Roland nodded back, then ducked as a bullet snapped close enough to his temple to flick his hatbrim.

He crouched to the left of the opening in the brush and peered around, the wind now striking full in his face. Latigo’s men were closing rapidly. More rapidly than he had expected. If the wind blew out the lucifers—

Never mind the ifs. Hold on, Roland . . . hold on . . . wait for them . . .

He held on, hunkering with an unlit match in each hand, now peering out through a tangle of interlaced branches. The smell of mesquite was strong in his nostrils. Not far behind it was the reek of burning oil. The drone of the thinny filled his head, making him feel dizzy, a stranger to himself. He thought of how it had been inside the pink storm, flying through the air . . . how he had been snatched away from his vision of Susan. *Thank God for Sheemie*, he thought

distantly. *He'll make sure she finishes the day someplace safe.* But the craven whine of the thinny seemed somehow to mock him, to ask him if there had been more to see.

Now Latigo and his men were crossing the last three hundred yards to the canyon's mouth at a full-out gallop, the ones behind closing up fast. It would be hard for the ones riding point to stop suddenly without the risk of being ridden down.

It was time. Roland stuck one of the lucifers between his front teeth and raked it forward. It lit, spilling one hot and sour spark onto the wet bed of his tongue. Before the lucifer's head could burn away, Roland touched it to the powder in the trench. It lit at once, running left beneath the north end of the brush in a bright yellow thread.

He lunged across the opening—which might be wide enough for two horses running flank to flank—with the second lucifer already poised behind his teeth. He struck it as soon as he was somewhat blocked from the wind, dropped it into the powder, heard the splutter-hiss, then turned and ran.

20

Mother and father, was Roland's first shocked thought—memory so deep and unexpected it was like a slap. *At Lake Saroni.*

When had they gone there, to beautiful Lake Saroni in the northern part of Gilead Barony? That Roland couldn't remember. He knew only that he had been very small, and that there had been a beautiful stretch of sandy beach for him to play on, perfect for an aspiring young castle-builder such as he. That was what he had been doing on one day of their

(vacation? was it a vacation? did my parents once upon a time actually take a vacation?)

trip, and he had looked up, something—maybe only the cries of the birds circling over the lake—had made him look up, and there

were his mother and father, Steven and Gabrielle Deschain, at the water's edge, standing with their backs to him and their arms around each other's waists, looking out at blue water beneath a blue summer sky. How his heart had filled with love for them! How infinite was love, twining in and out of hope and memory like a braid with three strong strands, so much the Bright Tower of every human's life and soul.

It wasn't love he felt now, however, but terror. The figures standing before him as he ran back to where the canyon ended (where the *rational* part of the canyon ended) weren't Steven of Gilead and Gabrielle of Arten but his mollies, Cuthbert and Alain. They didn't have their arms around each other's waists, either, but their hands were clasped, like the hands of fairy-tale children lost in a threatening fairy-tale wood. Birds circled, but they were vultures, not gulls, and the shimmering, mist-topped stuff before the two boys wasn't water.

It was the thinny, and as Roland watched, Cuthbert and Alain began to walk toward it.

"Stop!" he screamed. *"For your fathers' sakes, stop!"*

They did not stop. They walked hand-in-hand toward the white-edged hem of the smoky green shimmer. The thinny whined its pleasure, murmured endearments, promised rewards. It baked the nerves numb and picked at the brain.

There was no time to reach them, so Roland did the only thing he could think of: raised one of his guns and fired it over their heads. The report was a hammer-blow in the canyon's enclosure, and for a moment the ricochet whine was louder than that of the thinny. The two boys stopped only inches from its sick shimmer. Roland kept expecting it to reach out and grab them, as it had grabbed the low-flying bird when they had been here on the night of the Peddler's Moon.

He triggered two more shots into the air, the reports hitting the walls and rolling back. “*Gunslingers!*” he cried. “*To me! To me!*”

It was Alain who turned toward him first, his dazed eyes seeming to float in his dust-streaked face. Cuthbert continued forward another step, the tips of his boots disappearing in the greenish-silver froth at the edge of the thinny (the whingeing grumble of the thing rose half a note, as if in anticipation), and then Alain yanked him back by the tugstring of his *sombrero*. Cuthbert tripped over a good-sized chunk of fallen rock and landed hard. When he looked up, his eyes had cleared.

“Gods!” he murmured, and as he scrambled to his feet, Roland saw that the toes of his boots were gone, clipped off neatly, as if with a pair of gardening shears. His great toes stuck out.

“Roland,” he gasped as he and Alain stumbled toward him. “Roland, we were almost gone. It *talks!*”

“Yes. I’ve heard it. Come on. There’s no time.”

He led them to the notch in the canyon wall, praying that they could get up quick enough to avoid being riddled with bullets . . . as they certainly would be, if Latigo arrived before they could get up at least part of the way.

A smell, acrid and bitter, began to fill the air—an odor like boiling juniper berries. And the first tendrils of whitish-gray smoke drifted past them.

“Cuthbert, you first. Alain, you next. I’ll come last. Climb fast, boys. Climb for your lives.”

21

Latigo’s men poured through the slot in the wall of brush like water pouring into a funnel, gradually widening the gap as they came. The bottom layer of the dead vegetation was already on fire, but in their

excitement none of them saw these first low flames, or marked them if they did. The pungent smoke also went unnoticed; their noses had been deadened by the colossal stench of the burning oil. Latigo himself, in the lead with Hendricks close behind, had only one thought; two words that pounded at his brain in a kind of vicious triumph:

Box canyon! Box canyon! Box canyon!

Yet something began to intrude on this mantra as he galloped deeper into Eyebolt, his horse's hooves clattering nimbly through the scree of rocks and

(bones)

whitish piles of cow-skulls and ribcages. This was a kind of low buzzing, a maddening, slobbering whine, insectile and insistent. It made his eyes water. Yet, strong as the sound was (if it *was* a sound; it almost seemed to be coming from *inside* him), he pushed it aside, holding onto his mantra

(box canyon box canyon got em in a box canyon)

instead. He would have to face Walter when this was over, perhaps Farson himself, and he had no idea what his punishment would be for losing the tankers . . . but all that was for later. Now he wanted only to kill these interfering bastards.

Up ahead, the canyon took a jog to the north. They would be beyond that point, and probably not far beyond, either. Backed up against the canyon's final wall, trying to squeeze themselves behind what fallen rocks there might be. Latigo would mass what guns he had and drive them out into the open with ricochets. They would probably come with their hands up, hoping for mercy. They would hope in vain. After what they'd done, the trouble they'd caused—

As Latigo rode around the jog in the canyon's wall, already levelling his pistol, his horse screamed—like a woman, it screamed

—and reared beneath him. Latigo caught the saddle-horn and managed to stay up, but the horse's rear hooves slid sideways in the scree and the animal went down. Latigo let go of the horn and threw himself clear, already aware that the sound which had been creeping into his ears was suddenly ten times stronger, buzzing loud enough to make his eyeballs pulse in their sockets, loud enough to make his balls tingle unpleasantly, loud enough to blot out the mantra which had been beating so insistently in his head.

The insistence of the thinny was far, far greater than any George Latigo could have managed.

Horses flashed around him as he landed in a kind of sprawling squat, horses that were shoved forward willy-nilly by the oncoming press from behind, by riders that squeezed through the gap in pairs (then trios as the hole in the brush, now burning all along its length, widened) and then spread out again once they were past the bottleneck, none of them clearly realizing that the entire *canyon* was a bottleneck.

Latigo got a confused glimpse of black tails and gray forelegs and dappled fetlocks; he saw chaps, and jeans, and boots jammed into stirrups. He tried to get up and a horseshoe clanged against the back of his skull. His hat saved him from unconsciousness, but he went heavily to his knees with his head down, like a man who means to pray, his vision full of stars and the back of his neck instantly soaked with blood from the gash the passing hoof had opened in his scalp.

Now he heard more screaming horses. Screaming men, as well. He got up again, coughing out the dust raised by the passing horses (such acrid dust, too; it clawed his throat like smoke), and saw Hendricks trying to spur his horse south and east against the oncoming tide of riders. He couldn't do it. The rear third of the canyon was some sort of swamp, filled with greenish steaming water, and there must be quicksand beneath it, because Hendricks's horse seemed stuck. It screamed again, and tried to rear. Its hindquarters slewed sideways. Hendricks crashed his boots into the

animal's sides again and again, attempting to get it in motion, but the horse didn't—or couldn't—move. That hungry buzzing sound filled Latigo's ears, and seemed to fill the world.

“Back! Turn back!”

He tried to scream the words, but they came out in what was little more than a croak. Still the riders pounded past him, raising dust that was too thick to be *only* dust. Latigo pulled in breath so he could scream louder—they *had* to go back, something was dreadfully wrong in Eyebolt Canyon—and hacked it out without saying anything.

Screaming horses.

Reeking smoke.

And everywhere, filling the world like lunacy, that whining, whingeing, cringing buzz.

Hendricks's horse went down, eyes rolling, bit-parted teeth snapping at the smoky air and splattering curds of foam from its lips. Hendricks fell into the steaming stagnant water, and it wasn't water at all. It came alive, somehow, as he struck it; grew green hands and a green, shifty mouth; pawed his cheek and melted away the flesh, pawed his nose and tore it off, pawed at his eyes and stripped them from their sockets. It pulled Hendricks under, but before it did, Latigo saw his denuded jawbone, a bloody piston to drive his screaming teeth.

Other men saw, and tried to wheel away from the green trap. Those who managed to do so in time were broadsided by the next wave of men—some of whom were, incredibly, still yipping or bellowing full-throated battle cries. More horses and riders were driven into the green shimmer, which accepted them eagerly. Latigo, standing stunned and bleeding like a man in the middle of a stampede (which was exactly what he was), saw the soldier to whom he had given his gun. This fellow, who had obeyed Latigo's order

and shot one of his *compadres* in order to awaken the rest of them, threw himself from his saddle, howling, and crawled back from the edge of the green stuff even as his horse plunged in. He tried to get to his feet, saw two riders bearing down on him, and clapped his hands across his face. A moment later he was ridden down.

The shrieks of the wounded and dying echoed in the smoky canyon, but Latigo hardly heard them. What he heard mostly was that buzzing, a sound that was almost a voice. Inviting him to jump in. To end it here. Why not? It was over, wasn't it? All over.

He struggled away instead, and was now able to make some headway; the stream of riders packing its way into the canyon was easing. Some of the riders fifty or sixty yards back from the jog had even been able to turn their horses. But these were ghostly and confused in the thickening smoke.

The cunning bastards have set the brush on fire behind us. Gods of heaven, gods of earth, I think we're trapped in here.

He could give no commands—every time he drew in breath to try, he coughed it wordlessly back out again—but he was able to grab a passing rider who looked all of seventeen and yank him out of his saddle. The boy went down headfirst and smashed his brow open on a jutting chunk of rock. Latigo was mounted in his place before the kid's feet had stopped twitching.

He jerked the horse's head around and spurred for the front of the canyon, but the smoke thickened to a choking white cloud before he got more than twenty yards. The wind was driving it this way. Latigo could make out—barely—the shifting orange glare of the burning brush at the desert end.

He wheeled his new horse back the way it had come. More horses loomed out of the fog. Latigo crashed into one of them and was thrown for the second time in five minutes. He landed on his knees, scrambled to his feet, and staggered back downwind, coughing and retching, eyes red and streaming.

It was a little better beyond the canyon's northward jog, but wouldn't be for much longer. The edge of the thinny was a tangle of milling horses, many with broken legs, and crawling, shrieking men. Latigo saw several hats floating on the greenish surface of the whining organism that filled the back of the canyon; he saw boots; he saw wristlets; he saw neckerchiefs; he saw the bugle-boy's dented instrument, still trailing its frayed strap.

Come in, the green shimmer invited, and Latigo found its buzz strangely attractive . . . intimate, almost. *Come in and visit, squat and hunker, be at rest, be at peace, be at one.*

Latigo raised his gun, meaning to shoot it. He didn't believe it could be killed, but he would remember the face of his father and go down shooting, all the same.

Except he didn't. The gun dropped from his relaxing fingers and he walked forward—others around him were now doing the same—into the thinny. The buzzing rose and rose, filling his ears until there was nothing else.

Nothing else at all.

22

They saw it all from the notch, where Roland and his friends had stopped in a strung-out line about twenty feet below the top. They saw the screaming confusion, the panicky milling, the men who were trampled, the men and horses that were driven into the thinny . . . and the men who, at the end, walked willingly into it.

Cuthbert was closest to the top of the canyon's wall, then Alain, then Roland, standing on a six-inch shelf of rock and holding an outcrop just above him. From their vantage-point they could see what the men struggling in their smoky hell below them could not: that the thinny was growing, reaching out, crawling eagerly toward them like an incoming tide.

Roland, his battle-lust slaked, did not want to watch what was happening below, but he couldn't turn away. The whine of the thinny—cowardly and triumphant at the same time, happy and sad at the same time, lost and found at the same time—held him like sweet, sticky ropes. He hung where he was, hypnotized, as did his friends above him, even when the smoke began to rise, and its pungent tang made him cough dryly.

Men shrieked their lives away in the thickening smoke below. They struggled in it like phantoms. They faded as the fog thickened, climbing the canyon walls like water. Horses whinnied desperately from beneath that acrid white death. The wind swirled its surface in prankish whirlpools. The thinny buzzed, and above where it lay, the surface of the smoke was stained a mystic shade of palest green.

Then, at long last, John Farson's men screamed no more.

We killed them, Roland thought with a kind of sick and fascinated horror. Then: *No, not we. I. I killed them.*

How long he might have stayed there Roland didn't know—perhaps until the rising smoke engulfed him as well, but then Cuthbert, who had begun to climb again, called down three words from above him; called down in a tone of surprise and dismay.

“Roland! *The moon!*”

Roland looked up, startled, and saw that the sky had darkened to a velvety purple. His friend was outlined against it and looking east, his face stained fever-orange with the light of the rising moon.

Yes, orange, the thinny buzzed inside his head. *Laughed* inside his head. *Orange as 'twas when it rose on the night you came out here to see me and count me. Orange like a fire. Orange like a bonfire.*

How can it be almost dark? he cried inside himself, but he knew—yes, he knew very well. Time had slipped back together, that was all,

like layers of ground embracing once more after the argument of an earthquake.

Twilight had come.

Moonrise had come.

Terror struck Roland like a closed fist aimed at the heart, making him jerk backward on the small ledge he'd found. He groped for the horn-shaped outcrop above him, but that act of rebalancing was far away; most of him was inside the pink storm again, before he had been snatched away and shown half the cosmos. Perhaps the wizard's glass had only shown him what stood worlds far away in order to keep from showing him what might soon befall so close to home.

I'd turn around if I thought her life was in any real danger, he had said. *In a second.*

And if the ball knew that? If it couldn't lie, might it not misdirect? Might it not take him away and show him a dark land, a darker tower? And it had shown him something else, something that recurred to him only now: a scrawny man in farmer's overalls who had said . . . what? Not quite what he'd thought, not what he had been used to hearing all his life; not *Life for you and life for your crop*, but . . .

"Death," he whispered to the stones surrounding him. "Death for you, life for my crop. *Charyou tree*. That's what he said, *Charyou tree*. Come, Reap."

Orange, gunslinger, a cracked old voice laughed inside his head. The voice of the Cöos. *The color of bonfires*. Charyou tree, fin de año, *these are the old ways of which only the stuffy-guys with their red hands remain . . . until tonight. Tonight the old ways are refreshed, as the old ways must be, from time to time*. Charyou tree, *you damned babby*, charyou tree: *tonight you pay for my sweet Ermot. Tonight you pay for all. Come, Reap.*

“Climb!” he screamed, reaching up and slapping Alain’s behind. “Climb, climb! For your father’s sake, *climb!*”

“Roland, what—?” Alain’s voice was dazed, but he did begin to climb, going from handhold to handhold and rattling small pebbles down into Roland’s upturned face. Squinting against their fall, Roland reached and swatted Al’s bottom again, driving him like a horse.

“*Climb*, gods damn you!” he cried. “It mayn’t be too late, even now!”

But he knew better. Demon Moon had risen, he had seen its orange light shining on Cuthbert’s face like delirium, and he knew better. In his head the lunatic buzz of the thinny, that rotting sore eating through the flesh of reality, joined with the lunatic laughter of the witch, and he knew better.

Death for you, life for the crop. Charyou tree.

Oh, Susan—

23

Nothing was clear to Susan until she saw the man with the long red hair and the straw hat which did not quite obscure his lamb-slaughterer’s eyes; the man with the cornshucks in his hands. He was the first, just a farmer (she had glimpsed him in the Lower Market, she thought; had even nodded to him, as countryfolk do, and he back to her), standing by himself not far from the place where Silk Ranch Road and the Great Road intersected, standing in the light of the rising moon. Until they came upon him, nothing was clear; after he hurled his bundle of cornshucks at her as she passed, standing in the slowly rolling cart with her hands bound in front of her and her head lowered and a rope around her neck, everything was clear.

“*Charyou tree*,” he called, almost sweetly uttering words of the Old People she hadn’t heard since her childhood, words that meant

“Come, Reap” . . . and something else, as well. Something hidden, something secret, something to do with that root word, *char*, that word which meant only death. As the dried shucks fluttered around her boots, she understood the secret very well; understood also that there would be no baby for her, no wedding for her in the fairy-distant land of Gilead, no hall in which she and Roland would be joined and then saluted beneath the electric lights, no husband, no more nights of sweet love; all that was over. The world had moved on and all that was over, done before fairly begun.

She knew that she had been put in the back of the cart, *stood* in the back of the cart, and that the surviving Coffin Hunter had looped a noose around her neck. “Don’t try to sit,” he had said, sounding almost apologetic. “I have no desire to choke you, girly. If the wagon bumps and you fall, I’ll try to keep the knot loose, but if you try to sit, I’ll have to give you a pinching. *Her* orders.” He nodded to Rhea, who sat erect on the seat of the cart, the reins in her warped hands. “*She’s* in charge now.”

And so she had been; so, as they neared town, she still was. Whatever the possession of her glam had done to her body, whatever the loss of it had done to her mind, it had not broken her power; that seemed to have increased, if anything, as if she’d found some other source from which she could feed, at least for awhile. Men who could have broken her over one knee like a stick of kindling followed her commands as unquestioningly as children.

There were more and more men as that Reaping afternoon wound its shallow course to night: half a dozen ahead of the cart, riding with Rimer and the man with the cocked eye, a full dozen riding behind it with Reynolds, the rope leading to her neck wound around his tattooed hand, at their head. She didn’t know who these men were, or how they had been summoned.

Rhea had taken this rapidly increasing party north a little farther, then turned southwest on the old Silk Ranch Road, which wound back toward town. On the eastern edge of Hambry, it rejoined the Great Road. Even in her dazed state, Susan had realized the

harridan was moving slowly, measuring the descent of the sun as they went, not clucking at the pony to hurry but actually reining it in, at least until afternoon's gold had gone. When they passed the farmer, thin-faced and alone, a good man, no doubt, with a freehold farm he worked hard from first gleam to last glow and a family he loved (but oh, there were those lamb-slaughterer eyes below the brim of his battered hat), she understood this leisurely course of travel, too. Rhea had been waiting for the moon.

With no gods to pray to, Susan prayed to her father.

Da? If thee's there, help me to be strong as I can be, and help me hold to him, to the memory of him. Help me to hold to myself as well. Not for rescue, not for salvation, but just so as not to give them the satisfaction of seeing my pain and my fear. And him, help him as well . . .

"Help keep him safe," she whispered. "Keep my love safe; take my love safe to where he goes, give him joy in who he sees, and make him a cause of joy in those who see him."

"Praying, dearie?" the old woman asked without turning on the seat. Her croaking voice oozed false compassion. "Aye, ye'd do well t'make things right with the Powers while ye still can—before the spit's burned right out of yer throat!" She threw back her head and cackled, the straggling remains of her broomstraw hair flying out orange in the light of the bloated moon.

24

Their horses, led by Rusher, had come to the sound of Roland's dismayed shout. They stood not far away, their manes rippling in the wind, shaking their heads and whinnying their displeasure whenever the wind dropped enough for them to get a whiff of the thick white smoke rising from the canyon.

Roland paid no attention to the horses or the smoke. His eyes were fixed on the drawstring sack slung over Alain's shoulder. The

ball inside had come alive again; in the growing dark, the bag seemed to pulse like some weird pink firefly. He held out his hands for it.

“Give it to me!”

“Roland, I don’t know if—”

“Give it to me, damn your face!”

Alain looked at Cuthbert, who nodded . . . then lifted his hands skyward in a weary, distracted gesture.

Roland tore the bag away before Alain could do more than begin to shrug it off his shoulder. The gunslinger dipped into it and pulled the glass out. It was glowing fiercely, a pink Demon Moon instead of an orange one.

Behind and below them, the nagging whine of the thinny rose and fell, rose and fell.

“Don’t look directly into that thing,” Cuthbert muttered to Alain. “Don’t, for your father’s sake.”

Roland bent his face over the pulsing ball, its light running over his cheeks and brow like liquid, drowning his eyes in its dazzle.

In Maerlyn’s Rainbow he saw her—Susan, horse-drover’s daughter, lovely girl at the window. He saw her standing in the back of a black cart decorated with gold symbols, the old witch’s cart. Reynolds rode behind her, holding the end of a rope that was noosed around her neck. The cart was rolling toward Green Heart, making its way with processional slowness. Hill Street was lined with people of whom the farmer with the lamb-slaughterer’s eyes had been only the first—all those folk of Hambry and Mejis who had been deprived of their fair but were now given this ancient dark attraction in its stead: *charyou tree*, come, Reap, death for you, life for our crops.

A soundless whispering ran through them like a gathering wave, and they began to pelt her—first with cornhusks, then with rotting tomatoes, then with potatoes and apples. One of these latter struck her cheek. She reeled, almost fell, then stood straight again, now raising her swollen but still lovely face so the moon painted it. She looked straight ahead.

“*Charyou tree,*” they whispered. Roland couldn’t hear them, but he could see the words on their lips. Stanley Ruiz was there, and Pettie, and Gert Moggins, and Frank Claypool, the deputy with the broken leg; Jamie McCann, who was to have been this year’s Reap Lad. Roland saw a hundred people he had known (and mostly liked) during his time in Mejis. Now these people pelted his love with cornshucks and vegetables as she stood, hands bound before her, in the back of Rhea’s cart.

The slowly rolling cart reached Green Heart, with its colored paper lanterns and silent carousel where no laughing children rode . . . no, not this year. The crowd, still speaking those two words—*chanting* them now, it appeared—parted. Roland saw the heaped pyramid of wood that was the unlit bonfire. Sitting around it, their backs propped on the central column, their lumpy legs outstretched, was a ring of red-handed stuffy-guys. There was a single hole in the ring; a single waiting vacancy.

And now a woman emerged from the crowd. She wore a rusty black dress and held a pail in one hand. A smear of ash stood out on one of her cheeks like a brand. She—

Roland began to shriek. It was a single word, over and over again: *No, no, no, no, no, no!* The ball’s pink light flashed brighter with each repetition, as if his horror refreshed and strengthened it. And now, with each of those pulses, Cuthbert and Alain could see the shape of the gunslinger’s skull beneath his skin.

“We have to take it away from him,” Alain said. “We have to, it’s sucking him dry. It’s killing him!”

Cuthbert nodded and stepped forward. He grabbed the ball, but couldn't take it from Roland's hands. The gunslinger's fingers seemed welded to it.

"Hit him!" he told Alain. "Hit him again, you have to!"

But Alain might as well have been hitting a post. Roland didn't even rock back on his heels. He continued to cry out that single negative—"No! No! No! No"—and the ball flashed faster and faster, eating its way into him through the wound it had opened, sucking up his grief like blood.

25

"*Charyou tree!*" Cordelia Delgado cried, darting forward from where she had been waiting. The crowd cheered her, and beyond her left shoulder Demon Moon winked, as if in complicity. "*Charyou tree, ye faithless bitch! Charyou tree!*"

She flung the pail of paint at her niece, splattering her pants and dressing her tied hands in a pair of wet scarlet gloves. She grinned up at Susan as the cart rolled past. The smear of ash stood out on her cheek; in the center of her pale forehead, a single vein pulsed like a worm.

"*Bitch!*" Cordelia screamed. Her fists were clenched; she danced a kind of hilarious jig, feet jumping, bony knees pumping beneath her skirt. "*Life for the crops! Death for the bitch! Charyou tree! Come, Reap!*"

The cart rolled past her; Cordelia faded from Susan's sight, just one more cruel phantasm in a dream that would soon end. *Bird and bear and hare and fish*, she thought. *Be safe, Roland; go with my love. That's my fondest wish.*

"Take her!" Rhea screamed. "Take this murdering bitch and cook her red-handed! *Charyou tree!*"

“Charyou tree!” the crowd responded. A forest of willing hands grew in the moonlit air; somewhere firecrackers rattled and children laughed excitedly.

Susan was lifted from the cart and handed toward the waiting woodpile above the heads of the crowd, passed by uplifted hands like a heroine returned triumphantly home from the wars. Her hands dripped red tears upon their straining, eager faces. The moon overlooked it all, dwarfing the glow of the paper lanterns.

“Bird and bear and hare and fish,” she murmured as she was first lowered and then slammed against the pyramid of dry wood, put in the place which had been left for her—the whole crowd chanting in unison now, *“Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!”*

“Bird and bear and hare and fish.”

Trying to remember how he had danced with her that night. Trying to remember how he had loved with her in the willow grove. Trying to remember that first meeting on the dark road: *Thankee-sai, we’re well met*, he had said, and yes, in spite of everything, in spite of this miserable ending with the folk who had been her neighbors turned into prancing goblins by moonlight, in spite of pain and betrayal and what was coming, he had spoken the truth: they had been well met, they had been very well met, indeed.

“Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!”

Women came and piled dry cornshucks around her feet. Several of them slapped her (it didn’t matter; her bruised and puffy face seemed to have gone numb), and one—it was Misha Alvarez, whose daughter Susan had taught to ride—spat into her eyes and then leaped prankishly away, shaking her hands at the sky and laughing. For a moment she saw Coral Thorin, festooned with reap-charms, her arms filled with dead leaves which she threw at Susan; they fluttered down around her in a crackling, aromatic shower.

And now came her aunt again, and Rhea beside her. Each held a torch. They stood before her, and Susan could smell sizzling pitch.

Rhea raised her torch to the moon. "*CHARYOU TREE!*" she screamed in her rusty old voice, and the crowd responded,

"CHARYOU TREE!"

Cordelia raised her own torch. "*COME, REAP!*"

"COME, REAP!" they cried back to her.

"Now, ye bitch," Rhea crooned. "Now comes warmer kisses than any yer love ever gave ye."

"Die, ye faithless," Cordelia whispered. "Life for the crops, death for you."

It was she who first flung her torch into the cornshucks which were piled as high as Susan's knees; Rhea flung hers a bare second later. The cornshucks blazed up at once, dazzling Susan with yellow light.

She drew in a final breath of cool air, warmed it with her heart, and loosed it in a defiant shout: "*ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!*"

The crowd fell back, murmuring, as if uneasy at what they had done, now that it was too late to take it back; here was not a stuffy-guy but a cheerful girl they all knew, one of their own, for some mad reason backed up against the Reap-Night bonfire with her hands painted red. They might have saved her, given another moment—some might have, anyway—but it was too late. The dry wood caught; her pants caught; her shirt caught; her long blonde hair blazed on her head like a crown.

"ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!"

At the end of her life she was aware of heat but not pain. She had time to consider his eyes, eyes of that blue which is the color of the sky at first light of morning. She had time to think of him on the Drop,

riding Rusher flat-out with his black hair flying back from his temples and his neckerchief rippling; to see him laughing with an ease and freedom he would never find again in the long life which stretched out for him beyond hers, and it was his laughter she took with her as she went out, fleeing the light and heat into the silky, consoling dark, calling to him over and over as she went, calling bird and bear and hare and fish.

26

There was no word, not even *no*, in his screams at the end: he howled like a gutted animal, his hands welded to the ball, which beat like a runaway heart. He watched in it as she burned.

Cuthbert tried again to take the cursed thing away, and couldn't. He did the only other thing he could think of—drew his revolver, pointed it at the ball, and thumbed back the hammer. He would likely wound Roland, and the flying glass might even blind him, but there was no other choice. If they didn't do something, the glam would kill him.

But there was no need. As if seeing Cuthbert's gun and understanding what it meant, the ball went instantly dark and dead in Roland's hands. Roland's stiff body, every line and muscle trembling with horror and outrage, went limp. He dropped like a stone, his fingers at last letting go of the ball. His stomach cushioned it as he struck the ground; it rolled off him and trickled to a stop by one of his limp, outstretched hands. Nothing burned in its darkness now except for one baleful orange spark—the tiny reflection of the rising Demon Moon.

Alain looked at the glass with a species of disgusted, frightened awe; looked at it as one might look at a vicious animal that now sleeps . . . but will wake again, and bite when it does.

He stepped forward, meaning to crush it to powder beneath his boot.

“Don’t you dare,” Cuthbert said in a hoarse voice. He was kneeling beside Roland’s limp form but looking at Alain. The rising moon was in his eyes, two small, bright stones of light. “Don’t you dare, after all the misery and death we’ve gone through to get it. Don’t you even *think* of it.”

Alain looked at him uncertainly for a moment, thinking he should destroy the cursed thing, anyway—misery suffered did not justify misery to come, and as long as the thing on the ground remained whole, misery was all it would bring anyone. It was a misery-*machine*, that was what it was, and it had killed Susan Delgado. He hadn’t seen what Roland had seen in the glass, but he had seen his friend’s face, and that had been enough. It had killed Susan, and it would kill more, if left whole.

But then he thought of *ka* and drew back. Later he would bitterly regret doing so.

“Put it in the bag again,” Cuthbert said, “and then help me with Roland. We have to get out of here.”

The drawstring bag lay crumpled on the ground nearby, fluttering in the wind. Alain picked up the ball, hating the feel of its smooth, curved surface, expecting it to come alive under his touch. It didn’t, though. He put it in the bag, and looped it over his shoulder again. Then he knelt beside Roland.

He didn’t know how long they tried unsuccessfully to bring him around—until the moon had risen high enough in the sky to turn silver again, and the smoke roiling out of the canyon had begun to dissipate, that was all he knew. Until Cuthbert told him it was enough; they would have to sling him over Rusher’s saddle and ride with him that way. If they could get into the heavily forested lands west o’ Barony before dawn, Cuthbert said, they would likely be safe . . . but they had to get at least that far. They had smashed Farson’s men apart with stunning ease, but the remains would likely knit together again the following day. Best they be gone before that happened.

And that was how they left Eyebolt Canyon, and the seacoast side of Mejis; riding west beneath the Demon Moon, with Roland laid across his saddle like a corpse.

27

The next day they spent in Il Bosque, the forest west of Mejis, waiting for Roland to wake up. When afternoon came and he remained unconscious, Cuthbert said: "See if you can touch him."

Alain took Roland's hands in his own, marshalled all his concentration, bent over his friend's pale, slumbering face, and remained that way for almost half an hour. Finally he shook his head, let go of Roland's hands, and stood up.

"Nothing?" Cuthbert asked.

Alain sighed and shook his head.

They made a travois of pine branches so he wouldn't have to spend another night riding oversaddle (if nothing else, it seemed to make Rusher nervous to be carrying his master in such a way), and went on, not travelling on the Great Road—that would have been far too dangerous—but parallel to it. When Roland remained unconscious the following day (Mejis falling behind them now, and both boys feeling a deep tug of homesickness, inexplicable but as real as tides), they sat on either side of him, looking at each other over the slow rise and fall of his chest.

"Can an unconscious person starve, or die of thirst?" Cuthbert asked. "They can't, can they?"

"Yes," Alain said. "I think they can."

It had been a long, nerve-wracking night of travel. Neither boy had slept well the previous day, but on this one they slept like the dead, with blankets over their heads to block the sun. They awoke minutes apart as the sun was going down and Demon Moon, now two nights

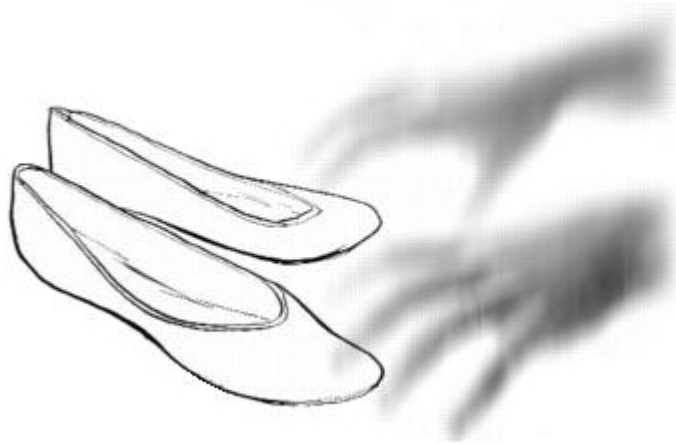
past the full, was rising through a troubled rack of clouds that presaged the first of the great autumn storms.

Roland was sitting up. He had taken the glass from the drawstring bag. He sat with it cradled in his arms, a darkened bit of magic as dead as the glass eyes of The Romp. Roland's own eyes, also dead, looked indifferently off into the moonlit corridors of the forest. He would eat but not sleep. He would drink from the streams they passed but not speak. And he would not be parted from the piece of Maerlyn's Rainbow which they had brought out of Mejis at such great price. It did not glow for him, however.

Not, Cuthbert thought once, while Al and I are awake to see it, anyway.

Alain couldn't get Roland's hands off the ball, and so he laid his own on Roland's cheeks, touching him that way. Except there was nothing to touch, nothing there. The thing which rode west with them toward Gilead was not Roland, or even a ghost of Roland. Like the moon at the close of its cycle, Roland had gone.

PART FOUR
ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT SHOES



CHAPTER I KANSAS IN THE MORNING

1

For the first time in

(hours? days?)

the gunslinger fell silent. He sat for a moment looking toward the building to the east of them (with the sun behind it, the glass palace was a black shape surrounded by a gold nimbus) with his forearms propped on his knees. Then he took the waterskin which lay on the pavement beside him, held it over his face, opened his mouth, and upended it.

He drank what happened to go in his mouth—the others could see his adam’s apple working as he lay back in the breakdown lane, still pouring—but drinking didn’t seem to be his primary purpose. Water streamed down his deeply lined forehead and bounced off his closed eyelids. It pooled in the triangular hollow at the base of his throat and ran back from his temples, wetting his hair and turning it darker.

At last he put the waterskin aside and only lay there, eyes closed, arms stretched out high above his head, like a man surrendering in his sleep. Steam rose in delicate tendrils from his wet face.

“Ahhh,” he said.

“Feel better?” Eddie asked.

The gunslinger’s lids rose, disclosing those faded yet somehow alarming blue eyes. “Yes. I do. I don’t understand how that can be,

as much as I dreaded this telling . . . but I do.”

“An ologist-of-the-psyche could probably explain it to you,” Susannah said, “but I doubt you’d listen.” She put her hands in the small of her back, stretched and winced . . . but the wince was only reflex. The pain and stiffness she’d expected weren’t there, and although there was one small creak near the base of her spine, she didn’t get the satisfying series of snaps, crackles, and pops she had expected.

“Tell you one thing,” Eddie said, “this gives a whole new meaning to ‘Get it off your chest.’ How long have we been here, Roland?”

“Just one night.”

“ ‘The spirits have done it all in a single night,’ ” Jake said in a dreamy voice. His legs were crossed at the ankles; Oy sat in the diamond shape made by the boy’s bent knees, looking at him with his bright gold-black eyes.

Roland sat up, wiping at his wet cheeks with his neckerchief and looking at Jake sharply. “What is it you say?”

“Not me. A guy named Charles Dickens wrote that. In a story called *A Christmas Carol*. All in a single night, huh?”

“Does any part of your body say it was longer?”

Jake shook his head. No, he felt pretty much the way he did any morning—better than on some. He had to take a leak, but his back teeth weren’t exactly floating, or anything like that.

“Eddie? Susannah?”

“I feel good,” Susannah said. “Surely not as if I stayed up all night, let alone many of em.”

Eddie said, “It reminds me of the time I spent as a junkie, in a way —”

“Doesn’t everything?” Roland asked dryly.

“Oh, that’s funny,” Eddie said. “A real howl. Next train that goes crazy on us, *you* can ask it the silly questions. What I meant was that you’d spend so many nights high that you got used to feeling like ten pounds of shit in a nine-pound bag when you got up in the morning—bad head, stuffy nose, thumping heart, glass in the old spine. Take it from your pal Eddie, you can tell just from the way you feel in the morning how good dope is for you. Anyway, you’d get so used to that—I did, anyway—that when you actually took a night off, you’d wake up the next morning and sit there on the edge of the bed, thinking, ‘What the fuck’s wrong with me? Am I sick? I feel weird. Did I have a stroke in the night?’ ”

Jake laughed, then clapped a hand over his mouth so violently that it was as if he wanted not just to hold the sound in but call it back. “Sorry,” he said. “That made me think of my dad.”

“One of my people, huh?” Eddie said. “Anyway, I expect to be sore, I expect to be tired, I expect to creak when I walk . . . but I actually think all I need to put me right is a quick pee in the bushes.”

“And a bite to eat?” Roland asked.

Eddie had been wearing a small smile. Now it faded. “No,” he said. “After that story, I’m not all that hungry. In fact, I’m not hungry at all.”

2

Eddie carried Susannah down the embankment and popped her behind a stand of laurel bushes to do her necessary. Jake was sixty or seventy yards east, in a grove of birches. Roland had said he would use the remedial strip to do his morning necessary, then raised his eyebrows when his New York friends laughed.

Susannah wasn’t laughing when she came out of the bushes. Her face was streaked with tears. Eddie didn’t ask her; he knew. He had been fighting the feeling himself. He took her gently in his arms and

she put her face against the side of his neck. They stayed that way for a little while.

“*Charyou tree*,” she said at last, pronouncing it as Roland had: chair-you tree, with a little upturned vowel at the end.

“Yeah,” Eddie said, thinking that a Charlie by any other name was still a Charlie. As, he supposed, a rose was a rose was a rose. “Come, Reap.”

She raised her head and began to wipe her swimming eyes. “To have gone through all that,” she said, keeping her voice low . . . and looking once at the turnpike embankment to make sure Roland wasn’t there, looking down at them. “And *at fourteen*.”

“Yeah. It makes my adventures searching for the elusive dime bag in Tompkins Square look pretty tame. In a way, though, I’m almost relieved.”

“Relieved? Why?”

“Because I thought he was going to tell us that he killed her himself. For his damned Tower.”

Susannah looked squarely into his eyes. “But he thinks that’s what he did. Don’t you understand that?”

3

When they were back together again and there was food actually in sight, all of them decided they could eat a bit, after all. Roland shared out the last of the burritos (*Maybe later today we can stop in at the nearest Boing Boing Burgers and see what they’ve got for leftovers*, Eddie thought), and they dug in. All of them, that was, except Roland. He picked up his burrito, looked at it, then looked away. Eddie saw an expression of sadness on the gunslinger’s face that made him look both old and lost. It hurt Eddie’s heart, but he couldn’t think what to do about it.

Jake, almost ten years younger, could. He got up, went to Roland, knelt beside him, put his arms around the gunslinger's neck, and hugged him. "I'm sorry you lost your friend," he said.

Roland's face worked, and for a moment Eddie was sure he was going to lose it. A long time between hugs, maybe. Mighty long. Eddie had to look away for a moment. *Kansas in the morning*, he told himself. *A sight you never expected to see. Dig on that for awhile, and let the man be.*

When he looked back, Roland had it together again. Jake was sitting beside him, and Oy had his long snout on one of the gunslinger's boots. Roland had begun to eat his burrito. Slowly, and without much relish . . . but he was eating.

A cold hand—Susannah's—crept into Eddie's. He took it and folded his fingers over it.

"One night," she marvelled.

"On our body-clocks, at least," Eddie said. "In our heads . . ."

"Who knows?" Roland agreed. "But storytelling always changes time. At least it does in my world." He smiled. It was unexpected, as always, and as always, it transformed his face into something nearly beautiful. Looking at that, Eddie mused, you could see how a girl might have fallen in love with Roland, once upon a time. Back when he had been long and going on tall but maybe not so ugly; back when the Tower hadn't yet got its best hold on him.

"I think it's that way in all worlds, sugar," Susannah said. "Could I ask you a couple of questions, before we get rolling?"

"If you like."

"What happened to you? How long were you . . . gone?"

“I was certainly gone, you’re right about that. I was travelling. *Wandering*. Not in Maerlyn’s Rainbow, exactly . . . I don’t think I ever would have returned from there, if I’d gone into it while I was still . . . sick . . . but everyone has a wizard’s glass, of course. Here.” He tapped his forehead gravely, just above the space between his eyebrows. “That’s where I went. That’s where I travelled while my friends travelled east with me. I got better there, little by little. I held onto the ball, and I travelled inside my head, and I got better. But the glass never glowed for me until the very end . . . when the battlements of the castle and the towers of the city were actually in sight. If it had awakened earlier . . .”

He shrugged.

“If it had awakened before I’d started to get some of my strength of mind back, I don’t think I’d be here now. Because any world—even a pink one with a glass sky—would have been preferable to one where there was no Susan. I suppose the force that gives the glass its life knew that . . . and waited.”

“But when it *did* glow for you again, it told you the rest,” Jake said. “It must have. It told you the parts that you weren’t there to see.”

“Yes. I know as much of the story as I do because of what I saw in the ball.”

“You told us once that John Farson wanted your head on a pole,” Eddie said. “Because you stole something from him. Something he held dear. It was the glass ball, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. He was more than furious when he found out. He was insane with rage. In your parlance, Eddie, he ‘went nuclear.’ ”

“How many more times *did* it glow for you?” Susannah asked.

“And what happened to it?” Jake added.

“I saw in it three times after we left Mejis Barony,” Roland said. “The first was on the night before we came home to Gilead. That was when I travelled in it the longest, and it showed me what I’ve told you. A few things I’ve only guessed at, but most I was shown. It showed me these things not to teach or enlighten, but to hurt and wound. The remaining pieces of the Wizard’s Rainbow are all evil things. Hurt enlivens them, somehow. It waited until my mind was strong enough to understand and *withstand* . . . and then it showed me all the things I missed in my stupid adolescent complacency. My lovesick daze. My prideful, murderous conceit.”

“Roland, don’t,” Susannah said. “Don’t let it hurt you still.”

“But it does. It always will. Never mind. It doesn’t matter now; that tale is told.

“The second time I saw into the glass—*went* into the glass—was three days after I came home. My mother wasn’t there, although she was due that evening. She had gone into Debaria—a kind of retreat for women—to wait and pray for my return. Nor was Marten there. He was in Cressia, with Farson.”

“The ball,” Eddie said. “Your father had it by then?”

“No-o,” Roland said. He looked down at his hands, and Eddie observed a faint flush rising into his cheeks. “I didn’t give it to him at first. I found it . . . hard to give up.”

“I bet,” Susannah said. “You and everyone else who ever looked into the goddam thing.”

“On the third afternoon, before we were to be banqueted to celebrate our safe return—”

“I bet you were really in a mood to party, too,” Eddie said.

Roland smiled without humor, still studying his hands. “At around four o’ the clock, Cuthbert and Alain came to my rooms. We were a

trio for an artist to paint, I wot—windburned, hollow-eyed, hands covered with healing cuts and scrapes from our climb up the side of the canyon, scrawny as scarecrows. Even Alain, who tended toward stoutness, all but disappeared when he turned sideways. They confronted me, I suppose you'd say. They'd kept the secret of the ball to that point—out of respect for me and for the loss I'd suffered, they told me, and I believed them—but they would keep it no longer than that night's meal. If I wouldn't give it up voluntarily, it would be a question for our fathers to decide. They were horribly embarrassed, especially Cuthbert, but they were determined.

"I told them I'd give it over to my own father before the banquet—before my mother arrived by coach from Debaria, even. They should come early and see that I kept my promise. Cuthbert started to hem and haw and say that wouldn't be necessary, but of course it *was* necessary—"

"Yeah," Eddie said. He had the look of a man who understood this part of the story perfectly. "You can go into the crapper on your own, but it's a lot easier to actually flush all the bad shit down the toilet if you have somebody with you."

"Alain, at least, knew it would be better for me—easier—if I didn't have to hand the ball over alone. He hushed Cuthbert up and said they'd be there. And they were. And I gave it over, little as I wanted to. My father went as pale as paper when he looked into the bag and saw what was there, then excused himself and took it away. When he came back, he picked up his glass of wine and went on talking to us of our adventures in Mejis as if nothing had happened."

"But between the time your friends talked to you about it and the time you gave it up, you looked into it," Jake said. "*Went* into it. Travelled in it. What did it show you that time?"

"First the Tower again," Roland said, "and the beginning of the way there. I saw the fall of Gilead, and the triumph of the Good Man. We'd put those things back a mere twenty months or so by destroying the tankers and the oilpatch. I could do nothing about

that, but it showed me something I *could* do. There was a certain knife. The blade had been treated with an especially potent poison, something from a distant Mid-World Kingdom called Garlan. Stuff so strong even the tiniest cut would cause almost instant death. A wandering singer—in truth, John Farson’s eldest nephew—had brought this knife to court. The man he gave it to was the castle’s chief of domestic staff. This man was to pass the knife on to the actual assassin. My father was not meant to see the sun come up on the morning after the banquet.” He smiled at them grimly. “Because of what I saw in the Wizard’s Glass, the knife never reached the hand that would have used it, and there was a new chief of domestics by the end of that week. These are pretty tales I tell you, are they not? Aye, very pretty, indeed.”

“Did you see the person the knife was meant for?” Susannah asked. “The actual killer?”

“Yes.”

“Anything else? Did you see anything else?” Jake asked. The plan to murder Roland’s father didn’t seem to hold much interest for him.

“Yes.” Roland looked puzzled. “Shoes. Just for a minute. Shoes tumbling through the air. At first I thought they were autumn leaves. And when I saw what they really were, they were gone and I was lying on my bed with the ball hugged in my arms . . . pretty much the way I carried it back from Mejis. My father . . . as I’ve said, his surprise when he looked inside the bag was very great, indeed.”

You told him who had the knife with the special poison on it, Susannah thought, Jeeves the Butler, or whoever, but you didn’t tell him who was supposed to actually use it, did you, sugar? Why not? Because you wanted to take care of dat little spot o’ work yo ownself? But before she could ask, Eddie was asking a question of his own.

“Shoes? Flying through the air? Does that mean anything to you now?”

Roland shook his head.

“Tell us about the rest of what you saw in it,” Susannah said.

He gave her a look of such terrible pain that what Susannah had only suspected immediately solidified to fact in her mind. She looked away from him and groped for Eddie’s hand.

“I cry your pardon, Susannah, but I cannot. Not now. For now, I’ve told all I can.”

“All right,” Eddie said. “All right, Roland, that’s cool.”

“Ool,” Oy agreed.

“Did you ever see the witch again?” Jake asked.

For a long time it seemed Roland would not answer this, either, but in the end he did.

“Yes. She wasn’t done with me. Like my dreams of Susan, she followed me. All the way from Mejis, she followed me.”

“What do you mean?” Jake asked in a low, awed voice. “Cripes, Roland, what do you mean?”

“Not now.” He got up. “It’s time we were on our way again.” He nodded to the building which floated ahead of them; the sun was just now clearing its battlements. “Yon glitter-dome’s a good distance away, but I think we can reach it this afternoon, if we move brisk. ’Twould be best. It’s not a place I’d reach after nightfall, if that can be avoided.”

“Do you know what it is yet?” Susannah asked.

“Trouble,” he repeated. “And in our road.”

For awhile that morning, the thinny warbled so loudly that not even the bullets in their ears would entirely stop up the sound; at its worst, Susannah felt as if the bridge of her nose would simply disintegrate, and when she looked at Jake, she saw he was weeping copiously—not crying the way people do when they're sad, but the way they do when their sinuses are in total revolt. She couldn't get the saw-player the kid had mentioned out of her mind. *Sounds Hawaiian*, she thought over and over again as Eddie pushed her grimly along in the new wheelchair, weaving in and out of the stalled vehicles. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it? Sounds fucking Hawaiian, doesn't it, Miss Oh So Black and Pretty?*

On both sides of the turnpike the thinny lapped all the way up to the embankment, casting its twitching, misshapen reflections of trees and grain elevators, seeming to watch the pilgrims pass as hungry animals in a zoo might watch plump children. Susannah would find herself thinking of the thinny in Eyebolt Canyon, reaching out hungrily through the smoke for Latigo's milling men, pulling them in (and some going in on their own, walking like zombies in a horror movie), and then she would find herself thinking of the guy in Central Park again, the wacko with the saw. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it? Counting one thinny, and it sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it?*

Just when she thought she could stand it not a moment longer, the thinny began to draw back from I-70 again, and its humming warble at last began to fade. Susannah was eventually able to pull the bullets out of her ears. She tucked them into the side-pocket of her chair with a hand that shook slightly.

"That was a bad one," Eddie said. His voice sounded clogged and weepy. She looked around at him and saw his cheeks were wet, his eyes red. "Take it easy, Suzie-pie," he said. "It's my sinuses, that's all. That sound kills em."

"Me, too," Susannah said.

"My sinuses are okay, but my head aches," Jake said. "Roland, do you have any more aspirin?"

Roland stopped, rummaged, and found the bottle.

“Did you ever see Clay Reynolds again?” Jake asked, after swallowing the pills with water from the skin he carried.

“No, but I know what happened to him. He got a bunch together, some of them deserters from Farson’s army, went to robbing banks . . . in toward our part of the world, this was, but by then bank-thieves and stage-robbers didn’t have much to fear from gunslingers.”

“The gunslingers were busy with Farson,” Eddie said.

“Yes. But Reynolds and his men were trapped by a smart sheriff who turned the main street of a town called Oakley into a killing-zone. Six of the ten in the gang were killed outright. The rest were hung. Reynolds was one of those. This was less than a year later, during the time of Wide Earth.” He paused, then said: “One of those shot dead in the killing-zone was Coral Thorin. She had become Reynolds’s woman; rode and killed with the rest of them.”

They went on in silence for a bit. In the distance, the thinny warbled its endless song. Jake suddenly ran ahead to a parked camper. A note had been left under the wiper blade on the driver’s side. By standing on his toes, he was just able to reach it. He scanned it, frowning.

“What does it say?” Eddie asked.

Jake handed it over. Eddie looked, then passed it to Susannah, who read it in turn and gave it to Roland. He looked, then shook his head. “I can make out only a few words—*old woman, dark man*. What does the rest say? Read it to me.”

Jake took it back. “ ‘The old woman from the dreams is in Nebraska. Her name is Abagail.’ ” He paused. “Then, down here, it says, ‘The dark man is in the west. Maybe Vegas.’ ”

Jake looked up at the gunslinger, the note fluttering in his hand, his face puzzled and uneasy. But Roland was looking toward the palace which shimmered across the highway—the palace that was not in the west but in the east, the palace that was light, not dark.

“In the west,” Roland said. “Dark man, Dark Tower, and always in the west.”

“Nebraska’s west of here, too,” Susannah said hesitantly. “I don’t know if that matters, this Abigail person, but . . .”

“I think she’s part of another story,” Roland said.

“But a story close to this one,” Eddie put in. “Next door, maybe. Close enough to swap sugar for salt . . . or start arguments.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Roland said, “and we may have business with the ‘old woman’ and the ‘dark man’ yet . . . but today our business is east. Come on.”

They began walking again.

5

“What about Sheemie?” Jake asked after awhile.

Roland laughed, partly in surprise at the question, partly in pleased remembrance. “He followed us. It couldn’t have been easy for him, and it must have been damned scary in places—there were wheels and wheels of wild country between Mejis and Gilead, and plenty of wild folks, too. Worse than just folks, mayhap. But *ka* was with him, and he showed up in time for Year’s End Fair. He and that damned mule.”

“Capi,” Jake said.

“Appy,” Oy repeated, padding along at Jake’s heel.

“When we went in search of the Tower, I and my friends, Sheemie was with us. As a sort of squire, I suppose you’d say. He . . .” But Roland trailed off, biting at his lip, and of that he would say no more.

“Cordelia?” Susannah asked. “The crazy aunt?”

“Dead before the bonfire had burned down to embers. It might have been a heart-storm, or a brain-storm—what Eddie calls a stroke.”

“Perhaps it was shame,” Susannah said. “Or horror at what she’d done.”

“It may have been,” Roland said. “Waking to the truth when it’s too late is a terrible thing. I know that very well.”

“Something up there,” Jake said, pointing at a long stretch of road from which the cars had been cleared. “Do you see?”

Roland did—with his eyes he seemed to see everything—but it was another fifteen minutes or so before Susannah began to pick up the small black specks ahead in the road. She was quite sure she knew what they were, although what she thought was less vision than intuition. Ten minutes after that, she was sure.

They were shoes. Six pairs of shoes placed neatly in a line across the eastbound lanes of Interstate 70.

CHAPTER II SHOES IN THE ROAD

1

They reached the shoes at mid-morning. Beyond them, clearer now, stood the glass palace. It glimmered a delicate green shade, like the reflection of a lily pad in still water. There were shining gates in front of it; red pennons snapped from its towers in a light breeze.

The shoes were also red.

Susannah's impression that there were six pairs was understandable but wrong—there were actually four pairs and one quartet. This latter—four dark red booties made of supple leather—was undoubtedly meant for the four-footed member of their *ka-tet*. Roland picked one of them up and felt inside it. He didn't know how many bumblers had worn shoes in the history of the world, but he was willing to guess that none had ever been gifted with a set of silk-lined leather booties.

"Bally, Gucci, eat your heart out," Eddie said. "This is great stuff."

Susannah's were easiest to pick out, and not just because of the feminine, sparkly swoops on the sides. They weren't really shoes at all—they had been made to fit over the stumps of her legs, which ended just above the knees.

"Now look at this," she marvelled, holding one up so the sun could flash on the rhinestones with which the shoes were decorated . . . if they *were* rhinestones. She had a crazy notion that maybe they were diamond chips. "Cappies. After four years of gettin along in what my

friend Cynthia calls ‘circumstances of reduced leg-room,’ I finally got myself a pair of cappies. Think of that.”

“Cappies,” Eddie mused. “Is that what they call em?”

“That’s what they call em, sugar.”

Jake’s were bright red Oxfords—except for the color, they would have looked perfectly at home in the well-bred classrooms of The Piper School. He flexed one, then turned it over. The sole was bright and unmarked. There was no manufacturer’s stamp, nor had he really expected one. His father had maybe a dozen pairs of fine handmade shoes. Jake knew them when he saw them.

Eddie’s were low boots with Cuban heels (*Maybe in this world you call them Mejis heels*, he thought) and pointed toes . . . what, back in his other life, had been known as “street-boppers.” Kids from the midsixties—an era Odetta/Detta/Susannah had just missed—might have called them “Beatle-boots.”

Roland’s, of course, were cowboy boots. Fancy ones—you’d go dancing rather than droving in such as these. Looped stitching, side decorations, narrow, haughty arches. He examined them without picking them up, then looked at his fellow travellers and frowned. They were looking at each other. You would have said three people couldn’t do that, only a pair . . . but you only would have said it if you’d never been part of a *ka-tet*.

Roland still shared *khef* with them; he felt the powerful current of their mingled thought, but could not understand it. *Because it’s of their world. They come from different whens of that world, but they see something here that’s common to all three of them.*

“What is it?” he asked. “What do they mean, these shoes?”

“I don’t think any of us know *that*, exactly,” Susannah said.

“No,” Jake said. “It’s another riddle.” He looked at the weird, blood-red Oxford shoe in his hands with distaste. “Another goddamned riddle.”

“Tell what you know.” He looked toward the glass palace again. It was perhaps fifteen New York miles away, now, shining in the clear day, delicate as a mirage, but as real as . . . well, as real as shoes. “Please, tell me what you know about these shoes.”

“I got shoes, *you* got shoes, all God’s chillun got shoes,” Odetta said. “That’s the prevailin opinion, anyway.”

“Well,” Eddie said, “*we* got em, anyway. And you’re thinking what I’m thinking, aren’t you?”

“I guess I am.”

“You, Jake?”

Instead of answering with words, Jake picked up the other Oxford (Roland had no doubt that all the shoes, including Oy’s, would fit perfectly) and clapped them briskly together three times. It meant nothing to Roland, but both Eddie and Susannah reacted violently, looking around, looking especially at the sky, as if expecting a storm born out of this bright autumn sunshine. They ended up looking at the glass palace again . . . and then at each other, in that knowing, round-eyed way that made Roland feel like shaking them both until their teeth rattled. Yet he waited. Sometimes that was all a man could do.

“After you killed Jonas, you looked into the ball,” Eddie said, turning to him.

“Yes.”

“*Travelled* in the ball.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to talk about that again now; it has nothing to do with these—”

“I think it does,” Eddie said. “You flew inside a pink storm. Inside a pink *gale*, you could say. Gale is a word you might use for a storm, isn’t it? Especially if you were making up a riddle.”

“Sure,” Jake said. He sounded dreamy, almost like a boy who talks in his sleep. “When does Dorothy fly over the Wizard’s Rainbow? When she’s a Gale.”

“We ain’t in Kansas anymore, sugar,” Susannah said, and then voiced a strange, humorless bark which Roland supposed was a species of laughter. “May look a little like it, but Kansas was never . . . you know, this *thin*.”

“I don’t understand you,” Roland said. But he felt cold, and his heart was beating too fast. There were thinnies everywhere now, hadn’t he told them that? Worlds melting into one another as the forces of the Tower weakened? As the day when the rose would be plowed under drew nearer?

“You saw things as you flew,” Eddie said. “Before you got to the dark land, the one you called Thunderclap, you saw things. The piano-player, Sheb. Who turned up again later in your life, didn’t he?”

“Yes, in Tull.”

“And the dweller with the red hair?”

“Him, too. He had a bird named Zoltan. But when we met, he and I, we said the normal. ‘Life for you, life for your crop,’ that sort of thing. I thought I heard the same when he flew by me in the pink storm, but he really said something else.” He glanced at Susannah. “I saw your wheelchair, too. The old one.”

“And you saw the witch.”

“Yes. I—”

In a creaky chortle that reminded Roland unnervingly of Rhea, Jake Chambers cried: “I’ll get you, my pretty! And your little dog, too!”

Roland stared at him, trying not to gape.

“Only in the movie, the witch wasn’t riding a broom,” Jake said. “She was on her bike, the one with the basket on the back.”

“Yeah, no reap-charms, either,” Eddie said. “Would have been a nice touch, though. I tell you, Jake, when I was a kid, I used to have nightmares about the way she laughed.”

“It was the monkeys that gave me the creeps,” Susannah said. “The flying monkeys. I’d get thinkin about em, and then have to crawl into bed with my mom and dad. They’d still be arguin ’bout whose bright idea it was to take me to that show in the foist place when I fell asleep between em.”

“I wasn’t worried about clapping the heels together,” Jake said. “Not a bit.” It was Susannah and Eddie he was speaking to; for the time being, it was as if Roland wasn’t even there. “I wasn’t wearing them, after all.”

“True,” Susannah said, sounding severe, “but you know what my daddy always used to say?”

“No, but I have a feeling we’re going to find out,” Eddie said.

She gave Eddie a brief, severe look, then turned her attention back to Jake. “ ‘Never whistle for the wind unless you want it to blow,’ ” she said. “And it’s good advice, no matter what Young Mister Foolish here may think.”

“Spanked again,” Eddie said, grinning.

“Panked!” Oy said, eyeing Eddie severely.

“Explain this to me,” Roland said in his softest voice. “I would hear. I would share your *khef*. And I would share it *now*.”

2

They told him a story almost every American child of the twentieth century knew, about a Kansas farmgirl named Dorothy Gale who had been carried away by a cyclone and deposited, along with her dog, in the Land of Oz. There was no I-70 in Oz, but there was a yellow brick road which served much the same purpose, and there were witches, both good and bad. There was a *ka-tet* comprised of Dorothy, Toto, and three friends she met along the way: the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Woodman, and the Scarecrow. They each had

(bird and bear and hare and fish)

a fondest wish, and it was with Dorothy’s that Roland’s new friends (and Roland himself, for that matter) identified the most strongly: she wanted to find her way home again.

“The Munchkins told her that she had to follow the yellow brick road to Oz,” Jake said, “and so she went. She met the others along the way, sort of like you met us, Roland—”

“Although you don’t look much like Judy Garland,” Eddie put in.

“—and eventually they got there. To Oz, the Emerald Palace, and the guy who lived in the Emerald Palace.” He looked toward the glass palace ahead of them, greener and greener in the strengthening light, and then back to Roland.

“Yes, I understand. And was this fellow, Oz, a powerful *dinh*? A Baron? Perhaps a King?”

Again, the three of them exchanged a glance from which Roland was excluded. “That’s complicated,” Jake said. “He was sort of a humbug—”

“A bumhug? What’s that?”

“*Humbug*,” Jake said, laughing. “A faker. All talk, no action. But maybe the important thing is that the Wizard actually came from—”

“Wizard?” Roland asked sharply. He grasped Jake’s shoulder with his diminished right hand. “Why do you call him so?”

“Because that was his title, sug,” Susannah said. “The Wizard of Oz.” She lifted Roland’s hand gently but firmly from Jake’s shoulder. “Let him tell it, now. He don’t need you to squeeze it out of him.”

“Did I hurt you? Jake, I cry your pardon.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Jake said. “Don’t worry about it. Anyway, Dorothy and her friends had a lot of adventures before finding out the Wizard was a, you know, a bumhug.” Jake giggled at this with his hands clapped to his forehead and pushing back his hair, like a child of five. “He couldn’t give the Lion courage, the Scarecrow a brain, or the Tin Woodman a heart. Worst of all, he couldn’t send Dorothy back to Kansas. The Wizard had a balloon, but he went without her. I don’t think he meant to, but he did.”

“It seems to me, from your telling of the tale,” Roland said, speaking very slowly, “that Dorothy’s friends had the things they wanted all along.”

“That’s the moral of the story,” Eddie said. “Maybe what makes it a great story. But Dorothy was stuck in Oz, you see. Then Glinda showed up. Glinda the Good. And, as a present for smooshing one of the bad witches under her house and melting another one, Glinda told Dorothy how to use the ruby slippers. The ones Glinda gave her.”

Eddie raised the red Cuban-heeled street-boppers which had been left for him on the dotted white line of I-70.

“Glinda told Dorothy to click the heels of the ruby slippers together three times. That would take her back to Kansas, she said. And it did.”

“And that’s the end of the tale?”

“Well,” Jake said, “it was so popular that the guy who wrote it went ahead and wrote about a thousand more Oz stories—”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “Everything but *Glinda’s Guide to Firm Thighs*.”

“—and there was this crazy remake called *The Wiz*, starring black people—”

“Really?” Susannah asked. She looked bemused. “What a *peculiar* concept.”

“—but the only one that really matters is the first one, I think,” Jake finished.

Roland hunkered and put his hands into the boots which had been left for him. He lifted them, looked at them, put them down again. “Are we supposed to put them on, do you think? Here and now?”

His three friends from New York looked at each other doubtfully. At last Susannah spoke for them—fed him the *khef* which he could feel but not quite share on his own.

“Best not to right now, maybe. Too many bad-ass spirits here.”

“*Takuro* spirits,” Eddie murmured, mostly to himself. Then: “Look, let’s just take em along. If we’re supposed to put em on, I think we’ll know when the time comes. In the meantime, I think we ought to beware of bumhugs bearing gifts.”

It cracked Jake up, as Eddie had known it would; sometimes a word or an image got into your funnybone like a virus and just lived there awhile. Tomorrow the word “bumhug” might mean nothing to the kid; for the rest of today, however, he was going to laugh every

time he heard it. Eddie intended to use it a lot, especially when ole Jake wasn't expecting it.

They picked up the red shoes which had been left for them in the eastbound lanes (Jake took Oy's) and moved on again toward the shimmering glass castle.

Oz, Roland thought. He searched his memory, but he didn't think it was a name he had ever heard before, or a word of the High Speech that had come in disguise, as *char* had come disguised as Charlie. Yet it had a sound that belonged in this business; a sound more of his world than of Jake's, Susannah's, and Eddie's, from whence the tale had come.

3

Jake kept expecting the Green Palace to begin looking normal as they drew closer to it, the way the attractions in Disney World began to look normal as you drew close to them—not *ordinary*, necessarily, but *normal*, things which were as much a part of the world as the corner bus stop or mailbox or park bench, stuff you could touch, stuff you could write FUCK PIPER on, if you took a notion.

But that didn't happen, wasn't *going* to happen, and as they neared the Green Palace, Jake realized something else: it was the most beautiful, radiant thing he had ever seen in his life. Not trusting it—and he did not—didn't change the fact. It was like a drawing in a fairy-tale book, one so good it had become real, somehow. And, like the thinny, it hummed . . . except that this sound was far fainter, and not unpleasant.

Pale green walls rose to battlements that jutted and towers that soared, seeming almost to touch the clouds floating over the Kansas plains. These towers were topped with needles of a darker, emerald green; it was from these that the red pennants flickered. Upon each pennant the symbol of the open eye



had been traced in yellow.

It's the mark of the Crimson King, Jake thought. *It's really his sigil, not John Farson's*. He didn't know how he knew this (how could he, when Alabama's Crimson Tide was the only Crimson *anything* he knew?), but he did.

"So beautiful," Susannah murmured, and when Jake glanced at her, he thought she was almost crying. "But not nice, somehow. Not right. Maybe not downright *bad*, the way the thinny is, but . . ."

"But not nice," Eddie said. "Yeah. That works. Not a red light, maybe, but a bright yellow one just the same." He rubbed the side of his face (a gesture he had picked up from Roland without even realizing it) and looked puzzled. "It feels almost not serious—a practical joke."

"I doubt it's a joke," Roland said. "Do you think it's a copy of the place where Dorothy and her *ka-tet* met the false wizard?"

Again, the three erstwhile New Yorkers seemed to exchange a single glance of consultation. When it was over, Eddie spoke for all of them. "Yeah. Yeah, probably. It's not the same as the one in the movie, but if this thing came out of our minds, it wouldn't be. Because we see the one from L. Frank Baum's book, too. Both from the illustrations in the book . . ."

"And the ones from our imaginations," Jake said.

"But that's it," Susannah said. "I'd say we're definitely off to see the Wizard."

"You bet," Eddie said. "Because-because-because-because-because—"

“Because of the wonderful things he does!” Jake and Susannah finished in unison, then laughed, delighted with each other, while Roland frowned at them, feeling puzzled and looking left out.

“But I have to tell you guys,” Eddie said, “that it’s only gonna take about one more wonderful thing to send me around to the dark side of the Psycho Moon. Most likely for good.”

4

As they drew closer, they could see Interstate 70 stretching away into the pale green depths of the castle’s slightly rounded outer wall; it floated there like an optical illusion. Closer yet, and they could hear the pennants snapping in the breeze and see their own ripply reflections, like drowned folk who somehow walk at the bottoms of watery tropical graves.

There was an inner redoubt of dark blue glass—it was a color Jake associated with the bottles fountain-pen ink came in—and a rust-hued wall-walk between the redoubt and the outer wall. That color made Susannah think of the bottles Hires root-beer had come in when she was a little girl.

The way in was blocked by a barred gate that was both huge and ethereal: it looked like wrought iron which had been turned to glass. Each cunningly made stake was a different color, and these colors seemed to come from the *inside*, as if the bars were filled with some bright gas or liquid.

The travellers stopped before it. There was no sign of the turnpike beyond it; instead of roadway, there was a courtyard of silver glass—a huge flat mirror, in fact. Clouds floated serenely through its depths; so did the image of the occasional swooping bird. Sun reflected off this glass courtyard and ran across the green castle walls in ripples. On the far side, the wall of the palace’s inner ward rose in a glimmery green cliff, broken by narrow loophole windows of jet-black glass. There was also an arched entry in this wall that made Jake think of St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

To the left of the main doorway was a sentry-box made of creamcolored glass shot through with hazy orange threads. Its door, painted with red stripes, stood open. The phone-booth-sized room inside was empty, although there was something on the floor which looked to Jake like a newspaper.

Above the entry, flanking its darkness, were two crouching, leering gargoyles of darkest violet glass. Their pointed tongues poked out like bruises.

The pennants atop the towers flapped like schoolyard flags.

Crows cawed over empty cornfields now a week past the Reap.

Distant, the thinny whined and warbled.

“Look at the bars of this gate,” Susannah said. She sounded breathless and awestruck. “Look very closely.”

Jake bent toward the yellow bar until his nose nearly touched it and a faint yellow stripe ran down the middle of his face. At first he saw nothing, and then he gasped. What he had taken for motes of some kind were creatures—living creatures—imprisoned inside the bar, swimming in tiny schools. They looked like fish in an aquarium, but they also (*their heads*, Jake told himself, *I think it's mostly their heads*) looked oddly, disquietingly human. As if, Jake thought, he were looking into a vertical golden sea, all the ocean in a glass rod—and living myths no bigger than grains of dust swimming within it. A tiny woman with a fish's tail and long blonde hair streaming out behind her swam to her side of the glass, seemed to peer out at the giant boy (her eyes were round, startled, and beautiful), and then flipped away again.

Jake felt suddenly dizzy and weak. He closed his eyes until the feeling of vertigo went away, then opened them again and looked around at the others. “Cripes! Are they all the same?”

“All different, I think,” said Eddie, who had already peered into two or three. He bent close to the purple rod, and his cheeks lit up as if in the glow of an old-fashioned fluoroscope. “These guys here look like birds—little tiny birds.”

Jake looked and saw that Eddie was right: inside the gate’s purple upright were flocks of birds no bigger than summer minges. They swooped giddily about in their eternal twilight, weaving over and under one another, their wings leaving tiny silver trails of bubbles.

“Are they really there?” Jake asked breathlessly. “Are they, Roland, or are we only imagining them?”

“I don’t know. But I know what this gate has been made to look like.”

“So do I,” Eddie said. He surveyed the shining posts, each with its own column of imprisoned light and life. Each of the gate’s wings consisted of six colored bars. The one in the center—broad and flat instead of round, and made to split in two when the gate was opened—was the thirteenth. This one was dead black, and in this one nothing moved.

Oh, maybe not that you can see, but there are things moving around in there, all right, Jake thought. There’s life in there, terrible life. And maybe there are roses, too. Drowned ones.

“It’s a Wizard’s Gate,” Eddie said. “Each bar has been made to look like one of the balls in Maerlyn’s Rainbow. Look, here’s the pink one.”

Jake leaned toward it, hands propped on his thighs. He knew what would be inside even before he saw them: horses, of courses. Tiny herds of them, galloping through that strange pink stuff that was neither light nor liquid. Horses running in search of a Drop they would never find, mayhap.

Eddie stretched his hands out to grasp the sides of the central post, the black one.

“Don’t!” Susannah called sharply.

Eddie ignored her, but Jake saw his chest stop for a moment and his lips tighten as he wrapped his hands around the black bar and waited for something—some force perhaps sent Special Delivery all the way from the Dark Tower itself—to change him, or even to strike him dead. When nothing happened, he breathed deep again, and risked a smile. “No electricity, but . . .” He pulled; the gate held fast. “No give, either. I see where it splits down the middle, but I get nothing. Want to take a shot, Roland?”

Roland reached for the gate, but Jake put a hand on his arm and stopped him before the gunslinger could do more than give it a preliminary shake. “Don’t bother. That’s not the way.”

“Then what is?”

Instead of answering, Jake sat down in front of the gate, near the place where this strange version of I-70 ended, and began putting on the shoes which had been left for him. Eddie watched a moment, then sat down beside him. “I guess we ought to try it,” he said to Jake, “even though it’ll probably turn out to be just another bumhug.”

Jake laughed, shook his head, and began to tighten the laces of the blood-red Oxfords. He and Eddie both knew it was no bumhug. Not this time.

5

“Okay,” Jake said when they had all put on their red shoes (he thought they looked extraordinarily stupid, especially Eddie’s pair). “I’ll count to three, and we’ll click our heels together. Like this.” He clicked the Oxfords together once, sharply . . . and the gate shivered like a loosely fastened shutter blown by a strong wind. Susannah

cried out. There followed a low, sweet chiming sound from the Green Palace, as if the walls themselves had vibrated.

“I guess this’ll do the trick, all right,” Eddie said. “I warn you, though, I’m not singing ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow.’ That’s not in my contract.”

“The rainbow is here,” the gunslinger said softly, stretching his diminished hand out to the gate.

It wiped the smile off Eddie’s face. “Yeah, I know. I’m a little scared, Roland.”

“So am I,” the gunslinger said, and indeed, Jake thought he looked pale and ill.

“Go on, sugar,” Susannah said. “Count before we all lose our nerve.”

“One . . . two . . . *three.*”

They clicked their heels together solemnly and in unison: *tock, tock, tock*. The gate shivered more violently this time, the colors in the uprights brightening perceptibly. The chime that followed was higher, sweeter—the sound of fine crystal tapped with the haft of a knife. It echoed in dreamy harmonics that made Jake shiver, half with pleasure and half with pain.

But the gate didn’t open.

“What—” Eddie began.

“I know,” Jake said. “We forgot Oy.”

“Oh Christ,” Eddie said. “I left the world I knew to watch a kid try to put booties on a fucked-up weasel. Shoot me, Roland, before I breed.”

Roland ignored him, watching Jake closely as the boy sat down on the turnpike and called, "Oy! To me!"

The bumbler came willingly enough, and although he had surely been a wild creature before they had met him on the Path of the Beam, he allowed Jake to slip the red leather booties onto his paws without making trouble: in fact, once he got the idea, he stepped into the last two. When all four of the little red shoes were in place (they looked, in fact, the most like Dorothy's ruby slippers), Oy sniffed at one of them, then looked attentively back at Jake.

Jake clicked his heels together three times, looking at the bumbler as he did so, ignoring the rattle of the gate and the soft chime from the walls of the Green Palace.

"You, Oy!"

"Oy!"

He rolled over on his back like a dog playing dead, then simply looked at his own feet with a kind of disgusted bewilderment. Looking at him, Jake had a sharp memory: trying to pat his stomach and rub his head at the same time, and his father making fun of him when he couldn't do it right away.

"Roland, help me. He knows what he's supposed to do, but he doesn't know how to do it." Jake glanced up at Eddie. "And don't make any smart remarks, okay?"

"No," Eddie said. "No smart remarks, Jake. Do you think just Oy has to do it this time, or is it still a group effort?"

"Just him, I think."

"But it wouldn't hurt us to kind of click along with Mitch," Susannah said.

"Mitch who?" Eddie asked, looking blank.

“Never mind. Go on, Jake, Roland. Give us a count again.”

Eddie grasped Oy’s forepaws. Roland gently grasped the bumbler’s rear paws. Oy looked nervous at this—as if he perhaps expected to be swung briskly into the air and given the old heave-ho—but he didn’t struggle.

“One, two, *three*.”

Jake and Roland gently patted Oy’s forepaws and rear paws together in unison. At the same time they clicked the heels of their own footwear. Eddie and Susannah did the same.

This time the harmonic was a deep, sweet bong, like a glass church bell. The black glass bar running down the center of the gate did not split open but shattered, spraying crumbs of obsidian glass in all directions. Some rattled against Oy’s hide. He sprang up in a hurry, yanking out of Jake’s and Roland’s grip and trotting a little distance away. He sat on the broken white line between the travel lane and the passing lane of the highway, his ears laid back, looking at the gate and panting.

“Come on,” Roland said. He went to the left wing of the gate and pushed it slowly open. He stood at the edge of the mirror courtyard, a tall, lanky man in cowpoke jeans, an ancient shirt of no particular color, and improbable red cowboy boots. “Let’s go in and see what the Wizard of Oz has to say for himself.”

“If he’s still here,” Eddie said.

“Oh, I think he’s here,” Roland murmured. “Yes, I think he’s here.”

He ambled toward the main door with the empty sentry-box beside it. The others followed, welded to their own downward reflections by the red shoes like sets of Siamese twins.

Oy came last, skipping nimbly along in his ruby slippers, pausing once to sniff down at his own reflected snout.

“Oy!” he cried to the bumbler floating below him, and then hurried after Jake.

CHAPTER III THE WIZARD

1

Roland stopped at the sentry-box, glanced in, then picked up the thing which was lying on the floor. The others caught up with him and clustered around. It had looked like a newspaper, and that was just what it was . . . although an exceedingly odd one. No Topeka *Capital-Journal* this, and no news of a population-levelling plague.

The Oz Daily Buzz

Vol. MDLXVIII No. 96 "Daily Buzz, Daily Buzz, Handsome Iz as Handsome Duuzz" Weather: Here today, gone tomorrow Lucky Numbers: None Prognosis: Bad

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blah blah. (Related story p. 6)

Below this was a picture of Roland, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake crossing the mirrored courtyard, as if this had happened the day before instead of only minutes ago. Beneath it was a caption reading: **Tragedy in Oz: Travellers Arrive Seeking Fame and Fortune; Find Death Instead.**

“I like that,” Eddie said, adjusting Roland’s revolver in the holster he wore low on his hip. “Comfort and encouragement after days of confusion. Like a hot drink on a cold fucking night.”

“Don’t be afraid of this,” Roland said. “This *is* a joke.”

“I’m not afraid,” Eddie said, “but it’s a little more than a joke. I lived with Henry Dean for a lot of years, and I know when there’s a plot to psych me out afoot. I know it very well.” He looked curiously at Roland. “I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but *you’re* the one who looks scared, Roland.”

“I’m terrified,” Roland said simply.

2

The arched entryway made Susannah think of a song which had been popular ten years or so before she had been yanked out of her world and into Roland’s. *Saw an eyeball peepin through a smoky cloud behind the Green Door*, the lyric went. *When I said “Joe sent me,” someone laughed out loud behind the Green Door.* There were actually two doors here instead of one, and no peephole through which an eyeball could look in either. Nor did Susannah try that old speakeasy deal about how Joe had sent her. She did, however, bend forward to read the sign hanging from one of the circular glass door-pulls. BELL OUT OF ORDER, PLEASE KNOCK, it said.

“Don’t bother,” she said to Roland, who had actually doubled up his fist to do as the sign said. “It’s from the story, that’s all.”

Eddie pulled her chair back slightly, stepped in front of it, and took hold of the circular pulls. The doors opened easily, the hinges rolling in silence. He took a step forward into what looked like a shadowy green grotto, cupped his hands to his mouth, and called: “*Hey!*”

The sound of his voice rolled away and came back changed . . . small, echoing, lost. Dying, it seemed.

“Christ,” Eddie said. “Do we have to do this?”

“If we want to get back to the Beam, I think so.” Roland looked paler than ever, but he led them in. Jake helped Eddie lift Susannah’s chair over the sill (a milky block of jade-colored glass) and inside. Oy’s little shoes flashed dim red on the green glass floor. They had gone only ten paces when the doors slammed shut behind them with a no-question-about-it boom that rolled past them and went echoing away into the depths of the Green Palace.

3

There was no reception room; only a vaulted, cavernous hallway that seemed to go on forever. The walls were lit with a faint green glow. *This is just like the hallway in the movie, Jake thought, the one where the Cowardly Lion got so scared when he stepped on his own tail.*

And, adding a little extra touch of verisimilitude Jake could have done without, Eddie spoke up in a trembly (and better than passable) Bert Lahr imitation: “Wait a minute, fellas, I wuz just thinkin—I really don’t wanna see the Wizard this much. I better wait for you outside!”

“Stop it,” Jake said sharply.

“Oppit!” Oy agreed. He walked directly at Jake’s heel, swinging his head watchfully from side to side as he went. Jake could hear no

sound except for their own passage . . . yet he sensed something: a sound that *wasn't*. It was, he thought, like looking at a wind-chime that wants only the slightest puff of breeze to set it tinkling.

“Sorry,” Eddie said. “Really.” He pointed. “Look down there.”

About forty yards ahead of them, the green corridor *did* end, in a narrow green doorway of amazing height—perhaps thirty feet from the floor to its pointed tip. And from behind it, Jake could now hear a steady thrumming sound. As they drew closer and the sound grew louder, his dread grew. He had to make a conscious effort to take the last dozen steps to the door. He knew this sound; he knew it from the run he'd made with Gasher under Lud, and from the run he and his friends had made on Blaine the Mono. It was the steady beat-beat-beat of slo-trans engines.

“It's like a nightmare,” he said in a small, close-to-tears voice. “We're right back where we started.”

“No, Jake,” the gunslinger said, touching his hair. “Never think it. What you feel is an illusion. Stand and be true.”

The sign on this door wasn't from the movie, and only Susannah knew it was from Dante. ABANDON HOPE, ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE, it said.

Roland reached out with his two-fingered right hand and pulled the thirty-foot door open.

4

What lay beyond it was, to the eyes of Jake, Susannah, and Eddie, a weird combination of *The Wizard of Oz* and Blaine the Mono. A thick rug (pale blue, like the one in the Barony Coach) lay on the floor. The chamber was like the nave of a cathedral, soaring to impenetrable heights of greenish-black. The pillars which supported the glowing walls were great glass ribs of alternating green and pink light; the pink was the exact shade of Blaine's hull. Jake saw these supporting pillars had been carven with a billion different images, none of them

comforting; they jostled the eye and unsettled the heart. There seemed to be a preponderance of screaming faces.

Ahead of them, dwarfing the visitors, turning them into creatures that seemed no bigger than ants, was the chamber's only furnishing: an enormous green glass throne. Jake tried to estimate its size and was unable—he had no reference-points to help him. He thought that the throne's back might be fifty feet high, but it could as easily have been seventy-five or a hundred. It was marked with the open eye symbol, this time traced in red instead of yellow. The rhythmic thrusting of the light made the eye seem alive; to be beating like a heart.

Above the throne, rising like the pipes of a mighty medieval organ, were thirteen great cylinders, each pulsing a different color. Each, that was, save for the pipe which ran directly down in back of the throne's center. That one was black as midnight and as still as death.

“Hey!” Susannah shouted from her chair. “Anyone here?”

At the sound of her voice, the pipes flashed so brilliantly that Jake had to shield his eyes. For a moment the entire throneroom glared like an exploding rainbow. Then the pipes went out, went dark, went dead, just as the wizard's glass in Roland's story had done when the glass (or the force inhabiting the glass) decided to shut up for awhile. Now there was only the column of blackness, and the steady green pulse of the empty throne.

Next, a somehow tired humming sound, as of a very old servomechanism being called into use one final time, began to whine its way into their ears. Panels, each at least six feet long and two feet wide, slid open in the arms of the throne. From the black slots thus revealed, a rosecolored smoke began to drift out and up. As it rose, it darkened to a bright red. And in it, a terribly familiar zigzag line appeared. Jake knew what it was even before the words

(Lud Candleton Rilea The Falls of the Hounds Dasherville Topeka)

appeared, glowing smoke-bright.

It was Blaine's route-map.

Roland could say all he wanted about how things had changed, how Jake's feeling of being trapped in a nightmare

(this is the worst nightmare of my life, and that is the truth)

was just an illusion created by his confused mind and frightened heart, but Jake knew better. This place might look a little bit like the throneroom of Oz the Great and Terrible, but it was really Blaine the Mono. They were back aboard Blaine, and soon the riddling would begin all over again.

Jake felt like screaming.

5

Eddie recognized the voice that boomed out of the smoky route-map hanging above the green throne, but he believed it was Blaine the Mono no more than he believed it was the Wizard of Oz. *Some* wizard, perhaps, but this wasn't the Emerald City, and Blaine was just as dead as dogshit. Eddie had sent him home with a fuckin rupture.

"HELLO THERE AGAIN, LITTLE TRAILHANDS!"

The smoky route-map pulsed, but Eddie no longer associated it with the voice, although he guessed they were supposed to. No, the voice was coming from the pipes.

He glanced down, saw Jake's paper-white face, and knelt beside him. "It's crap, kid," he said.

"N-No . . . it's Blaine . . . not dead . . ."

"He's dead, all right. This is nothing but an amplified version of the after-school announcements . . . who's got detention and who's

supposed to report to Room Six for Speech Therapy. You dig?”

“What?” Jake looked up at him, lips wet and trembling, eyes dazed. “What do you—”

“Those pipes are *speakers*. Even a pipsqueak can sound big through a twelve-speaker Dolby sound-system; don’t you remember the movie? It has to sound big because it’s a bumhug, Jake—just a bumhug.”

“WHAT ARE YOU TELLING HIM, EDDIE OF NEW YORK? ONE OF YOUR STUPID, NASTY-MINDED LITTLE JOKES? ONE OF YOUR UNFAIR RIDDLES?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “The one that goes, ‘How many dipolar computers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?’ Who are you, buddy? I know goddam well you’re not Blaine the Mono, so who are you?”

“I . . . AM . . . OZ!” the voice thundered. The glass columns flashed; so did the pipes behind the throne. “OZ THE GREAT! OZ THE POWERFUL! WHO ARE YOU?”

Susannah rolled forward until her wheelchair was at the base of the dull green steps leading up to a throne that would have dwarfed even Lord Perth.

“I’m Susannah Dean, the small and crippled,” she said, “and I was raised to be polite, but not to suffer bullshit. We’re here because we’re *s’poz*ed to be here—why else did we get left the shoes?”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME, SUSANNAH? WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE, LITTLE COWGIRL?”

“*You* know,” she said. “We want what everyone wants, so far as I know—to go back home again, ’cause there’s no place like home. We—”

“You can’t go home,” Jake said. He spoke in a rapid, frightened murmur. “You can’t go home again, Thomas Wolfe said that, and that is the truth.”

“It’s a *lie*, sug,” Susannah said. “A flat-out lie. You *can* go home again. All you have to do is find the right rainbow and walk under it. We’ve found it; the rest is just, you know, footwork.”

“WOULD YOU GO BACK TO NEW YORK, SUSANNAH DEAN? EDDIE DEAN? JAKE CHAMBERS? IS THAT WHAT YOU ASK OF OZ, THE MIGHTY AND POWERFUL?”

“New York isn’t home for us anymore,” Susannah said. She looked very small yet very fearless as she sat in her new wheelchair at the foot of the enormous, pulsing throne. “No more than Gilead is home for Roland. Take us back to the Path of the Beam. That’s where we want to go, because that’s our way home. Only way home we got.”

“GO AWAY!” cried the voice from the pipes. “GO AWAY AND COME BACK TOMORROW! WE’LL DISCUSS THE BEAM THEN! FIDDLE-DE-DEE, SAID SCARLETT, WE’LL TALK ABOUT THE BEAM TOMORROW, FOR TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY!”

“No,” Eddie said. “We’ll talk about it now.”

“DO NOT AROUSE THE WRATH OF THE GREAT AND POWERFUL OZ!” the voice cried, and the pipes flashed furiously with each word. Susannah was sure this was supposed to be scary, but she found it almost amusing, instead. It was like watching a salesman demonstrate a child’s toy. *Hey, kids! When you talk, the pipes flash bright colors! Try it and see!*

“Sugar, you best listen, now,” Susannah said. “What *you* don’t want to do is arouse the wrath of folks with guns. Especially when you be livin in a glass house.”

“I SAID COME BACK TOMORROW!”

Red smoke once more began to boil out of the slots in the arms of the throne. It was thicker now. The shape which had been Blaine's route-map melted apart and joined it. The smoke formed a face, this time. It was narrow and hard and watchful, framed by long hair.

It's the man Roland shot in the desert, Susannah thought wonderingly. *It's that man Jonas. I know it is.*

Now Oz spoke in a slightly trembling voice: "DO YOU PRESUME TO THREATEN THE GREAT OZ?" The lips of the huge, smoky face hovering over the throne's seat parted in a snarl of mingled menace and contempt. "YOU UNGRATEFUL CREATURES! OH, YOU UNGRATEFUL CREATURES!"

Eddie, who knew smoke and mirrors when he saw them, had glanced in another direction. His eyes widened and he gripped Susannah's arm above the elbow. "Look," he whispered. "Christ, Suze, look at Oy!"

The billy-bumbler had no interest in smoke-ghosts, whether they were monorail route-maps, dead Coffin Hunters, or just Hollywood special effects of the pre-World War II variety. He had seen (or smelled) something that was more interesting.

Susannah grabbed Jake, turned him, and pointed at the bumbler. She saw the boy's eyes widen with understanding a moment before Oy reached the small alcove in the left wall. It was screened from the main chamber by a green curtain which matched the glass walls. Oy stretched his long neck forward, caught the curtain's fabric in his teeth, and yanked it back.

6

Behind the curtain red and green lights flashed; cylinders spun inside glass boxes; needles moved back and forth inside long rows of lighted dials. Yet Jake barely noticed these things. It was the man who took all his attention, the one sitting at the console, his back to them. His filthy hair, streaked with dirt and blood, hung to his

shoulders in matted clumps. He was wearing some sort of headset, and was speaking into a tiny mike which hung in front of his mouth. His back was to them, and at first he had no idea that Oy had smelled him out and uncovered his hiding place.

“GO!” thundered the voice from the pipes . . . except now Jake saw where it was *really* coming from. “COME BACK TOMORROW IF YOU LIKE, BUT GO NOW! I WARN YOU!”

“It *is* Jonas, Roland must not have killed him after all,” Eddie whispered, but Jake knew better. He had recognized the voice. Even distorted by the amplification of the colored pipes, he had recognized the voice. How could he have ever believed it to be the voice of Blaine?

“I WARN YOU, IF YOU REFUSE—”

Oy barked, a sharp and somehow forbidding sound. The man in the equipment alcove began to turn.

Tell me, cully, Jake remembered this voice saying before its owner had discovered the dubious attractions of amplification. *Tell me all you know about dipolar computers and transitive circuits. Tell me and I'll give you a drink.*

It wasn't Jonas, and it wasn't the Wizard of anything. It was David Quick's grandson. It was the Tick-Tock Man.

7

Jake stared at him, horrified. The coiled, dangerous creature who had lived beneath Lud with his mates—Gasher and Hoots and Brandon and Tilly—was gone. This might have been that monster's ruined father . . . or grandfather. His left eye—the one Oy had punctured with his claws—bulged white and misshapen, partly in its socket and partly on his unshaven cheek. The right side of his head looked half-scalped, the skull showing through in a long, triangular strip. Jake had a distant, panicdarkened memory of a flap of skin

falling over the side of Tick-Tock's face, but he had been on the edge of hysteria by that point . . . and was again now.

Oy had also recognized the man who had tried to kill him and was barking hysterically, head down, teeth bared, back bowed. Tick-Tock stared at him with wide, stunned eyes.

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," said a voice from behind them, and then tittered. "My friend Andrew is having another in a long series of bad days. Poor boy. I suppose I was wrong to bring him out of Lud, but he just looked so *lost* . . ." The owner of the voice tittered again.

Jake swung around and saw that there was now a man sitting in the middle of the great throne, with his legs casually crossed in front of him. He was wearing jeans, a dark jacket that belted at the waist, and old, rundown cowboy boots. On his jacket was a button that showed a pig's head with a bullet-hole between the eyes. In his lap this newcomer held a drawstring bag. He rose, standing in the seat of the throne like a child in daddy's chair, and the smile dropped away from his face like loose skin. Now his eyes blazed, and his lips parted over vast, hungry teeth.

"Get them, Andrew! Get them! Kill them! Every sister-fucking one of them!"

"My life for you!" the man in the alcove screamed, and for the first time Jake saw the machine-gun propped in the corner. Tick-Tock sprang for it and snatched it up. *"My life for you!"*

He turned, and Oy was on him once again, leaping forward and upward, sinking his teeth deep into Tick-Tock's left thigh, just below the crotch.

Eddie and Susannah drew in unison, each raising one of Roland's big guns. They fired in concert, not even the smallest overlap in the sound of their shots. One of them tore off the top of Tick-Tock's miserable head, buried itself in the equipment, and created a loud

but mercifully brief snarl of feedback. The other took him in the throat.

He staggered forward one step, then two. Oy dropped to the floor and backed away from him, snarling. A third step took Tick-Tock out into the throneroom proper. He raised his arms toward Jake, and the boy could read Ticky's hatred in his remaining green eye; the boy thought he could hear the man's last, hateful thought: *Oh, you fucking little squint—*

Then Tick-Tock collapsed forward, as he had collapsed in the Cradle of the Grays . . . only this time he would rise no more.

"Thus fell Lord Perth, and the earth did shake with that thunder," said the man on the throne.

Except he's not a man, Jake thought. Not a man at all. We've found the Wizard at last, I think. And I'm pretty sure I know what's in the bag he has.

"Marten," Roland said. He held out his left hand, the one which was still whole. "Marten Broadcloak. After all these years. After all these *centuries*."

"Want this, Roland?"

Eddie put the gun he had used to kill the Tick-Tock Man in Roland's hand. A tendril of blue smoke was still rising from the barrel. Roland looked at the old revolver as if he had never seen it before, then slowly lifted it and pointed it at the grinning, rosy-cheeked figure sitting cross-legged on the Green Palace's throne.

"Finally," Roland breathed, thumbing back the trigger. "Finally in my sights."

“That six-shooter will do you no good, as I think you know,” the man on the throne said. “Not against *me*. Only misfires against *me*, Roland, old fellow. How’s the family, by the way? I seem to have lost touch with them over the years. I was always such a *lousy* correspondent. Someone ought to take a hosswhip to me, aye, so they should!”

He threw back his head and laughed. Roland pulled the trigger of the gun in his hand. When the hammer fell there was only a dull click.

“Toadjer,” the man on the throne said. “I think you must have gotten some of those wet slugs in there by accident, don’t you? The ones with the flat powder? Good for blocking the sound of the thinny, but not so good for shooting old wizards, are they? Too bad. And your hand, Roland, look at your *hand*! Short a couple of fingers, by the look. My, this *has* been hard on you, hasn’t it? Things could get easier, though. You and your friends could have a fine, fruitful life—and, as Jake would say, that is the truth. No more lobstrosities, no more mad trains, no more disquieting—not to mention dangerous—trips to other worlds. All you have to do is give over this stupid and hopeless quest for the Tower.”

“No,” Eddie said.

“No,” Susannah said.

“No,” Jake said.

“No!” Oy said, and added a bark.

The dark man on the green throne continued to smile, unperturbed. “Roland?” he asked. “What about you?” Slowly, he raised the drawstring bag. It looked dusty and old. It hung from the wizard’s fist like a teardrop, and now the thing in its pouch began to pulse with pink light. “Cry off, and they need never see what’s inside this—they need never see the last scene of that sad long-ago play. Cry off. Turn from the Tower and go your way.”

“No,” Roland said. He began to smile, and as his smile broadened, that of the man sitting on the throne began to falter. “You can enchant my guns, those of this world, I reckon,” he said.

“Roland, I don’t know what you’re thinking of, laddie, but I warn you not to—”

“Not to cross Oz the Great? Oz the Powerful? But I think I will, Marten . . . or Maerlyn . . . or whoever you call yourself now . . .”

“Flagg, actually,” the man on the throne said. “And we’ve met before.” He smiled. Instead of broadening his face, as smiles usually did, it contracted Flagg’s features into a narrow and spiteful grimace. “In the wreck of Gilead. You and your surviving pals—that laughing donkey Cuthbert Allgood made one of your party, I remember, and DeCurry, the fellow with the birthmark, made another—were on your way west, to seek the Tower. Or, in the parlance of Jake’s world, you were off to see the Wizard. I know you saw me, but I doubt you knew until now that I saw you, as well.”

“And will again, I reckon,” Roland said. “Unless, that is, I kill you now and put an end to your interference.”

Still holding his own gun out in his left hand, he went for the one tucked in the waistband of his jeans—Jake’s Ruger, a gun from another world and perhaps immune to this creature’s enchantments—with his right. And he was fast as he had always been fast, his speed blinding.

The man on the throne shrieked and cringed back. The bag fell from his lap, and the glass ball—once held by Rhea, once held by Jonas, once held by Roland himself—slipped out of its mouth. Smoke, green this time instead of red, billowed from the slots in the arms of the throne. It rose in obscuring fumes. Yet Roland still might have shot the figure disappearing into the smoke if he had made a clean draw. He didn’t, however; the Ruger slid in the grip of his reduced hand, then twisted. The front sight caught on his belt-buckle. It took only an extra quarter-second for him to free the snag,

but that was the quarter-second he had needed. He pumped three shots into the billowing smoke, then ran forward, oblivious of the shouts of the others.

He waved the smoke aside with his hands. His shots had shattered the back of the throne into thick green slabs of glass, but the man-shaped creature which had called itself Flagg was gone. Roland found himself already beginning to wonder if he—or it—had been there in the first place.

The ball was still there, however, unharmed and glowing the same enticing pink he remembered from so long ago—from Mejis, when he had been young and in love. This survivor of Maerlyn's Rainbow had rolled almost to the edge of the throne's seat; two more inches and it would have plunged over and shattered on the floor. Yet it had not; still it remained, this bewitched thing Susan Delgado had first glimpsed through the window of Rhea's hut, under the light of the Kissing Moon.

Roland picked it up—how well it fit his hand, how natural it felt against his palm, even after all these years—and looked into its cloudy, troubled depths. "You always did have a charmed life," he whispered to it. He thought of Rhea as he had seen her in this ball—her ancient, laughing eyes. He thought of the flames from the Reap-Night bonfire rising around Susan, making her beauty shimmer in the heat. Making it shiver like a mirage.

Wretched glam! he thought. *If I dashed you to the floor, surely we would drown in the sea of tears that would pour out of your split belly . . . the tears of all those you've put to ruin.*

And why not do it? Left whole, the nasty thing might be able to help them back to the Path of the Beam, but Roland didn't believe they actually *needed* it. He thought that Tick-Tock and the creature which had called itself Flagg had been their last challenge in that regard. The Green Palace was their door back to Mid-World . . . and it was theirs, now. They had conquered it by force of arms.

But you can't go yet, gunslinger. Not until you've finished your story, told the last scene.

Whose voice was that? Vannay's? No. Cort's? No. Nor was it the voice of his father, who had once turned him naked out of a whore's bed. That was the hardest voice, the one he often heard in his troubled dreams, the one he wanted so to please and so seldom could. No, not that voice, not this time.

This time what he heard was the voice of *ka*—*ka* like a wind. He had told so much of that awful fourteenth year . . . but he hadn't finished the tale. As with Detta Walker and the Blue Lady's forspecial plate, there was one more thing. A hidden thing. The question wasn't, he saw, whether or not the five of them could find their way out of the Green Palace and recover the Path of the Beam; the question was whether or not they could go on as *ka-tet*. If they were to do that, there could be nothing hidden; he would have to tell them of the final time he had looked into the wizard's glass in that long-ago year. Three nights past the welcoming banquet, it had been. He would have to tell them—

No, Roland, the voice whispered. Not just tell. Not this time. You know better.

Yes. He knew better.

"Come," he said, turning to them.

They drew slowly around him, their eyes wide and filling with the ball's flashing pink light. Already they were half-hypnotized by it, even Oy.

"We are *ka-tet*," Roland said, holding the ball toward them. "We are one from many. I lost my one true love at the beginning of my quest for the Dark Tower. Now look into this wretched thing, if you would, and see what I lost not long after. See it once and for all; see it very well."

They looked. The ball, cupped in Roland's upraised hands, began to pulse faster. It gathered them in and swept them away. Caught and whirled in the grip of that pink storm, they flew over the Wizard's Rainbow to the Gilead that had been.

CHAPTER IV THE GLASS

Jake of New York stands in an upper corridor of the Great Hall of Gilead—more castle, here in the green land, than Mayor’s House. He looks around and sees Susannah and Eddie standing by a tapestry, their eyes big, their hands tightly entwined. And Susannah is standing; she has her legs back, at least for now, and what she called “cappies” have been replaced by a pair of ruby slippers exactly like those Dorothy wore when she stepped out upon her version of the Great Road to find the Wizard of Oz, that bumhug.

She has her legs because this is a dream, Jake thinks, but knows it is no dream. He looks down and sees Oy looking up at him with his anxious, intelligent, gold-ringed eyes. He is still wearing the red booties. Jake bends and strokes Oy’s head. The feel of the bumbler’s fur under his hand is clear and real. No, this isn’t a dream.

Yet Roland is not here, he realizes; they are four instead of five. He realizes something else as well: the air of this corridor is faintly pink, and small pink halos revolve around the funny, old-fashioned lightbulbs that illuminate the corridor. Something is going to happen; some story is going to play out in front of their eyes. And now, as if the very thought had summoned them, the boy hears the click of approaching footfalls.

It’s a story I know, Jake thinks. One I’ve been told before.

As Roland comes around the corner, he realizes what story it is: the one where Marten Broadcloak stops Roland as Roland passes by on his way to the rooftop, where it will perhaps be cooler. “You, boy,” Marten will say. “Come in! Don’t stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you.” But of course that isn’t the truth, was never

the truth, will never be the truth, no matter how much time slips and bends. What Marten wants is for the boy to see his mother, and to understand that Gabrielle Deschain has become the mistress of his father's wizard. Marten wants to goad the boy into an early test of manhood while his father is away and can't put a stop to it; he wants to get the puppy out of his way before it can grow teeth long enough to bite.

Now they will see all this; the sad comedy will go its sad and preordained course in front of their eyes. I'm too young, Jake thinks, but of course he is not too young; Roland will be only three years older when he comes to Mejis with his friends and meets Susan upon the Great Road. Only three years older when he loves her; only three years older when he loses her.

I don't care, I don't want to see it—

And won't, he realizes as Roland draws closer; all that has already happened. For this is not August, the time of Full Earth, but late fall or early winter. He can tell by the serape Roland wears, a souvenir of his trip to the Outer Arc, and by the vapor that smokes from his mouth and nose each time he exhales: no central heating in Gilead, and it's cold up here.

There are other changes as well: Roland is now wearing the guns which are his birthright, the big ones with the sandalwood grips. His father passed them on at the banquet, Jake thinks. He doesn't know how he knows this, but he does. And Roland's face, although still that of a boy, is not the open, untried face of the one who idled up this same corridor five months before; the boy who was ensnared by Marten has been through much since then, and his battle with Cort has been the very least of it.

Jake sees something else, too: the boy gunslinger is wearing the red cowboy boots. He doesn't know it, though. Because this isn't really happening.

Yet somehow it is. They are inside the wizard's glass, they are inside the pink storm (those pink halos revolving around the light fixtures remind Jake of The Falls of the Hounds, and the moonbows revolving in the mist), and this is happening all over again.

"Roland!" Eddie calls from where he and Susannah stand by the tapestry. Susannah gasps and squeezes his shoulder, wanting him to be silent, but Eddie ignores her. "No, Roland! Don't! Bad idea!"

"No! Olan!" Oy yaps.

Roland ignores both of them, and he passes by Jake a hand's breadth away without seeing him. For Roland, they are not here; red boots or no red boots, this ka-tet is far in his future.

He stops at a door near the end of the corridor, hesitates, then raises his fist and knocks. Eddie starts down the corridor toward him, still holding Susannah's hand . . . now he looks almost as if he is dragging her.

"Come on, Jake," says Eddie.

"No, I don't want to."

"It's not about what you want, and you know it. We're supposed to see. If we can't stop him, we can at least do what we came here to do. Now come on!"

Heart heavy with dread, his stomach clenched in a knot, Jake comes along. As they approach Roland—the guns look enormous on his slim hips, and his unlined but already tired face somehow makes Jake feel like weeping—the gunslinger knocks again.

"She ain't there, sugar!" Susannah shouts at him. "She ain't there or she ain't answering the door, and which one it is don't matter to you! Leave it! Leave her! She ain't worth it! Just bein your mother don't make her worth it! Go away!"

But he doesn't hear her, either, and he doesn't go away. As Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Oy gather unseen behind him, Roland tries the door to his mother's room and finds it unlocked. He opens it, revealing a shadowy chamber decorated with silk hangings. On the floor is a rug that looks like the Persians beloved of Jake's mother . . . only this rug, Jake knows, comes from the Province of Kashamin.

On the far side of the parlor, by a window which has been shuttered against the winter winds, Jake sees a low-backed chair and knows it is the one she was in on the day of Roland's manhood test; it is where she was sitting when her son observed the love-bite on her neck.

The chair is empty now, but as the gunslinger takes another step into the room and turns to look toward the apartment's bedroom, Jake observes a pair of shoes—black, not red—beneath the drapes flanking the shuttered window.

"Roland!" he shouts. "Roland, behind the drapes! Someone behind the drapes! Look out!"

But Roland doesn't hear.

"Mother?" he calls, and even his voice is the same, Jake would know it anywhere . . . but it is such a magically freshened version of it! Young and uncracked by all the years of dust and wind and cigarette smoke. "Mother, it's Roland! I want to talk to you!"

Still no answer. He walks down the short hall which leads to the bedroom. Part of Jake wants to stay here in the parlor, to go to that drape and yank it aside, but he knows this isn't the way it's supposed to go. Even if he tried, he doubts it would do any good; his hand would likely pass right through, like the hand of a ghost.

"Come on," Eddie says. "Stay with him."

They go in a cluster that might have been comic under other circumstances. Not under these; here it is a case of three people desperate for the comfort of friends.

Roland stands looking at the bed against the room's left wall. He looks at it as if hypnotized. Perhaps he is trying to imagine Marten in it with his mother; perhaps he is remembering Susan, with whom he never slept in a proper bed, let alone a canopied luxury such as this. Jake can see the gunslinger's dim profile in a three-paneled mirror across the room, in an alcove. This triple glass stands in front of a small table the boy recognizes from his mother's side of his parents' bedroom; it is a vanity.

The gunslinger shakes himself and comes back from whatever thoughts have seized his mind. On his feet are those terrible boots; in this dim light, they look like the boots of a man who has walked through a creek of blood.

"Mother!"

He takes a step toward the bed and actually bends a little, as if he thinks she might be hiding under it. If she's been hiding, however, it wasn't there; the shoes which Jake saw beneath the drape were women's shoes, and the shape which now stands at the end of the short corridor, just outside the bedroom door, is wearing a dress. Jake can see its hem.

And he sees more than that. Jake understands Roland's troubled relationship with his mother and father better than Eddie or Susannah ever could, because Jake's own parents are peculiarly like them: Elmer Chambers is a gunslinger for the Network, and Megan Chambers has a long history of sleeping with sick friends. This is nothing Jake has been told, but he knows, somehow; he has shared khaf with his mother and father, and he knows what he knows.

He knows something about Roland, as well: that he saw his mother in the wizard's glass. It was Gabrielle Deschain, fresh back

from her retreat in Debaria, Gabrielle who would confess to her husband the errors of her ways and her thinking after the banquet, who would cry his pardon and beg to be taken back to his bed . . . and, when Steven drowsed after their lovemaking, she would bury the knife in his breast . . . or perhaps only lightly scratch his arm with it, not even waking him. With that knife, it would come to the same either way.

Roland had seen it all in the glass before finally turning the wretched thing over to his father, and Roland had put a stop to it. To save Steven Deschain's life, Eddie and Susannah would have said, had they seen so far into the business, but Jake has the unhappy wisdom of unhappy children and sees further. To save his mother's life as well. To give her one last chance to recover her sanity, one last chance to stand at her husband's side and be true. One last chance to repent of Marten Broadcloak.

Surely she will, surely she must! Roland saw her face that day, how unhappy she was, and surely she must! Surely she cannot have chosen the magician! If he can only make her see. . .

So, unaware that he has once more lapsed into the unwisdom of the very young—Roland cannot grasp that unhappiness and shame are often no match for desire—he has come here to speak to his mother, to beg her to come back to her husband before it's too late. He has saved her from herself once, he will tell her, but he cannot do it again.

And if she still won't go, Jake thinks, or tries to brave it out, pretend she doesn't know what he's talking about, he'll give her a choice: leave Gilead with his help—now, tonight—or be clapped in chains tomorrow morning, a traitor so outrageous she will almost certainly be hung as Hax the cook was hung.

“Mother?” he calls, still unaware of the shape standing in the shadows behind him. He takes one further step into the room, and now the shape moves. The shape raises its hands. There is

something in its hands. Not a gun, Jake can tell that much, but it has a deadly look to it, a snaky look, somehow—

“Roland, watch out!” Susannah shrieks, and her voice is like a magical switch. There is something on the dressing table—the glass, of course; Gabrielle has stolen it, it’s what she’ll bring to her lover as a consolation prize for the murder her son prevented—and now it lights as if in response to Susannah’s voice. It sprays brilliant pink light up the triple mirror and casts its glow back into the room. In that light, in that triple glass, Roland finally sees the figure behind him.

“Christ!” Eddie Dean shrieks, horrified. “Oh Christ, Roland! That’s not your mother! That’s—”

It’s not even a woman, not really, not anymore; it is a kind of living corpse in a road-filthy black dress. There are only a few straggling tufts of hair left on her head and there’s a gaping hole where her nose used to be, but her eyes still blaze, and the snake she holds wriggling between her hands is very lively. Even in his own horror, Jake has time to wonder if she got it from under the same rock where she found the one Roland killed.

It is Rhea who has been waiting for the gunslinger in his mother’s apartment; it is the Cöos, come not just to retrieve her glam but to finish with the boy who has caused her so much trouble.

“Now, ye trollop’s get!” she cries shrilly, cackling. “Now ye’ll pay!”

But Roland has seen her, in the glass he has seen her, Rhea betrayed by the very ball she came to take back, and now he is whirling, his hands dropping to his new guns with all their deadly speed. He is fourteen, his reflexes are the sharpest and quickest they’ll ever be, and he goes off like exploding gunpowder.

“No, Roland, don’t!” Susannah screams. “It’s a trick, it’s a glam!”

Jake has just time to look from the mirror to the woman actually standing in the doorway; has just time to realize he, too, has been

tricked.

Perhaps Roland also understands the truth at the last split-second—that the woman in the doorway really is his mother after all, that the thing in her hands isn't a snake but a belt, something she has made for him, a peace offering, mayhap, that the glass has lied to him in the only way it can . . . by reflection.

In any case, it's too late. The guns are out and thundering, their bright yellow flashes lighting the room. He pulls the trigger of each gun twice before he can stop, and the four slugs drive Gabrielle Deschain back into the corridor with the hopeful can-we-make-peace smile still on her face.

She dies that way, smiling.

Roland stands where he is, the smoking guns in his hands, his face cramped in a grimace of surprise and horror, just beginning to get the truth of what he must carry with him the rest of his life: he has used the guns of his father to kill his mother.

Now cackling laughter fills the room. Roland does not turn; he is frozen by the woman in the blue dress and black shoes who lies bleeding in the corridor of her apartment; the woman he came to save and has killed, instead. She lies with the hand-woven belt draped across her bleeding stomach.

Jake turns for him, and is not surprised to see a green-faced woman in a pointed black hat swimming inside the ball. It is the Wicked Witch of the East; it is also, he knows, Rhea of the Cöos. She stares at the boy with the guns in his hands and bares her teeth at him in the most terrible grin Jake has ever seen in his life.

"I've burned the stupid girl ye loved—aye, burned her alive, I did—and now I've made ye a matricide. Do ye repent of killing my snake yet, gunslinger? My poor, sweet Ermot? Do ye regret playing yer hard games with one more trig than ye'll ever be in yer miserable life?"

He gives no sign that he hears, only stares at his lady mother. Soon he will go to her, kneel by her, but not yet; not yet.

The face in the ball now turns toward the three pilgrims, and as it does it changes, becomes old and bald and raddled—becomes, in fact, the face Roland saw in the lying mirror. The gunslinger has been unable to see his future friends, but Rhea sees them; aye, she sees them very well.

“Cry it off!” she croaks—it is the caw of a raven sitting on a leafless branch beneath a winter-dimmed sky. “Cry it off! Renounce the Tower!”

“Never, you bitch,” Eddie says.

“Ye see what he is! What a monster he is! And this is only the beginning of it, ye ken! Ask him what happened to Cuthbert! To Alain—Alain’s touch, clever as ’twas, saved him not in the end, so it didn’t! Ask him what happened to Jamie De Curry! He never had a friend he didn’t kill, never had a lover who’s not dust in the wind!”

“Go your way,” Susannah says, “and leave us to ours.”

Rhea’s green, cracked lips twist in a horrible sneer. “He’s killed his own mother! What will he do to you, ye stupid brown-skinned bitch?”

“He didn’t kill her,” Jake said. “You killed her. Now go!”

Jake takes a step toward the ball, meaning to pick it up and dash it to the floor . . . and he can do that, he realizes, for the ball is real. It’s the one thing in this vision that is. But before he can put his hands to it, it flashes a soundless explosion of pink light. Jake throws his hands up in front of his face to keep from being blinded, and then he is (melting I’m melting what a world oh what a world) falling, he is being whirled down through the pink storm, out of Oz and back to Kansas, out of Oz and back to Kansas, out of Oz and back to—

CHAPTER V THE PATH OF THE BEAM

1

“—home,” Eddie muttered. His voice sounded thick and punch-drunk to his own ears. “Back home, because there’s no place like home, no indeed.”

He tried to open his eyes and at first couldn’t. It was as if they were glued shut. He put the heel of his hand to his forehead and pushed up, tightening the skin on his face. It worked; his eyes popped open. He saw neither the throneroom of the Green Palace nor (and this was what he had really expected) the richly appointed but somehow claustrophobic bedroom in which he had just been.

He was outside, lying in a small clearing of winter-white grass. Nearby was a little grove of trees, some still with their last brown leaves clinging to the branches. And one branch with an odd white leaf, an albino leaf. There was a pretty trickle of running water farther into the grove. Standing abandoned in the high grass was Susannah’s new and improved wheelchair. There was mud on the tires, Eddie saw, and a few late leaves, crispy and brown, caught in the spokes. A few swatches of grass, too. Overhead was a skyful of still white clouds, every bit as interesting as a laundry-basket full of sheets.

The sky was clear when we went inside the Palace, he thought, and realized time had slipped again. How much or how little, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know—Roland’s world was like a transmission with its gear-teeth all but stripped away; you never knew when time was going to pop into neutral or race you away in overdrive.

Was this Roland's world, though? And if it was, how had they gotten back to it?

"How should I know?" Eddie croaked, and got slowly to his feet, wincing as he did so. He didn't think he was hungover, but his legs were sore and he felt as if he had just taken the world's heaviest Sunday afternoon nap.

Roland and Susannah lay on the ground under the trees. The gunslinger was stirring, but Susannah lay on her back, arms spread extravagantly wide, snoring in an unladylike way that made Eddie grin. Jake was nearby, with Oy sleeping on his side by one of the kid's knees. As Eddie looked at them, Jake opened his eyes and sat up. His gaze was wide but blank; he was awake, but had been so heavily asleep he didn't know it yet.

"Gruz," Jake said, and yawned.

"Yep," Eddie said, "that works for me." He turned in a slow circle, and had gotten three quarters of the way back to where he'd started when he saw the Green Palace on the horizon. From here it looked very small, and its brilliance had been robbed by the sunless day. Eddie guessed it might be thirty miles away. Leading toward them from that direction were the tracks of Susannah's wheelchair.

He could hear the thinny, but faintly. He thought he could see it, as well—a quicksilver shimmer like bogwater, stretching across the flat, open land . . . and finally drying up about five miles away. Five miles west of here? Given the location of the Green Palace and the fact that they had been travelling east on I-70, that was the natural assumption, but who really knew, especially with no visible sun to use for orientation?

"Where's the turnpike?" Jake asked. His voice sounded thick and gummy. Oy joined him, stretching first one rear leg, then the other. Eddie saw he had lost one of his booties at some point.

"Maybe it was cancelled due to lack of interest."

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore,” Jake said. Eddie looked at him sharply, but didn’t believe the kid was consciously riffing on *The Wizard of Oz*. “Not the one where the Kansas City Royals play, not the one where the Monarchs play, either.”

“What gives you that idea?”

Jake hoisted a thumb toward the sky, and when Eddie looked up, he saw that he had been wrong: it wasn’t *all* still white overcast, boring as a basket of sheets. Directly above their heads, a band of clouds was moiling toward the horizon as steadily as a conveyor belt.

They were back on the Path of the Beam.

2

“Eddie? Where you at, sugar?”

Eddie looked down from the lane of clouds in the sky and saw Susannah sitting up, rubbing the back of her neck. She looked unsure of where she was. Perhaps even of *who* she was. The red cappies she was wearing looked oddly dull in this light, but they were still the brightest things in Eddie’s view . . . until he looked down at his own feet and saw the street-boppers with their Cuban heels. Yet these also looked dull, and Eddie no longer thought it was just the day’s cloudy light that made them seem so. He looked at Jake’s shoes, Oy’s remaining three slippers, Roland’s cowboy boots (the gunslinger was sitting up now, arms crossed around his knees, looking blankly off into the distance). All the same ruby red, but a *lifeless* red, somehow. As if some magic essential to them had been used up.

Suddenly, Eddie wanted them off his feet.

He sat down beside Susannah, gave her a kiss, and said: “Good morning, Sleeping Beauty. Or afternoon, if it’s that.” Then, quickly, almost hating to touch them (it was like touching dead skin,

somehow), Eddie yanked off the street-boppers. As he did, he saw that they were scuffed at the toes and muddy at the heels, no longer new-looking. He'd wondered how they'd gotten here; now, feeling the ache in the muscles of his legs and remembering the wheelchair tracks, he knew. They had walked, by God. Walked in their sleep.

"That," Susannah said, "is the best idea you've had since . . . well, in a long time." She stripped off the cappies. Close by, Eddie saw Jake taking off Oy's booties. "Were we there?" Susannah asked him. "Eddie, were we really there when he. . ."

"When I killed my mother," Roland said. "Yes, you were there. As I was. Gods help me, I was there. I did it." He covered his face with his hands and began to voice a series of harsh sobs.

Susannah crawled across to him in that agile way that was almost a version of walking. She put an arm around him and used her other hand to take his hands away from his face. At first Roland didn't want to let her do that, but she was persistent, and at last his hands—those killer's hands—came down, revealing haunted eyes which swam with tears.

Susannah urged his face down against her shoulder. "Be easy, Roland," she said. "Be easy and let it go. This part is over now. You past it."

"A man doesn't get past such a thing," Roland said. "No, I don't think so. Not ever."

"You didn't kill her," Eddie said.

"That's too easy." The gunslinger's face was still against Susannah's shoulder, but his words were clear enough. "Some responsibilities can't be shirked. Some *sins* can't be shirked. Yes, Rhea was there—in a way, at least—but I can't shift it all to the Cöos, much as I might like to."

"It wasn't her, either," Eddie said. "That's not what I mean."

Roland raised his head. “What in hell’s name are you talking about?”

“*Ka*,” Eddie said. “*Ka* like a wind.”

3

In their packs there was food none of them had put there—cookies with Keebler elves on the packages, Saran Wrapped sandwiches that looked like the kind you could get (if you were desperate, that was) from turnpike vending machines, and a brand of cola neither Eddie, Susannah, nor Jake knew. It tasted like Coke and came in a red and white can, but the brand was Nozz-A-La.

They ate a meal with their backs to the grove and their faces to the distant glam-gleam of the Green Palace, and called it lunch. *If we start to lose the light in an hour or so, we can make it supper by voice vote*, Eddie thought, but he didn’t believe they’d need to. His interior clock was running again now, and that mysterious but usually accurate device suggested that it was early afternoon.

At one point he stood up and raised his soda, smiling into an invisible camera. “When I’m travelling through the Land of Oz in my new Takuro Spirit, I drink Nozz-A-La!” he proclaimed. “It fills me up but never fills me out! It makes me happy to be a man! It makes me know God! It gives me the outlook of an angel and the balls of a tiger! When I drink Nozz-A-La, I say ‘Gosh! Ain’t I glad to be alive!’ I say—”

“Sit down, you bumhug,” Jake said, laughing.

“Ug,” Oy agreed. His snout was on Jake’s ankle, and he was watching the boy’s sandwich with great interest.

Eddie started to sit, and then that strange albino leaf caught his eye again. *That’s no leaf*, he thought, and walked over to it. No, not a leaf but a scrap of paper. He turned it over and saw columns of “blah blah” and “yak yak” and “all the stuff’s the same.” Usually

newspapers weren't blank on one side, but Eddie wasn't surprised to find this one was—the *Oz Daily Buzz* had only been a prop, after all.

Nor was the blank side blank. Printed on it in neat, careful letters, was this message:

Next time I won't leave. Renounce the
Tower. This is your last warning.
And have a great day! —R.F.

Below that, a little drawing:



Eddie brought the note back to where the others were eating. Each of them looked at it. Roland held it last, ran his thumb over it thoughtfully, feeling the texture of the paper, then gave it back to Eddie.

“R.F.,” Eddie said. “The man who was running Tick-Tock. This is from him, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He must have brought the Tick-Tock Man out of Lud.”

“Sure,” Jake said darkly. “That guy Flagg looked like someone who’d know a first-class bumhug when he found one. But how did they get here before us? What could be faster than Blaine the Mono, for cripe’s sake?”

“A door,” Eddie said. “Maybe they came through one of those special doors.”

“Bingo,” Susannah said. She held her hand out, palm up, and Eddie slapped it.

“In any case, what he suggests is not bad advice,” Roland said. “I urge you to consider it most seriously. And if you want to go back to your world, I will allow you to go.”

“Roland, I can’t believe you,” Eddie said. “This, after you dragged me and Suze over here, kicking and screaming? You know what my brother would say about you? That you’re as contrary as a hog on ice-skates.”

“I did what I did before I learned to know you as friends,” Roland said. “Before I learned to love you as I loved Alain and Cuthbert. And before I was forced to . . . to revisit certain scenes. Doing that has . . .” He paused, looking down at his feet (he had put his old boots back on again) and thinking hard. At last he looked up again. “There was a part of me that hadn’t moved or spoken in a good many years. I thought it was dead. It isn’t. I have learned to love again, and I’m aware that this is probably my last chance to love. I’m slow—Vannay and Cort knew that; so did my father—but I’m not stupid.”

“Then don’t act that way,” Eddie said. “Or treat us as if we were.”

“What you call ‘the bottom line,’ Eddie, is this: I get my friends killed. And I’m not sure I can even risk doing that again. Jake especially . . . I . . . never mind. I don’t have the words. For the first time since I turned around in a dark room and killed my mother, I may have found something more important than the Tower. Leave it at that.”

“All right, I guess I can respect that.”

“So can I,” Susannah said, “but Eddie’s right about *ka*.” She took the note and ran a finger over it thoughtfully. “Roland, you can’t talk about that—*ka*, I mean—then turn around and take it back again, just because you get a little low on willpower and dedication.”

“Willpower and dedication are good words,” Roland remarked. “There’s a bad one, though, that means the same thing. That one is

obsession.”

She shrugged it away with an impatient twitch of her shoulders. “Sugarpie, either this whole business is *ka*, or none of it is. And scary as *ka* might be—the idea of fate with eagle eyes and a bloodhound’s nose—I find the idea of no *ka* even scarier.” She tossed the R.F. note aside on the matted grass.

“Whatever you call it, you’re just as dead if it runs you over,” Roland said. “Rimer . . . Thorin . . . Jonas . . . my mother . . . Cuthbert . . . Susan. Just ask them. Any of them. If you only could.”

“You’re missing the biggest part of this,” Eddie said. “You *can’t* send us back. Don’t you realize that, you big galoot? Even if there was a door, we wouldn’t go through it. Am I wrong about that?”

He looked at Jake and Susannah. They shook their heads. Even Oy shook his head. No, he wasn’t wrong.

“We’ve *changed*,” Eddie said. “We . . .” Now he was the one who didn’t know how to go on. How to express his need to see the Tower . . . and his other need, just as strong, to go on carrying the gun with the sandalwood insets. *The big iron* was how he’d come to think of it. Like in that old Marty Robbins song about the man with the big iron on his hip. “It’s *ka*,” he said. It was all he could think of that was big enough to cover it.

“Kaka,” Roland replied, after a moment’s consideration. The three of them stared at him, mouths open.

Roland of Gilead had made a joke.

4

“There’s one thing I don’t understand about what we saw,” Susannah said hesitantly. “Why did your mother hide behind that drape when you came in, Roland? Did she mean to . . .” She bit her lip, then brought it out. “Did she mean to kill you?”

“If she’d meant to kill me, she wouldn’t have chosen a belt as her weapon. The very fact that she had made me a present—and that’s what it was, it had my initials woven into it—suggests that she meant to ask my forgiveness. That she had had a change of heart.”

Is that what you know, or only what you want to believe? Eddie thought. It was a question he would never ask. Roland had been tested enough, had won their way back to the Path of the Beam by reliving that terrible final visit to his mother’s apartment, and that was enough.

“I think she hid because she was ashamed,” the gunslinger said. “Or because she needed a moment to think of what to say to me. Of how to explain.”

“And the ball?” Susannah asked him gently. “Was it on the vanity table, where we saw it? And did she steal it from your father?”

“Yes to both,” Roland said. “Although . . . *did* she steal it?” He seemed to ask this question of himself. “My father knew a great many things, but he sometimes kept what he knew to himself.”

“Like him knowing that your mother and Marten were seeing each other,” Susannah said.

“Yes.”

“But, Roland . . . you surely don’t believe that your father would knowingly have allowed *you* to . . . to . . .”

Roland looked at her with large, haunted eyes. His tears had gone, but when he tried to smile at her question, he was unable. “Have knowingly allowed his son to kill his wife?” he asked. “No, I can’t say that. Much as I’d like to, I can’t. That he should have *caused* such a thing to have happened, to have deliberately set it in motion, like a man playing Castles . . . that I cannot believe. But would he allow *ka* to run its course? Aye, most certainly.”

“What happened to the ball?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know. I fainted. When I awoke, my mother and I were still alone, one dead and one alive. No one had come to the sound of the shots—the walls of that place were thick stone, and that wing mostly empty as well. Her blood had dried. The belt she’d made me was covered with it, but I took it, and I put it on. I wore that bloodstained gift for many years, and how I lost it is a tale for another day—I’ll tell it to you before we have done, for it bears on my quest for the Tower.

“But although no one had come to investigate the gunshots, someone had come for another reason. While I lay fainted away by my mother’s corpse, that someone came in and took the wizard’s glass away.”

“Rhea?” Eddie asked.

“I doubt she was so close in her body . . . but she had a way of making friends, that one. Aye, a way of making friends. I saw her again, you know.” Roland explained no further, but a stony gleam arose in his eyes. Eddie had seen it before, and knew it meant killing.

Jake had retrieved the note from R.F. and now gestured at the little drawing beneath the message. “Do you know what this means?”

“I have an idea it’s the *sigul* of a place I saw when I first travelled in the wizard’s glass. The land called Thunderclap.” He looked around at them, one by one. “I think it’s there that we’ll meet this man—this *thing*—named Flagg again.”

Roland looked back the way they had come, sleepwalking in their fine red shoes. “The Kansas we came through was *his* Kansas, and the plague that emptied out that land was *his* plague. At least, that’s what I believe.”

“But it might not stay there,” Susannah said.

“It could travel,” Eddie said.

“To *our* world,” Jake said.

Still looking back toward the Green Palace, Roland said: “To your world, or any other.”

“Who’s the Crimson King?” Susannah asked abruptly.

“Susannah, I know not.”

They were quiet, then, watching Roland look toward the palace where he had faced a false wizard and a true memory and somehow opened the door back to his own world by so doing.

Our world, Eddie thought, slipping an arm around Susannah. Our world now. If we go back to America, and perhaps we’ll have to before this is over, we’ll arrive as strangers in a strange land, no matter what when it is. This is our world now. The world of the Beams, and the Guardians, and the Dark Tower.

“We got some daylight left,” he said to Roland, and put a hesitant hand on the gunslinger’s shoulder. When Roland immediately covered it with his own hand, Eddie smiled. “You want to use it, or what?”

“Yes,” Roland said. “Let’s use it.” He bent and shouldered his pack.

“What about the shoes?” Susannah asked, looking doubtfully at the little red pile they had made.

“Leave them here,” Eddie said. “They’ve served their purpose. Into your wheelchair, girl.” He put his arms around her and helped her in.

“All God’s children have shoes,” Roland mused. “Isn’t that what you said, Susannah?”

“Well,” she said, settling herself, “the correct dialect adds a soupçon of flavor, but you’ve got the essence, honey, yes.”

“Then we’ll undoubtedly find more shoes as God wills it,” Roland said.

Jake was looking into his knapsack, taking inventory of the foodstuffs that had been added by some unknown hand. He held up a chicken leg in a Baggie, looked at it, then looked at Eddie. “Who do you suppose packed this stuff?”

Eddie raised his eyebrows, as if to ask Jake how he could possibly be so stupid. “The Keebler Elves,” he said. “Who else? Come on, let’s go.”

5

They clustered near the grove, five wanderers on the face of an empty land. Ahead of them, running across the plain, was a line in the grass which exactly matched the lane of rushing clouds in the sky. This line was nothing so obvious as a path . . . but to the awakened eye, the way that everything bent in the same direction was as clear as a painted stripe.

The Path of the Beam. Somewhere ahead, where this Beam intersected all the others, stood the Dark Tower. Eddie thought that, if the wind were right, he would almost be able to smell its sullen stone.

And roses—the dusky scent of roses.

He took Susannah’s hand as she sat in her chair; Susannah took Roland’s; Roland took Jake’s. Oy stood two paces before them, head up, scenting the autumn air that combed his fur with unseen fingers, his gold-ringed eyes wide.

“We are *ka-tet*,” Eddie said. It crossed his mind to wonder at how much he’d changed; how he had become a stranger, even to

himself. "We are one from many."

"Ka-tet," Susannah said. "We are one from many."

"One from many," Jake said. "Come on, let's go."

Bird and bear and hare and fish, Eddie thought.

With Oy in the lead, they once more set out for the Dark Tower, walking along the Path of the Beam.

AFTERWORD



The scene in which Roland bests his old teacher, Cort, and goes off to roister in the less savory section of Gilead was written in the spring of 1970. The one in which Roland's father shows up the following morning was written in the summer of 1996. Although only sixteen hours pass between the two occurrences in the world of the story, twenty-six *years* had passed in the life of the story's teller. Yet the moment finally came, and I found myself confronting myself across a whore's bed—the unemployed schoolboy with the long black hair and beard on one side, the successful popular novelist (“America's shlockmeister,” as I am affectionately known by my legions of admiring critics) on the other.

I mention this only because it sums up the essential weirdness of the Dark Tower experience for me. I have written enough novels and short stories to fill a solar system of the imagination, but Roland's story is my Jupiter—a planet that dwarfs all the others (at least from my own perspective), a place of strange atmosphere, crazy landscape, and savage gravitational pull. Dwarfs the others, did I say? I think there's more to it than that, actually. I am coming to understand that Roland's world (or worlds) actually *contains* all the others of my making; there is a place in Mid-World for Randall Flagg, Ralph Roberts, the wandering boys from *The Eyes of the Dragon*, even Father Callahan, the damned priest from *'Salem's Lot*, who rode out of New England on a Greyhound Bus and wound up dwelling on the border of a terrible Mid-World land called Thunderclap. This seems to be where they all finish up, and why not? Mid-World was here first, before all of them, dreaming under the blue gaze of Roland's bombardier eyes.

This book has been too long in coming—a good many readers who enjoy Roland's adventures have all but howled in frustration—and for that I apologize. The reason is best summed up by Susannah's thought as she prepares to tell Blaine the first riddle of their contest: *It is hard to begin*. There's nothing in these pages that I agree with more.

I knew that *Wizard and Glass* meant doubling back to Roland's young days, and to his first love affair, and I was scared to death of that story. Suspense is relatively easy, at least for me; love is hard. Consequently I dallied, I temporized, I procrastinated, and the book remained unwritten.

I began at last, working in motel rooms on my Macintosh PowerBook, while driving cross-country from Colorado to Maine after finishing my work on the miniseries version of *The Shining*. It occurred to me as I drove north through the deserted miles of western Nebraska (where I also happened to be, driving back from Colorado, when I got the idea for a story called "Children of the Corn"), that if I didn't start soon, I would never write the book at all.

But I no longer know the truth of romantic love, I told myself. I know about marriage, and mature love, but forty-eight has a way of forgetting the heat and passion of seventeen.

I will help you with that part, came the reply. I didn't know who that voice belonged to on that day outside Thetford, Nebraska, but I do now, because I have looked into his eyes across a whore's bed in a land that exists very clearly in my imagination. Roland's love for Susan Delgado (and hers for him) is what was told to me by the boy who began this story. If it's right, thank him. If it's wrong, blame whatever got lost in the translation.

Also thank my friend Chuck Verrill, who edited the book and hung with me every step of the way. His encouragement and help were invaluable, as was the encouragement of Elaine Koster, who has published all of these cowboy romances in paperback.

Most thanks of all go to my wife, who supports me in this madness as best she can and helped me on this book in a way she doesn't even know. Once, in a dark time, she gave me a funny little rubber figure that made me smile. It's Rocket J. Squirrel, wearing his blue aviator's hat and with his arms bravely outstretched. I put that figure on my manuscript as it grew (and grew . . . and *grew*), hoping some of the love that came with it would kind of fertilize the work. It must

have worked, at least to a degree; the book is here, after all. I don't know if it's good or bad—I lost all sense of perspective around page four hundred—but it's here. That alone seems like a miracle. And I have started to believe I might actually live to complete this cycle of stories. (Knock on wood.)

There are three more to be told, I think, two set chiefly in Mid-World and one almost entirely in our world—that's the one dealing with the vacant lot on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth, and the rose that grows there. That rose, I must tell you, is in terrible danger.

In the end, Roland's *ka-tet* will come to the nightscape which is Thunderclap . . . and to what lies beyond it. All may not live to reach the Tower, but I believe that those who do reach it will stand and be true.

—Stephen King

*Lovell, Maine,
October 27, 1996*

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STEPHEN
KING

THE WIND THROUGH
THE KEYHOLE

A Dark Tower Novel

In *The Wind Through the Keyhole*, Stephen King returns to the rich landscape of Mid-World, the spectacular territory of the Dark Tower fantasy saga that stands as his most beguiling achievement.

Roland Deschain and his ka-tet—Jake, Susannah, Eddie, and Oy, the billy-bumbler—encounter a ferocious storm just after crossing the River Whye on their way to the Outer Baronies. As they shelter from the howling gale, Roland tells his friends not just one strange story but two . . . and in so doing, casts new light on his own troubled past.

In his early days as a gunslinger, in the guilt-ridden year following his mother's death, Roland is sent by his father to investigate evidence of a murderous shape-shifter, a "skin-man" preying upon the population around Debaria. Roland takes charge of Bill Streeter, the brave but terrified boy who is the sole surviving witness to the beast's most recent slaughter. Only a teenager himself, Roland calms the boy and prepares him for the following day's trials by reciting a story from the *Magic Tales of the Eld* that his mother often read to him at bedtime. "A person's never too old for stories," Roland says to Bill. "Man and boy, girl and woman, never too old. We live for them." And indeed, the tale that Roland unfolds, the legend of Tim Stoutheart, is a timeless treasure for all ages, a story that lives for us.

King began the Dark Tower series in 1974; it gained momentum in the 1980s; and he brought it to a thrilling conclusion when the last three novels were published in 2003 and 2004. *The Wind Through the Keyhole* is sure to fascinate avid fans of the Dark Tower epic. But this novel also stands on its own for all readers, an enchanting and haunting journey to Roland's world and testimony to the power of Stephen King's storytelling magic.



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STEPHEN KING is the author of more than fifty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. His most recent include *11/22/63*, named a top ten book of 2011 by *The New York Times Book Review*; *Full Dark, No Stars*; *Under the Dome*; *Just Past Sunset*; and *Lisey's Story*. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

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STEPHEN
KING

THE WIND
THROUGH THE
KEYHOLE

A Dark Tower Novel

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*This is for Robin Furth,
and the gang at Marvel Comics.*

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FOREWORD

Many of the people holding this book have followed the adventures of Roland and his band—his ka-tet—for years, some of them from the very beginning. Others—and I hope there are many, newcomers and Constant Readers alike—may ask, *Can I read and enjoy this story if I haven't read the other Dark Tower books?* My answer is yes, if you keep a few things in mind.

First, Mid-World lies next to our world, and there are many overlaps. In some places there are doorways between the two worlds, and sometimes there are thin places, porous places, where the two worlds actually mingle. Three of Roland's ka-tet—Eddie, Susannah, and Jake—have been drawn separately from troubled lives in New York into Roland's Mid-World quest. Their fourth traveling companion, a billy-bumbler named Oy, is a golden-eyed creature native to Mid-World. Mid-World is very old, and falling to ruin, filled with monsters and untrustworthy magic.

Second, Roland Deschain of Gilead is a gunslinger—one of a small band that tries to keep order in an increasingly lawless world. If you think of the gunslingers of Gilead as a strange combination of knights errant and territorial marshals in the Old West, you'll be close to the mark. Most of them, although not all, are descended from the line of the old White King, known as Arthur Eld (I told you there were overlaps).

Third, Roland has lived his life under a terrible curse. He killed his mother, who was having an affair—mostly against her will, and certainly against her better judgment—with a fellow you will meet in these pages. Although it was by mistake, he holds himself accountable, and the unhappy Gabrielle Deschain's death has haunted him since his young manhood. These events are

fully narrated in the Dark Tower cycle, but for our purposes here, I think it's all you have to know.

For longtime readers, this book should be shelved between *Wizard and Glass* and *Wolves of the Calla* . . . which makes it, I suppose, *Dark Tower 4.5*.

As for me, I was delighted to discover my old friends had a little more to say. It was a great gift to find them again, years after I thought their stories were told.

—Stephen King
September 14, 2011

STARKBLAST

During the days after they left the Green Palace that wasn't Oz after all—but which was now the tomb of the unpleasant fellow Roland's ka-tet had known as the Tick-Tock Man—the boy Jake began to range farther and farther ahead of Roland, Eddie, and Susannah.

“Don't you worry about him?” Susannah asked Roland. “Out there on his own?”

“He's got Oy with him,” Eddie said, referring to the billy-bumbler who had adopted Jake as his special friend. “Mr. Oy gets along with nice folks all right, but he's got a mouthful of sharp teeth for those who aren't so nice. As that guy Gasher found out to his sorrow.”

“Jake also has his father's gun,” Roland said. “And he knows how to use it. That he knows very well. And he won't leave the Path of the Beam.” He pointed overhead with his reduced hand. The low-hanging sky was mostly still, but a single corridor of clouds moved steadily southeast. Toward the land of Thunderclap, if the note left behind for them by the man who styled himself RF had told the truth.

Toward the Dark Tower.

“But why—” Susannah began, and then her wheelchair hit a bump. She turned to Eddie. “Watch where you're pushin me, sugar.”

“Sorry,” Eddie said. “Public Works hasn't been doing any maintenance along this stretch of the turnpike lately. Must be dealing with budget cuts.”

It wasn't a turnpike, but it *was* a road . . . or had been: two ghostly ruts with an occasional tumbledown shack to mark the way. Earlier that morning they had even passed an abandoned store with a barely readable sign: TOOK'S OUTLAND MERCANTILE. They investigated inside for supplies—Jake and Oy had still been with them then—and had found nothing but dust, ancient cobwebs, and the skeleton of what had been either a large raccoon, a small dog, or a billy-bumbler. Oy had taken a cursory sniff and then pissed on the bones before leaving the store to sit on the hump in the middle of the old road with his squiggle of a tail curled around him. He faced back the way they had come, sniffing the air.

Roland had seen the bumbler do this several times lately, and although he had said nothing, he pondered it. Someone trailing them, maybe? He didn't actually believe this, but the bumbler's posture—nose lifted, ears pricked, tail curled—called up some old memory or association that he couldn't quite catch.

“Why does Jake want to be on his own?” Susannah asked.

“Do you find it worrisome, Susannah of New York?” Roland asked.

“Yes, Roland of Gilead, I find it *worrisome*.” She smiled amiably enough, but in her eyes, the old mean light sparkled. That was the Detta Walker part of her, Roland reckoned. It would never be completely gone, and he wasn't sorry. Without the strange woman she had once been still buried in her heart like a chip of ice, she would have been only a handsome black woman with no legs below the knees. With Detta onboard, she was a person to be reckoned with. A dangerous one. A gunslinger.

“He has plenty of stuff to think about,” Eddie said quietly. “He's been through a lot. Not every kid comes back from the dead. And it's like Roland says—if someone tries to face him down, it's the someone who's apt to be sorry.” Eddie stopped pushing the wheelchair, wiped sweat from his brow, and looked at Roland. “*Are* there someones in this particular suburb of nowhere, Roland? Or have they all moved on?”

“Oh, there are a few, I wot.”

He did more than wot; they had been peeked at several times as they continued their course along the Path of the Beam. Once by a frightened woman with her arms around two children and a babe hanging in a sling from her neck. Once by an old farmer, a half-mutie with a jerking tentacle that hung from one corner of his mouth. Eddie and Susannah had seen none of these people, or sensed the others that Roland felt sure had, from the safety of the woods and high grasses, marked their progress. Eddie and Susannah had a lot to learn.

But they had learned at least some of what they would need, it seemed, because Eddie now asked, “Are they the ones Oy keeps scenting up behind us?”

“I don’t know.” Roland thought of adding that he was sure something else was on Oy’s strange little bumbler mind, and decided not to. The gunslinger had spent long years with no ka-tet, and keeping his own counsel had become a habit. One he would have to break, if the tet was to remain strong. But not now, not this morning.

“Let’s move on,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll find Jake waiting for us up ahead.”

2

Two hours later, just shy of noon, they breasted a rise and halted, looking down at a wide, slow-moving river, gray as pewter beneath the overcast sky. On the northwestern bank—their side—was a barnlike building painted a green so bright it seemed to yell into the muted day. Its mouth jutted out over the water on pilings painted a similar green. Docked to two of these pilings by thick hawsers was a large raft, easily ninety feet by ninety, painted in alternating stripes of red and yellow. A tall wooden pole that looked like a mast jutted from the center, but there was no sign of a sail. Several wicker chairs sat in front of the pole, facing the shore on their side of the river. Jake was seated in one of these. Next to him was an old man in a vast straw hat, baggy green

pants, and longboots. On his top half he wore a thin white garment—the kind of shirt Roland thought of as a slinkum. Jake and the old man appeared to be eating well-stuffed popkins. Roland’s mouth sprang water at the sight of them.

Oy was beyond them, at the edge of the circus-painted raft, looking raptly down at his own reflection. Or perhaps at the reflection of the steel cable that ran overhead, spanning the river.

“Is it the Whye?” Susannah asked Roland.

“Yar.”

Eddie grinned. “You say Whye; I say Whye Not?” He raised one hand and waved it over his head. “Jake! Hey, Jake! Oy!”

Jake waved back, and although the river and the raft moored at its edge were still a quarter of a mile away, their eyes were uniformly sharp, and they saw the white of the boy’s teeth as he grinned.

Susannah cupped her hands around her mouth. “Oy! Oy! To me, sugar! Come see your mama!”

Uttering shrill yips that were the closest he could get to barks, Oy flew across the raft, disappeared into the barnlike structure, then emerged on their side. He came charging up the path with his ears lowered against his skull and his gold-ringed eyes bright.

“Slow down, sug, you’ll give yourself a heart attack!” Susannah shouted, laughing.

Oy seemed to take this as an order to speed up. He arrived at Susannah’s wheelchair in less than two minutes, jumped up into her lap, then jumped down again and looked at them cheerfully. “Olan! Ed! Suze!”

“Hile, Sir Throcken,” Roland said, using the ancient word for bumbler he’d first heard in a book read to him by his mother: *The Throcken and the Dragon*.

Oy lifted his leg, watered a patch of grass, then faced back the way they had come, scenting at the air, eyes on the horizon.

“Why does he keep doing that, Roland?” Eddie asked.

“I don’t know.” But he *almost* knew. Was it some old story, not *The Throcken and the Dragon* but one like it? Roland thought so. For a moment he thought of green eyes, watchful in the dark, and a little shiver went through him—not of fear, exactly (although that might have been a part of it), but of remembrance. Then it was gone.

There’ll be water if God wills it, he thought, and only realized he had spoken aloud when Eddie said, “Huh?”

“Never mind,” Roland said. “Let’s have a little palaver with Jake’s new friend, shall we? Perhaps he has an extra popkin or two.”

Eddie, tired of the chewy staple they called gunslinger burritos, brightened immediately. “Hell, yeah,” he said, and looked at an imaginary watch on his tanned wrist. “Goodness me, I see it’s just gobble o’clock.”

“Shut up and push, honeybee,” Susannah said.

Eddie shut up and pushed.

3

The old man was sitting when they entered the boathouse, standing when they emerged on the river side. He saw the guns Roland and Eddie were wearing—the big irons with the sandalwood grips—and his eyes widened. He dropped to one knee. The day was still, and Roland actually heard his bones creak.

“Hile, gunslinger,” he said, and put an arthritis-swollen fist to the center of his forehead. “I salute thee.”

“Rise up, friend,” Roland said, hoping the old man *was* a friend—Jake seemed to think so, and Roland had come to trust his instincts. Not to mention the billy-bumbler’s. “Rise up, do.”

The old man was having trouble managing it, so Eddie stepped aboard and gave him an arm.

“Thankee, son, thankee. Be you a gunslinger as well, or are you a ’prentice?”

Eddie looked at Roland. Roland gave him nothing, so Eddie looked back at the old man, shrugged, and grinned. “Little of both, I guess. I’m Eddie Dean, of New York. This is my wife, Susannah. And this is Roland Deschain. Of Gilead.”

The riverman’s eyes widened. “Gilead that was? Do you say so?”

“Gilead that was,” Roland agreed, and felt an unaccustomed sorrow rise up from his heart. Time was a face on the water, and like the great river before them, it did nothing but flow.

“Step aboard, then. And welcome. This young man and I are already fast friends, so we are.” Oy stepped onto the big raft and the old man bent to stroke the bumbler’s raised head. “And we are, too, aren’t we, fella? Does thee remember my name?”

“Bix!” Oy said promptly, then turned to the northwest again, raising his snout. His gold-ringed eyes stared raptly at the moving column of clouds that marked the Path of the Beam.

4

“Will’ee eat?” Bix asked them. “What I have is poor and rough, but such as there is, I’d be happy to share.”

“With thanks,” Susannah said. She looked at the overhead cable that ran across the river on a diagonal. “This is a ferry, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Bix told me there are people on the other side. Not close, but not far, either. He thinks they’re rice farmers, but they don’t come this way much.”

Bix stepped off the big raft and went into the boathouse. Eddie waited until he heard the old guy rummaging around, then bent to Jake and said in a low voice, “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” Jake said. “It’s the way we’re going, and he’s happy to have someone to take across. He says it’s been years.”

“I’ll bet it has been,” Eddie agreed.

Bix reappeared with a wicker basket, which Roland took from him—otherwise the old man might have tumbled into the water. Soon they were all sitting in the wicker chairs, munching popkins filled with some sort of pink fish. It was seasoned and delicious.

“Eat all you like,” Bix said. “The river’s filled with shannies, and most are true-threaded. The muties I throw back. Once upon a time we were ordered to throw the bad ’uns up a-bank so they wouldn’t breed more, and for a while I did, but now . . .” He shrugged. “Live and let live is what I say. As someone who’s lived long himself, I feel like I *can* say it.”

“How old are you?” Jake asked.

“I turned a hundred and twenty quite some time ago, but since then I’ve lost count, so I have. Time’s short on this side of the door, kennit.”

On this side of the door. That memory of some old story tugged at Roland again, and then was gone.

“Do you follow that?” The old man pointed to the moving band of clouds in the sky.

“We do.”

“To the Callas, or beyond?”

“Beyond.”

“To the great darkness?” Bix looked both troubled and fascinated by the idea.

“We go our course,” Roland said. “What fee would you take to cross us, sai ferryman?”

Bix laughed. The sound was cracked and cheerful. “Money’s no good with nothing to spend it on, you have no livestock, and it’s clear as day that I have more to eat than you do. And you could always draw on me and force me to take you across.”

“Never,” Susannah said, looking shocked.

“I know that,” Bix said, waving a hand at her. “Harriers might—and then burn my ferry for good measure once they got t’other side—but true men of the gun, never. And women too, I suppose. You don’t seem armed, missus, but with women, one can never tell.”

Susannah smiled thinly at this and said nothing.

Bix turned to Roland. “Ye come from Lud, I wot. I’d hear of Lud, and how things go there. For it was a marvelous city, so it was. Crumbling and growing strange when I knew it, but still marvelous.”

The four of them exchanged a look that was all an-tet, that peculiar telepathy they shared. It was a look that was also dark with shume, the old Mid-World term that can mean shame, but also means sorrow.

“What?” Bix asked. “What have I said? If I’ve asked for something you’d not give, I cry your pardon.”

“Not at all,” Roland said, “but Lud . . .”

“Lud is dust in the wind,” Susannah said.

“Well,” Eddie said, “not dust, exactly.”

“Ashes,” Jake said. “The kind that glow in the dark.”

Bix pondered this, then nodded slowly. “I’d hear anyway, or as much as you can tell in an hour’s time. That’s how long the crossing takes.”

Bix bristled when they offered to help him with his preparations. It was his job, he said, and he could still do it—just not as quickly as once upon a time, when there had been farms and a few little trading posts on both sides of the river.

In any case, there wasn’t much to do. He fetched a stool and a large ironwood ringbolt from the boathouse, mounted the stool to attach the

ringbolt to the top of the post, then hooked the ringbolt to the cable. He took the stool back inside and returned with a large metal crank shaped like a block **Z**. This he laid with some ceremony by a wooden housing on the far end of the raft.

“Don’t none of you kick that overboard, or I’ll never get home,” he said.

Roland squatted on his hunkers to study it. He beckoned to Eddie and Jake, who joined him. He pointed to the words embossed on the long stroke of the **Z**. “Does it say what I think it does?”

“Yep,” Eddie said. “North Central Positronics. Our old pals.”

“When did you get that, Bix?” Susannah asked.

“Ninety year ago, or more, if I were to guess. There’s an underground place over there.” He pointed vaguely in the direction of the Green Palace. “It goes for miles, and it’s full of things that belonged to the old people, perfectly preserved. Strange music still plays from overhead, music such as you’ve never heard. It scrambles your thinking, like. And you don’t dare stay there long, or you break out in sores and puke and start to lose your teeth. I went once. Never again. I thought for a while I was going to die.”

“Did you lose your hair as well as your chompers?” Eddie asked.

Bix looked surprised, then nodded. “Yar, some, but it grew back. That crank, it’s *still*, you know.”

Eddie pondered this a moment. Of course it was still, it was an inanimate object. Then he realized the old man was saying *steel*.

“Are’ee ready?” Bix asked them. His eyes were nearly as bright as Oy’s. “Shall I cast off?”

Eddie snapped off a crisp salute. “Aye-aye, cap’n. We’re away to the Treasure Isles, arr, so we be.”

“Come and help me with these ropes, Roland of Gilead, will ya do.”

Roland did, and gladly.

The raft moved slowly along the diagonal cable, pulled by the river's slow current. Fish jumped all around them as Roland's ka-tet took turns telling the old man about the city of Lud, and what had befallen them there. For a while Oy watched the fish with interest, his paws planted on the upstream edge of the raft. Then he once more sat and faced back the way they had come, snout raised.

Bix grunted when they told him how they'd left the doomed city. "Blaine the Mono, y'say. I remember. Crack train. There was another 'un, too, although I can't remember the name—"

"Patricia," Susannah said.

"Aye, that was it. Beautiful glass sides, she had. And you say the city's all gone?"

"All gone," Jake agreed.

Bix lowered his head. "Sad."

"It is," Susannah said, taking his hand and giving it a brief, light squeeze. "Mid-World's a sad place, although it can be very beautiful."

They had reached the middle of the river now, and a light breeze, surprisingly warm, ruffled their hair. They had all laid aside their heavy outer clothes and sat at ease in the wicker passenger chairs, which rolled this way and that, presumably for the views this provided. A large fish—probably one of the kind that had fed their bellies at gobble o'clock—jumped onto the raft and lay there, flopping at Oy's feet. Although he was usually death on any small creature that crossed his path, the bumbler appeared not even to notice it. Roland kicked it back into the water with one of his scuffed boots.

"Yer throcken knows it's coming," Bix remarked. He looked at Roland. "You'll want to take heed, aye?"

For a moment Roland could say nothing. A clear memory rose from the back of his mind to the front, one of a dozen hand-colored woodcut illustrations in

an old and well-loved book. Six bumblers sitting on a fallen tree in the forest beneath a crescent moon, all with their snouts raised. That volume, *Magic Tales of the Eld*, he had loved above all others when he had been but a sma' one, listening to his mother as she read him to sleep in his high tower bedroom, while an autumn gale sang its lonely song outside, calling down winter. "The Wind Through the Keyhole" was the name of the story that went with the picture, and it had been both terrible and wonderful.

"All my gods on the hill," Roland said, and thumped the heel of his reduced right hand to his brow. "I should have known right away. If only from how warm it's gotten the last few days."

"You mean you didn't?" Bix asked. "And you from In-World?" He made a tsking sound.

"Roland?" Susannah asked. "What is it?"

Roland ignored her. He looked from Bix to Oy and back to Bix. "The starkblast's coming."

Bix nodded. "Aye. Throcken say so, and about starkblast the throcken are never wrong. Other than speaking a little, it's their bright."

"Bright what?" Eddie asked.

"He means their talent," Roland said. "Bix, do you know of a place on the other side where we can hide up and wait for it to pass?"

"Happens I do." The old man pointed to the wooded hills sloping gently down to the far side of the Whye, where another dock and another boathouse—this one unpainted and far less grand—waited for them. "Ye'll find your way forward on the other side, a little lane that used to be a road. It follows the Path of the Beam."

"Sure it does," Jake said. "All things serve the Beam."

"As you say, young man, as you say. Which do'ee ken, wheels or miles?"

"Both," Eddie said, "but for most of us, miles are better."

"All right, then. Follow the old Calla road five miles . . . maybe six . . . and ye'll come to a deserted village. Most of the buildings are wood and no use

to'ee, but the town meeting hall is good stone. Ye'll be fine there. I've been inside, and there's a lovely big fireplace. Ye'll want to check the chimney, accourse, as ye'll want a good draw up its throat for the day or two ye have to sit out. As for wood, ye can use what's left of the houses."

"What is this starkblast?" Susannah asked. "Is it a storm?"

"Yes," Roland said. "I haven't seen one in many, many years. It's a lucky thing we had Oy with us. Even then I wouldn't have known, if not for Bix." He squeezed the old man's shoulder. "Thankee-sai. We all say thankee."

7

The boathouse on the southeastern side of the river was on the verge of collapse, like so many things in Mid-World; bats roosted heads-down from the rafters and fat spiders scuttered up the walls. They were all glad to be out of it and back under the open sky. Bix tied up and joined them. They each embraced him, being careful not to hug tight and hurt his old bones.

When they'd all taken their turn, the old man wiped his eyes, then bent and stroked Oy's head. "Keep em well, do, Sir Throcken."

"Oy!" the bumbler replied. Then: "Bix!"

The old man straightened, and again they heard his bones crackle. He put his hands to the small of his back and winced.

"Will you be able to get back across okay?" Eddie asked.

"Oh, aye," Bix said. "If it was spring, I might not—the Whye en't so placid when the snow melts and the rains come—but now? Piece o' piss. The storm's still some way off. I crank for a bit against the current, then click the bolt tight so I can rest and not slip back'ards, then I crank some more. It might take four hours instead of one, but I'll get there. I always have, anyway. I only wish I had some more food to give'ee."

"We'll be fine," Roland said.

“Good, then. Good.” The old man seemed reluctant to leave. He looked from face to face—seriously—then grinned, exposing toothless gums. “We’re well-met along the path, are we not?”

“So we are,” Roland agreed.

“And if you come back this way, stop and visit awhile with old Bix. Tell him of your adventures.”

“We will,” Susannah said, although she knew they would never be this way again. It was a thing they all knew.

“And mind the starkblast. It’s nothing to fool with. But ye might have a day, yet, or even two. He’s not turning circles yet, are ye, Oy?”

“Oy!” the bumbler agreed.

Bix fetched a sigh. “Now you go your way,” he said, “and I go mine. We’ll both be laid up undercover soon enough.”

Roland and his tet started up the path.

“One other thing!” Bix called after them, and they turned back. “If you see that cussed Andy, tell him I don’t want no songs, and I don’t want my gods-damned *horrascopes* read!”

“Who’s Andy?” Jake called back.

“Oh, never mind, you probably won’t see him, anyway.”

That was the old man’s last word on it, and none of them remembered it, although they did meet Andy, in the farming community of Calla Bryn Sturgis. But that was later, after the storm had passed.

It was only five miles to the deserted village, and they arrived less than an hour after they’d left the ferry. It took Roland less time than that to tell them about the starkblast.

“They used to come down on the Great Woods north of New Canaan once or twice a year, although we never had one in Gilead; they always rose away into the air before they got so far. But I remember once seeing carts loaded with frozen bodies drawn down Gilead Road. Farmers and their families, I suppose. Where their throdden had been—their billy-bumblers—I don’t know. Perhaps they took sick and died. In any case, with no bumblers to warn them, those folks were unprepared. The starkblast comes suddenly, you ken. One moment you’re warm as toast—because the weather always warms up before—and then it falls on you, like wolves on a ruttel of lambs. The only warning is the sound the trees make as the cold of the starkblast rolls over them. A kind of thudding sound, like grenados covered with dirt. The sound living wood makes when it contracts all at once, I suppose. And by the time they heard that, it would have been too late for those in the fields.”

“Cold,” Eddie mused. “How cold?”

“The temperature can fall to as much as forty limbits below freezing in less than an hour,” Roland said grimly. “Ponds freeze in an instant, with a sound like bullets breaking windowpanes. Birds turn to ice-statues in the sky and fall like rocks. Grass turns to glass.”

“You’re exaggerating,” Susannah said. “You must be.”

“Not at all. But the cold’s only part of it. The wind comes, too—gale-force, snapping the frozen trees off like straws. Such storms might roll for three hundred wheels before lifting off into the sky as suddenly as they came.”

“How do the bumblers know?” Jake asked.

Roland only shook his head. The how and why of things had never interested him much.

They came to a broken piece of signboard lying on the path. Eddie picked it up and read the faded remains of a single word. "It sums up Mid-World perfectly," he said. "Mysterious yet strangely hilarious." He turned toward them with the piece of wood held at chest level. What it said, in large, uneven letters, was **GOOK**.

"A gook is a deep well," Roland said. "Common law says any traveler may drink from it without let or penalty."

"Welcome to Gook," Eddie said, tossing the signboard into the bushes at the side of the road. "I like it. In fact, I want a bumper sticker that says I Waited Out the Starkblast in Gook."

Susannah laughed. Jake didn't. He only pointed at Oy, who had begun turning in tight, rapid circles, as if chasing his own tail.

"We might want to hurry a little," the boy said.

The woods drew back and the path widened to what had once been a village high street. The village itself was a sad cluster of abandonment that ran on both sides for about a quarter mile. Some of the buildings had been houses, some stores, but now it was impossible to tell which had been which. They were nothing but slumped shells staring out of dark empty sockets that might once have held glass. The only exception stood at the southern end of the town. Here the overgrown high street split around a squat blockhouse-like building constructed of gray fieldstone. It stood hip-deep in overgrown shrubbery and was partly concealed by young fir trees that must have grown up since Gook had been abandoned; the roots had already begun to work their way into the meeting hall's foundations. In the course of time they would bring it down, and time was one thing Mid-World had in abundance.

“He was right about the wood,” Eddie said. He picked up a weathered plank and laid it across the arms of Susannah’s wheelchair like a makeshift table. “We’ll have plenty.” He cast an eye at Jake’s furry pal, who was once more turning in brisk circles. “If we have time to pick it up, that is.”

“We’ll start gathering as soon as we make sure we’ve got yonder stone building to ourselves,” Roland said. “Let’s make this quick.”

11

The Gook meeting hall was chilly, and birds—what the New Yorkers thought of as swallows and Roland called bin-rusties—had gotten into the second floor, but otherwise they did indeed have the place to themselves. Once he was under a roof, Oy seemed freed of his compulsion to either face northwest or turn in circles, and he immediately reverted to his essential curious nature, bounding up the rickety stairs toward the soft flutterings and cooings above. He began his shrill yapping, and soon the members of the tet saw the bin-rusties streaking away toward less populated areas of Mid-World. Although, if Roland was right, Jake thought, the ones heading in the direction of the River Whye would all too soon be turned into birdsicles.

The first floor consisted of a single large room. Tables and benches had been stacked against the walls. Roland, Eddie, and Jake carried these to the glassless windows, which were mercifully small, and covered the openings. The ones on the northwest side they covered from the outside, so the wind from that direction would press them tighter rather than blow them over.

While they did this, Susannah rolled her wheelchair into the mouth of the fireplace, a thing she was able to accomplish without even ducking her head. She peered up, grasped a rusty hanging ring, and pulled it. There was a hellish *skreek* sound . . . a pause . . . and then a great black cloud of soot descended on her in a flump. Her reaction was immediate, colorful, and all Detta Walker.

“Oh, kiss my ass and go to heaven!” she screamed. “You cock-knocking motherfucker, just lookit this shittin mess!”

She rolled back out, coughing and waving her hands in front of her face. The wheels of her chair left tracks in the soot. A huge pile of the stuff lay in her lap. She slapped it away in a series of hard strokes that were more like punches.

“Filthy fucking chimbly! Dirty old cunt-tunnel! You badass, sonofabitching—”

She turned and saw Jake staring at her, openmouthed and wide-eyed. Beyond him, on the stairs, Oy was doing the same thing.

“Sorry, honey,” Susannah said. “I got a little carried away. Mostly I’m mad at myself. I grew up with stoves n fireplaces, and should have known better.”

In a tone of deepest respect, Jake said, “You know better swears than my father. I didn’t think *anyone* knew better swears than my father.”

Eddie went to Susannah and started wiping at her face and neck. She brushed his hands away. “You’re just spreadin it around. Let’s go see if we can find that gook, or whatever it is. Maybe there’s still water.”

“There will be if God wills it,” Roland said.

She swiveled to regard him with narrowed eyes. “You being smart, Roland? You don’t want to be smart while I’m sittin here like Missus Tarbaby.”

“No, sai, never think it,” Roland said, but there was the tiniest twitch at the left corner of his mouth. “Eddie, see if you can find gook-water so Susannah can clean herself. Jake and I will begin gathering wood. We’ll need you to help us as soon as you can. I hope our friend Bix has made it to his side of the river, because I think time is shorter than he guessed.”

The town well was on the other side of the meeting hall, in what Eddie thought might once have been the town common. The rope hanging from the

crank-operated drum beneath the well's rotting cap was long gone, but that was no problem; they had a coil of good rope in their gunna.

"The problem," Eddie said, "is what we're going to tie to the end of the rope. I suppose one of Roland's old saddlebags might—"

"What's that, honeybee?" Susannah was pointing at a patch of high grass and brambles on the left side of the well.

"I don't see . . ." But then he did. A gleam of rusty metal. Taking care to be scratched by the thorns as little as possible, Eddie reached into the tangle and, with a grunt of effort, pulled out a rusty bucket with a coil of dead ivy inside. There was even a handle.

"Let me see that," Susannah said.

He dumped out the ivy and handed it over. She tested the handle and it broke immediately, not with a snap but a soft, punky sigh. Susannah looked at him apologetically and shrugged.

"S okay," Eddie said. "Better to know now than when it's down in the well." He tossed the handle aside, cut off a chunk of their rope, untwisted the outer strands to thin it, and threaded what was left through the holes that had held the old handle.

"Not bad," Susannah said. "You mighty handy for a white boy." She peered over the lip of the well. "I can see the water. Not even ten feet down. Ooo, it looks *cold*."

"Chimney sweeps can't be choosers," Eddie said.

The bucket splashed down, tilted, and began to fill. When it sank below the surface of the water, Eddie hauled it back up. It had sprung several leaks at spots where the rust had eaten through, but they were small ones. He took off his shirt, dipped it in the water, and began to wash her face.

"Oh my goodness!" he said. "I see a girl!"

She took the balled-up shirt, rinsed it, wrung it out, and began to do her arms. "At least I got the dang flue open. You can draw some more water once I

get the worst of this mess cleaned off me, and when we get a fire going, I can wash in warm—”

Far to the northwest, they heard a low, thudding crump. There was a pause, then a second one. It was followed by several more, then a perfect fusillade. Coming in their direction like marching feet. Their startled eyes met.

Eddie, bare to the waist, went to the back of her wheelchair. “I think we better speed this up.”

In the distance—but definitely moving closer—came sounds that could have been armies at war.

“I think you’re right,” Susannah said.

13

When they got back, they saw Roland and Jake running toward the meeting hall with armloads of decaying lumber and splintered chunks of wood. Still well across the river but definitely closer, came those low, crumping explosions as trees in the path of the starkblast yanked themselves inward toward their tender cores. Oy was in the middle of the overgrown high street, turning and turning.

Susannah tipped herself out of her wheelchair, landed neatly on her hands, and began crawling toward the meetinghouse.

“What the hell are you doing?” Eddie asked.

“You can carry more wood in the chair. Pile it high. I’ll get Roland to give me his flint and steel, get a fire going.”

“But—”

“Mind me, Eddie. Let me do what I can. And put your shirt back on. I know it’s wet, but it’ll keep you from getting scratched up.”

He did so, then turned the chair, tilted it on its big back wheels, and pushed it toward the nearest likely source of fuel. As he passed Roland, he gave the

gunslinger Susannah's message. Roland nodded and kept running, peering over his armload of wood.

The three of them went back and forth without speaking, gathering wood against the cold on this weirdly warm afternoon. The Path of the Beam in the sky was temporarily gone, because all the clouds were in motion, roiling away to the southeast. Susannah had gotten a fire going, and it roared beastily up the chimney. The big downstairs room had a huge jumble of wood in the center, some with rusty nails poking out. So far none of them had been cut or punctured, but Eddie thought it was just a matter of time. He tried to remember when he'd last had a tetanus shot and couldn't.

As for Roland, he thought, his blood would probably kill any germ the second it dared show its head inside of that leather bag he calls skin.

"What are you smiling about?" Jake asked. The words came out in little out-of-breath gasps. The arms of his shirt were filthy and covered with splinters; there was a long smutch of dirt on his forehead.

"Nothing much, little hero. Watch out for rusty nails. One more load each and we'd better call it good. It's close."

"Okay."

The thuds were on their side of the river now, and the air, although still warm, had taken on a queer thick quality. Eddie loaded up Susannah's wheelchair a final time and trundled it back toward the meetinghouse. Jake and Roland were ahead of him. He could feel heat baking out of the open door. *It better get cold, he thought, or we're going to fucking roast in there.*

Then, as he waited for the two ahead of him to turn sideways so they could get their loads of lumber inside, a thin and pervasive screaming joined the pops and thuds of contracting wood. It made the hair bristle on the nape of Eddie's neck. The wind coming toward them sounded alive, and in agony.

The air began to move again. First it was warm, then cool enough to dry the sweat on his face, then cold. This happened in a matter of seconds. The creepy screech of the wind was joined by a fluttering sound that made Eddie think of

the plastic pennants you sometimes saw strung around used-car lots. It ramped up to a whir, and leaves began to blow off the trees, first in bundles and then in sheets. The branches thrashed against clouds that were lensing darker even as he looked at them, mouth agape.

“Oh, *shit*,” he said, and ran the wheelchair straight at the door. For the first time in ten trips, it stuck. The planks he’d stacked across the chair’s arms were too wide. With any other load, the ends would have snapped off with the same soft, almost apologetic sound the bucket handle had made, but not this time. Oh no, not now that the storm was almost here. Was nothing in Mid-World ever easy? He reached over the back of the chair to shove the longest boards aside, and that was when Jake shouted.

“Oy! Oy’s still out there! Oy! To me!”

Oy took no notice. He had stopped his turning. Now he only sat with his snout raised toward the coming storm, his gold-ringed eyes fixed and dreamy.

14

Jake didn’t think, and he didn’t look for the nails that were protruding from Eddie’s last load of lumber. He simply scrambled up the splintery pile and jumped. He struck Eddie, sending him staggering back. Eddie tried to keep his balance but tripped on his own feet and fell on his butt. Jake went to one knee, then scrambled up, eyes wide, long hair blowing back from his head in a tangle of licks and ringlets.

“Jake, no!”

Eddie grabbed for him and got nothing but the cuff of the kid’s shirt. It had been thinned by many washings in many streams, and tore away.

Roland was in the doorway. He batted the too-long boards to the right and left, as heedless of the protruding nails as Jake had been. The gunslinger yanked the wheelchair through the doorway and grunted, “Get in here.”

“Jake—”

“Jake will either be all right or he won’t.” Roland seized Eddie by the arm and hauled him to his feet. Their old bluejeans were making machine-gun noises around their legs as the wind whipped them. “He’s on his own. Get in here.”

“No! Fuck you!”

Roland didn’t argue, simply yanked Eddie through the door. Eddie went sprawling. Susannah knelt in front of the fire, staring at him. Her face was streaming with sweat, and the front of her deerskin shirt was soaked.

Roland stood in the doorway, face grim, watching Jake run to his friend.

15

Jake felt the temperature of the air around him plummet. A branch broke off with a dry snap and he ducked as it whistled over his head. Oy never stirred until Jake snatched him up. Then the bumbler looked around wildly, baring his teeth.

“Bite if you have to,” Jake said, “but I won’t put you down.”

Oy didn’t bite and Jake might not have felt it if he had. His face was numb. He turned back toward the meetinghouse and the wind became a huge cold hand planted in the middle of his back. He began running again, aware that now he was doing so in absurd leaps, like an astronaut running on the surface of the moon in a science fiction movie. One leap . . . two . . . three . . .

But on the third one he didn’t come down. He was blown straight forward with Oy cradled in his arms. There was a guttural, garumphing explosion as one of the old houses gave in to the wind and went flying southeast in a hail of shrapnel. He saw a flight of stairs, the crude plank banister still attached, spinning up toward the racing clouds. *We’ll be next*, he thought, and then a hand, minus two fingers but still strong, gripped him above the elbow.

Roland turned him toward the door. For a moment the issue was in doubt as the wind bullied them away from safety. Then Roland lunged forward into the doorway with his remaining fingers sinking deep into Jake's flesh. The pressure of the wind abruptly left them, and they both landed on their backs.

"Thank God!" Susannah cried.

"Thank him later!" Roland was shouting to be heard over the pervasive bellow of the gale. "Push! All of you push on this damned door! Susannah, you at the bottom! All your strength! You bar it, Jake! Do you understand me? Drop the bar into the clamps! Don't hesitate!"

"Don't worry about me," Jake snapped. Something had gashed him at one temple and a thin ribbon of blood ran down the side of his face, but his eyes were clear and sure.

"Now! Push! Push for your lives!"

The door swung slowly shut. They could not have held it for long—mere seconds—but they didn't have to. Jake dropped the thick wooden bar, and when they moved cautiously back, the rusty clamps held. They looked at each other, gasping for breath, then down at Oy. Who gave a single cheerful yap, and went to toast himself by the fire. The spell that the oncoming storm had cast on him seemed to be broken.

Away from the hearth, the big room was already growing cold.

"You should have let me grab the kid, Roland," Eddie said. "He could have been killed out there."

"Oy was Jake's responsibility. He should have gotten him inside sooner. Tied him to something, if he had to. Or don't you think so, Jake?"

"Yeah, I do." Jake sat down beside Oy, stroking the bumbler's thick fur with one hand and rubbing blood from his face with the other.

"Roland," Susannah said, "he's just a boy."

"No more," Roland said. "Cry your pardon, but . . . no more."

For the first two hours of the starkblast, they were in some doubt if even the stone meetinghouse would hold. The wind screamed and trees snapped. One slammed down on the roof and smashed it. Cold air jetted through the boards above them. Susannah and Eddie put their arms around each other. Jake shielded Oy—now lying placidly on his back with his stubby legs splayed to all points of the compass—and looked up at the swirling cloud of birdshit that had sifted through the cracks in the ceiling. Roland went on calmly laying out their little supper.

“What do you think, Roland?” Eddie asked.

“I think that if this building stands one more hour, we’ll be fine. The cold will intensify, but the wind will drop a little when dark comes. It will drop still more come tomorrowlight, and by the day after tomorrow, the air will be still and much warmer. Not like it was before the coming of the storm, but that warmth was unnatural and we all knew it.”

He regarded them with a half-smile. It looked strange on his face, which was usually so still and grave.

“In the meantime, we have a good fire—not enough to heat the whole room, but fine enough if we stay close to it. And a little time to rest. We’ve been through much, have we not?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “*Too* much.”

“And more ahead, I have no doubt. Danger, hard work, sorrow. Death, mayhap. So now we sit by the fire, as in the old days, and take what comfort we can.” He surveyed them, still with that little smile. The firelight cast him in strange profile, making him young on one side of his face and ancient on the other. “We are ka-tet. We are one from many. Be grateful for warmth, shelter, and companionship against the storm. Others may not be so lucky.”

“We’ll hope they are,” Susannah said. She was thinking of Bix.

“Come,” Roland said. “Eat.”

They came, and settled themselves around their dinh, and ate what he had set out for them.

Susannah slept for an hour or two early that night, but her dreams—of nasty, maggoty foods she was somehow compelled to eat—woke her. Outside, the wind continued to howl, although its sound was not quite so steady now. Sometimes it seemed to drop away entirely, then rose again, uttering long, icy shrieks as it ran under the eaves in cold currents and made the stone building tremble in its old bones. The door thudded rhythmically against the bar holding it shut, but like the ceiling above them, both the bar and the rusty clamps seemed to be holding. She wondered what would have become of them if the wooden bar had been as punky and rotted as the handle of the bucket they'd found near the gook.

Roland was awake and sitting by the fire. Jake was with him. Between them, Oy was asleep with one paw over his snout. Susannah joined them. The fire had burned down a little, but this close it threw a comforting heat on her face and arms. She took a board, thought about snapping it in two, decided it might wake Eddie, and tossed it onto the fire as it was. Sparks gushed up the chimney, swirling as the draft caught them.

She could have spared the consideration, because while the sparks were still swirling, a hand caressed the back of her neck just below the hairline. She didn't have to look; she would have known that touch anywhere. Without turning, she took the hand, brought it to her mouth, and kissed the cup of the palm. The *white* palm. Even after all this time together and all the lovemaking, she could sometimes hardly believe that. Yet there it was.

At least I won't have to bring him home to meet my parents, she thought.

“Can't sleep, sugar?”

“A little. Not much. I had funny dreams.”

“The wind brings them,” Roland said. “Anyone in Gilead would tell you the same. But I love the sound of the wind. I always have. It soothes my heart and makes me think of old times.”

He looked away, as if embarrassed to have said so much.

“None of us can sleep,” Jake said. “So tell us a story.”

Roland looked into the fire for a while, then at Jake. The gunslinger was once more smiling, but his eyes were distant. A knot popped in the fireplace. Outside the stone walls, the wind screamed as if furious at its inability to get in. Eddie put an arm around Susannah’s waist and she laid her head on his shoulder.

“What story would you hear, Jake, son of Elmer?”

“Any.” He paused. “About the old days.”

Roland looked at Eddie and Susannah. “And you? Would you hear?”

“Yes, please,” Susannah said.

Eddie nodded. “Yeah. If you want to, that is.”

Roland considered. “Mayhap I’ll tell you two, since it’s long until dawn and we can sleep tomorrow away, if we like. These tales nest inside each other. Yet the wind blows through both, which is a good thing. There’s nothing like stories on a windy night when folks have found a warm place in a cold world.”

He took a broken piece of wood paneling, poked the glowing embers with it, then fed it to the flames. “One I know is a true story, for I lived it along with my old ka-mate, Jamie DeCurry. The other, ‘The Wind Through the Keyhole,’ is one my mother read to me when I was still sma’. Old stories can be useful, you know, and I should have thought of this one as soon as I saw Oy scenting the air as he did, but that was long ago.” He sighed. “Gone days.”

In the dark beyond the firelight, the wind rose to a howl. Roland waited for it to die a little, then began. Eddie, Susannah, and Jake listened, rapt, all through that long and contentious night. Lud, the Tick-Tock Man, Blaine the

Mono, the Green Palace—all were forgotten. Even the Dark Tower itself was forgotten for a bit. There was only Roland's voice, rising and falling.

Rising and falling like the wind.

“Not long after the death of my mother, which as you know came by my own hand . . .”

THE SKIN-MAN

(Part 1)

Not long after the death of my mother, which as you know came by my own hand, my father—Steven, son of Henry the Tall—summoned me to his study in the north wing of the palace. It was a small, cold room. I remember the wind whining around the slit windows. I remember the high, frowning shelves of books—worth a fortune, they were, but never read. Not by him, anyway. And I remember the black collar of mourning he wore. It was the same as my own. Every man in Gilead wore the same collar, or a band around his shirtsleeve. The women wore black nets on their hair. This would go on until Gabrielle Deschain was six months in her tomb.

I saluted him, fist to forehead. He didn't look up from the papers on his desk, but I knew he saw it. My father saw everything, and very well. I waited. He signed his name several times while the wind whistled and the rooks cawed in the courtyard. The fireplace was a dead socket. He rarely called for it to be lit, even on the coldest days.

At last he looked up.

“How is Cort, Roland? How goes it with your teacher that was? You must know, because I've been given to understand that you spend most of your time in his hut, feeding him and such.”

“He has days when he knows me,” I said. “Many days he doesn't. He still sees a little from one eye. The other . . .” I didn't need to finish. The other was gone. My hawk, David, had taken it from him in my test of manhood. Cort, in turn, had taken David's life, but that was to be his last kill.

“I know what happened to his other peep. Do you truly feed him?”

“Aye, Father, I do.”

“Do you clean him when he messes?”

I stood there before his desk like a chastened schoolboy called before the master, and that is how I felt. Only how many chastened schoolboys have killed their own mothers?

“Answer me, Roland. I am your dinh as well as your father and I’d have you answer.”

“Sometimes.” Which was not really a lie. Sometimes I changed his dirty clouts three and four times a day, sometimes, on the good days, only once or not at all. He could get to the jakes if I helped him. And if he remembered he had to go.

“Does he not have the white amnies who come in?”

“I sent them away,” I said.

He looked at me with real curiosity. I searched for contempt in his face—part of me wanted to see it—but there was none that I could tell. “Did I raise you to the gun so you could become an ammie and nurse a broken old man?”

I felt my anger flash at that. Cort had raised a moit of boys to the tradition of the Eld and the way of the gun. Those who were unworthy he had bested in combat and sent west with no weapons other than what remained of their wits. There, in Cressia and places even deeper in those anarchic kingdoms, many of those broken boys had joined with Farson, the Good Man. Who would in time overthrow everything my father’s line had stood for. *Farson* had armed them, sure. He had guns, and he had plans.

“Would you throw him on the dungheap, Father? Is that to be his reward for all his years of service? Who next, then? Vannay?”

“Never in this life, as you know. But done is done, Roland, as thee also knows. And thee doesn’t nurse him out of love. Thee knows that, too.”

“I nurse him out of respect!”

“If ’twas only respect, I think you’d visit him, and read to him—for you read well, your mother always said so, and about that she spoke true—but you’d not

clean his shit and change his bed. You are scourging yourself for the death of your mother, which was not your fault.”

Part of me knew this was true. Part of me refused to believe it. The publication of her death was simple: “Gabrielle Deschain, she of Arten, died while possessed of a demon which troubled her spirit.” It was always put so when someone of high blood committed suicide, and so the story of her death was given. It was accepted without question, even by those who had, either secretly or not so secretly, cast their lot with Farson. Because it became known—gods know how, not from me or my friends—that she had become the consort of Marten Broadcloak, the court magis and my father’s chief advisor, and that Marten had fled west. Alone.

“Roland, hear me very well. I know you felt betrayed by your lady mother. So did I. I know that part of you hated her. Part of me hated her, too. But we both also loved her, and love her still. You were poisoned by the toy you brought back from Mejis, and you were tricked by the witch. One of those things alone might not have caused what happened, but the pink ball and the witch together . . . aye.”

“Rhea.” I could feel tears stinging my eyes, and I willed them back. I would not weep before my father. Never again. “Rhea of the Cöos.”

“Aye, she, the black-hearted cunt. It was she who killed your mother, Roland. She turned you into a gun . . . and then pulled the trigger.”

I said nothing.

He must have seen my distress, because he resumed shuffling his papers, signing his name here and there. Finally he raised his head again. “The amnies will have to see to Cort for a while. I’m sending you and one of your ka-mates to Debaria.”

“What? To Serenity?”

He laughed. “The retreat where your mother stayed?”

“Yes.”

“Not there, not at all. Serenity, what a joke. Those women are the *black* ammies. They’d flay you alive if you so much as trespassed their holy doors. Most of the sisters who bide there prefer the longstick to a man.”

I had no idea what he meant—remember I was still very young, and very innocent about many things, in spite of all I’d been through. “I’m not sure I’m ready for another mission, Father. Let alone a quest.”

He looked at me coldly. “I’ll be the judge of what you’re ready for. Besides, this is nothing like the mess you walked into in Mejis. There may be danger, it may even come to shooting, but at bottom it’s just a job that needs to be done. Partly so that people who’ve come to doubt can see that the White is still strong and true, but mostly because what’s wrong cannot be allowed to stand. Besides, as I’ve said, I won’t be sending you alone.”

“Who’ll go with me? Cuthbert or Alain?”

“Neither. I have work for Laughing Boy and Thudfoot right here. You go with Jamie DeCurry.”

I considered this and thought I would be glad to ride with Jamie Red-Hand. Although I would have preferred either Cuthbert or Alain. As my father surely knew.

“Will you go without argument, or will you annoy me further on a day when I have much to do?”

“I’ll go,” I said. In truth, it would be good to escape the palace—its shadowy rooms, its whispers of intrigue, its pervasive sense that darkness and anarchy were coming and nothing could stop them. The world would move on, but Gilead would not move on with it. That glittering, beautiful bubble would soon burst.

“Good. You’re a fine son, Roland. I may never have told you that, but it’s true. I hold nothing against you. Nothing.”

I lowered my head. When this meeting was finally over, I would go somewhere and let my heart free, but not just then. Not as I stood before him.

“Ten or twelve wheels beyond the hall of the women—Serenity, or whatever they call it—is the town of Debaria itself, on the edge of the alkali flats. Nothing serene about Debaria. It’s a dusty, hide-smelling railhead town where cattle and block salt are shipped south, east, and north—in every direction except the one where that bastard Farson’s laying his plans. There are fewer traildrive herds these days, and I expect Debaria will dry up and blow away like so many other places in Mid-World before long, but now it’s still a busy place, full of saloons, whoredens, gamblers, and confidence men. Hard as it might be to believe, there are even a few good people there. One is the High Sheriff, Hugh Peavy. It’s him that you and DeCurry will report to. Let him see your guns and a sigul which I will give to you. Do you ken everything I’ve told you so far?”

“Yes, Father,” I said. “What’s so bad there that it warrants the attention of gunslingers?” I smiled a little, a thing I had done seldom in the wake of my mother’s death. “Even baby gunslingers such as us?”

“According to the reports I have”—he lifted some of the papers and shook them at me—“there’s a skin-man at work. I have my doubts about that, but there’s no doubt the folk are terrified.”

“I don’t know what that is,” I said.

“Some sort of shape-changer, or so the old tales say. Go to Vannay when you leave me. He’s been collecting reports.”

“All right.”

“Do the job, find this lunatic who goes around wearing animal skins—that’s probably what it amounts to—but be not long about it. Matters far graver than this have begun to teeter. I’d have you back—you and all your ka-mates—before they fall.”

* * *

Two days later, Jamie and I led our horses onto the stable-car of a special two-car train that had been laid on for us. Once the Western Line ran a thousand wheels or more, all the way to the Mohaine Desert, but in the years before

Gilead fell, it went to Debaria and no farther. Beyond there, many tracklines had been destroyed by washouts and ground-shakers. Others had been taken up by harriers and roving bands of outlaws who called themselves land-pirates, for that part of the world had fallen into bloody confusion. We called those far western lands Out-World, and they served John Farson's purposes well. He was, after all, just a land-pirate himself. One with pretensions.

The train was little more than a steam-driven toy; Gilead folk called it Sma' Toot and laughed to see it puffing over the bridge to the west of the palace. We could have ridden faster a-horseback, but the train saved the mounts. And the dusty velveteen seats of our car folded out into beds, which we felt was a fine thing. Until we tried to sleep in them, that was. At one particularly hard jounce, Jamie was thrown right off his makeshift bed and onto the floor. Cuthbert would have laughed and Alain would have cursed, but Jamie Red-Hand only picked himself up, stretched out again, and went back to sleep.

We spoke little that first day, only looked out the wavery isinglass windows, watching as Gilead's green and forested land gave way to dirty scrub, a few struggling ranches, and herders' huts. There were a few towns where folk—many of them muties—gaped at us as Sma' Toot wheezed slowly past. A few pointed at the centers of their foreheads, as if at an invisible eye. It meant they stood for Farson, the Good Man. In Gilead, such folk would have been imprisoned for their disloyalty, but Gilead was now behind us. I was dismayed by how quickly the allegiance of these people, once taken for granted, had thinned.

On the first day of our journey, outside Beesford-on-Arten, where a few of my mother's people still lived, a fat man threw a rock at the train. It bounced off the closed stable-car door, and I heard our horses whinny in surprise. The fat man saw us looking at him. He grinned, grabbed his crotch with both hands, and waddled away.

"Someone has eaten well in a poor land," Jamie remarked as we watched his butters jounce in the seat of his old patched pants.

The following morning, after the servant had put a cold breakfast of porridge and milk before us, Jamie said, “I suppose you’d better tell me what it’s about.”

“Will you tell me something, first? If you know, that is?”

“Of course.”

“My father said that the women at the retreat in Debaria prefer the longstick to a man. Do you know what he meant?”

Jamie regarded me in silence for a bit—as if to make sure I wasn’t shaking his knee—and then his lips twitched at the corners. For Jamie this was the equivalent of holding his belly, rolling around the floor, and howling with glee. Which Cuthbert Allgood certainly would have done. “It must be what the whores in the low town call a diddlestick. Does that help?”

“Truly? And they . . . what? Use it on each other?”

“So ’tis said, but much talk is just la-la-la. You know more of women than I do, Roland; I’ve never lain with one. But never mind. Given time, I suppose I will. Tell me what we’re about in Debaria.”

“A skin-man is supposedly terrorizing the good folk. Probably the bad folk, as well.”

“A man who becomes some sort of animal?”

It was actually a little more complicated in this case, but he had the nub of it. The wind was blowing hard, flinging handfuls of alkali at the side of the car. After one particularly vicious gust, the little train lurched. Our empty porridge bowls slid. We caught them before they could fall. If we hadn’t been able to do such things, and without even thinking of them, we would not have been fit to carry the guns we wore. Not that Jamie preferred the gun. Given a choice (and the time to make it), he would reach for either his bow or his bah.

“My father doesn’t believe it,” I said. “But Vannay does. He—”

At that moment, we were thrown forward into the seats ahead of us. The old servant, who was coming down the center aisle to retrieve our bowls and cups,

was flung all the way back to the door between the car and his little kitchen. His front teeth flew out of his mouth and into his lap, which gave me a start.

Jamie ran up the aisle, which was now severely tilted, and knelt by him. As I joined him, Jamie plucked up the teeth and I saw they were made of painted wood and held together by a cunning clip almost too small to see.

“Are you all right, sai?” Jamie asked.

The old fellow got slowly to his feet, took his teeth, and filled the hole behind his upper lip with them. “I’m fine, but this dirty bitch has derailed again. No more Debaria runs for me, I have a wife. She’s an old nag, and I’m determined to outlive her. You young men had better check your horses. With luck, neither of them will have broken a leg.”

* * *

Neither had, but they were nervous and stamping, anxious to get out of confinement. We lowered the ramp and tethered them to the connecting bar between the two cars, where they stood with their heads lowered and their ears flattened against the hot and gritty wind blowing out of the west. Then we clambered back inside the passenger car and collected our gunna. The engineer, a broad-shouldered, bowlegged plug of a man, came down the side of his listing train with the old servant in tow. When he reached us, he pointed to what we could see very well.

“Yonder on that ridge be Debaria high road—see the marking-posts? You can be at the place o’ the females in less than an hour, but don’t bother asking nothing o’ those bitches, because you won’t get it.” He lowered his voice. “They eat men, is what I’ve heard. Not just a way o’ speakin, boys: *they . . . eat . . . the mens.*”

I found it easier to believe in the reality of the skin-man than in this, but I said nothing. It was clear that the enjie was shaken up, and one of his hands was as red as Jamie’s. But the enjie’s was only a little burn, and would go away. Jamie’s would still be red when he was sent down in his grave. It looked as if it had been dipped in blood.

“They may call to you, or make promises. They may even show you their titties, as they know a young man can’t take his eyes off such. But never mind. Turn yer ears from their promises and yer eyes from their titties. You just go on into the town. It’ll be less than another hour by horse. We’ll need a work crew to put this poxy whore upright. The rails are fine; I checked. Just covered with that damned alkali dust, is all. I suppose ye can’t pay men to come out, but if ye can write—as I suppose such gentle fellows as yerselves surely can—you can give em a premissary note or whatever it’s called—”

“We have specie,” I said. “Enough to hire a small crew.”

The enjie’s eyes widened at this. I supposed they would widen even more if I told him my father had given me twenty gold knuckles to carry in a special pocket sewn inside my vest.

“And oxes? Because we’ll need oxes if they’ve got em. Hosses if they don’t.”

“We’ll go to the livery and see what they have,” I said, mounting up. Jamie tied his bow on one side of his saddle and then moved to the other, where he slid his bah into the leather boot his father had made special for it.

“Don’t leave us stuck out here, young sai,” the enjie said. “We’ve no horses, and no weapons.”

“We won’t forget you,” I said. “Just stay inside. If we can’t get a crew out today, we’ll send a bucka to take you into town.”

“Thankee. And stay away from those women! *They . . . eat . . . the mens!*”

* * *

The day was hot. We ran the horses for a bit because they wanted to stretch after being pent up, then pulled them down to a walk.

“Vannay,” Jamie said.

“Pardon?”

“Before the train derailed, you said your father didn’t believe there was a skin-man, but Vannay does.”

“He said that after reading the reports High Sheriff Peavy sent along, it was hard not to believe. You know what he says at least once in every class: ‘When

facts speak, the wise man listens.' Twenty-three dead makes a moit of facts. Not shot or stabbed, mind you, but torn to pieces."

Jamie grunted.

"Whole families, in two cases. Large ones, almost clans. The houses turned all upsy-turvy and splashed with blood. Limbs ripped off the bodies and carried away, some found—partly eaten—some not. At one of those farms, Sheriff Peavy and his deputy found the youngest boy's head stuck on a fencepole with his skull smashed in and his brains scooped out."

"Witnesses?"

"A few. A sheepherder coming back with strays saw his partner attacked. The one who survived was on a nearby hill. The two dogs with him ran down to try and protect their other master, and were torn apart too. The thing came up the hill after the herder, but got distracted by the sheep instead, so the fellow struck lucky and got away. He said it was a wolf that ran upright, like a man. Then there was a woman with a gambler. He was caught cheating at Watch Me in one of the local pits. The two of them were given a bill of circulation and told to leave town by nightfall or be whipped. They were headed for the little town near the salt-mines when they were beset. The man fought. It gave the woman just enough time to get clear. She hid up in some rocks until the thing was gone. She's said 'twas a lion."

"On its back legs?"

"If so, she didn't wait to see. Last, two cowpunchers. They were camped on Debaria Stream near a young Manni couple on marriage retreat, although the punchers didn't know it until they heard the couple's screams. As they rode toward the sound, they saw the killer go loping off with the woman's lower leg in its jaws. It wasn't a man, but they swore on watch and warrant that it ran upright like a man."

Jamie leaned over the neck of his horse and spat. "Can't be so."

"Vannay says it can. He says there have been such before, although not for years. He believes they may be some sort of mutation that's pretty much

worked its way out of the true thread.”

“All these witnesses saw different animals?”

“Aye. The cowpokes described it as a tyger. It had stripes.”

“Lions and tygers running around like trained beasts in a traveling show. And out here in the dust. Are you sure we aren’t being tickled?”

I wasn’t old enough to be sure of much, but I did know the times were too desperate to be sending young guns even so far west as Debaria for a prank. Not that Steven Deschain could have been described as a prankster even in the best of times.

“I’m only telling what Vannay told me. The rope-swingers who came into town with the remains of those two Manni behind them on a travois had never even *heard* of such a thing as a tyger. Yet that is what they described. The testimony’s in here, green eyes and all.” I took the two creased sheets of paper I had from Vannay out of my inner vest pocket. “Care to look?”

“I’m not much of a reader,” Jamie said. “As thee knows.”

“Aye, fine. But take my word. Their description is just like the picture in the old story of the boy caught in the starkblast.”

“What old story is that?”

“The one about Tim Stoutheart—‘The Wind Through the Keyhole.’ Never mind. It’s not important. I know the punchers may have been drunk, they usually are if they’re near a town that has liquor, but if it’s true testimony, Vannay says the creature is a *shape-shifter* as well as a *shape-changer*.”

“Twenty-three dead, you say. Ay-yi.”

The wind gusted, driving the alkali before it. The horses shied, and we raised our neckerchiefs over our mouths and noses.

“Boogery hot,” Jamie said. “And this damned *dust*.”

Then, as if realizing he had been excessively chatty, he fell silent. That was fine with me, as I had much to think about.

A little less than an hour later, we breasted a hill and saw a sparkling white *baci* below us. It was the size of a barony estate. Behind it, tending down

toward a narrow creek, was a large greengarden and what looked like a grape arbor. My mouth watered at the sight of it. The last time I'd had grapes, my armpits had still been smooth and hairless.

The walls of the *haci* were tall and topped with forbidding sparkles of broken glass, but the wooden gates stood open, as if in invitation. In front of them, seated on a kind of throne, was a woman in a dress of white muslin and a hood of white silk that flared around her head like gullwings. As we drew closer, I saw the throne was ironwood. Surely no other chair not made of metal could have borne her weight, for she was the biggest woman I had ever seen, a giantess who could have mated with the legendary outlaw prince David Quick.

Her lap was full of needlework. She might have been knitting a blanket, but held before that barrel of a body and breasts so big each of them could have fully shaded a baby from the sun, whatever it was looked no bigger than a handkerchief. She caught sight of us, laid her work aside, and stood up. There was six and a half feet of her, maybe a bit more. The wind was less in this dip, but there was enough to flutter her dress against her long thighs. The cloth made a sound like a sail in a running-breeze. I remembered the enjie saying *they eat the mens*, but when she put one large fist to the broad plain of her forehead and lifted the side of her dress to dip a curtsy with her free hand, I nonetheless reined up.

"Hile, gunslingers," she called. She had a rolling voice, not quite a man's baritone. "In the name of Serenity and the women who bide here, I salute thee. May your days be long upon the earth."

We raised our own fists to our brows, and wished her twice the number.

"Have you come from In-World? I think so, for your duds aren't filthy enough for these parts. Although they will be, if you bide longer than a day." And she laughed. The sound was moderate thunder.

"We do," I said. It was clear Jamie would say nothing. Ordinarily closemouthed, he was now stunned to silence. Her shadow rose on the whitewashed wall behind her, as tall as Lord Perth.

“And have you come for the skin-man?”

“Yes,” I said. “Have you seen him, or do you only know of him from the talk? If that’s the case, we’ll move on and say thankee.”

“Not a him, lad. Never think it.”

I only looked at her. Standing, she was almost tall enough to look into my eyes, although I sat on Young Joe, a fine big horse.

“An *it*,” she said. “A monster from the Deep Cracks, as sure as you two serve the Eld and the White. It may have been a man once, but no more. Yes, I’ve seen it, and seen its work. Sit where you are, never move, and you shall see its work, too.”

Without waiting for any reply, she went through the open gate. In her white muslin she was like a sloop running before the wind. I looked at Jamie. He shrugged and nodded. This was what we had come for, after all, and if the enjie had to wait a bit longer for help putting Sma’ Toot back on the rails, so be it.

“*ELLEN!*” she bawled. Raised to full volume, it was like listening to a woman shouting into an electric megaphone. “*CLEMMIE! BRIANNA! BRING FOOD! BRING MEAT AND BREAD AND ALE—THE LIGHT, NOT THE DARK! BRING A TABLE, AND MIND YOU DON’T FORGET THE CLOTH! SEND FORTUNA TO ME NOW! HIE TO IT! DOUBLE-QUICK!*”

With these orders delivered she returned to us, delicately lifting her hem to keep it out of the alkali that puffed around the black boats she wore on her enormous feet.

“Lady-sai, we thank you for your offer of hospitality, but we really must—”

“You must eat is what you must do,” she said. “We’ll have it out here a-roadside, so your digestion will not be discomposed. For I know what stories they tell about us in Gilead, aye, so do we all. Men tell the same about any women who dare to live on their own, I wot. It makes em doubt the worth of their hammers.”

“We heard no stories about—”

She laughed and her bosom heaved like the sea. “Polite of you, young gunnie, aye, and very snick, but it’s long since I was weaned. We’ll not eat ye.” Her eyes, as black as her shoes, twinkled. “Although ye’d make a tasty snack, I think—one or both. I am Everlynnne of Serenity. The prioress, by the grace of God and the Man Jesus.”

“Roland of Gilead,” I said. “And this is Jamie of same.”

Jamie bowed from his saddle.

She curtsied to us again, this time dropping her head so that the wings of her silken hood closed briefly around her face like curtains. As she rose, a tiny woman glided through the open gate. Or perhaps she was of normal size, after all. Perhaps she only looked tiny next to Everlynnne. Her robe was rough gray cotton instead of white muslin; her arms were crossed over her scant bosom, and her hands were buried deep in her sleeves. She wore no hood, but we could still see only half of her face. The other half was hidden beneath a thick swath of bandagement. She curtsied to us, then huddled in the considerable shade of her prioress.

“Raise your head, Fortuna, and make your manners to these young gentlemen.”

When at last she looked up, I saw why she had kept her head lowered. The bandages could not fully conceal the damage to her nose; on the right side, a good part of it was gone. Where it had been was only a raw red channel.

“Hile,” she whispered. “May your days be long upon the earth.”

“May you have twice the number,” Jamie said, and I saw from the woeful glance she gave him with her one visible eye that she hoped this was not true.

“Tell them what happened,” Everlynnne said. “What you remember, any-ro’. I know ’t isn’t much.”

“Must I, Mother?”

“Yes,” she said, “for they’ve come to end it.”

Fortuna peered doubtfully at us, just a quick snatch of a glance, and then back at Everlynnne. “Can they? They look so *young*.”

She realized what she had said must sound impolite, and a flush colored the cheek we could see. She staggered a little on her feet, and Everlynne put an arm around her. It was clear that she had been badly hurt, and her body was still far from complete recovery. The blood that had run to her face had more important work to do in other parts of her body. Chiefly beneath the bandage, I supposed, but given the voluminous robe she wore, it was impossible to tell where else she might have been wounded.

“They may still be a year or more from having to shave but once a week, but they’re gunslingers, Fortie. If they can’t set this cursed town right, then no one can. Besides, it will do you good. Horror’s a worm that needs to be coughed out before it breeds. Now tell them.”

She told. As she did, other Sisters of Serenity came out, two carrying a table, the others carrying food and drink to fill it. Better viands than any we’d had on Sma’ Toot, by the look and the smell, yet by the time Fortuna had finished her short, terrible story, I was no longer hungry. Nor, by the look of him, was Jamie.

* * *

It was dusk, a fortnight and a day gone. She and another, Dolores, had come out to close the gate and draw water for the evening chores. Fortuna was the one with the bucket, and so she was the one who lived. As Dolores began to swing the gate closed, a creature knocked it wide, grabbed her, and bit her head from her shoulders with its long jaws. Fortuna said that she saw it well, for the Peddler’s Moon had just risen full in the sky. Taller than a man it was, with scales instead of skin and a long tail that dragged behind it on the ground. Yellow eyes with slitted dark pupils glowed in its flat head. Its mouth was a trap filled with teeth, each as long as a man’s hand. They dripped with Dolores’s blood as it dropped her still-twitching body on the cobbles of the courtyard and ran on its stubby legs toward the well where Fortuna stood.

“I turned to flee . . . it caught me . . . and I remember no more.”

“I do,” Everlynne said grimly. “I heard the screams and came running out with our gun. It’s a great long thing with a bell at the end of the barrel. It’s been loaded since time out of mind, but none of us has ever fired it. For all I knew, it could have blown up in my hands. But I saw it tearing at poor Fortie’s face, and then something else, too. When I did, I never thought of the risk. I never even thought that I might kill her, poor thing, as well as it, should the gun fire.”

“I wish you had killed me,” Fortuna said. “Oh, I wish you had.” She sat in one of the chairs that had been brought to the table, put her face in her hands, and began to weep. Her one remaining eye did, at least.

“Never say so,” Everlynne told her, and stroked her hair on the side of her head not covered by the bandagement. “For ’tis blasphemy.”

“Did you hit it?” I asked.

“A little. Our old gun fires shot, and one of the pellets—or p’raps more than one—tore away some of the knobs and scales on its head. Black tarry stuff flew up. We saw it later on the cobbles, and sanded it over without touching it, for fear it might poison us right through our skin. The chary thing dropped her, and I think it had almost made up its mind to come for me. So I pointed the gun at it, though a gun like that can only be fired once, then must be recharged down its throat with powder and shot. I told it to come on. Told it I’d wait until it was good and close, so the shot wouldn’t spread.” She hawked back and spat into the dust. “It must have a brain of some sort even when it’s out of its human shape, because it heard me and ran. But before I lost sight of it round the wall, it turned and looked back at me. As if marking me. Well, let it. I have no more shot for the gun, and won’t unless a trader happens to have some, but I have this.”

She lifted her skirts to her knee, and we saw a butcher’s knife in a rawhide scabbard strapped to the outside of her calf.

“So let it come for Everlynne, daughter of Roseanna.”

“You said you saw something else,” I said.

She considered me with her bright black eyes, then turned to the women. “Clemmie, Brianna, serve out. Fortuna, you will say grace, and be sure to ask God forgiveness for your blasphemy and thank Him that your heart still beats.”

Everlynnne grasped me above the elbow, drew me through the gate, and walked me to the well where the unfortunate Fortuna had been attacked. There we were alone.

“I saw its prick,” she said in a low voice. “Long and curved like a scimitar, twitching and full of the black stuff that serves it for blood . . . serves it for blood in *that* shape, any-ro’. It meant to kill her as it had Dolores, aye, right enough, but it meant to fuck her, too. It meant to fuck her as she died.”

* * *

Jamie and I ate with them—Fortuna even ate a little—and then we mounted up for town. But before we left, Everlynnne stood by my horse and spoke to me again.

“When your business here is done, come and see me again. I have something for you.”

“What might that be, sai?”

She shook her head. “Now is not the time. But when the filthy thing is dead, come here.” She took my hand, raised it to her lips, and kissed it. “I know who you are, for does your mother not live in your face? Come to me, Roland, son of Gabrielle. Fail not.”

Then she stepped away before I could say another word, and glided in through the gate.

* * *

The Debaria high street was wide and paved, although the pavement was crumbling away to the hardpan beneath in many places and would be entirely gone before too many years passed. There was a good deal of commerce, and judging from the sound coming from the saloons, they were doing a fine business. We only saw a few horses and mules tied to the hitching-posts,

though; in that part of the world, livestock was for trading and eating, not for riding.

A woman coming out of the mercantile with a basket over her arm saw us and stared. She ran back in, and several more people came out. By the time we reached the High Sheriff's office—a little wooden building attached to the much larger stone-built town jail—the streets were lined with spectators on both sides.

“Have ye come to kill the skin-man?” the lady with the basket called.

“Those two don't look old enough to kill a bottle of rye,” a man standing in front of the Cheery Fellows Saloon & Café called back. There was general laughter and murmurs of agreement at this sally.

“Town looks busy enough now,” Jamie said, dismounting and looking back at the forty or fifty men and women who'd come away from their business (and their pleasure) to have a gleep at us.

“It'll be different after sundown,” I said. “That's when such creatures as this skin-man do their marauding. Or so Vannay says.”

We went into the office. Hugh Peavy was a big-bellied man with long white hair and a droopy mustache. His face was deeply lined and careworn. He saw our guns and looked relieved. He noted our beardless faces and looked less so. He wiped off the nib of the pen he had been writing with, stood up, and held out his hand. No forehead-knocking for this fellow.

After we'd shaken with him and introduced ourselves, he said: “I don't mean to belittle you, young fellows, but I was hoping to see Steven Deschain himself. And perhaps Peter McVries.”

“McVries died three years ago,” I said.

Peavy looked shocked. “Do you say so? For he was a trig hand with a gun. Very trig.”

“He died of a fever.” Very likely induced by poison, but this was nothing the High Sheriff of the Debaria Outers needed to know. “As for Steven, he's otherwise occupied, and so he sent me. I am his son.”

“Yar, yar, I’ve heard your name and a bit of your exploits in Mejis, for we get some news even out here. There’s the dit-dah wire, and even a jing-jang.” He pointed to a contraption on the wall. Written on the brick beneath it was a sign reading DO NOT TOUCH WITHOUT PERMIZION. “It used to go all the way to Gilead, but these days only to Sallywood in the south, the Jefferson spread to the north, and the village in the foothills—Little Debaria, it’s called. We even have a few streetlamps that still work—not gas or kerosene but real sparklights, don’tcha see. Townfolk think such’ll keep the creature away.” He sighed. “I am less confident. This is a bad business, young fellows. Sometimes I feel the world has come loose of its moorings.”

“It has,” I said. “But what comes loose can be tied tight again, Sheriff.”

“If you say so.” He cleared his throat. “Now, don’t take this as disrespect, I know ye are who ye say ye are, but I was promised a sigul. If you’ve brought it, I’d have it, for it means special to me.”

I opened my swag-bag and brought out what I’d been given: a small wooden box with my father’s mark—the *D* with the *S* inside of it—stamped on the hinged lid. Peavy took it with the smallest of smiles dimpling the corners of his mouth beneath his mustache. To me it looked like a remembering smile, and it took years off his face.

“Do’ee know what’s inside?”

“No.” I had not been asked to look.

Peavy opened the box, looked within, then returned his gaze to Jamie and me. “Once, when I was still only a deputy, Steven Deschain led me, and the High Sheriff that was, and a posse of seven against the Crow Gang. Has your father ever spoken to you of the Crows?”

I shook my head.

“Not skin-men, no, but a nasty lot of work, all the same. They robbed what there was to rob, not just in Debaria but all along the ranchlands out this way. Trains, too, if they got word one was worth stopping. But their main business

was kidnapping for ransom. A coward's crime, sure—I'm told Farson favors it—but it paid well.

"Your da' showed up in town only a day after they stole a rancher's wife—Belinda Doolin. Her husband called on the jing-jang as soon as they left and he was able to get himself untied. The Crows didn't know about the jing-jang, and that was their undoing. Accourse it helped that there was a gunslinger doing his rounds in this part of the world; in those days, they had a knack of turning up when and where they were needed."

He eyed us. "P'raps they still do. Any-ro', we got out t'ranch while the crime was still fresh. There were places where any of us would have lost the trail—it's mostly hardpan out north of here, don'tcha see—but your father had eyes like you wouldn't believe. Hawks ain't even in it, dear, or eagles, either."

I knew of my father's sharp eyes and gift for trailing. I also knew that this story probably had nothing to do with our business, and I should have told him to move along. But my father never talked about his younger days, and I wanted to hear this tale. I was *hungry* to hear it. And it turned out to have a little more to do with our business in Debaria than I at first thought.

"The trail led in the direction of the mines—what Debaria folk call the salt-houses. The workings had been abandoned in those days; it was before the new plug was found twenty year ago."

"Plug?" Jamie asked.

"Deposit," I said. "He means a fresh deposit."

"Aye, as you say. But all that were abandoned then, and made a fine hideout for such as those beastly Crows. Once the trail left the flats, it went through a place of high rocks before coming out on the Low Pure, which is to say the foothill meadows below the salt-houses. The Low is where a shepherd was killed just recent, by something that looked like a—"

"Like a wolf," I said. "This we know. Go on."

"Well-informed, are ye? Well, that's all to the good. Where was I, now? Ah, I know—those rocks that are now known in these parts as Ambush Arroyo. It's

not an arroyo, but I suppose people like the sound. That's where the tracks went, but Deschain wanted to go around and come in from the east. From the High Pure. The sheriff, Pea Anderson it was back then, didn't want none o' that. Eager as a bird with its eye on a worm he was, mad to press on. Said it would take em three days, and by then the woman might be dead and the Crows anywhere. He said he was going the straight way, and he'd go alone if no one wanted to go with him. 'Or unless you order me in the name of Gilead to do different,' he says to your da'.

"Never think it,' Deschain says, 'for Debaria is your fill; I have my own.'

"The posse went. I stayed with your da', lad. Sheriff Anderson turned to me in the saddle and said, 'I hope they're hiring at one of the ranches, Hughie, because your days of wearing tin on your vest are over. I'm done with'ee.'

"Those were the last words he ever said to me. They rode off. Steven of Gilead squatted on his hunkers and I hunkered with him. After half an hour of quiet—might have been longer—I says to him, 'I thought we were going to hook around . . . unless you're done with me, too.'

"No,' he says. 'Your hire is not my business, Deputy.'

"Then what are we waitin for?'

"Gunfire,' says he, and not five minutes later we heard it. Gunfire and screams. It didn't last long. The Crows had seen us coming—probably nummore'n a glint of sun on a bootcap or bit o' saddle brightwork was enough to attract their attention, for Pa Crow was powerful trig—and doubled back. They got up in those high rocks and poured down lead on Anderson and his possemen. There were more guns in those days, and the Crows had a good share. Even a speed-shooter or two.

"So we went around, all right? Took us only two days, because Steven Deschain pushed hard. On the third day, we camped downslope and rose before dawn. Now, if ye don't know, and no reason ye should, salt-houses are just caverns in the cliff faces up there. Whole families lived in em, not just the miners themselves. The tunnels go down into the earth from the backs of em.

But as I say, in those days all were deserted. Yet we saw smoke coming from the vent on top of one, and that was as good as a kinkman standing out in front of a carnival tent and pointing at the show inside, don'tcha see it.

“‘This is the time,’ Steven says, ‘because they will have spent the last nights, once they were sure they were safe, deep in drink. They’ll still be sleeping it off. Will you stand with me?’

“‘Aye, gunslinger, that I will,’ I tells him.”

When Peavy said this, he unconsciously straightened his back. He looked younger.

“We snuck the last fifty or sixty yards, yer da’ with his gun drawn in case they’d posted a guard. They had, but he was only a lad, and fast asleep. The Deschain holstered his gun, swotted him with a rock, and laid him out. I later saw that young fellow standing on a trapdoor with tears running out of his eyes, a mess in his pants, and a rope around his neck. He wasn’t but fourteen, yet he’d taken his turn at sai Doolin—the kidnapped woman, don’tcha know, and old enough to be his grandmother—just like the rest of them, and I shed no tears when the rope shut off his cries for mercy. The salt ye take is the salt ye must pay for, as anyone from these parts will tell you.

“The gunslinger crep’ inside, and I right after him. They was all lying around, snoring like dogs. Hell, boys, they *were* dogs. Belinda Doolin was tied to a post. She saw us, and her eyes widened. Steven Deschain pointed to her, then to himself, then cupped his hands together, then pointed to her again. *You’re safe*, he meant. I never forgot the look of gratitude in her face as she nodded to him that she understood. *You’re safe*—that’s the world we grew up in, young men, the one that’s almost gone now.

“Then the Deschain says, ‘Wake up, Allan Crow, unless you’d go into the clearing at the end of the path with your eyes shut. Wake up, all.’

“They did. He never meant to try and bring them all in alive—’twould have been madness, that I’m sure you must see—but he wouldn’t shoot them as they slept, either. They woke up to varying degrees, but not for long. Steven drew

his guns so fast I never saw his hands move. Lightning ain't in it, dear. At one moment those revolvers with their big sandalwood grips were by his sides; at the next he was blazing away, the noise like thunder in that closed-in space. But that didn't keep me from drawing my own gun. It was just an old barrel-shooter I had from my granda', but I put two of them down with it. The first two men I ever killed. There have been plenty since, sad to say.

"The only one who survived that first fusillade was Pa Crow himself—Allan Crow. He was an old man, all snarled up and frozen on one side of his face from a stroke or summat, but he moved fast as the devil just the same. He was in his longjohns, and his gun was stuck in the top of one of his boots there at the end of his bedroll. He grabbed it up and turned toward us. Steven shot him, but the old bastard got off a single round. It went wild, but . . ."

Peavy, who could have been no older in those days than we two young men standing before him, opened the box on its cunning hinges, mused a moment at what he saw inside, then looked up at me. That little remembering smile still touched the corners of his mouth. "Have you ever seen a scar on your father's arm, Roland? Right here?" He touched the place just above the crook of his elbow, where a man's yanks begin.

My father's body was a map of scars, but it was a map I knew well. The scar above his inner elbow was a deep dimple, almost like the ones not quite hidden by Sheriff Peavy's mustache when he smiled.

"Pa Crow's last shot hit the wall above the post where the woman was tied, and ricocheted." He turned the box and held it out to me. Inside was a smashed slug, a big one, a hard caliber. "I dug this out of your da's arm with my skinning knife, and gave it to him. He thanked me, and said someday I should have it back. And here it is. Ka is a wheel, sai Deschain."

"Have you ever told this story?" I asked. "For I have never heard it."

"That I dug a bullet from the flesh of Arthur's true descendant? Eld of the Eld? No, never until now. For who would believe it?"

"I do," I said, "and I thank you. It could have poisoned him."

“Nar, nar,” Peavy said with a chuckle. “Not him. The blood of Eld’s too strong. And if I’d been laid low . . . or too squeamy . . . he would have done it himself. As it was, he let me take most of the credit for the Crow Gang, and I’ve been sheriff ever since. But not much longer. This skin-man business has done for me. I’ve seen enough blood, and have no taste for mysteries.”

“Who’ll take your place?” I asked.

He seemed surprised by the question. “Probably nobody. The mines will play out again in a few years, this time for good, and such rail lines as there are won’t last much longer. The two things together will finish Debaria, which was once a fine little city in the time of yer grandfathers. That holy hencoop I’m sure ye passed on the way in may go on; nothing else.”

Jamie looked troubled. “But in the meantime?”

“Let the ranchers, drifters, whoremasters, and gamblers all go to hell in their own way. It’s none o’ mine, at least for much longer. But I’ll not leave until this business is settled, one way or another.”

I said, “The skin-man was at one of the women at Serenity. She’s badly disfigured.”

“Been there, have ye?”

“The women are terrified.” I thought this over, and remembered a knife strapped to a calf as thick as the trunk of a young birch. “Except for the prioress, that is.”

He chuckled. “Everlynne. That one’d spit in the devil’s face. And if he took her down to Nis, she’d be running the place in a month.”

I said, “Do you have any idea who this skin-man might be when he’s in his human shape? If you do, tell us, I beg. For, as my father told your Sheriff Anderson that was, this is not our fill.”

“I can’t give ye a name, if that’s what you mean, but I might be able to give ye something. Follow me.”

* * *

He led us through the archway behind his desk and into the jail, which was in the shape of a **T**. I counted eight big cells down the central aisle and a dozen small ones on the cross-corridor. All were empty except for one of the smaller ones, where a drunk was snoozing away the late afternoon on a straw pallet. The door to his cell stood open.

“Once all of these cells would have been filled on Efday and Ethday,” Peavy said. “Loaded up with drunk cowpunchers and farmhands, don’tcha see it. Now most people stay in at night. Even on Efday and Ethday. Cowpokes in their bunkhouses, farmhands in theirs. No one wants to be staggering home drunk and meet the skin-man.”

“The salt-miners?” Jamie asked. “Do you pen them, too?”

“Not often, for they have their own saloons up in Little Debaria. Two of em. Nasty places. When the whores down here at the Cheery Fellows or the Busted Luck or the Bider-Wee get too old or too diseased to attract custom, they end up in Little Debaria. Once they’re drunk on White Blind, the salties don’t much care if a whore has a nose as long as she still has her sugar-purse.”

“Nice,” Jamie muttered.

Peavy opened one of the large cells. “Come on in here, boys. I haven’t any paper, but I do have some chalk, and here’s a nice smooth wall. It’s private, too, as long as old Salty Sam down there doesn’t wake up. And he rarely does until sundown.”

From the pocket of his twill pants the sheriff took a goodish stick of chalk, and on the wall he drew a kind of long box with jags all across the top. They looked like a row of upside-down **V**’s.

“Here’s the whole of Debaria,” Peavy said. “Over here’s the rail line you came in on.” He drew a series of hashmarks, and as he did so I remembered the enjie and the old fellow who’d served as our butler.

“Sma’ Toot is off the rails,” I said. “Can you put together a party of men to set it right? We have money to pay for their labor, and Jamie and I would be happy to work with them.”

“Not today,” Peavy said absently. He was studying his map. “Enjie still out there, is he?”

“Yes. Him and another.”

“I’ll send Kellin and Vikka Frye out in a bucka. Kellin’s my best deputy—the other two ain’t worth much—and Vikka’s his son. They’ll pick em up and bring em back in before dark. There’s time, because the days is long this time o’ year. For now, just pay attention, boys. Here’s the tracks and here’s Serenity, where that poor girl you spoke to was mauled. On the High Road, don’tcha see it.” He drew a little box for Serenity, and put an **X** in it. North of the women’s retreat, up toward the jags at the top of his map, he put another **X**. “This is where Yon Curry, the sheepherder, was killed.”

To the left of this **X**, but pretty much on the same level—which is to say, below the jags—he put another.

“The Alora farm. Seven killed.”

Farther yet to the left and little higher, he chalked another **X**.

“Here’s the Timbersmith farm on the High Pure. Nine killed. It’s where we found the little boy’s head on a pole. Tracks all around it.”

“Wolf?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nar, some kind o’ big cat. At first. Before we lost the trail, they changed into what looked like hooves. Then . . .” He looked at us grimly. “Footprints. First big—like a giant’s, almost—but then smaller and smaller until they were the size of any man’s tracks. Any-ro’, we lost em in the hardpan. Mayhap your father wouldn’t’ve, sai.”

He went on marking the map, and when he was done, stepped away so we could see it clearly.

“Such as you are supposed to have good brains as well as fast hands, I was always told. So what do you make of this?”

Jamie stepped forward between the rows of pallets (for this cell must have been for many guests, probably brought in on drunk-and-disorderly), and

traced the tip of his finger over the jags at the top of the map, blurring them a little. “Do the salt-houses run all along here? In all the foothills?”

“Yar. The Salt Rocks, those hills’re called.”

“Little Debaria is where?”

Peavy made another box for the salt-miners’ town. It was close to the X he’d made to mark the place where the woman and the gambler had been killed . . . for it was Little Debaria they’d been headed for.

Jamie studied the map a bit more, then nodded. “Looks to me like the skin-man could be one of the miners. Is that what you think?”

“Aye, a saltie, even though a couple of them has been torn up, too. It makes sense—as much as anything in a crazy business like this *can* make sense. The new plug’s a lot deeper than the old ones, and everyone knows there are demons in the earth. Mayhap one of the miners struck on one, wakened it, and was done a mischief by it.”

“There are also leftovers from the Great Old Ones in the ground,” I said. “Not all are dangerous, but some are. Perhaps one of those old things . . . those what-do-you-callums, Jamie?”

“Artyfax,” he said.

“Yes, those. Perhaps one of those is responsible. Mayhap the fellow will be able to tell us, if we take him alive.”

“Sma’ chance of that,” Peavy growled.

I thought there was a good chance. If we could identify him and close on him in the daytime, that was.

“How many of these salties are there?” I asked.

“Not s’many as in the old days, because now it’s just the one plug, don’tcha see it. I sh’d say no more’n . . . two hundred.”

I met Jamie’s eyes, and saw a glint of humor in them. “No fret, Roland,” said he. “I’m sure we can interview em all by Reaptide. If we hurry.”

He was exaggerating, but I still saw several weeks ahead of us in Debaria. We might interview the skin-man and still not be able to pick him out, either

because he was a masterful liar or because he had no guilt to cover up; his day-self might truly not know what his night-self was doing. I wished for Cuthbert, who could look at things that seemed unrelated and spot the connections, and I wished for Alain, with his power to touch minds. But Jamie wasn't so bad, either. He had, after all, seen what I should have seen myself, what was right in front of my nose. On one matter I was in complete accord with Sheriff Hugh Peavy: I hated mysteries. It's a thing that has never changed in this long life of mine. I'm not good at solving them; my mind has never run that way.

When we trooped back into the office, I said, "I have some questions I must ask you, Sheriff. The first is, will you open to us, if we open to you? The second —"

"The second is do I see you for what you are and accept what you do. The third is do I seek aid and succor. Sheriff Peavy says yar, yar, and yar. Now for gods' sake set your brains to working, fellows, for it's over two weeks since this thing showed up at Serenity, and that time it didn't get a full meal. Soon enough it'll be out there again."

"It only prowls at night," Jamie said. "You're sure of that much?"

"I am."

"Does the moon have any effect on it?" I asked. "Because my father's advisor—and our teacher that was—says that in some of the old legends . . ."

"I've heard the legends, sai, but in that they're wrong. At least for this particular creatur' they are. Sometimes the moon's been full when it strikes—it was Full Peddler when it showed up at Serenity, all covered with scales and knobs like an alligator from the Long Salt Swamps—but it did its work at Timbersmith when the moon was dark. I'd like to tell you different, but I can't. I'd also like to end this without having to pick anyone else's guts out of the bushes or pluck some other kiddie's head off'n a fencepost. Ye've been sent here to help, and I hope like hell you can . . . although I've got my doubts."

* * *

When I asked Peavy if there was a good hotel or boardinghouse in Debaria, he chuckled.

“The last boardinghouse was the Widow Brailley’s. Two year ago, a drunk saddletramp tried to rape her in her own outhouse, as she sat at business. But she was always a trig one. She’d seen the look in his eye, and went in there with a knife under her apron. Cut his throat for him, she did. Stringy Bodean, who used to be our Justice Man before he decided to try his luck at raising horses in the Crescent, declared her not guilty by reason of self-defense in about five minutes, but the lady decided she’d had enough of Debaria and trained back to Gilead, where she yet bides, I’ve no doubt. Two days after she left, some drunken buffoon burned the place to the ground. The hotel still stands. It’s called the Delightful View. The view ain’t delightful, young fellows, and the beds is full of bugs as big as toads’ eyeballs. I wouldn’t sleep in one without putting on a full suit of Arthur Eld’s armor.”

And so we ended up spending our first night in Debaria in the large drunk-and-disorderly cell, beneath Peavy’s chalked map. Salty Sam had been set free, and we had the jail to ourselves. Outside, a strong wind had begun to blow off the alkali flats to the west of town. The moaning sound it made around the eaves caused me to think again of the story my mother used to read to me when I was just a sma’ toot myself—the story of Tim Stoutheart and the starkblast Tim had to face in the Great Woods north of New Canaan. Thinking of the boy alone in those woods has always chilled my heart, just as Tim’s bravery has always warmed it. The stories we hear in childhood are the ones we remember all our lives.

After one particularly strong gust—the Debaria wind was warm, not cold like the starkblast—struck the side of the jail and puffed alkali grit in through the barred window, Jamie spoke up. It was rare for him to start a conversation.

“I hate that sound, Roland. It’s apt to keep me awake all night.”

I loved it myself; the sound of the wind has always made me think of good times and far places. Although I confess I could have done without the grit.

“How are we supposed to find this thing, Jamie? I hope you have some idea, because I don’t.”

“We’ll have to talk to the salt-miners. That’s the place to start. Someone may have seen a fellow with blood on him creeping back to where the salties live. Creeping back naked. For he can’t come back clothed, unless he takes them off beforehand.”

That gave me a little hope. Although if the one we were looking for knew what he was, he might take his clothes off when he felt an attack coming on, hide them, then come back to them later. But if he didn’t know . . .

It was a small thread, but sometimes—if you’re careful not to break it—you can pull on a small thread and unravel a whole garment.

“Goodnight, Roland.”

“Goodnight, Jamie.”

I closed my eyes and thought of my mother. I often did that year, but for once they weren’t thoughts of how she had looked dead, but of how beautiful she had been in my early childhood, as she sat beside me on my bed in the room with the colored glass windows, reading to me. “Look you, Roland,” she’d say, “here are the billy-bumblers sitting all a-row and scenting the air. *They* know, don’t they?”

“Yes,” I would say, “the bumblers know.”

“And what is it they know?” the woman I would kill asked me. “What is it they know, dear heart?”

“They know the starkblast is coming,” I said. My eyes would be growing heavy by then, and minutes later I would drift off to the music of her voice.

As I drifted off now, with the wind outside blowing up a strong gale.

* * *

I woke in the first thin light of morning to a harsh sound: *BRUNG! BRUNG! BRUNNNNG!*

Jamie was still flat on his back, legs splayed, snoring. I took one of my revolvers from its holster, went out through the open cell door, and shambled

toward that imperious sound. It was the jing-jang Sheriff Peavy had taken so much pride in. He wasn't there to answer it; he'd gone home to bed, and the office was empty.

Standing there bare-chested, with a gun in my hand and wearing nothing but the swabbies and slinkum I'd slept in—for it was hot in the cell—I took the listening cone off the wall, put the narrow end in my ear, and leaned close to the speaking tube. “Yes? Hello?”

“*Who the hell's this?*” a voice screamed, so loud that it sent a nail of pain into the side of my head. There were jing-jangs in Gilead, perhaps as many as a hundred that still worked, but none spoke so clear as this. I pulled the cone away, wincing, and could still hear the voice coming out of it.

“*Hello? Hello? Gods curse this fucking thing! HELLO?*”

“I hear you,” I said. “Lower thy voice, for your father's sake.”

“Who is this?” There was just enough drop in volume for me to put the listening cone a little closer to my ear. But not in it; I would not make that mistake twice.

“A deputy.” Jamie DeCurry and I were the farthest things in the world from that, but simplest is usually best. *Always* best, I wot, when speaking with a panicky man on a jing-jang.

“Where's Sheriff Peavy?”

“At home with his wife. It isn't yet five o' the clock, I reckon. Now tell me who you are, where you're speaking from, and what's happened.”

“It's Canfield of the Jefferson. I—”

“Of the Jefferson *what?*” I heard footsteps behind me and turned, half-raising my revolver. But it was only Jamie, with his hair standing up in sleep-spikes all over his head. He was holding his own gun, and had gotten into his jeans, although his feet were yet bare.

“The Jefferson Ranch, ye great grotting idiot! You need to get the sheriff out here, and jin-jin. Everyone's dead. Jefferson, his fambly, the cookie, all the proddies. Blood from one end t'other.”

“How many?” I asked.

“Maybe fifteen. Maybe twenty. Who can tell?” Canfield of the Jefferson began to sob. “They’re all in pieces. Whatever it was did for em left the two dogs, Rosie and Mozie. They was in there. We had to shoot em. They was lapping up the blood and eating the brains.”

* * *

It was a ten-wheel ride, straight north toward the Salt Hills. We went with Sheriff Peavy, Kellin Frye—the good deputy—and Frye’s son, Vikka. The enjie, whose name turned out to be Travis, also came along, for he’d spent the night at the Fryes’ place. We pushed our mounts hard, but it was still full daylight by the time we got to the Jefferson spread. At least the wind, which was still strengthening, was at our backs.

Peavy thought Canfield was a pokie—which is to say a wandering cowboy not signed to any particular ranch. Some such turned outlaw, but most were honest enough, just men who couldn’t settle down in one place. When we rode through the wide stock gate with JEFFERSON posted over it in white birch letters, two other cowboys—his mates—were with him. The three of them were bunched together by the shakepole fence of the horse corral, which stood near to the big house. A half a mile or so north, standing atop a little hill, was the bunkhouse. From this distance, only two things looked out of place: the door at the south end of the bunkie was unlatched, swinging back and forth in the alkali-wind, and the bodies of two large black dogs lay stretched on the dirt.

We dismounted and Sheriff Peavy shook with the men, who looked mightily glad to see us. “Aye, Bill Canfield, see you very well, pokie-fella.”

The tallest of them took off his hat and held it against his shirt. “I ain’t no pokie nummore. Or maybe I am, I dunno. For a while here I was Canfield of the Jefferson, like I told whoever answered the goddam speakie, because I signed on just last month. Old man Jefferson himself oversaw my mark on the wall, but now he’s dead like the rest of em.”

He swallowed hard. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. The stubble on his face looked very black, because his skin was very white. There was drying vomit on the front of his shirt.

"His wife and daughters've gone into the clearing, too. You can tell em by their long hair and their . . . their . . . ay, ay, Man Jesus, you see a thing like that and it makes you wish you were born blind." He raised his hat to his face to hide it and began to weep.

One of Canfield's mates said, "Is those gunslingers, Sheriff? Mighty young to be hauling iron, ain't they?"

"Never mind them," said Peavy. "Tell me what brought you here."

Canfield lowered his hat. His eyes were red and streaming. "The three of us was camped out on the Pure. Roundin strays, we were, and camped for the night. Then we heard screamin start from the east. Woke us from a sound sleep, because we was that tired. Then gunshots, two or three of em. They quit and there was more screamin. And somethin—somethin *big*—roarin and snarlin."

One of the others said, "It sounded like a bear."

"No, it didn't," said the third. "Never at all."

Canfield said, "Knew it was comin from the ranch, whatever it was. Had to've been four wheels from where we were, maybe six, but sound carries on the Pure, as ye know. We mounted up, but I got here way ahead of these two, because I was signed and they're yet pokies."

"I don't understand," I said.

Canfield turned to me. "I had a ranch horse, didn't I? A good 'un. Snip and Arn there had nothing but mules. Put em in there, with the others." He pointed into the corral. A big gust of wind blew through just then, driving dust before it, and all the livestock galloped away like a wave.

"They're still spooked," Kellin Frye said.

Looking toward the bunkhouse, the enjie—Travis—said, "They en't the only ones."

* * *

By the time Canfield, the Jefferson Ranch's newest proddie—which is to say hired hand—reached the home place, the screaming had stopped. So had the roaring of the beast, although there was still a good deal of snarling going on. That was the two dogs, fighting over the leavings. Knowing which side of the biscuit his honey went on, Canfield bypassed the bunkhouse—and the dogs snarling within—for the big house. The front door was wide open and there were lit 'seners in both the hall and the kitchen, but no one answered his hail.

He found Jefferson's lady-sai in the kitchen with her body under the table and her half-eaten head rolled up against the pantry door. There were tracks going out the stoop door, which was banging in the wind. Some were human; some were the tracks of a monstrous great bear. The bear tracks were bloody.

"I took the 'sener off o' sink-side where it'd been left and followed the tracks outside. The two girls was a-layin in the dirt between the house and the barn. One had gotten three or four dozen running steps ahead of her sissa, but they were both just as dead, with their nightdresses tore off em and their backs carved open right down to the spines." Canfield shook his head slowly from side to side, his large eyes—swimming with tears, they were—never leaving High Sheriff Peavy's face. "I never want to see the claws that could do a thing like that. Never, never, never in my life. I seen what they done, and that's enough."

"The bunkhouse?" Peavy asked.

"Aye, there I went next. You can see what's inside for yourself. The womenfolk too, for they're still where I found em. I won't take ye. Snip and Arn might—"

"Not me," said Snip.

"Me, neither," said Arn. "I'll see 'un all in my dreams, and that'll do me fine."

"I don't think we need a guide," Peavy said. "You three boys stay right here."

Sheriff Peavy, closely followed by the Fryes and Travis the enjie, started toward the big house. Jamie put a hand on Peavy's shoulder, and spoke almost apologetically when the High Sheriff turned to look at him. "Mind the tracks. They'll be important."

Peavy nodded. "Yar. We'll mind em very well. Especially those headed off to wherever the thing went."

* * *

The women were as sai Canfield had told us. I had seen bloodshed before—aye, plenty of it, both in Mejis and in Gilead—but I had never seen anything like this, and neither had Jamie. He was as pale as Canfield, and I could only hope he would not discredit his father by passing out. I needn't have worried; soon he was down on his knees in the kitchen, examining several enormous blood-rimmed animal tracks.

"These really are bear tracks," he said, "but there was never one so big, Roland. Not even in the Endless Forest."

"There was one here last night, cully," Travis said. He looked toward the body of the rancher's wife and shivered, even though she, like her unfortunate daughters, had been covered with blankets from upstairs. "I'll be glad to get back to Gilead, where such things are just legends."

"What do the tracks tell otherwise?" I asked Jamie. "Anything?"

"Yes. It went to the bunkhouse first, where the most . . . the most food was. The rumpus would have wakened the four of them here in the house . . . were there only four, Sheriff?"

"Aye," Peavy said. "There are two sons, but Jefferson would have sent em to the auctions in Gilead, I expect. They'll find a sack of woe when they return."

"The rancher left his womenfolk and went running for the bunkhouse. The gun Canfield and his mates heard must have been his."

"Much good it did him," Vikka Frye said. His father hit him on the shoulder and told him to hush.

“Then the thing came up here,” Jamie went on. “The lady-sai Jefferson and the two girls were in the kitchen by then, I think. And I think the sai must have told her daughters to run.”

“Aye,” Peavy said. “And she’d try to keep it from coming after them long enough for them to get away. That’s how it reads. Only it didn’t work. If they’d been at the front of the house—if they’d seen how big it was—she’d have known better, and we would have found all three of em out there in the dirt.” He fetched a deep sigh. “Come on, boys, let’s see what’s in the bunkhouse. Waiting won’t make it any prettier.”

“I think I might just stay out by the corral with those saddletramps,” Travis said. “I’ve seen enough.”

Vikka Frye blurted: “Can I do that too, Pa?”

Kellin looked at his son’s haunted face and said he could. Before he let the boy go, he put a kiss on his cheek.

* * *

Ten feet or so in front of the bunkhouse, the bare earth had been scuffed into a bloody churn of bootprints and clawed animal tracks. Nearby, in a clump of jugweed, was an old short-arm four-shot with its barrel bent to one side. Jamie pointed from the confusion of tracks, to the gun, to the open bunkhouse door. Then he raised his eyebrows, silently asking me if I saw it. I saw it very well.

“This is where the thing—the skin-man wearing the shape of a bear—met the rancher,” I said. “He got off a few rounds, then dropped the gun—”

“No,” Jamie said. “The thing took it from him. That’s why the barrel’s bent. Maybe Jefferson turned to run. Maybe he stood his ground. Either way, it did no good. His tracks stop here, so the thing picked him up and threw him through that door and into the bunkhouse. It went to the big house next.”

“So we’re backtracking it,” Peavy said.

Jamie nodded. “We’ll front-track it soon enough,” he said.

* * *

The thing had turned the bunkhouse into an abattoir. In the end, the butcher's bill came to eighteen: sixteen proddies, the cook—who had died beside his stove with his rent and bloodstained apron thrown over his face like a shroud—and Jefferson himself, who had been torn limbless. His severed head stared up at the rafters with a fearful grin that showed only his top teeth. The skin-man had ripped the rancher's lower jaw right out of his mouth. Kellin Frye found it under a bunk. One of the men had tried to defend himself with a saddle, using it as a shield, but it had done him no good; the thing had torn it in half with its claws. The unfortunate cowboy was still holding onto the pommel with one hand. He had no face; the thing had eaten it off his skull.

“Roland,” Jamie said. His voice was strangled, as if his throat had closed up to no more than a straw. “We have to find this thing. *We have to.*”

“Let's see what the outward tracks say before the wind wipes them out,” I replied.

We left Peavy and the others outside the bunkhouse and circled the big house to where the covered bodies of the two girls lay. The tracks beyond them had begun to blur at the edges and around the claw-points, but they would have been hard to miss even for someone not fortunate enough to have had Cort of Gilead as a teacher. The thing that made them must have weighed upwards of eight hundred pounds.

“Look here,” Jamie said, kneeling beside one. “See how it's deeper at the front? It was running.”

“And on its hind legs,” I said. “Like a man.”

The tracks went past the pump house, which was in shambles, as if the thing had given it a swipe out of pure malice as it went by. They led us onto an uphill lane that headed north, toward a long unpainted outbuilding that was either a tack shed or a smithy. Beyond this, perhaps twenty wheels farther north, were the rocky badlands below the salt hills. We could see the holes that led to the worked-out mines; they gaped like empty eyesockets.

“We may as well give this up,” I said. “We know where the tracks go—up to where the salties live.”

“Not yet,” Jamie said. “Look here, Roland. You’ve never seen anything like this.”

The tracks began to change, the claws merging into the curved shapes of large unshod hooves.

“It lost its bear-shape,” I said, “and became . . . what? A bull?”

“I think so,” Jamie said. “Let’s go a little further. I have an idea.”

As we approached the long outbuilding, the hoofprints became pawprints. The bull had become some kind of monstrous cat. These tracks were large at first, then started to grow smaller, as if the thing were shrinking from the size of a lion to that of a cougar even as it ran. When they veered off the lane and onto the dirt path leading to the tack shed, we found a large patch of jugweed grass that had been beaten down. The broken stalks were bloody.

“It fell,” Jamie said. “I think it fell . . . and then thrashed.” He looked up from the bed of matted weed. His face was thoughtful. “I think it was in pain.”

“Good,” I said. “Now look there.” I pointed to the path, which was imprinted with the hooves of many horses. And other signs, as well.

Bare feet, going to the doors of the building, which were run back on rusty metal tracks.

Jamie turned to me, wide-eyed. I put my finger to my lips, and drew one of my revolvers. Jamie did likewise, and we moved toward the shed. I waved him around to the far side. He nodded and split off to the left.

I stood outside the open doors, gun held up, giving Jamie time to get to the other end of the building. I heard nothing. When I judged my pard must be in place, I bent down, picked up a good-size stone with my free hand, and tossed it inside. It thumped, then rolled across wood. There was still nothing else to hear. I swung inside, crouched low, gun at the ready.

The place seemed empty, but there were so many shadows it was at first hard to tell for sure. It was already warm, and by noonday would be an oven. I saw a

pair of empty stalls on either side, a little smithy-stove next to drawers full of rusty shoes and equally rusty shoe-nails, dust-covered jugs of liniment and stinkum, branding irons in a tin sleeve, and a large pile of old tack that needed either to be mended or thrown out. Above a couple of benches hung a fair assortment of tools on pegs. Most were as rusty as the shoes and nails. There were a few wooden hitching hooks and a pedestal pump over a cement trough. The water in the trough hadn't been changed for a while; as my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I could see bits of straw floating on the surface. I kenned that this had once been more than a tack shed. It had also been a kind of hostelry where the ranch's working stock was seen to. Likely a jackleg veterinary, as well. Horses could be led in at one end, dealt with, and led out the other. But it looked in disrepair, abandoned.

The tracks of the thing that had by then been human led up the center aisle to other doors, also open, at the far end. I followed them. "Jamie? It's me. Don't shoot me, for your father's sake."

I stepped outside. Jamie had holstered his gun, and now pointed at a large heap of horseapples. "He knows what he is, Roland."

"You know this from a pile of horseshit?"

"As happens, I do."

He didn't tell me how, but after a few seconds I saw it for myself. The hostelry had been abandoned, probably in favor of one built closer in to the main house, but the horseapples were fresh. "If he came a-horseback, he came as a man."

"Aye. And left as one."

I squatted on my hunkers and thought about this. Jamie rolled a smoke and let me. When I looked up, he was smiling a little.

"Do you see what it means, Roland?"

"Two hundred salties, give or take," I said. I've ever been slow, but in the end I usually get there.

"Aye."

“*Salties*, mind, not pokies or proddies. Diggers, not riders. As a rule.”

“As you say.”

“How many of em up there have horses, do you suppose? How many even know how to ride?”

His smile broadened. “There might be twenty or thirty, I suppose.”

“It’s better than two hundred,” I said. “Better by a long stride. We’ll go up as soon as—”

I never finished what I was going to say, because that’s when the moaning started. It was coming from the tack shed I’d dismissed as empty. How glad I was at that moment Cort wasn’t there. He would have cuffed my ear and sent me sprawling. At least in his prime, he would have.

Jamie and I looked into each other’s startled eyes, then ran back inside. The moaning continued, but the place looked as empty as before. Then that big heap of old tack—busted hames, bridles, cinch straps and reins—started to heave up and down, as if it were breathing. The tangled bunches of leather began to tumble away to either side and from them a boy was born. His white-blond hair was sticking up in all directions. He wore jeans and an old shirt that hung open and unbuttoned. He didn’t look hurt, but in the shadows it was hard to tell.

“Is it gone?” he asked in a trembling voice. “Please, sais, say it is. Say it’s gone.”

“It is,” I said.

He started to wade his way out of the pile, but a strip of leather had gotten wound around one of his legs and he fell forward. I caught him and saw a pair of eyes, bright blue and utterly terrified, looking up into my face.

Then he passed out.

* * *

I carried him to the trough. Jamie pulled off his bandanna, dipped it in the water, and began to wipe the boy’s dirt-streaked face with it. He might have been eleven; he might have been a year or two younger. He was so thin it was

hard to tell. After a bit his eyes fluttered open. He looked from me to Jamie and then back to me again. “Who are you?” he asked. “You don’t b’long to the ranch.”

“We’re friends of the ranch,” I said. “Who are you?”

“Bill Streeter,” he said. “The proddies call me Young Bill.”

“Aye, do they? And is your father Old Bill?”

He sat up, took Jamie’s bandanna, dipped it in the trough, and squeezed it out so the water ran down his thin chest. “No, Old Bill’s my granther, went into the clearing two years ago. My da’, he’s just plain Bill.” Something about speaking his father’s name made his eyes widen. He grasped my arm. “He ain’t dead, is he? Say he ain’t, sai!”

Jamie and I exchanged another look, and that scared him worse than ever.

“Say he ain’t! Please say my daddy ain’t dead!” He started to cry.

“Hush and go easy now,” I said. “What is he, your da’? A proddie?”

“Nay, no, he’s the cook. *Say he ain’t dead!*”

But the boy knew he was. I saw it in his eyes as clearly I’d seen the bunkhouse cook with his bloodstained apron thrown over his face.

* * *

There was a willa-tree on one side of the big house, and that was where we questioned Young Bill Streeter—just me, Jamie, and Sheriff Peavy. The others we sent back to wait in the shade of the bunkhouse, thinking that to have too many folks around him would only upset the boy more. As it happened, he could tell us very little of what we needed to know.

“My da’ said to me that it was going to be a warm night and I should go up to the graze t’other side of the corral and sleep under the stars,” Young Bill told us. “He said it’d be cooler and I’d sleep better. But I knew why. Elrod’d got a bottle somewhere—again—and he was in drink.”

“That’d be Elrod Nutter?” Sheriff Peavy asked.

“Aye, him. Foreman of the boys, he is.”

“I know him well,” Peavy said to us. “Ain’t I had him locked up half a dozen times and more? Jefferson keeps him on because he’s a helluva rider and roper, but he’s one mean whoredog when he’s in drink. Ain’t he, Young Bill?”

Young Bill nodded earnestly and brushed his long hair, still all dusty from the tack he’d hidden in, out of his eyes. “Yessir, and he had a way of takin after me. Which my father knew.”

“Cook’s apprentice, were ye?” Peavy asked. I knew he was trying to be kind, but I wished he’d mind his mouth and stop talking in the way that says *once, but no more*.

But the boy didn’t seem to notice. “Bunkhouse boy. Not cook’s boy.” He turned to Jamie and me. “I make the bunks, coil the rope, cinch the bedrolls, polish the saddles, set the gates at the end of the day after the horses is turned in. Tiny Braddock taught me how to make a lasso, and I throw it pretty. Roscoe’s teaching me the bow. Freddy Two-Step says he’ll show me how to brand, come fall.”

“Do well,” I said, and tapped my throat.

That made him smile. “They’re good fellas, mostly.” The smile went away as fast as it had come, like the sun going behind a cloud. “Except for Elrod. He’s just grouchy when he’s sober, but when he’s in drink, he likes to tease. *Mean* teasing, if you do ken it.”

“Ken it well,” I said.

“Aye, and if you don’t laugh and act like it’s all a joke—even if it’s twisting on your hand or yanking you around on the bunkhouse floor by your hair—he gets uglier still. So when my da’ told me to sleep out, I took my blanket and my shaddie and I went. A word to the wise is sufficient, my da’ says.”

“What’s a shaddie?” Jamie asked the sheriff.

“Bit o’ canvas,” Peavy said. “Won’t keep off rain, but it’ll keep you from getting damp after dewfall.”

“Where did you roll in?” I asked the boy.

He pointed beyond the corral, where the horses were still skitty from the rising wind. Above us and around us, the willa sighed and danced. Pretty to hear, prettier still to look at. "I guess my blanket n shaddie must still be there."

I looked from where he had pointed, to the tack-shed hostelry where we'd found him, then to the bunkhouse. The three places made the corners of a triangle probably a quarter-mile on each side, with the corral in the middle.

"How did you get from where you slept to hiding under that pile of tack, Bill?" Sheriff Peavy asked.

The boy looked at him for a long time without speaking. Then the tears began to fall again. He covered them with his fingers so we wouldn't see them. "I don't remember," he said. "I don't remember *nuffink*." He didn't exactly lower his hands; they seemed to drop into his lap, as if they'd grown too heavy for him to hold up. "I want my da'."

Jamie got up and walked away, with his hands stuffed deep in his back pockets. I tried to say what needed saying, and couldn't. You have to remember that although Jamie and I wore guns, they weren't yet the big guns of our fathers. I'd never again be so young as before I met Susan Delgado, and loved her, and lost her, but I was still too young to tell this boy that his father had been torn to pieces by a monster. So I looked to Sheriff Peavy. I looked to the grownup.

Peavy took off his hat and laid it aside on the grass. Then he took the boy's hands. "Son," he said, "I've got some very hard news for you. I want you to pull in a deep breath and be a man about it."

But Young Bill Streeter had only nine or ten summers behind him, eleven at most, and he couldn't be a man about anything. He began to wail. When he did it, I saw my mother's pale dead face as clear as if she had been lying next to me under that willa, and I couldn't stand it. I felt like a coward, but that didn't stop me from getting up and walking away.

* * *

The lad either cried himself to sleep or into unconsciousness. Jamie carried him into the big house and put him in one of the beds upstairs. He was just the son of a bunkhouse cook, but there was no one else to sleep in them, not now. Sheriff Peavy used the jing-jang to call his office where one of the not-so-good deputies had been ordered to wait for his ring. Soon enough, Debaria's undertaker—if there was one—would organize a little convoy of wagons to come and pick up the dead.

Sheriff Peavy went into sai Jefferson's little office and plunked himself down in a chair on rollers. "What's next, boys?" he asked. "The salties, I reckon . . . and I suppose you'll want to get up there before this wind blows into a simoom. Which it certainly means t'do." He sighed. "The boy's no good to ye, that's certain. Whatever he saw was evil enough to scrub his mind clean."

Jamie began, "Roland has a way of—"

"I'm not sure what's next," I said. "I'd like to talk it over a little with my pard. We might take a little *pasear* back up to that tack shed."

"Tracks'll be blown away by now," Peavy said, "but have at it and may it do ya well." He shook his head. "Telling that boy was hard. Very hard."

"You did it the right way," I said.

"Do ya think so? Aye? Well, thankya. Poor little cullie. Reckon he can stay with me n the wife for a while. Until we figure what comes next for him. You boys go on and palaver, if it suits you. I think I'll just sit here and try to get back even wi' myself. No hurry about anything now; that damned thing ate well enough last night. It'll be a good while before it needs to go hunting again."

* * *

Jamie and I walked two circuits around the shed and corral while we talked, the strengthening wind rippling our pantlegs and blowing back our hair.

"Is it all truly erased from his mind, Roland?"

"What do *you* think?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Because 'Is it gone?' was the first thing he asked."

“And he knew his father was dead. Even when he asked us, it was in his eyes.”

Jamie walked without replying for a while, his head down. We’d tied our bandannas over our mouths and noses because of the blowing grit. Jamie’s was still wet from the trough. Finally he said, “When I started to tell the sheriff you have a way of getting at things that are buried—buried in people’s minds—you cut me off.”

“He doesn’t need to know, because it doesn’t always work.”

It had with Susan Delgado, in Mejis, but part of Susan had wanted badly to tell me what the witch, Rhea, had tried to hide from Susan’s front-mind, where we hear our own thoughts very clearly. She’d wanted to tell me because we were in love.

“But will you try? You will, won’t you?”

I didn’t answer him until we had started our second circuit of the corral. I was still putting my thoughts in order. As I may have said, that has always been slow work for me.

“The salties don’t live in the mines anymore; they have their own encampment a few wheels west of Little Debaria. Kellin Frye told me about it on the ride out here. I want you to go up there with Peavy and the Fries. Canfield, too, if he’ll go. I think he will. Those two pokies—Canfield’s trailmates—can stay here and wait for the undertaker.”

“You mean to take the boy back to town?”

“Yes. Alone. But I’m not sending you up there just to get you and the others away. If you travel fast enough, and they have a remuda, you may still be able to spot a horse that’s been rode hard.”

Under the bandanna, he might have smiled. “I doubt it.”

I did, too. It would have been more likely but for the wind—what Peavy had called the simoom. It would dry the sweat on a horse, even one that had been ridden hard, in short order. Jamie might spot one that was dustier than the rest, one with burdocks and bits of jugweed in its tail, but if we were right

about the skin-man knowing what he was, he would have given his mount a complete rubdown and curry, from hooves to mane, as soon as he got back.

“Someone may have seen him ride in.”

“Yes . . . unless he went to Little Debaria first, cleaned up, and came back to the saltie encampment from there. A clever man might do that.”

“Even so, you and the sheriff should be able to find out how many of them own horses.”

“And how many of them can ride, even if they don’t own,” Jamie said. “Aye, we can do that.”

“Round that bunch up,” I told him, “or as many of them as you can, and bring them back to town. Any who protests, remind them that they’ll be helping to catch the monster that’s been terrorizing Debaria . . . Little Debaria . . . the whole Barony. You won’t have to tell them that any who still refuse will be looked at with extra suspicion; even the dumbest of them will know.”

Jamie nodded, then grabbed the fencerail as an especially strong gust of wind blasted us. I turned to face him.

“And one other thing. You’re going to pull a cosy, and Kellin’s son, Vikka, will be your cat’s-paw. They’ll believe a kid might run off at the mouth, even if he’s been told not to. *Especially* if he’s been told not to.”

Jamie waited, but I felt sure he knew what I was going to say, for his eyes were troubled. It was a thing he’d never have done himself, even if he thought of it. Which was why my father had put me in charge. Not because I’d done well in Mejis—I hadn’t, not really—and not because I was his son, either. Although in a way, I suppose that was it. My mind was like his: cold.

“You’ll tell the salties who know about horses that there was a witness to the murders at the ranch. You’ll say you can’t tell them who it was—naturally—but that he saw the skin-man in his human form.”

“You don’t know that Young Bill actually saw him, Roland. And even if he did, he might not have seen the face. He was hiding in a pile of tack, for your

father's sake."

"That's true, but the skin-man won't know it's true. All the skin-man will know is that it *might* be true, because he was human when he left the ranch."

I began to walk again, and Jamie walked beside me.

"Now here's where Vikka comes in. He'll get separated from you and the others a bit and whisper to someone—another kid, one his own age, would be best—that the survivor was the cook's boy. Bill Streeter by name."

"The boy just lost his father and you want to use him as bait."

"It may not come to that. If the story gets to the right ears, the one we're looking for may bolt on the way to town. Then you'll know. And none of it matters if we're wrong about the skin-man being a saltie. We could be, you know."

"What if we're right, and the fellow decides to face it out?"

"Bring them all to the jail. I'll have the boy in a cell—a locked one, you ken—and you can walk the horsemen past, one by one. I'll tell Young Bill to say nothing, one way or the other, until they're gone. You're right, he may not be able to pick our man out, even if I can help him remember some of what happened last night. But our man won't know that, either."

"It's risky," said Jamie. "Risky for the kid."

"Small risk," I said. "It'll be daylight, with the skin-man in his human shape. And Jamie . . ." I grasped his arm. "I'll be in the cell, too. The bastard will have to go through me if he wants to get to the boy."

* * *

Peavy liked my plan better than Jamie had. I wasn't a bit surprised. It was his town, after all. And what was Young Bill to him? Only the son of a dead cook. Not much in the great scheme of things.

Once the little expedition to Saltie Town was on its way, I woke the boy and told him we were going to Debaria. He agreed without asking questions. He was distant and dazed. Every now and then he rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. As we walked out to the corral, he asked me again if I was sure his

da' was dead. I told him I was. He fetched a deep sigh, lowered his head, and put his hands on his knees. I gave him time, then asked if he'd like me to saddle a horse for him.

"If it's all right to ride Millie, I can saddle her myself. I feed her, and she's my special friend. People say mules ain't smart, but Millie is."

"Let's see if you can do it without getting kicked," I said.

It turned out he could, and smartly. He mounted up and said, "I guess I'm ready." He even tried to give me a smile. It was awful to look at. I was sorry for the plan I'd set in motion, but all I had to do was think of the carnage we were leaving behind and Sister Fortuna's ruined face to remind myself of what the stakes were.

"Will she skit in the wind?" I asked, nodding at the trim little mule. Sitting on her back, Young Bill's feet came almost down to the ground. In another year, he'd be too big for her, but of course in another year, he'd probably be far from Debaria, just another wanderer on the face of a fading world. Millie would be a memory.

"Not Millie," he said. "She's as solid as a dromedary."

"Aye, and what's a dromedary?"

"Dunno, do I? It's just something my da' says. One time I asked him, and he didn't know, either."

"Come on, then," I said. "The sooner we get to town, the sooner we'll get out of this grit." But I intended to make one stop before we got to town. I had something to show the boy while we were still alone.

* * *

About halfway between the ranch and Debaria, I spied a deserted shepherd's lean-to, and suggested we shelter in there for a bit and have a bite. Bill Streeter agreed willingly enough. He had lost his da' and everyone else he'd known, but he was still a growing boy and he'd had nothing to eat since his dinner the night before.

We tethered our mounts away from the wind and sat on the floor inside the lean-to with our backs against the wall. I had dried beef wrapped in leaves in my saddlebag. The meat was salty, but my waterskin was full. The boy ate half a dozen chunks of the meat, tearing off big bites and washing them down with water.

A strong gust of wind shook the lean-to. Millie blatted a protest and fell silent.

“It’ll be a full-going simoom by dark,” Young Bill said. “You watch and see if it ain’t.”

“I like the sound of the wind,” I said. “It makes me think of a story my mother read to me when I was a sma’ one. ‘The Wind Through the Keyhole,’ it was called. Does thee know it?”

Young Bill shook his head. “Mister, are you really a gunslinger? Say true?”

“I am.”

“Can I hold one of your guns for a minute?”

“Never in life,” I said, “but you can look at one of these, if you’d like.” I took a shell from my belt and handed it to him.

He examined it closely, from brass base to lead tip. “Gods, it’s heavy! Long, too! I bet if you shot someone with one of these, he’d stay down.”

“Yes. A shell’s a dangerous thing. But it can be pretty, too. Would you like to see a trick I can do with this one?”

“Sure.”

I took it back and began to dance it from knuckle to knuckle, my fingers rising and falling in waves. Young Bill watched, wide-eyed. “How does thee do it?”

“The same way anyone does anything,” I said. “Practice.”

“Will you show me the trick?”

“If you watch close, you may see it for yourself,” I said. “Here it is . . . and here it isn’t.” I palmed the shell so fast it disappeared, thinking of Susan

Delgado, as I supposed I always would when I did this trick. “Now here it is again.”

The shell danced fast . . . then slow . . . then fast again.

“Follow it with your eyes, Bill, and see if you can make out how I get it to disappear. Don’t take your eyes off it.” I dropped my voice to a lulling murmur. “Watch . . . and watch . . . and watch. Does it make you sleepy?”

“A little,” he said. His eyes slipped slowly closed, then the lids rose again. “I didn’t sleep much last night.”

“Did you not? Watch it go. Watch it slow. See it disappear and then . . . see it as it speeds up again.”

Back and forth the shell went. The wind blew, as lulling to me as my voice was to him.

“Sleep if you want, Bill. Listen to the wind and sleep. But listen to my voice, too.”

“I hear you, gunslinger.” His eyes closed again and this time didn’t reopen. His hands were clasped limply in his lap. “I hear you very well.”

“You can still see the shell, can’t you? Even with your eyes closed.”

“Yes . . . but it’s bigger now. It flashes like gold.”

“Do you say so?”

“Yes . . .”

“Go deeper, Bill, but hear my voice.”

“I hear.”

“I want you to turn your mind back to last night. Your mind and your eyes and your ears. Will you do that?”

A frown creased his brow. “I don’t want to.”

“It’s safe. All that’s happened, and besides, I’m with you.”

“You’re with me. And you have guns.”

“So I do. Nothing will happen to you as long as you can hear my voice, because we’re together. I’ll keep thee safe. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

“Your da’ told you to sleep out under the stars, didn’t he?”

“Aye. It was to be a warm night.”

“But that wasn’t the real reason, was it?”

“No. It was because of Elrod. Once he twirled the bunkhouse cat by her tail, and she never came back. Sometimes he pulls me around by my hair and sings ‘The Boy Who Loved Jenny.’ My da’ can’t stop him, because Elrod’s bigger. Also, he has a knife in his boot. He could cut with it. But he couldn’t cut the beast, could he?” His clasped hands twitched. “Elrod’s dead and I’m glad. I’m sorry about all the others . . . and my da’, I don’t know what I’ll do wi’out my da’ . . . but I’m glad about Elrod. He won’t tease me nummore. He won’t scare me nummore. I seen it, aye.”

So he *did* know more than the top of his mind had let him remember.

“Now you’re out on the graze.”

“On the graze.”

“Wrapped up in your blanket and shinnie.”

“*Shaddie.*”

“Your blanket and shaddie. You’re awake, maybe looking up at the stars, at Old Star and Old Mother—”

“No, no, asleep,” Bill said. “But the screams wake me up. The screams from the bunkhouse. And the sounds of fighting. Things are breaking. And something’s *roaring.*”

“What do you do, Bill?”

“I go down. I’m afraid to, but my da’ . . . my da’s in there. I look in the window at the far end. It’s greasepaper, but I can see through it well enough. More than I want to see. Because I see . . . I see . . . mister, can I wake up?”

“Not yet. Remember that I’m with you.”

“Have you drawn your guns, mister?” He was shivering.

“I have. To protect you. What do you see?”

“Blood. And a beast.”

“What kind, can you tell?”

“A bear. One so tall its head reaches the ceiling. It goes up the middle of the bunkhouse . . . between the cots, ye ken, and on its back legs . . . and it grabs the men . . . it grabs the men and pulls them to pieces with its great long claws.” Tears began to escape his closed lids and roll down his cheeks. “The last one was Elrod. He ran for the back door . . . where the woodpile is just outside, ye ken . . . and when he understood it would have him before he could open the door and dash out, he turned around to fight. He had his knife. He went to stab it. . . .”

Slowly, as if underwater, the boy’s right hand rose from his lap. It was curled into a fist. He made a stabbing motion with it.

“The bear grabbed his arm and tore it off his shoulder. Elrod screamed. He sounded like a horse I saw one time, after it stepped in a gomba hole and broke its leg. The thing . . . it hit Elrod in the face with ’is own arm. The blood flew. There was gristle that flapped and wound around the skin like strings. Elrod fell against the door and started to slide down. The bear grabbed him and lifted him up and bit into his neck and there was a *sound* . . . mister, it bit Elrod’s head right off his neck. I want to wake up now. *Please.*”

“Soon. What did you do then?”

“I ran. I meant to go to the big house, but sai Jefferson . . . he . . . he . . .”

“He what?”

“He *shot* at me! I don’t think he meant to. I think he just saw me out of the corner of his eye and thought . . . I heard the bullet go by me. *Wishhh!* That’s how close it was. So I ran for the corral instead. I went between the poles. While I was crossing, I heard two more shots. Then there was more screaming. I didn’t look to see, but I knew it was sai Jefferson screaming that time.”

This part we knew from the tracks and leavings: how the thing had come charging out of the bunkhouse, how it had grabbed away the four-shot pistol and bent the barrel, how it had unzipped the rancher’s guts and thrown him into the bunkhouse with his proddies. The shot Jefferson had thrown at Young

Bill had saved the boy's life. If not for that, he would have run straight to the big house and been slaughtered with the Jefferson womenfolk.

"You go into the old hostelry where we found you."

"Aye, so I do. And hide under the tack. But then I hear it . . . coming."

He had gone back to the *now* way of remembering, and his words came more slowly. They were broken by bursts of weeping. I knew it was hurting him, remembering terrible things always hurts, but I pressed on. I had to, for what happened in that abandoned hostelry was the important part, and Young Bill was the only one who had been there. Twice he tried to come back to the *then* way of remembering, the *ago*. This was a sign that he was trying to struggle free of his trance, so I took him deeper. In the end I got it all.

The terror he'd felt as the grunting, snuffling thing approached. The way the sounds had changed, blurring into the snarls of a cat. Once it had roared, Young Bill said, and when he heard that sound, he'd let loose water in his trousers. He hadn't been able to hold it. He waited for the cat to come in, knowing it would scent him where he lay—from the urine—only the cat didn't. There was silence . . . silence . . . and then more screaming.

"At first it's the cat screaming, then it changes into a human screaming. High to begin with, it's like a woman, but then it starts to go down until it's a man. It screams and screams. It makes *me* want to scream. I thought—"

"Think," I said. "You think, Bill, because it's happening now. Only I'm here to protect you. My guns are drawn."

"I think my head will split open. Then it stops . . . and it comes in."

"It walks up the middle to the other door, doesn't it?"

He shook his head. "Not walks. Shuffles. *Staggers*. Like it's hurt. It goes right past me. *He*. Now it's *he*. He almost falls down, but grabs one of the stall doors and stays up. Then he goes on. He goes on a little better now."

"Stronger?"

"Aye."

"Do you see his face?" I thought I already knew the answer to that.

“No, only his feet, through the tack. The moon’s up, and I see them very well.”

Perhaps so, but we wouldn’t be identifying the skin-man from his feet, I felt quite sure. I opened my mouth, ready to start bringing him up from his trance, when he spoke again.

“There’s a ring around one of his ankles.”

I leaned forward, as if he could see me . . . and if he was deep enough, mayhap he could, even with his eyes closed. “What kind of ring? Was it metal, like a manacle?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Like a bridle-ring? You know, a hoss-clinkum?”

“No, no. Like on Elrod’s arm, but that’s a picture of a nekkid woman, and you can hardly make it out nummore.”

“Bill, are you talking about a tattoo?”

In his trance, the boy smiled. “Aye, that’s the word. But this one wasn’t a picture, just a blue ring around his ankle. A blue ring in his skin.”

I thought, *We have you. You don’t know it yet, sai skin-man, but we have you.*

“Mister, can I wake up now? I want to wake up.”

“Is there anything else?”

“The white mark?” He seemed to be asking himself.

“What white mark?”

He shook his head slowly from side to side, and I decided to let it go. He’d had enough.

“Come to the sound of my voice. As you come, you’ll leave everything that happened last night behind, because it’s over. Come, Bill. Come now.”

“I’m coming.” His eyes rolled back and forth behind his closed lids.

“You’re safe. Everything that happened at the ranch is ago. Isn’t it?”

“Yes . . .”

“Where are we?”

“On Debaria high road. We’re going to town. I ain’t been there but once. My da’ bought me candy.”

“I’ll buy you some, too,” I said, “for you’ve done well, Young Bill of the Jefferson. Now open your eyes.”

He did, but at first he only looked through me. Then his eyes cleared and he gave an uncertain smile. “I fell asleep.”

“You did. And now we should push for town before the wind grows too strong. Can you do that, Bill?”

“Aye,” he said, and as he got up he added, “I was dreaming of candy.”

* * *

The two not-so-good deputies were in the sheriff’s office when we got there, one of them—a fat fellow wearing a tall black hat with a gaudy rattlesnake band—taking his ease behind Peavy’s desk. He eyed the guns I was wearing and got up in a hurry.

“You’re the gunslinger, ain’tcha?” he said. “Well-met, well-met, we both say so. Where’s t’other one?”

I escorted Young Bill through the archway and into the jail without answering. The boy looked at the cells with interest but no fear. The drunk, Salty Sam, was long gone, but his aroma lingered.

From behind me, the other deputy asked, “What do you think you’re doing, young sai?”

“My business,” I said. “Go back to the office and bring me the keyring to these cells. And be quick about it, if you please.”

None of the smaller cells had mattresses on their bunks, so I took Young Bill to the drunk-and-disorderly cell where Jamie and I had slept the night before. As I put the two straw pallets together to give the boy a little more comfort—after what he’d been through, I reckoned he deserved all the comfort he could get—Bill looked at the chalked map on the wall.

“What is it, sai?”

“Nothing to concern you,” I said. “Now listen to me. I’m going to lock you in, but you’re not to be afraid, for you’ve done nothing wrong. ’Tis but for your own safety. I have an errand that needs running, and when it’s done, I’m going to come in there with you.”

“And lock us both in,” said he. “You’d better lock us both in. In case it comes back.”

“Do you remember it now?”

“A little,” said he, looking down. “It wasn’t a man . . . then it was. It killed my da’.” He put the heels of his hands against his eyes. “Poor Da’.”

The deputy with the black hat returned with the keys. The other was right behind him. Both were gawking at the boy as if he were a two-headed goat in a roadshow.

I took the keys. “Good. Now back to the office, both of you.”

“Seems like you might be throwing your weight around a little, youngster,” Black Hat said, and the other—a little man with an undershot jaw—nodded vigorously.

“Go now,” I said. “This boy needs rest.”

They looked me up and down, then went. Which was the correct thing. The only thing, really. My mood was not good.

The boy kept his eyes covered until their bootheels faded back through the arch, then he lowered his hands. “Will you catch him, sai?”

“Yes.”

“And will you kill him?”

“Does thee *want* me to kill him?”

He considered this, and nodded. “Aye. For what he did to my da’, and to sai Jefferson, and all the others. Even Elrod.”

I closed the door of the cell, found the right key, and turned it. The keyring I hung over my wrist, for it was too big for my pocket. “I’ll make you a promise, Young Bill,” I said. “One I swear to on my father’s name. I won’t kill

him, but you shall be there when he swings, and with my own hand I'll give you the bread to scatter beneath his dead feet."

* * *

In the office, the two not-so-good deputies eyed me with caution and dislike. That was nothing to me. I hung the keyring on the peg next to the jing-jang and said, "I'll be back in an hour, maybe a little less. In the meantime, no one goes into the jail. And that includes you two."

"High-handed for a shaveling," the one with the undershot jaw remarked.

"Don't fail me in this," I said. "It wouldn't be wise. Do you understand?"

Black Hat nodded. "But the sheriff will hear how you done with us."

"Then you'll want to have a mouth still capable of speech when he gets back," I said, and went out.

* * *

The wind had continued to strengthen, blowing clouds of gritty, salt-flavored dust between the false-fronted buildings. I had Debaria high street entirely to myself except for a few hitched horses that stood with their hindquarters turned to the wind and their heads unhappily lowered. I would not leave my own so—nor Millie, the mule the boy had ridden—and led them down to the livery stable at the far end of the street. There the hostler was glad to take them, especially when I split him off half a gold knuck from the bundle I carried in my vest.

No, he said in answer to my first question, there was no jeweler in Debaria, nor ever had been in his time. But the answer to my second question was yar, and he pointed across the street to the blacksmith's shop. The smith himself was standing in the doorway, the hem of his tool-filled leather apron flapping in the wind. I walked across and he put his fist to his forehead. "Hile."

I hiled him in return and told him what I wanted—what Vannay had said I might need. He listened closely, then took the shell I handed him. It was the very one I'd used to entrance Young Bill. The blackie held it up to the light. "How many grains of powder does it blow, can'ee say?"

Of course I could. “Fifty-seven.”

“As many as that? Gods! It’s a wonder the barrel of your revolver don’t bust when’ee pull the trigger!”

The shells in my father’s guns—the ones I might someday carry—blew seventy-six, but I didn’t say so. He’d likely not have believed it. “Can you do what I ask, sai?”

“I think so.” He considered, then nodded. “Aye. But not today. I don’t like to run my smithhold hot in the wind. One loose ember and the whole town might catch ablaze. We’ve had no fire department since my da’ was a boy.”

I took out my bag of gold knuckles and shook two into the palm of my hand. I considered, then added a third. The smith stared at them with wonder. He was looking at two years’ wages.

“It has to be today,” I said.

He grinned, showing teeth of amazing whiteness within the forest of his ginger beard. “Tempting devil, get not aside! For what you’re showin me, I’d risk burning Gilead herself to her foundations. You’ll have it by sundown.”

“I’ll have it by three.”

“Aye, three’s what I meant. To the shaved point of the minute.”

“Good. Now tell me, which restaurant cooks the best chow in town?”

“There’s only two, and neither of em’ll make you remember your mother’s bird puddin, but neither’ll poison’ee. Racey’s Café is probably the better.”

That was good enough for me; I thought a growing boy like Bill Streeter would take quantity over quality any day. I headed for the café, now working against the wind. *It’ll be a full-going simoom by dark*, the boy had told me, and I thought he was right. He had been through a lot, and needed time to rest. Now that I knew about the ankle tattoo, I might not need him at all . . . but the skin-man wouldn’t know that. And in the jail, Young Bill was safe. At least I hoped so.

* * *

It was stew, and I could have sworn it had been seasoned with alkali grit instead of salt, but the kid ate all of his and finished mine as well when I put it aside. One of the not-so-good deputies had made coffee, and we drank that from tin cups. We made our meal right there in the cell, sitting cross-legged on the floor. I listened for the jing-jang, but it stayed quiet. I wasn't surprised. Even if Jamie and the High Sheriff came near one at their end, the wind had probably taken the wires down.

"I guess you know all about these storms you call simooms," I said to Young Bill.

"Oh, yes," he said. "This is the season for em. The proddies hate em and the pokies hate em even more, because if they're out on the range, they have to sleep rough. And they can't have a fire at night, accourse, because of—"

"Because of the embers," I said, remembering the blacksmith.

"Just as you say. Stew all gone, is it?"

"So it is, but there's one more thing."

I handed over a little sack. He looked inside it and lit up. "Candy! Rollers and chocker-twists!" He extended the bag. "Here, you have the first."

I took one of the little chocolate twists, then pushed the bag back to him. "You have the rest. If it won't make your belly sick, that is."

"It won't!" And he dived in. It did me good to see him. After the third roller went into his gob, he cheeked it—which made him look like a squirrel with a nut—and said, "What'll happen to me, sai? Now that my da's gone?"

"I don't know, but there'll be water if God wills it." I already had an idea where that water might be. If we could put paid to the skin-man, a certain large lady named Everlynnne would owe us a good turn, and I doubt if Bill Streeter would be the first stray she'd taken in.

I returned to the subject of the simoom. "How much will it strengthen?"

"It'll blow a gale tonight. Probably after midnight. And by noon tomorrow, it'll be gone."

"Does thee know where the salties live?"

“Aye, I’ve even been there. Once with my da’, to see the races they sometimes have up there, and once with some proddies looking for strays. The salties take em in, and we pay with hard biscuit for the ones that have the Jefferson brand.”

“My trailmate’s gone there with Sheriff Peavy and a couple of others. Think they have any chance of getting back before nightfall?”

I felt sure he would say no, but he surprised me. “Being as it’s all downhill from Salt Village—which is on this side of Little Debaria—I’d say they could. If they rode hard.”

That made me glad I’d told the blacksmith to hurry, although I knew better than to trust the reckoning of a mere boy.

“Listen to me, Young Bill. When they come back, I expect they’ll have some of the salties with em. Maybe a dozen, maybe as many as twenty. Jamie and I may have to walk em through the jail for you to look at, but you needn’t be afraid, because the door of this cell will be locked. And you don’t have to say anything, just look.”

“If you’re thinking I can tell which one killed my da’, I can’t. I don’t even remember if I saw him.”

“You probably won’t have to see them at all,” I said. This I truly believed. We’d have them into the sheriff’s office by threes, and have them hike their pants. When we found the one with the blue ring tattooed around his ankle, we’d have our man. Not that he *was* a man. Not anymore. Not really.

“Wouldn’t you like another chocker, sai? There’s three left, and I can’t eat nummore.”

“Save them for later,” I said, and got up.

His face clouded. “Will you come back? I don’t want to be in here on my own.”

“Aye, I’ll come back.” I stepped out, locked the cell door, then tossed the keys to him through the bars. “Let me in when I do.”

* * *

The fat deputy with the black hat was Strother. The one with the undershot jaw was Pickens. They looked at me with care and mistrust, which I thought a good combination, coming from the likes of them. I could work with care and mistrust.

“If I asked you fellows about a man with a blue ring tattooed on his ankle, would it mean anything to you?”

They exchanged a glance and then Black Hat—Strother—said, “The stockade.”

“What stockade would that be?” Already I didn’t like the sound of it.

“Beelie Stockade,” Pickens said, looking at me as if I were the utterest of utter idiots. “Does thee not know of it? And thee a gunslinger?”

“Beelie Town’s west of here, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Was,” Strother said. “It’s Beelie Ghost Town now. Harriers tore through it five year ago. Some say John Farson’s men, but I don’t believe that. Never in life. ’Twas plain old garden-variety outlaws. Once there was a militia outpost—back in the days when there *was* a militia—and Beelie Stockade was their place o’ business. It was where the circuit judge sent thieves and murderers and card cheats.”

“Witches n warlocks, too,” Pickens volunteered. He wore the face of a man remembering the good old days, when the railroad trains ran on time and the jing-jang no doubt rang more often, with calls from more places. “Practicers of the dark arts.”

“Once they took a cannibal,” Strother said. “He ate his wife.” This caused him to give out with a foolish giggle, although whether it was the eating or the relationship that struck him funny I couldn’t say.

“He was hung, that fellow,” Pickens said. He bit off a chunk of chew and worked it with his peculiar jaw. He still looked like a man remembering a better, rosier past. “There was lots of hangings at Beelie Stockade in those days. I went several times wi’ my da’ and my marmar to see em. Marmar allus packed a lunch.” He nodded slowly and thoughtfully. “Aye, many and many-a.

Lots o' folks came. There was booths and clever people doing clever things such as juggling. Sometimes there was dogfights in a pit, but accourse it was the hangins that was the real show." He chuckled. "I remember this one fella who kicked a regular commala when the drop didn't break 'is—"

"What's this to do with blue ankle tattoos?"

"Oh," Strother said, recalled to the initial subject. "Anyone who ever did time in Beelie had one of those put on, y'see. Although I disremember if it was for punishment or just identification in case they ran off from one o' the work gangs. All that stopped ten year ago, when the stockade closed. That's why the harriers was able to have their way with the town, you know—because the militia left and the stockade closed. Now we have to deal with all the bad element and riffraff ourselves." He eyed me up and down in the most insolent way. "We don't get much help from Gilead these days. Nawp. Apt to get more from John Farson, and there's some that'd send a parlay-party west to ask him." Perhaps he saw something in my eyes, because he sat up a little straighter in his chair and said, "Not me, accourse. Never. I believe in the straight law and the Line of Eld."

"So do we all," Pickens said, nodding vigorously.

"Would you want to guess if some of the salt-miners did time in Beelie Stockade before it was decommissioned?" I asked.

Strother appeared to consider, then said: "Oh, probably a few. Nummore'n four in every ten, I should say."

In later years I learned to control my face, but those were early times, and he must have seen my dismay. It made him smile. I doubt if he knew how close that smile brought him to suffering. I'd had a difficult two days, and the boy weighed heavily on my mind.

"Who did'ee think would take a job digging salt blocks out of a miserable hole in the ground for penny wages?" Strother asked. "Model citizens?"

It seemed that Young Bill would have to look at a few of the salties, after all. We'd just have to hope the fellow we wanted didn't know the ring tattoo was

the only part of him the kid had seen.

* * *

When I went back to the cell, Young Bill was lying on the pallets, and I thought he'd gone to sleep, but at the sound of my bootheels he sat up. His eyes were red, his cheeks wet. Not sleeping, then, but mourning. I let myself in, sat down beside him, and put an arm around his shoulders. This didn't come naturally to me—I know what comfort and sympathy are, but I've never been much good at giving such. I knew what it was to lose a parent, though. Young Bill and Young Roland had that much in common.

“Did you finish your candy?” I asked.

“Don't want the rest,” he said, and sighed.

Outside the wind boomed hard enough to shake the building, then subsided.

“I hate that sound,” he said—just what Jamie DeCurry had said. It made me smile a little. “And I hate being in here. It's like *I* did something wrong.”

“You didn't,” I said.

“Maybe not, but it already seems like I've been here forever. Cooped up. And if they don't get back before nightfall, I'll have to stay longer. Won't I?”

“I'll keep you company,” I said. “If those deputies have a deck of cards, we can play Jacks Pop Up.”

“For babies,” said he, morosely.

“Then Watch Me or poker. Can thee play those?”

He shook his head, then brushed at his cheeks. The tears were flowing again.

“I'll teach thee. We'll play for matchsticks.”

“I'd rather hear the story you talked about when we stopped in the sheppie's lay-by. I don't remember the name.”

“The Wind Through the Keyhole,” I said. “But it's a long one, Bill.”

“We have time, don't we?”

I couldn't argue that. “There are scary bits in it, too. Those things are all right for a boy such as I was—sitting up in his bed with his mother beside him

—but after what you’ve been through . . .”

“Don’t care,” he said. “Stories take a person away. If they’re good ones, that is. It is a good one?”

“Yes. I always thought so, anyway.”

“Then tell it.” He smiled a little. “I’ll even let you have two of the last three chockers.”

“Those are yours, but I might roll a smoke.” I thought about how to begin. “Do you know stories that start, ‘Once upon a bye, before your grandfather’s grandfather was born?’”

“They all start that way. At least, the ones my da’ told me. Before he said I was too old for stories.”

“A person’s never too old for stories, Bill. Man and boy, girl and woman, never too old. We live for them.”

“Do you say so?”

“I do.”

I took out my tobacco and papers. I rolled slowly, for in those days it was a skill yet new to me. When I had a smoke just to my liking—one with the draw end tapered to a pinhole—I struck a match on the wall. Bill sat cross-legged on the straw pallets. He took one of the chockers, rolled it between his fingers much as I’d rolled my smoke, then tucked it into his cheek.

I started slowly and awkwardly, because storytelling was another thing that didn’t come naturally to me in those days . . . although it was a thing I learned to do well in time. I had to. All gunslingers have to. And as I went along, I began to speak more naturally and easily. Because I began hearing my mother’s voice. It began to speak through my own mouth: every rise, dip, and pause.

I could see him fall into the tale, and that pleased me—it was like hypnotizing him again, but in a better way. A more honest way. The best part, though, was hearing my mother’s voice. It was like having her again, coming out from far inside me. It hurt, of course, but more often than not the best

things do, I've found. You wouldn't think it could be so, but—as the oldtimers used to say—the world's tilted, and there's an end to it.

“Once upon a bye, before your grandfather's grandfather was born, on the edge of an unexplored wilderness called the Endless Forest, there lived a boy named Tim with his mother, Nell, and his father, Big Ross. For a time, the three of them lived happily enough, although they owned little. . . .”

THE WIND THROUGH
THE KEYHOLE

Once upon a bye, long before your grandfather's grandfather was born, on the edge of an unexplored wilderness called the Endless Forest, there lived a boy named Tim with his mother, Nell, and his father, Big Ross. For a time the three of them lived happily enough, although they owned little.

"I have only four things to pass on to you," Big Ross told his son, "but four's enough. Can you say them to me, young boy?"

Tim had said them to him many and many-a, but never tired of it. "Thy ax, thy lucky coin, thy plot, and thy place, which is as good as the place of any king or gunslinger in Mid-World." He would then pause and add, "My mama, too. That makes five."

Big Ross would laugh and kiss the boy's brow as he lay in his bed, for this catechism usually came at the end of the day. Behind them, in the doorway, Nell waited to put her kiss on top of her husband's. "Aye," Big Ross would say, "we must never forget Mama, for wi'out her, all's for naught."

So Tim would go off to sleep, knowing he was loved, and knowing he had a place in the world, and listening to the night wind slip its strange breath over the cottage: sweet with the scent of the blossiewood at the edge of the Endless Forest, and faintly sour—but still pleasant—with the smell of the ironwood trees deeper in, where only brave men dared go.

Those were good years, but as we know—from stories and from life—the good years never last long.

One day, when Tim was eleven, Big Ross and his partner, Big Kells, drove their wagons down Main Road to where the Ironwood Trail

entered the forest, as they did every morning save the seventh, when all in the village of Tree rested. On this day, however, only Big Kells came back. His skin was sooty and his jerkin charred. There was a hole in the left leg of his homespun pants. Red and blistered flesh peeped through it. He slumped on the seat of his wagon, as if too weary to sit up straight.

Nell Ross came to the door of her house and cried, “Where is Big Ross? Where is my husband?”

Big Kells shook his head slowly from side to side. Ash sifted out of his hair and onto his shoulders. He spoke only a single word, but one was enough to turn Tim’s knees to water. His mother began to shriek.

The word was *dragon*.

No one living today has ever seen the like of the Endless Forest, for the world has moved on. It was dark and full of dangers. The woodsmen of Tree Village knew it better than anyone in Mid-World, and even they knew nothing of what might live or grow ten wheels beyond the place where the blossom groves ended and the ironwood trees—those tall, brooding sentinels—began. The great depths were a mystery filled with strange plants, stranger animals, stinking weirdmarshes, and—so ’twas said—leavings of the Old People that were often deadly.

The folk of Tree feared the Endless Forest, and rightly so; Big Ross wasn’t the first woodsman who went down Ironwood Trail and did not come back. Yet they loved it, too, for ’twas ironwood fed and clothed their families. They understood (though none would have said so aloud) that the forest was alive. And, like all living things, it needed to eat.

Imagine that you were a bird flying above that great tract of wildland. From up there it might look like a giant dress of a green so dark it was almost black. Along the bottom of the dress was a hem of lighter green. These were the blossomwood groves. Just below the blossies, at the farthest edge of North’rd

Barony, was the village of Tree. It was the last town in what was then a civilized country. Once Tim asked his father what *civilized* meant.

“Taxes,” Big Ross said, and laughed—but not in a funny way.

Most of the woodsmen went no farther than the blossie groves. Even there, sudden dangers could arise. Snakes were the worst, but there were also poisonous rodents called wervels that were the size of dogs. Many men had been lost in the blossies over the years, but on the whole, blossie was worth the risk. It was a lovely fine-grained wood, golden in color and almost light enough to float on air. It made fine lake and rivercraft, but was no good for sea travel; even a moderate gale would tear apart a boat made of blossie.

For sea travel ironwood was wanted, and ironwood brought a high price from Hodiak, the barony buyer who came twice a year to the Tree sawmill. It was ironwood that gave the Endless Forest its green-black hue, and only the bravest woodsmen dared go after it, for there were dangers along the Ironwood Trail—which barely pierced the skin of the Endless Forest, remember—that made the snakes, wervels, and mutie bees of the blossie groves seem mild by comparison.

Dragons, for instance.

So it was that in his eleventh year, Tim Ross lost his da’. Now there was no ax and no lucky coin hanging around Big Ross’s burly neck on its fine silver chain. Soon there might be no plot in the village or place in the world, either. For in those days, when the time of Wide Earth came around, the Barony Covenanter came with it. He carried a scroll of parchment paper, and the name of every family in Tree was writ upon it, along with a number. That number was the amount of tax. If you could pay it—four or six or eight silver knucks, even a gold one for the largest of the freeholds—all was well. If you couldn’t, the Barony took your plot and you were turned out on the land. There was no appeal.

Tim went half-days to the cottage of the Widow Smack, who kept school and was paid in food—usually vegetables, sometimes a bit of meat. Long ago, before the bloodsores had come on her and eaten off half her face (so the children whispered, although none had actually seen it), she had been a great lady in the barony estates far away (or so the children’s elders claimed, although none actually knew). Now she wore a veil and taught likely lads, and even a few lassies, how to read and practice the slightly questionable art known as *mathmatica*.

She was a fearsomely smart woman who took no guff, and most days she was tireless. Her pupils usually came to love her in spite of her veil, and the horrors they imagined might lie beneath it. But on occasion she would begin to tremble all over, and cry that her poor head was splitting, and that she must lie down. On these days she would send the children home, sometimes commanding them to tell their parents that she regretted nothing, least of all her beautiful prince.

Sai Smack had one of her fugues about a month after the dragon burned Big Ross to ashes, and when Tim came back to his cottage, which was called Goodview, he looked in the kitchen window and saw his mother crying with her head on the table.

He dropped the slate with his *mathmatica* problems on it (long division, which he had feared but turned out to be only backwards multiplication) and rushed to her side. She looked up at him and tried to smile. The contrast between her upturned lips and her streaming eyes made Tim feel like crying himself. It was the look of a woman at the end of her tether.

“What is it, Mama? What’s wrong?”

“Just thinking of your father. Sometimes I miss him so. Why are you home early?”

He began to tell her, but stopped when he saw the leather purse with the drawstring top. She had put one of her arms over it, as if to hide it from him, and when she saw him looking, she swept it off the table and into her lap.

Now Tim was far from a stupid boy, so he made tea before saying anything else. When she had drunk some—with sugar, which he insisted she take, although there was little enough left in the pot—and had calmed, he asked her what else was wrong.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Why were you counting our money?”

“What little there is to count,” said she. “Covenant Man will be here once Reaptide’s gone—aye, while the embers of the bonfire are still hot, if I know his ways—and what then? He’ll want six silver knuckles this year, p’raps as many as eight, for taxes have gone up, so they do say, probably another of their stupid wars somewhere far from here, soldiers with their banners flying, aye, very fine.”

“How much do we have?”

“Four and a scrap of a fifth. We have no livestock to sell, nor a single round of ironwood since your father died. What shall we do?” She began to cry again. “What shall we *do*?”

Tim was as frightened as she was, but since there was no man to comfort her, he held his own tears back and put his arms around her and soothed her as best he could.

“If we had his ax and his coin, I’d sell them to Destry,” she said at last.

Tim was horrified even though the ax and lucky coin were gone, burned in the same fiery blast that had taken their cheerful, goodhearted owner. “You never would!”

“Aye. To keep his plot and his place, I would. Those were the things he truly cared about, and thee, and me. Could he speak he’d say ‘Do it, Nell, and welcome,’ for Destry has hard coin.” She sighed. “But then would come old Barony Covenant Man next year . . . and the year after that . . .” She put her hands over her face. “Oh, Tim, we shall be turned out on the land, and there’s not one thing I can think to change it. Can you?”

Tim would have given everything he owned (which was very little) to be able to give her an answer, but he could not. He could only ask how long it would be before the Covenant Man would appear in Tree on his tall black horse, sitting astride a saddle worth more than Big Ross had made in twenty-five years of risking his life on that narrow track known as the Ironwood Trail.

She held up four fingers. "This many weeks if the weather is fair." She held up four more. "This many if it's foul, and he's held up in the farming villages of the Middles. Eight is the most we can hope for, I think. And then . . ."

"Something will happen before he comes," Tim said. "Da' always said that the forest gives to them that love it."

"All I've ever seen it do is take," said Nell, and covered her face again. When he tried to put an arm around her, she shook her head.

Tim trudged out to get his slate. He had never felt so sad and frightened. *Something will happen to change it*, he thought. *Please let something happen to change it.*

The worst thing about wishes is that sometimes they come true.

That was a rich Full Earth in Tree; even Nell knew it, although the ripe land was bitter in her eye. The following year she and Tim might be following the crops with burlap rucksacks on their backs, farther and farther from the Endless Forest, and that made summer's beauty hard to look at. The forest was a terrible place, and it had taken her man, but it was the only place she had ever known. At night, when the wind blew from the north, it stole to her bed through her open window like a lover, bringing its own special smell, one both bitter and sweet, like blood and strawberries. Sometimes when she slept, she dreamed of its deep tilts and secret corridors, and of sunshine so diffuse that it glowed like old green brass.

The smell of the forest when the wind's out of the north brings visions, the old folk said. Nell didn't know if this was true or just chimneycorner blather, but she knew the smell of the Endless Forest was the smell of life as well as death. And

she knew that Tim loved it as his father had. As she herself had (although often against her will).

She had secretly feared the day when the boy would grow tall enough and strong enough to go down that dangerous trail with his da', but now she found herself sorry that day would never come. Sai Smack and her *mathmatica* were all very well, but Nell knew what her son truly wanted, and she hated the dragon that had stolen it from him. Probably it had been a she-dragon, and only protecting her egg, but Nell hated it just the same. She hoped the plated yellow-eyed bitch would swallow her own fire, as the old stories said they sometimes did, and explode.

One day not so many after Tim had arrived home early and found her in tears, Big Kells came calling on Nell. Tim had gotten two weeks' work helping farmer Destry with the hay-cutting, so she was by her onesome in her garden, weeding on her knees. When she saw her late husband's friend and partner, she got to her feet and wiped her dirty hands on the burlap apron she called her weddiken.

A single look at his clean hands and carefully trimmed beard was enough to tell her why he'd come. Once upon a bye, Nell Robertson, Jack Ross, and Bern Kells had been children together, and great pals. *Littermates from different litters*, people of the village sometimes said when they saw the three together; in those days they were inseparable.

When they grew to young manhood, both boys fancied her. And while she loved them both, it was Big Ross she burned for, Big Ross she'd wed and taken to bed (although whether that was the order of it no one knew, nor really cared). Big Kells had taken it as well as any man can. He stood beside Ross at the wedding, and slipped the silk around them for their walk back down the aisle when the preacher was done. When Kells took it off them at the door (although it never *really* comes off, so they do say), he kissed them both and wished them a lifetime of long days and pleasant nights.

Although the afternoon Kells came to her in the garden was hot, he was wearing a broadcloth jacket. From the pocket he took a loosely knotted length of silk rope, as she knew he would. A woman knows. Even if she's long married, a woman knows, and Kells's heart had never changed.

"Will'ee?" he asked. "If'ee will, I'll sell my place to Old Destry—he wants it, for it sits next to his east field—and keep this'un. Covenant Man's coming, Nellie, and he'll have his hand out. With no man, how'll'ee fill it?"

"I cannot, as thee knows," said she.

"Then tell me—shall we slip the rope?"

She wiped her hands nervously on her weddiken, although they were already as clean as they'd be without water from the creek. "I . . . I need to think about it."

"What's to think about?" He took his bandanna—neatly folded in his pocket instead of tied loosely, woodsman-style, around his neck—and mopped his forehead with it. "Either'ee do and we go on in Tree as we always have—I'll find the boy something to work at that'll bring in a little, although he's far too wee for the woods—or ye and he'll go on the land. I can share, but I can't give, much as I might like to. I have only one place to sell, kennit."

She thought, *He's trying to buy me to fill the empty side of the bed that Millicent left behind.* But that seemed an unworthy thought for a man she'd known long before he *was* a man, and one who had worked for years by her beloved husband's side in the dark and dangerous trees near the end of the Ironwood Trail. *One to watch and one to work,* the oldtimers said. *Pull together and never apart.* Now that Jack Ross was gone, Bern Kells was asking her to pull with him. It was natural.

Yet she hesitated.

"Come tomorrow at this same time, if you still have a mind," Nell told him. "I'll give thee an answer then."

He didn't like it; she saw he didn't like it; she saw something in his eyes that she had occasionally glimpsed when she had been a green girl sparked by

two likely lads and the envy of all her friends. That look was what caused her to hesitate, even though he had appeared like an angel, offering her—and Tim, of course—a way out of the terrible dilemma that had come with Big Ross's death.

Perhaps he saw her seeing it, for he dropped his gaze. He studied his feet for a bit, and when he looked up again, he was smiling. It made him almost as handsome as he'd been as a youth . . . but never so handsome as Jack Ross.

“Tomorrow, then. But no longer. They have a saying in the West'ards, my dear. ‘Look not long at what's offered, for every precious thing has wings and may fly away.’”

She washed at the edge of the creek, stood smelling the sweet-sour aroma of the forest for a bit, then went inside and lay down upon her bed. It was unheard of for Nell Ross to be horizontal while the sun was still in the sky, but she had much to think of and much to remember from those days when two young woodsmen had vied for her kisses.

Even if her blood had called toward Bern Kells (not yet Big Kells in those days, although his father was dead, slain in the woods by a vurt or some such nightmare) instead of Jack Ross, she wasn't sure she would have slipped the rope with him. Kells was good-humored and laughing when he was sober, and as steady as sand through a glass, but he could be angry and quick with his fists when he was drunk. And he was drunk often in those days. His binges grew longer and more frequent after Ross and Nell were wed, and on many occasions he woke up in jail.

Jack had borne it awhile, but after a binge where Kells had destroyed most of the furniture in the saloon before passing out, Nell told her husband something had to be done. Big Ross reluctantly agreed. He got his partner and old friend out of jail—as he had many times before—but this time he spoke to him frankly instead of just telling Kells to go jump in the creek and stay there until his head was clear.

“Listen to me, Bern, and with both ears. You’ve been my friend since I could toddle, and my pard since we were old enough to go past the blossom and into the ironwood on our own. You’ve watched my back and I’ve watched yours. There’s not a man I trust more, when you’re sober. But once you pour the redevye down your throat, you’re no more reliable than quickmud. I can’t go into the forest alone, and everything I have—everything we *both* have—is at risk if I can’t depend on’ee. I’d hate to cast about for a new pard, but fair warning: I have a wife and a kiddy on the way, and I’ll do what I have to do.”

Kells continued his drinking, brawling, and bawding for a few more months, as if to spite his old friend (and his old friend’s new wife). Big Ross was on the verge of severing their partnership when the miracle happened. It was a small miracle, hardly more than five feet from toes to crown, and her name was Millicent Redhouse. What Bern Kells would not do for Big Ross, he did for Milly. When she died in childbirth six seasons later (and the babby soon after—even before the flush of labor had faded from the poor woman’s dead cheek, the midwife confided to Nell), Ross was gloomy.

“He’ll go back for the drink now, and gods know what will become of him.”

But Big Kells stayed sober, and when his business happened to bring him into the vicinity of Gitty’s Saloon, he crossed to the other side of the street. He said it had been Milly’s dying request, and to do otherwise would be an insult to her memory. “I’ll die before I take another drink,” he said.

He had kept this promise. . . but Nell sometimes felt his eyes upon her. Often, even. He had never touched her in a way that could be called intimate, or even forward, had never stolen so much as a Reaptide kiss, but she felt his eyes. Not as a man looks at a friend, or at a friend’s wife, but as a man looks at a woman.

Tim came home an hour before sunset with hay stuck to every visible inch of his sweaty skin, but happy. Farmer Destry had paid him in scrip for the town store, a fairish sum, and his goodwife had added a sack of her sweet

peppers and busturd tomatoes. Nell took the scrip and the sack, thanked him, kissed him, gave him a well-stuffed popkin, and sent him down to the spring to bathe.

Ahead of him, as he stood in the cold water, ran the dreaming, mist-banded fields toward the Inners and Gilead. To his left bulked the forest, which began less than a wheel away. In there it was twilight even at noonday, his father had said. At the thought of his father, his happiness at being paid a man's wages (or almost) for a day's work ran out of him like grain from a sack with a hole in it. This sorrow came often, but it always surprised him. He sat for a while on a big rock with his knees drawn up to his chest and his head cradled in his arms. To be taken by a dragon so close to the edge of the forest was unlikely and terribly unfair, but it had happened before. His father wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last.

His mother's voice came floating to him over the fields, calling him to come in and have some real supper. Tim called cheerily back to her, then knelt on the rock to splash cold water on his eyes, which felt swollen, although he had shed no tears. He dressed quickly and trotted up the slope. His mother had lit the lamps, for the gloaming had come, and they cast long rectangles of light across her neat little garden. Tired but happy again—for boys turn like weathercocks, so they do—Tim hurried into the welcoming glow of home.

When the meal was done and the few dishes ridded between them, Nell said: "I'd talk to you mother to son, Tim . . . and a bit more. You're old enough to work a little now, you'll soon be leaving your childhood behind—sooner than I'd like—and you deserve a say in what happens."

"Is it about the Covenant Man, Mama?"

"In a way, but I . . . I think more than that." She came close to saying *I fear* instead of *I think*, but why would she? There was a hard decision to be made, an important decision, but what was there to fear?

She led the way into their sitting room—so cozy Big Ross had almost been able to touch the opposing walls when he stood in the middle with his arms outstretched—and there, as they sat before the cold hearth (for it was a warm Full Earth night), she told him all that had passed between Big Kells and herself. Tim listened with surprise and mounting unease.

“So,” Nell said when she had finished. “What does thee think?” But before he could answer—perhaps she saw in his face the worry she felt in her own heart—she rushed on. “He’s a good man, and was more brother than mate to your da’. I believe he cares for me, and cares for thee.”

No, thought Tim, *I’m just what comes in the same saddlebag. He never even looks at me. Unless I happened to be with Da’, that is. Or with you.*

“Mama, I don’t know.” The thought of Big Kells in the house—lying next to Mama in his da’s place—made him feel light in his stomach, as if his supper had not set well. In truth, it no longer *was* sitting well.

“He’s quit the drink,” she said. Now she seemed to be talking to herself instead of to him. “Years ago. He could be wild as a youth, but your da’ tamed him. And Millicent, of course.”

“Maybe, but neither of them is here anymore,” Tim pointed out. “And Ma, he hasn’t found anyone yet to partner him on the Ironwood. He goes a-cutting on his own, and that’s dead risky.”

“It’s early days yet,” she said. “He’ll find someone to partner up with, for he’s strong and he knows where the good stands are. Your father showed him how to find them when they were both fresh to the work, and they have fine stakeouts near the place where the trail ends.”

Tim knew this was so, but was less sure Kells would find someone to partner with. He thought the other woodcutters kept clear of him. They seemed to do it without knowing they were doing it, the way a seasoned woodsman would detour around a poisonthorn bush, even if he only saw it from the corner of his eye.

Maybe I’m only making that up, he thought.

“I don’t know,” he said again. “A rope that’s slipped in church can’t be unslipped.”

Nell laughed nervously. “Where in Full Earth did thee hear that?”

“From you,” Tim said.

She smiled. “Yar, p’raps thee did, for my mouth’s hung in the middle and runs at both ends. We’ll sleep on it, and see clearer in the morning.”

But neither of them slept much. Tim lay wondering what it would be like to have Big Kells as a steppa. Would he be good to them? Would he take Tim into the forest with him to begin learning the woodsman’s life? That would be fine, he thought, but would his mother want him going into the line of work that had killed her husband? Or would she want him to stay south of the Endless Forest? To be a farmer?

I like Destrly well enough, he thought, but I’d never in life be a farmer. Not with the Endless Forest so close, and so much of the world to see.

Nell lay a wall away, with her own uncomfortable thoughts. Mostly she wondered what their lives would be like if she refused Kells’s offer and they were turned out on the land, away from the only place they’d ever known. What their lives would be like if the Barony Covenanter rode up on his tall black horse and they had nothing to give him.

The next day was even hotter, but Big Kells came wearing the same broadcloth coat. His face was red and shining. Nell told herself she didn’t smell graf on his breath, and if she did, what of it? ’Twas only hard cider, and any man might take a drink or two before going to hear a woman’s decision. Besides, her mind was made up. Or almost.

Before he could ask his question, she spoke boldly. As boldly as she was able, anyhap. “My boy reminds me that a rope slipped in church can’t be unslipped.”

Big Kells frowned, although whether it was the mention of the boy or the marriage-loop that fashed him, she could not tell. “Aye, and what of that?”

“Only will you be good to Tim and me?”

“Aye, good as I can be.” His frown deepened. She couldn’t tell if it was anger or puzzlement. She hoped for puzzlement. Men who could cut and chop and dare beasts in the deep wood often found themselves lost in affairs like this, she knew, and at the thought of Big Kells lost, her heart opened to him.

“Set your word on it?” she asked.

The frown eased. White flashed in his neatly trimmed black beard as he smiled. “Aye, by watch and by warrant.”

“Then I say yes.”

And so they were wed. That is where many stories end; it’s where this one—sad to say—really begins.

There was graf at the wedding reception, and for a man who no longer drank spirits, Big Kells tossed a goodly amount down his gullet. Tim viewed this with unease, but his mother appeared not to notice. Another thing that made Tim uneasy was how few of the other woodsmen showed up, although it was Ethday. If he had been a girl instead of a boy, he might have noticed something else. Several of the women whom Nell counted among her friends were looking at her with expressions of guarded pity.

That night, long after midnight, he was awakened by a thump and a cry that might have been part of a dream, but it seemed to come through the wall from the room his mother now shared (true, but not yet possible to believe) with Big Kells. Tim lay listening, and had almost dropped off to sleep again when he heard quiet weeping. This was followed by the voice of his new steppa, low and gruff: “Shut it, can’t you? You ain’t a bit hurt, there’s no blood, and I have to be up with the birdies.”

The sounds of crying stopped. Tim listened, but there was no more talk. Shortly after Big Kells’s snores began, he fell asleep. The next morning, while she was at the stove frying eggs, Tim saw a bruise on his mother’s arm above the inside of her elbow.

“It’s nothing,” Nell said when she saw him looking. “I had to get up in the night to do the necessary, and bumped it on the bedpost. I’ll have to get used to finding my way in the dark again, now that I’m not alone.”

Tim thought, *Yar—that’s what I’m afraid of.*

When the second Ethday of his married life came round, Big Kells took Tim with him to the house that now belonged to Baldy Anderson, Tree’s other big farmer. They went in Kells’s wood-wagon. The mules stepped lightly with no rounds or strakes of ironwood to haul; today there were only a few little piles of sawdust in the back of the wagon. And that lingering sweet-sour smell, of course, the smell of the deep woods. Kells’s old place looked sad and abandoned with its shutters closed and the tall, unscythed grass growing up to the splintery porch slats.

“Once I get my gunna out’n it, let Baldy take it all for kindling, do it please ’im,” Kells grunted. “Fine wi’ me.”

As it turned out, there were only two things he wanted from the house—a dirty old footrest and a large leather trunk with straps and a brass lock. This was in the bedroom, and Kells stroked it as if it were a pet. “Can’t leave this,” he said. “Never this. ’Twas my father’s.”

Tim helped him get it outside, but Kells had to do most of the work. The trunk was very heavy. When it was in the wagonbed, Big Kells leaned over with his hands on the knees of his newly (and neatly) mended trousers. At last, when the purple patches began to fade from his cheeks, he stroked the trunk again, and with a gentleness Tim had as yet not seen applied to his mother. “All I own stowed in one trunk. As for the house, did Baldy pay the price I should have had?” He looked at Tim challengingly, as if expecting an argument on this subject.

“I don’t know,” Tim said cautiously. “Folk say sai Anderson’s close.”

Kells laughed harshly. “Close? *Close?* Tight as a virgin’s cootchie is what he is. Nar, nar, I got crumbs instead of a slice, for he knew I couldn’t afford to

wait. Help me tie up this tailboard, boy, and be not sluggardly.”

Tim was not sluggardly. He had his side of the tailboard roped tight before Kells had finished tying his in a sloppy ollie-knot that would have made his father laugh. When he was finally done, Big Kells gave his trunk another of those queerly affectionate caresses.

“All in here now, all I have. Baldy knew I had to have silver before Wide Earth, didn’t he? Old You Know Who is coming, and he’ll have his hand out.” He spat between his old scuffed boots. “This is all your ma’s fault.”

“*Ma’s* fault? Why? Didn’t you want to marry her?”

“Watch your mouth, boy.” Kells looked down, seemed surprised to see a fist where his hand had been, and opened his fingers. “You’re too young to understand. When you’re older, you’ll find out how women can get the good of a man. Let’s go on back.”

Halfway to the driving seat, he stopped and looked across the stowed trunk at the boy. “I love yer ma, and that’s enough for you to be going on with.”

And as the mules trotted up the village high street, Big Kells sighed and added, “I loved yer da’, too, and how I miss ’im. ’Tain’t the same wi’out him beside me in the woods, or seein Misty and Bitsy up the trail ahead of me.”

At this Tim’s heart opened a little to the big, slump-shouldered man with the reins in his hands—in spite of himself, really—but before the feeling had any chance to grow, Big Kells spoke again.

“Ye’ve had enough of books and numbers and that weirdy Smack woman. She with her veils and shakes—how she manages to wipe her arse after she shits is more than I’ll ever know.”

Tim’s heart seemed to clap shut in his chest. He loved learning things, and he loved the Widow Smack—veil, shakes, and all. It dismayed him to hear her spoken of with such crude cruelty. “What would I do, then? Go into the woods with you?” He could see himself on Da’s wagon, behind Misty and Bitsy. That would not be so bad. No, not so bad at all.

Kells barked a laugh. “*You?* In the woods? And not yet twelve?”

“I’ll be twelve next m—”

“You won’t be big enough to lumber on the Ironwood Trail at twice that age, for’ee take after yer ma’s side of things, and will be Sma’ Ross all yer life.” That bark of laughter again. Tim felt his face grow hot at the sound of it. “No, lad, I’ve spoke a place for’ee at the sawmill. You ain’t too sma’ to stack boards. Ye’ll start after harvest’s done, and before first snow.”

“What does Mama say?” Tim tried to keep the dismay out of his voice and failed.

“She don’t get aye, no, or maybe in the matter. I’m her husband, and that makes me the one to decide.” He snapped the reins across the backs of the plodding mules. “*Hup!*”

Tim went down to Tree Sawmill three days later, with one of the Destry boys—Straw Willem, so called for his nearly colorless hair. Both were hired on to stack, but they would not be needed for yet awhile, and only part-time, at least to begin with. Tim had brought his father’s mules, which needed the exercise, and the boys rode back side by side.

“Thought you said your new step-poppa didn’t drink,” Willem said, as they passed Gitty’s—which at midday was shuttered tight, its barrelhouse piano silent.

“He doesn’t,” Tim said, but he remembered the wedding reception.

“Do you say so? I guess the fella my big brother seed rollin out of yonder redeye last night must’ve been some other orphing-boy’s steppa, because Randy said he was as sloshed as a shindybug and heavin up over the hitchin-rail.” Having said this, Willem snapped his suspenders, as he always did when he felt he’d gotten off a good one.

Should have let you walk back to town, you stupid git, Tim thought.

That night, his mother woke him again. Tim sat bolt upright in bed and swung his feet out onto the floor, then froze. Kells’s voice was soft, but the wall between the two rooms was thin.

“Shut it, woman. If you wake the boy and get him in here, I’ll give you double.”

Her crying ceased.

“It was a slip, is all—a mistake. I went in with Mellon just to have a ginger-beer and hear about his new stake, and someone put a glass of jackaroo in front of me. It was down my throat before I knew what I was drinking, and then I was off. ’Twon’t happen again. Ye have my word on it.”

Tim lay back down again, hoping that was true.

He looked up at a ceiling he could not see, and listened to an owl, and waited for either sleep or the first light of morning. It seemed to him that if the wrong man stepped into the marriage-loop with a woman, it was a noose instead of a ring. He prayed that wasn’t the case here. He already knew he couldn’t like his mother’s new husband, let alone love him, but perhaps his mother could do both. Women were different. They had larger hearts.

Tim was still thinking these long thoughts as dawn tinted the sky and he finally fell asleep. That day there were bruises on both of his mother’s arms. The bedpost in the room she now shared with Big Kells had grown very lively, it seemed.

Full Earth gave way to Wide Earth, as it always must. Tim and Straw Willem went to work stacking at the sawmill, but only three days a week. The foreman, a decent sai named Rupert Venn, told them they might get more time if that season’s snowfall was light and the winter haul was good—meaning the ironwood rounds that cutters such as Kells brought back from the forest.

Nell’s bruises faded and her smile came back. Tim thought it a more cautious smile than before, but it was better than no smile at all. Kells hitched his mules and went down the Ironwood Trail, and although the stakes he and Big Ross had claimed were good ones, he still had no one to partner him. He consequently brought back less haul, but ironwood was ironwood, and

ironwood always sold for a good price, one paid in shards of silver rather than scrip.

Sometimes Tim wondered—usually as he was wheeling boards into one of the sawmill's long covered sheds—if life might be better were his new step-poppa to fall afoul a snake or a wervel. Perhaps even a vurt, those nasty flying things sometimes known as bullet-birds. One such had done for Bern Kells's father, boring a hole right through him with its stony beak.

Tim pushed these thoughts away with horror, amazed to find that some room in his heart—some *black* room—could hold such things. His father, Tim was sure, would be ashamed. Perhaps *was* ashamed, for some said that those in the clearing at the end of the path knew all the secrets the living kept from each other.

At least he no longer smelled graf on his stepfather's breath, and there were no more stories—from Straw Willem or anyone else—of Big Kells reeling out of the redeye when Old Gitty shut and locked the doors.

He promised and he's keeping his promise, Tim thought. And the bedpost has stopped moving around in Mama's room, because she doesn't have those bruises. Life's begun to come right. That's the thing to remember.

When he got home from the sawmill on the days he had work, his mother would have supper on the stove. Big Kells would come in later, first stopping to wash the sawdust from his hands, arms, and neck at the spring between the house and the barn, then gobbling his own supper. He ate prodigious amounts, calling for seconds and thirds that Nell brought promptly. She didn't speak when she did this; if she did, her new husband would only growl a response. Afterward, he would go into the back hall, sit on his trunk, and smoke.

Sometimes Tim would look up from his slate, where he was working the *mathmatica* problems the Widow Smack still gave him, and see Kells staring at him through his pipe-smoke. There was something disconcerting about that gaze, and Tim began to take his slate outside, even though it was growing chilly in Tree, and dark came earlier each day.

Once his mother came out, sat beside him on the porch step, and put her arm around his shoulders. “You’ll be back to school with sai Smack next year, Tim. It’s a promise. I’ll bring him round.”

Tim smiled at her and said thankee, but he knew better. Next year he’d still be at the sawmill, only by then he’d be big enough to carry boards as well as stack them, and there would be less time to do problems, because he’d have work five days a week instead of three. Mayhap even six. The year after that, he’d be planing as well as carrying, then using the swing-saw like a man. In a few more years he’d *be* a man, coming home too tired to think about reading the Widow Smack’s books even if she still wanted to lend them out, the orderly ways of the *mathematica* fading in his mind. That grown Tim Ross might want no more than to fall into bed after meat and bread. He would begin to smoke a pipe and perhaps get a taste for *graf* or beer. He would watch his mother’s smile grow pale; he would watch her eyes lose their sparkle.

And for these things he would have Bern Kells to thank.

Reaping was gone by; Huntress Moon grew pale, waxed again, and pulled her bow; the first gales of Wide Earth came howling in from the west. And just when it seemed he might not come after all, the Barony Covenanter blew into the village of Tree on one of those cold winds, astride his tall black horse and as thin as Tom Scrawny Death. His heavy black cloak flapped around him like a batwing. Beneath his wide hat (as black as his cloak), the pale lamp of his face turned ceaselessly from side to side, marking a new fence here, a cow or three added to a herd there. The villagers would grumble but pay, and if they couldn’t pay, their land would be taken in the name of Gilead. Perhaps even then, in those olden days, some were whispering it wasn’t fair, the taxes were too much, that Arthur Eld was long dead (if he had ever existed at all), and the Covenant had been paid a dozen times over, in blood as well as silver. Perhaps some of them were already waiting for a Good Man to appear, and make them strong enough to say *No more, enough’s enough, the world has moved on.*

Perhaps, but not that year, and not for many and many-a to come.

Late in the afternoon, while the swag-bellied clouds tumbled across the sky and the yellow cornstalks clattered in Nell's garden-like teeth in a loose jaw, sai Covenanter nudged his tall black horse between gateposts Big Ross had set up himself (with Tim looking on and helping when asked). The horse paced slowly and solemnly up to the front steps. There it halted, nodding and blowing. Big Kells stood on the porch and still had to look up to see the visitor's pallid face. Kells held his hat crushed to his breast. His thinning black hair (now showing the first streaks of gray, for he was nearing forty and would soon be old) flew around his head. Behind him in the doorway stood Nell and Tim. She had an arm around her boy's shoulders and was clutching him tightly, as if afraid (maybe 'twas a mother's intuition) that the Covenant Man might steal him away.

For a moment there was silence save for the flapping of the unwelcome visitor's cloak, and the wind, which sang an eerie tune beneath the eaves. Then the Barony Covenanter bent forward, regarding Kells with wide dark eyes that did not seem to blink. His lips, Tim saw, were as red as a woman's when she paints them with fresh madder. From somewhere inside his cloak he produced not a book of slates but a roll of real parchment paper, and pulled it down so 'twas long. He studied it, made it short again, and replaced it in whatever inner pocket it had come from. Then he returned his gaze to Big Kells, who flinched and looked at his feet.

"Kells, isn't it?" He had a rough, husky voice that made Tim's skin pucker into hard points of gooseflesh. He had seen the Covenant Man before, but only from a distance; his da' had made shift to keep Tim away from the house when the barony's tax-man came calling on his annual rounds. Now Tim understood why. He thought he would have bad dreams tonight.

"Kells, aye." His step-poppa's voice was shakily cheerful. He managed to raise his eyes again. "Welcome, sai. Long days and pleasant—"

“Yar, all that, all that,” the Covenant Man said with a dismissive wave of one hand. His dark eyes were now looking over Kells’s shoulder. “And . . . Ross, isn’t it? Now two instead of three, they tell me, Big Ross having fallen to unfortunate happenstance.” His voice was low, little more than a monotone. *Like listening to a deaf man try to sing a lullabye*, Tim thought.

“Just so,” Big Kells said. He swallowed hard enough for Tim to hear the gulping sound, then began to babble. “He n me were in the forest, ye ken, in one of our little stakes off the Ironwood Path—we have four or five, all marked proper wi’ our names, so they are, and I haven’t changed em, because in my mind he’s still my partner and always will be—and we got separated a bit. Then I heard a hiss. You know that sound when you hear it, there’s no sound on earth like the hiss of a bitch dragon drawrin in breath before she—”

“Hush,” the Covenant Man said. “When I want to hear a story, I like it to begin with ‘Once upon a bye.’”

Kells began to say something else—perhaps only to cry pardon—and thought better of it. The Covenant Man leaned an arm on the horn of his saddle and stared at him. “I understand you sold your house to Rupert Anderson, sai Kells.”

“Yar, and he cozened me, but I—”

The visitor overrode him. “The tax is nine knuckles of silver or one of rhodite, which I know you don’t have in these parts, but I’m bound to tell you, as it’s in the original Covenant. One knuck for the transaction, and eight for the house where you now sit your ass at sundown and no doubt hide your tallywhacker after moonrise.”

“Nine?” Big Kells gasped. “*Nine?* That’s—”

“It’s what?” the Covenant Man said in his rough, crooning voice. “Be careful how you answer, Bern Kells, son of Mathias, grandson of Limping Peter. Be ever so careful, because, although your neck is thick, I believe it would stretch thin. Aye, so I do.”

Big Kells turned pale . . . although not as pale as the Barony Covenanter. “It’s very fair. That’s all I meant to say. I’ll get it.”

He went into the house and came back with a deerskin purse. It was Big Ross’s moneysack, the one over which Tim’s mother had been crying on a day early on in Full Earth. A day when life had seemed fairer, even though Big Ross was dead. Kells handed the sack to Nell and let her count the precious knuckles of silver into his cupped hands.

All during this, the visitor sat silent on his tall black horse, but when Big Kells made to come down the steps and hand him the tax—almost all they had, even with Tim’s little bit of wages added into the common pot—the Covenant Man shook his head.

“Keep your place. I’d have the boy bring it to me, for he’s fair, and in his countenance I see his father’s face. Aye, I see it very well.”

Tim took the double handful of knucks—so heavy!—from Big Kells, barely hearing the whisper in his ear: “Have a care and don’t drop em, ye gormless boy.”

Tim walked down the porch steps like a boy in a dream. He held up his cupped hands, and before he knew what was happening, the Covenant Man had seized him by the wrists and hauled him up onto his horse. Tim saw that bow and pommel were decorated with a cascade of silver runes: moons and stars and comets and cups pouring cold fire. At the same time, he realized his double handful of knucks was gone. The Covenant Man had taken them, although Tim couldn’t remember exactly when it had happened.

Nell screamed and ran forward.

“Catch her and hold her!” the Covenant Man thundered, so close by Tim’s ear that he was near deafened on that side.

Kells grabbed his wife by the shoulders and jerked her roughly backwards. She tripped and tumbled to the porch boards, long skirts flying up around her ankles.

"Mama!" Tim shouted. He tried to jump from the saddle, but the Covenant Man restrained him easily. He smelled of campfire meat and old cold sweat. "Sit easy, young Tim Ross, she's not hurt a mite. See how spry she rises." Then, to Nell—who had indeed regained her feet: "Be not fashed, sai, I'd only have a word with him. Would I harm a future taxpayer of the realm?"

"If you harm him, I'll kill you, you devil," said she.

Kells raised a fist to her. "Shut yer stupid mouth, woman!" Nell did not shrink from the fist. She had eyes only for Tim, sitting on the high black horse in front of the Covenant Man, whose arms were banded across her son's chest.

The Covenant Man smiled down at the two on the porch, one with his fist still upraised to strike, the other with tears coursing down her cheeks. "Nell and Kells!" he proclaimed. "The happy couple!"

He kneed his mount in a circle and slow-walked it as far as the gate, his arms still firmly around Tim's chest, his rank breath puffing against Tim's cheek. At the gate he squeezed his knees again and the horse halted. In Tim's ear—which was still ringing—he whispered: "How does thee like thy new steppa, young Tim? Speak the truth, but speak it low. This is our palaver, and they have no part in it."

Tim didn't want to turn, didn't want the Covenant Man's pallid face any closer than it already was, but he had a secret that had been poisoning him. So he did turn, and in the tax-man's ear he whispered, "When he's in drink, he beats my ma."

"Does he, now? Ah, well, does that surprise me? For did not his da' beat his own ma? And what we learn as children sets as a habit, so it does."

A gloved hand threw one wing of the heavy black cloak over them like a blanket, and Tim felt the other gloved hand slither something small and hard into his pants pocket. "A gift for you, young Tim. It's a key. Does thee know what makes it special?"

Tim shook his head.

“’Tis a magic key. It will open anything, but only a single time. After that, ’tis as useless as dirt, so be careful how you use it!” He laughed as if this were the funniest joke he’d ever heard. His breath made Tim’s stomach churn.

“I . . .” He swallowed. “I have nothing to open. There’s no locks in Tree, ’cept at the redeye and the jail.”

“Oh, I think thee knows of another. Does thee not?”

Tim looked into the Covenant Man’s blackly merry eyes and said nothing. That worthy nodded, however, as if he had.

“What are you telling my son?” Nell screamed from the porch. *“Pour not poison in his ears, devil!”*

“Pay her no mind, young Tim, she’ll know soon enough. She’ll know much but see little.” He snickered. His teeth were very large and very white. “A riddle for you! Can you solve it? No? Never mind, the answer will come in time.”

“Sometimes he opens it,” Tim said, speaking in the slow voice of one who talks in his sleep. “He takes out his honing bar. For the blade of his ax. But then he locks it again. At night he sits on it to smoke, like it was a chair.”

The Covenant Man didn’t ask what *it* was. “And does he touch it each time he passes by, young Tim? As a man would touch a favorite old dog?”

He did, of course, but Tim didn’t say so. He didn’t need to say so. He felt there wasn’t a secret he could keep from the mind ticking away behind that long white face. Not one.

He’s playing with me, Tim thought. I’m just a bit of amusement on a dreary day in a dreary town he’ll soon leave behind. But he breaks his toys. You only have to look at his smile to know that.

“I’ll camp a wheel or two down the Ironwood Trail the next night or two,” the Covenant Man said in his rusty, tuneless voice. “It’s been a long ride, and I’m weary of all the quack I have to listen to. There are vurts and wervels and snakes in the forest, but they don’t *quack*.”

You’re never weary, Tim thought. Not you.

“Come and see me if you care to.” No snicker this time; this time he tittered like a naughty girl. “And if you *dare* to, of course. But come at night, for this jilly’s son likes to sleep in the day when he gets the chance. Or stay here if you’re timid. It’s naught to me. *Hup!*”

This was to the horse, which paced slowly back to the porch steps, where Nell stood wringing her hands and Big Kells stood glowering beside her. The Covenant Man’s thin strong fingers closed over Tim’s wrists again—like handcuffs—and lifted him. A moment later he was on the ground, staring up at the white face and smiling red lips. The key burned in the depths of his pocket. From above the house came a peal of thunder, and it began to rain.

“The Barony thanks you,” the Covenant Man said, touching one gloved finger to the side of his wide-brimmed hat. Then he wheeled his black horse around and was gone into the rain. The last thing Tim saw was passing odd: when the heavy black cloak belled out, he spied a large metal object tied to the top of the Covenant Man’s gunna. It looked like a washbasin.

Big Kells came striding down the steps, seized Tim by the shoulders, and commenced shaking him. Rain matted Kells’s thinning hair to the sides of his face and streamed from his beard. Black when he had slipped into the silk rope with Nell, that beard was now heavily streaked with gray.

“What did he tell’ee? Was it about me? What lies did’ee speak? *Tell!*”

Tim could tell him nothing. His head snapped back and forth hard enough to make his teeth clack together.

Nell rushed down the steps. “Stop it! Let him alone! You promised you’d never—”

“Get out of what don’t concern you, woman,” he said, and struck her with the side of his fist. Tim’s mama fell into the mud, where the teeming rain was now filling the tracks left by the Covenant Man’s horse.

“*You bastard!*” Tim screamed. “You can’t hit my mama, you can’t *ever!*”

He felt no immediate pain when Kells dealt him a similar sidehand blow, but white light sheared across his vision. When it lifted, he found himself lying in the mud next to his mother. He was dazed, his ears were ringing, and still the key burned in his pocket like a live coal.

“Nis take both of you,” Kells said, and strode away into the rain. Beyond the gate he turned right, in the direction of Tree’s little length of high street. Headed for Gitty’s, Tim had no doubt. He had stayed away from drink all of that Wide Earth—as far as Tim knew, anyway—but he would not stay away from it this night. Tim saw from his mother’s sorrowful face—wet with rain, her hair hanging limp against her reddening muck-splattered cheek—that she knew it, too.

Tim put his arm around her waist, she put hers about his shoulders. They made their way slowly up the steps and into the house.

She didn’t so much sit in her chair at the kitchen table as collapse into it. Tim poured water from the jug into the basin, wetted a cloth, and put it gently on the side of her face, which had begun to swell. She held it there for a bit, then extended it wordlessly to him. To please her, he took it and put it on his own face. It was cool and good against the throbbing heat.

“This is a pretty business, wouldn’t you say?” she asked, with an attempt at brightness. “Woman beaten, boy slugged, new husband off t’boozer.”

Tim had no idea what to say to this, so said nothing.

Nell lowered her head to the heel of her hand and stared at the table. “I’ve made such a mess of things. I was frightened and at my wits’ end, but that’s no excuse. We would have been better on the land, I think.”

Turned off the place? Away from the plot? Wasn’t it enough that his da’s ax and lucky coin were gone? She was right about one thing, though; it was a mess.

But I have a key, Tim thought, and his fingers stole down to his pants to feel the shape of it.

“Where has he gone?” Nell asked, and Tim knew it wasn’t Bern Kells she was speaking of.

A wheel or two down the Ironwood. Where he’ll wait for me.

“I don’t know, Mama.” So far as he could remember, it was the first time he had ever lied to her.

“But we know where Bern’s gone, don’t we?” She laughed, then winced because it hurt her face. “He promised Milly Redhouse he was done with the drink, and he promised me, but he’s weak. Or . . . is it me? Did I drive him to it, do you think?”

“No, Mama.” But Tim wondered if it might not be true. Not in the way she meant—by being a nag, or keeping a dirty house, or refusing him what men and women did in bed after dark—but in some other way. There was a mystery here, and he wondered if the key in his pocket might solve it. To keep from touching it again, he got up and went to the pantry. “What would you like to eat? Eggs? I’ll scramble them, if you do.”

She smiled wanly. “Thankee, son, but I’m not hungry. I think I’ll lie down.” She rose a bit shakily.

Tim helped her into the bedroom. There he pretended to look at interesting things out the window while she took off her mud-stained day dress and put on her nightgown. When Tim turned around again, she was under the covers. She patted the place beside her, as she had sometimes done when he was sma’. In those days his da’ might have been in bed beside her, wearing his long woodsman’s underwear and smoking one of his roll-ups.

“I can’t turn him out,” she said. “I would if I could, but now that the rope’s slipped, the place is more his than mine. The law can be cruel to a woman. I never had cause to think about that before, but now . . . now . . .” Her eyes had gone glassy and distant. She would sleep soon, and that was probably a good thing.

He kissed her unbruised cheek and made to get up, but she stayed him. “What did the Covenant Man say to thee?”

“Asked me how I liked my new step-da’. I can’t remember how I answered him. I was scared.”

“When he covered thee with his cloak, I was, too. I thought he meant to ride away with thee, like the Red King in the old story.” She closed her eyes, then opened them again, very slowly. There was something in them now that could have been horror. “I remember him coming to my da’s when I was but a wee girl not long out of clouts—the black horse, the black gloves and cape, the saddle with the silver siguls on it. His white face gave me nightmares—it’s so *long*. And do you know what, Tim?”

He shook his head slowly from side to side.

“He even carries the same silver basin roped on behind, for I saw it then, too. That’s twenty years a-gone—aye, twenty and a doubleton-deucy more—but he looks the same. *He hasn’t aged a day.*”

Her eyes closed again. This time they didn’t reopen, and Tim stole from the room.

When he was sure his mother was asleep, Tim went down the little bit of back hall to where Big Kells’s trunk, a squarish shape under an old remnant of blanket, stood just outside the mudroom. When he’d told the Covenant Man he knew of only two locks in Tree, the Covenant Man had replied, *Ob, I think thee knows of another.*

He stripped off the blanket and looked at his step-da’s trunk. The trunk he sometimes caressed like a well-loved pet and often sat upon at night, puffing at his pipe with the back door cracked open to let out the smoke.

Tim hurried back to the front of the house—in his stocking feet, so as not to risk waking his mother—and peered out the front window. The yard was empty, and there was no sign of Big Kells on the rainy road. Tim had expected nothing else. Kells would be at Gitty’s by now, getting through as much of what he had left as he could before falling down unconscious.

I hope somebody beats him up and gives him a taste of his own medicine. I'd do it myself, were I big enough.

He went back to the trunk, padding noiselessly in his stockings, knelt in front of it, and took the key from his pocket. It was a tiny silver thing the size of half a knuck, and strangely warm in his fingers, as if it were alive. The keyhole in the brass facing on the front of the trunk was much bigger. *The key he gave me will never work in that,* Tim thought. Then he remembered the Covenant Man saying *'Tis a magic key. It will open anything, but only a single time.*

Tim put the key in the lock, where it clicked smoothly home, as if it had been meant for just that place all along. When he applied pressure, it turned smoothly, but the warmth left it as soon as it did. Now there was nothing between his fingers but cold dead metal.

“After that, ’tis as useless as dirt,” Tim whispered, then looked around, half convinced he’d see Big Kells standing there with a scowl on his face and his hands rolled into fists. There was no one, so he unbuckled the straps and raised the lid. He cringed at the scream of the hinges and looked over his shoulder again. His heart was beating hard, and although that rainy evening was chilly, he could feel a dew of sweat on his forehead.

There were shirts and pants on top, stuffed in any whichway, most of them ragged. Tim thought (with a bitter resentment that was entirely new to him), *It's my Mama who'll wash them and mend them and fold them neat when he tells her to. And will he thank her with a blow to the arm or a punch to her neck or face?*

He pulled the clothes out, and beneath them found what made the trunk heavy. Kells’s father had been a carpenter, and here were his tools. Tim didn’t need a grownup to tell him they were valuable, for they were of made metal. *He could have sold these to pay the tax, he never uses them nor even knows how, I warrant. He could have sold them to someone who does—Haggerty the Nail, for instance—and paid the tax with a good sum left over.*

There was a word for that sort of behavior, and thanks to the Widow Smack’s teaching, Tim knew it. The word was *miser*.

He tried to lift the toolbox out, and at first couldn't. It was too heavy for him. Tim laid the hammers and screwdrivers and honing bar aside on the clothes. Then he could manage. Beneath were five ax-heads that would have made Big Ross slap his forehead in disgusted amazement. The precious steel was speckled with rust, and Tim didn't have to test with his thumb to see that the blades were dull. Nell's new husband occasionally honed his current ax, but hadn't bothered with these spare heads for a long time. By the time he needed them, they would probably be useless.

Tucked into one corner of the trunk were a small deerskin bag and an object wrapped in fine chamois cloth. Tim took this latter up, unwrapped it, and beheld the likeness of a woman with a sweetly smiling face. Masses of dark hair tumbled over her shoulders. Tim didn't remember Millicent Kells—he would have been no more than three or four when she passed into the clearing where we must all eventually gather—but he knew it was she.

He rewrapped it, replaced it, and picked up the little bag. From the feel there was only a single object inside, small but quite heavy. Tim pulled the drawstring with his fingers and tipped the bag. More thunder boomed, Tim jerked with surprise, and the object which had been hidden at the very bottom of Kells's trunk fell out into Tim's hand.

It was his father's lucky coin.

Tim put everything but his father's property back into the trunk, loading the toolbox in, returning the tools he'd removed to lighten it, and then piling in the clothes. He refastened the straps. All well enough, but when he tried the silver key, it turned without engaging the tumblers.

Useless as dirt.

Tim gave up and covered the trunk with the old piece of blanket again, fussing with it until it looked more or less as it had. It might serve. He'd often seen his new steppa pat the trunk and sit on the trunk, but only infrequently did he *open* the trunk, and then just to get his honing bar. Tim's burglary

might go undiscovered for a little while, but he knew better than to believe it would go undiscovered forever. There would come a day—maybe not until next month, but more likely next week (or even tomorrow!), when Big Kells would decide to get his bar, or remember that he had more clothes than the ones he'd brought in his kick-bag. He would discover the trunk was unlocked, he'd dive for the deerskin bag, and find the coin it had contained was gone. And then? Then his new wife and new stepson would take a beating. Probably a fearsome one.

Tim was afraid of that, but as he stared at the familiar reddish-gold coin on its length of silver chain, he was also truly angry for the first time in his life. It was not a boy's impotent fury but a man's rage.

He had asked Old Destry about dragons, and what they might do to a fellow. Did it hurt? Would there be . . . well . . . *parts* left? The farmer had seen Tim's distress and put a kindly arm around his shoulders. "Nar to both, son. Dragon's fire is the hottest fire there is—as hot as the liquid rock that sometimes drools from cracks in the earth far south of here. So all the stories say. A man caught in dragonblast is burned to finest ash in but a second—clothes, boots, buckle and all. So if you're asking did yer da' suffer, set yer mind at rest. 'Twas over for him in an instant."

Clothes, boots, buckle and all. But Da's lucky coin wasn't even smudged, and every link of the silver chain was intact. Yet he didn't take it off even to sleep. So what had happened to Big Jack Ross? And why was the coin in Kells's trunk? Tim had a terrible idea, and he thought he knew someone who could tell him if the terrible idea was right. If Tim were brave enough, that was.

Come at night, for this jilly's son likes to sleep in the day when he gets the chance.

It was night now, or almost.

His mother was still sleeping. By her hand Tim left his slate. On it he had written: I WILL BE BACK. DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME.

Of course, no boy who ever lived can comprehend how useless such a command must be when addressed to a mother.

Tim wanted nothing to do with either of Kells's mules, for they were ill-tempered. The two his father had raised from guffins were just the opposite. Misty and Bitsy were mollies, unsterilized females theoretically capable of bearing offspring, but Ross had kept them so for sweetness of temper rather than for breeding. "Perish the thought," he had told Tim when Tim was old enough to ask about such things. "Animals like Misty and Bitsy weren't meant to breed, and almost never give birth to true-threaded offspring when they do."

Tim chose Bitsy, who had ever been his favorite, leading her down the lane by her bridle and then mounting her bareback. His feet, which had ended halfway down the mule's sides when his da' had first lifted him onto her back, now came almost to the ground.

At first Bitsy plodded with her ears lopped dispiritedly down, but when the thunder faded and the rain slackened to a drizzle, she perked up. She wasn't used to being out at night, but she and Misty had been cooped up all too much since Big Ross had died, and she seemed eager enough to—

Maybe he's not dead.

This thought burst into Tim's mind like a skyrocket and for a moment dazzled him with hope. Maybe Big Ross was still alive and wandering somewhere in the Endless Forest—

Yar, and maybe the moon's made of green cheese, like Mama used to tell me when I was wee.

Dead. His heart knew it, just as he was sure his heart would have known if Big Ross were still alive. *Mama's heart would have known, too. She would have known and never married that . . . that . . .*

"That bastard."

Bitsy's ears pricked. They had passed the Widow Smack's house now, which was at the end of the high street, and the woodland scents were stronger: the light and spicy aroma of blossiewood and, overlaying that, the stronger, graver smell of ironwood. For a boy to go up the trail alone, with not so much as an ax to defend himself with, was madness. Tim knew it and went on just the same.

“That hitting *bastard*.”

This time he spoke in a voice so low it was almost a growl.

Bitsy knew the way, and didn't hesitate when Tree Road narrowed at the edge of the blossies. Nor did she when it narrowed again at the edge of the ironwood. But when Tim understood he was truly in the Endless Forest, he halted her long enough to rummage in his pack and bring out a gaslight he'd filched from the barn. The little tin bulb at the base was heavy with fuel, and he thought it would give at least an hour's light. Two, if he used it sparingly.

He popped a sulphur match with a thumbnail (a trick his da' had taught him), turned the knob where the bulb met the gaslight's long, narrow neck, and stuck the match through the little slot known as the marygate. The lamp bloomed with a blue-white glow. Tim raised it and gasped.

He had been this far up the Ironwood several times with his father, but never at night, and what he saw was awesome enough to make him consider going back. This close to civilization the best irons had been cut to stumps, but the ones that remained towered high above the boy on his little mule. Tall and straight and as solemn as Manni elders at a funeral (Tim had seen a picture of this in one of the Widow's books), they rose far beyond the light thrown by his puny lamp. They were completely smooth for the first forty feet or so. Above that, the branches leaped skyward like upraised arms, tangling the narrow trail with a cobweb of shadows. Because they were little more than thick black stakes at ground level, it would be possible to walk among them. Of course it would also be possible to cut your throat with a sharp stone. Anyone foolish enough to wander off the Ironwood Trail—or go beyond it—would quickly be lost in a maze, where he might well starve. If he were not eaten first, that was. As if to underline this idea, somewhere in the darkness a creature that sounded big uttered a hoarse chuckling sound.

Tim asked himself what he was doing here when he had a warm bed with clean sheets in the cottage where he had grown up. Then he touched his father's

lucky coin (now hanging around his own neck), and his resolve hardened. Bitsy was looking around as if to ask, *Well? Which way? Forward or back? You're the boss, you know.*

Tim wasn't sure he had the courage to extinguish the gaslight until it was done and he was in darkness again. Although he could no longer see the ironwoods, he could feel them crowding in.

Still: forward.

He squeezed Bitsy's flanks with his knees, clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and Bitsy got moving again. The smoothness of her gait told him she was keeping to the righthand wheelrut. The placidity of it told him she did not sense danger. At least not yet, and honestly, what did a mule know of danger? From that *he* was supposed to protect *her*. He was, after all, the boss.

Oh, Bitsy, he thought. If thee only knew.

How far had he come? How far did he still have to go? How far *would* he go before he gave this madness up? He was the only thing in the world his mother had left to love and depend on, so how far?

It felt like he'd ridden ten wheels or more since leaving the fragrant aroma of the blossies behind, but he knew better. As he knew that the rustling he heard was the Wide Earth wind in the high branches, and not some nameless beast padding along behind him with its jaws opening and closing in anticipation of a small evening snack. He knew this very well, so why did that wind sound so much like breathing?

I'll count to a hundred and then turn Bitsy around, he told himself, but when he reached a hundred and there was still nothing in the pitch black save for him and his brave little mollie-mule (*plus whatever beast treads behind us, closer and closer,* his traitorous mind insisted on adding), he decided he would go on to two hundred. When he reached one hundred and eighty-seven, he heard a branch snap. He lit the gaslight and whirled around, holding it high. The grim shadows seemed first to rear up, then leap forward to clutch him. And did something retreat from the light? Did he see the glitter of a red eye?

Surely not, but—

Tim hissed air through his teeth, turned the knob to shut off the gas, and clucked his tongue. He had to do it twice. Bitsy, formerly placid, now seemed uneasy about going forward. But, good and obedient thing that she was, she gave in to his command and once more began walking. Tim resumed his count, and reaching two hundred didn't take long.

I'll count back down to ought, and if I see no sign of him, I really will go back.

He had reached nineteen in this reverse count when he saw an orange-red flicker ahead and to his left. It was a campfire, and Tim was in no doubt of who had built it.

The beast stalking me was never behind, he thought. It's ahead. Yon flicker may be a campfire, but it's also the eye I saw. The red eye. I should go back while there's still time.

Then he touched the lucky coin lying against his breast and pushed on.

He lit his lamp again and lifted it. There were many short side-trails, called stubs, shooting off from either side of the main way. Just ahead, nailed to a humble birch, was a wooden board marking one of these. Daubed on it in black paint was *COSINGTON-MARCHLY*. Tim knew these men. Peter Cosington (who had suffered his own ill luck that year) and Ernest Marchly were cutters who had come to supper at the Ross cottage on many occasions, and the Ross family had many times eaten at one or the other of theirs.

“Fine fellows, but they won't go deep,” Big Ross told his son after one of these meals. “There's plenty of good ironwood left in close to the blossie, but the true treasure—the densest, purest wood—is in deep, close to where the trail ends at the edge of the Fagonard.”

So perhaps I only did come a wheel or two, but the dark changes everything.

He turned Bitsy up the Cosington-Marchly stub, and less than a minute later entered a clearing where the Covenant Man sat on a log before a cheery

campfire. “Why, here’s young Tim,” he said. “You’ve got balls, even if there won’t be hair on em for another year or three. Come, sit, have some stew.”

Tim wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to share whatever this strange fellow ate for his supper, but he’d had none of his own, and the smell wafting from the pot hung over the fire was savory.

Reading the cast of his young visitor’s thoughts with an accuracy that was unsettling, the Covenant Man said: “It’ll not poison thee, young Tim.”

“I’m sure not,” Tim said . . . but now that poison had been mentioned, he wasn’t sure at all. Nevertheless, he let the Covenant Man ladle a goodly helping onto a tin plate, and took the offered tin spoon, which was battered but clean.

There was nothing magical about the meal; the stew was beef, taters, carrots, and onions swimming in a flavorsome gravy. While he squatted on his hunkers and ate, Tim watched Bitsy cautiously approach his host’s black horse. The stallion briefly touched the humble mule’s nose, then turned away (rather disdainfully, Tim thought) to where the Covenant Man had spread a moit of oats on ground which had been carefully cleared of splinters—the leavings of sais Cosington and Marchly.

The tax collector made no conversation while Tim ate, only kicked repeatedly into the ground with one bootheel, making a small hole. Beside it was the basin that had been tied on top of the stranger’s gunna. It was hard for Tim to believe his mother had been right about it—a basin made of silver would be worth a fortune—but it certainly *looked* like silver. How many knucks would have to be melted and smelted to make such a thing?

The Covenant Man’s bootheel encountered a root. From beneath his cloak he produced a knife almost as long as Tim’s forearm and slit it at a stroke. Then he resumed with his heel: *thud* and *thud* and *thud*.

“Why does thee dig?” asked Tim.

The Covenant Man looked up long enough to flash the boy a thin smile. “Perhaps you’ll find out. Perhaps you won’t. I think you will. Have you finished your meal?”

“Aye, and say thankya.” Tim tapped his throat three times. “It was fine.”

“Good. Kissin don’t last, cookin do. So say the Manni-folk. I see you admiring my basin. It’s fine, isn’t it? A relic of Garlan that was. In Garlan there really were dragons, and bonfires of them still live deep in the Endless Forest, I feel sure. There, young Tim, you’ve learned something. Many lions is a pride; many crows is a murder; many bumblers is a throcket; many dragons is a bonfire.”

“A bonfire of dragons,” Tim said, tasting it. Then the full sense of what the Covenant Man had said came home to him. “If the dragons of the Endless Forest are in deep—”

But the Covenant Man interrupted before Tim could finish his thought. “Ta-ta, sha-sha, na-na. Save thy imaginings. For now, take the basin and fetch me water. You’ll find it at the edge of the clearing. You’ll want your little lamp, for the glow of the fire doesn’t reach so far, and there’s a pooky in one of the trees. He’s fair swole, which means he’s eaten not long ago, but I still wouldn’t draw water from beneath him.” He flashed another smile. Tim thought it a cruel one, but this was no surprise. “Although a boy brave enough to come into the Endless Forest with only one of his father’s mules for company must do as he likes.”

The basin *was* silver; it was too heavy to be anything else. Tim carried it clumsily beneath one arm. In his free hand he held up the gaslight. As he approached the far end of the clearing, he began to smell something brackish and unpleasant, and to hear a low smacking sound, like many small mouths. He stopped.

“You don’t want this water, sai, it’s stagnant.”

“Don’t tell me what I do or don’t want, young Tim, just fill the basin. And mind the pooky, do ya, I beg.”

The boy knelt, set the basin down in front of him, and looked at the sluggish little stream. The water teemed with fat white bugs. Their oversize heads were black, their eyes on stalks. They looked like waterborne maggots

and appeared to be at war. After a moment's study, Tim realized they were eating each other. His stew lurched in his stomach.

From above him came a sound like a hand gliding down a long length of sandpaper. He raised his gaslight. In the lowest branch of an ironwood tree to his left, a huge reddish snake hung down in coils. Its spade-shaped head, bigger than his mama's largest cooking pot, was pointed at Tim. Amber eyes with black slit pupils regarded him sleepily. A ribbon of tongue, split into a fork, appeared, danced, then snapped back, making a liquid *sloooop* sound.

Tim filled the basin with the stinking water as fast as he could, but with most of his attention fixed on the creature looking at him from above, several of the bugs got on his hands, where they immediately began to bite. He brushed them off with a low cry of pain and disgust, then carried the basin back to the campfire. He did this slowly and carefully, determined not to spill a drop on himself, because the foul water squirmed with life.

"If this is to drink or to wash . . ."

The Covenant Man looked at him with his head cocked to one side, waiting for him to finish, but Tim couldn't. He just put the basin down beside the Covenant Man, who seemed to have done with his pointless hole.

"Not to drink, not to wash, although we could do either, if we wanted to."

"You're joking, sai! It's *foul!*"

"The *world* is foul, young Tim, but we build up a resistance, don't we? We breathe its air, eat its food, do its doings. Yes. Yes, we do. Never mind. Hunker."

The Covenant Man pointed to a spot, then rummaged in his gunna. Tim watched the bugs eating each other, revolted but fascinated. Would they go on until only one—the strongest—was left?

"Ah, here we are!" His host produced a steel rod with a white tip that looked like ivory, and squatted so the two of them faced each other above the lively brew in the basin.

Tim stared at the steel rod in the gloved hand. "Is that a magic wand?"

The Covenant Man appeared to consider. "I suppose so. Although it started life as the gearshift of a Dodge Dart. America's economy car, young Tim."

"What's America?"

"A kingdom filled with toy-loving idiots. It has no part in our palaver. But know this, and tell your children, should you ever be so unfortunate as to have any: in the proper hand, any object can be magic. Now watch!"

The Covenant Man threw back his cloak to fully free his arm, and passed the wand over the basin of murky, infested water. Before Tim's wide eyes, the bugs fell still . . . floated on the surface . . . disappeared. The Covenant Man made a second pass and the murk disappeared, as well. The water did indeed now look drinkable. In it, Tim found himself staring down at his own amazed face.

"Gods! How did—"

"Hush, stupid boy! Disturb the water even the slightest bit and thee'll see nothing!"

The Covenant Man passed his makeshift wand over the basin yet a third time, and Tim's reflection disappeared just as the bugs and the murk had. What replaced it was a shivery vision of Tim's own cottage. He saw his mother, and he saw Bern Kells. Kells was walking unsteadily into the kitchen from the back hall where he kept his trunk. Nell was standing between the stove and the table, wearing the nightgown she'd had on when Tim last saw her. Kells's eyes were red-rimmed and bulging in their sockets. His hair was plastered to his forehead. Tim knew that, if he had been in that room instead of only watching it, he would have smelled redeye jackaroe around the man like a fog. His mouth moved, and Tim could read the words as they came from his lips: *How did you open my trunk?*

No! Tim wanted to cry. *Not her, me!* But his throat was locked shut.

"Like it?" the Covenant Man whispered. "Enjoying the show, are you?"

Nell first shrank back against the pantry door, then turned to run. Kells seized her before she could, one hand gripping her shoulder, the other wrapped in her hair. He shook her back and forth like a Rag Sally, then threw her

against the wall. He swayed back and forth in front of her, as if about to collapse. But he didn't fall, and when Nell once more tried to run, he seized the heavy ceramic jug that stood by the sink—the same water-jug Tim had poured from earlier to ease her hurt—and brought it crashing into the center of her forehead. It shattered, leaving him holding nothing but the handle. Kells dropped it, grabbed his new wife, and began to rain blows upon her.

“NO!” Tim screamed.

His breath ruffled the water and the vision was gone.

Tim sprang to his feet and lunged toward Bitsy, who was looking at him in surprise. In his mind, the son of Jack Ross was already riding back down the Ironwood Trail, urging Bitsy with his heels until she was running full-out. In reality, the Covenant Man seized him before he could manage three steps, and hauled him back to the campfire.

“Ta-ta, na-na, young Tim, be not so speedy! Our palaver's well begun but far from done.”

“Let me loose! She's dying, if he ain't killed her already! Unless . . . was it a glam? Your little joke?” If so, Tim thought, it was the meanest joke ever played on a boy who loved his mother. Yet he hoped it was. He hoped the Covenant Man would laugh and say *I really pulled your snout that time, didn't I, young Tim?*

The Covenant Man was shaking his head. “No joke and no glammer, for the basin never lies. It's already happened, I fear. Terrible what a man in drink may do to a woman, isn't it? Yet look again. This time thee may find some comfort.”

Tim fell on his knees in front of the basin. The Covenant Man flicked his steel stick over the water. A vague mist seemed to pass above it . . . or perhaps it was only a trick of Tim's eyes, which were filled with tears. Whichever it was, the obscurity faded. Now in the shallow pool he saw the porch of their cottage, and a woman who seemed to have no face bending over Nell. Slowly,

slowly, with the newcomer's help, Nell was able to get to her feet. The woman with no face turned her toward the front door, and Nell began taking shuffling, painful steps in that direction.

"She's alive!" Tim shouted. "My mama's alive!"

"So she is, young Tim. Bloody but unbowed. Well . . . a *bit* bowed, p'raps." He chuckled.

This time Tim had shouted across the basin rather than into it, and the vision remained. He realized that the woman helping his mother appeared to have no face because she was wearing a veil, and the little burro he could see at the very edge of the wavering picture was Sunshine. He had fed, watered, and walked Sunshine many times. So had the other pupils at the little Tree school; it was part of what the headmistress called their "tuition," but Tim had never seen her actually ride him. If asked, he would have said she was probably unable. Because of her shakes.

"That's the Widow Smack! What's *she* doing at our house?"

"Perhaps you'll ask her, young Tim."

"Did you send her, somehow?"

Smiling, the Covenant Man shook his head. "I have many hobbies, but rescuing damsels in distress isn't one of them." He bent close to the basin, the brim of his hat shading his face. "Oh, dearie me. I believe she's *still* in distress. Which is no surprise; it was a terrible beating she took. People say the truth can be read in a person's eyes, but look at the hands, I always say. Look at your mama's, young Tim!"

Tim bent close to the water. Supported by the Widow, Nell crossed the porch with her spread hands held out before her, and she was walking toward the wall instead of the door, although the porch was not wide and the door right in front of her. The Widow gently corrected her course, and the two women went inside together.

The Covenant Man used his tongue to make a *tch-tch* sound against the roof of his mouth. "Doesn't look good, young Tim. Blows to the head can be very

nasty things. Even when they don't kill, they can do terrible damage. *Lasting damage.*" His words were grave, but his eyes twinkled with unspeakable merriment.

Tim barely noticed. "I have to go. My mother needs me."

Once again he started for Bitsy. This time he got almost half a dozen steps before the Covenant Man laid hold of him. His fingers were like rods of steel. "Before you go, Tim—and with my blessing, of course—you have one more thing to do."

Tim felt as if he might be going mad. *Maybe, he thought, I'm in bed with tick fever and dreaming all this.*

"Take my basin back to the stream and dump it. But not where you got it, because yon pooky has begun to look far too interested in his surroundings."

The Covenant Man picked up Tim's gaslight, twisted the feed-knob fully open, and held it up. The snake now hung down for most of its length. The last three feet, however—the part ending in the pooky's spade-shaped head—was raised and weaving from side to side. Amber eyes stared raptly into Tim's blue ones. Its tongue lashed out—*sloooop*—and for a moment Tim saw two long curved fangs. They sparkled in the glow cast by the gaslight.

"Go to the left of him," the Covenant Man advised. "I shall accompany you and stand watch."

"Can't you just dump it yourself? I want to go to my mother. I *need* to—"

"Your mother isn't why I brought you here, young Tim." The Covenant Man seemed to grow taller. "*Now do as I say.*"

Tim picked up the basin and cut across the clearing to his left. The Covenant Man, still holding up the gaslight, kept between him and the snake. The pooky had swiveled to follow their course but made no attempt to follow, although the ironwoods were so close and their lowest branches so intertwined, it could have done so with ease.

"This stub is part of the Cosington-Marchly stake," the Covenant Man said chattily. "Perhaps thee read the sign."

“Aye.”

“A boy who can read is a treasure to the Barony.” The Covenant Man was now treading so close to Tim that it made the boy’s skin prickle. “You will pay great taxes some day—always assuming you don’t die in the Endless Forest this night . . . or the next . . . or the night after that. But why look for storms that are still over the horizon, eh?”

“You know whose stake this is, but I know a little more. Discovered it when I made my rounds, along with news of Frankie Simons’s broken leg, the Wyland baby’s milk-sick, the Riverlys’ dead cows—about which they’re lying through their few remaining teeth, if I know my business, and I do—and all sorts of other interesting fiddle-de-dum. How people talk! But here’s the point, young Tim. I discovered that, early on in Full Earth, Peter Cosington was caught under a tree that fell wrong. Trees will do that from time to time, especially ironwood. I believe that ironwood trees actually *think*, which is where the tradition of crying their pardon before each day’s chopping comes from.”

“I know about sai Cosington’s accident,” Tim said. In spite of his anxiety, he was curious about this turn of the conversation. “My mama sent them a soup, even though she was in mourning for my da’ at the time. The tree fell across his back, but not *square* across. That would have killed him. What of it? He’s better these days.”

They were near the water now, but the smell here was less strong and Tim heard none of those smacking bugs. That was good, but the pooky was still watching them with hungry interest. Bad.

“Yar, Square Fella Cosie’s back to work and we all say thankya. But while he was laid up—for two weeks before your da’ met his dragon and for six weeks after—this stub and all the others in the Cosington-Marchly stake were empty, because Ernie Marchly’s not like your steppa. Which is to say, he won’t come cutting in the Endless Forest without a pard. But of course—*also* not like your steppa—Slow Ernie actually *has* a pard.”

Tim remembered the coin lying against his skin, and why he'd come on this mad errand in the first place. "There *was* no dragon! If there'd been a dragon, it would have burned up my da's lucky coin with the rest of him! And why was it in Kells's trunk?"

"Dump out my basin, young Tim. I think you'll find there are no bugs in the water to trouble thee. No, not here."

"But I want to know—"

"Close thy clam and dump my basin, for you'll not leave this clearing while it's full."

Tim knelt to do as he was told, wanting only to complete the chore and be gone. He cared nothing about Peter "Square Fella" Cosington, and didn't believe the man in the black cloak did, either. *He's teasing me, or torturing me. Maybe he doesn't even know the difference. But as soon as this damn basin is empty, I'll mount Bitsy and ride back as fast as I can. Let him try to stop me. Just let him tr—*

Tim's thoughts broke as cleanly as a dry stick under a bootheel. He lost his hold on the basin and it fell upsy-turvy in the matted underbrush. There were no bugs in the water here, the Covenant Man was right about that; the stream was as clear as the water that flowed from the spring near their cottage. Lying six or eight inches below the surface was a human body. The clothes were only rags that floated in the current. The eyelids were gone, and so was most of the hair. The face and arms, once deeply tanned, were now as pale as alabaster. But otherwise, the body of Big Jack Ross was perfectly preserved. If not for the emptiness in those lidless, lashless eyes, Tim could have believed his father might rise, dripping, and fold him into an embrace.

The pooky made its hungry *sloooop*.

Something broke inside of Tim at the sound, and he began to scream.

The Covenant Man was forcing something into Tim's mouth. Tim tried to fend him off, but it did no good. The Covenant Man simply seized Tim's hair at the back of his head, and when Tim yelled, the mouth of a flask

was shoved between his teeth. Some fiery liquid gushed down his throat. Not redevye, for instead of making him drunk, it calmed him. More—it made him feel like an icy visitor in his own head.

“That will wear off in ten minutes, and then I’ll let you go your course,” the Covenant Man said. His jocularitv was gone. He no longer called the boy young Tim; he no longer called him anything. “Now dig out thy ears and listen. I began to hear stories in Tavares, forty wheels east of here, of a woodsman who’d been cooked by a dragon. It was on everyone’s lips. A bitch dragon as big as a house, they said. I knew it was bullshit. I believe there might still be a tyger somewhere in the forest—”

At that the Covenant Man’s lips twitched in a rictus of a grin, there and gone almost too quickly to see.

“—but a dragon? Never. There hasn’t been one this close to civilization for years ten times ten, and never one as big as a house. My curiosity was aroused. Not because Big Ross is a taxpayer—or *was*—although that’s what I’d’ve told the toothless multitude, were any member of it trig enough—and brave enough—to ask. No, it was curiosity for its own sake, because wanting to know secrets has always been my besetting vice. Someday ’twill be the death of me, I have no doubt.

“I was camped on the Ironwood Trail last night, too—before I started my rounds. Only last night I went all the way to the trail’s end. The signs on the last few stubs before the Fagonard Swamp say Ross and Kells. There I filled my basin at the last clear stream before the swamp begins, and what did I see in the water? Why, a sign reading Cosington-Marchly. I packed up my gunna, mounted Blackie, and rode him back here, just to see what I might see. There was no need to consult the basin again; I saw where yon pooky would not venture and where the bugs hadn’t polluted the stream. The bugs are voracious flesh-eaters, but according to the old wives, they’ll not eat the flesh of a virtuous man. The old wives are often wrong, but not about that, it seems. The chill of the water has preserved him, and he appears to be unmarked, because

the man who murdered him struck from behind. I saw the riven skull when I turned him over, and have put him back as you see him now to spare you that sight.” The Covenant Man paused, then added: “And so he’d see you, I suppose, if his essence lingers near his corse. On that, the old wives reach no consensus. Still all right, or would you like another small dose of nen?”

“I’m all right.” Never had he told such a lie.

“I felt quite sure of who the culprit was—as you do, I reckon—but any remaining doubts were put to rest at Gitty’s Saloon, my first stop in Tree. The local boozers always good for a dozen knucks come tax time, if not more. There I found out that Bern Kells had slipped the rope with his dead partner’s widow.”

“Because of *you*,” Tim said in a monotone that didn’t sound like his own voice at all. “Because of your gods-damned *taxes*.”

The Covenant Man laid a hand on his breast and spoke in wounded tones. “You wrong me! ’Twasn’t *taxes* that kept Big Kells burning in his bed all these years, aye, even when he still had a woman next to him to quench his torch.”

He went on, but the stuff he called nen was wearing off, and Tim lost the sense of the words. Suddenly he was no longer cold but hot, burning up, and his stomach was a churning bag. He staggered toward the remains of the campfire, fell on his knees, and vomited his supper into the hole the Covenant Man had been digging with his bootheel.

“There!” the man in the black cloak said in a tone of hearty self-congratulation. “I *thought* that might come in handy.”

“**You’ll want to go** and see your mother now,” said the Covenant Man when Tim had finished puking and was sitting beside the dying campfire with his head down and his hair hanging in his eyes. “Good son that you are. But I have something you may want. One more minute. It’ll make no difference to Nell Kells; she is as she is.”

“Don’t call her so!” Tim spat.

“How can I not? Is she not wed? Marry in haste, repent at leisure, the old folken say.” The Covenant Man squatted once more in front of his heaped gunna, his cloak billowing around him like the wings of an awful bird. “They also say what’s slipped cannot be unslipped, and they say true. An amusing concept called *divorce* exists on some levels of the Tower, but not in our charming little corner of Mid-World. Now let me see . . . it’s here somewhere . . .”

“I don’t understand why Square Peter and Slow Ernie didn’t find him,” Tim said dully. He felt deflated, empty. Some emotion still pulsed deep in his heart, but he didn’t know what it was. “This is their plot . . . their stake . . . and they’ve been back cutting ever since Cosington was well enough to work again.”

“Aye, they cut the iron, but not here. They’ve plenty of other stubs. They’ve left this one fallow for a bit. Does thee not know why?”

Tim supposed he did. Square Peter and Slow Ernie were good and kindly, but not the bravest men ever to log the iron, which was why they didn’t go much deeper into the forest than this. “They’ve been waiting for the pooky to move on, I wot.”

“It’s a wise child,” the Covenant Man said approvingly. “He wots well. And how does thee think thy steppa felt, knowing yon treeworm might move on at any time, and those two come back? Come back and find his crime, unless he screws up enough gut to come himself and move the body deeper into the woods?”

The new emotion in Tim’s heart was pulsing more strongly now. He was glad. Anything was better than the helpless terror he felt for his mother. “I hope he feels bad. I hope he can’t sleep.” And then, with dawning understanding: “It’s why he went back to the drink.”

“A wise child indeed, wise beyond his— Ah! Here it is!”

The Covenant Man turned toward Tim, who was now untying Bitsy and preparing to mount up. He approached the boy, holding something beneath his

cloak. “He did it on impulse, sure, and afterward he must have been in a panic. Why else would he concoct such a ridiculous story? The other woodsmen doubt it, of that you may be sure. He built a fire and leaned into it as far as he dared and for as long as he could take it, scorching his clothes and blistering his skin. I know, because I built my fire on the bones of his. But first he threw his dead pard’s gunna across yon stream, as far into the woods as his strength would allow. Did it with your da’s blood not yet dry on his hands, I warrant. I waded across and found it. Most of it’s useless mickle, but I saved thee one thing. It was rusty, but my pumice stone and honing bar have cleaned it up very well.”

From beneath his cloak he produced Big Ross’s hand-ax. Its freshly sharpened edge glittered. Tim, now astride Bitsy, took it, brought it to his lips, and kissed the cold steel. Then he shoved the handle into his belt, blade turned out from his body, just as Big Ross had taught him, once upon a bye.

“I see you wear a rhodite double around your neck. Was it your da’s?”

Mounted, Tim was almost eye-to-eye with the Covenant Man. “It was in that murdering bastard’s trunk.”

“You have his coin; now you have his ax, as well. Where will you put it, I wonder, if ka offers you the chance?”

“In his head.” The emotion—pure rage—had broken free of his heart like a bird with its wings on fire. “Back or front, either will do me fine.”

“Admirable! I like a boy with a plan! Go with all the gods you know, and the Man Jesus for good measure.” Then, having wound the boy to his fullest stop, he turned to build up his fire. “I may bide along the Iron for another night or two. I find Tree strangely interesting this Wide Earth. Watch for the green sighe, my boy! She glows, so she does!”

Tim made no reply, but the Covenant Man felt sure he had heard.

Once they were wound to the fullest stop, they always did.

The Widow Smack must have been watching from the window, for Tim had just led a footsore Bitsy up to the porch (in spite of his growing anxiety he had walked the last half-mile to spare her) when she came rushing out.

“Thank gods, thank gods. Your mother was three quarters to believing you were dead. Come in. Hurry. Let her hear and touch you.”

The import of these words didn't strike Tim fully until later. He tied Bitsy beside Sunshine and hurried up the steps. “How did you know to come to her, sai?”

The Widow turned her face to him (which, given her veil, was hardly a face at all). “Has thee gone soft in the head, Timothy? You rode past my house, pushing that mule for all she was worth. I couldn't think why you'd be out so late, and headed in the direction of the forest, so I came here to ask your mother. But come, come. And keep a cheery voice, if you love her.”

The Widow led him across the living room, where two 'seners burned low. In his mother's room another 'sener burned on the bed table, and by its light he saw Nell lying in bed with much of her face wrapped in bandages and another—this one badly bloodstained—around her neck like a collar.

At the sound of their footsteps, she sat up with a wild look upon her face. “If it's Kells, stay away! You've done enough!”

“It's Tim, Mama.”

She turned toward him and held out her arms. “Tim! To me, to me!”

He knelt beside the bed, and the part of her face not covered by bandages he covered with kisses, crying as he did so. She was still wearing her nightgown, but now the neck and bosom were stiff with rusty blood. Tim had seen his steppa fetch her a terrible lick with the ceramic jug, and then commence with his fists. How many blows had he seen? He didn't know. And how many had fallen on his hapless mother after the vision in the silver basin had disappeared? Enough so he knew she was very fortunate to be alive, but one of those blows—likely the one dealt with the ceramic jug—had struck his mother blind.

“**’Twas a concussive blow,**” the Widow Smack said. She sat in Nell’s bedroom rocker; Tim sat on the bed, holding his mother’s left hand. Two fingers of the right were broken. The Widow, who must have been very busy since her fortuitous arrival, had splinted them with pieces of kindling and flannel strips torn from another of Nell’s nightgowns. “I’ve seen it before. There’s swelling to the brain. When it goes down, her sight may return.”

“May,” Tim said bleakly.

“There will be water if God wills it, Timothy.”

Our water is poisoned now, Tim thought, *and it was none of any god’s doing.* He opened his mouth to say just that, but the Widow shook her head. “She’s asleep. I gave her an herb drink—not strong, I didn’t dare give her strong after he cuffed her so around the head—but it’s taken hold. I wasn’t sure ’twould.”

Tim looked down at his mother’s face—terribly pale, with freckles of blood still drying on the little exposed skin the Widow’s bandagements had left—and then back up at his teacher. “She’ll wake again, won’t she?”

The Widow repeated, “There will be water if God wills it.” Then the ghost-mouth beneath the veil lifted in what might have been a smile. “In this case, I think there will be. She’s strong, your ma.”

“Can I talk to you, sai? For if I don’t talk to someone, I’ll explode.”

“Of course. Come out on the porch. I’ll stay here tonight, by your leave. Will you have me? And will you stable Sunshine, if so?”

“Aye,” Tim said. In his relief, he actually managed a smile. “And say thankya.”

The air was even warmer. Sitting in the rocker that had been Big Ross’s favorite roost on summer nights, the Widow said, “It feels like starkblast weather. Call me crazy—you wouldn’t be the first—but so it does.”

“What’s that, sai?”

“Never mind, it’s probably nothing . . . unless you see Sir Throcken dancing in the starlight or looking north with his muzzle upraised, that is. There hasn’t

been a starkblast in these parts since I was a weebee, and that's many and many-a year a-gone. We've other things to talk about. Is it only what that beast did to your mother that troubles you so, or is there more?"

Tim sighed, not sure how to start.

"I see a coin around your neck that I believe I've seen around your father's. Perhaps that's where you'll begin. But there's one other thing we have to speak of first, and that's protecting your ma. I'd send you to Constable Howard's, no matter it's late, but his house is dark and shuttered. I saw that for myself on my way here. No surprise, either. Everyone knows that when the Covenant Man comes to Tree, Howard Tasley finds some reason to make himself scarce. I'm an old woman and you're but a child. What will we do if Bern Kells comes back to finish what he started?"

Tim, who no longer felt like a child, reached down to his belt. "My father's coin isn't all I found tonight." He pulled Big Ross's hand-ax and showed it to her. "This was also my da's, and if he dares to come back, I'll put it in his head, where it belongs."

The Widow Smack began to remonstrate, but saw a look in his eyes that made her change direction. "Tell me your tale," said she. "Leave out not a word."

When Tim had finished—minding the Widow's command to leave nothing out, he made sure to tell what his mother had said about the peculiar changelessness of the man with the silver basin—his old teacher sat quietly for a moment . . . although the night breeze caused her veil to flutter eerily and made her look as though she were nodding.

"She's right, you know," she said at last. "Yon chary man hasn't aged a day. And tax collecting's not his job. I think it's his hobby. He's a man with *hobbies*, aye. He has his little *pastimes*." She raised her fingers in front of her veil, appeared to study them, then returned them to her lap.

"You're not shaking," Tim ventured.

“No, not tonight, and that’s a good thing if I’m to sit vigil at your mother’s bedside. Which I mean to do. You, Tim, will make yourself a pallet behind the door. ’Twill be uncomfortable, but if your steppa comes back, and if you’re to have a chance against him, you’ll have to come at him from behind. Not much like Brave Bill in the stories, is it?”

Tim’s hands rolled shut, the fingernails digging into his palms. “It’s how the bastard did for my da’, and all he deserves.”

She took one of his hands in her own and soothed it open. “He’ll probably not come back, anyway. Certainly not if he thinks he’s done for her, and he may. There was so much blood.”

“*Bastard,*” Tim said in a low and choking voice.

“He’s probably lying up drunk somewhere. Tomorrow you must go to Square Peter Cosington and Slow Ernie Marchly, for it’s their patch where your da’ now lies. Show them the coin you wear, and tell how you found it in Kells’s trunk. They can round up a posse and search until Kells is found and locked up tight in the jailhouse. It won’t take them long to run him down, I warrant, and when he comes back sober, he’ll claim he has no idea of what he’s done. He may even be telling the truth, for when it gets in some men, strong drink draws down a curtain.”

“I’ll go with them.”

“Nay, it’s no work for a boy. Bad enough you have to watch for him tonight with your da’s hand-ax. Tonight you need to be a man. Tomorrow you can be a boy again, and a boy’s place when his mother has been badly hurt is by her side.”

“The Covenant Man said he might bide along the Ironwood Trail for another night or two. Maybe I should—”

The hand that had soothed moments before now grasped Tim’s wrist where the flesh was thin, and hard enough to hurt. “Never think it! Hasn’t he done damage enough?”

“What are you saying? That he made all this happen? It was Kells who killed my da’, and it was Kells who beat my mama!”

“But ’twas the Covenant Man who gave you the key, and there’s no telling what else he may have done. Or *will* do, if he gets the chance, for he leaves ruin and weeping in his wake, and has for time out of mind. Do you think people only fear him because he has the power to turn them out on the land if they can’t pay the barony taxes? No, Tim, no.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Nay, nor need to, for I know what he *is*—pestilence with a heartbeat. Once upon a bye, after he’d done a foul business here I’d not talk about to a boy, I determined to find out what I could. I wrote a letter to a great lady I knew long ago in Gilead—a woman of discretion as well as beauty, a rare combination—and paid good silver for a messenger to take it and bring a reply . . . which my correspondent in the great city begged me to burn. She said that when Gilead’s Covenant Man is not at his *hobby* of collecting taxes—a job that comes down to licking the tears from the faces of poor working folk—he’s an advisor to the palace lords who call themselves the Council of Eld. Although it’s only themselves who claim they have any blood connection to the Eld. ’Tis said he’s a great mage, and there may be at least some truth in that, for you’ve seen his magic at work.”

“So I have,” Tim said, thinking of the basin. And of the way sai Covenant Man seemed to grow taller when he was wroth.

“My correspondent said there are even some who claim he’s Maerlyn, he who was court mage to Arthur Eld himself, for Maerlyn was said to be eternal, a creature who lives backward in time.” From behind the veil came a snorting sound. “Just thinking of it makes my head hurt, for such an idea makes no earthly sense.”

“But Maerlyn was a white magician, or so the stories do say.”

“Those who claim the Covenant Man’s Maerlyn in disguise say he was turned evil by the glam of the Wizard’s Rainbow, for he was given the keeping of it in

the days before the Elden Kingdom fell. Others say that, during his wanderings after the fall, he discovered certain artyfax of the Old People, became fascinated by them, and was blackened by them to the bottom of his soul. This happened in the Endless Forest, they say, where he still keeps in a magic house where time stands still.”

“Doesn’t seem too likely,” Tim said . . . although he was fascinated by the idea of a magic house where clock hands never moved and sand never fell in the glass.

“Bullshit is what it is!” And, noting his shocked look: “Cry your pardon, but sometimes only vulgarity will serve. Even Maerlyn couldn’t be two places at the same time, mooning around the Endless Forest at one end of the North’rd Barony and serving the lords and gunslingers of Gilead at the other. Nay, the tax man’s no Maerlyn, but he is a magician—a black one. So said the lady I once taught, and so I believe. That’s why you must never go near him again. Any good he offers to do you will be a lie.”

Tim considered this, then asked: “Do you know what a sighe is, sai?”

“Of course. The sighe are the fairy-folk, who supposedly live in the deep woods. Did the dark man speak of them?”

“No, ’twas just some story Straw Willem told me one day at the sawmill.”

Now why did I lie?

But deep in his heart, Tim knew.

Bern Kells didn’t come back that night, which was for the best. Tim meant to stay on guard, but he was just a boy, and exhausted. *I’ll close my eyes for a few seconds, to rest them*, was what he told himself when he lay down on the straw pallet he made for himself behind the door, and it *felt* like no more than a few seconds, but when he opened them again, the cottage was filled with morning light. His father’s ax lay on the floor beside him, where his relaxing hand had dropped it. He picked it up, put it back in his belt, and hurried into the bedroom to see his mother.

The Widow Smack was fast asleep in the Tavares rocker, which she had drawn up close to Nell's bed, her veil fluttering with her snores. Nell's eyes were wide open, and they turned toward the sound of Tim's steps. "Who comes?"

"Tim, Mama." He sat beside her on the bed. "Has your sight come back? Even a little?"

She tried to smile, but her swollen mouth could do little more than twitch. "Still dark, I'm afraid."

"It's all right." He raised the hand that wasn't splinted and kissed the back of it. "Probably still too early."

Their voices had roused the Widow. "He says true, Nell."

"Blind or not, next year we'll be turned out for sure, and then what?"

Nell turned her face to the wall and began to cry. Tim looked at the Widow, not sure what to do. She motioned for him to leave. "I'll give her something to calm her—'tis in my bag. You have men to see, Tim. Go at once, or they'll be off to the woods."

He might have missed Peter Cosington and Ernie Marchly anyway, if Baldy Anderson, one of Tree's big farmers, hadn't stopped by the pair's storing shed to chat as they hitched their mules and prepared for the day. The three men listened to his story in grim silence, and when Tim finally stumbled to a halt, telling them his mother was still blind this morning, Square Peter gripped Tim by the upper arms and said, "Count on us, boy. We'll rouse every ax-man in town, those who work the blossies as well as those who go up the Ironwood. There'll be no cutting in the forest today."

Anderson said, "And I'll send my boys around to the farmers. To Destry and to the sawmill, as well."

"What about the constable?" Slow Ernie asked, a trifle nervously.

Anderson dipped his head, spat between his boots, and wiped his chin with the heel of his hand. "Gone up Tavares way, I hear, either looking for poachers

or visiting the woman he keeps up there. Makes no difference. Howard Tasley en't never been worth a fart in a high wind. We'll do the job ourselves, and have Kells juggled by the time he comes back."

"With a pair of broken arms, if he kicks up rough," Cosington added. "He's never been able to hold his drink or his temper. He was all right when he had Jack Ross to rein 'im in, but look what it's come to! Nell Ross beaten blind! Big Kells always kept a warm eye for her, and the only one who didn't know it was—"

Anderson hushed him with an elbow, then turned to Tim, bending forward with his hands on his knees, for he was tallish. "'Twas the Covenant Man who found your da's corse?"

"Aye."

"And you saw the body yourself."

Tim's eyes filled, but his voice was steady enough. "Aye, so I did."

"On our stake," Slow Ernie said. "T'back of one of our stubs. The one where the pooky's set up housekeeping."

"Aye."

"I could kill him just for that," Cosington said, "but we'll bring him alive if we can. Ernie, you n me'd best ride up there and bring back the . . . you know, remains . . . before we get in on the search. Baldy, can you get the word around on your own?"

"Aye. We'll gather at the mercantile. Keep a good eye out along the Ironwood Trail as you go, boys, but my best guess is that we'll find the booger in town, laid up drunk." And, more to himself than to the others: "I *never* believed that dragon story."

"Start behind Gitty's," Slow Ernie said. "He's slept it off there more than once."

"So we will." Baldy Anderson looked up at the sky. "I don't care much for this weather, tell ya true. It's too warm for Wide Earth. I hope it don't bring a storm, and I hope to gods it don't bring a starkblast. That'd cap everything."

Wouldn't be none of us able to pay the Covenant Man when he comes next year. Although if it's true what the boy says, he's turned a bad apple out of the basket and done us a service."

He didn't do my mama one, Tim thought. If he hadn't given me that key, and if I hadn't used it, she'd still have her sight.

"Go on home now," Marchly said to Tim. He spoke kindly, but in a tone that brooked no argument. "Stop by my house on the way, do ya, and tell my wife there's ladies wanted at yours. Widow Smack must need to go home and rest, for she's neither young nor well. Also . . ." He sighed. "Tell her they'll be wanted at Stokes's burying parlor later on."

This time Tim had taken Misty, and she was the one who had to stop and nibble at every bush. By the time he got home, two wagons and a pony-trap had passed him, each carrying a pair of women eager to help his mother in her time of hurt and trouble.

He had no more than stabled Misty next to Bitsy before Ada Cosington was on the porch, telling him he was needed to drive the Widow Smack home. "You can use my pony-trap. Go gentle where there's ruts, for the poor woman's fair done up."

"Has she got her shakes, sai?"

"Nay, I think the poor thing's too tired to shake. She was here when she was most needed, and may have saved your mama's life. Never forget that."

"Can my mother see again? Even a little?"

Tim knew the answer from sai Cosington's face before she opened her mouth. "Not yet, son. You must pray."

Tim thought of telling her what his father had sometimes said: *Pray for rain all you like, but dig a well as you do it.* In the end, he kept silent.

It was a slow trip to the Widow's house with her little burro tied to the back of Ada Cosington's pony-trap. The unseasonable heat continued, and the

sweet-sour breezes that usually blew from the Endless Forest had fallen still. The Widow tried to say cheerful things about Nell, but soon gave up; Tim supposed they sounded as false to her ears as they did to his own. Halfway up the high street, he heard a thick gurgling sound from his right. He looked around, startled, then relaxed. The Widow had fallen asleep with her chin resting on her birdlike chest. The hem of her veil lay in her lap.

When they reached her house on the outskirts of the village, he offered to see her inside. “Nay, only help me up the steps and after that I’ll be fine-o. I want tea with honey and then my bed, for I’m that tired. You need to be with your mother now, Tim. I know half the ladies in town will be there by the time you get back, but it’s you she needs.”

For the first time in the five years he’d had her as a schoolteacher, she gave Tim a hug. It was dry and fierce. He could feel her body thrumming beneath her dress. She wasn’t too tired to shake after all, it seemed. Nor too tired to give comfort to a boy—a tired, angry, deeply confused boy—who badly needed it.

“Go to her. And stay away from that dark man, should he appear to thee. He’s made of lies from boots to crown, and his gospels bring nothing but tears.”

On his way back down the high street, he encountered Straw Willem and his brother, Hunter (known as Spot Hunter for his freckles), riding to meet the posse, which had gone out Tree Road. “They mean to search every stake and stub on the Ironwood,” Spot Hunter said excitedly. “We’ll find him.”

The posse hadn’t found Kells in town after all, it seemed. Tim had a feeling they’d not find him along the Iron, either. There was no basis for the feeling, but it was strong. So was his feeling that the Covenant Man hadn’t finished with him yet. The man in the black cloak had had some of his fun . . . but not *all* of it.

His mother was sleeping, but woke when Ada Cosington ushered him in. The other ladies sat about in the main room, but they had not been idle while Tim was away. The pantry had been mysteriously stocked—every shelf groaned with bottles and sacks—and although Nell was a fine country housekeeper, Tim had never seen the place looking so snick. Even the overhead beams had been scrubbed clean of woodsmoke.

Every trace of Bern Kells had been removed. The awful trunk had been banished to beneath the back porch stoop, to keep company with the spiders, fieldmice, and moortoads.

“Tim?” And when he put his hands in Nell’s, which were reaching out, she sighed with relief. “All right?”

“Aye, Mama, passing fine.” This was a lie, and they both knew it.

“We knew he was dead, didn’t we? But it’s no comfort. It’s as if he’s been killed all over again.” Tears began to spill from her sightless eyes. Tim cried, himself, but managed to do it silently. Hearing him sob would do her no good. “They’ll bring him to the little burying parlor Stokes keeps out behind his smithy. Most of these kind ladies will go to him there, to do the fitting things, but will you go to him first, Timmy? Will you take him your love and all of mine? For I can’t. The man I was fool enough to marry has lamed me so badly I can hardly walk . . . and of course I can’t see anything. What a ka-mai I turned out to be, and what a price we’ve paid!”

“Hush. I love you, Mama. Of course I’ll go.”

But because there was time, he went first to the barn (there were far too many women in the cottage for his taste) and made a jackleg bed with hay and an old mule blanket. He fell asleep almost at once. He was awakened around three of the clock by Square Peter, who held his hat clasped to his breast and wore an expression of sad solemnity.

Tim sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Have you found Kells?”

“Nay, lad, but we’ve found your father, and brought him back to town. Your mother says you’ll pay respects for the both of you. Does she say true?”

“Aye, yes.” Tim stood up, brushing hay from his pants and shirt. He felt ashamed to have been caught sleeping, but his rest the previous night had been thin, and haunted by bad dreams.

“Come, then. We’ll take my wagon.”

The burying parlor behind the smithy was the closest thing the town had to a mortuary in a time when most country folk preferred to see to their own dead, interring them on their own land with a wooden cross or a slab of roughly carved stone to mark the grave. Dustin Stokes—inevitably known as Hot Stokes—stood outside the door, wearing white cotton pants instead of his usual leathers. Over them billowed a vast white shirt, falling all the way to the knees so it looked almost like a dress.

Looking at him, Tim remembered it was customary to wear white for the dead. He understood everything in that moment, realizing the truth in a way that not even looking at his father’s open-eyed corpse in running water had been able to make him realize it, and his knees loosened.

Square Peter bore him up with a strong hand. “Can’ee do it, lad? If’ee can’t, there’s no shame. He was your da’, and I know you loved him well. We all did.”

“I’ll be all right,” Tim said. He couldn’t seem to get enough air into his lungs, and the words came out in a whisper.

Hot Stokes put a fist to his forehead and bowed. It was the first time in his life that Tim had been saluted as a man. “Hile, Tim, son of Jack. His ka’s gone into the clearing, but what’s left is here. Will’ee come and see?”

“Yes, please.”

Square Peter stayed behind, and now it was Stokes who took Tim’s arm, Stokes not dressed in his leather breeches and cursing as he fanned an open furnace-hole with his bellows, but clad in ceremonial white; Stokes who led

him into the little room with forest scenes painted on the walls all around; Stokes who took him to the ironwood bier in the center—that open space that had ever represented the clearing at the end of the path.

Big Jack Ross also wore white, although his was a fine linen shroud. His lidless eyes stared raptly at the ceiling. Against one painted wall leaned his coffin, and the room was filled with the sour yet somehow pleasant smell of it, for the coffin was also of ironwood, and would keep this poor remnant very well for a thousand years and more.

Stokes let go of his arm, and Tim went forward on his own. He knelt. He slipped one hand into the linen shroud's overlap and found his da's hand. It was cold, but Tim did not hesitate to entwine his warm and living fingers with the dead ones. This was the way the two of them had held hands when Tim was only a sma' one, and barely able to toddle. In those days, the man walking beside him had seemed twelve feet tall, and immortal.

Tim knelt by the bier and beheld the face of his father.

When he came out, Tim was startled by the declining angle of the sun, which told him more than an hour had passed. Cosington and Stokes stood near the man-high ash heap at the rear of the smithy, smoking roll-ups. There was no news of Big Kells.

“P'raps he's thow'd hisself in the river and drowned,” Stokes speculated.

“Hop up in the wagon, son,” Cosington said. “I'll drive'ee back to yer ma's.”

But Tim shook his head. “Thankee, I'll walk, if it's all the same to you.”

“Need time to think, is it? Well, that's fine. I'll go on to my own place. It'll be a cold dinner, but I'll eat it gladly. No one begrudges your ma at a time like this, Tim. Never in life.”

Tim smiled wanly.

Cosington put his feet on the splashboard of his wagon, seized the reins, then had a thought and bent down to Tim. “Have an eye out for Kells as ye

walk, is all. Not that I think ye'll see 'im, not in daylight. And there'll be two or three strong fellas posted around yer homeplace tonight."

"Thankee-sai."

"Nar, none of that. Call me Peter, lad. You're old enough, and I'd have it." He reached down and gave Tim's hand a brief squeeze. "So sorry about yer da'. *Dreadful* sorry."

Tim set out along Tree Road with the sun declining red on his right side. He felt hollow, scooped out, and perhaps it was better so, at least for the time being. With his mother blind and no man in the house to bring a living, what future was there for them? Big Ross's fellow woodcutters would help as much as they could, and for as long as they could, but they had their own burdens. His da' had always called the homeplace a freehold, but Tim now saw that no cottage, farm, or bit of land in Tree Village was truly free. Not when the Covenant Man would come again next year, and all the years after that, with his scroll of names. Suddenly Tim hated far-off Gilead, which for him had always seemed (when he thought of it at all, which was seldom) a place of wonders and dreams. If there were no Gilead, there would be no taxes. Then they would be truly free.

He saw a cloud of dust rising in the south. The lowering sun turned it into a bloody mist. He knew it was the women who had been at the cottage. They were bound in their wagons and traps for the burying parlor Tim had just left. There they would wash the body that had already been washed by the stream into which it had been cast. They would anoint it with oils. They would put birch bark inscribed with the names of his wife and son in the dead man's right hand. They would put the blue spot on his forehead and place him in his coffin. This Hot Stokes would nail shut with short blows of his hammer, each blow terrible in its finality.

The women would offer Tim their condolences with the best will in the world, but Tim didn't want them. Didn't know if he could bear them without

breaking down once again. He was so *tired* of crying. With that in mind, he left the road and walked overland to the little chuckling rivulet known as Stape Brook, which would in short order bring him to its source-point: the clear spring between the Ross cottage and barn.

He trudged in a half-dream, thinking first of the Covenant Man, then of the key that would work only once, then of the pooky, then of his mother's hands reaching toward the sound of his voice . . .

Tim was so preoccupied that he almost passed the object jutting up from the path that followed the course of the stream. It was a steel rod with a white tip that looked like ivory. He hunkered, staring at it with wide eyes. He remembered asking the Covenant Man if it was a magic wand, and heard the enigmatic reply: *It started life as the gearshift of a Dodge Dart.*

It had been jammed to half its length in the hardpan, something that must have taken great strength. Tim reached for it, hesitated, then told himself not to be a fool, it was no pooky that would paralyze him with its bite and then eat him alive. He pulled it free and examined it closely. Steel it was, fine-forged steel of the sort only the Old Ones had known how to make. Very valuable, for sure, but was it really magic? To him it felt like any other metal thing, which was to say cold and dead.

In the proper hand, the Covenant Man whispered, *any object can be magic.*

Tim spied a frog hopping along a rotted birch on the far side of the stream. He pointed the ivory tip at it and said the only magic word he knew: *abba-ka-dabba*. He half-expected the frog to fall over dead or change into . . . well, *something*. It didn't die and it didn't change. What it did was hop off the log and disappear into the high green grass at the edge of the brook. Yet this had been left for him, he was sure of it. The Covenant Man had somehow known he'd come this way. And when.

Tim turned south again, and saw a flash of red light. It came from between their cottage and the barn. For a moment Tim only stood looking at that bright scarlet reflection. Then he broke into a run. The Covenant Man had left

him the key; the Covenant Man had left him his wand; and beside the spring where they drew their water, he had left his silver basin.

The one he used in order to see.

Only it wasn't the basin, just a battered tin pail. Tim's shoulders slumped and he started for the barn, thinking he would give the mules a good feed before he went in. Then he stopped and turned around.

A pail, but not *their* pail. Theirs was smaller, made of ironwood, and equipped with a blossie handle. Tim returned to the spring and picked it up. He tapped the ivory knob of the Covenant Man's wand against the side. The pail gave back a deep and ringing note that made Tim leap back a step. No piece of tin had ever produced such a resonant sound. Now that he thought of it, no old tin pail could reflect the declining sun as perfectly as this one had, either.

Did you think I'd give up my silver basin to a half-grown sprat like you, Tim, son of Jack? Why would I, when any object can be magic? And, speaking of magic, haven't I given you my very own wand?

Tim understood that this was but his imagination making the Covenant Man's voice, but he believed the man in the black cloak would have said much the same, if he had been there.

Then another voice spoke in his head. *He's made of lies from boots to crown, and his gospels bring nothing but tears.*

This voice he pushed away and stooped to fill the pail that had been left for him. When it was full, doubt set in again. He tried to remember if the Covenant Man had made any particular series of passes over the water—weren't mystic passes part of magic?—and couldn't. All Tim could remember was the man in black telling him that if he disturbed the water, he would see nothing.

Doubtful not so much of the magic wand as of his ability to use it, Tim waved the rod aimlessly back and forth above the water. For a moment there was nothing. He was about to give up when a mist clouded the surface,

blotting out his reflection. It cleared, and he saw the Covenant Man looking up at him. It was dark wherever the Covenant Man was, but a strange green light, no bigger than a thumbnail, hovered over his head. It rose higher, and by its light Tim saw a board nailed to the trunk of an ironwood tree. ROSS-KELLS had been painted on it.

The bit of green light spiraled up until it was just below the surface of the water in the pail, and Tim gasped. There was a *person* embedded in that green light—a tiny green woman with transparent wings on her back.

It's a sighe—one of the fairy-folk!

Seemingly satisfied that she had his attention, the sighe spun away, lighted briefly on the Covenant Man's shoulder, then seemed to leap from it. Now she hovered between two posts holding up a crossbar. From this there hung another sign, and, as was the case with the lettering on the sign marking out the Ross-Kells stake, Tim recognized his father's careful printing. IRONWOOD TRAIL ENDS HERE, the sign read. BEYOND LIES FAGONARD. And below this, in larger, darker letters: **TRAVELER, BEWARE!**

The sighe darted back to the Covenant Man, made two airy circles around him that seemed to leave spectral, fading trails of greenglow behind, then rose and hovered demurely beside his cheek. The Covenant Man looked directly at Tim; a figure that shimmered (as Tim's own father had when Tim beheld the corse in the water) and yet was perfectly real, perfectly *there*. He raised one hand in a semicircle above his head, scissoring the first two fingers as he did so. This was sign language Tim knew well, for everyone in Tree used it from time to time: *Make haste, make haste*.

The Covenant Man and his fairy consort faded to nothing, leaving Tim staring at his own wide-eyed face. He passed the wand over the pail again, barely noticing that the steel rod was now vibrating in his fist. The thin caul of mist reappeared, seeming to rise from nowhere. It swirled and disappeared. Now Tim saw a tall house with many gables and many chimneys. It stood in a clearing surrounded by ironwoods of such great girth and height that they

made the ones along the trail look small. *Surely*, Tim thought, *their tops must pierce the very clouds*. He understood this was deep in the Endless Forest, deeper than even the bravest ax-man of Tree had ever gone, and by far. The many windows of the house were decorated with cabalistic designs, and from these Tim knew he was looking at the home of Maerlyn Eld, where time stood still or perhaps even ran backward.

A small, wavering Tim appeared in the pail. He approached the door and knocked. It was opened. Out came a smiling old man whose white waist-length beard sparkled with gems. Upon his head was a conical cap as yellow as the Full Earth sun. Water-Tim spoke earnestly to Water-Maerlyn. Water-Maerlyn bowed and went back inside his house . . . which seemed to be constantly changing shape (although that might have been the water). The mage returned, now holding a black cloth that looked like silk. He lifted it to his eyes, demonstrating its use: a blindfold. He handed it toward Water-Tim, but before that other Tim could take it, the mist reappeared. When it cleared, Tim saw nothing but his own face and a bird passing overhead, no doubt wanting to get home to its nest before sunset.

Tim passed the rod across the top of the pail a third time, now aware of the steel rod's thrumming in spite of his fascination. When the mist cleared, he saw Water-Tim sitting at Water-Nell's bedside. The blindfold was over his mother's eyes. Water-Tim removed it, and an expression of unbelieving joy lit Water-Nell's face. She clasped him to her, laughing. Water-Tim was laughing, too.

The mist overspread this vision as it had the other two, but the vibration in the steel rod ceased. *Useless as dirt*, Tim thought, and it was true. When the mist melted away, the water in the tin pail showed him nothing more miraculous than the dying light in the sky. He passed the Covenant Man's wand over the water several more times, but nothing happened. That was all right. He knew what he had to do.

Tim got to his feet, looked toward the house, and saw no one. The men who had volunteered to stand watch would be here soon, though. He would have to move fast.

In the barn, he asked Bitsy if she would like to go for another evening ride.

The Widow Smack was exhausted by her unaccustomed labors on Nell Ross's behalf, but she was also old, and sick, and more disturbed by the queerly unseasonable weather than her conscious mind would admit. So it was that, although Tim did not dare knock loudly on her door (knocking at all after sunset took most of his resolve), she woke at once.

She took a lamp, and when by its light she saw who stood there, her heart sank. If the degenerative disease that afflicted her had not taken the ability of her remaining eye to make tears, she would have wept at the sight of that young face so full of foolish resolve and lethal determination.

"You mean to go back to the forest," said she.

"Aye." Tim spoke low, but firmly.

"In spite of all I told thee."

"Aye."

"He's fascinated you. And why? For gain? Nay, not him. He saw a bright light in the darkness of this forgotten backwater, that's all, and nothing will do for him but to put it out."

"Sai Smack, he showed me—"

"Something to do with your mother, I wot. He knows what levers move folk; aye, none better. He has magic keys to unlock their hearts. I know I can't stop thee with words, for one eye is enough to read your face. And I know I can't restrain thee with force, and so do you. Why else was it me you came to for whatever it is you want?"

At this Tim showed embarrassment but no flagging of resolve, and by this she understood he was truly lost to her. Worse, he was likely lost to himself.

"What *is* it you want?"

“Only to send word to my mother, will it please ya. Tell her I’ve gone to the forest, and will return with something to cure her sight.”

Sai Smack said nothing to this for several seconds, only looked at him through her veil. By the light of her raised lamp, Tim could see the ruined geography of her face far better than he wanted to. At last she said, “Wait here. Don’t skitter away wi’out taking leave, lest you’d have me think thee a coward. Be not impatient, either, for thee knows I’m slow.”

Although he was in a fever to be off, Tim waited as she asked. The seconds seemed like minutes, the minutes like hours, but she returned at last. “I made sure you were gone,” said she, and the old woman could not have wounded Tim more if she had whipped his face with a quirt.

She handed him the lamp she had brought to the door. “To light your way, for I see you have none.”

It was true. In his fever to be off, he had forgotten.

“Thankee-sai.”

In her other hand she held a cotton sack. “There’s a loaf of bread in here. ’Tisn’t much, and two days old, but for provender ’tis the best I can do.”

Tim’s throat was temporarily too full for speech, so he only tapped his throat three times, then held out his hand for the bag. But she held it a moment longer.

“There’s something else in here, Tim. It belonged to my brother, who died in the Endless Forest almost twenty years ago now. He bought it from a roving peddler, and when I chafed him about it and called him a fool easily cozened, he took me out to the fields west of town and showed me it worked. Ay, gods, such a noise it made! My ears rang for hours!”

From the bag she brought a gun.

Tim stared at it, wide-eyed. He had seen pictures of them in the Widow’s books, and Old Destry had on the wall of his parlor a framed drawing of a kind called a rifle, but he had never expected to see the real thing. It was about a foot long, the gripping handle of wood, the trigger and barrels of dull metal.

The barrels numbered four, bound together by bands of what looked like brass. The holes at the end, where whatever it shot came out, were square.

“He fired it twice before showing me, and it’s never been fired since the day he did, because he died soon after. I don’t know if it still *will* fire, but I’ve kept it dry, and once every year—on his birthday—I oil it as he showed me. Each chamber is loaded, and there are five more projectiles. They’re called bullets.”

“Pullets?” Tim asked, frowning.

“Nay, nay, *bullets*. Look you.”

She handed him the bag to free both of her gnarled hands, then turned to one side in the doorway. “Joshua said a gun must never be pointed at a person unless you want to hurt or kill him. For, he said, guns have eager hearts. Or perhaps he said evil hearts? After all these years, I no longer remember. There’s a little lever on the side . . . just here . . .”

There was a click, and the gun broke open between the handle and the barrels. She showed him four square brass plates. When she pulled one from the hole where it rested, Tim saw that the plate was actually the base of a projectile—a *bullet*.

“The brass bottom remains after you fire,” said she. “You must pull it out before you can load in another. Do you see?”

“Aye.” He longed to handle the bullets himself. More; he longed to hold the gun in his hand, and pull the trigger, and hear the explosion.

The Widow closed the gun (again it made that perfect little click) and then showed him the handle end. He saw four small cocking devices meant to be pulled back with the thumb. “These are the hammers. Each one fires a different barrel . . . if the cursed thing still fires at all. Do you see?”

“Aye.”

“It’s called a four-shot. Joshua said it was safe as long as none of the hammers were drawn.” She reeled a bit on her feet, as if she had come over lightheaded. “Giving a gun to a child! One who means to go into the Endless Forest at night, to meet a devil! Yet what else can I do?” And then, not to Tim: “But he

won't expect a child to have a gun, will he? Mayhap there's White in the world yet, and one of these old bullets will end up in his black heart. Put it in the bag, do ya."

She held the gun out to him, handle first. Tim almost dropped it. That such a small thing could be so heavy seemed astounding. And, like the Covenant Man's magic wand when it had passed over the water in the pail, it seemed to *thrum*.

"The extra bullets are wrapped in cotton batting. With the four in the gun, you have nine. May they do you well, and may I not find myself cursed in the clearing for giving them to you."

"Thank . . . *thankee-sai!*" It was all Tim could manage. He slipped the gun into the bag.

She put her hands to the sides of her head and uttered a bitter laugh. "You're a fool, and I'm another. Instead of bringing you my brother's four-shot, I should have brought my broom and hit you over the head wi' it." She voiced that bitter, despairing laugh again. "Yet 'twould do no good, with my old woman's strength."

"Will you take word to my mama in the morning? For it won't be just a little way down the Ironwood Trail I'll be going this time, but all the way to the end."

"Aye, and break her heart, likely." She bent toward him, the hem of her veil swinging. "Has thee thought of that? I see by your face thee has. Why do you do this when you know the news of it will harrow her soul?"

Tim flushed from chin to hairline, but held his ground. In that moment he looked very much like his gone-on father. "I mean to save her eyesight. He has left me enough of his magic to show me how it's to be done."

"*Black* magic! In support of lies! Of *lies*, Tim Ross!"

"So you say." Now his jaw jutted, and that was also very like Jack Ross. "But he didn't lie about the key—it worked. He didn't lie about the beating—it

happened. He didn't lie about my mama being blind—she is. As for my da' . . . thee knows.”

“Yar,” she said, now speaking in a harsh country accent Tim had never heard before. “Yar, and each o' his truths has worked two ways: they hurt'ee, and they've baited his trap for'ee.”

He said nothing to this at first, only lowered his head and studied the toes of his scuffed shor'boots. The Widow had almost allowed herself to hope when he raised his head, met her eyes, and said, “I'll leave Bitsy tethered uptrail from the Cosington-Marchly stake. I don't want to leave her at the stub where I found my da', because there's a pooky in the trees. When you go to see Mama, will you ask sai Cosington to fetch Bitsy home?”

A younger woman might have continued to argue, perhaps even to plead—but the Widow was not that woman. “Anything else?”

“Two things.”

“Speak.”

“Will you give my mama a kiss for me?”

“Aye, and gladly. What's the other?”

“Will you set me on with a blessing?”

She considered this, then shook her head. “As for blessings, my brother's four-shot is the best I can do.”

“Then it will have to be enough.” He made a leg and brought his fist to his forehead in salute; then he turned and went down the steps to where the faithful little mollie mule was tethered.

In a voice almost—but not quite—too low to hear, the Widow Smack said, “In Gan's name, I bless thee. Now let ka work.”

The moon was down when Tim dismounted Bitsy and tethered her to a bush at the side of the Ironwood Trail. He had filled his pockets with oats ere leaving the barn, and he now spread them before her as he'd seen the Covenant Man do for his horse the previous night.

“Be easy, and sai Cosington will come for thee in the morning,” Tim said. An image of Square Peter finding Bitsy dead, with a gaping hole in her belly made by one of the predators of the forest (perhaps the very one he'd sensed behind him on his *pasear* down the Ironwood the night before) lit up his mind. Yet what else could he do? Bitsy was sweet, but not smart enough to find her way home on her own, no matter how many times she'd been up and down this same trail.

“Thee'll be passing fine,” he said, stroking her smooth nose . . . but would she? The idea that the Widow had been right about everything and this was just the first evidence of it came to his mind, and Tim pushed it aside.

He told me the truth about the rest; surely he told the truth about this, too.

By the time he was three wheels farther up the Ironwood Trail, he had begun to believe this.

You must remember he was only eleven.

He spied no campfire that night. Instead of the welcoming orange glow of burning wood, Tim glimpsed a cold green light as he approached the end of the Ironwood Trail. It flickered and sometimes disappeared, but it always came back, strong enough to cast shadows that seemed to slither around his feet like snakes.

The trail—faint now, because the only ruts were those made by the wagons of Big Ross and Big Kells—swept left to skirt an ancient ironwood with a trunk bigger than the largest house in Tree. A hundred paces beyond this curve, the way forward ended in a clearing. There was the crossbar, and there the sign. Tim could read every word, for above it, suspended in midair by virtue of wings beating so rapidly they were all but invisible, was the sighe.

He stepped closer, all else forgotten in the wonder of this exotic vision. The sighe was no more than four inches tall. She was naked and beautiful. It was impossible to tell if her body was as green as the glow it gave off, for the light around her was fierce. Yet he could see her welcoming smile, and knew she was seeing him very well even though her upturned, almond-shaped eyes were pupilless. Her wings made a steady low purring sound.

Of the Covenant Man there was no sign.

The sighe spun in a playful circle, then dived into the branches of a bush. Tim felt a tingle of alarm, imagining those gauzy wings torn apart by thorns, but she emerged unharmed, rising in a dizzy spiral to a height of fifty feet or more—as high as the first upreaching ironwood branches—before plunging back down, right at him. Tim saw her shapely arms cast out behind her, making her look like a girl who dives into a pool. He ducked, and as she passed over his head close enough to stir his hair, he heard laughter. It sounded like bells coming from a great distance.

He straightened up cautiously and saw her returning, now somersaulting over and over in the air. His heart was beating fiercely in his chest. He thought he had never seen anything so lovely.

She flew above the crossbar, and by her firefly light he saw a faint and mostly overgrown path leading into the Endless Forest. She raised one arm. The hand at the end of it, glowing with green fire, beckoned to him. Enchanted by her otherworldly beauty and welcoming smile, Tim did not hesitate but at once ducked beneath the crossbar with never a look at the last two words on his dead father's sign: TRAVELER, BEWARE.

The sighe hovered until he was almost close enough to reach out and touch her, then whisked away, down the remnant of path. There she hovered, smiling and beckoning. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders, sometimes concealing her tiny breasts, sometimes fluttering upward in the breeze of her wings to reveal them.

The second time he drew close, Tim called out . . . but low, afraid that if he hailed her in a voice too loud, it might burst her tiny eardrums. “Where is the Covenant Man?”

Another silvery tinkle of laughter was her reply. She barrel-rolled twice, knees drawn all the way up to the hollows of her shoulders, then was off, pausing only to look back and make sure Tim was following before darting onward. So it was that she led the captivated boy deeper and deeper into the Endless Forest. Tim didn’t notice when the poor remnant of path disappeared and his course took him between tall ironwood trees that had been seen by the eyes of only a few men, and that long ago. Nor did he notice when the grave, sweet-sour smell of the ironwoods was replaced by the far less pleasant aroma of stagnant water and rotting vegetation. The ironwood trees had fallen away. There would be more up ahead, countless leagues of them, but not here. Tim had come to the edge of the great swamp known as the Fagonard.

The sighe, once more flashing her teasing smile, flew on. Now her glow was reflected up at her from murky water. Something—not a fish—broke the scummy surface, stared at the airy interloper with a glabrous eye, and slid back below the surface.

Tim didn’t notice. What he saw was the tussock above which she was now hovering. It would be a long stride, but there was no question of not going. She was waiting. He jumped just to be safe and still barely made it; that greenglow was deceptive, making things look closer than they actually were. He tottered, pinwheeling his arms. The sighe made things worse (unintentionally, Tim was sure; she was just playing) by spinning rapid circles

around his head, blinding him with her aura and filling his ears with the bells of her laughter.

The issue was in doubt (and he never saw the scaly head that surfaced behind him, the protruding eyes, or the yawning jaws filled with triangular teeth), but Tim was young and agile. He caught his balance and was soon standing on top of the tussock.

“What’s thy name?” he asked the glowing sprite, who was now hovering just beyond the tussock.

He wasn’t sure, in spite of her tinkling laughter, that she could speak, or that she would respond in either the low speech or the high if she could. But she answered, and Tim thought it was the loveliest name he’d ever heard, a perfect match for her ethereal beauty.

“Armaneeta!” she called, and then was off again, laughing and looking flirtatiously back at him.

He followed her deeper and deeper into the Fagonard. Sometimes the tussocks were close enough for him to step from one to the next, but as they progressed onward, he found that more and more frequently he had to jump, and these leaps grew longer and longer. Yet Tim wasn’t frightened. On the contrary, he was dazzled and euphoric, laughing each time he tottered. He did not see the V-shapes that followed him, cutting through the black water as smoothly as a seamstress’s needle through silk; first one, then three, then half a dozen. He was bitten by suckerbugs and brushed them off without feeling their sting, leaving bloody splats on his skin. Nor did he see the slumped but more or less upright shapes that paced him on one side, staring with eyes that gleamed in the dark.

He reached for Armaneeta several times, calling, “Come to me, I won’t hurt thee!” She always eluded him, once flying between his closing fingers and tickling his skin with her wings.

She circled a tussock that was larger than the others. There were no weeds growing on it, and Tim surmised it was actually a rock—the first one he'd seen in this part of the world, where things seemed more liquid than solid.

“That’s too far!” Tim called to Armaneeta. He looked for another stepping-stone, but there was none. If he wanted to reach the next tussock, he would have to leap onto the rock first. And she was beckoning.

Maybe I can make it, he thought. Certainly she thinks I can; why else would she beckon me on?

There was no space on his current tussock to back up and get a running start, so Tim flexed his knees and broad-jumped, putting every ounce of his strength into it. He flew over the water, saw he wasn't going to make the rock—almost, but not quite—and stretched out his arms. He landed on his chest and chin, the latter connecting hard enough to send bright dots flocking in front of eyes already dazzled by fairy-glow. There was a moment to realize it wasn't a rock he was clutching—not unless rocks breathed—and then there was a vast and filthy grunt from behind him. This was followed by a great splash that spattered Tim's back and neck with warm, bug-infested water.

He scrambled up on the rock that was not a rock, aware that he had lost the Widow's lamp but still had the bag. Had he not knotted the neck of it tightly around one wrist, he would have lost that, too. The cotton was damp but not actually soaked. At least not yet.

Then, just as he sensed the thing behind him closing in, the “rock” began to rise. He was standing on the head of some creature that had been taking its ease in the mud and silt. Now it was fully awake and not happy. It let out a roar, and green-orange fire belched from its mouth, sizzling the reeds poking up from the water just ahead.

Not as big as a house, no, probably not, but it's a dragon, all right, and oh, gods, I'm standing on its head!

The creature's exhalation lit this part of the Fagonard brightly. Tim saw the reeds bending this way and that as the critters that had been following him

made away from the dragon's fire as fast as they could. Tim also saw one more tussock. It was a little bigger than the ones he had hopscotched across to arrive at his current—and very perilous—location.

There was no time to worry about being eaten by an oversize cannibal fish if he landed short, or being turned into a charcoal boy by the dragon's next breath if he actually reached the tussock. With an inarticulate cry, Tim leaped. It was by far his longest jump, and almost too long. He had to grab at handfuls of sawgrass to keep from tumbling off the other side and into the water. The grass was sharp, cutting into his fingers. Some bunches were also hot and smoking from the irritated dragon's broadside, but Tim held on. He didn't want to think about what might be waiting for him if he tumbled off this tiny island.

Not that his position here was safe. He rose onto his knees and looked back the way he had come. The dragon—'twas a bitch, for he could see the pink maiden's-comb on her head—had risen from the water, standing on her back legs. Not the size of a house, but bigger than Blackie, the Covenant Man's stallion. She fanned her wings twice, sending droplets in every direction and creating a breeze that blew Tim's sweat-clotted hair off his forehead. The sound was like his mother's sheets on the clothesline, snapping in a brisk wind.

She was looking at him from beady, red-veined eyes. Ropes of burning saliva dropped from her jaws and hissed out when they struck the water. Tim could see the gill high up between her plated breasts fluttering as she pulled in air to stoke the furnace in her guts. He had time to think how strange it was—also a bit funny—that what his steppa had lied about would now become the truth. Only Tim would be the one cooked alive.

The gods must be laughing, Tim thought. And if they weren't, the Covenant Man probably was.

With no rational consideration, Tim fell to his knees and held his hands out to the dragon, the cotton sack still swinging from his right wrist. "Please, my lady!" he cried. "Please don't burn me, for I was led astray and cry your pardon!"

For several moments the dragon continued to regard him, and her gill continued to pulse; her fiery spittle went on dripping and hissing. Then, slowly—to Tim it seemed like inches at a time—she began to submerge again. Finally there was nothing left but the top of her head . . . and those awful, staring eyes. They seemed to promise that she would not be merciful, should he choose to disturb her repose a second time. Then they were gone, too, and once more all that Tim could see was something that might have been a rock.

“Armaneeta?” He turned around, looking for her greenglow, knowing he would not see it. She had led him deep into the Fagonard, to a place where there were no more tussocks ahead and a dragon behind. Her job was done.

“Nothing but lies,” Tim whispered.

The Widow Smack had been right all along.

He sat down on the hummock, thinking he would cry, but there were no tears. That was fine with Tim. What good would crying do? He had been made a fool of, and that was an end to it. He promised himself he would know better next time . . . if there *was* a next time. Sitting here alone in the gloom, with the hidden moon casting an ashy glow through the overgrowth, that didn’t seem likely. The submerged things that had fled were back. They avoided the dragon’s watery boudoir, but that still left them plenty of room to maneuver, and there could be no doubt that the sole object of their interest was the tiny island where Tim sat. He could only hope they were fish of some kind, unable to leave the water without dying. He knew, however, that large creatures living in water this thick and shallow were very likely air-breathers as well as water-breathers.

He watched them circle and thought, *They’re getting up their courage to attack.*

He was looking at death and knew it, but he was still eleven, and hungry in spite of everything. He took out the loaf, saw that only one end was damp, and had a few bites. Then he set it aside to examine the four-shot as well as he could by the chancy moonlight and the faint phosphorescent glow of the

swampwater. It looked and felt dry enough. So did the extra shells, and Tim thought he knew a way to make sure they stayed that way. He tore a hole in the dry half of the loaf, poked the spare bullets deep inside, plugged the cache, and put the loaf beside the bag. He hoped the bag would dry, but he didn't know. The air was very damp, and—

And here they came, two of them, arrowing straight for Tim's island. He jumped to his feet and shouted the first thing to come into his head. "You better not! You better not, cullies! There's a gunslinger here, a true son of Gilead and the Eld, so you better not!"

He doubted if such beasts with their pea brains had the slightest idea what he was shouting—or would care if they did—but the sound of his voice startled them, and they sheared off.

'Ware you don't wake yon fire-maiden, Tim thought. *She's apt to rise up and crisp you just to stop the noise.*

But what choice did he have?

The next time those living underwater boats came charging at him, the boy clapped his hands as well as shouted. He would have pounded on a hollow log if he'd had a log to pound on, and Na'ar take the dragon. Tim thought that, should it come to the push, her burning death would be more merciful than what he would suffer in the jaws of the swimming things. Certainly it would be quicker.

He wondered if the Covenant Man was somewhere close, watching this and enjoying it. Tim decided that was half-right. Watching, yes, but the Covenant Man wouldn't dirty his boots in this stinking swamp. He was somewhere dry and pleasant, watching the show in his silver basin with Armaneeta circling close. Perhaps even sitting on his shoulder, her chin propped on her tiny hands.

By the time a dirty dawnlight began to creep through the overhanging trees (gnarled, moss-hung monstrosities of a sort Tim had never seen before), his tussock was surrounded by two dozen of the circling shapes.

The shortest looked to be about ten feet in length, but most were far longer. Shouting and clapping no longer drove them away. They were going to come for him.

If that wasn't bad enough, there was now enough light coming through the greenroof for him to see that his death and ingestion would have an audience. It wasn't yet bright enough for him to make out the faces of the watchers, and for this Tim was miserably glad. Their slumped, semihuman shapes were bad enough. They stood on the nearest bank, seventy or eighty yards away. He could make out half a dozen, but thought there were more. The dim and misty light made it hard to tell for sure. Their shoulders were rounded, their shaggy heads thrust forward. The tatters hanging from their indistinct bodies might have been remnants of clothing or ribbons of moss like those hanging from the branches. To Tim they looked like a small tribe of mudmen who had risen from the watery floor of the swamp just to watch the swimmers first tease and then take their prey.

What does it matter? I'm a goner whether they watch or not.

One of the circling reptiles broke from the pack and drove at the tussock, tail lashing the water, prehistoric head raised, jaws split in a grin that looked longer than Tim's whole body. It struck below the place where Tim stood, and hard enough to make the tussock shiver like jelly. On the bank, several of the watching mudmen hooted. Tim thought they were like spectators at a Saturday-afternoon Points match.

The idea was so infuriating that it drove his fear out. What rushed in to fill the place where it had been was fury. Would the water-beasts have him? He saw no way they would not. Yet if the four-shot the Widow had given him hadn't taken too much of a wetting, he might be able to make at least one of them pay for its breakfast.

And if it doesn't fire, I'll turn it around and club the beast with the butt end until it tears my arm off my shoulder.

The thing was crawling out of the water now, the claws at the ends of its stubby front legs tearing away clumps of reed and weed, leaving black gashes that quickly filled up with water. Its tail—blackish-green on top, white as a dead man’s belly beneath—drove it ever forward and upward, slapping at the water and throwing fans of muddy filth in all directions. Above its snout was a nest of eyes that pulsed and bulged, pulsed and bulged. They never left Tim’s face. The long jaws gnashed; the teeth sounded like stones driven together.

On the shore—seventy yards or a thousand wheels, it made no difference—the mudmen called again, seeming to cheer the monster on.

Tim opened the cotton sack. His hands were steady and his fingers sure, although the thing had hauled half its length onto the little island and there was now only three feet between Tim’s sodden boots and those clicking teeth.

He pulled back one of the hammers as the Widow had shown him, curled his finger around the trigger, and dropped to one knee. Now he and the approaching horror were on the same level. Tim could smell its rich carrion breath and see deep into its pulsing pink gullet. Yet Tim was smiling. He felt it stretching his lips, and he was glad. It was good to smile in one’s final moments, so it was. He only wished it was the barony tax collector crawling up the bank, with his treacherous green familiar on his shoulder.

“Let’s see how’ee like this, cully,” Tim murmured, and pulled the trigger.

There was such a huge bang that Tim at first believed the four-shot had exploded in his hand. Yet it wasn’t the gun that exploded, but the reptile’s hideous nest of eyes. They splattered blackish-red ichor. The creature uttered an agonized roar and curled backward on its tail. Its short forelegs pawed the air. It fell into the water, thrashed, then rolled over, displaying its belly. A red cloud began to grow around its partially submerged head. Its hungry ancient grin had become a death rictus. In the trees, rudely awakened birds flapped and chattered and screamed down abuse.

Still wrapped in that coldness (and still smiling, although he wasn’t aware of it), Tim broke open the four-shot and removed the spent casing. It was

smoking and warm to the touch. He grabbed the half-loaf, stuck the bread-plug in his mouth, and thumbed one of the spare loads into the empty chamber. He snapped the pistol closed, then spat out the plug, which now had an oily taste.

“*Come on!*” he shouted to the reptiles that were now swimming back and forth in agitated fashion (the hump marking the top of the submerged dragon had disappeared). “*Come have some more!*”

Nor was this bravado. Tim discovered he actually *wanted* them to come. Nothing—not even his father’s ax, which he still carried in his belt—had ever felt so divinely right to him as did the heavy weight of the four-shot in his left hand.

From the shore came a sound Tim could not at first identify, not because it was strange but because it ran counter to all the assumptions he had made about those watching. The mudmen were clapping.

When he turned to face them, the smoking gun still in his hand, they dropped to their knees, fisted their foreheads, and spoke the only word of which they seemed capable. That word was *bile*, one of the few which is exactly the same in both low and high speech, the one the Manni called *fin-Gan*, or the first word; the one that set the world spinning.

Is it possible . . .

Tim Ross, son of Jack, looked from the kneeling mudmen on the bank to the antique (but very effective) weapon he still held.

Is it possible they think . . .

It *was* possible. More than possible, in fact.

These people of the Fagonard believed he was a gunslinger.

For several moments he was too stunned to move. He stared at them from the tussock where he had fought for his life (and might yet lose it); they knelt in high green reeds and oozy mud seventy yards away, fisted hands to their shaggy heads, and stared back.

Finally some semblance of reason began to reassert itself, and Tim understood that he must use their belief while he still could. He groped for the stories his mama and his da' had told him, and those the Widow Smack had read to her pupils from her precious books. Nothing quite seemed to fit the situation, however, until he recalled a fragment of an old story he'd heard from Splinter Harry, one of the codgers who worked part-time at the sawmill. Half-foolish was Old Splint, apt to point a finger-gun at you and pretend to pull the trigger, also prone to babbling nonsense in what he claimed was the high speech. He loved nothing better than talking about the men from Gilead who carried the big irons and went forth on quests.

Oh, Harry, I only hope it was ka that put me in earshot on that particular noonrest.

"Hile, bondsmen!" he cried to the mudmen on the bank. "I see you very well! Rise in love and service!"

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then they rose and stood staring at him from deep-socketed and fundamentally exhausted eyes. Their sloping jaws hung almost to their breastbones in identical expressions of wonder. Tim saw that some carried primitive bows; others had bludgeons strapped to their sunken chests with woven vines.

What do I say now?

Sometimes, Tim thought, only the bald truth would do.

"Get me off this fucking island!" he shouted.

At first the mudmen only gaped at him. Then they drew together and palavered in a mixture of grunts, clicks, and unsettling growls. Just when Tim was beginning to believe the conference would go on forever, several of the tribesmen turned and sprinted off. Another, the tallest, turned to Tim and held out both of his hands. They *were* hands, although there were too many fingers on them and the palms were green with some mossy substance. The gesture they made was clear and emphatic: *Stay put.*

Tim nodded, then sat down on the tussock (*like Sma' Lady Muffin on her tuffin*, he thought) and began munching the rest of his bread. He cocked an eye for the wakes of returning swimmers as he ate, and kept the four-shot in one hand. Flies and small bugs settled on his skin long enough to sip his sweat before flying off again. Tim thought that if something didn't happen soon, he'd have to jump in the water just to get away from the irritating things, which were too quick to catch with a slap. Only who knew what else might be hiding in that murk, or creeping along the bottom?

As he swallowed the last bite of bread, a rhythmic thudding began to pulse across the morning-misty swamp, startling more birds into flight. Some of these were surprisingly large, with pink plumage and long, thin legs that paddled the water as they fought their way into the air. They made high, ululating cries that sounded to Tim like the laughter of children who had lost their minds.

Someone's beating on the hollow log I wished for, not so long ago. The thought raised a tired grin.

The pounding went on for five minutes or so, then ceased. The cullies on the bank were staring in the direction from which Tim had come—a much younger Tim that had been, foolishly laughing and following a bad fairy named Armaneeta. The mudmen shaded their eyes against the sun, now shining fiercely through the overhanging foliage and burning off the mist. It was shaping to be another unnaturally hot day.

Tim heard splashing, and it was not long before a queer, misshapen boat emerged from the unraveling mists. It had been cobbled together of wood-scrapings gleaned from gods knew where and rode low in the water, trailing long tangles of moss and waterweed. There was a mast but no sail; at the top, acting as lookout, was a boar's head surrounded by a shifting skein of flies. Four of the swamp-dwellers rowed with paddles of some orange wood Tim did not recognize. A fifth stood at the prow, wearing a black silk top hat decorated with a red ribbon that trailed down over one bare shoulder. He peered ahead,

sometimes waving left, sometimes right. The oarsmen followed his wigwagging with the efficiency of long practice, the boat swooping neatly between the tussocks that had led Tim into his present difficulty.

When the boat approached the black stretch of still water where the dragon had been, the helmsman bent, then stood up with a grunt of effort. In his arms he held a dripping chunk of carcass that Tim assumed had not long ago been attached to the head decorating the mast. The helmsman cradled it, never minding the blood that smeared his shaggy chest and arms, peering down into the water. He uttered a sharp, hooting cry, followed by several rapid clicks. The crew shipped their oars. The boat maintained a little headway toward the tussock where Tim waited, but Helmsman paid no attention; he was still peering raptly into the water.

With a quiet more shocking than the noisiest splash, a giant claw rose up, the talons half-clenched. Sai Helmsman laid the bloody chunk of boar into that demanding palm as gently as a mother lays her sleeping babe into its crib. The talons closed around the meat, squeezing out droplets of blood that pattered into the water. Then, as quietly as it had come, the claw disappeared, bearing its tribute.

Now you know how to appease a dragon, Tim thought. It occurred to him that he was amassing a wonderful store of tales, ones that would hold not just Old Splint but the whole village of Tree in thrall. He wondered if he would ever live to tell them.

The scow bumped the tussock. The oarsmen bent their heads and fisted their brows. Helmsman did the same. When he gestured to Tim from the boat, indicating that he should board, long strands of green and brown swung back and forth from his scrawny arm. More of this growth hung on his cheeks and straggled from his chin. Even his nostrils seemed plugged with vegetable matter, so that he had to breathe through his mouth.

Not mudmen at all, Tim thought as he climbed into the boat. They're plantmen. Muties who are becoming a part of the swamp they live in.

"I say thankee," Tim told Helmsman, and touched the side of his fist to his own forehead.

"Hile!" Helmsman replied. His lips spread in a grin. The few teeth thus revealed were green, but the grin was no less charming for that.

"We are well-met," Tim said.

"Hile," Helmsman repeated, and then they all took it up, making the swamp ring: *Hile! Hile! Hile!*

Onshore (if ground that trembled and oozed at every step could be called shore), the tribe gathered around Tim. Their smell was earthy and enormous. Tim kept the four-shot in his hand, not because he intended to shoot or even threaten them with it, but because they so clearly wanted to see it. If any had reached out to actually touch it, he would have put it back in the bag, but none did. They grunted, they gestured, they made those chattering bird cries, but none of them spoke a word other than *hile* that Tim could understand. Yet when Tim spoke to them, he had no doubt that *he* was understood.

He counted at least sixteen, all men and all muties. As well as plant life, most were supporting fungoid growths that looked like the shelf mushrooms Tim sometimes saw growing on the blossiewood he'd hauled at the sawmill. They were also afflicted with boils and festering sores. A near-certainty grew in Tim: somewhere there might be women—a few—but there would be no children. This was a dying tribe. Soon the Fagonard would take them just as the bitch dragon had taken her sacrificial chunk of boar. In the meantime, though, they were looking at him in a way he also recognized from his days in the sawmill. It was the way he and the rest of the boys looked at the foreman when the last job had been done and the next not yet assigned.

The Fagonard tribe thought he was a gunslinger—ridiculous, he was only a kid, but there it was—and they were, at least for the time being, his to

command. Easy enough for them, but Tim had never been a boss nor dreamed of being one. What did he want? If he asked them to take him back to the south end of the swamp, they would; he was sure of it. From there he believed he could find his way to the Ironwood Trail, which would in turn take him back to Tree Village.

Back home.

That was the reasonable thing, and Tim knew it. But when he got back, his mother would still be blind. Even Big Kells's capture would not change that. He, Tim Ross, would have dared much to no gain. Even worse, the Covenant Man might use his silver basin to watch him slink south, beaten. He'd laugh. Probably with his wretched pixie sitting on his shoulder, laughing right along with him.

As he considered this, he minded something the Widow Smack used to say in happier days, when he was just a schoolboy whose biggest concern was to finish his chores before his da' came back from the woods: *The only stupid question, my cullies, is the one you don't ask.*

Speaking slowly (and without much hope), Tim said: "I'm on a quest to find Maerlyn, who is a great magician. I was told he has a house in the Endless Forest, but the man who told me so was . . ." Was a bastard. Was a liar. Was a cruel trickster who passed the time cozening children. ". . . was untrustworthy," he finished. "Have you of the Fagonard ever heard of this Maerlyn? He may wear a tall cap the color of the sun."

He expected headshakes or incomprehension. Instead, the members of the tribe moved away from him and formed a tight, jabbering circle. This went on for at least ten minutes, and on several occasions the discussion grew quite warm. At last they returned to where Tim waited. Crooked hands with sore-raddled fingers pushed the erstwhile helmsman forward. This worthy was broad-shouldered and sturdily built. Had he not grown up in the waterlogged poison-bowl that was the Fagonard, he might have been considered handsome.

His eyes were bright with intelligence. On his chest, above his right nipple, an enormous infected sore bulged and trembled.

He raised a finger in a way Tim recognized: it was the Widow Smack's *attend me* gesture. Tim nodded and pointed the first two fingers of his right hand—the one not holding the gun—at his eyes, as the Widow had taught them.

Helmsman—the tribe's best play-actor, Tim surmised—nodded back, then stroked the air below the straggly growth of intermixed stubble and weed on his chin.

Tim felt a stab of excitement. “A beard? Yes, he has a beard!”

Helmsman next stroked the air above his head, closing his fist as he did so, indicating not just a tall cap but a tall *conical* cap.

“That's him!” Tim actually laughed.

Helmsman smiled, but Tim thought it a troubled smile. Several of the others jabbered and twittered. Helmsman motioned them quiet, then turned back to Tim. Before he could continue his dumbshow, however, the sore above his nipple burst open in a spray of pus and blood. From it crawled a spider the size of a robin's egg. Helmsman grabbed it, crushed it, and tossed it aside. Then, as Tim watched with horrified fascination, he used one hand to push the wound wide. When the sides gaped like lips, he used his other hand to reach in and scoop out a slick mass of faintly throbbing eggs. He slatted these casually aside, ridding himself of them as a man might rid himself of a palmful of snot he has blown out of his nose on a cold morning. None of the others paid this any particular attention. They were waiting for the show to continue.

With his sore attended to, Helmsman dropped to his hands and knees and began to make a series of predatory lunges this way and that, growling as he did so. He stopped and looked up at Tim, who shook his head. He was also struggling with his stomach. These people had just saved his life, and he reckoned it would be very impolite to puke in front of them.

“I don't understand that one, sai. Say sorry.”

Helmsman shrugged and got to his feet. The matted weeds growing from his chest were now beaded with blood. Again he made the beard and the tall conical cap. Again he dropped to the ground, snarling and making lunges. This time all the others joined him. The tribe briefly became a pack of dangerous animals, their laughter and obvious good cheer somewhat spoiling the illusion.

Tim once more shook his head, feeling quite stupid.

Helmsman did not look cheerful; he looked worried. He stood for a moment, hands on hips, thinking, then beckoned one of his fellow tribesmen forward. This one was tall, bald, and toothless. The two of them palavered at length. Then the tall man ran off, making great speed even though his legs were so severely bent that he rocked from side to side like a skiff in a swell. Helmsman beckoned two others forward and spoke to them. They also ran off.

Helmsman then dropped to his hands and knees and recommenced his fierce-animal imitation. When he was done, he looked up at Tim with an expression that was close to pleading.

“Is it a dog?” Tim ventured.

At this, the remaining tribesmen laughed heartily.

Helmsman got up and patted Tim on the shoulder with a six-fingered hand, as if to tell him not to take it to heart.

“Just tell me one thing,” Tim said. “Maerlyn . . . sai, is he real?”

Helmsman considered this, then flung his arms skyward in an exaggerated *delab* gesture. It was body language any Tree villager would have recognized: *Who knows?*

The two tribesmen who had run off together came back carrying a basket of woven reeds and a hemp shoulder strap to carry it with. They deposited it at Helmsman’s feet, turned to Tim, saluted him, then stood back, grinning. Helmsman hunkered and motioned for Tim to do the same.

The boy knew what the basket held even before Helmsman opened it. He could smell fresh-cooked meat and had to wipe his mouth on his sleeve to keep

from drooling. The two men (or perhaps their women) had packed the Fagonard equivalent of a woodsman's lunch. Sliced pork had been layered with rounds of some orange vegetable that looked like squash. These were wrapped in thin green leaves to make breadless popkins. There were also strawberries and blueberries, fruits long gone by for the season in Tree.

"Thankee-sai!" Tim tapped his throat three times. This made them all laugh and tap their own throats.

The tall tribesman returned. From one shoulder hung a waterskin. In his hand he carried a small purse of the finest, smoothest leather Tim had ever seen. The purse he gave to Helmsman. The waterskin he held out to the boy.

Tim wasn't aware of how thirsty he was until he felt the skin's weight and pressed his palms against its plump, gently yielding sides. He pulled the plug with his teeth, raised it on his elbow as did the men of his village, and drank deep. He expected it to be brackish (and perhaps buggy), but it was as cool and sweet as that which came from their own spring between the house and the barn.

The tribesmen laughed and applauded. Tim saw a sore on the shoulder of Tallman getting ready to give birth, and was relieved when Helmsman tapped him on the shoulder, wanting him to look at something.

It was the purse. There was some sort of metal seam running across the middle of it. When Helmsman pulled a tab attached to this seam, the purse opened like magic.

Inside was a brushed metal disc the size of a small plate. There was writing on the top side that Tim couldn't read. Below the writing were three buttons. Helmsman pushed one of these, and a short stick emerged from the plate with a low whining sound. The tribesmen, who had gathered round in a loose semicircle, laughed and applauded some more. They were clearly having a wonderful time. Tim, with his thirst slaked and his feet on solid (*semisolid*, at least) ground, decided he was having a pretty good time himself.

"Is that from the Old People, sai?"

Helmsman nodded.

“Such things are held to be dangerous where I come from.”

Helmsman at first didn't seem to understand this, and from their puzzled expressions, none of the other plant-fellas did, either. Then he laughed and made a sweeping gesture that took in everything: the sky, the water, the oozing land upon which they stood. As if to say *everything* was dangerous.

And in this place, Tim thought, everything probably is.

Helmsman poked Tim's chest, then gave an apologetic little shrug: *Sorry, but you must pay attention.*

“All right,” Tim said. “I'm watching.” And forked two fingers at his eyes, which made them all chuckle and elbow each other, as if he had gotten off an especially good one.

Helmsman pushed a second button. The disc beeped, which made the watchers murmur appreciatively. A red light came on below the buttons. Helmsman began to turn in a slow circle, holding the metal device out before him like an offering. Three quarters of the way around the circle, the device beeped again and the red light turned green. Helmsman pointed one overgrown finger in the direction the device was now pointing. As well as Tim could ken from the mostly hidden sun, this was north. Helmsman looked to see if Tim understood. Tim thought he did, but there was a problem.

“There's water that way. I can swim, but . . .” He bared his teeth and chomped them together, pointing toward the tussock where he had almost become some scaly thing's breakfast. They all laughed hard at this, none harder than Helmsman, who actually had to bend and grip his mossy knees to keep from falling over.

Yar, Tim thought, very funny, I almost got eaten alive.

When his throe had passed and Helmsman was able to stand up straight again, he pointed at the rickety boat.

“Oh,” Tim said. “I forgot about that.”

He was thinking that he made a very stupid gunslinger.

Helmsman saw Tim onboard, then took his accustomed place beneath the pole where the decaying boar's head had been. The crew took theirs. The food and water were handed in; the little leather case with the compass (if that was what it was) Tim had stowed in the Widow's cotton sack. The four-shot went into his belt on his left hip, where it made a rough balance for the hand-ax on his right side.

There was a good deal of *hile*-ing back and forth, then Tallman—who Tim believed was probably Headman, although Helmsman had done most of the communicating—approached. He stood on the bank and looked solemnly at Tim in the boat. He forked two fingers at his eyes: *Attend me*.

"I see you very well." And he did, although his eyes were growing heavy. He couldn't remember when he had last slept. Not last night, certainly.

Headman shook his head, made the forked-finger gesture again—with more emphasis this time—and deep in the recesses of Tim's mind (perhaps even in his soul, that tiny shining splinter of ka), he seemed to hear a whisper. For the first time it occurred to him that it might not be his *words* that these swampfolk understood.

"Watch?"

Headman nodded; the others muttered agreement. There was no laughter or merriment in their faces now; they looked sorrowful and strangely childlike.

"Watch for what?"

Headman got down on his hands and knees and began turning in rapid circles. This time instead of growls, he made a series of doglike yipping sounds. Every now and then he stopped and raised his head in the northerly direction the device had pointed out, flaring his green-cruled nostrils, as if scenting the air. At last he rose and looked at Tim questioningly.

"All right," Tim said. He didn't know what Headman was trying to convey—or why all of them now looked so downcast—but he would remember. And he would know what Headman was trying so hard to show him, if he saw it. If he saw it, he might understand it.

“Sai, do you hear my thoughts?”

Headman nodded. They all nodded.

“Then thee knows I am no gunslinger. I was but trying to spark my courage.”

Headman shook his head and smiled, as if this were of no account. He made the *attend me* gesture again, then clapped his arms around his sore-ridden torso and began an exaggerated shivering. The others—even the seated crewmembers on the boat—copied him. After a little of this, Headman fell over on the ground (which squelched under his weight). The others copied this, too. Tim stared at this litter of bodies, astonished. At last, Headman stood up. Looked into Tim’s eyes. The look asked if Tim understood, and Tim was terribly afraid he did.

“Are you saying—”

He found he couldn’t finish, at least not aloud. It was too terrible.

(Are you saying you’re all going to die)

Slowly, while looking gravely into his eyes—yet smiling a little, just the same—Headman nodded. Then Tim proved conclusively that he was no gunslinger. He began to cry.

Helmsman pushed off with a long stick. The oarsmen on the left side turned the boat, and when it had reached open water, Helmsman gestured with both hands for them to row. Tim sat in the back and opened the food hamper. He ate a little because his belly was still hungry, but only a little, because the rest of him now wasn’t. When he offered to pass the basket around, the oarsmen grinned their thanks but declined. The water was smooth, the steady rhythm of the oars lulling, and Tim’s eyes soon closed. He dreamed that his mother was shaking him and telling him it was morning, that if he stayed slugabed, he’d be too late to help his da’ saddle the mollies.

Is he alive, then? Tim asked, and the question was so absurd that Nell laughed.

He was shaken awake, that much *did* happen, but not by his mother. It was Helmsman who was bending over him when he opened his eyes, the man smelling so powerfully of sweat and decaying vegetable matter that Tim had to stifle a sneeze. Nor was it morning. Quite the opposite: the sun had crossed the sky and shone redly through stands of strange, gnarled trees that grew right out of the water. Those trees Tim could not have named, but he knew the ones growing on the slope beyond the place where the swamp boat had come to ground. They were ironwoods, and real giants. Deep drifts of orange and gold flowers grew around their bases. Tim thought his mother would swoon at their beauty, then remembered she would no longer be able to see them.

They had come to the end of the Fagonard. Ahead were the true forest deeps.

Helmsman helped Tim over the side of the boat, and two of the oarsmen handed out the basket of food and the waterskin. When his gunna was at Tim's feet—this time on ground that didn't ooze or quake—Helmsman motioned for Tim to open the Widow's cotton sack. When Tim did, Helmsman made a beeping sound that brought an appreciative chuckle from his crew.

Tim took out the leather case that held the metal disc and tried to hand it over. Helmsman shook his head and pointed at Tim. The meaning was clear enough. Tim pulled the tab that opened the seam and took out the device. It was surprisingly heavy for something so thin, and eerily smooth.

Mustn't drop it, he told himself. I'll come back this way and return it as I'd return any borrowed dish or tool, back in the village. Which is to say, as it was when it was given to me. If I do that, I'll find them alive and well.

They were watching to see if he remembered how to use it. Tim pushed the button that brought up the short stick, then the one that made the beep and the red light. There was no laughter or hooting this time; now it was serious business, perhaps even a matter of life and death. Tim began to turn slowly, and when he was facing a rising lane in the trees—what might once have been a path—the red light changed to green and there was a second beep.

“Still north,” Tim said. “It shows the way even after sundown, does it? And if the trees are too thick to see Old Star and Old Mother?”

Helmsman nodded, patted Tim on the shoulder . . . then bent and kissed him swiftly and gently on the cheek. He stepped back, looking alarmed at his own temerity.

“It’s all right,” Tim said. “It’s fine.”

Helmsman dropped to one knee. The others had gotten out of the boat, and they did the same. They fisted their foreheads and cried *Hile!*

Tim felt more tears rise and fought them back. He said: “Rise, bondsmen . . . if that’s what you think you are. Rise in love and thanks.”

They rose and scrambled back into their boat.

Tim raised the metal disc with the writing on it. “I’ll bring this back! Good as I found it! I will!”

Slowly—but still smiling, and that was somehow terrible—Helmsman shook his head. He gave the boy a last fond and lingering look, then poled the ramshackle boat away from solid ground and into the unsteady part of the world that was their home. Tim stood watching it make its slow and stately turn south. When the crew raised their dripping paddles in salute, he waved. He watched them go until the boat was nothing but a phantom waver on the belt of fire laid down by the setting sun. He dashed warm tears from his eyes and restrained (barely) an urge to call them back.

When the boat was gone, he slung his gunna about his slender body, turned in the direction the device had indicated, and began to walk deeper into the forest.

Dark came. At first there was a moon, but its glow was only an untrustworthy glimmer by the time it reached the ground . . . and then that too was gone. There *was* a path, he was sure of it, but it was easy to wander to one side or the other. The first two times this happened he managed to avoid running into a tree, but not the third. He was thinking of Maerlyn, and how

likely it was there was no such person, and smacked chest-first into the bole of an ironwood. He held onto the silver disc, but the basket of food tumbled to the ground and spilled.

Now I'll have to grope around on my hands and knees, and unless I stay here until morning, I'll still probably miss some of the—

“Would you like a light, traveler?” a woman’s voice asked.

Tim would later tell himself he shouted in surprise—for don’t we all have a tendency to massage our memories so they reflect our better selves?—but the truth was a little balder: he screamed in terror, dropped the disc, bolted to his feet, and was on the verge of taking to his heels (and never mind the trees he might crash into) when the part of him dedicated to survival intervened. If he ran, he would likely never be able to find the food scattered at the edge of the path. Or the disc, which he had promised to protect and bring back undamaged.

It was the disc that spoke.

A ridiculous idea, even a fairy the size of Armaneeta couldn’t fit inside that thin plate of metal . . . but was it any more ridiculous than a boy on his own in the Endless Forest, searching for a mage who had to be long centuries dead? Who, even if alive, was likely thousands of wheels north of here, in that part of the world where the snow never melted?

He looked for the greenglow and didn’t see it. With his heart still hammering in his chest, Tim got down on his knees and felt around, touching a litter of leaf-wrapped pork popkins, discovering a small basket of berries (most spilled on the ground), discovering the hamper itself . . . but no silver disc.

In despair, he cried: “Where in Nis are you?”

“Here, traveler,” the woman’s voice said. Perfectly composed. Coming from his left. Still on his hands and knees, he turned in that direction.

“Where?”

“Here, traveler.”

“Keep talking, will ya do.”

The voice was obliging. “Here, traveler. Here, traveler, here, traveler.”

He reached toward the voice; his hand closed on the precious artifact. When he turned it over in his hand, he saw the green light. He cradled it to his chest, sweating. He thought he had never been so terrified, not even when he realized he was standing on the head of a dragon, nor so relieved.

“Here, traveler. Here, traveler. Here—”

“I’ve got you,” Tim said, feeling simultaneously foolish and not foolish at all. “You can, um, be quiet now.”

Silence from the silver disc. Tim sat still for perhaps five minutes, listening to the night-noises of the forest—not so threatening as those in the swamp, at least so far—and getting himself under control. Then he said, “Yes, sai, I’d like a light.”

The disc commenced the same low whining noise it made when it brought forth the stick, and suddenly a white light, so brilliant it made Tim temporarily blind, shone out. The trees leaped into being all around him, and some creature that had crept close without making a sound leaped back with a startled *yark* sound. Tim’s eyes were still too dazzled for him to get a good look, but he had an impression of a smooth-furred body and—perhaps—a squiggle of tail.

A second stick had emerged from the plate. At the top, a small hooded bulge was producing that furious glare. It was like burning phosphorous, but unlike phosphorous, it did not burn out. Tim had no idea how sticks and lights could hide in a metal plate so thin, and didn’t care. One thing he did care about.

“How long will it last, my lady?”

“Your question is nonspecific, traveler. Rephrase.”

“How long will the light last?”

“Battery power is eighty-eight percent. Projected life is seventy years, plus or minus two.”

Seventy years, Tim thought. That should be enough.

He began picking up and repacking his gunna.

With the bright glare to guide him, the path he was following was even clearer than it had been on the edge of the swamp, but it sloped steadily upward, and by midnight (if it *was* midnight; he had no way of telling), Tim was tired out in spite of his long sleep in the boat. The oppressive and unnatural heat continued, and that didn't help. Neither did the weight of the hamper and the waterskin. At last he sat, put the disc down beside him, opened the hamper, and munched one of the popkins. It was delicious. He considered a second, then reminded himself that he didn't know how long he would have to make these rations last. It also crossed his mind that the brilliant light shining from the disc could be seen by anything that happened to be in the vicinity, and some of those things might not be friendly.

"Would you turn the light off, lady?"

He wasn't sure she would respond—he had tried several conversational gambits in the last four or five hours, with no result—but the light went off, plunging him into utter darkness. At once Tim seemed to sense living things all around him—boars, woods-wolves, vurts, mayhap a pooky or two—and he had to restrain an urge to ask for the light again.

These ironwoods seemed to know it was Wide Earth in spite of the unnatural heat, and had sprinkled down plenty of year-end duff, mostly on the flowers that surrounded their bases, but also beyond them. Tim gathered up enough to make a jackleg bed and lay down upon it.

I've gone jippa, he thought—the unpleasant Tree term for people who lost their minds. But he didn't *feel* jippa. What he felt was full and content, although he missed the Fagonarders and worried about them.

"I'm going to sleep," he said. "Will you wake me if something comes, sai?"

She responded, but not in a way Tim understood: "Directive Nineteen."

That's the one after eighteen and before twenty, Tim thought, and closed his eyes. He began to drift at once. He thought to ask the disembodied female voice another question: *Did thee speak to the swamp people?* But by then he was gone.

In the deepest crease of the night, Tim Ross's part of the Endless Forest came alive with small, creeping forms. Within the sophisticated device marked North Central Positronics Portable Guidance Module DARIA, NCP-1436345-AN, the ghost in the machine marked the approach of these creatures but remained silent, sensing no danger. Tim slept on.

The throcken—six in all—gathered around the slumbering boy in a loose semicircle. For a while they watched him with their strange gold-ringed eyes, but then they turned north and raised their snouts in the air.

Above the northernmost reaches of Mid-World, where the snows never end and New Earth never comes, a great funnel had begun to form, turning in air lately arrived from the south that was far too warm. As it began to breathe like a lung, it sucked up a moit of frigid air from below and began to turn faster, creating a self-sustaining energy pump. Soon the outer edges found the Path of the Beam, which Guidance Module DARIA read electronically and which Tim Ross saw as a faint path through the woods.

The Beam tasted the storm, found it good, and sucked it in. The starkblast began to move south, slowly at first, then faster.

Tim awoke to birdsong and sat up, rubbing his eyes. For a moment he didn't know where he was, but the sight of the hamper and the greenish shafts of sunlight falling through the high tops of the ironwood trees soon set him in place. He stood up, started to step off the path to do his morning necessary, then paused. He saw several tight little bundles of scat around the place where he had slept, and wondered what had come to investigate him in the night.

Something smaller than wolves, he thought. *Let that be enough.*

He unbuttoned his flies and took care of his business. When he was finished, he repacked the hamper (a little surprised that his visitors hadn't raided it), had a drink from the waterskin, and picked up the silver disc. His eye fell on the third button. The Widow Smack spoke up inside his head, telling him not to push it, to leave well enough alone, but Tim decided this was advice he would disregard. If he had paid attention to well-meaning advice, he wouldn't be here. Of course, his mother might also have her sight . . . but Big Kells would still be his steppa. He supposed all of life was full of similar trades.

Hoping the damned thing wouldn't explode, Tim pushed the button.

"Hello, traveler!" the woman's voice said.

Tim began to hello her back, but she went on without acknowledging him. "Welcome to DARIA, a guidance service of North Central Positronics. You are on the Beam of the Cat, sometimes known as the Beam of the Lion or of the Tyger. You are also on the Way of the Bird, known variously as the Way of the Eagle, the Way of the Hawk, and the Way of the Vulturine. All things serve the Beam!"

"So they do say," Tim agreed, so wonderstruck he was hardly aware he was speaking. "Although no one knows what it means."

"You have left Waypoint Nine, in Fagonard Swamp. There is no Dogan in Fagonard Swamp, but there is a charging station. If you need a charging station, say *yes* and I will compute your course. If you do not need a charging station, say *continue*."

"Continue," Tim said. "Lady . . . Daria . . . I seek Maerlyn—"

She overrode him. "The next Dogan on the current course is on the North Forest Kinnock, also known as the Northern Aerie. The charging station at the North Forest Kinnock Dogan is off-line. Disturbance in the Beam suggests magic at that location. There may also be Changed Life at that location. Detour is recommended. If you would like to detour, say *detour* and I will compute the necessary changes. If you would like to visit the North Forest Kinnock Dogan, also known as the Northern Aerie, say *continue*."

Tim considered the choices. If the Daria-thing was suggesting a detour, this Dogan-place was probably dangerous. On the other hand, wasn't magic exactly what he had come in search of? Magic, or a miracle? And he'd already stood on the head of a dragon. How much more dangerous could the North Forest Kinnock Dogan be?

Maybe a lot, he admitted to himself . . . but he had his father's ax, he had his father's lucky coin, and he had a four-shot. One that worked, and had already drawn blood.

"Continue," he said.

"The distance to the North Forest Kinnock Dogan is fifty miles, or forty-five-point-forty-five wheels. The terrain is moderate. Weather conditions . . ."

Daria paused. There was a loud click. Then:

"Directive Nineteen."

"What is Directive Nineteen, Daria?"

"To bypass Directive Nineteen, speak your password. You may be asked to spell."

"I don't know what that means."

"Are you sure you would not like me to plot a detour, traveler? I am detecting a strong disturbance in the Beam, indicating deep magic."

"Is it white magic or black?" It was as close as Tim could come to asking a question the voice from the plate probably wouldn't understand: *Is it Maerlyn or is it the man who got Mama and me into this mess?*

When there was no answer for ten seconds, Tim began to believe there would be no answer at all . . . or another repetition of *Directive Nineteen*, which really amounted to the same thing. But an answer came back, although it did him little good.

"Both," said Daria.

His way continued upward, and the heat continued, as well. By noon, Tim was too tired and hungry to go on. He had tried several times to

engage Daria in conversation, but she had once again gone silent. Pushing the third button did not help, although her navigation function seemed unimpaired; when he deliberately turned to the right or left of the discernible path leading ever deeper into the woods (and ever upward), the green light turned red. When he turned back, the green reappeared.

He ate from the hamper, then settled in for a nap. When he awoke, it was late afternoon and a little cooler. He reslung the hamper on his back (it was lighter now), shouldered the waterskin, and pushed ahead. The afternoon was short and the twilight even shorter. The night held fewer terrors for him, partly because he had already survived one, but mostly because, when he called for the light, Daria provided it. And after the heat of the day, the cool of evening was refreshing.

Tim went on for a good many hours before he began to tire again. He was gathering some duff to sleep on until daylight when Daria spoke up. "There is a scenic opportunity ahead, traveler. If you wish to take advantage of this scenic opportunity, say *continue*. If you do not wish to observe, say *no*."

Tim had been in the act of putting the hamper on the ground. Now he picked it up again, intrigued. "Continue," he said.

The disc's bright light went out, but after Tim's eyes had a chance to adjust, he saw light up ahead. Only moonlight, but far brighter than that which filtered through the trees overhanging the path.

"Use the green navigation sensor," Daria said. "Move quietly. The scenic opportunity is one mile, or point-eight wheels, north of your current location."

With that, she clicked off.

Tim moved as quietly as he could, but to himself he sounded very loud. In the end, it probably made no difference. The path opened into the first large clearing he had come to since entering the forest, and the beings occupying it took no notice of him at all.

There were six billy-bumblers sitting on a fallen ironwood tree, with their snouts raised to the crescent moon. Their eyes gleamed like jewels. Throcken were hardly ever seen in Tree these days, and to see even one was considered extremely lucky. Tim never had. Several of his friends claimed to have glimpsed them at play in the fields, or in the blossie groves, but he suspected they were fibbing. And now . . . to see a full half-dozen . . .

They were, he thought, far more beautiful than the treacherous Armaneeta, because the only magic about them was the plain magic of living things. *These were the creatures that surrounded me last night—I know they were.*

He approached them as in a dream, knowing he would probably frighten them away, but helpless to stay where he was. They did not move. He stretched his hand out to one, ignoring the doleful voice in his head (it sounded like the Widow's) telling him he would certainly be bitten.

The bumbler did not bite, but when it felt Tim's fingers in the dense fur below the shelf of its jaw, it seemed to awake. It leaped from the log. The others did the same. They began to chase around his feet and between his legs, nipping at each other and uttering high-pitched barks that made Tim laugh.

One looked over its shoulder at him . . . and seemed to laugh back.

They left him and raced to the center of the clearing. There they made a moving ring in the moonlight, their faint shadows dancing and weaving. They all stopped at once and rose on their hind legs with their paws outstretched, looking for all the world like little furry men. Beneath the cold smile of the crescent moon, they all faced north, along the Path of the Beam.

"You're wonderful!" Tim called.

They turned to him, concentration broken. "Wunnerful!" one of them said . . . and then they all raced into the trees. It happened so quickly that Tim could almost believe he had imagined the whole thing.

Almost.

He made camp in the clearing that night, hoping they might return. And, as he drifted toward sleep, he remembered something the Widow Smack had

said about the unseasonably warm weather. *It's probably nothing . . . unless you see Sir Throcken dancing in the starlight or looking north with his muzzle upraised.*

He had seen not just one bumbler but a full half-dozen doing both.

Tim sat up. The Widow had said those things were a sign of something—what? A stunblast? That was close, but not quite—

“Starkblast,” he said. “That was it.”

“Starkblast,” Daria said, startling him more wide awake than ever. “A fast-moving storm of great power. Its features include steep and sudden drops in temperature accompanied by strong winds. It has been known to cause major destruction and loss of life in civilized portions of the world. In primitive areas, entire tribes have been wiped out. This definition of *starkblast* has been a service of North Central Positronics.”

Tim lay down again on his bed of duff, arms crossed behind his head, looking up at the circle of stars this clearing made visible. A service of North Central Positronics, was it? Well . . . maybe. He had an idea it might really have been a service of Daria. She was a marvelous machine (although he wasn't sure a machine was *all* she was), but there were things she wasn't allowed to tell him. He had an idea she might be *hinting* at some things, though. Was she leading him on, as the Covenant Man and Armaneeta had done? Tim had to admit it was a possibility, but he didn't really believe it. He thought—possibly because he was just a stupid kid, ready to believe anything—that maybe she hadn't had anyone to talk to for a long time, and had taken a shine to him. One thing he knew for sure: if there was a terrible storm coming, he would do well to finish his business quickly, and then get undercover. But where would be safe?

This led his musings back to the Fagonard tribe. They weren't a bit safe . . . as they knew, for hadn't they already imitated the bumlbers for him? He had promised himself he would recognize what they were trying to show him if it was put before him, and he had. The storm was coming—the starkblast. They knew it, probably from the bumlbers, and they expected it to kill them.

With such thoughts in his mind, Tim guessed it would be a long time before he could get to sleep, but five minutes later he was lost to the world.

He dreamed of throdden dancing in the moonlight.

He began to think of Daria as his companion, although she didn't speak much, and when she did, Tim didn't always understand why (or what in Na'ar she was talking about). Once it was a series of numbers. Once she told him she would be "off-line" because she was "searching for satellite" and suggested he stop. He did, and for half an hour the plate seemed completely dead—no lights, no voice. Just when he'd begun to believe she really had died, the green light came back on, the little stick reappeared, and Daria announced, "I have reestablished satellite link."

"Wish you joy of it," Tim replied.

Several times, she offered to calculate a detour. This Tim continued to decline. And once, near the end of the second day after leaving the Fagonard, she recited a bit of verse:

*See the Eagle's brilliant eye,
And wings on which he holds the sky!
He spies the land and spies the sea
And even spies a child like me.*

If he lived to be a hundred (which, given his current mad errand, Tim doubted was in the cards), he thought he would never forget the things he saw on the three days he and Daria trudged ever upward in the continuing heat. The path, once vague, became a clear lane, one that for several wheels was bordered by crumbling rock walls. Once, for a space of almost an hour, the corridor in the sky above that lane was filled with thousands of huge red birds flying south, as if in migration. *But surely*, Tim thought, *they must come to rest in the Endless Forest*. For no birds like that had ever been seen above the village of Tree. Once four blue deer less than two feet high crossed the path ahead of him,

seeming to take no notice of the thunderstruck boy who stood staring at these mutie dwarfs. And once they came to a field filled with giant yellow mushrooms standing four feet high, with caps the size of umbrellas.

“Are they good to eat, Daria?” Tim asked, for he was reaching the end of the goods in the hamper. “Does thee know?”

“No, traveler,” Daria replied. “They are poison. If you even brush their dust on your skin, you will die of seizures. I advise extreme caution.”

This was advice Tim took, even holding his breath until he was past that deadly grove filled with treacherous, sunshiny death.

Near the end of the third day, he emerged on the edge of a narrow chasm that fell away for a thousand feet or more. He could not see the bottom, for it was filled with a drift of white flowers. They were so thick that he at first mistook them for a cloud that had fallen to earth. The smell that wafted up to him was fantastically sweet. A rock bridge spanned this gorge, on the other side passing through a waterfall that glowed blood-red in the reflected light of the setting sun.

“Am I meant to cross that?” Tim asked faintly. It looked not much wider than a barn-beam . . . and, in the middle, not much thicker.

No answer from Daria, but the steadily glowing green light was answer enough.

“Maybe in the morning,” Tim said, knowing he would not sleep for thinking about it, but also not wanting to chance it so close to day’s end. The idea of having to negotiate the last part of that lofty causeway in the dark was terrifying.

“I advise you to cross now,” Daria told him, “and continue to the North Forest Kinnock Dogan with all possible speed. Detour is no longer possible.”

Looking at the gorge with its chancy bridge, Tim hardly needed the voice from the plate to tell him that a detour was no longer possible. But still . . .

“Why can’t I wait until morning? Surely it would be safer.”

“Directive Nineteen.” A click louder than any he had heard before came from the plate and then Daria added, “But I advise speed, Tim.”

He had several times asked her to call him by name rather than as *traveler*. This was the first time she had done so, and it convinced him. He left the Fagonard tribe’s basket—not without some regret—because he thought it might unbalance him. He tucked the last two popkins into his shirt, slung the waterskin over his back, then checked to make sure both the four-shot and his father’s hand-ax were firmly in place on either hip. He approached the stone causeway, looked down into the banks of white flowers, and saw the first shadows of evening beginning to pool there. He imagined himself making that one you-can-never-take-it-back misstep; saw himself whirling his arms in a fruitless effort to keep his balance; felt his feet first losing the rock and then running on air; heard his scream as the fall began. There would be a few moments to regret all the life he might have lived, and then—

“Daria,” he said in a small, sick voice, “do I have to?”

No answer, which was answer enough. Tim stepped out over the drop.

The sound of his bootheels on rock was very loud. He didn’t want to look down, but had no choice; if he didn’t mind where he was going, he would be doomed for sure. The rock bridge was as wide as a village path when he began, but by the time he got to the middle—as he had feared, although he had hoped it was just his eyes playing tricks—it was only the width of his shor’boots. He tried walking with his arms outstretched, but a breeze came blowing down the gorge, billowing his shirt and making him feel like a kite about to lift off. He lowered them and walked on, heel-to-toe and heel-to-toe, wavering from side to side. He became convinced his heart was beating its last frenzied beats, his mind thinking its last random thoughts.

Mama will never know what happened to me.

Halfway across, the bridge was at its narrowest, also its thinnest. Tim could feel its fragility through his feet, and could hear the wind playing its pitch pipe

along its eroded underside. Now each time he took a step, he had to swing a boot out over the drop.

Don't freeze, he told himself, but he knew that if he hesitated, he might do just that. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw movement below, and he *did* hesitate.

Long, leathery tentacles were emerging from the flowers. They were slate-gray on top and as pink as burned skin underneath. They rose toward him in a wavy dance—first two, then four, then eight, then a forest of them.

Daria again said, “I advise speed, Tim.”

He forced himself to start walking again. Slowly at first, but faster as the tentacles continued to close in. Surely no beast had a thousand-foot reach, no matter how monstrous the body hiding down there in the flowers, but when Tim saw the tentacles thinning out and stretching to reach even higher, he began to hurry. And when the longest of them reached the underside of the bridge and began to fumble its way along it, he broke into a run.

The waterfall—no longer red, now a fading pinkish-orange—thundered ahead of him. Cold spray splattered his hot face. Tim felt something caress his boot, seeking purchase, and threw himself forward at the water with an inarticulate yell. There was one moment of freezing cold—it encased his body like a glove—and then he was on the other side of the falls and back on solid ground.

One of the tentacles came through. It reared up like a snake, dripping . . . and then withdrew.

“Daria! Are you all right?”

“I’m waterproof,” Daria replied with something that sounded suspiciously like smugness.

Tim picked himself up and looked around. He was in a little rock cave. Written on one wall, in paint that once might have been red but had over the years (or perhaps centuries) faded to a dull rust, was this cryptic notation:

JOHN 3:16
FEER HELL HOPE FOR HEVEN
MAN JESUS

Ahead of him was a short stone staircase filled with fading sunset light. To one side of it was a litter of tin cans and bits of broken machinery—springs, wires, broken glass, and chunks of green board covered with squiggles of metal. On the other side of the stairs was a grinning skeleton with what looked like an ancient canteen draped over its ribcage. *Hello, Tim!* that grin seemed to say. *Welcome to the far side of the world! Want a drink of dust? I have plenty!*

Tim climbed the stairs, skittering past the relic. He knew perfectly well it wouldn't come to life and try to snare him by the boot, as the tentacles from the flowers had tried to do; dead was dead. Still, it seemed safer to skitter.

When he emerged, he saw that the path once more entered the woods, but he wouldn't be there for long. Not far ahead, the great old trees pulled back and the long, long upslope he had been climbing ended in a clearing far larger than the one where the bumblebees had danced. There an enormous tower made of metal girders rose into the sky. At the top was a blinking red light.

"You have almost reached your destination," Daria said. "The North Forest Kinnock Dogan is three wheels ahead." That click came again, even louder than before. "You really must hurry, Tim."

As Tim stood looking at the tower with its blinking light, the breeze that had so frightened him while crossing the rock bridge came again, only this time its breath was chilly. He looked up into the sky and saw the clouds that had been lazing toward the south were now racing.

"It's the starkblast, Daria, isn't it? The starkblast is coming."

Daria didn't reply, but Tim didn't need her to.

He began to run.

By the time he reached the Dogan clearing, he was out of breath and only able to trot, in spite of his sense of urgency. The wind continued to

rise, pushing against him, and the high branches of the ironwood trees had begun to whisper. The air was still warm, but Tim didn't think it would stay that way for long. He needed to get undercover, and he hoped to do so in this Dogan-thing.

But when he entered the clearing, he barely spared a glance for the round, metal-roofed building which stood at the base of the skeletal tower with its blinking light. He had seen something else that took all his attention, and stole his breath.

Am I seeing that? Am I really seeing that?

"Gods," he whispered.

The path, as it crossed the clearing, was paved in some smooth dark material, so bright that it reflected both the trees dancing in the rising wind and the sunset-tinged clouds flowing overhead. It ended at a rock precipice. The whole world seemed to end there, and to begin again a hundred wheels or more distant. In between was a great chasm of rushing air in which leaves danced and swirled. There were bin-rusties as well. They rose and twisted helplessly in the eddies and currents. Some were obviously dead, the wings ripped from their bodies.

Tim hardly noticed the great chasm and the dying birds, either. To the left of the metal road, about three yards from the place where the world dropped off into nothingness, there stood a round cage made of steel bars. Overturned in front of it was a battered tin bucket he knew all too well.

In the cage, pacing slowly around a hole in the center, was an enormous tyger.

It saw the staring, gapemouthered boy and approached the bars. Its eyes were as large as Points balls, but a brilliant green instead of blue. On its hide, stripes of dark orange alternated with those of richest midnight black. Its ears were cocked. Its snout wrinkled back from long white teeth. It growled. The sound was low, like a silk garment being ripped slowly up a seam. It could have been a greeting . . . but Tim somehow doubted it.

Around its neck was a silver collar. From this hung two objects. One looked like a playing card. The other was a key with a strange twisted shape.

Tim had no idea how long he stood captured by those fabulous emerald eyes, or how long he might have remained so, but the extreme peril of his situation announced itself in a series of low, thudding explosions.

“What’s that?”

“Trees on the far side of the Great Canyon,” Daria said. “Extreme rapid temperature change is causing them to implode. Seek shelter, Tim.”

The starkblast—what else? “How long before it gets here?”

“Less than an hour.” There was another of those loud clicks. “I may have to shut down.”

“No!”

“I have violated Directive Nineteen. All I can say in my defense is that it’s been a very long time since I have had anyone to talk to.” *Click!* Then—more worrisome, more ominous—*Clunk!*

“What about the tyger? Is it the Guardian of the Beam?” As soon as he articulated the idea, Tim was filled with horror. “I can’t leave a Guardian of the Beam out here to die in the starkblast!”

“The Guardian of the Beam at this end is Aslan,” Daria said. “Aslan is a lion, and if he still lives, he is far from here, in the land of endless snows. This tyger is . . . *Directive Nineteen!*” Then an even louder clunk as she overrode the directive, at what cost Tim did not know. “This tyger is the magic of which I spoke. Never mind it. *Seek shelter!* Good luck, Tim. You have been my fr—”

Not a click this time, nor a clunk, but an awful crunch. Smoke drifted up from the plate and the green light went out.

“Daria!”

Nothing.

“*Daria, come back!*”

But Daria was gone.

The artillery sounds made by the dying trees were still far across that cloudy gap in the world, but there could be no doubt that they were approaching. The wind continued to strengthen, growing ever colder. High above, a final batch of clouds was boiling past. Behind them was an awful violet clarity in which the first stars had begun to appear. The whisper of the wind in the high branches of the surrounding trees had risen to an unhappy chorus of sighs. It was as if the ironwoods knew their long, long lives were coming to an end. A great woodsman was on the way, swinging an ax made of wind.

Tim took another look at the tyger (it had resumed its slow and stately pacing, as if Tim had been worth only momentary consideration), then hurried to the Dogan. Small round windows of real glass—very thick, from the look—marched around its circumference at the height of Tim’s head. The door was also metal. There was no knob or latch, only a slot like a narrow mouth. Above the slot, on a rusting steel plate, was this:

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.

North Forest Kinnock

Bend Quadrant

OUTPOST 9

Low Security

USE KEYCARD

These words were hard for him to make out, because they were in a weird mixture of High and Low Speech. What had been scrawled below them, however, was easy: **All here are dead.**

At the base of the door was a box that looked like the one Tim’s mother had for her little trinkets and keepsakes, only of metal instead of wood. He tried to open it, but it was locked. Engraved upon it were letters Tim couldn’t read. There was a keyhole of odd shape—like the letter **¶***—but no key. He tried to

lift the box and couldn't. It might have been anchored to the ground at the top of a buried stone post.

A dead bin-rusty smacked the side of Tim's face. More feathered corpses flew past, turning over and over in the increasingly lively air. Some struck the side of the Dogan and fell around him.

Tim read the last words on the steel plate again: *USE KEYCARD.* If he had any doubt about what such a thing might be, he had only to look at the slot just below the words. He thought he even knew what a "keycard" looked like, for he believed he had just seen it, along with a more recognizable key that might fit the Ψ -shaped keyhole of the metal box. Two keys—and possible salvation—hanging around the neck of a tyger that could probably swallow him down in three bites. And, since there had been no food that Tim could see in the cage, it might only take two.

This was smelling more and more like a practical joke, although only a very cruel man would find such a joke amusing. The sort of fellow who might use a bad fairy to lure a boy into a dangerous swamp, perhaps.

What to do? Was there anything he *could* do? Tim would have liked to ask Daria, but he was terribly afraid his friend in the plate—a good fairy to match the Covenant Man's bad one—was dead, killed by Directive Nineteen.

Slowly, he approached the cage, now having to lean against the wind. The tyger saw him and came padding around the hole in the middle to stand by the door of the cage. It lowered its great head and stared at him with its lambent eyes. The wind rippled its thick coat, making the stripes waver and seem to change places.

The tin bucket should have rolled away in the wind, but it didn't. Like the steel box, it seemed anchored in place.

The bucket he left for me back home, so I could see his lies and believe them.

The whole thing had been a joke, and under this bucket he would find the point of it, that final clever line—like *I can't fork hay with a spoon!* or *So then I*

turned her over and warmed the other side—that was supposed to make folks roar with laughter. But since it was the end, why not? He could use a laugh.

Tim grasped the bucket and lifted it. He expected to find the Covenant Man's magic wand beneath, but no. The joke was better than that. It was another key, this one large and ornately carved. Like the Covenant Man's seeing-basin and the tyger's collar, it was made of silver. A note had been attached to the key's head with a bit of twine.

Across the gorge, the trees cracked and boomed. Now dust came rolling up from the chasm in giant clouds that were whipped away in ribbons like smoke.

The Covenant Man's note was brief:

Greetings, Brave and Resourceful Boy! Welcome to the North Forest Kinnock, which was once known as the Gateway of Out-World. Here I have left you a troublesome Tyger. He is VERY hungry! But as you may have guessed, the Key to SHELTER hangs about his Neck. As you may have also guessed, this Key opens the Cage. Use it if you dare! With all regards to your Mother (whose New Husband will visit her SOON), I remain your Faithful Servant!

RF/MB

The man—if he was a man—who left Tim that note was surprised by very little, but he might have been surprised by the smile on the boy's face as he rose to his feet with the key in his hand and booted away the tin bucket. It rose and flew off on the rising wind, which had now almost reached gale force. Its purpose had been served, and all the magic was out of it.

Tim looked at the tyger. The tyger looked at Tim. It seemed completely unaware of the rising storm. Its tail swished slowly back and forth.

“He thinks I'd rather be blown away or die of the cold than face your claws and teeth. Perhaps he didn't see this.” Tim drew the four-shot from his belt. “It did for the fish-thing in the swamp, and I'm sure it would do for you, Sai Tyger.”

Tim was once more amazed by how right the gun felt. Its function was so simple, so clear. All it wanted to do was shoot. And when Tim held it, shooting was all he wanted to do.

But.

“Oh, he saw it,” Tim said, and smiled more widely. He could hardly feel the corners of his mouth drawing up, because the skin on his face had begun to grow numb from the cold. “Yar, he saw it very well. Did he think I would get so far as this? Perhaps not. Did he think that if I did, I’d shoot you to live? Why not? *He* would. But why send a boy? Why, when he’s probably hung a thousand men and cut a hundred throats and turned who knows how many poor widows like my mama out on the land? Can you answer that, Sai Tyger?”

The tyger only stared, head lowered and tail swishing slowly from side to side.

Tim put the four-shot back into his belt with one hand; with the other he slid the ornate silver key into the lock on the cage’s curved door. “Sai Tyger, I offer a bargain. Let me use the key around your neck to open yon shelter and we’ll both live. But if you tear me to shreds, we’ll both die. Does thee kennit? Give me a sign if thee does.”

The tyger gave no sign. It only stared at him.

Tim really hadn’t expected one, and perhaps he didn’t need one. There would be water if God willed it.


“I love you, Mama,” he said, and turned the key. There was a thud as the ancient tumblers turned. Tim grasped the door and pulled it open on hinges that uttered a thin screaming sound. Then he stood back with his hands at his sides.

For a moment the tyger stood where it was, as if suspicious. Then it padded out of the cage. He and Tim regarded each other beneath the deepening purple sky while the wind howled and the marching explosions neared. They regarded each other like gunslingers. The tyger began to walk forward. Tim took one step back, but understood if he took another his nerve would break and he would take to his heels. So he stood where he was.

“Come, thee. Here is Tim, son of Big Jack Ross.”

Instead of tearing out Tim's throat, the tyger sat down and raised its head to expose its collar and the keys that hung from it.

Tim did not hesitate. Later he might be able to afford the luxury of amazement, but not now. The wind was growing stronger by the second, and if he didn't act fast, he'd be lifted and blown into the trees, where he would probably be impaled. The tyger was heavier, but it would follow soon enough.


The key that looked like a card and the key that looked like an  were welded to the silver collar, but the collar's clasp was easy enough. Tim squeezed its sides at the indentations and the collar dropped off. He had a moment to register the fact that the tyger was still wearing a collar—this one made of pink hide where the fur had been rubbed away—and then he was hurrying to the Dogan's metal door.

He lifted the keycard and inserted it. Nothing happened. He turned it around and tried it the other way. Still nothing. The wind gusted, a cold dead hand that slammed him into the door and started his nose bleeding. He pushed back from it, turned the card upside down, and tried again. Still nothing. Tim suddenly remembered something Daria had said—had it only been three days ago? *North Forest Kinnock Dogan is off-line.* Tim guessed he now knew what that meant. The flasher on the tower of metal girders might still be working, but down here the sparkpower that had run the place was out. He had dared the tyger, and the tyger had responded by not eating him, but the Dogan was locked. They were going to die out here just the same.

It was the end of the joke, and somewhere the man in black was laughing.

He turned and saw the tyger pushing its nose against the metal box with the engraving on top. The beast looked up, then nuzzled the box again.

“All right,” Tim said. “Why not?”

He knelt close enough to the tyger's lowered head to feel its warm breath puffing against his cold cheek. He tried the -key. It fit the lock perfectly. For a moment he had a clear memory of using the key the Covenant Man had given

him to open Kells's trunk. Then he turned this one, heard the click, and lifted the lid. Hoping for salvation.

Instead of that, he saw three items that seemed of no earthly use to him: a large white feather, a small brown bottle, and a plain cotton napkin of the sort that were laid out on the long tables behind the Tree meeting hall before each year's Reaptide dinner.

The wind had passed gale force; a ghostly screaming had begun as it blew through the crisscrossing girders of the metal tower. The feather whirled out of the box, but before it could fly away, the tyger stretched out its neck and snatched it in its teeth. It turned to the boy, holding it out. Tim took it and stuck it in his belt beside his father's hand-ax, not really thinking about it. He began to creep away from the Dogan on his hands and knees. Flying into the trees and being struck through by a branch would not be a pleasant way to die, but it might be better—quicker—than having the life crushed out of him against the Dogan while that deadly wind crept through his skin and into his vitals, freezing them.

The tyger growled; that sound of slowly ripping silk. Tim started to turn his head and was slammed into the Dogan. He fought to catch another breath, but the wind kept trying to rip it out of his mouth and nose.

Now it was the napkin the tyger was holding out, and as Tim finally whooped air into his lungs (it numbed his throat as it went down), he saw a surprising thing. Sai Tyger had picked the napkin up by the corner, and it had unfolded to four times its former size.

That's impossible.

Except he was seeing it. Unless his eyes—now gushing water that froze on his cheeks—were deceiving him, the napkin in the tyger's jaws had grown to the size of a towel. Tim reached out for it. The tyger held on until it saw the thing firmly clutched in Tim's numb fist, then let go. The gale was howling around them, now hard enough to make even a six-hundred-pound tyger brace

against it, but the napkin that was now a towel hung limply from Tim's hand, as if in a dead calm.

Tim stared at the tyger. It stared back, seemingly at complete ease with itself and the howling world around it. The boy found himself thinking of the tin bucket, which had done as well for seeing as the Covenant Man's silver basin. *In the proper hand, he had said, any object can be magic.*

Mayhap even a humble swatch of cotton.

It was still doubled—at least doubled. Tim unfolded it again, and the towel became a tablecloth. He held it up in front of him, and although the rising gale continued to storm past on both sides, the air between his face and the hanging cloth was dead calm.

And *warm.*

Tim grabbed the tablecloth that had been a napkin in both hands, shook it, and it opened once again. Now it was a sheet, and it lay easily on the ground even though a storm of dust, twigs, and dead bin-rusties flew past it and on either side. The sound of all that loose gunna striking the curved side of the Dogan was like hail. Tim started to crawl beneath the sheet, then hesitated, looking into the tyger's brilliant green eyes. He also looked at the thick spikes of its teeth, which its muzzle did not quite cover, before raising the corner of the magic cloth.

"Come on. Get under here. There's no wind or cold."

But you knew that, Sai Tyger. Didn't you?

The tyger crouched, extended its admirable claws, and crawled forward on its belly until it was beneath the sheet. Tim felt something like a nest of wires brush down his arm as the tyger made itself comfortable: whiskers. He shivered. Then the long furred length of the beast was lying against the side of his body.

It was very large, and half its body still lay outside the thin white covering. Tim half rose, fighting the wind that buffeted his head and shoulders as they emerged into the open air, and shook the sheet again. There was a rippling

sound as it once more unfolded, this time becoming the size of a lakeboat's mainsail. Now its hem lay almost at the base of the tyger's cage.

The world roared and the air raged, but beneath the sheet, all was still. Except, that was, for Tim's pounding heart. When that began to settle, he felt another heart pounding slowly against his ribcage. And heard a low, rough rumble. The tyger was purring.

"We're safe, aren't we?" Tim asked it.

The tyger looked at him for a moment, then closed its eyes. It seemed to Tim answer enough.

Night came, and the full fury of the starkblast came with it. Beyond the strong magic that had at first looked to be no more than a humble napkin, the cold grew apace, driven by a wind that was soon blowing at well over one hundred wheels an hour. The windows of the Dogan grew inch-thick cataracts of frost. The ironwood trees behind it first imploded inward, then toppled backward, then blew southward in a deadly cloud of branches, splinters, and entire treetrunks. Beside Tim, his bedmate snoozed on, oblivious. Its body relaxed and spread as its sleep deepened, pushing Tim toward the edge of their covering. At one point he found himself actually elbowing the tyger, the way one might elbow any fellow sleeper who is trying to steal all the covers. The tyger made a furry growling sound and flexed its claws, but moved away a bit.

"Thankee-sai," Tim whispered.

An hour after sunset—or perhaps it was two; Tim's sense of time had gotten lost—a ghastly screeching sound joined the howl of the wind. The tyger opened its eyes. Tim cautiously pulled down the top edge of the sheet and looked out. The tower above the Dogan had begun to bend. He watched, fascinated, as the bend became a lean. Then, almost too fast to see, the tower disintegrated. At one moment it was there; at the next it was flying bars and

spears of steel thrown by the wind into a wide lane of what had been, only that day, a forest of ironwood trees.

The Dogan will go next, Tim thought, but it didn't.

The Dogan stayed, as it had for a thousand years.

It was a night he never forgot, but one so fabulously strange that he could never describe it . . . or even remember rationally, as we remember the mundane events of our lives. Full understanding only returned to him in his dreams, and he dreamed of the starkblast until the end of his life. Nor were they nightmares. These were good dreams. They were dreams of safety.

It was warm beneath the sheet, and the sleeping bulk of his bunkmate made it even warmer. At some point he slipped down their covering enough to see a trillion stars sprawled across the dome of the sky, more than he had ever seen in his life. It was as if the storm had blown tiny holes in the world above the world, and turned it into a sieve. Shining through was all the brilliant mystery of creation. Perhaps such things were not meant for human eyes, but Tim felt sure he had been granted a special dispensation to look, for he was under a blanket of magic, and lying next to a creature even the most credulous villagers in Tree would have dismissed as mythical.

He felt awe as he looked up at those stars, but also a deep and abiding contentment, such as he had felt as a child, awakening in the night, safe and warm beneath his quilt, drowsing half in and half out of sleep, listening to the wind sing its lonely song of other places and other lives.

Time is a keyhole, he thought as he looked up at the stars. *Yes, I think so. We sometimes bend and peer through it. And the wind we feel on our cheeks when we do—the wind that blows through the keyhole—is the breath of all the living universe.*

The wind roared across the empty sky, the cold deepened, but Tim Ross lay safe and warm, with a tyger sleeping beside him. At some point he slipped away himself, into a rest that was deep and satisfying and untroubled by dreams. As he went, he felt that he was very wee, and flying on the wind that

blew through time's keyhole. Away from the edge of the Great Canyon, over the Endless Forest and the Fagonard, above the Ironwood Trail, past Tree—just a brave little nestle of lights from where he rode the wind—and farther, farther, oh, very much farther, across the entire reach of Mid-World to where a huge ebony Tower reared itself into the heavens.

I will go there! Someday I will!

It was his last thought before sleep took him.

In the morning, the steady shriek of the wind had lowered to a drone. Tim's bladder was full. He pushed back the sheet, crawled out onto ground that had been swept clean all the way to the bone of underlying rock, and hurried around the Dogan with his breath emerging from his mouth in bursts of white vapor that were immediately yanked away by the wind. The other side of the Dogan was in the lee of that wind, but it was cold, cold. His urine steamed, and by the time he finished, the puddle on the ground was starting to freeze.

He hurried back, fighting the wind for every step and shivering all over. By the time he crawled back beneath the magic sheet and into the blessed warmth, his teeth were chattering. He wrapped his arms around the tyger's heavily muscled body without even thinking, and had only a moment's fright when its eyes and mouth opened. A tongue that looked as long as a rug runner and as pink as a New Earth rose emerged. It licked the side of his face and Tim shivered again, not from fright but from memory: his father rubbing his cheek against Tim's early in the morning, before Big Ross filled the basin and scraped his face smooth. He said he would never grow a beard like his partner's, said 'twouldn't suit him.

The tyger lowered its head and began to sniff at the collar of his shirt. Tim laughed as its whiskers tickled his neck. Then he remembered the last two popkins. "I'll share," he said, "although we know thee could have both if thee wanted."

He gave one of the popkins to the tyger. It disappeared at once, but the beast only watched as Tim went to work on the other one. He ate it as fast as he could, just in case Sai Tyger changed its mind. Then he pulled the sheet over his head and drowsed off again.

When he woke the second time, he guessed it might be noon. The wind had dropped still more, and when he poked his head out, the air was a trifle warmer. Still, he guessed the false summer the Widow Smack had been so right to distrust was now gone for good. As was the last of his food.

“What did thee eat in there?” Tim asked the tyger. This question led naturally to another. “And how long was thee caged?”

The tyger rose to its feet, walked a little distance toward the cage, and then stretched: first one rear leg and then the other. It walked farther toward the edge of the Great Canyon, where it did its own necessary. When it had finished, it sniffed the bars of its prison, then turned from the cage as though it were of no interest, and came back to where Tim lay propped on his elbows, watching.

It regarded him somberly—so it seemed to Tim—with its green eyes, then lowered its head and nosed back the magic sheet that had sheltered them from the starkblast. The metal box lay beneath. Tim couldn’t remember picking it up, but he must have; if it had been left where it was, it would have blown away. That made him think of the feather. It was still safely tucked in his belt. He took it out and examined it closely, running his fingers over its rich thickness. It might have been a hawk feather . . . if, that was, it had been half the size. Or if he had ever seen a white hawk, which he had not.

“This came from an eagle, didn’t it?” Tim asked. “Gan’s blood, it *did*.”

The tyger seemed uninterested in the feather, although it had been eager enough to snatch it from the breath of the rising storm last evening. The long, yellow-fuzzed snout lowered and pushed the box at Tim’s hip. Then it looked at him.

Tim opened the box. The only thing left inside was the brown bottle, which looked like the sort that might contain medicine. Tim picked it up and immediately felt a tingle in his fingertips, very like the one he'd felt in the Covenant Man's magic wand when he passed it back and forth over the tin bucket.

"Shall I open it? For it's certain thee can't."

The tyger sat, its green eyes fixed unwaveringly on the tiny bottle. Those eyes seemed to glow from within, as if its very brain burned with magic. Carefully, Tim unscrewed the top. When he took it off, he saw a small transparent dropper fixed beneath.

The tyger opened its mouth. The meaning was clear enough, but . . .

"How much?" Tim asked. "I'd not poison thee for the world."

The tyger only sat with its head slightly uptilted and its mouth open, looking like a baby bird waiting to receive a worm.

After a little experimentation—he'd never used a dropper before, although he'd seen a larger, cruder version that Destry called a bull-squirter—Tim got some of the fluid into the little tube. It sucked up almost all the liquid in the bottle, for there was only a bit. He held it over the tyger's mouth, heart beating hard. He thought he knew what was going to happen, for he had heard many legends of skin-men, but it was impossible to be sure the tyger was an enchanted human.

"I'll put it in drop by drop," he told the tyger. "If you want me to stop before it's gone, close thy mouth. Give me a sign if you understand."

But, as before, the tyger gave no sign. It only sat, waiting.

One drop . . . two . . . three . . . the little tube half-empty now . . . four . . . fi

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Suddenly the tyger's skin began to ripple and bulge, as if creatures were trapped beneath and struggling to get out. The snout melted away to reveal its cage of teeth, then reknit itself so completely that its mouth was sealed over.

Then it gave a muffled roar of either pain or outrage, seeming to shake the clearing.

Tim scooted away on his bottom, terrified.

The green eyes began to bulge in and out, as if on springs. The lashing tail was yanked inward, reappeared, was yanked inward again. The tyger staggered away, this time toward the precipice at the edge of the Great Canyon.

“Stop!” Tim screamed. *“Thee’ll fall over!”*

The tyger lurched drunkenly along the edge, one paw actually going over and dislodging a spall of pebbles. It walked behind the cage that had held it, the stripes first blurring, then fading. Its head was changing shape. White emerged, and then, above it, a brilliant yellow where its snout had been. Tim could hear a grinding sound as the very bones inside its body rearranged themselves.

On the far side of the cage, the tyger roared again, but halfway through, the roar became a very human cry. The blurring, changing creature reared up on its back legs, and where there had been paws, Tim now saw a pair of ancient black boots. The claws became silver sigils: moons, crosses, spirals.

The yellow top of the tyger’s head continued to grow until it became the conical hat Tim had seen in the tin pail. The white below it, where the tyger’s bib had been, turned into a beard that sparkled in the cold and windy sunshine. It sparkled because it was full of rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds.

Then the tyger was gone, and Maerlyn of the Eld stood revealed before the wondering boy.

He was not smiling, as he had been in Tim’s vision of him . . . but of course that had never been *his* vision at all. It had been the Covenant Man’s glammer, meant to lead him on to destruction. The real Maerlyn looked at Tim with kindness, but also with gravity. The wind blew his robe of white silk around a body so thin it could have been little more than a skeleton.

Tim got on one knee, bowed his head, and raised a trembling fist to his brow. He tried to say *Hile, Maerlyn*, but his voice had deserted him, and he could manage nothing but a dusty croak.

“Rise, Tim, son of Jack,” the mage said. “But before you do, put the cap back on the bottle. There’s a few drops left, I wot, and you’ll want them.”

Tim raised his head and looked questioningly at the tall figure standing beside the cage that had held him.

“For thy mother,” said Maerlyn. “For thy mother’s eyes.”

“Say true?” Tim whispered.

“True as the Turtle that holds up the world. You’ve come a goodly way, you’ve shown great bravery—and not a little foolishness, but we’ll pass that, since they often go together, especially in the young—and you’ve freed me from a shape I’ve been caught in for many and many-a. For that you must be rewarded. Now cap the bottle and get on your feet.”

“Thankee,” Tim said. His hands were trembling and his eyes were blurred with tears, but he managed to get the cap on the bottle without spilling what was left. “I thought you were a Guardian of the Beam, so I did, but Daria told me different.”

“And who is Daria?”

“A prisoner, like you. Locked in a little machine the people of the Fagonard gave me. I think she’s dead.”

“Sorry for your loss, son.”

“She was my friend,” Tim said simply.

Maerlyn nodded. “It’s a sad world, Tim Ross. As for me, since this is the Beam of the Lion, ’twas his little joke to put me in the shape of a great cat. Although not in the shape of Aslan, for that’s magic not even he can do . . . although he’d like to, aye. Or slay Aslan and all the other Guardians, so the Beams collapse.”

“The Covenant Man,” Tim whispered.

Maerlyn threw back his head and laughed. His conical cap stayed on, which Tim thought magical in itself. “Nay, nay, not he. Little magic and long life’s all *he’s* capable of. No, Tim, there’s one far greater than he of the broad cloak. When the Great One points his finger from where he bides, the Broad Cloak scurries. But sending you was none of the Red King’s bidding, and the one you call the Covenant Man will pay for his foolery, I’m sure. He’s too valuable to kill, but to hurt? To *punish*? Aye, I think so.”

“What will he do to him? This Red King?”

“Best not to know, but of one thing you can be sure: no one in Tree will ever see him again. His tax-collecting days are finally over.”

“And will my mother . . . will she really be able to see again?”

“Aye, for you have done me fine. Nor will I be the last you’ll serve in your life.” He pointed at Tim’s belt. “That’s only the first gun you’ll wear, and the lightest.”

Tim looked at the four-shot, but it was his father’s ax he took from his belt. “Guns are not for such as me, sai. I’m just a village boy. I’ll be a woodcutter, like my father. Tree’s my place, and I’ll stay there.”

The old mage looked at him shrewdly. “You say so with the ax in your hand, but would you say so if ’twas the gun? Would your *heart* say so? Don’t answer, for I see the truth in your eyes. Ka will take you far from Tree Village.”

“But I love it,” Tim whispered.

“Thee’ll bide there yet awhile, so be not fashed. But hear me well, and obey.”

He put his hands on his knees and leaned his tall, scrawny body toward Tim. His beard lashed in the dying wind, and the jewels caught in it flickered like fire. His face was gaunt, like the Covenant Man’s, but illuminated by gravity instead of malicious humor, and by kindness rather than cruelty.

“When you return to your cottage—a trip that will be much faster than the one you made to get here, and far less risky—you will go to your mother and put the last drops from the bottle in her eyes. Then you must give thy father’s ax to her. Do you understand me? His coin you’ll wear all your life—you’ll be

buried with it yet around your neck—*but give the ax to thy mother*. Do it at once.”

“W-Why?”

The wild tangle of Maerlyn’s brows drew together; his mouth turned down at the corners; suddenly the kindness was gone, replaced by a frightening obduracy. “Not yours to ask, boy. When ka comes, it comes like the wind—like the starkblast. Will you obey?”

“Yes,” Tim said, frightened. “I’ll give it to her as you say.”

“Good.”

The mage turned to the sheet beneath which they had slept and raised his hands over it. The end near the cage flipped up with a brisk ruffling sound, folded over, and was suddenly half the size it had been. It flipped up again and became the size of a tablecloth. Tim thought the women of Tree would much like to have magic like that when beds needed to be made, and wondered if such an idea were blasphemy.

“No, no, I’m sure you’re right,” Maerlyn said absently. “But ’twould go wrong and cause hijinks. Magic’s full of tricks, even for an old fellow like me.”

“Sai . . . is it true you live backwards in time?”

Maerlyn raised his hands in amused irritation; the sleeves of his robe slipped back, revealing arms as thin and white as birch branches. “Everyone thinks so, and if I said different, they’d still think it, wouldn’t they? I live as I live, Tim, and the truth is, I’m mostly retired these days. Have you also heard of my magical house in the woods?”

“Aye!”

“And if I told you I lived in a cave with nothing but a single table and a pallet on the floor, and if you told others that, would they believe you?”

Tim considered this, and shook his head. “No. They wouldn’t. I doubt folk will believe I met you at all.”

“That’s their business. As for yours . . . are you ready to go back?”

“May I ask one more question?”

The mage raised a single finger. “*Only* one. For I’ve been here many long years in yon cage—which you see keeps its place to the very inch, in spite of how hard the wind blew—and I’m tired of shitting in that hole. Living monk-simple is all very fine, but there’s a limit. Ask your question.”

“How did the Red King catch thee?”

“He can’t catch anyone, Tim—he’s himself caught, pent at the top of the Dark Tower. But he has his powers, and he has his emissaries. The one you met is far from the greatest of them. A man came to my cave. I was fooled into believing he was a wandering peddler, for his magic was strong. Magic lent to him by the King, as you must ken.”

Tim risked another question. “Magic stronger than yours?”

“Nay, but . . .” Maerlyn sighed and looked up at the morning sky. Tim was astounded to realize that the magician was embarrassed. “I was drunk.”

“Oh,” Tim said in a small voice. He could think of nothing else to say.

“Enough palaver,” said the mage. “Sit on the dibbin.”

“The—?”

Maerlyn gestured at what was sometimes a napkin, sometimes a sheet, and was now a tablecloth. “That. And don’t worry about dirtying it with your boots. It’s been used by many far more travel-stained than thee.”

Tim had been worried about exactly that, but he stepped onto the tablecloth and then sat down.

“Now the feather. Take it in your hands. It’s from the tail of Garuda, the eagle who guards the other end of this Beam. Or so I was told, although as a wee one myself—yes, I was once wee, Tim, son of Jack—I was also told that babies were found under cabbages in the garden.”

Tim barely heard this. He took the feather which the tyger had saved from flying away into the wind, and held it.

Maerlyn regarded him from beneath his tall yellow cap. “When thee gets home, what’s the first thing thee’ll do?”

“Put the drops in Mama’s eyes.”

“Good, and the second?”

“Give her my da’s ax.”

“Don’t forget.” The old man leaned forward and kissed Tim’s brow. For a moment the whole world flared as brilliantly in the boy’s eyes as the stars at the height of the starkblast. For a moment it was all *there*. “Thee’s a brave boy with a stout heart—as others will see and come to call you. Now go with my thanks, and fly away home.”

“F-F-Fly? *How?*”

“How does thee walk? Just think of it. Think of home.” A thousand wrinkles flowed from the corners of the old man’s eyes as he broke into a radiant grin. “For, as someone or other famous once said, there’s no place like home. See it! See it very well!”

So Tim thought of the cottage where he had grown up, and the room where he had all his life fallen asleep listening to the wind outside, telling its stories of other places and other lives. He thought of the barn where Misty and Bitsy were stabled, and hoped someone was feeding them. Straw Willem, perhaps. He thought of the spring where he had drawn so many buckets of water. He thought most of all of his mother: her sturdy body with its wide shoulders, her chestnut hair, her eyes when they had been full of laughter instead of worry and woe.

He thought, *How I miss you, Mama . . .* and when he did, the tablecloth rose from the rocky ground and hovered over its shadow.

Tim gasped. The cloth rocked, then turned. Now he was higher than Maerlyn’s cap, and the magician had to look up at him.

“What if I fall?” Tim cried.

Maerlyn laughed. “Sooner or later, we all do. For now, hold tight to the feather! The dibbin won’t spill thee, so just hold tight to the feather and think of home!”

Tim clutched it before him and thought of Tree: the high street, the smithy with the burial parlor between it and the cemetery, the farms, the sawmill by the river, the Widow's cottage, and—most of all—his own plot and place. The dibbin rose higher, floated above the Dogan for several moments (as if deciding), then headed south along the track of the starkblast. It moved slowly at first, but when its shadow fell over the tangled, frost-rimed deadfalls that had lately been a million acres of virgin forest, it began to go faster.

A terrible thought came to Tim: what if the starkblast had rolled over Tree, freezing it solid and killing everyone, including Nell Ross? He turned to call his question back to Maerlyn, but Maerlyn was already gone. Tim saw him once more, but when that happened, Tim was an old man himself. And that is a story for another day.

The dibbin rose until the world below was spread out like a map. Yet the magic that had protected Tim and his furry bedmate from the storm still held, and although he could hear the last of the starkblast's cold breath whooshing all around him, he was perfectly warm. He sat crosslegged on his transport like a young prince of the Mohaine on an elephaunt, the Feather of Garuda held out before him. He *felt* like Garuda, soaring above a great tract of wildland that looked like a giant dress of a green so dark it was almost black. Yet a gray scar ran through it, as if the dress had been slashed to reveal a dirty underskirt beneath. The starkblast had ruined everything it had touched, although the forest as a whole was very little hurt. The lane of destruction was no more than forty wheels wide.

Yet forty wheels wide had been enough to lay waste to the Fagonard. The black swampwater had become yellowish-white cataracts of ice. The gray, knotted trees that had grown out of that water had all been knocked over. The tussocks were no longer green; now they looked like tangles of milky glass.

Run aground on one of them and lying on its side was the tribe's boat. Tim thought of Helmsman and Headman and all the others, and burst into bitter

tears. If not for them, he would be lying frozen on one of those tussocks five hundred feet below. The people of the swamp had fed him, and they had gifted him with Daria, his good fairy. It was not fair, it was not fair, it was not fair. So cried his child's heart, and then his child's heart died a little. For that is also the way of the world.

Before leaving the swamp behind, he saw something else that hurt his heart: a large blackened patch where the ice had been melted. Sooty chunks of ice floated around a vast, plated corpse lying on its side like the beached boat. It was the dragon that had spared him. Tim could imagine—aye, all too well—how she must have fought the cold with blasts of her fiery breath, but in the end the starkblast had taken her, as it had everything else in the Fagonard. It was now a place of frozen death.

Above the Ironwood Trail, the dibbin began to descend. Down and down it glided, and when it came to the Cosington-Marchly stub, it touched down. But before the wider sweep of the world was lost, Tim had observed the path of the starkblast, formerly dead south, bending to a course more westerly. And the damage seemed less, as if the storm had been starting to lift off. It gave him hope that the village had been spared.

He studied the dibbin thoughtfully, and then waved his hands over it. "Fold!" he said (feeling a trifle foolish). The dibbin did not, but when he bent to do the job himself, it flipped over once, then twice, then thrice, becoming smaller each time—but no thicker. In a matter of seconds it once more appeared to be nothing but a cotton napkin lying on the path. Not one you'd want to spread on your lap at dinner, though, for it had a footprint square in the middle of it.

Tim put it in his pocket and began walking. And, when he reached the blossom groves (where most of the trees were still standing), he began to run.

He skirted the town, for he didn't want to waste even minutes answering questions. Few people would have had time for him, anyway. The starkblast *had* largely spared Tree, but he saw folk tending to livestock they'd managed to pull from flattened barns, and inspecting their fields for damage. The sawmill had been blown into Tree River. The pieces had floated away downstream, and nothing was left but the stone foundation.

He followed Stape Brook, as he had on the day when he had found the Covenant Man's magic wand. Their spring, which had been frozen, was already beginning to thaw, and although some of the blossie shingles had been ripped from the roof of the cottage, the building itself stood as firm as ever. It looked as though his mother had been left alone, for there were no wagons or mules out front. Tim understood that people would want to see to their own plots with such a storm as a starkblast coming, but it still made him angry. To leave a woman who was blind and beaten to the whims of a storm . . . that wasn't right. And it wasn't the way folk in Tree neighbored.

Someone took her to safety, he told himself. *To the Gathering Hall, most likely.*

Then he heard a bleat from the barn that didn't sound like either of their mules. Tim poked his head in, and smiled. The Widow Smack's little burro, Sunshine, was tethered to a post, munching hay.

Tim reached into his pocket and felt a moment's panic when he couldn't find the precious bottle. Then he discovered it hiding under the dibbin, and his heart eased. He climbed to the porch (the familiar creak of the third step making him feel like a boy in a dream), and eased the door open. The cottage was warm, for the Widow had made a good fire in the hearth, which was only now burning down to a thick bed of gray ash and rosy embers. She sat sleeping in his da's chair with her back to him and her face to the fire. Although he was wild to go to his mother, he paused long enough to slip off his boots. The Widow had come when there was no one else; she had built a fire to keep the cottage warm; even with the prospect of what looked like ruin for the whole

village, she had not forgotten how to neighbor. Tim wouldn't have wakened her for anything.

He tiptoed to the bedroom door, which stood open. There in bed lay his mother, her hands clasped on the counterpane, her eyes staring sightlessly up at the ceiling.

"Mama?" Tim whispered.

For a moment she didn't stir, and Tim felt a cold shaft of fear. He thought, *I'm too late. She's a-lying there dead.*

Then Nell rose on her elbows, her hair cascading in a flood to the down pillow behind her, and looked toward him. Her face was wild with hope. "Tim? Is it you, or am I dreaming?"

"You're awake," he said.

And rushed to her.

Her arms enfolded him in a strong grip, and she covered his face with the heartfelt kisses that are only a mother's to give. "I thought you were killed! Oh, Tim! And when the storm came, I made sure of it, and I wanted to die myself. Where have you been? How could you break my heart so, you bad boy?" And then the kissing began again.

Tim gave himself over to it, smiling and rejoicing in the familiar clean smell of her, but then he remembered what Maerlyn had said: *When thee gets home, what's the first thing thee'll do?*

"Where have you been? Tell me!"

"I'll tell you everything, Mama, but first lie back and open your eyes wide. As wide as you can."

"Why?" Her hands kept fluttering over his eyes and nose and mouth, as if to reassure herself that he was really here. The eyes Tim hoped to cure stared at him . . . and through him. They had begun to take on a milky look. "Why, Tim?"

He didn't want to say, in case the promised cure didn't work. He didn't believe Maerlyn would have lied—it was the Covenant Man who made lies his hobby—but he might have been mistaken.

Oh please, don't let him have been mistaken.

“Never mind. I've brought medicine, but there's only a little, so you must lie very still.”

“I don't understand.”

In her darkness, Nell thought what he said next might have come from the dead father rather than the living son. “Just know I've been far and dared much for what I hold. Now lie still!”

She did as he bade, looking up at him with her blind eyes. Her lips were trembling.

Tim's hands were, too. He commanded them to grow still, and for a wonder, they did. He took a deep breath, held it, and unscrewed the top of the precious bottle. He drew all there was into the dropper, which was little enough. The liquid didn't even fill half of the short, thin tube. He leaned over Nell.

“Still, Mama! Promise me, for it may burn.”

“Still as can be,” she whispered.

One drop in the left eye. “Does it?” he asked. “Does it burn?”

“No,” said she. “Cool as a blessing. Put some in the other, will ya please.”

Tim put a drop into the right eye, then sat back, biting his lip. Was the milkeness a little less, or was that only wishing?

“Can you see anything, Mama?”

“No, but . . .” Her breath caught. “There's light! *Tim, there's light!*”

She started to rise up on her elbows again, but Tim pressed her back. He put another drop in each eye. It would have to be enough, for the dropper was empty. A good thing, too, for when Nell shrieked, Tim dropped it on the floor.

“Mama? *Mama!* What is it?”

“*I see thy face!*” she cried, and put her hands on his cheeks. Now her eyes were filling with tears, but that did Tim very well, because now they were looking at

him instead of through him. And they were as bright as they ever had been. “Oh, Tim, oh my dear, *I see thy face, I see it very well!*”

Next came a bit of time which needs no telling—a good thing, too, for some moments of joy are beyond description.

You must give thy father's ax to her.

Tim fumbled in his belt, brought the hand-ax from it, and placed it beside her on the bed. She looked at it—and saw it, a thing still marvelous to both of them—then touched the handle, which had been worn smooth by long years and much use. She raised her face to him questioningly.

Tim could only shake his head, smiling. “The man who gave me the drops told me to give it to you. That’s all I know.”

“Who, Tim? What man?”

“That’s a long story, and one that would go better with some breakfast.”

“Eggs!” she said, starting to rise. “At least a dozen! And the pork side from the cold pantry!”

Still smiling, Tim gripped her shoulders and pushed her gently back to the pillow. “I can scramble eggs and fry meat. I’ll even bring it to you.” A thought occurred to him. “Sai Smack can eat with us. It’s a wonder all the shouting didn’t wake her.”

“She came when the wind began to blow, and was up all through the storm, feeding the fire,” Nell said. “We thought the house would blow over, but it stood. She must be so tired. Wake her, Tim, but be gentle about it.”

Tim kissed his mother’s cheek again and left the room. The Widow slept on in the dead man’s chair by the fire, her chin upon her breast, too tired even to snore. Tim shook her gently by the shoulder. Her head jiggled and rolled, then fell back to its original position.

Filled with a horrid certainty, Tim went around to the front of the chair. What he saw stole the strength from his legs and he collapsed to his knees. Her veil had been torn away. The ruin of a face once beautiful hung slack and dead.

Her one remaining eye stared blankly at Tim. The bosom of her black dress was rusty with dried blood, for her throat had been cut from ear to ear.

He drew in breath to scream, but was unable to let it out, for strong hands had closed around his throat.

Bern Kells had stolen into the main room from the mudroom, where he had been sitting on his trunk and trying to remember why he had killed the old woman. He thought it was the fire. He had spent two nights shivering under a pile of hay in Deaf Rincon's barn, and this old kitty, she who had put all sorts of useless learning into his stepson's head, had been warm as toast the whole time. 'Twasn't right.

He had watched the boy go into his mother's room. He had heard Nell's cries of joy, and each one was like a nail in his vitals. She had no right to cry out with anything but pain. She was the author of all his misery; had bewitched him with her high breasts, slim waist, long hair, and laughing eyes. He had believed her hold on his mind would lessen over the years, but it never had. Finally he simply had to have her. Why else would he have murdered his best and oldest friend?

Now came the boy who had turned him into a hunted man. The bitch was bad and the whelp was worse. And what was that jammed into his belt? Was it a gun, by gods? Where had he gotten such a thing?

Kells choked Tim until the boy's struggles began to weaken and he simply hung from the woodsman's strong hands, rasping. Then he plucked the gun from Tim's belt and tossed it aside.

"A bullet's too good for a meddler such as you," Kells said. His mouth was against Tim's ear. Distantly—as if all sensation were retreating deep into his body—Tim felt his steppa's beard tickling his skin. "So's the knife I used to cut the diseased old bitch's throat. It's the fire for you, whelp. There's plenty of coals yet. Enough to fry your eyeballs and boil the skin from your—"

There was a low, meaty sound, and suddenly the choking hands were gone. Tim turned, gasping in air that burned like fire.

Kells stood beside Big Ross's chair, looking unbelievably over Tim's head at the gray fieldstone chimney. Blood pattered down on the right sleeve of his flannel woodsman's shirt, which was still speckled with hay from his fugitive nights in Deaf Rincon's barn. Above his right ear, his head had grown an ax-handle. Nell Ross stood behind him, the front of her nightgown spattered with blood.

Slowly, slowly, Big Kells shuffled around to face her. He touched the buried blade of the ax, and held his hand out to her, the palm full of blood.

"I cut the rope so, chary man!" Nell screamed into his face, and as if the words rather than the ax had done it, Bern Kells collapsed dead on the floor.

Tim put his hands to his face, as if to blot from sight and memory the thing he had just seen . . . although he knew even then it would be with him the rest of his life.

Nell put her arms around him and led him out onto the porch. The morning was bright, the frost on the fields beginning to melt, a misty haze rising in the air.

"Are you all right, Tim?" she asked.

He drew in a deep breath. The air in his throat was still warm, but no longer burning. "Yes. Are you?"

"I'll be fine," said she. "*We'll* be fine. It's a beautiful morning, and we're alive to see it."

"But the Widow . . ." Tim began to cry.

They sat down on the porch steps and looked out on the yard where, not long ago, the Barony Covenanter had sat astride his tall black horse. *Black horse, black heart*, Tim thought.

"We'll pray for Ardelia Smack," Nell said, "and all of Tree will come to her burying. I'll not say Kells did her a favor—murder's never a favor—but she

suffered terribly for the last three years, and her life would not have been long, in any case. I think we should go to town, and see if the constable's back from Taveres. On the way, you can tell me everything. Can thee help me hitch Misty and Bitsy to the wagon?"

"Yes, Mama. But I have to get something, first. Something she gave me."

"All right. Try not to look at what's left in there, Tim."

Nor did he. But he picked up the gun, and put it in his belt. . . .

*Which sounds like \mathcal{S} , in the Low Speech.

THE SKIN-MAN

(Part 2)

“She told him not to look at what was left inside—the body of his steppa, you ken—and he said he wouldn’t. Nor did he, but he picked up the gun, and put it in his belt—”

“The four-shot the widow-woman gave him,” Young Bill Streeter said. He was sitting against the cell wall below the chalked map of Debaria with his chin on his chest, he had said little, and in truth, I thought the lad had fallen asleep and I was telling the tale only to myself. But he had been listening all along, it seemed. Outside, the rising wind of the simoom rose to a brief shriek, then settled back to a low and steady moan.

“Aye, Young Bill. He picked up the gun, put it in his belt on the left side, and carried it there for the next ten years of his life. After that he carried bigger ones—six-shooters.” That was the story, and I ended it just as my mother had ended all the stories she read me when I was but a sma’ one in my tower room. It made me sad to hear those words from my own mouth. “And so it happened, once upon a bye, long before your grandfather’s grandfather was born.”

Outside, the light was beginning to fail. I thought it would be tomorrow after all before the deputation that had gone up to the foothills would return with the salties who could sit a horse. And really, did it matter so much? For an uncomfortable thought had come to me while I was telling Young Bill the story of Young Tim. If I were the skin-man, and if the sheriff and a bunch of deputies (not to mention a young gunslinger all the way from Gilead) came asking if I could saddle, mount, and ride, would I admit it? Not likely. Jamie

and I should have seen this right away, but of course we were still new to the lawman's way of thinking.

"Sai?"

"Yes, Bill."

"Did Tim ever become a real gunslinger? He did, didn't he?"

"When he was twenty-one, three men carrying hard calibers came through Tree. They were bound for Tavares and hoping to raise a posse, but Tim was the only one who would go with them. They called him 'the lefthanded gun,' for that was the way he drew.

"He rode with them, and acquitted himself well, for he was both fearless and a dead shot. They called him tet-fa, or friend of the tet. But there came a day when he became ka-tet, one of the very, very few gunslingers not from the proven line of Eld. Although who knows? Don't they say that Arthur had many sons from three wives, and moity-more born on the dark side of the blanket?"

"I dunno what that means."

With that I could sympathize; until two days before, I hadn't known what was meant by "the longstick."

"Never mind. He was known first as Lefty Ross, then—after a great battle on the shores of Lake Cawn—as Tim Stoutheart. His mother finished her days in Gilead as a great lady, or so my mother said. But all those things are—"

"—a tale for another day," Bill finished. "That's what my da' always says when I ask for more." His face drew in on itself and his mouth trembled at the corners as he remembered the bloody bunkhouse and the cook who had died with his apron over his face. "What he *said*."

I put my arm around his shoulders again, a thing that felt a little more natural this time. I'd made my mind up to take him back to Gilead with us if Everlynne of Serenity refused to take him in . . . but I thought she would not refuse. He was a good boy.

Outside the wind whined and howled. I kept an ear out for the jing-jang, but it stayed silent. The lines were surely down somewhere.

“Sai, how long was Maerlyn caged as a tyger?”

“I don’t know, but a very long time, surely.”

“What did he *eat*?”

Cuthbert would have made something up on the spot, but I was stumped.

“If he was shitting in the hole, he must have eaten,” Bill said, and reasonably enough. “If you don’t eat, you can’t shit.”

“I don’t know what he ate, Bill.”

“P’raps he had enough magic left—even as a tyger—to make his own dinner. Out of thin air, like.”

“Yes, that’s probably it.”

“Did Tim ever reach the Tower? For there are stories about that, too, aren’t there?”

Before I could answer, Strother—the fat deputy with the rattlesnake hatband—came into the jail. When he saw me sitting with my arm around the boy, he gave a smirk. I considered wiping it off his face—it wouldn’t have taken long—but forgot the idea when I heard what he had to say.

“Riders comin. Must be a moit, and wagons, because we can hear em even over the damn beastly wind. People is steppin out into the grit to see.”

I got up and let myself out of the cell.

“Can I come?” Bill asked.

“Better that you bide here yet awhile,” I said, and locked him in. “I won’t be long.”

“I hate it here, sai!”

“I know,” I told him. “It’ll be over soon enough.”

I hoped I was right about that.

* * *

When I stepped out of the sheriff’s office, the wind made me stagger and alkali grit stung my cheeks. In spite of the rising gale, both boardwalks of the high street were lined with spectators. The men had pulled their bandannas over their mouths and noses; the women were using their kerchiefs. I saw one lady-

sai wearing her bonnet backwards, which looked strange but was probably quite useful against the dust.

To my left, horses began to emerge from the whitish clouds of alkali. Sheriff Peavy and Canfield of the Jefferson were in the van, with their hats yanked low and their neckcloths pulled high, so only their eyes showed. Behind them came three long flatbed wagons, open to the wind. They were painted blue, but their sides and decks were rimed white with salt. On the side of each the words DEBARIA SALT COMBYNE had been daubed in yellow paint. On each deck sat six or eight fellows in overalls and the straw workingmen's hats known as clobbers (or clumpets, I disremember which). On one side of this caravan rode Jamie DeCurry, Kellin Frye, and Kellin's son, Vikka. On the other were Snip and Arn from the Jefferson spread and a big fellow with a sand-colored handlebar mustache and a yellow duster to match. This turned out to be the man who served as constable in Little Debaria . . . at least when he wasn't otherwise occupied at the faro or Watch Me tables.

None of the new arrivals looked happy, but the salties looked least happy of all. It was easy to regard them with suspicion and dislike; I had to remind myself that only one was a monster (assuming, that was, the skin-man hadn't slipped our net entirely). Most of the others had probably come of their own free will when told they could help put an end to the scourge by doing so.

I stepped into the street and raised my hands over my head. Sheriff Peavy reined up in front of me, but I ignored him for the time being, looking instead at the huddled miners in the flatbed wagons. A swift count made their number twenty-one. That was twenty more suspects than I wanted, but far fewer than I had feared.

I shouted to make myself heard over the wind. *"You men have come to help us, and on behalf of Gilead, I say thankya!"*

They were easier to hear, because the wind was blowing toward me. "Balls to your Gilead," said one. "Snot-nosed brat," said another. "Lick my johnny on behalf of Gilead," said a third.

“I can smarten em up anytime you’d like,” said the man with the handlebar mustache. “Say the word, young’un, for I’m constable of the shithole they come from, and that makes em my fill. Will Wegg.” He put a perfunctory fist to his brow.

“Never in life,” I said, and raised my voice again. “*How many of you men want a drink?*”

That stopped their grumbling in its tracks, and they raised a cheer instead.

“*Then climb down and line up!*” I shouted. “*By twos, if you will!*” I grinned at them. “*And if you won’t, go to hell and go there thirsty!*”

That made most of them laugh.

“Sai Deschain,” Wegg said, “puttin drink in these fellers ain’t a good idea.”

But I thought it was. I motioned Kellin Frye to me and dropped two gold knucks into his hand. His eyes widened.

“You’re the trail-boss of this herd,” I told him. “What you’ve got there should buy them two whiskeys apiece, if they’re short shots, and that’s all I want them to have. Take Canfield with you, and that one there.” I pointed to one of the pokies. “Is it Arn?”

“Snip,” the fellow said. “T’other one’s Arn.”

“Aye, good. Snip, you at one end of the bar, Canfield at the other. Frye, you stand behind them at the door and watch their backs.”

“I won’t be taking my son into the Busted Luck,” Kellin Frye said. “It’s a whore-hole, so it is.”

“You won’t need to. Soh Vikka goes around back with the other pokie.” I cocked my thumb at Arn. “All you two fellows need to do is watch for any saltie trying to sneak out the back door. If you do, let loose a yell and then scat, because he’ll probably be our man. Understand?”

“Yep,” Arn said. “Come on, kid, off we go. Maybe if I get out of this wind, I can get a smoke to stay lit.”

“Not just yet,” I said, and beckoned to the boy.

“Hey, gunbunny!” one of the miners yelled. “You gonna let us out of this wind before nightfall? I’m fuckin thirsty!”

The others agreed.

“Hold your gabber,” I said. “Do that, and you get to wet your throat. Run your gums at me while I’m doing my job and you’ll sit out here in the back of a wagon and lick salt.”

That quieted them, and I bent to Vikka Frye. “You were to tell someone something while you were up there at the Salt Rocks. Did you do it?”

“Yar, I—” His father elbowed him almost hard enough to knock him over. The boy remembered his manners and started again, this time with a fist to his brow. “Yes, sai, do it please you.”

“Who did you speak to?”

“Puck DeLong. He’s a boy I know from Reap Fairday. He’s just a miner’s kid, but we palled around some, and did the three-leg race together. His da’s foreman of the nightwork crew. That’s what Puck says, anyways.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“That it was Billy Streeter who seen the skin-man in his human shape. I said how Billy hid under a pile of old tack, and that was what saved him. Puck knew who I was talking about, because Billy was at Reap Fairday, too. It was Billy who won the Goose Dash. Do you know the Goose Dash, sai gunslinger?”

“Yes,” I said. I had run it myself on more than one Reap Fairday, and not that long ago, either.

Vikka Frye swallowed hard, and his eyes filled with tears. “Billy’s da’ cheered like to bust his throat when Billy come in first,” he whispered.

“I’m sure he did. Did this Puck DeLong put the story on its way, do you think?”

“Dunno, do I? But I would’ve, if it’d been me.”

I thought that was good enough, and clapped Vikka on the shoulder. “Go on, now. And if anyone tries to take it on the sneak, raise a shout. A good loud one, so to be heard over the wind.”

He and Arn struck off for the alley that would take them behind the Busted Luck. The salties paid them no mind; they only had eyes for the batwing doors and thoughts for the rotgut waiting behind them.

“Men!” I shouted. And when they turned to me: *“Wet thy whistles!”*

That brought another cheer, and they set off for the saloon. But walking, not running, and still two by two. They had been well trained. I guessed that their lives as miners were little more than slavery, and I was thankful ka had pointed me along a different path . . . although, when I look back on it, I wonder how much difference there might be between the slavery of the mine and the slavery of the gun. Perhaps one: I’ve always had the sky to look at, and for that I tell Gan, the Man Jesus, and all the other gods that may be, thankya.

* * *

I motioned Jamie, Sheriff Peavy, and the new one—Wegg—to the far side of the street. We stood beneath the overhang that shielded the sheriff’s office. Strother and Pickens, the not-so-good deputies, were crowded into the doorway, fair goggling.

“Go inside, you two,” I told them.

“We don’t take orders from you,” Pickens said, just as haughty as Mary Dame, now that the boss was back.

“Go inside and shut the door,” Peavy said. “Have you thudbrains not kenned even yet who’s in charge of this raree?”

They drew back, Pickens glaring at me and Strother glaring at Jamie. The door slammed hard enough to rattle the glass. For a moment the four of us stood there, watching the great clouds of alkali dust blow up the high street, some of them so thick they made the saltwagons disappear. But there was little time for contemplation; it would be night all too soon, and then one of the salties now drinking in the Busted Luck might be a man no longer.

“I think we have a problem,” I said. I was speaking to all of them, but it was Jamie I was looking at. “It seems to me that a skin-turner who knows what he is would hardly admit to being able to ride.”

“Thought of that,” Jamie said, and tilted his head to Constable Wegg.

“We’ve got all of em who can sit a horse,” Wegg said. “Depend on it, sai. Ain’t I seen em myself?”

“I doubt if you’ve seen all of them,” I said.

“I think he has,” Jamie said. “Listen, Roland.”

“There’s one rich fella up in Little Debaria, name of Sam Shunt,” Wegg said. “The miners call him Shunt the Cunt, which ain’t surprising, since he’s got most of em where the hair grows short. He don’t own the Combyne—it’s big bugs in Gilead who’ve got that—but he owns most of the rest: the bars, the whores, the skiddums—”

I looked at Sheriff Peavy.

“Shacks in Little Debaria where some of the miners sleep,” he said. “Skiddums ain’t much, but they ain’t underground.”

I looked back at Wegg, who had hold of his duster’s lapels and was looking pleased with himself.

“Sammy Shunt owns the company store. Which means he owns the miners.” He grinned. When I didn’t grin back, he took his hands from his lapels and flipped them skyward. “It’s the way of the world, young sai—I didn’t make it, and neither did you.

“Now Sammy’s a great one for fun n games . . . always assumin he can turn a few pennies on em, that is. Four times a year, he sets up races for the miners. Some are footraces, and some are obstacle-course races, where they have to jump over wooden barrycades, or leap gullies filled up with mud. It’s pretty comical when they fall in. The whores always come to watch, and that makes em laugh like loons.”

“Hurry it up,” Peavy growled. “Those fellas won’t take long to get through two drinks.”

“He has hoss-races, too,” said Wegg, “although he won’t provide nothing but old nags, in case one of them ponies breaks a leg and has to be shot.”

“If a miner breaks a leg, is *he* shot?” I asked.

Wegg laughed and slapped his thigh as if I'd gotten off a good one. Cuthbert could have told him I don't joke, but of course Cuthbert wasn't there. And Jamie rarely says anything, if he doesn't have to.

"Trig, young gunslinger, very trig ye are! Nay, they're mended right enough, if they can be mended; there's a couple of whores that make a little extra coin working as ammies after Sammy Shunt's little competitions. They don't mind; it's servicin em either way, ain't it?"

"There's an entry fee, accourse, taken out of wages. That pays Sammy's expenses. As for the miners, the winner of whatever the particular competition happens to be—dash, obstacle-course, hoss-race—gets a year's worth of debt forgiven at the company store. Sammy keeps the in'drest s'high on the others that he never loses by it. You see how it works? Quite snick, wouldn't you say?"

"Snick as the devil," I said.

"Yar! So when it comes to racing those nags around the little track he had made, any miner who *can* ride, *does* ride. It's powerful comical to watch em smashin their nutsacks up n down, set my watch and warrant on that. And I'm allus there to keep order. I've seen every race for the last seven years, and every diggerboy who's ever run in em. For riders, those boys over there are it. There was one more, but in the race Sammy put on this New Earth, that pertic'ler salt-mole fell off his mount and got his guts squashed. Lived a day or two, then goozled. So I don't think he's your skin-man, do you?"

At this, Wegg laughed heartily. Peavy looked at him with resignation, Jamie with a mixture of contempt and wonder.

Did I believe this man when he said they'd rounded up every saltie who could sit a horse? I would, I decided, if he could answer one question in the affirmative.

"Do you bet on these horse-races yourself, Wegg?"

"Made a goodish heap last year," he said proudly. "Course Shunt only pays in scrip—he's tight—but it keeps me in whores and whiskey. I like the whores

young and the whiskey old.”

Peavy looked at me over Wegg’s shoulder and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *He’s what they have up there, so don’t blame me for it.*

Nor did I. “Wegg, go on in the office and wait for us. Jamie and Sheriff Peavy, come with me.”

I explained as we crossed the street. It didn’t take long.

* * *

“You tell them what we want,” I said to Peavy as we stood outside the batwings. I kept it low because we were still being watched by the whole town, although the ones clustered outside the saloon had drawn away from us, as if we might have something that was catching. “They know you.”

“Not as well as they know Wegg,” he said.

“Why do you think I wanted him to stay across the street?”

He grunted a laugh at that, and pushed his way through the batwings. Jamie and I followed.

The regular patrons had drawn back to the gaming tables, giving the bar over to the salties. Snip and Canfield flanked them; Kellin Frye stood with his back leaning against the barnboard wall and his arms folded over his sheepskin vest. There was a second floor—given over to bump-cribs, I assumed—and the balcony up there was loaded with less-than-charming ladies, looking down at the miners.

“You men!” Peavy said. “Turn around and face me!”

They did as he said, and promptly. What was he to them but just another foreman? A few held onto the remains of their short whiskeys, but most had already finished. They looked livelier now, their cheeks flushed with alcohol rather than the scouring wind that had chased them down from the foothills.

“Now here’s what,” Peavy said. “You’re going to sit up on the bar, every mother’s son of you, and take off your boots so we can see your feet.”

A muttering of discontent greeted this. “If you want to know who’s spent time in Beelie Stockade, why not just ask?” a graybeard called. “I was there,

and I en't ashamed. I stole a loaf for my old woman and our two babbies. Not that it did the babbies any good; they both died."

"What if we won't?" a younger one asked. "Them gunnies shoot us? Not sure I'd mind. At least I wouldn't have to go down in the plug nummore."

A rumble of agreement met this. Someone said something that sounded like *green light*.

Peavy took hold of my arm and pulled me forward. "It was this gunny got you out of a day's work, then bought you drinks. And unless you're the man we're looking for, what the hell are you afraid of?"

The one that answered this couldn't have been more than my age. "Sai Sheriff, we're *always* afraid."

This was truth a little balder than they were used to, and complete silence dropped over the Busted Luck. Outside, the wind moaned. The grit hitting the thin board walls sounded like hail.

"Boys, listen to me," Peavy said, now speaking in a lower and more respectful tone of voice. "These gunslingers could draw and make you do what has to be done, but I don't want that, and you shouldn't need it. Counting what happened at the Jefferson spread, there's over three dozen dead in Debaria. Three at the Jefferson was women." He paused. "Nar, I tell a lie. One was a woman, the other two mere girls. I know you've got hard lives and nothing to gain by doing a good turn, but I'm asking you, anyway. And why not? There's only one of you with something to hide."

"Well, what the fuck," said the graybeard.

He reached behind him to the bar and boosted himself up so he was sitting on it. He must have been the Old Fella of the crew, for all the others followed suit. I watched for anyone showing reluctance, but to my eye there was none. Once it was started, they took it as a kind of joke. Soon there were twenty-one overalled salties sitting on the bar, and the boots rained down on the sawdusty floor in a series of thuds. Ay, gods, I can smell the reek of their feet to this day.

“Oogh, that’s enough for me,” one of the whores said, and when I looked up, I saw our audience vacating the balcony in a storm of feathers and a swirl of pettislips. The bartender joined the others by the gaming tables, holding his nose pinched shut. I’ll bet they didn’t sell many steak dinners in Racey’s Café at suppertime; that smell was an appetite-killer if ever there was one.

“Yank up your cuffs,” Peavy said. “Let me gleep yer ankles.”

Now that the thing was begun, they complied without argument. I stepped forward. “If I point to you,” I said, “get down off the bar and go stand against the wall. You can take your boots, but don’t bother putting them on. You’ll only be walking across the street, and you can do that barefooty.”

I walked down the line of extended feet, most pitifully skinny and all but those belonging to the youngest miners clogged with bulging purple veins.

“You . . . you . . . and you . . .”

In all, there were ten of them with blue rings around their ankles that meant time in the Beelie Stockade. Jamie drifted over to them. He didn’t draw, but he hooked his thumbs in his crossed gunbelts, with his palms near enough to the butts of his six-shooters to make the point.

“Barkeep,” I said. “Pour these men who are left another short shot.”

The miners without stockade tattoos cheered at this and began putting on their boots again.

“What about us?” the graybeard asked. The tattooed ring above his ankle was faded to a blue ghost. His bare feet were as gnarled as old tree-stumps. How he could walk on them—let alone *work* on them—was more than I could understand.

“Nine of you will get *long* shots,” I said, and that wiped the gloom from their faces. “The tenth will get something else.”

“A yank of rope,” Canfield of the Jefferson said in a low voice. “And after what I seen out t’ranch, I hope he dances at the end of it a long time.”

* * *

We left Snip and Canfield to watch the eleven salties drinking at the bar, and marched the other ten across the street. The graybeard led the way and walked briskly on his tree-stump feet. That day's light had drained to a weird yellow I had never seen before, and it would be dark all too soon. The wind blew and the dust flew. I was watching for one of them to make a break—hoping for it, if only to spare the child waiting in the jail—but none did.

Jamie fell in beside me. “If he's here, he's hoping the kiddo didn't see any higher than his ankles. He means to face it out, Roland.”

“I know,” I said. “And since that's all the kiddo *did* see, he'll probably ride the bluff.”

“What then?”

“Lock em all up, I suppose, and wait for one of em to change his skin.”

“What if it's not just something that comes over him? What if he can keep it from happening?”

“Then I don't know,” I said.

* * *

Wegg had started a penny-in, three-to-stay Watch Me game with Pickens and Strother. I thumped the table with one hand, scattering the matchsticks they were using as counters. “Wegg, you'll accompany these men into the jail with the sheriff. It'll be a few minutes yet. There's a few more things to attend to.”

“What's in the jail?” Wegg asked, looking at the scattered matchsticks with some regret. I guessed he'd been winning. “The boy, I suppose?”

“The boy and the end of this sorry business,” I said with more confidence than I felt.

I took the graybeard by the elbow—gently—and pulled him aside. “What's your name, sai?”

“Steg Luka. What's it to you? You think I'm the one?”

“No,” I said, and I didn't. No reason; just a feeling. “But if you know which one it is—if you even think you know—you ought to tell me. There's a frightened boy in there, locked in a cell for his own good. He saw something

that looked like a giant bear kill his father, and I'd spare him any more pain if I could. He's a good boy."

He considered, then it was him who took my elbow . . . and with a hand that felt like iron. He drew me into the corner. "I can't say, gunslinger, for we've all been down there, deep in the new plug, and we all saw it."

"Saw what?"

"A crack in the salt with a green light shining through. Bright, then dim. Bright, then dim. Like a heartbeat. And . . . it speaks to your face."

"I don't understand you."

"I don't understand myself. The only thing I know is we've all seen it, and we've all felt it. It speaks to your face and tells you to come in. It's bitter."

"The light, or the voice?"

"Both. It's of the Old People, I've no doubt of that. We told Banderly—him that's the bull foreman—and he went down himself. Saw it for himself. *Felt* it for himself. But was he going to close the plug for that? Balls he was. He's got his own bosses to answer to, and they know there's a moit of salt left down there. So he ordered a crew to close it up with rocks, which they did. I know, because I was one of em. But rocks that are put in can be pulled out. And they have been, I'd swear to it. They were one way then, now they're another. Someone went in there, gunslinger, and whatever's on the other side . . . it changed him."

"But you don't know who."

Luka shook his head. "All I can say is it must've been between twelve o' the clock and six in the morning, for then all's quiet."

"Go on back to your mates, and say thankee. You'll be drinking soon enough, and welcome." But sai Luka's drinking days were over. We never know, do we?

He went back and I surveyed them. Luka was the oldest by far. Most of the others were middle-aged, and a couple were still young. They looked interested and excited rather than afraid, and I could understand that; they'd had a couple

of drinks to perk them up, and this made a change in the drudgery of their ordinary days. None of them looked shifty or guilty. None looked like anything more or less than what they were: salties in a dying mining town where the rails ended.

“Jamie,” I said. “A word with you.”

I walked him to the door, and spoke directly into his ear. I gave him an errand, and told him to do it as fast as ever he could. He nodded and slipped out into the stormy afternoon. Or perhaps by then it was early evening.

“Where’s *he* off to?” Wegg asked.

“That’s nonnies to you,” I said, and turned to the men with the blue tattoos on their ankles. “Line up, if you please. Oldest to youngest.”

“I dunno how old I am, do I?” said a balding man wearing a wrist-clock with a rusty string-mended band. Some of the others laughed and nodded.

“Just do the best you can,” I said.

I had no interest in their ages, but the discussion and argument took up some time, which was the main object. If the blacksmith had fulfilled his commission, all would be well. If not, I would improvise. A gunslinger who can’t do that dies early.

The miners shuffled around like kids playing *When the Music Stops*, swapping spots until they were in some rough approximation of age. The line started at the door to the jail and ended at the door to the street. Luka was first; Wrist-Clock was in the middle; the one who looked about my age—the one who’d said they were always afraid—was last.

“Sheriff, will you get their names?” I asked. “I want to speak to the Streeter boy.”

* * *

Billy was standing at the bars of the drunk-and-disorderly cell. He’d heard our palaver, and looked frightened. “Is it here?” he asked. “The skin-man?”

“I think so,” I said, “but there’s no way to be sure.”

“Sai, I’m ascairt.”

“I don’t blame you. But the cell’s locked and the bars are good steel. He can’t get at you, Billy.”

“You ain’t seen him when he’s a bear,” Billy whispered. His eyes were huge and shiny, fixed in place. I’ve seen men with eyes like that after they’ve been punched hard on the jaw. It’s the look that comes over them just before their knees go soft. Outside, the wind gave a thin shriek along the underside of the jail roof.

“Tim Stoutheart was afraid, too,” I said. “But he went on. I expect you to do the same.”

“Will you be here?”

“Aye. My mate, Jamie, too.”

As if I had summoned him, the door to the office opened and Jamie hurried in, slapping alkali dust from his shirt. The sight of him gladdened me. The smell of dirty feet that accompanied him was less welcome.

“Did you get it?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s a pretty enough thing. And here’s the list of names.”

He handed both over.

“Are you ready, son?” Jamie asked Billy.

“I guess so,” Billy said. “I’m going to pretend I’m Tim Stoutheart.”

Jamie nodded gravely. “That’s a fine idea. May you do well.”

A particularly strong gust of wind blew past. Bitter dust puffed in through the barred window of the drunk-and-disorderly cell. Again came that eerie shriek along the eaves. The light was fading, fading. It crossed my mind that it might be better—safer—to jail the waiting salties and leave this part for tomorrow, but nine of them had done nothing. Neither had the boy. Best to have it done. If it *could* be done, that was.

“Hear me, Billy,” I said. “I’m going to walk them through nice and slow. Maybe nothing will happen.”

“A-All right.” His voice was faint.

“Do you need a drink of water first? Or to have a piss?”

“I’m fine,” he said, but of course he didn’t look fine; he looked terrified. “Sai? How many of them have blue rings on their ankles?”

“All,” I said.

“Then how—”

“They don’t know how much you saw. Just look at each one as he passes. And stand back a little, doya.” Out of reaching-distance was what I meant, but I didn’t want to say it out loud.

“What should I say?”

“Nothing. Unless you see something that sets off a recollection, that is.” I had little hope of that. “Bring them in, Jamie. Sheriff Peavy at the head of the line and Wegg at the end.”

He nodded and left. Billy reached through the bars. For a second I didn’t know what he wanted, then I did. I gave his hand a brief squeeze. “Stand back now, Billy. And remember the face of your father. He watches you from the clearing.”

He obeyed. I glanced at the list, running over names (probably misspelled) that meant nothing to me, with my hand on the butt of my righthand gun. That one now contained a very special load. According to Vannay, there was only one sure way to kill a skin-man: with a piercing object of the holy metal. I had paid the blacksmith in gold, but the bullet he’d made me—the one that would roll under the hammer at first cock—was pure silver. Perhaps it would work.

If not, I would follow with lead.

* * *

The door opened. In came Sheriff Peavy. He had a two-foot ironwood headknocker in his right hand, the rawhide drop cord looped around his wrist. He was patting the business end gently against his left palm as he stepped through the door. His eyes found the white-faced lad in the cell, and he smiled.

“Hey-up, Billy, son of Bill,” he said. “We’re with ye, and all’s fine. Fear nothing.”

Billy tried to smile, but looked like he feared much.

Steg Luka came next, rocking from side to side on those tree-stump feet of his. After him came a man nearly as old, with a mangy white mustache, dirty gray hair falling to his shoulders, and a sinister, squinted look in his eyes. Or perhaps he was only nearsighted. The list named him as Bobby Frane.

“Come slow,” I said, “and give this boy a good look at you.”

They came. As each one passed, Bill Streeter looked anxiously into his face.

“G’d eve’n to’ee, boy,” Luka said as he went by. Bobby Frane tipped an invisible cap. One of the younger ones—Jake Marsh, according to the list—stuck out a tongue yellow from bingo-weed tobacco. The others just shuffled past. A couple kept their heads lowered until Wegg barked at them to raise up and look the kiddo in the eye.

There was no dawning recognition on Bill Streeter’s face, only a mixture of fright and perplexity. I kept my own face blank, but I was losing hope. Why, after all, would the skin-man break? He had nothing to lose by playing out his string, and he must know it.

Now there were only four left . . . then two . . . then only the kid who in the Busted Luck had spoken of being afraid. I saw change on Billy’s face as that one went by, and for a moment I thought we had something, then realized it was nothing more than the recognition of one young person for another.

Last came Wegg, who had put away his headknocker and donned brass knuckledusters on each hand. He gave Billy Streeter a not very pleasant smile. “Don’t see no merchandise you want to buy, younker? Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t say I’m surpri—”

“Gunslinger!” Billy said to me. “Sai Deschain!”

“Yes, Billy.” I shouldered Wegg aside and stood in front of the cell.

Billy touched his tongue to his upper lip. “Walk them by again, if it please you. Only this time have them hold up their pants. I can’t see the rings.”

“Billy, the rings are all the same.”

“No,” he said. “They ain’t.”

The wind was in a lull, and Sheriff Peavy heard him. “Turn around, my cullies, and back you march. Only this time hike up your trousers.”

“Ain’t enough enough?” the man with the old wrist-clock grumbled. The list called him Ollie Ang. “We was promised shots. *Long* ones.”

“What’s it to you, honey?” Wegg asked. “Ain’t you got to go back that way anyro’? Did yer marmar drop’ee on your head?”

They grumbled about it, but started back down the corridor toward the office, this time from youngest to oldest, and holding up their pants. All the tattoos looked about the same to me. I at first thought they must to the boy, as well. Then I saw his eyes widen, and he took another step away from the bars. Yet he said nothing.

“Sheriff, hold them right there for a moment, if you will,” I said.

Peavy moved in front of the door to the office. I stepped to the cell and spoke low. “Billy? See something?”

“The mark,” he said. “I seen the mark. It’s the man with the broken ring.”

I didn’t understand . . . then I did. I thought of all the times Cort had called me a slowkins from the eyebrows up. He called the others those things and worse—of course he did, it was his job—but standing in the corridor of that Debaria jail with the simoom blowing outside, I thought he had been right about me. I *was* a slowkins. Only minutes ago I’d thought that if there had been more than the memory of the tattoo, I’d have gotten it from Billy when he was hypnotized. Now, I realized, I *had* gotten it.

Is there anything else? I’d asked him, already sure that there wasn’t, only wanting to raise him from the trance that was so obviously upsetting him. And when he’d said *the white mark*—but dubiously, as if asking himself—foolish Roland had let it pass.

The salties were getting restless. Ollie Ang, the one with the rusty wrist-clock, was saying they’d done as asked and he wanted to go back to the Busted to get his drink and his damn boots.

“Which one?” I asked Billy.

He leaned forward and whispered.

I nodded, then turned to the knot of men at the end of the corridor. Jamie was watching them closely, hands resting on the butts of his revolvers. The men must have seen something in my face, because they ceased their grumbling and just stared. The only sound was the wind and the constant gritty slosh of dust against the building.

As to what happened next, I've thought it over many times since, and I don't think we could have prevented it. We didn't know how fast the change happened, you see; I don't think Vannay did, either, or he would have warned us. Even my father said as much when I finished making my report and stood, with all those books frowning down upon me, waiting for him to pass judgment on my actions in Debaria—not as my father, but as my dinh.

For one thing I was and am grateful. I almost told Peavy to bring forward the man Billy had named, but then I changed my mind. Not because Peavy had helped my father once upon a bye, but because Little Debaria and the salt-houses were not his fill.

"Wegg," I said. "Ollie Ang to me, do it please ya."

"Which?"

"The one with the clock on his wrist."

"Here, now!" Ollie Ang squawked as Constable Wegg laid hold of him. He was slight for a miner, almost bookish, but his arms were slabbed with muscle and I could see more muscle lifting the shoulders of his chambray workshirt. "Here, now, I ain't done nothing! It ain't fair to single me out just because this here kid wants to show off!"

"Shut your hole," Wegg said, and pulled him through the little clot of miners.

"Huck up your pants again," I told him.

"Fuck you, brat! And the horse you rode in on!"

"Huck up or I'll do it for you."

He raised his hands and balled them into fists. "Try! Just you t—"

Jamie strolled up behind him, drew one of his guns, tossed it lightly into the air, caught it by the barrel, and brought the butt down on Ang's head. A smartly calculated blow: it didn't knock the man out, but he dropped his fists, and Wegg caught him under the armpit when his knees loosened. I pulled up the right leg of his overalls, and there it was: a blue Beelie Stockade tattoo that had been cut—*broken*, to use Billy Streeter's word—by a thick white scar that ran all the way to his knee.

"That's what I saw," Billy breathed. "That's what I saw when I was a-layin under that pile of tack."

"He's making it up," Ang said. He looked dazed and his words were muzzy. A thin rill of blood ran down the side of his face from where Jamie's blow had opened his scalp a little.

I knew better. Billy had mentioned the white mark long before he'd set eyes on Ollie Ang in the jail. I opened my mouth, meaning to tell Wegg to throw him in a cell, but that was when the Old Man of the crew burst forward. In his eyes was a look of belated realization. Nor was that all. He was furious.

Before I or Jamie or Wegg could stop him, Steg Luka grabbed Ang by the shoulders and bore him back against the bars across the aisle from the drunk-and-disorderly cell. "*I should have known!*" he shouted. "*I should have known weeks ago, ye great growit shifty asshole! Ye murderin trulloch!*" He seized the arm bearing the old watch. "*Where'd ye get this, if not in the crack the green light comes from? Where else? Oh, ye murderin skin-changin bastard!*"

Luka spit into Ang's dazed face, then turned to Jamie and me, still holding up the miner's arm. "Said he found it in a hole outside one of the old foothill plugs! Said it was probably leftover outlaw booty from the Crow Gang, and like fools we believed him! Even went diggin around for more on our days off, didn't we!"

He turned back to the dazed Ollie Ang. Dazed was how he looked to us, anyway, but who knows what was going on behind those eyes?

“And you laughin up your fuckin sleeve at us while we did it, I’ve no doubt. You found it in a hole, all right, but it wasn’t in one of the old plugs. You went into the crack! Into the green light! It was you! It was you! It was—”

Ang twisted from the chin up. I don’t mean he grimaced; his entire head *twisted*. It was like watching a cloth being wrung by invisible hands. His eyes rose up until one was almost above the other, and they turned from blue to jet-black. His skin paled first to white, then to green. It rose as if pushed by fists from beneath, and cracked into scales. His clothes dropped from his body, because his body was no longer that of a man. Nor was it a bear, or a wolf, or a lion. Those things we might have been prepared for. We might even have been prepared for an ally-gator, such as the thing that had assaulted the unfortunate Fortuna at Serenity. Although it was closer to an ally-gator than anything else.

In a space of three seconds, Ollie Ang turned into a man-high snake. A pooky.

Luka, still holding onto an arm that was shrinking toward that fat green body, gave out a yell that was muffled when the snake—still with a flopping tonsure of human hair around its elongating head—jammed itself into the old man’s mouth. There was a wet popping sound as Luka’s lower jaw was torn from the joints and tendons holding it to the upper. I saw his wattled neck swell and grow smooth as that thing—still changing, still standing on the dwindling remnants of human legs—bored into his throat like a drill.

There were yells and screams of horror from the head of the aisle as the other salties stampeded. I paid them no notice. I saw Jamie wrap his arms around the snake’s growing, swelling body in a fruitless attempt to pull it out of the dying Steg Luka’s throat, and I saw the enormous reptilian head when it tore its way through the nape of Luka’s neck, its red tongue flicking, its scaly head painted with beads of blood and bits of flesh.

Wegg threw one of his brass-knuckle-decorated fists at it. The snake dodged easily, then struck forward, exposing enormous, still-growing fangs: two on

top, two on bottom, all dripping with clear liquid. It batted on Wegg's arm and he shrieked.

"Burns! Dear gods, it BURNS!"

Luka, impaled at the head, seemed to dance as the snake dug its fangs into the struggling constable. Blood and gobbets of flesh spattered everywhere.

Jamie looked at me wildly. His guns were drawn, but where to shoot? The pooky was writhing between two dying men. Its lower body, now legless, flipped free of the heaped clothes, wound itself around Luka's waist in fat coils, drew tight. The part behind the head was slithering out through the widening hole at the nape of Luka's neck.

I stepped forward, seized Wegg, and dragged him backward by the scruff of his vest. His bitten arm had already turned black and swelled to twice its normal size. His eyes were bulging from their sockets as he stared at me, and white foam began to drizzle from his lips.

Somewhere, Billy Streeter was screaming.

The fangs tore free. "Burns," Wegg said in a low voice, and then he could say no more. His throat swelled, and his tongue shot out of his mouth. He collapsed, shuddering in his death-throes. The snake stared at me, its forked tongue licking in and out. They were black snake-eyes, but they were filled with human understanding. I lifted the revolver holding the special load. I had only one silver shell and the head was weaving erratically from side to side, but I never doubted I could make the shot; it's what such as I was made for. It lunged, fangs flashing, and I pulled the trigger. The shot was true, and the silver bullet went right into that yawning mouth. The head blew away in a splatter of red that had begun to turn white even before it hit the bars and the floor of the corridor. I'd seen such mealy white flesh before. It was brains. *Human* brains.

Suddenly it was Ollie Ang's ruined face peering at me from the ragged hole in the back of Luka's neck—peering from atop a snake's body. Shaggy black fur sprang from between the scales on its body as whatever force dying inside lost

all control of the shapes it made. In the moment before it collapsed, the remaining blue eye turned yellow and became a wolf's eye. Then it went down, bearing the unfortunate Steg Luka with it. In the corridor, the dying body of the skin-man shimmered and burned, wavered and changed. I heard the pop of muscles and the grind of shifting bones. A naked foot shot out, turned into a furry paw, then became a man's foot again. The remains of Ollie Ang shuddered all over, then grew still.

The boy was still screaming.

"Go to yon pallet and lie down," I said to him. My voice was not quite steady. "Close your eyes and tell yourself it's over, for now it is."

"I want you," Billy sobbed as he went to the pallet. His cheeks were speckled with blood. I was drenched with it, but this he didn't see. His eyes were already closed. "I want you with me! Please, sai, please!"

"I'll come to you as soon as I can," I said. And I did.

* * *

Three of us spent the night on pushed-together pallets in the drunk-and-disorderly cell: Jamie on the left, me on the right, Young Bill Streeter in the middle. The simoom had begun to die, and until late, we heard the sound of revels on the high street as Debaria celebrated the death of the skin-man.

"What will happen to me, sai?" Billy asked just before he finally fell asleep.

"Good things," I said, and hoped Everlynnne of Serenity would not prove me wrong about that.

"Is it dead? Really dead, sai Deschain?"

"Really."

But on that score I meant to take no chance. After midnight, when the wind was down to a bare breeze and Bill Streeter lay in an exhausted sleep so deep even bad dreams couldn't reach him, Jamie and I joined Sheriff Peavy on the waste ground behind the jail. There we doused the body of Ollie Ang with coal oil. Before setting match to it, I asked if either of them wanted the wrist-clock

as a souvenir. Somehow it hadn't been broken in the struggle, and the cunning little second hand still turned.

Jamie shook his head.

"Not I," said Peavy, "for it might be haunted. Go on, Roland. If I may call ye so."

"And welcome," I said. I struck the sulphur and dropped it. We stood watching until the remains of Debaria's skin-man were nothing but black bones. The wrist-clock was a charred lump in the ash.

* * *

The following morning, Jamie and I rounded up a crew of men—more than willing, they were—to go out to the rail line. Once they were there, it was a matter of two hours to put Sma' Toot back on the double-steel. Travis, the enjie, directed the operation, and I made many friends by telling them I'd arranged for everyone in the crew to eat free at Racey's at top o' day and drink free at the Busted Luck that afternoon.

There was to be a town celebration that night, at which Jamie and I would be guests of honor. It was the sort of thing I could happily do without—I was anxious to get home, and as a rule, company doesn't suit me—but such events are often part of the job. One good thing: there would be women, some of them no doubt pretty. That part I wouldn't mind, and suspected Jamie wouldn't, either. He had much to learn about women, and Debaria was as good a place to begin his studies as any.

He and I watched Sma' Toot puff slowly up to the roundway and then make its way toward us again, pointed in the right direction: toward Gilead.

"Will we stop at Serenity on the way back to town?" Jamie asked. "To ask if they'll take the boy in?"

"Aye. And the prioress said she had something for me."

"Do you know what?"

I shook my head.

* * *

Everlynn, that mountain of a woman, swept toward us across the courtyard of Serenity, her arms spread wide. I was almost tempted to run; it was like standing in the path of one of the vast trucks that used to run at the oil-fields near Kuna.

Instead of running us down, she swept us into a vast and bosomy double hug. Her aroma was sweet: a mixture of cinnamon and thyme and baked goods. She kissed Jamie on the cheek—he blushed. Then she kissed me full on the lips. For a moment we were enveloped by her complicated and billowing garments and shaded by her winged silk hood. Then she drew back, her face shining.

“What a service you have done this town! And how we say thankya!”

I smiled. “Sai Everlynn, you are too kind.”

“Not kind enough! You’ll have noonies with us, yes? And meadow wine, although only a little. Ye’ll have more to drink tonight, I have no doubt.” She gave Jamie a roguish side-glance. “But ye’ll want to be careful when the toasts go around; too much drink can make a man less a man later on, and blur memories he might otherwise want to keep.” She paused, then broke into a knowing grin that went oddly with her robes. “Or . . . p’raps not.”

Jamie blushed harder than ever, but said nothing.

“We saw you coming,” Everlynn said, “and there’s someone else who’d like to give you her thanks.”

She moved aside and there stood the tiny Sister of Serenity named Fortuna. She was still swathed in bandagement, but she looked less wraithlike today, and the side of the face we could see was shining with happiness and relief. She stepped forward shyly.

“I can sleep again. And in time, I may even be able to sleep wi’out nightmares.”

She twitched up the skirt of her gray robe, and—to my deep discomfort—fell on her knees before us. “Sister Fortuna, Annie Clay that was, says thank you. So do we all, but this comes from my own heart.”

I took her gently by the shoulders. "Rise, bondswoman. Kneel not before such as us."

She looked at me with shining eyes, and kissed me on the cheek with the side of her mouth that could still kiss. Then she fled back across the courtyard toward what I assumed was their kitchen. Wonderful smells were already arising from that part of the *baci*.

Everlynne watched her go with a fond smile, then turned back to me.

"There's a boy—" I began.

She nodded. "Bill Streeter. I know his name and his story. We don't go to town, but sometimes the town comes to us. Friendly birds twitter news in our ears, if you take my meaning."

"I take it well," I said.

"Bring him tomorrow, after your heads have shrunk back to their normal size," said she. "We're a company of women, but we're happy to take an orphan boy . . . at least until he grows enough hair on his upper lip to shave. After that, women trouble a boy, and it might not be so well for him to stay here. In the meantime, we can set him about his letters and numbers . . . if he's trig enough to learn, that is. Would you say he's trig enough, Roland, son of Gabrielle?"

It was odd to be called from my mother's side rather than my father's, but strangely pleasant. "I'd say he's very trig."

"That's well, then. And we'll find a place for him when it's time for him to go."

"A plot and a place," I said.

Everlynne laughed. "Aye, just so, like in the story of Tim Stoutheart. And now we'll break bread together, shall we? And with meadow wine we'll toast the prowess of young men."

* * *

We ate, we drank, and all in all, it was a very merry meeting. When the sisters began to clear the trestle tables, Prioress Everlynne took me to her private

quarters, which consisted of a bedroom and a much larger office where a cat slept in a bar of sun on a huge oaken desk heaped high with papers.

“Few men have been here, Roland,” she said. “One was a fellow you might know. He had a white face and black clothes. Do you know the man of whom I speak?”

“Marten Broadcloak,” I said. The good food in my stomach was suddenly sour with hate. And jealousy, I suppose—nor just on behalf of my father, whom Gabrielle of Arten had decorated with cuckold’s horns. “Did he see her?”

“He demanded to, but I refused and sent him hence. At first he declined to go, but I showed him my knife and told him there were other weapons in Serenity, aye, and women who knew how to use them. One, I said, was a gun. I reminded him he was deep inside the *baci*, and suggested that, unless he could fly, he had better take heed. He did, but before he went he cursed me, and he cursed this place.” She hesitated, stroked the cat, then looked up at me. “There was a time when I thought perhaps the skin-man was his work.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Nor I, but neither of us will ever be entirely sure, will we?” The cat tried to climb into the vast playground of her lap, and Everlynne shooed it away. “Of one thing I *am* sure: he spoke to her anyway, although whether through the window of her cell late at night or only in her troubled dreams, no one will ever know. That secret she took with her into the clearing, poor woman.”

To this I did not reply. When one is amazed and heartsick, it’s usually best to say nothing, for in that state, any word will be the wrong word.

“Your lady-mother quit her retirement with us shortly after we turned this Broadcloak fellow around. She said she had a duty to perform, and much to atone for. She said her son would come here. I asked her how she knew and she said, ‘Because ka is a wheel and it always turns.’ She left this for you.”

Everlynne opened one of the many drawers of her desk and removed an envelope. Written on the front was my name, in a hand I knew well. Only my father would have known it better. That hand had once turned the pages of a

fine old book as she read me “The Wind Through the Keyhole.” Aye, and many others. I loved all the stories held in the pages that hand turned, but never so much as I loved the hand itself. Even more, I loved the sound of the voice that told them as the wind blew outside. Those were the days before she was mazed and fell into the sad bitchery that brought her under a gun in another hand. My gun, my hand.

Everlynn rose, smoothing her large apron. “I must go and see how things are advancing in other parts of my little kingdom. I’ll bid you goodbye now, Roland, son of Gabrielle, only asking that you pull the door shut when you go. It will lock itself.”

“You trust me with your things?” I asked.

She laughed, came around the desk, and kissed me again. “Gunslinger, I’d trust you with my life,” said she, and left. She was so tall she had to duck her head when she went through the door.

* * *

I sat looking at Gabrielle Deschain’s last missive for a long time. My heart was full of hate and love and regret—all those things that have haunted me ever since. I considered burning it, unread, but at last I tore the envelope open. Inside was a single sheet of paper. The lines were uneven, and the pigeon-ink in which they had been written was blotted in many places. I believe the woman who wrote those lines was struggling to hold onto a few last shreds of sanity. I’m not sure many would have understood her words, but I did. I’m sure my father would have, as well, but I never showed it to him or told him of it.

The feast I ate was rotten

what I thought was a palace was a dungeon

how it burns Roland

I thought of Wegg, dying of snakebite.

If I go back and tell what I know

what I overheard

*Gilead may yet be saved a few years
you may be saved a few years
your father little that he ever cared for me*

The words “little that he ever cared for me” had been crossed out with a series of heavy lines, but I could read them anyway.

*he says I dare not
he says “Bide at Serenity until death finds you.”
he says “If you go back death will find you early.”
he says “Your death will destroy the only one in the world
for whom you care.”
he says “Would you die at your brat’s hand and see
every goodness
every kindness
every loving thought
poured out of him like water from a dipper?
for Gilead that cared for you little
and will die anyway?”
But I must go back. I have prayed on it
and meditated on it
and the voice I hear always speaks the same words:
THIS IS WHAT KA DEMANDS*

There was a little more, words I traced over and over during my wandering years after the disastrous battle at Jericho Hill and the fall of Gilead. I traced them until the paper fell apart and I let the wind take it—the wind that blows through time’s keyhole, ye ken. In the end, the wind takes everything, doesn’t it? And why not? Why other? If the sweetness of our lives did not depart, there would be no sweetness at all.

I stayed in Everlynn’s office until I had myself under control. Then I put my mother’s last word—her dead-letter—in my purse and left, making sure the door locked behind me. I found Jamie and we rode to town. That night there were lights and music and dancing; many good things to eat and plenty of liquor to wash it down with. There were women, too, and that night Silent Jamie left his virginity behind him. The next morning . . .

ST O R M ' S O V E R

“That night,” Roland said, “there were lights and music and dancing; many good things to eat and plenty of liquor to wash it down with.”

“Booze,” Eddie said, and heaved a seriocomic sigh. “I remember it well.”

It was the first thing any of them had said in a very long time, and it broke the spell that had held them through that long and windy night. They stirred like people awaking from a deep dream. All except Oy, who still lay on his back in front of the fireplace with his short paws splayed and the tip of his tongue lolling comically from the side of his mouth.

Roland nodded. “There were women, too, and that night Silent Jamie left his virginity behind him. The next morning we reboarded Sma’ Toot, and made our way back to Gilead. And so it happened, once upon a bye.”

“Long before my grandfather’s grandfather was born,” Jake said in a low voice.

“Of that I can’t say,” Roland said with a slight smile, and then took a long drink of water. His throat was very dry.

For a moment there was silence among them. Then Eddie said, “Thank you, Roland. That was boss.”

The gunslinger raised an eyebrow.

“He means it was wonderful,” Jake said. “It was, too.”

“I see light around the boards we put over the windows,” Susannah said. “Just a little, but it’s there. You talked down the dark, Roland. I guess you’re

not the strong silent Gary Cooper type after all, are you?"

"I don't know who that is."

She took his hand and gave it a brief hard squeeze. "Ne'mine, sugar."

"Wind's dropped, but it's still blowing pretty hard," Jake observed.

"We'll build up the fire, then sleep," the gunslinger said. "This afternoon it should be warm enough for us to go out and gather more wood. And tomorrowday . . ."

"Back on the road," Eddie finished.

"As you say, Eddie."

Roland put the last of their fuel on the guttering fire, watched as it sprang up again, then lay down and closed his eyes. Seconds later, he was asleep.

Eddie gathered Susannah into his arms, then looked over her shoulder at Jake, who was sitting cross-legged and looking into the fire. "Time to catch forty winks, little trailhand."

"Don't call me that. You know I hate it."

"Okay, buckaroo."

Jake gave him the finger. Eddie smiled and closed his eyes.

The boy gathered his blanket around him. *My shaddie*, he thought, and smiled. Beyond the walls, the wind still moaned—a voice without a body. Jake thought, *It's on the other side of the keyhole. And over there, where the wind comes from? All of eternity. And the Dark Tower.*

He thought of the boy Roland Deschain had been an unknown number of years ago, lying in a circular bedroom at the top of a stone tower. Tucked up cozy and listening to his mother read the old tales while the wind blew across the dark land. As he drifted, Jake saw the woman's face and thought it kind as well as beautiful. His own mother had never read him stories. In his plot and place, that had been the housekeeper's job.

He closed his eyes and saw billy-bumblers on their hind legs, dancing in the moonlight.

He slept.

When Roland woke in the early afternoon, the wind was down to a whisper and the room was much brighter. Eddie and Jake were still deeply asleep, but Susannah had awakened, boosted herself into her wheelchair, and removed the boards blocking one of the windows. Now she sat there with her chin propped on her hand, looking out. Roland went to her and put his own hand on her shoulder. Susannah reached up and patted it without turning around.

“Storm’s over, sugar.”

“Yes. Let’s hope we never see another like it.”

“And if we do, let’s hope there’s a shelter as good as this one close by. As for the rest of Gook village . . .” She shook her head.

Roland bent a little to look out. What he saw didn’t surprise him, but it was what Eddie would have called *awesome*. The high street was still there, but it was full of branches and shattered trees. The buildings that had lined it were gone. Only the stone meeting hall remained.

“We were lucky, weren’t we?”

“Luck’s the word those with poor hearts use for ka, Susannah of New York.”

She considered this without speaking. The last breezes of the dying starkblast came through the hole where the window had been and stirred the tight cap of her hair, as if some invisible hand were stroking it. Then she turned to him. “She left Serenity and went back to Gilead—your lady-mother.”

“Yes.”

“Even though the sonofabitch told her she’d die at her own son’s hand?”

“I doubt if he put it just that way, but . . . yes.”

“It’s no wonder she was half-crazy when she wrote that letter.”

Roland was silent, looking out the window at the destruction the storm had brought. Yet they had found shelter. Good shelter from the storm.

She took his three-fingered right hand in both of hers. “What did she say at the end? What were the words you traced over and over until her letter fell

apart? Can you tell me?”

He didn't answer for a long time. Just when she was sure he wouldn't, he did. In his voice—almost undetectable, but most certainly there—was a tremor Susannah had never heard before. “She wrote in the low speech until the last line. That she wrote in the High, each character beautifully drawn: *I forgive you everything. And: Can you forgive me?*”

Susannah felt a single tear, warm and perfectly human, run down her cheek. “And could you, Roland? Did you?”

Still looking out the window, Roland of Gilead—son of Steven and Gabrielle, she of Arten that was—smiled. It broke upon his face like the first glow of sunrise on a rocky landscape. He spoke a single word before going back to his gunna to build them an afternoon breakfast.

The word was *yes*.

They spent one more night in the meeting hall. There was fellowship and palaver, but no stories. The following morning they gathered their gunna and continued along the Path of the Beam—to Calla Bryn Sturgis, and the borderlands, and Thunderclap, and the Dark Tower beyond. These are things that happened, once upon a bye.

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STEPHEN
KING

WOLVES OF THE CALLA

THE DARK TOWER



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Jake, and Oy will find their loyalty richly rewarded. . . . King has certainly reached the top of his game.”

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ABOUT STEPHEN KING

**This book is for Frank Muller,
who hears the voices in my head.**

THE FINAL ARGUMENT

Wolves of the Calla is the fifth volume of a longer tale inspired by Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." The sixth, *Song of Susannah*, was published in 2004. The seventh and last, *The Dark Tower*, was published later that same year.

The first volume, *The Gunslinger*, tells how Roland Deschain of Gilead pursues and at last catches Walter, the man in black—he who pretended friendship with Roland's father but actually served the Crimson King in far-off End-World. Catching the half-human Walter is for Roland a step on the way to the Dark Tower, where he hopes the quickening destruction of Mid-World and the slow death of the Beams may be halted or even reversed. The subtitle of this novel is RESUMPTION.

The Dark Tower is Roland's obsession, his grail, his only reason for living when we meet him. We learn of how Marten tried, when Roland was yet a boy, to see him sent west in disgrace, swept from the board of the great game. Roland, however, lays Marten's plans at nines, mostly due to his choice of weapon in his manhood test.

Steven Deschain, Roland's father, sends his son and two friends (Cuthbert Allgood and Alain Johns) to the seacoast barony of Mejis, mostly to place the boy beyond Walter's reach. There Roland meets and falls in love with Susan Delgado, who has fallen afoul of a witch. Rhea of the Cöos is jealous of the girl's beauty, and particularly dangerous because she has obtained one of the great glass balls known as the Bends o' the Rainbow . . . or the Wizard's Glasses. There are thirteen of these in all, the most powerful and dangerous being Black Thirteen. Roland and his friends have many adventures in Mejis, and although they escape with their lives (and the pink Bend o' the Rainbow), Susan Delgado, the lovely girl at the window, is burned at the stake. This tale is told in the fourth volume, *Wizard and Glass*. The subtitle of this novel is REGARD.

In the course of the tales of the Tower we discover that the gunslinger's world is related to our own in fundamental and terrible

ways. The first of these links is revealed when Jake, a boy from the New York of 1977, meets Roland at a desert way station long years after the death of Susan Delgado. There are doors between Roland's world and our own, and one of them is death. Jake finds himself in this desert way station after being pushed into Forty-third Street and run over by a car. The car's driver was a man named Enrico Balazar. The pusher was a criminal sociopath named Jack Mort, Walter's representative on the New York level of the Dark Tower.

Before Jake and Roland reach Walter, Jake dies again . . . this time because the gunslinger, faced with an agonizing choice between this symbolic son and the Dark Tower, chooses the Tower. Jake's last words before plunging into the abyss are "Go, then—there are other worlds than these."

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs near the Western Sea. In a long night of palaver, the man in black tells Roland's future with a Tarot deck of strange device. Three cards—the Prisoner, the Lady of Shadows, and Death ("but not for you, gunslinger")—are especially called to Roland's attention.

The Drawing of the Three, subtitled RENEWAL, begins on the shore of the Western Sea not long after Roland awakens from his confrontation with Walter. The exhausted gunslinger is attacked by a horde of carnivorous "lobstrosities," and before he can escape, he has lost two fingers of his right hand and has been seriously infected. Roland resumes his trek along the shore of the Western Sea, although he is sick and possibly dying.

On his walk he encounters three doors standing freely on the beach. These open into New York at three different *whens*. From 1987, Roland draws Eddie Dean, a prisoner of heroin. From 1964, he draws Odetta Susannah Holmes, a woman who lost her legs when a sociopath named Jack Mort pushed her in front of a subway train. She is the Lady of Shadows, with a violent "other" hidden in her brain. This hidden woman, the violent and crafty Detta Walker, is determined to kill both Roland and Eddie when the gunslinger draws her into Mid-World.

Roland thinks that perhaps he has drawn three in just Eddie and Odetta, since Odetta is really two personalities, yet when Odetta and Detta merge as one into Susannah (largely thanks to Eddie Dean's

love and courage), the gunslinger knows it's not so. He knows something else, as well: he is being tormented by thoughts of Jake, the boy who spoke of other worlds at the time of his death.

The Waste Lands, subtitled REDEMPTION, begins with a paradox: to Roland, Jake seems both alive and dead. In the New York of the late 1970s, Jake Chambers is haunted by the same question: alive or dead? Which is he? After killing a gigantic bear named either Mir (so called by the old people who went in fear of it) or Shardik (by the Great Old Ones who built it), Roland, Eddie, and Susannah backtrack the beast and discover the Path of the Beam known as Shardik to Maturin, Bear to Turtle. There were once six of these Beams, running between the twelve portals which mark the edges of Mid-World. At the point where the Beams cross, at the center of Roland's world (and all worlds), stands the Dark Tower, the nexus of all *where* and *when*.

By now Eddie and Susannah are no longer prisoners in Roland's world. In love and well on the way to becoming gunslingers themselves, they are full participants in the quest and follow Roland, the last seppe-sai (death-seller), along the Path of Shardik, the Way of Maturin.

In a speaking ring not far from the Portal of the Bear, time is mended, paradox is ended, and the *real* third is drawn. Jake reenters Mid-World at the end of a perilous rite where all four—Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Roland—remember the faces of their fathers and acquit themselves honorably. Not long after, the quartet becomes a quintet, when Jake befriends a billy-bumbler. Bumlbers, which look like a combination of badger, raccoon, and dog, have a limited speaking ability. Jake names his new friend Oy.

The way of the pilgrims leads them toward the city of Lud, where the degenerate survivors of two old factions carry on an endless conflict. Before reaching the city, in the little town of River Crossing, they meet a few ancient survivors of the old days. They recognize Roland as a fellow survivor of those days before the world moved on, and honor him and his companions. The Old People also tell them of a monorail train which may still run from Lud and into the waste lands, along the Path of the Beam and toward the Dark Tower.

Jake is frightened by this news but not surprised; before being drawn from New York, he obtained two books from a bookstore

owned by a man with the thought-provoking name of Calvin Tower. One is a book of riddles with the answers torn out. The other, *Charlie the Choo-Choo*, is a children's story with dark echoes of Mid-World. For one thing, the word *char* means *death* in the High Speech Roland grew up speaking in Gilead.

Aunt Talitha, the matriarch of River Crossing, gives Roland a silver cross to wear, and the travelers go their course. While crossing the dilapidated bridge which spans the River Send, Jake is abducted by a dying (and very dangerous) outlaw named Gasher. Gasher takes his young prisoner underground to the Tick-Tock Man, the last leader of the faction known as the Grays.

While Roland and Oy go after Jake, Eddie and Susannah find the Cradle of Lud, where Blaine the Mono awakes. Blaine is the last aboveground tool of a vast computer system that lies beneath Lud, and Blaine has only one remaining interest: riddles. It promises to take the travelers to the monorail's final stop . . . *if* they can pose it a riddle it cannot solve. Otherwise, Blaine says, their trip will end in death: *charyou tree*.

Roland rescues Jake, leaving the Tick-Tock Man for dead. Yet Andrew Quick is not dead. Half-blind, hideously wounded about the face, he is rescued by a man who calls himself Richard Fannin. Fannin, however, also identifies himself as the Ageless Stranger, a demon of whom Roland has been warned.

The pilgrims continue their journey from the dying city of Lud, this time by monorail. The fact that the actual mind running the mono exists in computers falling farther and farther behind them will make no difference one way or the other when the pink bullet jumps the decaying tracks somewhere along the Path of the Beam at a speed in excess of eight hundred miles an hour. Their one chance of survival is to pose Blaine a riddle which the computer cannot answer.

At the beginning of *Wizard and Glass*, Eddie does indeed pose such a riddle, destroying Blaine with a uniquely human weapon: illogic. The mono comes to a stop in a version of Topeka, Kansas, which has been emptied by a disease called "superflu." As they recommence their journey along the Path of the Beam (now on an apocalyptic version of Interstate 70), they see disturbing signs. ALL HAIL THE CRIMSON KING, advises one. WATCH FOR THE WALKIN DUDE, advises another.

And, as alert readers will know, the Walkin Dude has a name very similar to Richard Fannin.

After telling his friends the story of Susan Delgado, Roland and his friends come to a palace of green glass which has been constructed across I-70, a palace that bears a strong resemblance to the one Dorothy Gale sought in *The Wizard of Oz*. In the throne-room of this great castle they encounter not Oz the Great and Terrible but the Tick-Tock Man, the great city of Lud's final refugee. With Tick-Tock dead, the *real* Wizard steps forward. It's Roland's ancient nemesis, Marten Broadcloak, known in some worlds as Randall Flagg, in others as Richard Fannin, in others as John Farson (the Good Man). Roland and his friends are unable to kill this apparition, who warns them one final time to give up their quest for the Tower ("Only misfires against *me*, Roland, old fellow," he tells the gunslinger), but they are able to banish him.

After a final trip into the Wizard's Glass and a final dreadful revelation—that Roland of Gilead killed his own mother, mistaking her for the witch named Rhea—the wanderers find themselves once more in Mid-World and once more on the Path of the Beam. They take up their quest again, and it is here that we will find them in the first pages of *Wolves of the Calla*.

This argument in no way summarizes the first four books of the *Tower* cycle; if you have not read those books before commencing this one, I urge you to do so or to put this one aside. These books are but parts of a single long tale, and you would do better to read them from beginning to end rather than starting in the middle.

“Mister, we deal in lead.”

—Steve McQueen, in *The Magnificent Seven*

“First comes smiles, then lies. Last is gunfire.”

—Roland Deschain, of Gilead

The blood that flows through you
flows through me,
when I look in any mirror,
it's your face that I see.
Take my hand,
lean on me,
We're almost free,
Wandering boy.

—Rodney Crowell

RESISTANCE

19

PROLOGUE:

ROONT

ONE

Tian was blessed (though few farmers would have used such a word) with three patches: River Field, where his family had grown rice since time out of mind; Roadside Field, where ka-Jaffords had grown sharproot, pumpkin, and corn for those same long years and generations; and Son of a Bitch, a thankless tract which mostly grew rocks, blisters, and busted hopes. Tian wasn't the first Jaffords determined to make something of the twenty acres behind the home place; his Gran-pere, perfectly sane in most other respects, had been convinced there was gold there. Tian's Ma had been equally positive it would grow porin, a spice of great worth. Tian's particular insanity was madrigal. Of course madrigal would grow in Son of a Bitch. *Must* grow there. He'd gotten hold of a thousand seeds (and a dear penny they had cost him) that were now hidden beneath the floorboards of his bedroom. All that remained before planting next year was to break ground in Son of a Bitch. This chore was easier spoken of than accomplished.

Clan Jaffords was blessed with livestock, including three mules, but a man would be mad to try using a mule out in Son of a Bitch; the beast unlucky enough to draw such duty would likely be lying legbroke or stung to death by noon of the first day. One of Tian's uncles had almost met this latter fate some years before. He had come running back to the home place, screaming at the top of his lungs and pursued by huge mutie wasps with stingers the size of nails.

They had found the nest (well, Andy had found it; Andy wasn't bothered by wasps no matter how big they were) and burned it with kerosene, but there might be others. And there were holes. Yer-bugger, plenty o' *them*, and you couldn't burn holes, could you? No. Son of a Bitch sat on what the old folks called "loose ground." It was consequently possessed of almost as many holes as rocks, not to

mention at least one cave that puffed out draughts of nasty, decay-smelling air. Who knew what boggarts and speakies might lurk down its dark throat?

And the worst holes weren't out where a man (or a mule) could see them. Not at all, sir, never think so. The leg-breakers were always concealed in innocent-seeming nestles of weeds and high grass. Your mule would step in, there would come a bitter crack like a snapping branch, and then the damned thing would be lying there on the ground, teeth bared, eyes rolling, braying its agony at the sky. Until you put it out of its misery, that was, and stock was valuable in Calla Bryn Sturgis, even stock that wasn't precisely threaded.

Tian therefore plowed with his sister in the traces. No reason not to. Tia was roont, hence good for little else. She was a big girl—the roont ones often grew to prodigious size—and she was willing, Man Jesus love her. The Old Fella had made her a Jesus-tree, what he called a *crusie-fix*, and she wore it everywhere. It swung back and forth now, thumping against her sweating skin as she pulled.

The plow was attached to her shoulders by a rawhide harness. Behind her, alternately guiding the plow by its old ironwood handles and his sister by the hame-traces, Tian grunted and yanked and pushed when the blade of the plow dropped down and verged on becoming stuck. It was the end of Full Earth but as hot as midsummer here in Son of a Bitch; Tia's overalls were dark and damp and stuck to her long and meaty thighs. Each time Tian tossed his head to get his hair out of his eyes, sweat flew out of the mop in a spray.

"Gee, ye bitch!" he cried. "Yon rock's a plow-breaker, are ye blind?"

Not blind; not deaf, either; just roont. She heaved to the left, and hard. Behind her, Tian stumbled forward with a neck-snapping jerk and barked his shin on another rock, one he hadn't seen and the plow had, for a wonder, missed. As he felt the first warm trickles of blood running down to his ankle, he wondered (and not for the first time) what madness it was that always got the Jaffordses out here. In his deepest heart he had an idea that madrigal would sow no more than the porin had before it, although you could grow devil-grass; yar, he could've bloomed all twenty acres with that shit, had he wanted. The trick was to keep it *out*, and it was always New Earth's first chore. It—

The plow rocked to the right and then jerked forward, almost pulling his arms out of their sockets. “*Arr!*” he cried. “Go easy, girl! I can’t grow em back if you pull em out, can I?”

Tia turned her broad, sweaty, empty face up to a sky full of low-hanging clouds and honked laughter. Man Jesus, but she even *sounded* like a donkey. Yet it was laughter, human laughter. Tian wondered, as he sometimes couldn’t help doing, if that laughter *meant* anything. Did she understand some of what he was saying, or did she only respond to his tone of voice? Did any of the roont ones—

“Good day, sai,” said a loud and almost completely toneless voice from behind him. The owner of the voice ignored Tian’s scream of surprise. “Pleasant days, and may they be long upon the earth. I am here from a goodish wander and at your service.”

Tian whirled around, saw Andy standing there—all seven feet of him—and was then almost jerked flat as his sister took another of her large lurching steps forward. The plow’s hame-traces were pulled from his hands and flew around his throat with an audible snap. Tia, unaware of this potential disaster, took another sturdy step forward. When she did, Tian’s wind was cut off. He gave a whooping, gagging gasp and clawed at the straps. All of this Andy watched with his usual large and meaningless smile.

Tia jerked forward again and Tian was pulled off his feet. He landed on a rock that dug savagely into the cleft of his buttocks, but at least he could breathe again. For the moment, anyway. Damned unlucky field! Always had been! Always would be!

Tian snatched hold of the leather strap before it could pull tight around his throat again and yelled, “Hold, ye bitch! Whoa up if you don’t want me to twist yer great and useless tits right off the front of yer!”

Tia halted agreeably enough and looked back to see what was what. Her smile broadened. She lifted one heavily muscled arm—it glowed with sweat—and pointed. “Andy!” she said. “Andy’s come!”

“I ain’t blind,” Tian said and got to his feet, rubbing his bottom. Was that part of him also bleeding? Good Man Jesus, he had an idea it was.

“Good day, sai,” Andy said to her, and tapped his metal throat three times with his three metal fingers. “Long days and pleasant nights.”

Although Tia had surely heard the standard response to this—*And may you have twice the number*—a thousand times or more, all she could do was once more raise her broad idiot’s face to the sky and honk her donkey laugh. Tian felt a surprising moment of pain, not in his arms or throat or outraged ass but in his heart. He vaguely remembered her as a little girl: as pretty and quick as a dragonfly, as smart as ever you could wish. Then—

But before he could finish the thought, a premonition came. He felt a sinking in his heart. *The news would come while I’m out here*, he thought. *Out in this godforsaken patch where nothing is well and all luck is bad*. It was time, wasn’t it? *Overtime*.

“Andy,” he said.

“Yes!” Andy said, smiling. “Andy, your friend! Back from a goodish wander and at your service. Would you like your horoscope, sai Tian? It is Full Earth. The moon is red, what is called the Huntress Moon in Mid-World that was. A friend will call! Business affairs prosper! You will have two ideas, one good and one bad—”

“The bad one was coming out here to turn this field,” Tian said. “Never mind my goddam horoscope, Andy. Why are you here?”

Andy’s smile probably could not become troubled—he was a robot, after all, the last one in Calla Bryn Sturgis or for miles and wheels around—but to Tian it seemed to *grow* troubled, just the same. The robot looked like a young child’s stick-figure of an adult, impossibly tall and impossibly thin. His legs and arms were silvery. His head was a stainless-steel barrel with electric eyes. His body, no more than a cylinder, was gold. Stamped in the middle—what would have been a man’s chest—was this legend:

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
LaMERK INDUSTRIES

PRESENTS

ANDY

Design: MESSENGER (Many Other Functions)
Serial # DNF-44821-V-63

Why or how this silly thing had survived when all the rest of the robots were gone—gone for generations—Tian neither knew nor cared. You were apt to see him anywhere in the Calla (he would not venture beyond its borders) striding on his impossibly thin silver legs, looking everywhere, occasionally clicking to himself as he stored (or perhaps purged—who knew?) information. He sang songs, passed on gossip and rumor from one end of town to the other—a tireless walker was Andy the Messenger Robot—and seemed to enjoy the giving of horoscopes above all things, although there was general agreement in the village that they meant little.

He had one other function, however, and that meant much.

“Why are ye here, ye bag of bolts and beams? Answer me! Is it the Wolves? Are they coming from Thunderclap?”

Tian stood there looking up into Andy’s stupid smiling metal face, the sweat growing cold on his skin, praying with all his might that the foolish thing would say no, then offer to tell his horoscope again, or perhaps to sing “The Green Corn A-Dayo,” all twenty or thirty verses.

But all Andy said, still smiling, was: “Yes, sai.”

“Christ and the Man Jesus,” Tian said (he’d gotten an idea from the Old Fella that those were two names for the same thing, but had never bothered pursuing the question). “How long?”

“One moon of days before they arrive,” Andy replied, still smiling.

“From full to full?”

“Close enough, sai.”

Thirty days, then, give or take one. Thirty days to the Wolves. And there was no sense hoping Andy was wrong. No one kened how the robot could know they were coming out of Thunderclap so far in advance of their arrival, but he *did* know. And he was never wrong.

“Fuck you for your bad news!” Tian cried, and was furious at the waver he heard in his own voice. “What use are you?”

“I’m sorry that the news is bad,” Andy said. His guts clicked audibly, his eyes flashed a brighter blue, and he took a step backward. “Would you not like me to tell your horoscope? This is the end of Full Earth, a time particularly propitious for finishing old business and meeting new people—”

“And fuck your false prophecy, too!” Tian bent, picked up a clod of earth, and threw it at the robot. A pebble buried in the clod clanged off Andy’s metal hide. Tia gasped, then began to cry. Andy backed off another step, his shadow trailing out long in Son of a Bitch field. But his hateful, stupid smile remained.

“What about a song? I have learned an amusing one from the Manni far north of town; it is called ‘In Time of Loss, Make God Your Boss.’ ” From somewhere deep in Andy’s guts came the wavering honk of a pitch-pipe, followed by a ripple of piano keys. “It goes—”

Sweat rolling down his cheeks and sticking his itchy balls to his thighs. The stink-smell of his own foolish obsession. Tia blatting her stupid face at the sky. And this idiotic, bad-news-bearing robot getting ready to sing him some sort of Manni hymn.

“Be quiet, Andy.” He spoke reasonably enough, but through clamped teeth.

“Sai,” the robot agreed, then fell mercifully silent.

Tian went to his bawling sister, put his arm around her, smelled the large (but not entirely unpleasant) smell of her. No obsession there, just the smell of work and obedience. He sighed, then began to stroke her trembling arm.

“Quit it, ye great bawling cunt,” he said. The words might have been ugly but the tone was kind in the extreme, and it was tone she responded to. She began to quiet. Her brother stood with the flare of her hip pushing into him just below his ribcage (she was a full foot taller), and any passing stranger would likely have stopped to look at them, amazed by the similarity of face and the great dissimilarity of size. The resemblance, at least, was honestly come by: they were twins.

He soothed his sister with a mixture of endearments and profanities—in the years since she had come back roont from the east, the two modes of expression were much the same to Tian Jaffords—and at last she ceased her weeping. And when a rustie flew across the sky, doing loops and giving out the usual series of ugly blats, she pointed and laughed.

A feeling was rising in Tian, one so foreign to his nature that he didn’t even recognize it. “Isn’t right,” he said. “Nossir. By the Man Jesus and all the gods that be, it isn’t.” He looked to the east, where

the hills rolled away into a rising membranous darkness that might have been clouds but wasn't. It was the edge of Thunderclap.

"Isn't right what they do to us."

"Sure you wouldn't like to hear your horoscope, sai? I see bright coins and a beautiful dark lady."

"The dark ladies will have to do without me," Tian said, and began pulling the harness off his sister's broad shoulders. "I'm married, as I'm sure ye very well know."

"Many a married man has had his jilly," Andy observed. To Tian he sounded almost smug.

"Not those who love their wives." Tian shouldered the harness (he'd made it himself, there being a marked shortage of tack for human beings in most livery barns) and turned toward the home place. "And not farmers, in any case. Show me a farmer who can afford a jilly and I'll kiss your shiny ass. Garn, Tia. Lift em up and put em down."

"Home place?" she asked.

"That's right."

"Lunch at home place?" She looked at him in a muddled, hopeful way. "Taters?" A pause. "*Gravy?*"

"Shore," Tian said. "Why the hell not?"

Tia let out a whoop and began running toward the house. There was something almost awe-inspiring about her when she ran. As their father had once observed, not long before the fall that carried him off, "Bright or dim, that's a lot of meat in motion."

Tian walked slowly after her, head down, watching for the holes which his sister seemed to avoid without even looking, as if some deep part of her had mapped the location of each one. That strange new feeling kept growing and growing. He knew about anger—any farmer who'd ever lost cows to the milk-sick or watched a summer hailstorm beat his corn flat knew plenty about that—but this was deeper. This was rage, and it was a new thing. He walked slowly, head down, fists clenched. He wasn't aware of Andy following along behind him until the robot said, "There's other news, sai. Northwest of town, along the Path of the Beam, strangers from Out-World—"

"Bugger the Beam, bugger the strangers, and bugger your good self," Tian said. "Let me be, Andy."

Andy stood where he was for a moment, surrounded by the rocks and weeds and useless knobs of Son of a Bitch, that thankless tract of Jaffords land. Relays inside him clicked. His eyes flashed. And he decided to go and talk to the Old Fella. The Old Fella never told him to bugger his good self. The Old Fella was always willing to hear his horoscope.

And he was *always* interested in strangers.

Andy started toward town and Our Lady of Serenity.

TWO

Zalia Jaffords didn't see her husband and sister-in-law come back from Son of a Bitch; didn't hear Tia plunging her head repeatedly into the rain-barrel outside the barn and then blowing moisture off her lips like a horse. Zalia was on the south side of the house, hanging out wash and keeping an eye on the children. She wasn't aware that Tian was back until she saw him looking out the kitchen window at her. She was surprised to see him there at all and much more than surprised by the look of him. His face was ashy pale except for two bright blots of color high up on his cheeks and a third glaring in the center of his forehead like a brand.

She dropped the few pins she was still holding back into her clothes basket and started for the house.

"Where goin, Maw?" Heddon called, and "Where goin, Maw-Maw?" Hedda echoed.

"Never mind," she said. "Just keep a eye on your ka-babbies."

"*Why-yyy?*" Hedda whined. She had that whine down to a science. One of these days she would draw it out a little too long and her mother would clout her right down dead.

"Because ye're the oldest," she said.

"But—"

"Shut your mouth, Hedda Jaffords."

"We'll watch em, Ma," Heddon said. Always agreeable was her Heddon; probably not quite so bright as his sister, but bright wasn't everything. Far from it. "Want us to finish hanging the wash?"

"*Hed-donnnnn . . .*" From his sister. That irritating whine again. But Zalia had no time for them. She just took one glance at the others:

Lyman and Lia, who were five, and Aaron, who was two. Aaron sat naked in the dirt, happily chunking two stones together. He was the rare singleton, and how the women of the village envied her on account of him! Because Aaron would always be safe. The others, however, Heddon and Hedda . . . Lyman and Lia . . .

She suddenly understood what it might mean, him back at the house in the middle of the day like this. She prayed to the gods it wasn't so, but when she came into the kitchen and saw the way he was looking out at the kiddies, she became almost sure it was.

"Tell me it isn't the Wolves," she said in a dry and frantic voice. "Say it ain't."

" 'Tis," Tian replied. "Thirty days, Andy says—moon to moon. And on that Andy's never—"

Before he could go on, Zalia Jaffords clapped her hands to her temples and shrieked. In the side yard, Hedda jumped up. In another moment she would have been running for the house, but Heddon held her back.

"They won't take any as young as Lyman and Lia, will they?" she asked him. "Hedda or Heddon, maybe, but surely not my little ones? Why, they won't see their sixth for another half-year!"

"The Wolves have taken em as young as three, and you know it," Tian said. His hands opened and closed, opened and closed. That feeling inside him continued to grow—the feeling that was deeper than mere anger.

She looked at him, tears spilling down her face.

"Mayhap it's time to say no." Tian spoke in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"How can we?" she whispered. "How in the name of the gods can we?"

"Dunno," he said. "But come here, woman, I beg ya."

She came, throwing one last glance over her shoulder at the five children in the back yard—as if to make sure they were still all there, that no Wolves had taken them yet—and then crossed the living room. Gran-pere sat in his corner chair by the dead fire, head bent over, dozing and drizzling from his folded, toothless mouth.

From this room the barn was visible. Tian drew his wife to the window and pointed. "There," he said. "Do you mark em, woman? Do

you see em very well?”

Of course she did. Tian’s sister, six and a half feet tall, now standing with the straps of her overalls lowered and her big breasts sparkling with water as she splashed them from the rain barrel. Standing in the barn doorway was Zalman, Zalia’s very own brother. Almost seven feet tall was he, big as Lord Perth, tall as Andy, and as empty of face as the girl. A strapping young man watching a strapping young woman with her breasts out on show like that might well have been sporting a bulge in his pants, but there was none in Zally’s. Nor ever would be. He was roont.

She turned back to Tian. They looked at each other, a man and a woman not roont, but only because of dumb luck. So far as either of them knew, it could just as easily have been Zal and Tia standing in here and watching Tian and Zalia out by the barn, grown large of body and empty of head.

“Of course I see,” she told him. “Does thee think I’m blind?”

“Don’t it sometimes make you wish you was?” he asked. “To see em so?”

Zalia made no reply.

“Not right, woman. Not right. Never has been.”

“But since time out of mind—”

“Bugger time out of mind, too!” Tian cried. “They’s children! *Our* children!”

“Would you have the Wolves burn the Calla to the ground, then? Leave us all with our throats cut and our eyes fried in our heads? For it’s happened before. You know it has.”

He knew, all right. But who would put matters right, if not the men of Calla Bryn Sturgis? Certainly there were no authorities, not so much as a sheriff, either high or low, in these parts. They were on their own. Even long ago, when the Inner Baronies had glowed with light and order, they would have seen precious little sign of that bright-life out here. These were the borderlands, and life here had always been strange. Then the Wolves had begun coming and life had grown far stranger. How long ago had it begun? How many generations? Tian didn’t know, but he thought “time out of mind” was too long. The Wolves had been raiding into the borderland villages when Gran-pere was young, certainly—Gran-pere’s own twin had

been snatched as the two of them sat in the dust, playing at jacks. “Dey tuk im cos he closer to de rud,” Gran-pere had told them (many times). “If Ah come out of dee house firs’ dat day, *Ah* be closer to de rud an dey take *me*, God is good!” Then he would kiss the wooden crucie the Old Fella had given him, hold it skyward, and cackle.

Yet Gran-pere’s own Gran-pere had told him that in *his* day—which would have been five or perhaps even six generations back, if Tian’s calculations were right—there had been no Wolves sweeping out of Thunderclap on their gray horses. Once Tian had asked the old man, *And did all but a few of the babbies come in twos back then? Did any of the old folks ever say?* Gran-pere had considered this long, then had shaken his head. No, he couldn’t remember what the old-timers had ever said about that, one way or the other.

Zalia was looking at him anxiously. “Ye’re in no mood to think of such things, I wot, after spending your morning in that rocky patch.”

“My frame of mind won’t change when they come or who they’ll take,” Tian said.

“Ye’ll not do something foolish, T, will you? Something foolish and all on your own?”

“No,” he said.

No hesitation. *He’s already begun to lay plans*, she thought, and allowed herself a thin gleam of hope. Surely there was nothing Tian could do against the Wolves—nothing *any* of them could do—but he was far from stupid. In a farming village where most men could think no further than planting the next row (or planting their stiffies on Saturday night), Tian was something of an anomaly. He could write his name; he could write words that said I LOVE YOU ZALLIE (and had won her by so doing, even though she couldn’t read them there in the dirt); he could add the numbers and also call them back from big to small, which he said was even more difficult. Was it possible . . . ?

Part of her didn’t want to complete that thought. And yet, when she turned her mother’s heart and mind to Hedda and Heddon, Lia and Lyman, part of her wanted to hope. “What, then?”

“I’m going to call a Town Gathering. I’ll send the feather.”

“Will they come?”

“When they hear this news, every man in the Calla will turn up. We’ll talk it over. Mayhap they’ll want to fight this time. Mayhap

they'll want to fight for their babbies."

From behind them, a cracked old voice said, "Ye foolish killin."

Tian and Zalia turned, hand in hand, to look at the old man. *Killin* was a harsh word, but Tian judged the old man was looking at them—at *him*—kindly enough.

"Why d'ye say so, Gran-pere?" he asked.

"Men'd go forrad from such a meetin as ye plan on and burn down half the countryside, were dey in drink," the old man said. "Men sober—" He shook his head. "Ye'll never move such."

"I think this time you might be wrong, Granpere," Tian said, and Zalia felt cold terror squeeze her heart. And yet buried in it, warm, was that hope.

THREE

There would have been less grumbling if he'd given them at least one night's notice, but Tian wouldn't do that. They didn't have the luxury of even a single fallow night. And when he sent Heddon and Hedda with the feather, they *did* come. He'd known they would.

The Calla's Gathering Hall stood at the end of the village high street, beyond Took's General Store and cater-corner from the town Pavilion, which was now dusty and dark with the end of summer. Soon enough the ladies of the town would begin decorating it for Reap, but they'd never made a lot of Reaping Night in the Calla. The children always enjoyed seeing the stuffy-guys thrown on the fire, of course, and the bolder fellows would steal their share of kisses as the night itself approached, but that was about it. Your fripperies and festivals might do for Mid-World and In-World, but this was neither. Out here they had more serious things to worry about than Reaping Day Fairs.

Things like the Wolves.

Some of the men—from the well-to-do farms to the west and the three ranches to the south—came on horses. Eisenhart of the Rocking B even brought his rifle and wore crisscrossed ammunition bandoliers. (Tian Jaffords doubted if the bullets were any good, or that the ancient rifle would fire even if some of them were.) A delegation of the Manni-folk came crammed into a bucka drawn by a pair of mutie geldings—one with three eyes, the other with a pylon of

raw pink flesh poking out of its back. Most of the Calla men came on donks and burros, dressed in their white pants and long, colorful shirts. They knocked their dusty sombreros back on the tugstrings with callused thumbs as they stepped into the Gathering Hall, looking uneasily at each other. The benches were of plain pine. With no womenfolk and none of the roont ones, the men filled fewer than thirty of the ninety benches. There was some talk, but no laughter at all.

Tian stood out front with the feather now in his hands, watching the sun as it sank toward the horizon, its gold steadily deepening to a color that was like infected blood. When it touched the land, he took one more look up the high street. It was empty except for three or four roont fellas sitting on the steps of Took's. All of them huge and good for nothing more than yanking rocks out of the ground. He saw no more men, no more approaching donkeys. He took a deep breath, let it out, then drew in another and looked up at the deepening sky.

“Man Jesus, I don't believe in you,” he said. “But if you're there, help me now. Tell God thankee.”

Then he went inside and closed the Gathering Hall doors a little harder than was strictly necessary. The talk stopped. A hundred and forty men, most of them farmers, watched him walk to the front of the hall, the wide legs of his white pants swishing, his shor'boots clacking on the hardwood floor. He had expected to be terrified by this point, perhaps even to find himself speechless. He was a farmer, not a stage performer or a politician. Then he thought of his children, and when he looked up at the men, he found he had no trouble meeting their eyes. The feather in his hands did not tremble. When he spoke, his words followed each other easily, naturally, and coherently. They might not do as he hoped they would—Gran-pere could be right about that—but they looked willing enough to listen.

“You all know who I am,” he said as he stood there with his hands clasped around the reddish feather's ancient stalk. “Tian Jaffords, son of Luke, husband of Zalia Hoonik that was. She and I have five, two pairs and a singleton.”

Low murmurs at that, most probably having to do with how lucky Tian and Zalia were to have their Aaron. Tian waited for the voices to die away.

“I’ve lived in the Calla all my life. I’ve shared your khuf and you have shared mine. Now hear what I say, I beg.”

“We say thankee-sai,” they murmured. It was little more than a stock response, yet Tian was encouraged.

“The Wolves are coming,” he said. “I have this news from Andy. Thirty days from moon to moon and then they’re here.”

More low murmurs. Tian heard dismay and outrage, but no surprise. When it came to spreading news, Andy was extremely efficient.

“Even those of us who can read and write a little have almost no paper to write on,” Tian said, “so I cannot tell ye with any real certainty when last they came. There are no records, ye ken, just one mouth to another. I know I was well-breeched, so it’s longer than twenty years—”

“It’s twenty-four,” said a voice in the back of the room.

“Nay, twenty-three,” said a voice closer to the front. Reuben Caverra stood up. He was a plump man with a round, cheerful face. The cheer was gone from it now, however, and it showed only distress. “They took Ruth, my sissa, hear me, I beg.”

A murmur—really no more than a vocalized sigh of agreement—came from the men sitting crammed together on the benches. They could have spread out, but had chosen shoulder-to-shoulder instead. Sometimes there was comfort in discomfort, Tian reckoned.

Reuben said, “We were playing under the big pine in the front yard when they came. I made a mark on that tree each year after. Even after they brung her back, I went on with em. It’s twenty-three marks and twenty-three years.” With that he sat down.

“Twenty-three or twenty-four, makes no difference,” Tian said. “Those who were kiddies when the Wolves came last time have grown up since and had kiddies of their own. There’s a fine crop here for those bastards. A fine crop of children.” He paused, giving them a chance to think of the next idea for themselves before speaking it aloud. “*If* we let it happen,” he said at last. “If we let the Wolves take our children into Thunderclap and then send them back to us roont.”

“What the hell else can we do?” cried a man sitting on one of the middle benches. “They’s not human!” At this there was a general (and miserable) mumble of agreement.

One of the Manni stood up, pulling his dark-blue cloak tight against his bony shoulders. He looked around at the others with baleful eyes. They weren't mad, those eyes, but to Tian they looked a long league from reasonable. "Hear me, I beg," he said.

"We say thankee-sai." Respectful but reserved. To see a Manni in town was a rare thing, and here were eight, all in a bunch. Tian was delighted they had come. If anything would underline the deadly seriousness of this business, the appearance of the Manni would do it.

The Gathering Hall door opened and one more man slipped inside. He wore a long black coat. There was a scar on his forehead. None of the men, including Tian, noticed. They were watching the Manni.

"Hear what the Book of Manni says: When the Angel of Death passed over Ajjip, he killed the firstborn in every house where the blood of a sacrificial lamb hadn't been daubed on the doorposts. So says the Book."

"Praise the Book," said the rest of the Manni.

"Perhaps we should do likewise," the Manni spokesman went on. His voice was calm, but a pulse beat wildly in his forehead. "Perhaps we should turn these next thirty days into a festival of joy for the wee ones, and then put them to sleep, and let their blood out upon the earth. Let the Wolves take their corpses into the east, should they desire."

"You're insane," Benito Cash said, indignant and at the same time almost laughing. "You and all your kind. We ain't gonna kill our babbies!"

"Would the ones that come back not be better off dead?" the Manni responded. "Great useless hulks! Scooped-out shells!"

"Aye, and what about their brothers and sisters?" asked Vaughn Eisenhart. "For the Wolves only take one out of every two, as ye very well know."

A second Manni rose, this one with a silky-white beard flowing down over his breast. The first one sat down. The old man, Henschick, looked around at the others, then at Tian. "You hold the feather, young fella—may I speak?"

Tian nodded for him to go ahead. This wasn't a bad start at all. Let them fully explore the box they were in, explore it all the way to the

corners. He was confident they'd see there were only two alternatives, in the end: let the Wolves take one of every pair under the age of puberty, as they always had, or stand and fight. But to see that, they needed to understand that all other ways out were dead ends.

The old man spoke patiently. Sorrowfully, even. "'Tis a terrible idea, aye. But think'ee this, sais: if the Wolves were to come and find us childless, they might leave us alone ever after."

"Aye, so they might," one of the smallhold farmers rumbled—his name was Jorge Estrada. "And so they might not. Manni-sai, would you really kill a whole town's children for what *might* be?"

A strong rumble of agreement ran through the crowd. Another smallholder, Garrett Strong, rose to his feet. His pug-dog's face was truculent. His thumbs were hung in his belt. "Better we all kill ourselves," he said. "Babbies and grown-ups alike."

The Manni didn't look outraged at this. Nor did any of the other blue-cloaks around him. "It's an option," the old man said. "We would speak of it if others would." He sat down.

"Not me," Garrett Strong said. "It'd be like cuttin off your damn head to save shaving, hear me, I beg."

There was laughter and a few cries of *Hear you very well*. Garrett sat back down, looking a little less tense, and put his head together with Vaughn Eisenhart. One of the other ranchers, Diego Adams, was listening in, his black eyes intent.

Another smallholder rose—Bucky Javier. He had bright little blue eyes in a small head that seemed to slope back from his goateed chin. "What if we left for awhile?" he asked. "What if we took our children and went back west? All the way to the west branch of the Big River, mayhap?"

There was a moment of considering silence at this bold idea. The west branch of the Whye was almost all the way back to Mid-World . . . where, according to Andy, a great palace of green glass had lately appeared and even more lately disappeared again. Tian was about to respond himself when Eben Took, the storekeeper, did it for him. Tian was relieved. He hoped to be silent as long as possible. When they were talked out, he'd tell them what was left.

"Are ye mad?" Eben asked. "Wolves'd come in, see us gone, and burn all to the ground—farms and ranches, crops and stores, root

and branch. What would we come back to?”

“And what if they came after *us*?” Jorge Estrada chimed in. “Do’ee think we’d be hard to follow, for such as the Wolves? They’d burn us out as Took says, ride our backtrail, and take the kiddies anyway!”

Louder agreement. The stomp of shor’boots on the plain pine floorboards. And a few cries of *Hear him, hear him!*

“Besides,” Neil Faraday said, standing and holding his vast and filthy sombrero in front of him, “they never steal *all* our children.” He spoke in a frightened let’s-be-reasonable tone that set Tian’s teeth on edge. It was this counsel he feared above all others. Its deadly-false call to reason.

One of the Manni, this one younger and beardless, uttered a sharp and contemptuous laugh. “Ah, one saved out of every two! And that make it all right, does it? God bless thee!” He might have said more, but Henschick clamped a gnarled hand on the young man’s arm. The young one said no more, but he didn’t lower his head submissively, either. His eyes were hot, his lips a thin white line.

“I don’t mean it’s right,” Neil said. He had begun to spin his sombrero in a way that made Tian feel a little dizzy. “But we have to face the realities, don’t we? Aye. And they *don’t* take em all. Why my daughter, Georgina, she’s just as apt and canny—”

“Yar, and yer son George is a great empty-headed galoot,” Ben Slightman said. Slightman was Eisenhart’s foreman, and he did not suffer fools lightly. He took off his spectacles, wiped them with a bandanna, and set them back on his face. “I seen him settin on the steps in front of Tooky’s when I rode downstreet. Seen him very well. Him and some others equally empty-brained.”

“But—”

“I know,” Slightman said. “It’s a hard decision. Some empty-brained’s maybe better than all dead.” He paused. “Or all taken instead of just half.”

Cries of *Hear him* and *Say thankee* as Ben Slightman sat down.

“They always leave us enough to go on with, don’t they?” asked a smallhold farmer whose place was just west of Tian’s, near the edge of the Calla. His name was Louis Haycox, and he spoke in a musing, bitter tone of voice. Below his mustache, his lips curved in a smile that didn’t have much humor in it. “We won’t kill our children,” he said,

looking at the Manni. “All God’s grace to ye, gentlemen, but I don’t believe even *you* could do so, came it right down to the killin-floor. Or not all of ye. We can’t pull up bag and baggage and go west—or in any other direction—because we leave our farms behind. They’d burn us out, all right, and come after the children just the same. They need em, gods know why.

“It always comes back to the same thing: we’re farmers, most of us. Strong when our hands are in the soil, weak when they ain’t. I got two kiddies of my own, four years old, and I love em both well. Should hate to lose either. But I’d give one to keep the other. And my farm.” Murmurs of agreement met this. “What other choice do we have? I say this: it would be the world’s worst mistake to anger the Wolves. Unless, of course, we can stand against them. If ’twere possible, I’d stand. But I just don’t see how it is.”

Tian felt his heart shrivel with each of Haycox’s words. How much of his thunder had the man stolen? Gods and the Man Jesus!

Wayne Overholser got to his feet. He was Calla Bryn Sturgis’s most successful farmer, and had a vast sloping belly to prove it. “Hear me, I beg.”

“We say thankee-sai,” they murmured.

“Tell you what we’re going to do,” he said, looking around. “What we *always* done, that’s what. Do any of you want to talk about standing against the Wolves? Are any of you that mad? With what? Spears and rocks, a few bows and bahs? Maybe four rusty old sof’ calibers like that?” He jerked a thumb toward Eisenhart’s rifle.

“Don’t be making fun of my shooting-iron, son,” Eisenhart said, but he was smiling ruefully.

“They’ll come and they’ll take the children,” Overholser said, looking around. “*Some* of em. Then they’ll leave us alone again for a generation or even longer. So it is, so it has been, and I say leave it alone.”

Disapproving rumbles rose at this, but Overholser waited them out.

“Twenty-three years or twenty-four, it don’t matter,” he said when they were quiet again. “Either way it’s a long time. A long time of *peace*. Could be you’ve forgotten a few things, folks. One is that children are like any other crop. God always sends more. I know that sounds hard. But it’s how we’ve lived and how we have to go on.”

Tian didn't wait for any of the stock responses. If they went any further down this road, any chance he might have to turn them would be lost. He raised the opopanax feather and said, "Hear what I say! Would ye hear, I beg!"

"Thankee-sai," they responded. Overholser was looking at Tian distrustfully.

And you're right to look at me so, the farmer thought. For I've had enough of such cowardly common sense, so I have.

"Wayne Overholser is a smart man and a successful man," Tian said, "and I hate to speak against his position for those reasons. And for another, as well: he's old enough to be my Da'."

" 'Ware he *ain't* your Da'," Garrett Strong's only farmhand—Rossiter, his name was—called out, and there was general laughter. Even Overholser smiled at this jest.

"Son, if ye truly hate to speak agin me, don't ye do it," Overholser said. He continued to smile, but only with his mouth.

"I must, though," Tian said. He began to walk slowly back and forth in front of the benches. In his hands, the rusty-red plume of the opopanax feather swayed. Tian raised his voice slightly so they'd understand he was no longer speaking just to the big farmer.

"I must *because* sai Overholser is old enough to be my Da'. *His* children are grown, do ye kennit, and so far as I know there were only two to begin with, one girl and one boy." He paused, then shot the killer. "Born two years apart." Both singletons, in other words. Both safe from the Wolves, although he didn't need to say it right out loud. The crowd murmured.

Overholser flushed a bright and dangerous red. "That's a rotten goddamned thing to say! My get's got nothing to do with this whether single or double! Give me that feather, Jaffords. I got a few more things to say."

But the boots began to thump down on the boards, slowly at first, then picking up speed until they rattled like hail. Overholser looked around angrily, now so red he was nearly purple.

"I'd speak!" he shouted. "Would'ee not hear me, I beg?"

Cries of *No, no* and *Not now* and *Jaffords has the feather* and *Sit and listen* came in response. Tian had an idea sai Overholser was learning—and remarkably late in the game—that there was often a deep-

running resentment of a village's richest and most successful. Those less fortunate or less canny (most of the time they amounted to the same) might tug their hats off when the rich folk passed in their buckas or lowcoaches, they might send a slaughtered pig or cow as a thank-you when the rich folk loaned their hired hands to help with a house- or barn-raising, the well-to-do might be cheered at Year End Gathering for helping to buy the piano that now sat in the Pavilion's *musica*. Yet the men of the Calla tromped their shor'boots to drown Overholser out with a certain savage satisfaction.

Overholser, unused to being balked in such a way—flabbergasted, in fact—tried one more time. “*I’d have the feather, do ye, I beg!*”

“No,” Tian said. “Later if it does ya, but not now.”

There were actual *cheers* at this, mostly from the smallest of the smallhold farmers and some of their hands. The Manni did not join in. They were now drawn so tightly together that they looked like a dark blue inkstain in the middle of the hall. They were clearly bewildered by this turn. Vaughn Eisenhart and Diego Adams, meanwhile, moved to flank Overholser and speak low to him.

You’ve got a chance, Tian thought. Better make the most of it.

He raised the feather and they quieted.

“Everyone will have a chance to speak,” he said. “As for me, I say this: we can’t go on this way, simply bowing our heads and standing quiet when the Wolves come and take our children. They—”

“They always return them,” a hand named Farren Posella said timidly.

“*They return husks!*” Tian cried, and there were a few cries of *Hear him*. Not enough, however, Tian judged. Not enough by far. Not yet.

He lowered his voice again. He did not want to harangue them. Overholser had tried that and gotten nowhere, a thousand acres or not.

“They return husks. And what of us? What is this doing to us? Some might say nothing, that the Wolves have always been a part of our life in Calla Bryn Sturgis, like the occasional cyclone or earthquake. Yet that is not true. They’ve been coming for six generations, at most. But the Calla’s been here a thousand years and more.”

The old Manni with the bony shoulders and baleful eyes half-rose. “He says true, *folken*. There were farmers here—and Manni-folk

among em—when the darkness in Thunderclap hadn't yet come, let alone the Wolves.”

They received this with looks of wonder. Their awe seemed to satisfy the old man, who nodded and sat back down.

“So in time's greater course, the Wolves are almost a new thing,” Tian said. “Six times have they come over mayhap a hundred and twenty or a hundred and forty years. Who can say? For as ye ken, time has softened, somehow.”

A low rumble. A few nods.

“In any case, once a generation,” Tian went on. He was aware that a hostile contingent was coalescing around Overholser, Eisenhart, and Adams. Ben Slightman might or might not be with them—probably was. These men he would not move even if he were gifted with the tongue of an angel. Well, he could do without them, maybe. If he caught the rest. “Once a generation they come, and how many children do they take? Three dozen? Four?”

“Sai Overholser may not have babbies this time, but *I* do—not one set of twins but two. Heddon and Hedda, Lyman and Lia. I love all four, but in a month of days, two of them will be taken away. And when those two come back, they'll be roont. Whatever spark there is that makes a complete human being, it'll be out forever.”

Hear him, hear him swept through the room like a sigh.

“How many of you have twins with no hair except that which grows on their heads?” Tian demanded. “Raise yer hands!”

Six men raised their hands. Then eight. A dozen. Every time Tian began to think they were done, another reluctant hand went up. In the end, he counted twenty-two hands, and of course not everyone who had children was here. He could see that Overholser was dismayed by such a large count. Diego Adams had his hand raised, and Tian was pleased to see he'd moved away a little bit from Overholser, Eisenhart, and Slightman. Three of the Manni had their hands up. Jorge Estrada. Louis Haycox. Many others he knew, which was not surprising, really; he knew almost every one of these men. Probably all save for a few wandering fellows working smallhold farms for short wages and hot dinners.

“Each time they come and take our children, they take a little more of our hearts and our souls,” Tian said.

“Oh come on now, son,” Eisenhart said. “That’s laying it on a bit th
—”

“Shut up, Rancher,” a voice said. It belonged to the man who had come late, he with the scar on his forehead. It was shocking in its anger and contempt. “He’s got the feather. Let him speak out to the end.”

Eisenhart whirled around to mark who had spoken to him so. He saw, and made no reply. Nor was Tian surprised.

“Thankee, Pere,” Tian said evenly. “I’ve almost come to the end. I keep thinking of trees. You can strip the leaves of a strong tree and it will live. Cut its bark with many names and it will grow its skin over them again. You can even take from the heartwood and it will live. But if you take of the heartwood again and again and again, there will come a time when even the strongest tree must die. I’ve seen it happen on my farm, and it’s an ugly thing. They die from the inside out. You can see it in the leaves as they turn yellow from the trunk to the tips of the branches. And that’s what the Wolves are doing to this little village of ours. What they’re doing to our Calla.”

“Hear him!” cried Freddy Rosario from the next farm over. “Hear him very well!” Freddy had twins of his own, although they were still on the tit and so probably safe.

Tian went on, “You say that if we stand and fight, they’ll kill us all and burn the Calla from east-border to west.”

“Yes,” Overholser said. “So I do say. Nor am I the only one.” From all around him came rumbles of agreement.

“Yet each time we simply stand by with our heads lowered and our hands open while the Wolves take what’s dearer to us than any crop or house or barn, they scoop a little more of the heart’s wood from the tree that is this village!” Tian spoke strongly, now standing still with the feather raised high in one hand. “If we don’t stand and fight soon, we’ll be dead anyway! This is what I say, Tian Jaffords, son of Luke! If we don’t stand and fight soon, we’ll be roont ourselves!”

Loud cries of *Hear him!* Exuberant stomping of shor’boots. Even some applause.

George Telford, another rancher, whispered briefly to Eisenhart and Overholser. They listened, then nodded. Telford rose. He was

silver-haired, tanned, and handsome in the weatherbeaten way women seemed to like.

“Had your say, son?” he asked kindly, as one might ask a child if he had played enough for one afternoon and was ready for his nap.

“Yar, reckon,” Tian said. He suddenly felt dispirited. Telford wasn’t a rancher on a scale with Vaughn Eisenhart, but he had a silver tongue. Tian had an idea he was going to lose this, after all.

“May I have the feather, then?”

Tian thought of holding onto it, but what good would it do? He’d said his best. Had tried. Perhaps he and Zalia should pack up the kids and go out west themselves, back toward the Mids. Moon to moon before the Wolves came, according to Andy. A person could get a hell of a head start on trouble in thirty days.

He passed the feather.

“We all appreciate young sai Jaffords’s passion, and certainly no one doubts his courage,” George Telford said. He spoke with the feather held against the left side of his chest, over his heart. His eyes roved the audience, seeming to make eye contact—*friendly* eye contact—with each man. “But we have to think of the kiddies who’d be left as well as those who’d be taken, don’t we? In fact, we have to protect *all* the kiddies, whether they be twins, triplets, or singletons like sai Jaffords’s Aaron.”

Telford turned to Tian now.

“What will you tell your children as the Wolves shoot their mother and mayhap set their Gran-pere on fire with one of their light-sticks? What can you say to make the sound of those shrieks all right? To sweeten the smell of burning skin and burning crops? That it’s *souls* we’re a-saving? Or the heart’s wood of some make-believe *tree*?”

He paused, giving Tian a chance to reply, but Tian had no reply to make. He’d almost had them . . . but he’d left Telford out of his reckoning. Smooth-voiced sonofabitch Telford, who was also far past the age when he needed to be concerned about the Wolves calling into his dooryard on their great gray horses.

Telford nodded, as if Tian’s silence was no more than he expected, and turned back to the benches. “When the Wolves come,” he said, “they’ll come with fire-hurling weapons—the light-sticks, ye ken—and guns, and flying metal things. I misremember the name of those—”

“The buzz-balls,” someone called.

“The sneetches,” called someone else.

“Stealthies!” called a third.

Telford was nodding and smiling gently. A teacher with good pupils. “Whatever they are, they fly through the air, seeking their targets, and when they lock on, they put forth whirling blades as sharp as razors. They can strip a man from top to toe in five seconds, leaving nothing around him but a circle of blood and hair. Do not doubt me, *for I have seen it happen.*”

“*Hear him, hear him well!*” the men on the benches shouted. Their eyes had grown huge and frightened.

“The Wolves themselves are terrible fearsome,” Telford went on, moving smoothly from one campfire story to the next. “They look sommat like men, and yet they are *not* men but something bigger and far more awful. And those they serve in far Thunderclap are more terrible by far. Vampires, I’ve heard. Men with the heads of birds and animals, mayhap. Broken-helm undead ronin. Warriors of the Scarlet Eye.”

The men muttered. Even Tian felt a cold scamper of rats’ paws up his back at the mention of the Eye.

“The Wolves I’ve seen; the rest I’ve been told,” Telford went on. “And while I don’t believe it all, I believe much. But never mind Thunderclap and what may den there. Let’s stick to the Wolves. The Wolves are our problem, and problem enough. Especially when they come armed to the teeth!” He shook his head, smiling grimly. “What would we do? Perhaps we could knock them from their greathorses with hoes, sai Jaffords? D’ee think?”

Derisive laughter greeted this.

“We have no weapons that can stand against them,” Telford said. He was now dry and businesslike, a man stating the bottom line. “Even if we had such, we’re farmers and ranchers and stockmen, not fighters. We—”

“Stop that yellow talk, Telford. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Shocked gasps greeted this chilly pronouncement. There were cracking backs and creaking necks as men turned to see who had spoken. Slowly, then, as if to give them exactly what they wanted, the

white-haired latecomer in the long black coat and turned-around collar rose slowly from the bench at the very back of the room. The scar on his forehead—it was in the shape of a cross—was bright in the light of the kerosene lamps.

It was the Old Fella.

Telford recovered himself with relative speed, but when he spoke, Tian thought he still looked shocked. “Beg pardon, Pere Callahan, but I have the feather—”

“To hell with your heathen feather and to hell with your cowardly counsel,” Pere Callahan said. He walked down the center aisle, stepping with the grim gait of arthritis. He wasn’t as old as the Manni elder, nor *nearly* so old as Tian’s Gran-pere (who claimed to be the oldest person not only here but in Calla Lockwood to the south), and yet he seemed somehow older than both. Older than the ages. Some of this no doubt had to do with the haunted eyes that looked out at the world from below the scar on his forehead (Zalia claimed it had been self-inflicted). More had to do with the *sound* of him. Although he had been here enough years to build his strange Man Jesus church and convert half the Calla to his way of spiritual thinking, not even a stranger would have been fooled into believing Pere Callahan was *from* here. His alienness was in his flat and nasal speech and in the often obscure slang he used (“street-jive,” he called it). He had undoubtedly come from one of those other worlds the Manni were always babbling about, although he never spoke of it and Calla Bryn Sturgis was now his home. He had the sort of dry and unquestionable authority that made it difficult to dispute his right to speak, with or without the feather.

Younger than Tian’s Gran-pere he might be, but Pere Callahan was still the Old Fella.

FOUR

Now he surveyed the men of Calla Bryn Sturgis, not even glancing at George Telford. The feather sagged in Telford’s hand. He sat down on the first bench, still holding it.

Callahan began with one of his slang-terms, but they were farmers and no one needed to ask for an explanation.

“This is chickenshit.”

He surveyed them longer. Most would not return his look. After a moment, even Eisenhart and Adams dropped their eyes. Overholser kept his head up, but under the Old Fella’s hard gaze, the rancher looked petulant rather than defiant.

“Chickenshit,” the man in the black coat and turned-around collar repeated, enunciating each syllable. A small gold cross gleamed below the notch in the backwards collar. On his forehead, that other cross—the one Zalia believed he’d carved in his flesh with his own thumbnail in partial penance for some awful sin—glared under the lamps like a tattoo.

“This young man isn’t one of mine, but he’s right, and I think you all know it. You know it in your hearts. Even you, Mr. Overholser. And you, George Telford.”

“Know no such thing,” Telford said, but his voice was weak and stripped of its former persuasive charm.

“All your lies will cross your eyes, that’s what my mother would have told you.” Callahan offered Telford a thin smile Tian wouldn’t have wanted pointed in his direction. And then Callahan *did* turn to him. “I never heard it put better than you put it tonight, boy. Thankee-sai.”

Tian raised a feeble hand and managed an even more feeble smile. He felt like a character in a silly festival play, saved at the last moment by some improbable supernatural intervention.

“I know a bit about cowardice, may it do ya,” Callahan said, turning to the men on the benches. He raised his right hand, misshapen and twisted by some old burn, looked at it fixedly, then dropped it to his side again. “I have personal experience, you might say. I know how one cowardly decision leads to another . . . and another . . . and another . . . until it’s too late to turn around, too late to change. Mr. Telford, I assure you the tree of which young Mr. Jaffords spoke is not make-believe. The Calla is in dire danger. Your *souls* are in danger.”

“Hail Mary, full of grace,” said someone on the left side of the room, “the Lord is with thee. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, J—”

“Bag it,” Callahan snapped. “Save it for Sunday.” His eyes, blue sparks in their deep hollows, studied them. “For this night, never mind God and Mary and the Man Jesus. Never mind the light-sticks and the buzz-bugs of the Wolves, either. You must fight. You’re the

men of the Calla, are you not? Then *act* like men. Stop behaving like dogs crawling on their bellies to lick the boots of a cruel master.”

Overholser went dark red at that, and began to stand. Diego Adams grabbed his arm and spoke in his ear. For a moment Overholser remained as he was, frozen in a kind of crouch, and then he sat back down. Adams stood up.

“Sounds good, *padrone*,” Adams said in his heavy accent. “Sounds brave. Yet there are still a few questions, mayhap. Haycox asked one of em. How can ranchers and farmers stand against armed killers?”

“By hiring armed killers of our own,” Callahan replied.

There was a moment of utter, amazed silence. It was almost as if the Old Fella had lapsed into another language. At last Diego Adams said—cautiously, “I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t,” the Old Fella said. “So listen and gain wisdom. Rancher Adams and all of you, listen and gain wisdom. Not six days’ ride nor’west of us, and bound southeast along the Path of the Beam, come three gunslingers and one ’prentice.” He smiled at their amazement. Then he turned to Slightman. “The ’prentice isn’t much older than your boy Ben, but he’s already as quick as a snake and as deadly as a scorpion. The others are quicker and deadlier by far. I have it from Andy, who’s seen them. You want hard calibers? They’re at hand. I set my watch and warrant on it.”

This time Overholser made it all the way to his feet. His face burned as if with a fever. His great pod of a belly trembled. “What children’s goodnight story is this?” he asked. “If there ever were such men, they passed out of existence with Gilead. And Gilead has been dust in the wind for a thousand years.”

There were no mutterings of support or dispute. No mutterings of any kind. The crowd was still frozen, caught in the reverberation of that one mythic word: *gunslingers*.

“You’re wrong,” Callahan said, “but we don’t need to fight over it. We can go and see for ourselves. A small party will do, I think. Jaffords here . . . myself . . . and what about you, Overholser? Want to come?”

“*There ain’t no gunslingers!*” Overholser roared.

Behind him, Jorge Estrada stood up. “Pere Callahan, God’s grace on you—”

“—and you, Jorge.”

“—but even if there *were* gunslingers, how could three stand against forty or sixty? And not forty or sixty normal men, but forty or sixty *Wolves*?”

“Hear him, he speaks sense!” Eben Took, the storekeeper, called out.

“And why would they fight for us?” Estrada continued. “We make it from year to year, but not much more. What could we offer them, beyond a few hot meals? And what man agrees to die for his dinner?”

“*Hear him, hear him!*” Telford, Overholser, and Eisenhart cried in unison. Others stamped rhythmically up and down on the boards.

The Old Fella waited until the stomping had quit, and then said: “I have books in the rectory. Half a dozen.”

Although most of them knew this, the thought of books—all that paper—still provoked a general sigh of wonder.

“According to one of them, gunslingers were forbidden to take reward. Supposedly because they descend from the line of Arthur Eld.”

“The Eld! The Eld!” the Manni whispered, and several raised fists into the air with the first and fourth fingers pointed. *Hook em horns*, the Old Fella thought. *Go, Texas*. He managed to stifle a laugh, but not the smile that rose on his lips.

“Are ye speaking of hardcases who wander the land, doing good deeds?” Telford asked in a gently mocking voice. “Surely you’re too old for such tales, Pere.”

“Not hardcases,” Callahan said patiently, “*gunslingers*.”

“How can three men stand against the Wolves, Pere?” Tian heard himself ask.

According to Andy, one of the gunslingers was actually a woman, but Callahan saw no need to muddy the waters further (although an impish part of him wanted to, just the same). “That’s a question for their dinh, Tian. We’ll ask him. And they wouldn’t just be fighting for their suppers, you know. Not at all.”

“What else, then?” Bucky Javier asked.

Callahan thought they would want the thing that lay beneath the floorboards of his church. And that was good, because that thing had awakened. The Old Fella, who had once run from a town called

Jerusalem's Lot in another world, wanted to be rid of it. If he wasn't rid of it soon, it would kill him.

Ka had come to Calla Bryn Sturgis. Ka like a wind.

"In time, Mr. Javier," Callahan said. "All in good time, sai."

Meantime, a whisper had begun in the Gathering Hall. It slipped along the benches from mouth to mouth, a breeze of hope and fear.

Gunslingers.

Gunslingers to the west, come out of Mid-World.

And it was true, God help them. Arthur Eld's last deadly children, moving toward Calla Bryn Sturgis along the Path of the Beam. Ka like a wind.

"Time to be men," Pere Callahan told them. Beneath the scar on his forehead, his eyes burned like lamps. Yet his tone was not without compassion. "Time to stand up, gentlemen. Time to stand and be true."

PART ONE
TODASH



CHAPTER I: THE FACE ON THE WATER

ONE

Time is a face on the water: this was a proverb from the long-ago, in far-off Mejis. Eddie Dean had never been there.

Except he had, in a way. Roland had carried all four of his companions—Eddie, Susannah, Jake, Oy—to Mejis one night, storying long as they camped on I-70, the Kansas Turnpike in a Kansas that never was. That night he had told them the story of Susan Delgado, his first love. Perhaps his only love. And how he had lost her.

The saying might have been true when Roland had been a boy not much older than Jake Chambers, but Eddie thought it was even truer now, as the world wound down like the mainspring in an ancient watch. Roland had told them that even such basic things as the points of the compass could no longer be trusted in Mid-World; what was dead west today might be *southwest* tomorrow, crazy as that might seem. And time had likewise begun to soften. There were days Eddie could have sworn were forty hours long, some of them followed by nights (like the one on which Roland had taken them to Mejis) that seemed even longer. Then there would come an afternoon when it seemed you could almost see darkness bloom as night rushed over the horizon to meet you. Eddie wondered if time had gotten lost.

They had ridden (and riddled) out of a city called Lud on Blaine the Mono. *Blaine is a pain*, Jake had said on several occasions, but he—or it—turned out to be quite a bit more than just a pain; Blaine the Mono had been utterly mad. Eddie killed it with illogic (“Somethin you’re just naturally good at, sugar,” Susannah told him), and they had detrained in a Topeka which wasn’t quite part of the world from

which Eddie, Susannah, and Jake had come. Which was good, really, because this world—one in which the Kansas City pro baseball team was called The Monarchs, Coca-Cola was called Nozz-A-La, and the big Japanese car-maker was Takuro rather than Honda—had been overwhelmed by some sort of plague which had killed damn near everyone. *So stick that in your Takuro Spirit and drive it*, Eddie thought.

The passage of time had seemed clear enough to him through all of this. During much of it he'd been scared shitless—he guessed all of them had been, except maybe for Roland—but yes, it had seemed real and clear. He'd not had that feeling of time slipping out of his grasp even when they'd been walking up I-70 with bullets in their ears, looking at the frozen traffic and listening to the warble of what Roland called a thinny.

But after their confrontation in the glass palace with Jake's old friend the Tick-Tock Man and Roland's old friend (Flagg . . . or Marten . . . or—just perhaps—Maerlyn), time had changed.

Not right away, though. We traveled in that damned pink ball . . . saw Roland kill his mother by mistake . . . and when we came back . . .

Yes, that was when it had happened. They had awakened in a clearing perhaps thirty miles from the Green Palace. They had still been able to see it, but all of them had understood that it was in another world. Someone—or some force—had carried them over or through the thinny and back to the Path of the Beam. Whoever or whatever it had been, it had actually been considerate enough to pack them each a lunch, complete with Nozz-A-La sodas and rather more familiar packages of Keebler cookies.

Near them, stuck on the branch of a tree, had been a note from the being Roland had just missed killing in the Palace: "Renounce the Tower. This is your last warning." Ridiculous, really. Roland would no more renounce the Tower than he'd kill Jake's pet billy-bumbler and then roast him on a spit for dinner. *None* of them would renounce Roland's Dark Tower. God help them, they were in it all the way to the end.

We got some daylight left, Eddie had said on the day they'd found Flagg's warning note. *You want to use it, or what?*

Yes, Roland of Gilead had replied. *Let's use it.*

And so they had, following the Path of the Beam through endless open fields that were divided from each other by belts of straggly, annoying underbrush. There had been no sign of people. Skies had remained low and cloudy day after day and night after night. Because they followed the Path of the Beam, the clouds directly above them sometimes roiled and broke open, revealing patches of blue, but never for long. One night they opened long enough to disclose a full moon with a face clearly visible on it: the nasty, complicitous squint-and-grin of the Peddler. That made it late summer by Roland's reckoning, but to Eddie it looked like half-past no time at all, the grass mostly listless or outright dead, the trees (what few there were) bare, the bushes scrubby and brown. There was little game, and for the first time in weeks—since leaving the forest ruled by Shardik, the cyborg bear—they sometimes went to bed with their bellies not quite full.

Yet none of that, Eddie thought, was quite as annoying as the sense of having lost hold of time itself: no hours, no days, no weeks, no *seasons*, for God's sake. The moon might have told Roland it was the end of summer, but the world around them looked like the first week of November, dozing sleepily toward winter.

Time, Eddie had decided during this period, was in large part created by external events. When a lot of interesting shit was happening, time seemed to go by fast. If you got stuck with nothing but the usual boring shit, it slowed down. And when *everything* stopped happening, time apparently quit altogether. Just packed up and went to Coney Island. Weird but true.

Had everything stopped happening? Eddie considered (and with nothing to do but push Susannah's wheelchair through one boring field after another, there was plenty of time for consideration). The only peculiarity he could think of since returning from the Wizard's Glass was what Jake called the Mystery Number, and that probably meant nothing. They'd needed to solve a mathematical riddle in the Cradle of Lud in order to gain access to Blaine, and Susannah had suggested the Mystery Number was a holdover from that. Eddie was far from sure she was right, but hey, it was a theory.

And really, what could be so special about the number nineteen? Mystery Number, indeed. After some thought, Susannah had pointed

out it was prime, at least, like the numbers that had opened the gate between them and Blaine the Mono. Eddie had added that it was the only one that came between eighteen and twenty every time you counted. Jake had laughed at that and told him to stop being a jerk. Eddie, who had been sitting close to the campfire and carving a rabbit (when it was done, it would join the cat and dog already in his pack), told Jake to quit making fun of his only real talent.

TWO

They might have been back on the Path of the Beam five or six weeks when they came to a pair of ancient double ruts that had surely once been a road. It didn't follow the Path of the Beam exactly, but Roland swung them onto it anyway. It bore closely enough to the Beam for their purposes, he said. Eddie thought being on a road again might refocus things, help them to shake that maddening becalmed-in-the-Horse-Latitudes feeling, but it didn't. The road carried them up and across a rising series of fields like steps. They finally topped a long north-south ridge. On the far side, their road descended into a dark wood. Almost a fairy-tale wood, Eddie thought as they passed into its shadows. Susannah shot a small deer on their second day in the forest (or maybe it was the third day . . . or the fourth), and the meat was delicious after a steady diet of vegetarian gunslinger burritos, but there were no orcs or trolls in the deep glades, and no elves—Keebler or otherwise. No more deer, either.

“I keep lookin for the candy house,” Eddie said. They'd been winding their way through the great old trees for several days by then. Or maybe it had been as long as a week. All he knew for sure was that they were still reasonably close to the Path of the Beam. They could see it in the sky . . . and they could feel it.

“What candy house is this?” Roland asked. “Is it another tale? If so, I'd hear.”

Of course he would. The man was a glutton for stories, especially those that led off with a “Once upon a time when everyone lived in the forest.” But the way he listened was a little odd. A little off. Eddie had mentioned this to Susannah once, and she'd nailed it with a

single stroke, as she often did. Susannah had a poet's almost uncanny ability to put feelings into words, freezing them in place.

"That's cause he doesn't listen all big-eyed like a kid at bedtime," she said. "That's just how you *want* him to listen, honeybunch."

"And how *does* he listen?"

"Like an anthropologist," she had replied promptly. "Like an anthropologist tryin to figure out some strange culture by their myths and legends."

She was right. And if Roland's way of listening made Eddie uncomfortable, it was probably because in his heart, Eddie felt that if anyone should be listening like scientists, it should be him and Suze and Jake. Because they came from a far more sophisticated where and when. Didn't they?

Whether they did or didn't, the four had discovered a great number of stories that were common to both worlds. Roland knew a tale called "Diana's Dream" that was eerily close to "The Lady or the Tiger," which all three exiled New Yorkers had read in school. The tale of Lord Perth was similar to the Bible story of David and Goliath. Roland had heard many tales of the Man Jesus, who died on the cross to redeem the sins of the world, and told Eddie, Susannah, and Jake that Jesus had His fair share of followers in Mid-World. There were also songs common to both worlds. "Careless Love" was one. "Hey Jude" was another, although in Roland's world, the first line of this song was "Hey Jude, I see you, lad."

Eddie passed at least an hour telling Roland the story of Hansel and Gretel, turning the wicked child-eating witch into Rhea of the Cöos almost without thinking of it. When he got to the part about her trying to fatten the children up, he broke off and asked Roland: "Do you know this one? A version of this one?"

"No," Roland said, "but it's a fair tale. Tell it to the end, please."

Eddie did, finishing with the required *They lived happily ever after*; and the gunslinger nodded. "No one ever *does* live happily ever after, but we leave the children to find that out for themselves, don't we?"

"Yeah," Jake said.

Oy was trotting at the boy's heel, looking up at Jake with the usual expression of calm adoration in his gold-ringed eyes. "Yeah," the bumbler said, copying the boy's rather glum inflection exactly.

Eddie threw an arm around Jake's shoulders. "Too bad you're over here instead of back in New York," he said. "If you were back in the Apple, Jakeyboy, you'd probably have your own child psychiatrist by now. You'd be working on these issues about your parents. Getting to the heart of your unresolved conflicts. Maybe getting some good drugs, too. Ritalin, stuff like that."

"On the whole, I'd rather be here," Jake said, and looked down at Oy.

"Yeah," Eddie said. "I don't blame you."

"Such stories are called 'fairy tales,'" Roland mused.

"Yeah," Eddie replied.

"There were no fairies in this one, though."

"No," Eddie agreed. "That's more like a category name than anything else. In our world you got your mystery and suspense stories . . . your science fiction stories . . . your Westerns . . . your fairy tales. Get it?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Do people in your world always want only one story-flavor at a time? Only one taste in their mouths?"

"I guess that's close enough," Susannah said.

"Does no one eat stew?" Roland asked.

"Sometimes at supper, I guess," Eddie said, "but when it comes to entertainment, we *do* tend to stick with one flavor at a time, and don't let any one thing touch another thing on your plate. Although it sounds kinda boring when you put it that way."

"How many of these fairy tales would you say there are?"

With no hesitation—and certainly no collusion—Eddie, Susannah, and Jake all said the same word at exactly the same time: "Nineteen!" And a moment later, Oy repeated it in his hoarse voice: "Nie-teen!"

They looked at each other and laughed, because "nineteen" had become a kind of jokey catchword among them, replacing "bumhug," which Jake and Eddie had pretty much worn out. Yet the laughter had a tinge of uneasiness about it, because this business about nineteen had gotten a trifle weird. Eddie had found himself carving it on the side of his most recent wooden animal, like a brand: *Hey there, Pard, welcome to our spread! We call it the Bar-Nineteen.* Both Susannah and Jake had confessed to bringing wood for the evening fire in armloads of

nineteen pieces. Neither of them could say why; it just felt right to do it that way, somehow.

Then there was the morning Roland had stopped them at the edge of the wood through which they were now traveling. He had pointed at the sky, where one particularly ancient tree had reared its hoary branches. The shape those branches made against the sky was the number nineteen. Clearly nineteen. They had all seen it, but Roland had seen it first.

Yet Roland, who believed in omens and portents as routinely as Eddie had once believed in lightbulbs and Double-A batteries, had a tendency to dismiss his ka-tet's odd and sudden infatuation with the number. They had grown close, he said, as close as any ka-tet could, and so their thoughts, habits, and little obsessions had a tendency to spread among them all, like a cold. He believed that Jake was facilitating this to a certain degree.

"You've got the touch, Jake," he said. "I'm not sure that it's as strong in you as it was in my old friend Alain, but by the gods I believe it may be."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jake had replied, frowning in puzzlement. Eddie did—sort of—and guessed that Jake would know, in time. If time ever began passing in a normal way again, that was.

And on the day Jake brought the muffin-balls, it did.

THREE

They had stopped for lunch (more uninteresting vegetarian burritos, the deermeat now gone and the Keebler cookies little more than a sweet memory) when Eddie noticed that Jake was gone and asked the gunslinger if he knew where the kid had gotten off to.

"Peeled off about half a wheel back," Roland said, and pointed along the road with the two remaining fingers of his right hand. "He's all right. If he wasn't, we'd all feel it." Roland looked at his burrito, then took an unenthusiastic bite.

Eddie opened his mouth to say something else, but Susannah got there first. "Here he is now. Hi there, sugar, what you got?"

Jake's arms were full of round things the size of tennis balls. Only these balls would never bounce true; they had little horns sticking up from them. When the kid got closer, Eddie could smell them, and the smell was wonderful—like fresh-baked bread.

"I think these might be good to eat," Jake said. "They smell like the fresh sourdough bread my mother and Mrs. Shaw—the housekeeper—got at Zabar's." He looked at Susannah and Eddie, smiling a little. "Do you guys know Zabar's?"

"I sure do," Susannah said. "Best of everything, mmm-hmmm. And they *do* smell fine. You didn't eat any yet, did you?"

"No way." He looked questioningly at Roland.

The gunslinger ended the suspense by taking one, plucking off the horns, and biting into what was left. "Muffin-balls," he said. "I haven't seen any in gods know how long. They're wonderful." His blue eyes were gleaming. "Don't want to eat the horns; they're not poison but they're sour. We can fry them, if there's a little deerfat left. That way they taste almost like meat."

"Sounds like a good idea," Eddie said. "Knock yourself out. As for me, I think I'll skip the mushroom muff-divers, or whatever they are."

"They're not mushrooms at all," Roland said. "More like a kind of ground berry."

Susannah took one, nibbled, then helped herself to a bigger bite. "You don't want to skip these, sweetheart," she said. "My Daddy's friend, Pop Mose, would have said 'These are *prime*.' " She took another of the muffin-balls from Jake and ran a thumb over its silky surface.

"Maybe," he said, "but there was this book I read for a report back in high school—I think it was called *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*—where this nutty chick poisoned her whole family with things like that." He bent toward Jake, raising his eyebrows and stretching the corners of his mouth in what he hoped was a creepy smile. "Poisoned her whole family and they died in *AG-o-ny!*"

Eddie fell off the log on which he had been sitting and began to roll around on the needles and fallen leaves, making horrible faces and choking sounds. Oy ran around him, yipping Eddie's name in a series of high-pitched barks.

"Quit it," Roland said. "Where did you find these, Jake?"

“Back there,” he said. “In a clearing I spotted from the path. It’s *full* of these things. Also, if you guys are hungry for meat . . . I know I am . . . there’s all kinds of sign. A lot of the scat’s fresh.” His eyes searched Roland’s face. “Very . . . fresh . . . scat.” He spoke slowly, as if to someone who wasn’t fluent in the language.

A little smile played at the corners of Roland’s mouth. “Speak quiet but speak plain,” he said. “What worries you, Jake?”

When Jake replied, his lips barely made the shapes of the words. “Men watching me while I picked the muffin-balls.” He paused, then added: “They’re watching us now.”

Susannah took one of the muffin-balls, admired it, then dipped her face as if to smell it like a flower. “Back the way we came? To the right of the road?”

“Yes,” Jake said.

Eddie raised a curled fist to his mouth as if to stifle a cough, and said: “How many?”

“I think four.”

“Five,” Roland said. “Possibly as many as six. One’s a woman. Another a boy not much older than Jake.”

Jake looked at him, startled. Eddie said, “How long have they been there?”

“Since yesterday,” Roland said. “Cut in behind us from almost dead east.”

“And you didn’t tell us?” Susannah asked. She spoke rather sternly, not bothering to cover her mouth and obscure the shapes of the words.

Roland looked at her with the barest twinkle in his eye. “I was curious as to which of you would smell them out first. Actually, I had my money on you, Susannah.”

She gave him a cool look and said nothing. Eddie thought there was more than a little Detta Walker in that look, and was glad not to be on the receiving end.

“What do we do about them?” Jake asked.

“For now, nothing,” the gunslinger said.

Jake clearly didn’t like this. “What if they’re like Tick-Tock’s ka-tet? Gasher and Hoots and those guys?”

“They’re not.”

“How do you know?”

“Because they would have set on us already and they’d be fly-food.”

There seemed no good reply to that, and they took to the road again. It wound through deep shadows, finding its way among trees that were centuries old. Before they had been walking twenty minutes, Eddie heard the sound of their pursuers (or shadowers): snapping twigs, rustling underbrush, once even a low voice. Slewfeet, in Roland’s terminology. Eddie was disgusted with himself for remaining unaware of them for so long. He also wondered what yon cullies did for a living. If it was tracking and trapping, they weren’t very good at it.

Eddie Dean had become a part of Mid-World in many ways, some so subtle he wasn’t consciously aware of them, but he still thought of distances in miles instead of wheels. He guessed they’d come about fifteen from the spot where Jake rejoined them with his muffin-balls and his news when Roland called it a day. They stopped in the middle of the road, as they always did since entering the forest; that way the embers of their campfire stood little chance of setting the woods on fire.

Eddie and Susannah gathered a nice selection of fallen branches while Roland and Jake made a little camp and set about cutting up Jake’s trove of muffin-balls. Susannah rolled her wheelchair effortlessly over the duff under the ancient trees, piling her selections in her lap. Eddie walked nearby, humming under his breath.

“Lookit over to your left, sugar,” Susannah said.

He did, and saw a distant orange blink. A fire.

“Not very good, are they?” he asked.

“No. Truth is, I feel a little sorry for em.”

“Any idea what they’re up to?”

“Unh-unh, but I think Roland’s right—they’ll tell us when they’re ready. Either that or decide we’re not what they want and just sort of fade away. Come on, let’s go back.”

“Just a second.” He picked up one more branch, hesitated, then took yet another. Then it was right. “Okay,” he said.

As they headed back, he counted the sticks he’d picked up, then the ones in Susannah’s lap. The total came to nineteen in each case.

“Suze,” he said, and when she glanced over at him: “Time’s started up again.”

She didn’t ask him what he meant, only nodded.

FOUR

Eddie’s resolution about not eating the muffin-balls didn’t last long; they just smelled too damned good sizzling in the lump of deerfat Roland (thrifty, murderous soul that he was) had saved away in his scuffed old purse. Eddie took his share on one of the ancient plates they’d found in Shardik’s woods and gobbled them.

“These are as good as lobster,” he said, then remembered the monsters on the beach that had eaten Roland’s fingers. “As good as Nathan’s hotdogs is what I meant to say. And I’m sorry for teasing you, Jake.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jake said, smiling. “You never tease hard.”

“One thing you should be aware of,” Roland said. He was smiling—he smiled more these days, quite a lot more—but his eyes were serious. “All of you. Muffin-balls sometimes bring very lively dreams.”

“You mean they make you stoned?” Jake asked, rather uneasily. He was thinking of his father. Elmer Chambers had enjoyed many of the weirder things in life.

“Stoned? I’m not sure I—”

“Buzzed. High. Seeing things. Like when you took the mescaline and went into the stone circle where that thing almost . . . you know, almost hurt me.”

Roland paused for a moment, remembering. There had been a kind of succubus imprisoned in that ring of stones. Left to its own devices, she undoubtedly would have initiated Jake Chambers sexually, then fucked him to death. As matters turned out, Roland had made it speak. To punish him, it had sent him a vision of Susan Delgado.

“Roland?” Jake was looking at him anxiously.

“Don’t concern yourself, Jake. There are mushrooms that do what you’re thinking of—change consciousness, heighten it—but not muffin-balls. These are berries, just good to eat. If your dreams are particularly vivid, just remind yourself you *are* dreaming.”

Eddie thought this a very odd little speech. For one thing, it wasn't like Roland to be so tenderly solicitous of their mental health. Not like him to waste words, either.

Things have started again and he knows it, too, Eddie thought. *There was a little time-out there, but now the clock's running again. Game on, as they say.*

"We going to set a watch, Roland?" Eddie asked.

"Not by my warrant," the gunslinger said comfortably, and began rolling himself a smoke.

"You really don't think they're dangerous, do you?" Susannah said, and raised her eyes to the woods, where the individual trees were now losing themselves in the general gloom of evening. The little spark of campfire they'd noticed earlier was now gone, but the people following them were still there. Susannah felt them. When she looked down at Oy and saw him gazing in the same direction, she wasn't surprised.

"I think that may be their problem," Roland said.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Eddie asked, but Roland would say no more. He simply lay in the road with a rolled-up piece of deerskin beneath his neck, looking up at the dark sky and smoking.

Later, Roland's ka-tet slept. They posted no watch and were undisturbed.

FIVE

The dreams, when they came, were not dreams at all. They all knew this except perhaps for Susannah, who in a very real sense was not there at all that night.

My God, I'm back in New York, Eddie thought. And, on the heels of this: *Really back in New York. This is really happening.*

It was. He was in New York. On Second Avenue.

That was when Jake and Oy came around the corner from Fifty-fourth Street. "Hey, Eddie," Jake said, grinning. "Welcome home."

Game on, Eddie thought. *Game on.*

CHAPTER II: NEW YORK GROOVE

ONE

Jake fell asleep looking into pure darkness—no stars in that cloudy night sky, no moon. As he drifted off, he had a sensation of falling that he recognized with dismay: in his previous life as a so-called normal child he'd often had dreams of falling, especially around exam time, but these had ceased since his violent rebirth into Mid-World.

Then the falling feeling was gone. He heard a brief chiming melody that was somehow *too* beautiful: three notes and you wanted it to stop, a dozen and you thought it would kill you if it didn't. Each chime seemed to make his bones vibrate. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it?* he thought, for although the chiming melody was nothing like the sinister warble of the thinny, somehow it was.

It was.

Then, just when he truly believed he could bear it no longer, the terrible, gorgeous tune stopped. The darkness behind his closed eyes suddenly lit up a brilliant dark red.

He opened them cautiously on strong sunlight.

And gaped.

At New York.

Taxis bustled past, gleaming bright yellow in the sunshine. A young black man wearing Walkman earphones strolled by Jake, bopping his sandaled feet a little bit to the music and going “Cha-da-ba, cha-da-bow!” under his breath. A jackhammer battered Jake's eardrums. Chunks of cement dropped into a dumptruck with a crash that echoed from one cliff-face of buildings to another. The world was a-

din with racket. He had gotten used to the deep silences of Mid-World without even realizing it. No, more. Had come to love them. Still, this noise and bustle had its attractions, and Jake couldn't deny it. Back in the New York groove. He felt a little grin stretch his lips.

"Ake! Ake!" cried a low, rather distressed voice.

Jake looked down and saw Oy sitting on the sidewalk with his tail curled neatly around him. The billy-bumbler wasn't wearing little red booties and Jake wasn't wearing the red Oxfords (thank God), but this was still very like their visit to Roland's Gilead, which they had reached by traveling in the pink Wizard's Glass. The glass ball that had caused so much trouble and woe.

No glass this time . . . he'd just gone to sleep. But this was no dream. It was more intense than any dream he'd ever had, and more textured. Also . . .

Also, people kept detouring around him and Oy as they stood to the left of a midtown saloon called Kansas City Blues. While Jake was making this observation, a woman actually stepped *over* Oy, hitching up her straight black skirt a bit at the knee in order to do so. Her preoccupied face (*I'm just one more New Yorker minding my business, so don't screw with me* was what that face said to Jake) never changed.

They don't see us, but somehow they sense us. And if they can sense us, we must really be here.

The first logical question was Why? Jake considered this for a moment, then decided to table it. He had an idea the answer would come. Meantime, why not enjoy New York while he had it?

"Come on, Oy," he said, and walked around the corner. The billy-bumbler, clearly no city boy, walked so close to him that Jake could feel his breath feathering against his ankle.

Second Avenue, he thought. Then: *My God—*

Before he could finish the thought, he saw Eddie Dean standing outside of the Barcelona Luggage store, looking dazed and more than a little out of place in old jeans, a deerskin shirt, and deerskin moccasins. His hair was clean, but it hung to his shoulders in a way that suggested no professional had seen to it in quite some time. Jake realized he himself didn't look much better; he was also wearing a deerskin shirt and, on his lower half, the battered remains of the

Dockers he'd had on the day he left home for good, setting sail for Brooklyn, Dutch Hill, and another world.

Good thing no one can see us, Jake thought, then decided that wasn't true. If people could see them, they'd probably get rich on spare change before noon. The thought made him grin. "Hey, Eddie," he said. "Welcome home."

Eddie nodded, looking bemused. "See you brought your friend."

Jake reached down and gave Oy an affectionate pat. "He's my version of the American Express Card. I don't go home without him."

Jake was about to go on—he felt witty, bubbly, full of amusing things to say—when someone came around the corner, passed them without looking (as everyone else had), and changed everything. It was a kid wearing Dockers that looked like Jake's because they *were* Jake's. Not the pair he had on now, but they were his, all right. So were the sneakers. They were the ones Jake had lost in Dutch Hill. The plaster-man who guarded the door between the worlds had torn them right off his feet.

The boy who had just passed them was John Chambers, it was *him*, only this version looked soft and innocent and painfully young. *How did you survive?* he asked his own retreating back. *How did you survive the mental stress of losing your mind, and running away from home, and that horrible house in Brooklyn? Most of all, how did you survive the doorkeeper? You must be tougher than you look.*

Eddie did a doubletake so comical that Jake laughed in spite of his own shocked surprise. It made him think of those comic-book panels where Archie or Jughead is trying to look in two directions at the same time. He looked down and saw a similar expression on Oy's face. Somehow that made the whole thing even funnier.

"What the *fuck?*" Eddie asked.

"Instant replay," Jake said, and laughed harder. It came out sounding goofy as shit, but he didn't care. He *felt* goofy. "It's like when we watched Roland in the Great Hall of Gilead, only this is New York and it's May 31st, 1977! It's the day I took French Leave from Piper! Instant replay, baby!"

"French—?" Eddie began, but Jake didn't give him a chance to finish. He was struck by another realization. Except *struck* was too mild a word. He was *buried* by it, like a man who just happens to be on

the beach when a tidal wave rolls in. His face blazed so brightly that Eddie actually took a step back.

“The rose!” he whispered. He felt too weak in the diaphragm to speak any louder, and his throat was as dry as a sandstorm. “Eddie, *the rose!*”

“What about it?”

“This is the day I see it!” He reached out and touched Eddie’s forearm with a trembling hand. “I go to the bookstore . . . then to the vacant lot. I think there used to be a delicatessen—”

Eddie was nodding and beginning to look excited himself. “Tom and Jerry’s Artistic Deli, corner of Second and Forty-sixth—”

“The deli’s gone but the rose is there! That me walking down the street is going to see it, *and we can see it, too!*”

At that, Eddie’s own eyes blazed. “Come on, then,” he said. “We don’t want to lose you. Him. Whoever the fuck.”

“Don’t worry,” Jake said. “I know where he’s going.”

TWO

The Jake ahead of them—New York Jake, spring-of-1977 Jake—walked slowly, looking everywhere, clearly digging the day. Mid-World Jake remembered exactly how that boy had felt: the sudden relief when the arguing voices in his mind

(I died!)

(I didn’t!)

had finally stopped their squabbling. Back by the board fence that had been, where the two businessmen had been playing tic-tac-toe with a Mark Cross pen. And, of course, there had been the relief of being away from the Piper School and the insanity of his Final Essay for Ms. Avery’s English class. The Final Essay counted a full twenty-five per cent toward each student’s final grade, Ms. Avery had made that perfectly clear, and Jake’s had been gibberish. The fact that his teacher had later given him an A+ on it didn’t change that, only made it clear that it wasn’t just him; the whole world was losing its shit, going nineteen.

Being out from under all that—even for a little while—had been great. Of course he was digging the day.

Only the day's not quite right, Jake thought—the Jake walking along behind his old self. *Something about it . . .*

He looked around but couldn't figure it out. Late May, bright summer sun, lots of strollers and window-shoppers on Second Avenue, plenty of taxis, the occasional long black limo; nothing wrong with any of this.

Except there was.

Everything was wrong with it.

THREE

Eddie felt the kid twitch his sleeve. “What’s wrong with this picture?” Jake asked.

Eddie looked around. In spite of his own adjustment problems (his involved coming back to a New York that was clearly a few years behind his when), he knew what Jake meant. Something *was* wrong.

He looked down at the sidewalk, suddenly sure he wouldn't have a shadow. They'd lost their shadows like the kids in one of the stories . . . one of the nineteen fairy tales . . . or was it maybe something newer, like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or *Peter Pan*? One of what might be called the Modern Nineteen?

Didn't matter in any case, because their shadows were there.

Shouldn't be, though, Eddie thought. *Shouldn't be able to see our shadows when it's this dark.*

Stupid thought. It *wasn't* dark. It was *morning*, for Christ's sake, a bright May morning, sunshine winking off the chrome of passing cars and the windows of the stores on the east side of Second Avenue brightly enough to make you squint your eyes. Yet still it seemed somehow dark to Eddie, as if all this were nothing but fragile surface, like the canvas backdrop of a stage set. “At rise we see the Forest of Arden.” Or a Castle in Denmark. Or the Kitchen of Willy Loman's House. In this case we see Second Avenue, midtown New York.

Yes, like that. Only behind this canvas you wouldn't find the workshop and storage areas of backstage but only a great bulging

darkness. Some vast dead universe where Roland's Tower had already fallen.

Please let me be wrong, Eddie thought. Please let this just be a case of culture shock or the plain old heebie-jeebies.

He didn't think it was.

"How'd we get here?" he asked Jake. "There was no door . . ." He trailed off, and then asked with some hope: "Maybe it *is* a dream?"

"No," Jake said. "It's more like when we traveled in the Wizard's Glass. Except this time there was no ball." A thought struck him. "Did you hear music, though? Chimes? Just before you wound up here?"

Eddie nodded. "It was sort of overwhelming. Made my eyes water."

"Right," Jake said. "Exactly."

Oy sniffed a fire hydrant. Eddie and Jake paused to let the little guy lift his leg and add his own notice to what was undoubtedly an already crowded bulletin board. Ahead of them, that other Jake—Kid Seventy-seven—was still walking slowly and gawking everywhere. To Eddie he looked like a tourist from Michigan. He even craned up to see the tops of the buildings, and Eddie had an idea that if the New York Board of Cynicism caught you doing that, they took away your Bloomingdale's charge card. Not that he was complaining; it made the kid easy to follow.

And just as Eddie was thinking that, Kid Seventy-seven disappeared.

"Where'd you go? Christ, where'd you go?"

"Relax," Jake said. (At his ankle, Oy added his two cents' worth: "Ax!") The kid was grinning. "I just went into the bookstore. The . . . um . . . Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind, it's called."

"Where you got *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and the riddle book?"

"Right."

Eddie loved the mystified, dazzled grin Jake was wearing. It lit up his whole face. "Remember how excited Roland got when I told him the owner's name?"

Eddie did. The owner of The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind was a fellow named Calvin Tower.

"Hurry up," Jake said. "I want to watch."

Eddie didn't have to be asked twice. He wanted to watch, too.

FOUR

Jake stopped in the doorway to the bookstore. His smile didn't fade, exactly, but it faltered.

"What is it?" Eddie asked. "What's wrong?"

"Dunno. Something's different, I think. It's just . . . so much has happened since I was here . . ."

He was looking at the chalkboard in the window, which Eddie thought was actually a very clever way of selling books. It looked like the sort of thing you saw in diners, or maybe the fish markets.

TODAY'S SPECIALS

From Mississippi! Pan-Fried William Faulkner

Hardcovers Market Price

Vintage Library Paperbacks 75c each

From Maine! Chilled Stephen King

Hardcovers Market Price

Book Club Bargains

Paperbacks 75c each

From California! Hard-Boiled Raymond Chandler

Hardcovers Market Price

Paperbacks 7 for \$5.00

Eddie looked beyond this and saw that other Jake—the one without the tan or the look of hard clarity in his eyes—standing at a small display table. Kiddie books. Probably both the Nineteen Fairy Tales and the Modern Nineteen.

Quit it, he told himself. That's obsessive-compulsive crap and you know it.

Maybe, but good old Jake Seventy-seven was about to make a purchase from that table which had gone on to change—and very likely to save—their lives. He'd worry about the number nineteen later. Or not at all, if he could manage it.

"Come on," he told Jake. "Let's go in."

The boy hung back.

"What's the matter?" Eddie asked. "Tower won't be able to see us, if that's what you're worried about."

"*Tower* won't be able to," Jake said, "but what if *he* can?" He pointed at his other self, the one who had yet to meet Gasher and Tick-Tock and the old people of River Crossing. The one who had yet to meet Blaine the Mono and Rhea of the Cöos.

Jake was looking at Eddie with a kind of haunted curiosity. "What if I see *myself*?"

Eddie supposed that might really happen. Hell, *anything* might happen. But that didn't change what he felt in his heart. "I think we're supposed to go in, Jake."

"Yeah . . ." It came out in a long sigh. "I do, too."

FIVE

They went in and they weren't seen and Eddie was relieved to count twenty-one books on the display table that had attracted the boy's notice. Except, of course, when Jake picked up the two he wanted—*Charlie the Choo-Choo* and the riddle book—that left nineteen.

"Find something, son?" a mild voice inquired. It was a fat fellow in an open-throated white shirt. Behind him, at a counter that looked as if it might have been filched from a turn-of-the-century soda fountain, a trio of old guys were drinking coffee and nibbling pastries. A chessboard with a game in progress sat on the marble counter.

"The guy sitting on the end is Aaron Deepneau," Jake whispered. "He's going to explain the riddle about Samson to me."

"Shh!" Eddie said. He wanted to hear the conversation between Calvin Tower and Kid Seventy-seven. All of a sudden that seemed very important . . . only why was it so fucking *dark* in here?

Except it's not dark at all. The east side of the street gets plenty of sun at this hour, and with the door open, this place is getting all of it. How can you say

it's dark?

Because it somehow was. The sunlight—the *contrast* of the sunlight—only made it worse. The fact that you couldn't exactly *see* that darkness made it worse still . . . and Eddie realized a terrible thing: these people were in danger. Tower, Deepneau, Kid Seventy-seven. Probably him and Mid-World Jake and Oy, as well.

All of them.

SIX

Jake watched his other, younger self take a step back from the bookshop owner, his eyes widening in surprise. *Because his name is Tower*, Jake thought. *That's what surprised me. Not because of Roland's Tower, though—I didn't know about that yet—but because of the picture I put on the last page of my Final Essay.*

He had pasted a photo of the Leaning Tower of Pisa on the last page, then had scribbled all over it with a black Crayola, darkening it as best he could.

Tower asked him his name. Seventy-seven Jake told him and Tower joked around with him a little. It was good joking-around, the kind you got from adults who really didn't mind kids.

"Good handle, pard," Tower was saying. "Sounds like the footloose hero in a Western novel—the guy who blows into Black Fork, Arizona, cleans up the town, and then travels on. Something by Wayne D. Overholser, maybe . . ."

Jake took a step closer to his old self (part of him was thinking what a wonderful sketch all this would make on *Saturday Night Live*), and his eyes widened slightly. "Eddie!" He was still whispering, although he knew the people in the bookstore couldn't—

Except maybe on some level they could. He remembered the lady back on Fifty-fourth Street, twitching her skirt up at the knee so she could step over Oy. And now Calvin Tower's eyes shifted slightly in his direction before going back to the other version of him.

"Might be good not to attract unnecessary attention," Eddie muttered in his ear.

"I know," Jake said, "but look at *Charlie the Choo-Choo*, Eddie!"

Eddie did, and for a moment saw nothing—except for Charlie himself, of course: Charlie with his headlight eye and not-quite-trustworthy cowcatcher grin. Then Eddie’s eyebrows went up.

“I thought *Charlie the Choo-Choo* was written by a lady named Beryl Evans,” he whispered.

Jake nodded. “I did, too.”

“Then who’s this—” Eddie took another look. “Who’s this Claudia y Inez Bachman?”

“I have no idea,” Jake said. “I never heard of her in my life.”

SEVEN

One of the old men at the counter came sauntering toward them. Eddie and Jake drew away. As they stepped back, Eddie’s spine gave a cold little wrench. Jake was very pale, and Oy was giving out a series of low, distressed whines. Something was wrong here, all right. In a way they *had* lost their shadows. Eddie just didn’t know how.

Kid Seventy-seven had taken out his wallet and was paying for the two books. There was some more talk and good-natured laughter, then he headed for the door. When Eddie started after him, Mid-World Jake grabbed his arm. “No, not yet—I come back in.”

“I don’t care if you alphabetize the whole place,” Eddie said. “Let’s wait out on the sidewalk.”

Jake thought about this, biting his lip, then nodded. They headed for the door, then stopped and moved aside as the other Jake returned. The riddle book was open. Calvin Tower had lumbered over to the chessboard on the counter. He looked around with an amiable smile.

“Change your mind about that cup of coffee, O Hyperborean Wanderer?”

“No, I wanted to ask you—”

“This is the part about Samson’s Riddle,” Mid-World Jake said. “I don’t think it matters. Although the Deepneau guy sings a pretty good song, if you want to hear it.”

“I’ll pass,” Eddie said. “Come on.”

They went out. And although things on Second Avenue were still wrong—that sense of endless dark behind the scenes, behind the very

sky—it was somehow better than in The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. At least there was fresh air.

“Tell you what,” Jake said. “Let’s go down to Second and Forty-sixth right now.” He jerked his head toward the version of him listening to Aaron Deepneau sing. “I’ll catch up with us.”

Eddie considered it, then shook his head.

Jake’s face fell a little. “Don’t you want to see the rose?”

“You bet your ass I do,” Eddie said. “I’m wild to see it.”

“Then—”

“I don’t feel like we’re done here yet. I don’t know why, but I don’t.”

Jake—the Kid Seventy-seven version of him—had left the door open when he went back inside, and now Eddie moved into it. Aaron Deepneau was telling Jake a riddle they would later try on Blaine the Mono: What can run but never walks, has a mouth but never talks. Mid-World Jake, meanwhile, was once more looking at the notice-board in the bookstore window (*Pan-Fried William Faulkner, Hard-Boiled Raymond Chandler*). He wore a frown of the kind that expresses doubt and anxiety rather than ill temper.

“That sign’s different, too,” he said.

“How?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Is it important?”

Jake turned to him. The eyes below the furrowed brow were haunted. “I don’t know. It’s another riddle. I *hate* riddles!”

Eddie sympathized. *When is a Beryl not a Beryl?* “When it’s a Claudia,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Better step back, Jake, or you’re going to run into yourself.”

Jake gave the oncoming version of John Chambers a startled glance, then did as Eddie suggested. And when Kid Seventy-seven started on down Second Avenue with his new books in his left hand, Mid-World Jake gave Eddie a tired smile. “I *do* remember one thing,” he said. “When I left this bookstore, I was sure I’d never come here again. But I did.”

“Considering that we’re more ghosts than people, I’d say that’s debatable.” Eddie gave the back of Jake’s neck a friendly scruff. “And if you *have* forgotten something important, Roland might be able to help you remember. He’s good at that.”

Jake grinned at this, relieved. He knew from personal experience that the gunslinger really *was* good at helping people remember. Roland’s friend Alain might have been the one with the strongest ability to touch other minds, and his friend Cuthbert had gotten all the sense of humor in that particular ka-tet, but Roland had developed over the years into one *hell* of a hypnotist. He could have made a fortune in Las Vegas.

“Can we follow me now?” Jake asked. “Check out the rose?” He looked up and down Second Avenue—a street that was somehow bright and dark at the same time—with a kind of unhappy perplexity. “Things are probably better there. The rose makes everything better.”

Eddie was about to say okay when a dark gray Lincoln Town Car pulled up in front of Calvin Tower’s bookshop. It parked by the yellow curb in front of a fire hydrant with absolutely no hesitation. The front doors opened, and when Eddie saw who was getting out from behind the wheel, he seized Jake’s shoulder.

“Ow!” Jake said. “Man, that hurts!”

Eddie paid no attention. In fact the hand on Jake’s shoulder clamped down even tighter.

“Christ,” Eddie whispered. “Dear Jesus Christ, what’s this? What in hell is *this*?”

EIGHT

Jake watched Eddie go past pale to ashy gray. His eyes were bulging from their sockets. Not without difficulty, Jake pried the clamping hand off his shoulder. Eddie made as if to point with that hand, but didn’t seem to have the strength. It fell against the side of his leg with a little thump.

The man who had gotten out on the passenger side of the Town Car walked around to the sidewalk while the driver opened the rear curbside door. Even to Jake their moves looked practiced, almost like steps in a dance. The man who got out of the back seat was wearing

an expensive suit, but that didn't change the fact that he was basically a dumpy little guy with a potbelly and black hair going gray around the edges. *Dandruffy* black hair, from the look of his suit's shoulders.

To Jake, the day suddenly felt darker than ever. He looked up to see if the sun had gone behind a cloud. It hadn't, but it almost seemed to him that there was a black corona forming around its brilliant circle, like a ring of mascara around a startled eye.

Half a block farther downtown, the 1977 version of him was glancing in the window of a restaurant, and Jake could remember the name of it: Chew Chew Mama's. Not far beyond it was Tower of Power Records, where he would think *Towers are selling cheap today*. If that version of him had looked back, he would have seen the gray Town Car . . . but he hadn't. Kid Seventy-seven's mind was fixed firmly on the future.

"It's Balazar," Eddie said.

"*What?*"

Eddie was pointing at the dumpy guy, who had paused to adjust his Sulka tie. The other two now stood flanking him. They looked simultaneously relaxed and watchful.

"Enrico Balazar. And looking much younger. God, he's almost middle-aged!"

"It's 1977," Jake reminded him. Then, as the penny dropped: "That's the guy you and Roland *killed?*" Eddie had told Jake the story of the shoot-out at Balazar's club in 1987, leaving out the gorier parts. The part, for instance, where Kevin Blake had lobbed the head of Eddie's brother into Balazar's office in an effort to flush Eddie and Roland into the open. Henry Dean, the great sage and eminent junkie.

"Yeah," Eddie said. "The guy Roland and I killed. And the one who was driving, that's Jack Andolini. Old Double-Ugly, people used to call him, although never to his face. He went through one of those doors with me just before the shooting started."

"Roland killed him, too. Didn't he?"

Eddie nodded. It was simpler than trying to explain how Jack Andolini had happened to die blind and faceless beneath the tearing claws and ripping jaws of the lobstrosities on the beach.

“The other bodyguard’s George Biondi. Big Nose. I killed him myself. *Will* kill him. Ten years from now.” Eddie looked as if he might faint at any second.

“Eddie, are you okay?”

“I guess so. I guess I have to be.” They had drawn away from the bookshop’s doorway. Oy was still crouched at Jake’s ankle. Down Second Avenue, Jake’s other, earlier self had disappeared. *I’m running by now*, Jake thought. *Maybe jumping over the UPS guy’s dolly. Sprinting all-out for the delicatessen, because I’m sure that’s the way back to Mid-World. The way back to him.*

Balazar peered at his reflection in the window beside the TODAY’S SPECIALS display-board, gave the wings of hair above his ears one last little fluff with the tips of his fingers, then stepped through the open door. Andolini and Biondi followed.

“Hard guys,” Jake said.

“The hardest,” Eddie agreed.

“From Brooklyn.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Why are hard guys from Brooklyn visiting a used-book store in Manhattan?”

“I think that’s what we’re here to find out. Jake, did I hurt your shoulder?”

“I’m okay. But I don’t really want to go back in there.”

“Neither do I. So let’s go.”

They went back into The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind.

NINE

Oy was still at Jake’s heel and still whining. Jake wasn’t crazy about the sound, but he understood it. The smell of fear in the bookstore was palpable. Deepneau sat beside the chessboard, gazing unhappily at Calvin Tower and the newcomers, who didn’t look much like bibliophiles in search of the elusive signed first edition. The other two old guys at the counter were drinking the last of their coffee in big gulps, with the air of fellows who have just remembered important appointments elsewhere.

Cowards, Jake thought with a contempt he didn't recognize as a relatively new thing in his life. *Lowbellies*. *Being old forgives some of it, but not all of it*.

"We just have a couple of things to discuss, Mr. Toren," Balazar was saying. He spoke in a low, calm, reasonable voice, without even a trace of accent. "Please, if we could step back into your office—"

"We don't have business," Tower said. His eyes kept drifting to Andolini. Jake supposed he knew why. Jack Andolini looked the ax-wielding psycho in a horror movie. "Come July fifteenth, we might have business. *Might*. So we could talk after the Fourth. I guess. If you wanted to." He smiled to show he was being reasonable. "But now? Gee, I just don't see the point. It's not even June yet. And for your information my name's not—"

"He doesn't see the point," Balazar said. He looked at Andolini; looked at the one with the big nose; raised his hands to his shoulders, then dropped them. *What's wrong with this world of ours?* the gesture said. "Jack? George? This man took a check from me—the amount before the decimal point was a one followed by five zeroes—and now he says he doesn't see the point of talking to me."

"Unbelievable," Biondi said. Andolini said nothing. He simply looked at Calvin Tower, muddy brown eyes peering out from beneath the unlovely bulge of his skull like mean little animals peering out of a cave. With a face like that, Jake supposed, you didn't have to talk much to get your point across. The point being intimidation.

"*I want to talk to you*," Balazar said. He spoke in a patient, reasonable tone of voice, but his eyes were fixed on Tower's face with a terrible intensity. "Why? Because my employers in this matter *want* me to talk to you. That's good enough for me. And do you know what? I think you can afford five minutes of chit-chat for your hundred grand. Don't you?"

"The hundred thousand is gone," Tower said bleakly. "As I'm sure you and whoever hired you must know."

"That's of no concern to me," Balazar said. "Why would it be? It was your money. What concerns me is whether or not you're going to take us out back. If not, we'll have to have our conversation right here, in front of the whole world."

The whole world now consisted of Aaron Deepneau, one billy-bumbler, and a couple of expatriate New Yorkers none of the men in the bookstore could see. Deepneau's counter-buddies had run like the lowbellies they were.

Tower made one last try. "I don't have anyone to mind the store. Lunch-hour is coming up, and we often have quite a few browsers during—"

"This place doesn't do fifty dollars a day," Andolini said, "and we all know it, Mr. Toren. If you're really worried you're going to miss a big sale, let *him* run the cash register for a few minutes."

For one horrible second, Jake thought the one Eddie had called "Old Double-Ugly" meant none other than John "Jake" Chambers. Then he realized Andolini was pointing past him, at Deepneau.

Tower gave in. Or Toren. "Aaron?" he asked. "Do you mind?"

"Not if you don't," Deepneau said. He looked troubled. "Sure you want to talk with these guys?"

Biondi gave him a look. Jake thought Deepneau stood up under it remarkably well. In a weird way, he felt proud of the old guy.

"Yeah," Tower said. "Yeah, it's fine."

"Don't worry, he won't lose his butthole virginity on our account," Biondi said, and laughed.

"Watch your mouth, you're in a place of scholarship," Balazar said, but Jake thought he smiled a little. "Come on, Toren. Just a little chat."

"That's not my name! I had it legally changed on—"

"Whatever," Balazar said soothingly. He actually patted Tower's arm. Jake was still trying to get used to the idea that all this . . . all this *melodrama* . . . had happened after he'd left the store with his two new books (new to him, anyway) and resumed his journey. That it had all happened behind his back.

"A squarehead's always a squarehead, right, boss?" Biondi asked jovially. "Just a Dutchman. Don't matter what he calls himself."

Balazar said, "If I want you to talk, George, I'll tell you what I want you to say. Have you got that?"

"Okay," Biondi said. Then, perhaps after deciding that didn't sound quite enthusiastic enough: "Yeah! Sure."

“Good.” Balazar, now holding the arm he had patted, guided Tower toward the back of the shop. Books were piled helter-skelter here; the air was heavy with the scent of a million musty pages. There was a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. Tower produced a ring of keys, and they jingled slightly as he picked through them.

“His hands are shaking,” Jake murmured.

Eddie nodded. “Mine would be, too.”

Tower found the key he wanted, turned it in the lock, opened the door. He took another look at the three men who had come to visit him—hard guys from Brooklyn—then led them into the back room. The door closed behind them, and Jake heard the sound of a bolt being shot across. He doubted Tower himself had done that.

Jake looked up into the convex anti-shoplifting mirror mounted in the corner of the shop, saw Deepneau pick up the telephone beside the cash register, consider it, then put it down again.

“What do we do now?” Jake asked Eddie.

“I’m gonna try something,” Eddie said. “I saw it in a movie once.” He stood in front of the closed door, then tipped Jake a wink. “Here I go. If I don’t do anything but bump my head, feel free to call me an asshole.”

Before Jake could ask him what he was talking about, Eddie walked into the door. Jake saw his eyes close and his mouth tighten in a grimace. It was the expression of a man who expects to take a hard knock.

Only there *was* no hard knock. Eddie simply passed through the door. For one moment his moccasin-clad foot was sticking out, and then it went through, too. There was a low rasping sound, like a hand being passed over rough wood.

Jake bent down and picked Oy up. “Close your eyes,” he said.

“Eyes,” the bumbler agreed, but continued to look at Jake with that expression of calm adoration. Jake closed his own eyes, squinting them shut. When he opened them again, Oy was mimicking him. Without wasting any time, Jake walked into the door with the EMPLOYEES ONLY sign on it. There was a moment of darkness and the smell of wood. Deep in his head, he heard a couple of those disturbing chimes again. Then he was through.

TEN

It was a storage area much bigger than Jake had expected—almost as big as a warehouse and stacked high with books in every direction. He guessed that some of those stacks, held in place by pairs of upright beams that provided shoring rather than shelving, had to be fourteen or sixteen feet high. Narrow, crooked aisles ran between them. In a couple he saw rolling platforms that made him think of the portable boarding ramps you saw in smaller airports. The smell of old books was the same back here as in front, but ever so much stronger, almost overwhelming. Above them hung a scattering of shaded lamps that provided yellowish, uneven illumination. The shadows of Tower, Balazar, and Balazar's friends leaped grotesquely on the wall to their left. Tower turned that way, leading his visitors to a corner that really was an office: there was a desk with a typewriter and a Rolodex on it, three old filing cabinets, and a wall covered with various pieces of paperwork. There was a calendar with some nineteenth-century guy on the May sheet Jake didn't recognize . . . and then he did. Robert Browning. Jake had quoted him in his Final Essay.

Tower sat down in the chair behind his desk, and immediately seemed sorry he'd done that. Jake could sympathize. The way the other three crowded around him couldn't have been very pleasant. Their shadows jumped up the wall behind the desk like the shadows of gargoyles.

Balazar reached into his suitcoat and brought out a folded sheet of paper. He opened it and put it down on Tower's desk. "Recognize this?"

Eddie moved forward. Jake grabbed at him. "Don't go close! They'll sense you!"

"I don't care," Eddie said. "I need to see that paper."

Jake followed, not knowing what else to do. Oy stirred in his arms and whined. Jake shushed him curtly, and Oy blinked. "Sorry, buddy," Jake said, "but you have to keep quiet."

Was the 1977 version of him in the vacant lot yet? Once inside it, that earlier Jake had slipped somehow and knocked himself unconscious. Had that happened yet? No sense wondering. Eddie was right. Jake didn't like it, but he knew it was true: they were supposed

to be *here*, not there, and they were supposed to see the paper Balazar was now showing Calvin Tower.

ELEVEN

Eddie got the first couple of lines before Jack Andolini said, “Boss, I don’t like this. Something feels hinky.”

Balazar nodded. “I agree. Is someone back here with us, Mr. Toren?” He still sounded calm and courteous, but his eyes were everywhere, assessing this large room’s potential for concealment.

“No,” Tower said. “Well, there’s Sergio; he’s the shop cat. I imagine he’s back here somew—”

“This ain’t no shop,” Biondi said, “it’s a hole you pour money into. One of those chi-chi designers’d have trouble making enough to cover the overhead on a joint this big, and a *bookstore*? Man, who are you kidding?”

Himself, that’s who, Eddie thought. *He’s been kidding himself.*

As if this thought had summoned them, those terrible chimes began again. The hoods gathered in Tower’s storeroom office didn’t hear them, but Jake and Oy did; Eddie could read it on their distressed faces. And suddenly this room, already dim, began to grow dimmer still.

We’re going back, Eddie thought. *Jesus, we’re going back! But not before*

He bent forward between Andolini and Balazar, aware that both men were looking around with wide, wary eyes, not caring. What he cared about was the paper. Someone had hired Balazar first to get it signed (probably) and then to shove it under Tower/Toren’s nose when the time was right (certainly). In most cases, *Il Roche* would have been content to send a couple of his hard boys—what he called his “gentlemen”—on an errand like that. This job, however, was important enough to warrant his personal attention. Eddie wanted to know why.

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT

This document constitutes a Pact of Agreement between Mr. Calvin Tower, a New York State resident, owning real property which is principally a vacant lot, identified as Lot # 298 and Block # 19, located . . .

Those chimes wriggled through his head again, making him shiver. This time they were louder. The shadows drew thicker, leaping up the storage room's walls. The darkness Eddie had sensed out on the street was breaking through. They might be swept away, and that would be bad. They might be drowned in it, and that would be worse, of course it would, being drowned in darkness would surely be an awful way to go.

And suppose there were *things* in that darkness? Hungry things like the doorkeeper?

There are. That was Henry's voice. For the first time in almost two months. Eddie could imagine Henry standing just behind him and grinning a sallow junkie's grin: all bloodshot eyes and yellow, uncared-for teeth. *You know there are. But when you hear the chimes, you got to go, bro, as I think you know.*

"Eddie!" Jake cried. "It's coming back! Do you hear it?"

"Grab my belt," Eddie said. His eyes raced back and forth over the paper in Tower's pudgy hands. Balazar, Andolini, and Big Nose were still looking around. Biondi had actually drawn his gun.

"Your—?"

"Maybe we won't be separated," Eddie said. The chimes were louder than ever, and he groaned. The words of the agreement blurred in front of him. Eddie squinted his eyes, bringing the print back together:

. . . identified as Lot #298 and Block #19, located in Manhattan, New York City, on 46th Street and 2nd Avenue, and Sombra Corporation, a corporation doing business within the State of New York.

On this day of July 15, 1976, Sombra is paying a non-returnable sum of \$100,000.00 to Calvin Tower, receipt of which

is acknowledged in regard to this property. In consideration thereof, Calvin Tower agrees not to . . .

July 15th, 1976. Not quite a year ago.

Eddie felt the darkness sweeping down on them, and tried to cram the rest of it through his eyes and into his brain: enough, maybe, to make sense of what was going on here. If he could do that, it would be at least a step toward figuring out what all this meant to them.

If the chimes don't drive me crazy. If the things in the darkness don't eat us on the way back.

“Eddie!” Jake. And terrified, by the sound. Eddie ignored him.

. . . Calvin Tower agrees not to sell or lease or otherwise encumber the property during a one-year period commencing on the date hereof and ending on July 15, 1977. It is understood that the Sombra Corporation shall have first right of purchase on the abovementioned property, as defined below.

During this period, Calvin Tower will fully preserve and protect Sombra Corporation's stated interest in the abovementioned Property and will permit no liens or other encumbrances . . .

There was more, but now the chimes were hideous, head-bursting. For just one moment Eddie understood—hell, could almost *see*—how thin this world had become. All of the worlds, probably. As thin and worn as his own jeans. He caught one final phrase from the agreement: . . . **if these conditions are met, will have the right to sell or otherwise dispose of the property to Sombra or any other party.** Then the words were gone, everything was gone, spinning into a black whirlpool. Jake held onto Eddie's belt with one hand and Oy with the other. Oy was barking wildly now, and Eddie had another confused image of Dorothy being swirled away to the Land of Oz.

There *were* things in the darkness: looming shapes behind weird phosphorescent eyes, the sort of things you saw in movies about exploring the deepest cracks of the ocean floor. Except in those movies, the explorers were always inside a steel diving-bell, while he and Jake—

The chimes grew to an ear-splitting volume. Eddie felt as if he had been jammed headfirst into the works of Big Ben as it was striking midnight. He screamed without hearing himself. And then it was gone, everything was all gone—Jake, Oy, Mid-World—and he was floating somewhere beyond the stars and the galaxies.

Susannah! he cried. *Where are you, Suze?*

No answer. Only darkness.

CHAPTER III:

MIA

ONE

Once upon a time, back in the sixties (before the world moved on), there had been a woman named Odetta Holmes, a pleasant and really quite socially conscious young woman who was wealthy, good-looking, and perfectly willing to look out for the other guy (or gal). Without even realizing it, this woman shared her body with a far less pleasant creature named Detta Walker. Detta did not give a tin shit for the other guy (or gal). Rhea of the Cöos would have recognized Detta, and called her sister. On the other side of Mid-World, Roland of Gilead, the last gunslinger, had drawn this divided woman to him and had created a third, who was far better, far stronger, than either of the previous two. This was the woman with whom Eddie Dean had fallen in love. She called him husband, and thus herself by the name of his father. Having missed the feminist squabbles of later decades, she did this quite happily. If she did not call herself Susannah Dean with pride as well as happiness, it was only because her mother had taught her that pride goeth before a fall.

Now there was a fourth woman. She had been born out of the third in yet another time of stress and change. She cared nothing for Odetta, Detta, or Susannah; she cared for nothing save the new chap who was on his way. The new chap needed to be fed. The banqueting hall was near. That was what mattered and all that mattered.

This new woman, every bit as dangerous in her own way as Detta Walker had been, was Mia. She bore the name of no man's father, only the word that in the High Speech means *mother*.

TWO

She walked slowly down long stone corridors toward the place of feasting. She walked past the rooms of ruin, past the empty naves and niches, past forgotten galleries where the apartments were hollow and none was the number. Somewhere in this castle stood an old throne drenched in ancient blood. Somewhere ladderways led to bone-walled crypts that went gods knew how deep. Yet there *was* life here; life and rich food. Mia knew this as well as she knew the legs under her and the textured, many-layered skirt swishing against them. Rich food. Life for you and for your crop, as the saying went. And she was so hungry now. Of course! Wasn't she eating for two?

She came to a broad staircase. A sound, faint but powerful, rose up to her: the beat-beat-beat of slotrans engines buried in the earth below the deepest of the crypts. Mia cared nothing for them, nor for North Central Positronics, Ltd., which had built them and set them in motion tens of thousands of years before. She cared nothing for the dipolar computers, or the doors, or the Beams, or the Dark Tower which stood at the center of everything.

What she cared about was the smells. They drifted up to her, thick and wonderful. Chicken and gravy and roasts of pork dressed in suits of crackling fat. Sides of beef beaded with blood, wheels of moist cheese, huge Calla Fundy shrimp like plump orange commas. Split fish with staring black eyes, their bellies brimming with sauce. Great pots of jambalaya and fanata, the vast *caldo largo* stews of the far south. Add to this a hundred fruits and a thousand sweets, and still you were only at the beginning! The appetizers! The first mouthfuls of the first course!

Mia ran quickly down the broad central staircase, the skin of her palm skimming silkily along the bannister, her small slippered feet stuttering on the steps. Once she'd had a dream that she had been pushed in front of an underground train by an awful man, and her legs had been cut off at the knee. But dreams were foolish. Her feet were there, and the legs above them, weren't they? Yes! And so was the babe in her belly. The chap, wanting to be fed. He was hungry, and so was she.

THREE

From the foot of the stairs, a wide corridor floored with polished black marble ran ninety feet to a pair of tall double doors. Mia hurried that way. She saw her reflection floating below her, and the electric flambeaux that burned in the depths of the marble like torches underwater, but she did not see the man who came along behind her, descending the sweeping curve of the stairs not in dress pumps but in old and range-battered boots. He wore faded jeans and a shirt of blue chambray instead of court clothes. One gun, a pistol with a worn sandalwood grip, hung at his left side, the holster tied down with rawhide. His face was tanned and lined and weathered. His hair was black, although now seeded with growing streaks of white. His eyes were his most striking feature. They were blue and cold and steady. Detta Walker had feared no man, not even this one, but she had feared those shooter's eyes.

There was a foyer just before the double doors. It was floored with red and black marble squares. The wood-paneled walls were hung with faded portraits of old lords and ladies. In the center was a statue made of entwined rose marble and chrome steel. It seemed to be a knight errant with what might have been a sixgun or a short sword raised above his head. Although the face was mostly smooth—the sculptor had done no more than hint at the features—Mia knew who it was, right enough. Who it must be.

“I salute thee, Arthur Eld,” she said, and dropped her deepest curtsy. “Please bless these things I’m about to take to my use. And to the use of my chap. Good evening to you.” She could not wish him long days upon the earth, for his days—and those of most of his kind—were gone. Instead she touched her smiling lips with the tips of her fingers and blew him a kiss. Having made her manners, she walked into the dining hall.

It was forty yards wide and seventy yards long, that room. Brilliant electric torches in crystal sheaths lined both sides. Hundreds of chairs stood in place at a vast ironwood table laden with delicacies both hot and cold. There was a white plate with delicate blue webbing, a *forspecial* plate, in front of each chair. The chairs were empty, the *forspecial* banquet plates were empty, and the wineglasses were empty,

although the wine to fill them stood in golden buckets at intervals along the table, chilled and ready. It was as she had known it would be, as she had seen it in her fondest, clearest imaginings, as she had found it again and again, and would find it as long as she (and the chap) needed it. Wherever she found herself, this castle was near. And if there was a smell of dampness and ancient mud, what of that? If there were scuttering sounds from the shadows under the table—mayhap the sound of rats or even fortnoy weasels—why should she care? Abovetable, all was lush and lighted, fragrant and ripe and ready for taking. Let the shadows belowtable take care of themselves. That was none of her business, no, none of hers.

“Here comes Mia, daughter of none!” she called gaily to the silent room with its hundred aromas of meats and sauces and creams and fruits. “I am hungry and I will be fed! Moreover, I’ll feed my chap! If anyone would say against me, let him step forward! Let me see him very well, and he me!”

No one stepped forward, of course. Those who might once have banqueted here were long gone. Now there was only the deep and sleepy beat of the slo-trans engines (and those faint and unpleasant scampering sounds from the Land of Undertable). Behind her, the gunslinger stood quietly, watching. Nor was it for the first time. He saw no castle but he saw her; he saw her very well.

“Silence gives consent!” she called. She pressed her hand to her belly, which had begun to protrude outward. To curve. Then, with a laugh, she cried: “Aye, so it does! Here comes Mia to the feast! May it serve both her and the chap who grows inside her! May it serve them very well!”

And she did feast, but not in one place and never from one of the plates. She hated the plates, the white-and-blue *forspecials*. She didn’t know why and didn’t care to know. What she cared about was the food. She walked along the table like a woman at the world’s grandest buffet, taking things with her fingers and tossing them into her mouth, sometimes chewing meat hot and tender right off the bone before slinging the joints back onto their serving platters. A few times she missed these and the chunks of meat would go rolling across the white linen tablecloth, leaving splotches of juice in nosebleed stains. One of these rolling roasts overturned a gravy-boat. One smashed a

crystal serving dish filled with cranberry jelly. A third rolled clean off the far side of the table, where Mia heard something drag it underneath. There was a brief, squealing squabble, followed by a howl of pain as something sank its teeth into something else. Then silence. It was brief, though, and soon broken by Mia's laughter. She wiped her greasy fingers on her bosom, doing it slowly. Enjoying the way the stains of the mixed meats and juices spread on the expensive silk. Enjoying the ripening curves of her breasts and the feel of her nipples under her fingertips, rough and hard and excited.

She made her way slowly down the table, talking to herself in many voices, creating a kind of lunatic chitchat.

How they hangin, honey?

Oh they hanging just fine, thank you so much for asking, Mia.

Do you really believe that Oswald was working alone when he shot Kennedy?

Never in a million years, darling—that was a CIA job the whole way. Them, or those honky millionaires from the Alabama steel crescent.

Bombingham, Alabama, honey, ain't it the truth?

Have you heard the new Joan Baez record?

My God, yes, doesn't she sing like an angel? I hear that she and Bob Dylan are going to get themselves married . . .

And on and on, chitter and chatter. Roland heard Odetta's cultured voice and Detta's rough but colorful profanity. He heard Susannah's voice, and many others, as well. How many women in her head? How many personalities, formed and half-formed? He watched her reach over the empty plates that weren't there and empty glasses (also not there), eating directly from the serving platters, chewing everything with the same hungry relish, her face gradually picking up the shine of grease, the bodice of her gown (which he did not see but sensed) darkening as she wiped her fingers there again and again, squeezing the cloth, matting it against her breasts—these motions were too clear to mistake. And at each stop, before moving on, she would seize the empty air in front of her and throw a plate he could not see either on the floor at her feet or across the table at a wall that must exist in her dream.

"There!" she'd scream in the defiant voice of Detta Walker. *"There, you nasty old Blue Lady, I done broke it again! I broke yo' fuckin plate, and*

how do you like it? How do you like it now?"

Then, stepping to the next place, she might utter a pleasant but restrained little trill of laughter and ask so-and-so how their boy so-and-so was coming along down there at Morehouse, and wasn't it wonderful to have such a fine school for people of color, just the most *wonderful! . . . thing!* And how is your Mamma, dear? Oh I am so *sorry* to hear it, we'll all be praying for her recovery.

Reaching across another of those make-believe plates as she spoke. Grabbing up a great tureen filled with glistening black roe and lemon rinds. Lowering her face into it like a hog dropping its face into the trough. Gobbling. Raising her face again, smiling delicately and demurely in the glow of the electric torches, the fish eggs standing out like black sweat on her brown skin, dotting her cheeks and her brow, nestling around her nostrils like clots of old blood—*Oh yes, I think we are making wonderful progress, folks like that Bull Connor are living in the sunset years now, and the best revenge on them is that they know it—* and then she would throw the tureen backward over her head like a crazed volleyball player, some of the roe raining down in her hair (Roland could almost see it), and when the tureen smashed against the stone, her polite isn't-this-a-wonderful-party face would cramp into a ghoulish Detta Walker snarl and she might scream, *"Dere, you nasty old Blue Lady, how dat feel? You want to stick some of dat caviar up yo dry-ass cunt, you go on and do it! You go right on! Dat be fine, sho!"*

And then she would move on to the next place. And the next. And the next. Feeding herself in the great banquet hall. Feeding herself and feeding her chap. Never turning to see Roland at all. Never realizing that this place did not, strictly speaking, even exist.

FOUR

Eddie and Jake had been far from Roland's mind and concerns as the four of them (five, if Oy was counted) bedded down after feasting on the fried muffin-balls. He had been focused on Susannah. The gunslinger was quite sure she would go wandering again tonight, and again he would follow after her when she did. Not to see what she was up to; he knew what it would be in advance.

No, his chief purpose had been protection.

Early that afternoon, around the time Jake had returned with his armload of food, Susannah had begun to show signs Roland knew: speech that was clipped and short, movements that were a little too jerky to be graceful, an absent tendency to rub at her temple or above her left eyebrow, as if there was a pain there. Did Eddie not see those signs? Roland wondered. Eddie had been a dull observer indeed when Roland first met him, but he had changed greatly since then, and . . .

And he loved her. *Loved* her. How could he and not see what Roland saw? The signs weren't quite as obvious as they had been on the beach at the edge of the Western Sea, when Detta was preparing to leap forward and wrest control from Odetta, but they were there, all right, and not so different, at that.

On the other hand, Roland's mother had had a saying, *Love stumbles*. It could be that Eddie was simply too close to her to see. *Or doesn't want to*, Roland thought. *Doesn't want to face the idea that we might have to go through that whole business again. The business of making her face herself and her divided nature.*

Except this time it wasn't about *her*. Roland had suspected this for a long time—since before their palaver with the people of River Crossing, in fact—and now he knew. No, it wasn't about *her*.

And so he'd lain there, listening to their breathing lengthen as they dropped off one by one: Oy, then Jake, then Susannah. Eddie last.

Well . . . not *quite* last. Faintly, very faintly, Roland could hear a murmur of conversation from the folk on the other side of yonder south hill, the ones who were trailing them and watching them. Nerving themselves to step forward and make themselves known, very likely. Roland's ears were sharp, but not quite sharp enough to pick out what they were saying. There were perhaps half a dozen murmured exchanges before someone uttered a loud shushing hiss. Then there was silence, except for the low, intermittent snuffling of the wind in the treetops. Roland lay still, looking up into the darkness where no stars shone, waiting for Susannah to rise. Eventually she did.

But before that, Jake, Eddie, and Oy went todash.

FIVE

Roland and his mates had learned about todash (what there was to learn) from Vannay, the tutor of court in the long-ago when they had been young. They had been a quintet to begin with: Roland, Alain, Cuthbert, Jamie, and Wallace, Vannay's son. Wallace, fiercely intelligent but ever sickly, had died of the falling sickness, sometimes called king's evil. Then they had been four, and under the umbrella of true ka-tet. Vannay had known it as well, and that knowing was surely part of his sorrow.

Cort taught them to navigate by the sun and stars; Vannay showed them compass and quadrant and sextant and taught them the mathematics necessary to use them. Cort taught them to fight. With history, logic problems, and tutorials on what he called "the universal truths," Vannay taught them how they could sometimes avoid having to do so. Cort taught them to kill if they had to. Vannay, with his limp and his sweet but distracted smile, taught them that violence worsened problems far more often than it solved them. He called it the hollow chamber, where all true sounds became distorted by echoes.

He taught them physics—what physics there was. He taught them chemistry—what chemistry was left. He taught them to finish such sentences as "That tree is like a" and "When I'm running I feel as happy as a" and "We couldn't help laughing because." Roland hated these exercises, but Vannay wouldn't let him slip away from them. "Your imagination is a poor thing, Roland," the tutor told him once—Roland might have been eleven at the time. "I will not let you feed it short rations and make it poorer still."

He had taught them the Seven Dials of Magic, refusing to say if he believed in any of them, and Roland thought it was tangential to one of these lessons that Vannay had mentioned todash. Or perhaps you capitalized it, perhaps it was Todash. Roland didn't know for sure. He knew that Vannay had spoken of the Manni sect, people who were far travelers. And hadn't he also mentioned the Wizard's Rainbow?

Roland thought yes, but he had twice had the pink bend o' the rainbow in his own possession, once as a boy and once as a man, and

although he had traveled in it both times—with his friends on the second occasion—it had never taken him todash.

Ah, but how would you know? he asked himself. *How would you know, Roland, when you were inside it?*

Because Cuthbert and Alain would have told him, that was why.

Are you sure?

Some feeling so strange as to be unidentifiable rose in the gunslinger's bosom—was it indignation? horror? perhaps even a sense of betrayal?—as he realized that no, he *wasn't* sure. All he knew was that the ball had taken him deep into itself, and he had been lucky to ever get out again.

There's no ball here, he thought, and again it was that other voice—the dry, implacable voice of his old limping tutor, whose grief for his only son had never really ended—that answered him, and the words were the same:

Are you sure?

Gunslinger, are you sure?

SIX

It started with a low crackling sound. Roland's first thought was the campfire: one of them had gotten some green fir boughs in there, the coals had finally reached them, and they were producing that sound as the needles smoldered. But—

The sound grew louder, became a kind of electric buzzing. Roland sat up and looked across the dying fire. His eyes widened and his heart began to speed up.

Susannah had turned from Eddie, had drawn away a little, too. Eddie had reached out and so had Jake. Their hands touched. And, as Roland looked at them, they commenced fading in and out of existence in a series of jerky pulses. Oy was doing the same thing. When they were gone, they were replaced by a dull gray glow that approximated the shapes and positions of their bodies, as if something was holding their places in reality. Each time they came back, there would be that crackling buzz. Roland could see their closed eyelids ripple as the balls rolled beneath.

Dreaming. But not *just* dreaming. This was todash, the passing between two worlds. Supposedly the Manni could do it. And supposedly some pieces of the Wizard's Rainbow could *make* you do it, whether you wanted to or not. One piece of it in particular.

They could get caught between and fall, Roland thought. Vannay said that, too. He said that going todash was full of peril.

What else had he said? Roland had no time to recall, for at that moment Susannah sat up, slipped the soft leather caps Roland had made her over the stumps of her legs, then hoisted herself into her wheelchair. A moment later she was rolling toward the ancient trees on the north side of the road. It was directly away from the place where the watchers were camped; there was that much to be grateful for.

Roland stayed where he was for a moment, torn. But in the end, his course was clear enough. He couldn't wake them up while they were in the todash state; to do so would be a horrible risk. All he could do was follow Susannah, as he had on other nights, and hope she didn't get herself into trouble.

You might also do some thinking about what happens next. That was Vannay's dry, lecturely voice. Now that his old tutor was back, he apparently meant to stay for awhile. Reason was never your strong point, but you must do it, nevertheless. You'll want to wait until your visitors make themselves known, of course—until you can be sure of what they want—but eventually, Roland, you must act. Think first, however. Sooner would be better than later.

Yes, sooner was always better than later.

There was another loud, buzzing crackle. Eddie and Jake were back, Jake lying with his arm curled around Oy, and then they were gone again, nothing left where they had been but a faint ectoplasmic shimmer. Well, never mind. His job was to follow Susannah. As for Eddie and Jake, there would be water if God willed it.

Suppose you come back here and they're gone? It happens, Vannay said so. What will you tell her if she wakes and finds them both gone, her husband and her adopted son?

It was nothing he could worry about now. Right now there was Susannah to worry about, Susannah to keep safe.

SEVEN

On the north side of the road, old trees with enormous trunks stood at considerable distances from each other. Their branches might entwine and create a solid canopy overhead, but at ground level there was plenty of room for Susannah's wheelchair, and she moved along at a good pace, weaving between the vast ironwoods and pines, rolling downhill over a fragrant duff of mulch and needles.

Not Susannah. Not Detta or Odetta, either. This one calls herself Mia.

Roland didn't care if she called herself Queen o' Green Days, as long as she came back safe, and the other two were still there when she did.

He began to smell a brighter, fresher green: reeds and water-weeds. With it came the smell of mud, the thump of frogs, the sarcastic *hool! hool!* salute of an owl, the splash of water as something jumped. This was followed by a thin shriek as something died, maybe the jumper, maybe the jumped-upon. Underbrush began to spring up in the duff, first dotting it and then crowding it out. The tree-cover thinned. Mosquitoes and chiggers whined. Binnie-bugs stitched the air. The bog-smells grew stronger.

The wheels of the chair had passed over the duff without leaving any trace. As duff gave way to straggling low growth, Roland began to see broken twigs and torn-off leaves marking her passage. Then, as she reached the more or less level low ground, the wheels began to sink into the increasingly soft earth. Twenty paces farther on, he began to see liquid seeping into the tracks. She was too wise to get stuck, though—too crafty. Twenty paces beyond the first signs of seepage, he came to the wheelchair itself, abandoned. Lying on the seat were her pants and shirt. She had gone on into the bog naked save for the leather caps that covered her stumps.

Down here there were ribbons of mist hanging over puddles of standing water. Grassy hummocks rose; on one, wired to a dead log that had been planted upright, was what Roland at first took for an ancient stuffy-guy. When he got closer, he saw it was a human skeleton. The skull's forehead had been smashed inward, leaving a triangle of darkness between the staring sockets. Some sort of primitive war-club had made that wound, no doubt, and the corpse

(or its lingering *spirit*) had been left to mark this as the edge of some tribe's territory. They were probably long dead or moved on, but caution was ever a virtue. Roland drew his gun and continued after the woman, stepping from hummock to hummock, wincing at the occasional jab of pain in his right hip. It took all his concentration and agility to keep up with her. Partly this was because she hadn't Roland's interest in staying as dry as possible. She was as naked as a mermaid and moved like one, as comfortable in the muck and swamp-ooze as on dry land. She crawled over the larger hummocks, slid through the water between them, pausing every now and then to pick off a leech. In the darkness, the walking and sliding seemed to merge into a single slithering motion that was eely and disturbing.

She went on perhaps a quarter of a mile into the increasingly oozy bog with the gunslinger following patiently along behind her. He kept as quiet as possible, although he doubted if there was any need; the part of her that saw and felt and thought was far from here.

At last she came to a halt, standing on her truncated legs and holding to tough tangles of brush on either side in order to keep her balance. She looked out over the black surface of a pond, head up, body still. The gunslinger couldn't tell if the pond was big or small; its borders were lost in the mist. Yet there was light here, some sort of faint and unfocused radiance which seemed to lie just beneath the surface of the water itself, perhaps emanating from submerged and slowly rotting logs.

She stood there, surveying this muck-crusting woodland pond like a queen surveying a . . . a what? What did she see? A banquet hall? That was what he had come to believe. Almost to see. It was a whisper from her mind to his, and it dovetailed with what she said and did. The banqueting hall was her mind's ingenious way of keeping Susannah apart from Mia as it had kept Odetta apart from Detta all those years. Mia might have any number of reasons for wanting to keep her existence a secret, but surely the greatest of these had to do with the life she carried inside her.

The chap, she called it.

Then, with a suddenness that still startled him (although he had seen this before, as well), she began to hunt, slipping in eerie splashless silence first along the edge of the pond and then a little way

out into it. Roland watched her with an expression that contained both horror and lust as she knitted and wove her way in and out of the reeds, between and over the tussocks. Now, instead of picking the leeches off her skin and throwing them away, she tossed them into her mouth like pieces of candy. The muscles in her thighs rippled. Her brown skin gleamed like wet silk. When she turned (Roland had by this time stepped behind a tree and become one of the shadows), he could clearly see the way her breasts had ripened.

The problem, of course, extended beyond “the chap.” There was Eddie to consider, as well. *What the hell’s wrong with you, Roland?* Roland could hear him saying. *That might be our kid. I mean, you can’t know for sure that it isn’t. Yeah, yeah, I know something had her while we were yanking Jake through, but that doesn’t necessarily mean . . .*

On and on and on, blah-blah-blah as Eddie himself might say, and why? Because he loved her and would want the child of their union. And because arguing came as naturally to Eddie Dean as breathing. Cuthbert had been the same.

In the reeds, the naked woman’s hand pistoned forward and seized a good-sized frog. She squeezed and the frog popped, squirting guts and a shiny load of eggs between her fingers. Its head burst. She lifted it to her mouth and ate it greedily down while its greenish-white rear legs still twitched, licking the blood and shiny ropes of tissue from her knuckles. Then she mimed throwing something down and cried out “*How you like that, you stinkin Blue Lady?*” in a low, guttural voice that made Roland shiver. It was Detta Walker’s voice. Detta at her meanest and craziest.

With hardly a pause she moved on again, questing. Next it was a small fish . . . then another frog . . . and then a real prize: a water-rat that squeaked and writhed and tried to bite. She crushed the life out of it and stuffed it into her mouth, paws and all. A moment later she bent her head down and regurgitated the waste—a twisted mass of fur and splintered bones.

Show him this, then—always assuming that he and Jake get back from whatever adventure they’re on, that is. And say, “I know that women are supposed to have strange cravings when they carry a child, Eddie, but doesn’t this seem a little too strange? Look at her, questing through the reeds and ooze

like some sort of human alligator. Look at her and tell me she's doing that in order to feed your child. Any human child."

Still he would argue. Roland knew it. What he *didn't* know was what Susannah herself might do when Roland told her she was growing something that craved raw meat in the middle of the night. And as if this business wasn't worrisome enough, now there was todash. And strangers who had come looking for them. Yet the strangers were the least of his problems. In fact, he found their presence almost comforting. He didn't know what they wanted, and yet he *did* know. He had met them before, many times. At bottom, they always wanted the same thing.

EIGHT

Now the woman who called herself Mia began to talk as she hunted. Roland was familiar with this part of her ritual as well, but it chilled him nevertheless. He was looking right at her and it was still hard to believe all those different voices could be coming from the same throat. She asked herself how she was. She told herself she was doing fine, thank you so *vereh* much. She spoke of someone named Bill, or perhaps it was Bull. She asked after someone's mother. She asked someone about a place called Morehouse, and then in a deep, gravelly voice—a man's voice, beyond doubt—she told herself that she didn't go to Morehouse or *no* house. She laughed raucously at this, so it must have been some sort of joke. She introduced herself several times (as she had on other nights) as Mia, a name Roland knew well from his early life in Gilead. It was almost a holy name. Twice she curtsied, lifting invisible skirts in a way that tugged at the gunslinger's heart—he had first seen that sort of curtsy in Mejis, when he and his friends Alain and Cuthbert had been sent there by their fathers.

She worked her way back to the edge of the

(hall)

pond, glistening and wet. She stayed there without moving for five minutes, then ten. The owl uttered its derisive salute again—*hool!*—and as if in response, the moon came out of the clouds for a brief look around. When it did, some small animal's bit of shady

concealment disappeared. It tried to dart past the woman. She snared it faultlessly and plunged her face into its writhing belly. There was a wet crunching noise, followed by several smacking bites. She held the remains up in the moonlight, her dark hands and wrists darker with its blood. Then she tore it in half and bolted down the remains. She gave a resounding belch and rolled herself back into the water. This time she made a great splash, and Roland knew tonight's banqueting was done. She had even eaten some of the binnie-bugs, snatching them effortlessly out of the air. He could only hope nothing she'd taken in would sicken her. So far, nothing had.

While she made her rough toilet, washing off the mud and blood, Roland retreated back the way he'd come, ignoring the more frequent pains in his hip and moving with all his guile. He had watched her go through this three times before, and once had been enough to see how gruesomely sharp her senses were while in this state.

He paused at her wheelchair, looking around to make sure he'd left no trace of himself. He saw a bootprint, smoothed it away, then tossed a few leaves over it for good measure. Not too many; too many might be worse than none at all. With that done, he headed back toward the road and their camp, not hurrying anymore. She would pause for a little housekeeping of her own before going on. What would Mia see as she was cleaning Susannah's wheelchair, he wondered? Some sort of small, motorized cart? It didn't matter. What did was how clever she was. If he hadn't awakened with a need to make water just as she left on one of her earlier expeditions, he quite likely still wouldn't know about her hunting trips, and he was supposed to be clever about such things.

Not as clever as she, maggot. Now, as if the ghost of Vannay were not enough, here was Cort to lecture him. *She's shown you before, hasn't she?*

Yes. She had shown him cleverness as three women. Now there was this fourth.

NINE

When Roland saw the break in the trees ahead—the road they'd been following, and the place where they'd camped for the night—he took

two long, deep breaths. These were meant to steady him and didn't succeed very well.

Water if God wills it, he reminded himself. About the great matters, Roland, you have no say.

Not a comfortable truth, especially for a man on a quest such as his, but one he'd learned to live with.

He took another breath, then stepped out. He released the air in a long, relieved sigh as he saw Eddie and Jake lying deeply asleep beside the dead fire. Jake's right hand, which had been linked with Eddie's left when the gunslinger had followed Susannah out of camp, now circled Oy's body.

The bumbler opened one eye and regarded Roland. Then he closed it again.

Roland couldn't hear her coming, but sensed her just the same. He lay down quickly, rolled over onto his side, and put his face in the crook of his elbow. And from this position he watched as the wheelchair rolled out of the trees. She had cleaned it quickly but well. Roland couldn't see a single spot of mud. The spokes gleamed in the moonlight.

She parked the chair where it had been before, slipped out of it with her usual grace, and moved across to where Eddie lay. Roland watched her approach her husband's sleeping form with some anxiety. Anyone, he thought, who had met Detta Walker would have felt that anxiety. Because the woman who called herself *mother* was simply too close to what Detta had been.

Lying completely still, like one in sleep's deepest sling, Roland prepared himself to move.

Then she brushed the hair back from the side of Eddie's face and kissed the hollow of his temple. The tenderness in that gesture told the gunslinger all he needed to know. It was safe to sleep. He closed his eyes and let the darkness take him.

CHAPTER IV:

PALAVER

ONE

When Roland woke in the morning, Susannah was still asleep but Eddie and Jake were up. Eddie had built a small new fire on the gray bones of the old one. He and the boy sat close to it for the warmth, eating what Eddie called gunslinger burritos. They looked both excited and worried.

“Roland,” Eddie said, “I think we need to talk. Something happened to us last night—”

“I know,” Roland said. “I saw. You went todash.”

“Todash?” Jake asked. “What’s that?”

Roland started to tell them, then shook his head. “If we’re going to palaver, Eddie, you’d better wake Susannah up. That way we won’t have to double back over the first part.” He glanced south. “And hopefully our new friends won’t interrupt us until we’ve had our talk. They’re none of this.” But already he was wondering about that.

He watched with more than ordinary interest as Eddie shook Susannah awake, quite sure but by no means positive that it *would* be Susannah who opened her eyes. It was. She sat up, stretched, ran her fingers through her tight curls. “What’s your problem, honeychile? I was good for another hour, at least.”

“We need to talk, Suze,” Eddie said.

“All you want, but not quite yet,” she said. “*God*, but I’m stiff.”

“Sleeping on hard ground’ll do it every time,” Eddie said.

*Not to mention hunting naked in the bogs and damp*s, Roland thought.

“Pour me some water, sug.” She held out her palms, and Eddie filled them with water from one of the skins. She dashed this over her

cheeks and into her eyes, gave out a little shivery cry, and said, "Cold."

"Old!" Oy said.

"Not yet," she told the bumbler, "but you give me a few more months like the last few, and I *will* be. Roland, you Mid-World folks know about coffee, right?"

Roland nodded. "From the plantations of the Outer Arc. Down south."

"If we come across some, we'll hook it, won't we? You promise me, now."

"I promise," Roland said.

Susannah, meanwhile, was studying Eddie. "What's going on? You boys don't look so good."

"More dreams," Eddie said.

"Me too," Jake said.

"Not dreams," the gunslinger said. "Susannah, how did *you* sleep?"

She looked at him candidly. Roland did not sense even the shadow of a lie in her answer. "Like a rock, as I usually do. One thing all this traveling *is* good for—you can throw your damn Nembutal away."

"What's this toadish thing, Roland?" Eddie asked.

"Todash," he said, and explained it to them as well as he could. What he remembered best from Vannay's teachings was how the Manni spent long periods fasting in order to induce the right state of mind, and how they traveled around, looking for exactly the right spot in which to induce the todash state. This was something they determined with magnets and large plumb-bobs.

"Sounds to me like these guys would have been right at home down in Needle Park," Eddie said.

"Anywhere in Greenwich Village," Susannah added.

" 'Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it?' " Jake said in a grave, deep voice, and they all laughed. Even Roland laughed a little.

"Todash is another way of traveling," Eddie said when the laughter had stopped. "Like the doors. And the glass balls. Is that right?"

Roland started to say yes, then hesitated. "I think they might all be variations of the same thing," he said. "And according to Vannay, the glass balls—the pieces of the Wizard's Rainbow—make going todash easier. Sometimes *too* easy."

Jake said, “We really flickered on and off like . . . like lightbulbs? What you call sparklights?”

“Yes—you appeared and disappeared. When you were gone, there was a dim glow where you’d been, almost as if something were holding your place for you.”

“Thank God if it was,” Eddie said. “When it ended . . . when those chimes started playing again and we kicked loose . . . I’ll tell you the truth, I didn’t think we were going to get back.”

“Neither did I,” Jake said quietly. The sky had clouded over again, and in the dull morning light, the boy looked very pale. “I lost you.”

“I was never so glad to see anyplace in my life as I was when I opened my eyes and saw this little piece of road,” Eddie said. “And you beside me, Jake. Even Rover looked good to me.” He glanced at Oy, then over at Susannah. “Nothing like this happened to you last night, hon?”

“We’d have seen her,” Jake said.

“Not if she todashed off to someplace else,” Eddie said.

Susannah shook her head, looking troubled. “I just slept the night away. As I told you. What about you, Roland?”

“Nothing to report,” Roland said. As always, he would keep his own counsel until his instinct told him it was time to share. And besides, what he’d said wasn’t exactly a lie. He looked keenly at Eddie and Jake. “There’s trouble, isn’t there?”

Eddie and Jake looked at each other, then back at Roland. Eddie sighed. “Yeah, probably.”

“How bad? Do you know?”

“I don’t think we do. Do we, Jake?”

Jake shook his head.

“But I’ve got some ideas,” Eddie went on, “and if I’m right, we’ve got a problem. A *big* one.” He swallowed. Hard. Jake touched his hand, and the gunslinger was concerned to see how quickly and firmly Eddie took hold of the boy’s fingers.

Roland reached out and drew Susannah’s hand into his own. He had a brief vision of that hand seizing a frog and squeezing the guts out of it. He put it out of his mind. The woman who had done that was not here now.

“Tell us,” he said to Eddie and Jake. “Tell us everything. We would hear it all.”

“Every word,” Susannah agreed. “For your fathers’ sakes.”

TWO

They recounted what had happened to them in the New York of 1977. Roland and Susannah listened, fascinated, as they told of following Jake to the bookstore, and of seeing Balazar and his gentlemen pull up in front.

“Huh!” Susannah said. “The very same bad boys! It’s almost like a Dickens novel.”

“Who is Dickens, and what is a novel?” Roland asked.

“A novel’s a long story set down in a book,” she said. “Dickens wrote about a dozen. He was maybe the best who ever lived. In his stories, folks in this big city called London kept meeting people they knew from other places or long ago. I had a teacher in college who hated the way that always happened. He said Dickens’s stories were full of easy coincidences.”

“A teacher who either didn’t know about ka or didn’t believe in it,” Roland said.

Eddie was nodding. “Yeah, this is ka, all right. No doubt.”

“I’m more interested in the woman who wrote *Charlie the Choo-Choo* than this storyteller Dickens,” Roland said. “Jake, I wonder if you’d—”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Jake said, unbuckling the straps of his pack. Almost reverently, he slid out the battered book telling the adventures of Charlie the locomotive and his friend, Engineer Bob. They all looked at the cover. The name below the picture was still Beryl Evans.

“Man,” Eddie said. “That is so weird. I mean, I don’t want to get sidetracked, or anything . . .” He paused, realizing he had just made a railroading pun, then went on. Roland wasn’t very interested in puns and jokes, anyway. “. . . but that is *weird*. The one Jake bought—Jake Seventy-seven—was by Claudia something Bachman.”

“Inez,” Jake said. “Also, there was a y. A lowercase y. Any of you know what that means?”

None of them did, but Roland said there had been names like it in Mejis. “I believe it was some sort of added honorific. And I’m not sure it *is* to the side. Jake, you said the sign in the window was different from before. How?”

“I can’t remember. But you know what? I think if you hypnotized me again—you know, with the bullet—I could.”

“And in time I may,” Roland said, “but this morning time is short.”

Back to that again, Eddie thought. Yesterday it hardly existed, and now it’s short. But it’s all about time, somehow, isn’t it? Roland’s old days, our old days, and these new days. These dangerous new days.

“Why?” Susannah asked.

“Our friends,” Roland said, and nodded to the south. “I have a feeling they’ll be making themselves known to us soon.”

“*Are* they our friends?” Jake asked.

“That really *is* to the side,” Roland said, and again wondered if that were really true. “For now, let’s turn the mind of our khef to this Bookstore of the Mind, or whatever it’s called. You saw the harriers from the Leaning Tower greensticking the owner, didn’t you? This man Tower, or Toren.”

“Pressuring him, you mean?” Eddie asked. “Twisting his arm?”

“Yes.”

“Sure they were,” Jake said.

“Were,” Oy put in. “Sure were.”

“Bet you anything that Tower and Toren are really the same name,” Susannah said. “That *toren’s* Dutch for ‘tower.’ ” She saw Roland getting ready to speak, and held up her hand. “It’s the way folks often do things in our bit of the universe, Roland—change the foreign name to one that’s more . . . well . . . American.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “So Stempowicz becomes Stamper . . . Yakov becomes Jacob . . . or . . . ”

“Or Beryl Evans becomes Claudia y Inez Bachman,” Jake said. He laughed but didn’t sound very amused.

Eddie picked a half-burned stick out of the fire and began to doodle with it in the dirt. One by one the Great Letters formed: C . . . L . . . A . . . U. “Big Nose even *said* Tower was Dutch. ‘A squarehead’s always a squarehead, right, boss?’ ” He looked at Jake for

confirmation. Jake nodded, then took the stick and continued on with it: D . . . I . . . A.

“Him being Dutch makes a lot of sense, you know,” Susannah said. “At one time, the Dutch owned most of Manhattan.”

“You want another Dickens touch?” Jake asked. He wrote y in the dirt after CLAUDIA, then looked up at Susannah. “How about the haunted house where I came through into this world?”

“The Mansion,” Eddie said.

“The Mansion in *Dutch Hill*,” Jake said.

“Dutch Hill. Yeah, that’s right. Goddam.”

“Let’s go to the core,” Roland said. “I think it’s the agreement paper you saw. And you felt you *had* to see it, didn’t you?”

Eddie nodded.

“Did your need feel like a part of following the Beam?”

“Roland, I think it *was* the Beam.”

“The way to the Tower, in other words.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. He was thinking about the way clouds flowed along the Beam, the way shadows bent along the Beam, the way every twig of every tree seemed to turn in its direction. *All things serve the Beam*, Roland had told them, and Eddie’s need to see the paper Balazar had put in front of Calvin Tower had felt like a need, harsh and imperative.

“Tell me what it said.”

Eddie bit his lip. He didn’t feel as scared about this as he had about carving the key which had ultimately allowed them to rescue Jake and pull him through to this side, but it was close. Because, like the key, this was important. If he forgot something, worlds might crash.

“Man, I can’t remember it all, not word for word—”

Roland made an impatient gesture. “If I need that, I’ll hypnotize you and *get* it word for word.”

“Do you think it matters?” Susannah asked.

“I think it *all* matters,” Roland said.

“What if hypnosis doesn’t work on me?” Eddie asked. “What if I’m not, like, a good subject?”

“Leave that to me,” Roland said.

“Nineteen,” Jake said abruptly. They all turned toward him. He was looking at the letters he and Eddie had drawn in the dirt beside the

dead campfire. “Claudia y Inez Bachman. Nineteen letters.”

THREE

Roland considered for a moment, then let it pass. If the number nineteen *was* somehow part of this, its meaning would declare itself in time. For now there were other matters.

“The paper,” he said. “Let’s stay with that for now. Tell me everything about it you can remember.”

“Well, it was a legal agreement, with the seal at the bottom and everything.” Eddie paused, struck by a fairly basic question. Roland *probably* got this part of it—he’d been a kind of law enforcement officer, after all—but it wouldn’t hurt to be sure. “You know about lawyers, don’t you?”

Roland spoke in his driest tone. “You forget that I came from Gilead, Eddie. The most inner of the Inner Baronies. We had more merchants and farmers and manufactors than lawyers, I think, but the count would have been close.”

Susannah laughed. “You make me think of a scene from Shakespeare, Roland. Two characters—might have been Falstaff and Prince Hal, I’m not sure—are talkin about what they’re gonna do when they win the war and take over. And one of em says, ‘First we’ll kill all the lawyers.’ ”

“It would be a fairish way to start,” Roland said, and Eddie found his thoughtful tone rather chilling. Then the gunslinger turned to him again. “Go on. If you can add anything, Jake, please do. And relax, both of you, for your fathers’ sakes. For now I only want a sketch.”

Eddie supposed he’d known that, but hearing Roland say it made him feel better. “All right. It was a Memorandum of Agreement. That was right at the top, in big letters. At the bottom it said *Agreed to*, and there were two signatures. One was Calvin Tower. The other was Richard someone. Do you remember, Jake?”

“Sayre,” Jake said. “Richard Patrick Sayre.” He paused briefly, lips moving, then nodded. “Nineteen letters.”

“And what did it say, this agreement?” Roland asked.

“Not all that much, if you want to know the truth,” Eddie said. “Or that’s what it seemed like to me, anyway. Basically it said that Tower owned a vacant lot on the corner of Forty-sixth Street and Second Avenue—”

“*The* vacant lot,” Jake said. “The one with the rose in it.”

“Yeah, that one. Anyway, Tower signed this agreement on July 15th, 1976. Sombra Corporation gave him a hundred grand. What he gave them, so far as I could tell, was a promise not to sell the lot to anyone but Sombra for the next year, to take care of it—pay the taxes and such—and then to give Sombra first right of purchase, assuming he hasn’t sold it to them by then, anyway. Which he hadn’t when we were there, but the agreement still had a month and a half to run.”

“Mr. Tower said the hundred thousand was all spent,” Jake put in.

“Was there anything in the agreement about this Sombra Corporation having a topping privilege?” Susannah asked.

Eddie and Jake thought it over, exchanged a glance, then shook their heads.

“Sure?” Susannah asked.

“Not quite, but *pretty* sure,” Eddie said. “You think it matters?”

“I don’t know,” Susannah said. “The kind of agreement you’re talking about . . . well, without a topping privilege, it just doesn’t seem to make sense. What does it boil down to, when you stop to think about it? ‘I, Calvin Tower, agree to think about selling you my vacant lot. You pay me a hundred thousand dollars and I’ll think about it for a whole year. When I’m not drinking coffee and playing chess with my friends, that is. And when the year’s up, maybe I’ll sell it to you and maybe I’ll keep it and maybe I’ll just auction it off to the highest bidder. And if you don’t like it, sweetcheeks, you just go spit.’ ”

“You’re forgetting something,” Roland said mildly.

“What?” Susannah asked.

“This Sombra is no ordinary law-abiding combination. Ask yourself if an ordinary law-abiding combination would hire someone like Balazar to carry their messages.”

“You have a point,” Eddie said. “Tower was *mucho* scared.”

“Anyway,” Jake said, “it makes at least a few things clearer. The sign I saw in the vacant lot, for instance. This Sombra Company also got

the right to ‘advertise forthcoming projects’ there for their hundred thousand. Did you see that part, Eddie?”

“I think so. Right after the part about Tower not permitting any liens or encumbrances on his property, because of Sombra’s ‘stated interest,’ wasn’t it?”

“Right,” Jake said. “The sign I saw in the lot said . . . ” He paused, thinking, then raised his hands and looked between them, as if reading a sign only he could see: “MILLS CONSTRUCTION AND SOMBRA REAL ESTATE ASSOCIATES ARE CONTINUING TO REMAKE THE FACE OF MANHATTAN. And then, COMING SOON, TURTLE BAY LUXURY CONDOMINIUMS.”

“So that’s what they want it for,” Eddie said. “Condos. But—”

“What are condominiums?” Susannah asked, frowning. “It sounds like some newfangled kind of spice rack.”

“It’s a kind of co-op apartment deal,” Eddie said. “They probably had em in your when, but by a different name.”

“Yeah,” Susannah said with some asperity. “We called em co-ops. Or sometimes we went *way* downtown and called em apartment buildings.”

“It doesn’t matter because it was never about condos,” Jake said. “Never about the building the sign said they were going to put there, for that matter. All that’s only, you know . . . shoot, what’s the word?”

“Camouflage?” Roland suggested.

Jake grinned. “Camouflage, yeah. It’s about the *rose*, not the building! And they can’t get at it until they own the ground it grows on. I’m sure of it.”

“You may be right about the building’s not meaning anything,” Susannah said, “but that Turtle Bay name has a certain resonance, wouldn’t you say?” She looked at the gunslinger. “That part of Manhattan is *called* Turtle Bay, Roland.”

He nodded, unsurprised. The Turtle was one of the twelve Guardians, and almost certainly stood at the far end of the Beam upon which they now traveled.

“The people from Mills Construction might not know about the rose,” Jake said, “but I bet the ones from Sombra Corporation do.” His hand stole into Oy’s fur, which was thick enough at the billy-bumbler’s neck to make his fingers disappear entirely. “I think that

somewhere in New York City—in some business building, probably in Turtle Bay on the East Side—there’s a door marked SOMBRA CORPORATION. And someplace behind that door there’s *another* door. The kind that takes you here.”

For a minute they sat thinking about it—about worlds spinning on a single axle in dying harmony—and no one said anything.

FOUR

“Here’s what I think is happening,” Eddie said. “Suze, Jake, feel free to step in if you think I’m getting it wrong. This guy Cal Tower’s some sort of custodian for the rose. He may not know it on a conscious level, but he must be. Him and maybe his whole family before him. It explains the name.”

“Only he’s the last,” Jake said.

“You can’t be sure of that, hon,” Susannah said.

“No wedding ring,” Jake responded, and Susannah nodded, giving him that one, at least provisionally.

“Maybe at one time there were lots of Torens owning lots of New York property,” Eddie said, “but those days are gone. Now the only thing standing between the Sombra Corporation and the rose is one nearly broke fat guy who changed his name. He’s a . . . what do you call someone who loves books?”

“A bibliophile,” Susannah said.

“Yeah, one of those. And George Biondi may not be Einstein, but he said at least one smart thing while we were eavesdropping. He said Tower’s place wasn’t a real shop but just a hole you poured money into. What’s going on with him is a pretty old story where we come from, Roland. When my Ma used to see some rich guy on TV—Donald Trump, for instance—”

“Who?” Susannah asked.

“You don’t know him, he would’ve been just a kid back in ’64. And it doesn’t matter. ‘Shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations,’ my mother would tell us. ‘It’s the American way, boys.’”

“So here’s Tower, and he’s sort of like Roland—the last of his line. He sells off a piece of property here and a piece there, making his taxes, making his house payments, keeping up with the credit cards

and the doctor bills, paying for his stock. And yeah, I'm making this up . . . except somehow it doesn't feel that way."

"No," Jake said. He spoke in a low, fascinated voice. "It doesn't."

"Perhaps you shared his khaf," Roland said. "More likely, you touched him. As my old friend Alain used to. Go on, Eddie."

"And every year he tells himself the bookstore'll turn around. Catch on, maybe, the way things in New York sometimes do. Get out of the red and into the black and then he'll be okay. And finally there's only one thing left to sell: lot two-ninety-eight on Block Nineteen in Turtle Bay."

"Two-nine-eight adds up to nineteen," Susannah said. "I wish I could decide if that means something or if it's just Blue Car Syndrome."

"What's Blue Car Syndrome?" Jake asked.

"When you buy a blue car, you see blue cars everywhere."

"Not here, you don't," Jake said.

"Not here," Oy put in, and they all looked at him. Days, sometimes whole weeks would go by, and Oy would do nothing but give out the occasional echo of their talk. Then he would say something that might almost have been the product of original thought. But you didn't know. Not for sure. Not even Jake knew for sure.

The way we don't know for sure about nineteen, Susannah thought, and gave the bumbler a pat on the head. Oy responded with a companionable wink.

"He holds onto that lot until the bitter end," Eddie said. "I mean hey, he doesn't even own the crappy building his bookstore's in, he only leases it."

Jake took over. "Tom and Jerry's Artistic Deli goes out of business, and Tower has it torn down. Because part of him wants to sell the lot. That part of him says he'd be crazy not to." Jake fell silent for a moment, thinking about how some thoughts came in the middle of the night. Crazy thoughts, crazy ideas, and voices that wouldn't shut up. "But there's *another* part of him, another voice—"

"The voice of the Turtle," Susannah put in quietly.

"Yes, the Turtle or the Beam," Jake agreed. "They're probably the same thing. And this voice tells him he has to hold onto it at all costs."

He looked at Eddie. “Do you think he knows about the rose? Do you think he goes down there sometimes and looks at it?”

“Does a rabbit shit in the woods?” Eddie responded. “Sure he goes. And sure he *knows*. On some level he *must* know. Because a corner lot in Manhattan . . . how much would a thing like that be worth, Susannah?”

“In my time, probably a million bucks,” she said. “By 1977, God knows. Three? Five?” She shrugged. “Enough to let sai Tower go on selling books at a loss for the rest of his life, provided he was reasonably careful about how he invested the principal.”

Eddie said, “Everything about this shows how reluctant he is to sell. I mean Suze already pointed out how little Sombra got for their hundred grand.”

“But they *did* get something,” Roland said. “Something very important.”

“A foot in the door,” Eddie said.

“You say true. And now, as the term of their agreement winds down, they send your world’s version of the Big Coffin Hunters. Hard-caliber boys. If greed or necessity doesn’t compel Tower to sell them the land with the rose on it, they’ll terrify him into it.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. And who would stand on Tower’s side? Maybe Aaron Deepneau. Maybe no one. “So what do we do?”

“Buy it ourselves,” Susannah said promptly. “Of course.”

FIVE

There was a moment of thunderstruck silence, and then Eddie nodded thoughtfully. “Sure, why not? The Sombra Corporation doesn’t have a topping privilege in their little agreement—they probably tried, but Tower wouldn’t go for it. So sure, we’ll buy it. How many deerskins do you think he’ll want? Forty? Fifty? If he’s a real hard bargainer, maybe we can throw in some relics from the Old People. You know, cups and plates and arrowheads. They’d be conversation pieces at cocktail parties.”

Susannah was looking at him reproachfully.

“Okay, maybe not so funny,” Eddie said. “But we have to face the facts, hon. We’re nothing but a bunch of dirty-ass pilgrims currently

camped out in some other reality—I mean, this isn't even Mid-World anymore.”

“Also,” Jake said apologetically, “we weren't even really there, at least not the way you are when you go through one of the doors. They sensed us, but basically we were invisible.”

“Let's take one thing at a time,” Susannah said. “As far as money goes, I have plenty. If we could get at it, that is.”

“How much?” Jake asked. “I know that's sort of impolite—my mother'd faint if she heard me ask someone that, but—”

“We've come a little bit too far to worry about being polite,” Susannah said. “Truth is, honey, I don't exactly know. My dad invented a couple of new dental processes that had to do with capping teeth, and he made the most of it. Started a company called Holmes Dental Industries and handled the financial side mostly by himself until 1959.”

“The year Mort pushed you in front of the subway train,” Eddie said.

She nodded. “That happened in August. About six weeks later, my father had a heart attack—the first of many. Some of it was probably stress over what happened to me, but I won't own all of it. He was a hard driver, pure and simple.”

“You don't have to own *any* of it,” Eddie said. “I mean, it's not as if you *jumped* in front of that subway car, Suze.”

“I know. But how you feel and how long you feel it doesn't always have a lot to do with objective truth. With Mama gone, it was my job to take care of him and I couldn't handle it—I could never completely get the idea that it was my fault out of my head.”

“Gone days,” Roland said, and without much sympathy.

“Thanks, sug,” Susannah said dryly. “You have *such* a way of puttin things in perspective. In any case, my Dad turned over the financial side of the company to his accountant after that first heart attack—an old friend named Moses Carver. After my Dad passed, Pop Mose took care of things for me. I'd guess that when Roland yanked me out of New York and into this charming piece of nowhere, I might have been worth eight or ten million dollars. Would that be enough to buy Mr. Tower's lot, always assuming he'd sell it to us?”

“He probably *would* sell it for deerskins, if Eddie’s right about the Beam,” Roland said. “I believe a deep part of Mr. Tower’s mind and spirit—the ka that made him hold onto the lot for so long in the first place—has been waiting for us.”

“Waiting for the cavalry,” Eddie said with a trace of a grin. “Like Fort Ord in the last ten minutes of a John Wayne movie.”

Roland looked at him, unsmiling. “He’s been waiting for the White.”

Susannah held her brown hands up to her brown face and looked at them. “Then I guess he isn’t waiting for me,” she said.

“Yes,” Roland said, “he is.” And wondered, briefly, what color that other one was. Mia.

“We need a door,” Jake said.

“We need at least two,” Eddie said. “One to deal with Tower, sure. But before we can do that, we need one to go back to Susannah’s when. And I mean as close to when Roland took her as we can possibly get. It’d be a bummer to go back to 1977, get in touch with this guy Carver, and discover he had Odetta Holmes declared legally dead in 1971. That the whole estate had been turned over to relatives in Green Bay or San Berdoo.”

“Or to go back to 1968 and discover Mr. Carver was gone,” Jake said. “Funneled everything into his own accounts and retired to the Costa del Sol.”

Susannah was looking at him with a shocked oh-my-lands expression that would have been funny under other circumstances. “Pop Mose’d never do such a thing! Why, he’s my godfather!”

Jake looked embarrassed. “Sorry. I read lots of mystery novels—Agatha Christie, Rex Stout, Ed McBain—and stuff like that happens in them all the time.”

“Besides,” Eddie said, “big money can do weird things to people.”

She gave him a cold and considering glance that looked strange, almost alien, on her face. Roland, who knew something Eddie and Jake didn’t, thought it a frog-squeezing look. “How would *you* know?” she asked. And then, almost at once, “Oh, sugar, I’m sorry. That was uncalled-for.”

“It’s okay,” Eddie said. He smiled. The smile looked stiff and unsure of itself. “Heat of the moment.” He reached out, took her

hand, squeezed it. She squeezed back. The smile on Eddie's face grew a little, started to look as if it belonged there.

"It's just that I know Moses Carver. He's as honest as the day is long."

Eddie raised his hand—not signaling belief so much as an unwillingness to go any further down that path.

"Let me see if I understand your idea," Roland said. "First, it depends upon our ability to go back to your world of New York at not just one point of when, but two."

There was a pause while they parsed that, and then Eddie nodded. "Right. 1964, to start with. Susannah's been gone a couple of months, but nobody's given up hope or anything like that. She strolls in, everybody claps. Return of the prodigal daughter. We get the dough, which might take a little time—"

"The hard part's apt to be getting Pop Mose to let go of it," Susannah said. "When it comes to money in the bank, that man got a tight grip. And I'm pretty sure that in his heart, he still sees me as eight years old."

"But legally it's yours, right?" Eddie asked. Roland could see that he was still proceeding with some caution. Hadn't quite got over that crack—How would *you* know?—just yet. And the look that had gone with it. "I mean, he can't stop you from taking it, can he?"

"No, honey," she said. "My dad and Pop Mose made me a trust fund, but it went moot in 1959, when I turned twenty-five." She turned her eyes—dark eyes of amazing beauty and expression—upon him. "There. You don't need to devil me about my age anymore, do you? If you can subtract, you can figure it out for yourself."

"It doesn't matter," Eddie said. "Time is a face on the water."

Roland felt gooseflesh run up his arms. Somewhere—perhaps in a glaring, blood-colored field of roses still far from here—a rustie had just walked over his grave.

SIX

"Has to be cash," Jake said in a dry, businesslike tone.

"Huh?" Eddie looked away from Susannah with an effort.

“Cash,” Jake repeated. “No one’d honor a check, even a cashier’s check, that was thirteen years old. Especially not one for millions of dollars.”

“How do you know stuff like that, sug?” Susannah asked.

Jake shrugged. Like it or not (usually he didn’t), he was Elmer Chambers’s son. Elmer Chambers wasn’t one of the world’s good guys—Roland would never call him part of the White—but he had been a master of what network execs called “the kill.” *A Big Coffin Hunter in TV Land*, Jake thought. Maybe that was a little unfair, but saying that Elmer Chambers knew how to play the angles was definitely *not* unfair. And yeah, he was Jake, son of Elmer. He hadn’t forgotten the face of his father, although he had times when he wished that wasn’t so.

“Cash, by all means cash,” Eddie said, breaking the silence. “A deal like this has to be cash. If there’s a check, we cash it in 1964, not 1977. Stick it in a gym-bag—did they have gym-bags in 1964, Suze? Never mind. Doesn’t matter. We stick it in a bag and take it to 1977. Doesn’t have to be the same day Jake bought *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and *Riddle-De-Dum*, but it ought to be close.”

“And it can’t be after July fifteenth of ’77,” Jake put in.

“God, no,” Eddie agreed. “We’d be all too likely to find Balazar’d persuaded Tower to sell, and there we’d be, bag of cash in one hand, thumbs up our asses, and big grins on our faces to pass the time of day.”

There was a moment of silence—perhaps they were considering this lurid image—and then Roland said, “You make it sound very easy, and why not? To you three, the concept of doorways between this world and your world of tack-sees and astin and fottergrafs seems almost as mundane as riding a mule would to me. Or strapping on a sixgun. And there’s good reason for you to feel that way. Each of you has been through one of these doors. Eddie has actually gone both ways—into this world and then back into his own.”

“I gotta tell you that the return trip to New York wasn’t much fun,” Eddie said. “Too much gunplay.” *Not to mention my brother’s severed head rolling across the floor of Balazar’s office.*

“Neither was getting through the door on Dutch Hill,” Jake added.

Roland nodded, ceding these points without yielding his own. “All my life I’ve accepted what you said the first time I knew you, Jake—

what you said when you were dying.”

Jake looked down, pale and without answer. He did not like to recall that (it was mercifully hazy in any case), and knew that Roland didn't, either. *Good!* he thought. *You shouldn't want to remember! You let me drop! You let me die!*

“You said there were other worlds than these,” Roland said, “and there are. New York in all its multiple whens is only one of many. That we are drawn there again and again has to do with the rose. I have no doubt of that, nor do I doubt that in some way I do not understand the rose *is* the Dark Tower. Either that or—”

“Or it's another door,” Susannah murmured. “One that opens on the Dark Tower itself.”

Roland nodded. “The idea has done more than cross my mind. In any case, the Manni know of these other worlds, and in some fashion have dedicated their lives to them. They believe todash to be the holiest of rites and most exalted of states. My father and his friends have long known of the glass balls; this I have told you. That the Wizard's Rainbow, todash, and these magical doors may all be much the same is something we have guessed.”

“Where you going with this, sug?” Susannah asked.

“I'm simply reminding you that I have wandered long,” Roland said. “Because of changes in time—a *softening* of time which I know you all have felt—I've quested after the Dark Tower for over a thousand years, sometimes skipping over whole generations the way a sea-bird may cruise from one wave-top to the next, only wetting its feet in the foam. Never in all this time did I come across one of these doors between the worlds until I came to the ones on the beach at the edge of the Western Sea. I had no idea what they were, although I could have told you something of todash and the bends o' the rainbow.”

Roland looked at them earnestly.

“You speak as though my world were as filled with magical doorways as yours is with . . . ” He thought about it. “. . . with airplanes or stage-buses. That's not so.”

“Where we are now isn't the same as anywhere you've been before, Roland,” Susannah said. She touched his deeply tanned wrist, her

fingers gentle. “We’re not in your world anymore. You said so yourself, back in that version of Topeka where Blaine finally blew his top.”

“Agreed,” Roland said. “I only want you to realize that such doors may be far more rare than you realize. And now you’re speaking not of one but two. Doors you can aim in time, the way you’d aim a gun.”

I do not aim with my hand, Eddie thought, and shivered a little. “When you put it that way, Roland, it *does* sound a little iffy.”

“Then what do we do next?” Jake asked.

“I might be able to help you with that,” a voice said.

They all turned, only Roland without surprise. He had heard the stranger when he arrived, about halfway through their palaver. Roland did turn with interest, however, and one look at the man standing twenty feet from them on the edge of the road was enough to tell him that the newcomer was either from the world of his new friends, or from one right next door.

“Who are you?” Eddie asked.

“Where are your friends?” Susannah asked.

“Where are you from?” Jake asked. His eyes were alight with eagerness.

The stranger wore a long black coat open over a dark shirt with a notched collar. His hair was long and white, sticking up on the sides and in front as if scared. His forehead was marked with a T-shaped scar. “My friends are still back there a little piece,” he said, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the woods in a deliberately nonspecific way. “I now call Calla Bryn Sturgis my home. Before that, Detroit, Michigan, where I worked in a homeless shelter, making soup and running AA meetings. Work I knew quite well. Before that—for a short while—Topeka, Kansas.”

He observed the way the three younger ones started at that with a kind of interested amusement.

“Before that, New York City. And before *that*, a little town called Jerusalem’s Lot, in the state of Maine.”

SEVEN

“You’re from our side,” Eddie said. He spoke in a kind of sigh. “Holy God, you’re really from our side!”

“Yes, I think I am,” the man in the turned-around collar said. “My name is Donald Callahan.”

“You’re a priest,” Susannah said. She looked from the cross that hung around his neck—small and discreet, but gleaming gold—to the larger, cruder one that scarred his forehead.

Callahan shook his head. “No more. Once. Perhaps one day again, with the blessing, but not now. Now I’m just a man of God. May I ask . . . when are you from?”

“1964,” Susannah said.

“1977,” Jake said.

“1987,” Eddie said.

Callahan’s eyes gleamed at that. “1987. And I came here in 1983, counting as we did then. So tell me something, young man, something very important. Had the Red Sox won the World Series yet when you left?”

Eddie threw back his head and laughed. The sound was both surprised and cheerful. “No, man, sorry. They came within one out of it last year—at Shea Stadium this was, against the Mets—and then this guy named Bill Buckner who was playing first base let an easy grounder get through his wickets. He’ll never live it down. Come on over here and sit down, what do you say? There’s no coffee, but Roland—that’s this beat-up-lookin’ guy on my right—makes a pretty fair cup of woods tea.”

Callahan turned his attention to Roland and then did an amazing thing: dropped to one knee, lowered his head slightly, and put his fist against his scarred brow. “Hile, gunslinger, may we be well-met on the path.”

“Hile,” Roland said. “Come forward, good stranger, and tell us of your need.”

Callahan looked up at him, surprised.

Roland looked back at him calmly, and nodded. “Well-met or ill, it may be you will find what you seek.”

“And you may also,” Callahan said.

“Then come forward,” Roland said. “Come forward and join our palaver.”

EIGHT

“Before we really get going, can I ask you something?”

This was Eddie. Beside him, Roland had built up the fire and was rummaging in their combined gunna for the little earthen pot—an artifact of the Old People—in which he liked to brew tea.

“Of course, young man.”

“You’re Donald Callahan.”

“Yes.”

“What’s your *middle* name?”

Callahan cocked his head a little to the side, raised one eyebrow, then smiled. “Frank. After my grandfather. Does it signify?”

Eddie, Susannah, and Jake shared a look. The thought that went with it flowed effortlessly among them: Donald Frank Callahan. Equals nineteen.

“It *does* signify,” Callahan said.

“Perhaps,” Roland said. “Perhaps not.” He poured water for the tea, manipulating the water-skin easily.

“You seem to have suffered an accident,” Callahan said, looking at Roland’s right hand.

“I make do,” Roland said.

“Gets by with a little help from his friends, you might say,” Jake added, not smiling.

Callahan nodded, not understanding and knowing he need not: they were ka-tet. He might not know that particular term, but the term didn’t matter. It was in the way they looked at each other and moved around each other.

“You know my name,” Callahan said. “May I have the pleasure of knowing yours?”

They introduced themselves: Eddie and Susannah Dean, of New York; Jake Chambers, of New York; Oy of Mid-World; Roland Deschain, of Gilead that was. Callahan nodded to each in turn, raising his closed fist to his forehead.

“And to you comes Callahan, of the Lot,” he said when the introductions were done. “Or so I was. Now I guess I’m just the Old Fella. That’s what they call me in the Calla.”

“Won’t your friends join us?” Roland said. “We haven’t a great deal to eat, but there’s always tea.”

“Perhaps not just yet.”

“Ah,” Roland said, and nodded as if he understood.

“In any case, we’ve eaten well,” Callahan said. “It’s been a good year in the Calla—until now, anyway—and we’ll be happy to share what we have.” He paused, seemed to feel he had gone too far too fast, and added: “Mayhap. If all goes well.”

“If,” Roland said. “An old teacher of mine used to call it the only word a thousand letters long.”

Callahan laughed. “Not bad! In any case, we’re probably better off for food than you are. We also have fresh muffin-balls—Zalia found em—but I suspect you know about those. She said the patch, although large, had a picked-over look.”

“Jake found them,” Roland said.

“Actually, it was Oy,” Jake said, and stroked the bumbler’s head. “I guess he’s sort of a muffin-hound.”

“How long have you known we were here?” Callahan asked.

“Two days.”

Callahan contrived to look both amused and exasperated. “Since we cut your trail, in other words. And we tried to be so crafty.”

“If you didn’t think you needed someone craftier than you are, you wouldn’t have come,” Roland said.

Callahan sighed. “You say true, I say thankya.”

“Do you come for aid and succor?” Roland asked. There was only mild curiosity in his voice, but Eddie Dean felt a deep, deep chill. The words seemed to hang there, full of resonance. Nor was he alone in feeling that. Susannah took his right hand. A moment later Jake’s hand crept into Eddie’s left.

“That is not for me to say.” Callahan sounded suddenly hesitant and unsure of himself. Afraid, maybe.

“Do you know you come to the line of Eld?” Roland asked in that same curiously gentle voice. He stretched a hand toward Eddie, Susannah, and Jake. Even toward Oy. “For these are mine, sure. As I am theirs. We are round, and roll as we do. And you know what we are.”

“Are you?” Callahan asked. “Are you *all*?”

Susannah said, "Roland, what are you getting us into?"

"Naught be zero, naught be free," he said. "I owe not you, nor you owe me. At least for now. They have not decided to ask."

They will, Eddie thought. Dreams of the rose and the deli and little todash-jaunts aside, he didn't think of himself as particularly psychic, but he didn't *need* to be psychic to know that they—the people from whom this Callahan had come as representative—*would* ask. Somewhere chestnuts had fallen into a hot fire, and Roland was supposed to pull them out.

But not *just* Roland.

You've made a mistake here, Pops, Eddie thought. *Perfectly understandable, but a mistake, all the same. We're not the cavalry. We're not the posse. We're not gunslingers. We're just three lost souls from the Big Apple who—*

But no. No. Eddie had known who they were since River Crossing, when the old people had knelt in the street to Roland. Hell, he'd known since the woods (what he still thought of as Shardik's Woods), where Roland had taught them to aim with the eye, shoot with the mind, kill with the heart. Not three, not four. One. That Roland should finish them so, *complete* them so, was horrible. He was filled with poison and had kissed them with his poisoned lips. He had made them gunslingers, and had Eddie really thought there was no work left for the line of Arthur Eld in this mostly empty and husked-out world? That they would simply be allowed to toddle along the Path of the Beam until they got to Roland's Dark Tower and fixed whatever was wrong there? Well, guess again.

It was Jake who said what was in Eddie's mind, and Eddie didn't like the look of excitement in the boy's eyes. He guessed plenty of kids had gone off to plenty of wars with that same excited gonna-kick-some-ass look on their faces. Poor kid didn't know he'd been poisoned, and that made him pretty dumb, because no one should have known better.

"They will, though," he said. "Isn't that true, Mr. Callahan? They will ask."

"I don't know," Callahan said. "You'd have to convince them . . ."

He trailed off, looking at Roland. Roland was shaking his head.

“That’s not how it works,” the gunslinger said. “Not being from Mid-World you may not know that, but that’s not how it works. Convincing isn’t what we do. We deal in lead.”

Callahan sighed deeply, then nodded. “I have a book. *Tales of Arthur*; it’s called.”

Roland’s eyes gleamed. “*Do you? Do you, indeed? I would like to see such a book. I would like it very well.*”

“Perhaps you shall,” Callahan said. “The stories in it are certainly not much like the tales of the Round Table I read as a boy, but . . . ” He shook his head. “I understand what you’re saying to me, let’s leave it at that. There are three questions, am I right? And you just asked me the first.”

“Three, yes,” Roland said. “Three is a number of power.”

Eddie thought, *If you want to try a real number of power, Roland old buddy, try nineteen.*

“And all three must be answered yes.”

Roland nodded. “And if they are, you may ask no more. We may be cast on, sai Callahan, but no man may cast us back. Make sure your people”—he nodded toward the woods south of them—“understand that.”

“Gunslinger—”

“Call me Roland. We’re at peace, you and I.”

“All right, Roland. Hear me well, do ya, I beg. (For so we say in the Calla.) We who come to you are only half a dozen. We six cannot decide. Only the Calla can decide.”

“Democracy,” Roland said. He pushed his hat back from his forehead, rubbed his forehead, and sighed.

“But if we six agree—especially sai Overholser—” He broke off, looking rather warily at Jake. “What? Did I say something?”

Jake shook his head and motioned Callahan to continue.

“If we six agree, it’s pretty much a done deal.”

Eddie closed his eyes, as if in bliss. “Say it again, pal.”

Callahan eyed him, puzzled and wary. “What?”

“Done deal. Or anything from your where and when.” He paused. “Our side of the big ka.”

Callahan considered this, then began to grin. “I didn’t know whether to shit or go blind,” he said. “I went on a bender, broke the

bank, kicked the bucket, blew my top, walked on thin ice, rode the pink horse down nightmare alley. Like that?”

Roland looked puzzled (perhaps even a little bored), but Eddie Dean’s face was a study in bliss. Susannah and Jake seemed caught somewhere between amusement and a kind of surprised, recollective sadness.

“Keep em coming, pal,” Eddie said hoarsely, and made a *come on, man* gesture with both hands. He sounded as if he might have been speaking through a throatful of tears. “Just keep em coming.”

“Perhaps another time,” Callahan said gently. “Another time we may sit and have our own palaver about the old places and ways of saying. Baseball, if it do ya. Now, though, time is short.”

“In more ways than you know, maybe,” Roland said. “What would you have of us, sai Callahan? And now you must speak to the point, for I’ve told you in every way I can that we are not wanderers your friends may interview, then hire or not as they do their farmhands or saddle-tramps.”

“For now I ask only that you stay where you are and let me bring them to you,” he said. “There’s Tian Jaffords, who’s really responsible for us being out here, and his wife, Zalia. There’s Overholser, the one who most needs to be convinced that we need you.”

“*We* won’t convince him or anyone,” Roland said.

“I understand,” Callahan said hastily. “Yes, you’ve made that perfectly clear. And there’s Ben Slightman and his boy, Benny. Ben the Younger is an odd case. His sister died four years ago, when she and Benny were both ten. No one knows if that makes Ben the Younger a twin or a singleton.” He stopped abruptly. “I’ve wandered. I’m sorry.”

Roland gestured with an open palm to show it was all right.

“You make me nervous, hear me I beg.”

“You don’t need to beg us nothing, sugar,” Susannah said.

Callahan smiled. “It’s only the way we speak. In the Calla, when you meet someone, you may say, ‘How from head to feet, do ya, I beg?’ And the answer, ‘I do fine, no rust, tell the gods thankee-sai.’ You haven’t heard this?”

They shook their heads. Although some of the words were familiar, the overall expressions only underlined the fact that they had come to

somewhere else, a place where talk was strange and customs perhaps stranger.

“What matters,” Callahan said, “is that the borderlands are terrified of creatures called the Wolves, who come out of Thunderclap once a generation and steal the children. There’s more to it, but that’s the crux. Tian Jaffords, who stands to lose not just one child this time but two, says no more, the time has come to stand and fight. Others—men like Overholser—say doing that would be disaster. I think Overholser and those like him would have carried the day, but your coming has changed things.” He leaned forward earnestly. “Wayne Overholser isn’t a bad man, just a frightened man. He’s the biggest farmer in the Calla, and so he has more to lose than some of the rest. But if he could be convinced that we might drive the Wolves off . . . that we could actually win against them . . . I believe he might also stand and fight.”

“I told you—” Roland began.

“You don’t convince,” Callahan broke in. “Yes, I understand. I do. But if they see you, hear you speak, and then convince themselves . . . ?”

Roland shrugged. “There’ll be water if God wills it, we say.”

Callahan nodded. “They say it in the Calla, too. May I move on to another, related matter?”

Roland raised his hands slightly—as if, Eddie thought, to tell Callahan it was his nickel.

For a moment the man with the scar on his brow said nothing. When he did speak, his voice had dropped. Eddie had to lean forward to hear him. “I have something. Something you want. That you may need. It has reached out to you already, I think.”

“Why do you say so?” Roland asked.

Callahan wet his lips and then spoke a single word: “Todash.”

NINE

“What about it?” Roland asked. “What about todash?”

“Haven’t you gone?” Callahan looked momentarily unsure of himself. “Haven’t *any* of you gone?”

“Say we have,” Roland said. “What’s that to you, and to your problem in this place you call the Calla?”

Callahan sighed. Although it was still early in the day, he looked tired. “This is harder than I thought it would be,” he said, “and by quite a lot. You are considerably more—what’s the word?—trig, I suppose. More trig than I expected.”

“You expected to find nothing but saddle-tramps with fast hands and empty heads, isn’t that about the size of it?” Susannah asked. She sounded angry. “Well, joke’s on you, honeybunch. Anyway, we may be tramps, but we got no saddles. No need for saddles with no horses.”

“We’ve brought you horses,” Callahan said, and that was enough. Roland didn’t understand everything, but he thought he now had enough to clarify the situation quite a bit. Callahan had known they were coming, known how many they were, known they were walking instead of riding. Some of those things could have been passed on by spies, but not all. And todash . . . knowing that some or all of them had gone todash . . .

“As for empty heads, we may not be the brightest four on the planet, but—” She broke off suddenly, wincing. Her hands went to her stomach.

“Suze?” Eddie asked, instantly concerned. “Suze, what is it? You okay?”

“Just gas,” she said, and gave him a smile. To Roland that smile didn’t look quite real. And he thought he saw tiny lines of strain around the corners of her eyes. “Too many muffin-balls last night.” And before Eddie could ask her any more questions, Susannah turned her attention back to Callahan. “You got something else to say, then say it, sugar.”

“All right,” Callahan said. “I have an object of great power. Although you are still many wheels from my church in the Calla, where this object is hidden, I think it’s already reached out to you. Inducing the todash state is only one of the things it does.” He took a deep breath and let it out. “If you will render us—for the Calla is my town now, too, ye ken, where I hope to finish my days and then be buried—the service I beg, I will give you this . . . this thing.”

“For the last time, I’d ask you to speak no more so,” Roland said. His tone was so harsh that Jake looked around at him with dismay. “It

dishonors me and my an-tet. We're bound to do as you ask, if we judge your Calla in the White and those you call Wolves as agents of the outer dark: Beam-breakers, if you ken. We may take *no* reward for our services, and you must not offer. If one of your own mates were to speak so—the one you call Tian or the one you call Overholster—”

(Eddie thought to correct the gunslinger's pronunciation and then decided to keep his mouth shut—when Roland was angry, it was usually best to stay silent.)

“—that would be different. They know nothing but legends, mayhap. But you, sai, have at least one book which should have taught you better. I told you we deal in lead, and so we do. But that doesn't make us hired guns.”

“All right, all right—”

“As for what you have,” Roland said, his voice rising and overriding Callahan's, “you'd be rid of it, would you not? It terrifies you, does it not? Even if we decide to ride on past your town, you'd beg us to take it with us, would you not? *Would you not?*”

“Yes,” Callahan said miserably. “You speak true and I say thankee. But . . . it's just that I heard a bit of your palaver . . . enough to know you want to go back . . . to pass over, as the Manni say . . . and not just to one place but two . . . or maybe more . . . and time . . . I heard you speak of aiming time like a gun . . .”

Jake's face filled with understanding and horrified wonder. “Which one is it?” he asked. “It can't be the pink one from Mejis, because Roland went inside it, it never sent him todash. So which one?”

A tear spilled down Callahan's right cheek, then another. He wiped them away absently. “I've never dared handle it, but I've seen it. Felt its power. Christ the Man Jesus help me, I have Black Thirteen under the floorboards of my church. And it's come alive. Do you understand me?” He looked at them with his wet eyes. “*It's come alive.*”

Callahan put his face in his hands, hiding it from them.

TEN

When the holy man with the scar on his forehead left to get his trailmates, the gunslinger stood watching him go without moving. Roland's thumbs were hooked into the waistband of his old patched

jeans, and he looked as if he could stand that way well into the next age. The moment Callahan was out of sight, however, he turned to his own mates and made an urgent, almost bearish, clutching gesture at the air: *Come to me*. As they did, Roland squatted on his hunkers. Eddie and Jake did the same (and to Susannah, hunkers were almost a way of life). The gunslinger spoke almost curtly.

“Time is short, so tell me, each of you, and don’t shilly-shally: honest or not?”

“Honest,” Susannah said at once, then gave another little wince and rubbed beneath her left breast.

“Honest,” said Jake.

“Onnes,” said Oy, although he had not been asked.

“Honest,” Eddie agreed, “but look.” He took an unburned twig from the edge of the campfire, brushed away a patch of pine-duff, and wrote in the black earth underneath:

Calla Callahan

“Live or Memorex?” Eddie said. Then, seeing Susannah’s confusion: “Is it a coincidence, or does it mean something?”

“Who knows?” Jake asked. They were all speaking in low tones, heads together over the writing in the dirt. “It’s like nineteen.”

“I think it’s only a coincidence,” Susannah said. “Surely not *everything* we encounter on our path is ka, is it? I mean, these don’t even *sound* the same.” And she pronounced them, *Calla* with the tongue up, making the broad-a sound, *Callahan* with the tongue down, making a much sharper a-sound. “*Calla*’s Spanish in our world . . . like many of the words you remember from Mejis, Roland. It means street or square, I think . . . don’t hold me to it, because high school Spanish is far behind me now. But if I’m right, using the word as a prefix for the name of a town—or a whole series of them, as seems to be the case in these parts—makes pretty good sense. Not perfect, but pretty good. Callahan, on the other hand . . . ” She shrugged. “What is it? Irish? English?”

“It’s sure not Spanish,” Jake said. “But the nineteen thing—”

“Piss on nineteen,” Roland said rudely. “This isn’t the time for number games. He’ll be back here with his friends in short order, and

I would speak to you an-tet of another matter before he does.”

“Do you think he could possibly be right about Black Thirteen?” Jake asked.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Based just on what happened to you and Eddie last night, I think the answer is yes. Dangerous for us to have such a thing if he *is* right, but have it we must. I fear these Wolves out of Thunderclap will if we don’t. Never mind, that need not trouble us now.”

Yet Roland looked very troubled indeed. He turned his regard toward Jake.

“You started when you heard the big farmer’s name. So did you, Eddie, although you concealed it better.”

“Sorry,” Jake said. “I have forgotten the face of—”

“Not even a bit have you,” Roland said. “Unless I have, as well. Because I’ve heard the name myself, and recently. I just can’t remember where.” Then, reluctantly: “I’m getting old.”

“It was in the bookstore,” Jake said. He took his pack, fiddled nervously with the straps, undid them. He flipped the pack open as he spoke. It was as if he had to make sure *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and *Riddle-De-Dum* were still there, still real. “The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. It’s so weird. Once it happened to me and once I *watched* it happen to me. That’d make a pretty good riddle all by itself.”

Roland made a rapid rotating gesture with his diminished right hand, telling him to go on and be quick.

“Mr. Tower introduced himself,” Jake said, “and then I did the same. Jake Chambers, I said. And *he* said—”

“ ‘Good handle, partner,’” Eddie broke in. “That’s what he said. Then he said Jake Chambers sounded like the name of the hero in a Western novel.”

“ ‘The guy who blows into Black Fork, Arizona, cleans up the town, then moves on,’” Jake quoted. “And then he said, ‘Something by Wayne D. Overholser, maybe.’ ” He looked at Susannah and repeated it. “*Wayne D. Overholser*. And if you tell me *that’s* a coincidence, Susannah . . . ” He broke into a sunny, sudden grin. “I’ll tell you to kiss my white-boy ass.”

Susannah laughed. “No need of that, sass-box. I don’t believe it’s a coincidence. And when we meet Callahan’s farmer friend, I intend to

ask him what his middle name is. I set my warrant that it'll not only begin with D, it'll be something like Dean or Dane, just four letters—" Her hand went back to the place below her breast. "This *gas!* My! What I wouldn't give for a roll of Tums or even a bottle of—" She broke off again. "Jake, what is it? What's wrong?"

Jake was holding *Charlie the Choo-Choo* in his hands, and his face had gone dead white. His eyes were huge, shocked. Beside him, Oy whined uneasily. Roland leaned over to look, and his eyes also widened.

"Good gods," he said.

Eddie and Susannah looked. The title was the same. The picture was the same: an anthropomorphic locomotive puffing up a hill, its cowcatcher wearing a grin, its headlight a cheerful eye. But the yellow letters across the bottom, Story and Pictures by Beryl Evans, were gone. There was no credit line there at all.

Jake turned the book and looked at the spine. It said *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and McCauley House, Publishers. Nothing else.

South of them now, the sound of voices. Callahan and his friends, approaching. Callahan from the Calla. Callahan of the Lot, he had also called himself.

"Title page, sugar," Susannah said. "Look there, quick."

Jake did. Once again there was only the title of the story and the publisher's name, this time with a colophon.

"Look at the copyright page," Eddie said.

Jake turned the page. Here, on the verso of the title page and beside the recto where the story began, was the copyright information. Except there *was* no information, not really.

Copyright 1936,

it said. Numbers which added up to nineteen.

The rest was blank.

CHAPTER V: OVERHOLSER

ONE

Susannah was able to observe a good deal on that long and interesting day, because Roland gave her the chance and because, after her morning's sickness passed off, she felt wholly herself again.

Just before Callahan and his party drew within earshot, Roland murmured to her, "Stay close to me, and not a word from you unless I prompt it. If they take you for my sh'veen, let it be so."

Under other circumstances, she might have had something pert to say about the idea of being Roland's quiet little side-wife, his nudge in the night, but there was no time this morning, and in any case, it was far from a joking matter; the seriousness in his face made that clear. Also, the part of the faithful, quiet second appealed to her. In truth, *any* part appealed to her. Even as a child, she had rarely been so happy as when pretending to be someone else.

Which probably explains all there is about you worth knowing, sugar, she thought.

"Susannah?" Roland asked. "Do you hear me?"

"Hear you well," she told him. "Don't you worry about me."

"If it goes as I want, they'll see you little and you'll see them much."

As a woman who'd grown up black in mid-twentieth-century America (Odetta had laughed and applauded her way through Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, often rocking back and forth in her seat like one who has been visited by a revelation), Susannah knew exactly what he wanted. And would give it to him. There was a part of her—a spiteful Detta Walker part—that would always resent Roland's ascendancy in her heart and mind, but for the most part she

recognized him for what he was: the last of his kind. Maybe even a hero.

TWO

Watching Roland make the introductions (Susannah was presented dead last, after Jake, and almost negligently), she had time to reflect on how fine she felt now that the nagging gas-pains in her left side had departed. Hell, even the lingering headache had gone its way, and *that* sucker had been hanging around—sometimes in the back of her head, sometimes at one temple or the other, sometimes just above her left eye, like a migraine waiting to hatch—for a week or more. And of course there were the mornings. Every one found her feeling nauseated and with a bad case of jelly-leg for the first hour or so. She never vomited, but for that first hour she always felt on the verge of it.

She wasn't stupid enough to mistake such symptoms, but had reason to know they meant nothing. She just hoped she wouldn't embarrass herself by swelling up as her Mama's friend Jessica had done, not once but twice. Two false pregnancies, and in both cases that woman had looked ready to bust out twins. Triplets, even. But of course Jessica Beasley's periods had stopped, and that made it all too easy for a woman to believe she was with child. Susannah knew she wasn't pregnant for the simplest of reasons: she was still menstruating. She had begun a period on the very day they had awakened back on the Path of the Beam, with the Green Palace twenty-five or thirty miles behind them. She'd had another since then. Both courses had been exceptionally heavy, necessitating the use of many rags to soak up the dark flow, and before then her menses had always been light, some months no more than a few of the spots her mother called "a lady's roses." Yet she didn't complain, because before her arrival in this world, her periods had usually been painful and sometimes excruciating. The two she'd had since returning to the Path of the Beam hadn't hurt at all. If not for the soaked rags she'd carefully buried to one side of their path or the other, she wouldn't have had a clue that it was her time of the month. Maybe it was the purity of the water.

Of course she knew what all this was about; it didn't take a rocket scientist, as Eddie sometimes said. The crazy, scrambled dreams she couldn't recall, the weakness and nausea in the mornings, the transient headaches, the strangely fierce gas attacks and occasional cramps all came down to the same thing: she wanted his baby. More than anything else in the world, she wanted Eddie Dean's chap growing in her belly.

What she *didn't* want was to puff up in a humiliating false pregnancy.

Never mind all that now, she thought as Callahan approached with the others. Right now you've got to watch. Got to see what Roland and Eddie and Jake don't see. That way nothing gets dropped. And she felt she could do that job very well.

Really, she had never felt finer in her life.

THREE

Callahan came first. Behind him were two men, one who looked about thirty and another who looked to Susannah nearly twice that. The older man had heavy cheeks that would be jowls in another five years or so, and lines carving their courses from the sides of his nose down to his chin. "I-want lines," her father would have called them (and Dan Holmes had had a pretty good set of his own). The younger man wore a battered sombrero, the older a clean white Stetson that made Susannah want to smile—it looked like the kind of hat the good guy would wear in an old black-and-white Western movie. Still, she guessed a lid like that didn't come cheap, and she thought the man wearing it had to be Wayne Overholser. "The big farmer," Roland had called him. The one that had to be convinced, according to Callahan.

But not by us, Susannah thought, which was sort of a relief. The tight mouth, the shrewd eyes, and most of all those deep-carved lines (there was another slashed vertically into his brow, just above the eyes) suggested sai Overholser would be a pain in the ass when it came to convincing.

Just behind these two—specifically behind the younger of the two—there came a tall, handsome woman, probably not black but nonetheless nearly as dark-skinned as Susannah herself. Bringing up

the rear was an earnest-looking man in spectacles and farmer's clothes and a likely-looking boy probably two or three years older than Jake. The resemblance between this pair was impossible to miss; they had to be Slightman the Elder and Younger.

Boy may be older than Jake in years, she thought, but he's got a soft look about him, all the same. True, but not necessarily a bad thing. Jake had seen far too much for a boy not yet in his teens. *Done* too much, as well.

Overholser looked at their guns (Roland and Eddie each wore one of the big revolvers with the sandalwood grips; the .44 Ruger from New York City hung under Jake's arm in what Roland called a docker's clutch), then at Roland. He made a perfunctory salute, his half-closed fist skimming somewhere at least close to his forehead. There was no bow. If Roland was offended by this, it didn't show on his face. Nothing showed on his face but polite interest.

"Hile, gunslinger," the man who had been walking beside Overholser said, and this one actually dropped to one knee, with his head down and his brow resting on his fist. "I am Tian Jaffords, son of Luke. This lady is my wife, Zalia."

"Hile," Roland said. "Let me be Roland to you, if it suits. May your days be long upon the earth, sai Jaffords."

"Tian. Please. And may you and your friends have twice the—"

"I'm Overholser," the man in the white Stetson broke in brusquely. "We've come to meet you—you and your friends—at the request of Callahan and young Jaffords. I'd pass the formalities and get down to business as soon as possible, do ya take no offense, I beg."

"Ask pardon but that's not quite how it is," Jaffords said. "There was a meeting, and the men of the Calla voted—"

Overholser broke in again. He was, Susannah thought, just that kind of man. She doubted he was even aware he was doing it. "The town, yes. The Calla. I've come along with every wish to do right by my town and my neighbors, but this is a busy time for me, none busier —"

"Charyou tree," Roland said mildly, and although Susannah knew a deeper meaning for this phrase, one that made her back prickle, Overholser's eyes lit up. She had her first inkling then of how this day was going to go.

“Come reap, yessir, say thankee.” Off to one side, Callahan was gazing into the woods with a kind of studied patience. Behind Overholser, Tian Jaffords and his wife exchanged an embarrassed glance. The Slightmans only waited and watched. “You understand that much, anyway.”

“In Gilead we were surrounded by farms and freeholds,” Roland said. “I got my share of hay and corn in barn. Aye, and sharproot, too.”

Overholser was giving Roland a grin that Susannah found fairly offensive. It said, *We know better than that, don't we, sai? We're both men of the world, after all.* “Where are you from really, sai Roland?”

“My friend, you need to see an audiologist,” Eddie said.

Overholser looked at him, puzzled. “Beg-my-ear?”

Eddie made a *there, you see?* gesture and nodded. “Exactly what I mean.”

“Be still, Eddie,” Roland said. Still as mild as milk. “Sai Overholser, we may take a moment to exchange names and speak a good wish or two, surely. For that is how civilized, kindly folk behave, is it not?” Roland paused—a brief, underlining pause—and then said, “With harriers it may be different, but there are no harriers here.”

Overholser's lips pressed together and he looked hard at Roland, ready to take offense. He saw nothing in the gunslinger's face that offered it, and relaxed again. “Thankee,” he said. “Tian and Zalia Jaffords, as told—”

Zalia curtsied, spreading invisible skirts to either side of her battered corduroy pants.

“—and here are Ben Slightman the Elder and Benny the Younger.”

The father raised his fist to his forehead and nodded. The son, his face a study in awe (it was mostly the guns, Susannah surmised), bowed with his right leg out stiffly in front of him and the heel planted.

“The Old Fella you already know,” Overholser finished, speaking with exactly the sort of offhand contempt at which Overholser himself would have taken deep offense, had it been directed toward his valued self. Susannah supposed that when you were the big farmer, you got used to talking just about any way you wanted. She wondered how far he might push Roland before discovering that he hadn't been

pushing at all. Because some men couldn't be pushed. They might go along with you for awhile, but then—

“These are my trailmates,” Roland said. “Eddie Dean and Jake Chambers, of New York. And this is Susannah.” He gestured at her without turning in her direction. Overholser's face took on a knowing, intensely male look Susannah had seen before. Detta Walker had had a way of wiping that look off men's faces that she didn't believe sai Overholser would care for at all.

Nonetheless, she gave Overholser and the rest of them a demure little smile and made her own invisible-skirts curtsy. She thought hers as graceful in its way as the one made by Zalia Jaffords, but of course a curtsy didn't look quite the same when you were missing your lower legs and feet. The newcomers had marked the part of her that was gone, of course, but their feelings on that score didn't interest her much. She *did* wonder what they thought of her wheelchair, though, the one Eddie had gotten her in Topeka, where Blaine the Mono had finished up. These folks would never have seen the like of it.

Callahan may have, she thought. *Because Callahan's from our side.* He

The boy said, “Is that a bumbler?”

“Hush, do ya,” Slightman said, sounding almost shocked that his son had spoken.

“That's okay,” Jake said. “Yeah, he's a bumbler. Oy, go to him.” He pointed at Ben the Younger. Oy trotted around the campfire to where the newcomer stood and looked up at the boy with his gold-ringed eyes.

“I never saw a tame one before,” Tian said. “Have heard of em, of course, but the world has moved on.”

“Mayhap not all of it has moved on,” Roland said. He looked at Overholser. “Mayhap some of the old ways still hold.”

“Can I pat him?” the boy asked Jake. “Will he bite?”

“You can and he won't.”

As Slightman the Younger dropped on his hunkers in front of Oy, Susannah certainly hoped Jake was right. Having a billy-bumbler chomp off this kid's nose would not set them on in any style at all.

But Oy suffered himself to be stroked, even stretching his long neck up so he could sample the odor of Slightman's face. The boy

laughed. "What did you say his name was?"

Before Jake could reply, the bumbler spoke for himself. "Oy!"

They all laughed. And as simply as that they were together, well-met on this road that followed the Path of the Beam. The bond was fragile, but even Overholser sensed it. And when he laughed, the big farmer looked as if he might be a good enough fellow. Maybe frightened, and pompous to be sure, but there was something there.

Susannah didn't know whether to be glad or afraid.

FOUR

"I'd have a word alone with'ee, if it does ya," Overholser said. The two boys had walked off a little distance with Oy between them, Slightman the Younger asking Jake if the bumbler could count, as he'd heard some of them could.

"I think not, Wayne," Jaffords said at once. "It was agreed we'd go back to our camp, break bread, and explain our need to these folk. And then, if they agreed to come further—"

"I have no objection to passing a word with sai Overholser," Roland said, "nor will you, sai Jaffords, I think. For is he not your dinh?" And then, before Tian could object further (or deny it): "Give these folks tea, Susannah. Eddie, step over here with us a bit, if it do ya fine."

This phrase, new to all their ears, came out of Roland's mouth sounding perfectly natural. Susannah marveled at it. If she had tried saying that, she would have sounded as if she were sucking up.

"We have food south aways," Zalia said timidly. "Food and graf and coffee. Andy—"

"We'll eat with pleasure, and drink your coffee with joy," Roland said. "But have tea first, I beg. We'll only be a moment or two, won't we, sai?"

Overholser nodded. His look of stern unease had departed. So had his stiffness of body. From the far side of the road (close to where a woman named Mia had slipped into the woods only the night before), the boys laughed as Oy did something clever—Benny with surprise, Jake with obvious pride.

Roland took Overholser's arm and led him a little piece up the road. Eddie strolled with them. Jaffords, frowning, made as if to go

with them anyway. Susannah touched his shoulder. "Don't," she said in a low voice. "He knows what he's doing."

Jaffords looked at her doubtfully for a moment, then came with her. "P'raps I could build that fire up for you a bit, sai," Slightman the Elder said with a kindly look at her diminished legs. "For I see a few sparks yet, so I do."

"If you please," Susannah said, thinking how wonderful all this was. How wonderful, how strange. Potentially deadly as well, of course, but she had come to learn that also had its charms. It was the possibility of darkness that made the day seem so bright.

FIVE

Up the road about forty feet from the others, the three men stood together. Overholser appeared to be doing all the talking, sometimes gesturing violently to punctuate a point. He spoke as if Roland were no more than some gunbunny hobo who happened to come drifting down the road with a few no-account friends riding drogue behind him. He explained to Roland that Tian Jaffords was a fool (albeit a well-meaning one) who did not understand the facts of life. He told Roland that Jaffords had to be restrained, cooled off, not only in his best interests but in those of the entire Calla. He insisted to Roland that if anything *could* be done, Wayne Overholser, son of Alan, would be first in line to do it; he'd never shirked a chore in his life, but to go against the Wolves was madness. And, he added, lowering his voice, speaking of madness, there was the Old Fella. When he kept to his church and his rituals, he was fine. In such things, a little madness made a fine sauce. This, however, was summat different. Aye, and by a long hike.

Roland listened to it all, nodding occasionally. He said almost nothing. And when Overholser was finally finished, Calla Bryn Sturgis's big farmer simply looked with a kind of fixed fascination at the gunman who stood before him. Mostly at those faded blue eyes.

"Are ye what ye say?" he asked finally. "Tell me true, sai."

"I'm Roland of Gilead," the gunslinger said.

"From the line of Eld? Ye do say it?"

"By watch and by warrant," Roland said.

“But Gilead . . . ” Overholser paused. “Gilead’s long gone.”

“I,” Roland said, “am not.”

“Would ye kill us all, or cause us to be killed? Tell me, I beg.”

“What would *you*, sai Overholser? Not later; not a day or a week or a moon from now, but at this minute?”

Overholser stood a long time, looking from Roland to Eddie and then back to Roland again. Here was a man not used to changing his mind; if he did so, it would hurt him like a rupture. From down the road came the laughter of the boys as Oy fetched something Benny had thrown—a stick almost as big as the bumbler was himself.

“I’d listen,” Overholser said at last. “I’d do that much, gods help me, and say thankee.”

“In other words he explained all the reasons why it was a fool’s errand,” Eddie told her later, “and then did exactly what Roland wanted him to do. It was like magic.”

“Sometimes Roland *is* magic,” she said.

SIX

The Calla’s party had camped in a pleasant hilltop clearing not far south of the road but just enough off the Path of the Beam so that the clouds hung still and moveless in the sky, seemingly close enough to touch. The way there through the woods had been carefully marked; some of the blazes Susannah saw were as big as her palm. These people might be crackerjack farmers and stockmen, but it was clear the woods made them uneasy.

“May I spell ye on that chair a bit, young man?” Overholser asked Eddie as they began the final push upslope. Susannah could smell roasting meat and wondered who was tending to the cooking if the entire Callahan-Overholser party had come out to meet them. Had the woman mentioned someone named Andy? A servant, perhaps? She had. Overholser’s personal? Perhaps. Surely a man who could afford a Stetson as grand as the one now tipped back on his head could afford a personal.

“Do ya,” Eddie said. He didn’t quite dare to add “I beg” (*Still sounds phony to him*, Susannah thought), but he moved aside and gave over the wheelchair’s push-handles to Overholser. The farmer was a big

man, it was a fair slope, and now he was pushing a woman who weighed close on to a hundred and thirty pounds, but his breathing, although heavy, remained regular.

“Might I ask you a question, sai Overholser?” Eddie asked.

“Of course,” Overholser replied.

“What’s your middle name?”

There was a momentary slackening of forward motion; Susannah put this down to mere surprise. “That’s an odd ’un, young fella; why d’ye ask?”

“Oh, it’s a kind of hobby of mine,” Eddie said. “In fact, I tell fortunes by em.”

Careful, Eddie, careful, Susannah thought, but she was amused in spite of herself.

“Oh, aye?”

“Yes,” Eddie said. “You, now. I’ll bet your middle name begins with”—he seemed to calculate—“with the letter D.” Only he pronounced it *Deh*, in the fashion of the Great Letters in the High Speech. “And I’d say it’s short. Five letters? Maybe only four?”

The slackening of forward push came again. “Devil say please!” Overholser exclaimed. “How’d you know? Tell me!”

Eddie shrugged. “It’s no more than counting and guessing, really. In truth, I’m wrong almost as often as I’m right.”

“More often,” Susannah said.

“Tell ya my middle name’s Dale,” Overholser said, “although if anyone ever explained me why, it’s slipped my mind. I lost my folks when I was young.”

“Sorry for your loss,” Susannah said, happy to see that Eddie was moving away. Probably to tell Jake she’d been right about the middle name: Wayne Dale Overholser. Equals nineteen.

“Is that young man trig or a fool?” Overholser asked Susannah. “Tell me, I beg, for I canna’ tell myself.”

“A little of both,” she said.

“No question about this push-chair, though, would you say? It’s trig as a compass.”

“Say thankya,” she said, then gave a small inward sigh of relief. It had come out sounding all right, probably because she hadn’t exactly planned on saying it.

“Where did it come from?”

“Back on our way a good distance,” she said. This turn of the conversation did not please her much. She thought it was Roland’s job to tell their history (or not tell it). He was their dinh. Besides, what was told by only one could not be contradicted. Still, she thought she could say a little more. “There’s a thinny. We came from the other side of that, where things are much different.” She craned around to look at him. His cheeks and neck had flushed, but really, she thought, he was doing very well for a man who had to be deep into his fifties. “Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Yar,” he said, hawked, and spat off to the left. “Not that I’ve seen or heard it myself, you understand. I never wander far; too much to do on the farm. Those of the Calla aren’t woodsy people as a rule, anyway, do ya kennit.”

Oh yes, I think I kennit, Susannah thought, spying another blaze roughly the size of a dinner plate. The unfortunate tree so marked would be lucky to survive the coming winter.

“Andy’s told of the thinny many and many-a. Makes a sound, he says, but can’t tell what it is.”

“Who’s Andy?”

“Ye’ll meet him for y’self soon enough, sai. Are’ee from this Calla York, like yer friends?”

“Yes,” she said, again on her guard. He swung her wheelchair around a hoary old ironwood. The trees were sparser now, and the smell of cooking much stronger. Meat . . . and coffee. Her stomach rumbled.

“And they be not gunslingers,” Overholser said, nodding at Jake and Eddie. “You’ll not tell me so, surely.”

“You must decide that for yourself when the time comes,” Susannah said.

He made no reply for a few moments. The wheelchair rumbled over a rock outcropping. Ahead of them, Oy padded along between Jake and Benny Slightman, who had made friends with boyhood’s eerie speed. She wondered if it was a good idea. For the two boys were different. Time might show them how much, and to their sorrow.

“He scared me,” Overholser said. He spoke in a voice almost too low to hear. As if to himself. “ ’Twere his eyes, I think. Mostly his eyes.”

“Would you go on as you have, then?” Susannah asked. The question was far from as idle as she hoped it sounded, but she was still startled by the fury of his response.

“Are’ee mad, woman? Course not—not if I saw a way out of the box we’re in. Hear me well! That boy”—he pointed at Tian Jaffords, walking ahead of them with his wife—“that boy as much as accused me of running yella. Had to make sure they all knew I didn’t have any children of the age the Wolves fancy, aye. Not like *he* has, kennit. But do’ee think I’m a fool that can’t count the cost?”

“Not me,” Susannah said, calmly.

“But do *he*? I halfway think so.” Overholser spoke as a man does when pride and fear are fighting it out in his head. “Do I want to give the babbies to the Wolves? Babbies that’re sent back roont to be a drag on the town ever after? No! But neither do I want some hardcase to lead us all to blunder wi’ no way back!”

She looked over her shoulder at him and saw a fascinating thing. He now wanted to say yes. To find a reason to say yes. Roland had brought him that far, and with hardly a word. Had only . . . well, had only looked at him.

There was movement in the corner of her eye. “Holy *Christ!*” Eddie cried. Susannah’s hand darted for a gun that wasn’t there. She turned forward in the chair again. Coming down the slope toward them, moving with a prissy care that she couldn’t help find amusing even in her startlement, was a metal man at least seven feet high.

Jake’s hand had gone to the docker’s clutch and the butt of the gun that hung there.

“Easy, Jake!” Roland said.

The metal man, eyes flashing blue, stopped in front of them. It stood perfectly still for perhaps ten seconds, plenty of time for Susannah to read what was stamped on its chest. *North Central Positronics*, she thought, *back for another curtain call. Not to mention LaMerk Industries.*

Then the robot raised one silver arm, placing a silver hand against its stainless-steel forehead. “Hile, gunslinger, come from afar,” it said. “Long days and pleasant nights.”

Roland raised his fingers to his own forehead. “May you have twice the number, Andy-sai.”

“Thankee.” Clickings from its deep and incomprehensible guts. Then it leaned forward toward Roland, blue eyes flashing brighter. Susannah saw Eddie’s hand creep to the sandalwood grip of the ancient revolver he wore. Roland, however, never flinched.

“I’ve made a goodish meal, gunslinger. Many good things from the fullness of the earth, aye.”

“Say thankee, Andy.”

“May it do ya fine.” The robot’s guts clicked again. “In the meantime, would you perhaps care to hear your horoscope?”

CHAPTER VI: THE WAY OF THE ELD

ONE

At around two in the afternoon of that day, the ten of them sat down to what Roland called a rancher's dinner. "During the morning chores, you look forward with love," he told his friends later. "During the evening ones, you look back with nostalgia."

Eddie thought he was joking, but with Roland you could never be completely sure. What humor he had was dry to the point of desiccation.

It wasn't the best meal Eddie had ever had, the banquet put on by the old people in River Crossing still held pride of place in that regard, but after weeks in the woods, subsisting on gunslinger burritos (and shitting hard little parcels of rabbit turds maybe twice a week), it was fine fare indeed. Andy served out whopping steaks done medium rare and smothered in mushroom gravy. There were beans on the side, wrapped things like tacos, and roasted corn. Eddie tried an ear of this and found it tough but tasty. There was coleslaw which, Tian Jaffords was at pains to tell them, had been made by his own wife's hands. There was also a wonderful pudding called strawberry cosy. And of course there was coffee. Eddie guessed that, among the four of them, they must have put away at least a gallon. Even Oy had a little. Jake put down a saucer of the dark, strong brew. Oy sniffed, said "Coff!" and then lapped it up quickly and efficiently.

There was no serious talk during the meal ("Food and palaver don't mix" was but one of Roland's many little nuggets of wisdom), and yet Eddie learned a great deal from Jaffords and his wife, mostly about how life was lived out here in what Tian and Zalia called "the

borderlands.” Eddie hoped Susannah (sitting by Overholser) and Jake (with the youngster Eddie was already coming to think of as Benny the Kid) were learning half as much. He would have expected Roland to sit with Callahan, but Callahan sat with no one. He took his food off a little distance from all of them, blessed himself, and ate alone. Not very much, either. Mad at Overholser for taking over the show, or just a loner by nature? Hard to tell on such short notice, but if someone had put a gun to his head, Eddie would have voted for the latter.

What struck Eddie with the most force was how goddam *civilized* this part of the world was. It made Lud, with its warring Grays and Pubes, look like the Cannibal Isles in a boy’s sea-story. These people had roads, law enforcement, and a system of government that made Eddie think of New England town meetings. There was a Town Gathering Hall and a feather which seemed to be some sort of authority symbol. If you wanted to call a meeting, you had to send the feather around. If enough people touched it when it came to their place, there was a meeting. If they didn’t, there wasn’t. Two people were sent to carry the feather, and their count was trusted without question. Eddie doubted if it would work in New York, but for a place like this it seemed a fine way to run things.

There were at least seventy other Callas, stretching in a mild arc north and south of Calla Bryn Sturgis. Calla Bryn Lockwood to the south and Calla Amity to the north were also farms and ranches. They also had to endure the periodic depredations of the Wolves. Farther south were Calla Bryn Bouse and Calla Staffel, containing vast tracts of ranchland, and Jaffords said they suffered the Wolves as well . . . at least he thought so. Farther north, Calla Sen Pinder and Calla Sen Chre, which were farms and sheep.

“Farms of a good size,” Tian said, “but they’re smaller as ye go north, kennit, until ye’re in the lands where the snows fall—so I’m told; I’ve never seen it myself—and wonderful cheese is made.”

“Those of the north wear wooden shoes, or so ’tis said,” Zalia told Eddie, looking a little wistful. She herself wore scuffed clodhoppers called shor’boots.

The people of the Callas traveled little, but the roads were there if they wanted to travel, and trade was brisk. In addition to them, there

was the Whye, sometimes called Big River. This ran south of Calla Bryn Sturgis all the way to the South Seas, or so 'twas said. There were mining Callas and manufacturing Callas (where things were made by steam-press and even, aye, by electricity) and even one Calla devoted to nothing but pleasure: gambling and wild, amusing rides, and . . .

But here Tian, who had been talking, felt Zalia's eyes on him and went back to the pot for more beans. And a conciliatory dish of his wife's slaw.

"So," Eddie said, and drew a curve in the dirt. "These are the borderlands. The Callas. An arc that goes north and south for . . . how far, Zalia?"

" 'Tis men's business, so it is," she said. Then, seeing her own man was still at the embering fire, inspecting the pots, she leaned forward a bit toward Eddie. "Do you speak in miles or wheels?"

"A little of both, but I'm better with miles."

She nodded. "Mayhap two thousand miles so"—she pointed north—"and twice that, *so*." To the south. She remained that way, pointing in opposite directions, then dropped her arms, clasped her hands in her lap, and resumed her former demure pose.

"And these towns . . . these Callas . . . stretch the whole way?"

"So we're told, if it please ya, and the traders *do* come and go. Northwest of here, the Big River splits in two. We call the east branch Devar-Tete Whye—the Little Whye, you might say. Of course we see more river-travel from the north, for the river flows north to south, do ya see."

"I do. And to the east?"

She looked down. "Thunderclap," she said in a voice Eddie could barely hear. "None go there."

"Why?"

"It's dark there," said she, still not looking up from her lap. Then she raised an arm. This time she pointed in the direction from which Roland and his friends had come. Back toward Mid-World. "There," she said, "the world is ending. Or so we're told. And there . . ." She pointed east and now raised her face to Eddie's. "There, in Thunderclap, it's *already* ended. In the middle are we, who only want to go our way in peace."

"And do you think it will happen?"

“No.” And Eddie saw she was crying.

TWO

Shortly after this, Eddie excused himself and stepped into a copse of trees for a personal moment. When he rose from his squat, reaching for some leaves with which to clean himself, a voice spoke from directly behind him.

“Not those, sai, do it please ya. Those be poison flurry. Wipe with those and how you’ll itch.”

Eddie jumped and wheeled around, grabbing the waistband of his jeans with one hand and reaching for Roland’s gunbelt, hanging from the branch of a nearby tree, with the other. Then he saw who had spoken—or *what*—and relaxed a little.

“Andy, it’s not really kosher to creep up behind people when they’re taking a dump.” Then he pointed to a thatch of low green bushes. “What about those? How much trouble will I get into if I wipe with those?”

There were pauses and clicks.

“What?” Eddie asked. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” Andy said. “I’m simply processing information, sai. *Kosher*: unknown word. *Creeping up*: I didn’t, I walked, if it do ye fine. *Taking a dump*: likely slang for the excretion of—”

“Yeah,” Eddie said, “that’s what it is. But listen—if you didn’t creep up on me, Andy, how come I didn’t hear you? I mean, there’s *underbrush*. Most people make noise when they go through underbrush.”

“I am not a person, sai,” Andy said. Eddie thought he sounded smug.

“Guy, then. How can a big guy like you be so quiet?”

“Programming,” Andy said. “Those leaves will be fine, do ya.”

Eddie rolled his eyes, then grabbed a bunch. “Oh yeah. Programming. Sure. Should have known. Thankee-sai, long days, kiss my ass and go to heaven.”

“Heaven,” said Andy. “A place one goes after death; a kind of paradise. According to the Old Fella, those who go to heaven sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, forever and ever.”

“Yeah? Who’s gonna sit at his left hand? All the Tupperware salesmen?”

“Sai, I don’t know. *Tupperware* is an unknown word to me. Would you like your horoscope?”

“Why not?” Eddie said. He started back toward the camp, guided by the sounds of laughing boys and a barking billy-bumbler. Andy towered beside him, shining even beneath the cloudy sky and seeming to not make a sound. It was eerie.

“What’s your birth date, sai?”

Eddie thought he might be ready for this one. “I’m Goat Moon,” he said, then remembered a little more. “Goat with beard.”

“Winter’s snow is full of woe, winter’s child is strong and wild,” said Andy. Yes, that was smugness in its voice, all right.

“Strong and wild, that’s me,” Eddie said. “Haven’t had a real bath in over a month, you better believe I’m strong and wild. What else do you need, Andy old guy? Want to look at my palm, or anything?”

“That will not be necessary, sai Eddie.” The robot sounded unmistakably happy and Eddie thought, *That’s me, spreading joy wherever I go. Even robots love me. It’s my ka.* “This is Full Earth, say we all thankya. The moon is red, what is called the Huntress Moon in Mid-World that was. You will travel, Eddie! You will travel far! You and your friends! This very night you return to Calla New York. You will meet a dark lady. You—”

“I want to hear more about this trip to New York,” Eddie said, stopping. Just ahead was the camp. He was close enough so he could see people moving around. “No joking around, Andy.”

“You will go todash, sai Eddie! You and your friends. You must be careful. When you hear the *kammen*—the chimes, ken ya well—you must all concentrate on each other. To keep from getting lost.”

“How do you know this stuff?” Eddie asked.

“Programming,” Andy said. “Horoscope is done, sai. No charge.” And then, what struck Eddie as the final capping lunacy: “Sai Callahan—the Old Fella, ye ken—says I have no license to tell fortunes, so must never charge.”

“Sai Callahan says true,” Eddie said, and then, when Andy started forward again: “But stay a minute, Andy. Do ya, I beg.” It was absolutely weird how quickly that started to sound okay.

Andy stopped willingly enough and turned toward Eddie, his blue eyes glowing. Eddie had roughly a thousand questions about todash, but he was currently even more curious about something else.

“You know about these Wolves.”

“Oh, yes. I told sai Tian. He was wroth.” Again Eddie detected something like smugness in Andy’s voice . . . but surely that was just the way it struck him, right? A robot—even one that had survived from the old days—couldn’t enjoy the discomforts of humans? Could it?

Didn’t take you long to forget the mono, did it, sugar? Susannah’s voice asked in his head. Hers was followed by Jake’s. *Blaine’s a pain.* And then, just his own: *If you treat this guy like nothing more than a fortune-telling machine in a carnival arcade, Eddie old boy, you deserve whatever you get.*

“Tell me about the Wolves,” Eddie said.

“What would you know, sai Eddie?”

“Where they come from, for a start. The place where they feel like they can put their feet up and fart right out loud. Who they work for. Why they take the kids. And why the ones they take come back ruined.” Then another question struck him. Perhaps the most obvious. “Also, how do you know when they’re coming?”

Clicks from inside Andy. A lot of them this time, maybe a full minute’s worth. When Andy spoke again, its voice was different. It made Eddie think about Officer Bosconi, back in the neighborhood. Brooklyn Avenue, that was Bosco Bob’s beat. If you just met him, walking along the street and twirling his nightstick, Bosco talked to you like you were a human being and so was he—howya doin, Eddie, how’s your mother these days, how’s your good-fornothin bro, are you gonna sign up for PAL Middlers, okay, seeya at the gym, stay off the smokes, have a good day. But if he thought maybe you’d done something, Bosco Bob turned into a guy you didn’t want to know. That Officer Bosconi didn’t smile, and the eyes behind his glasses were like puddle ice in February (which just happened to be the Time o’ the Goat, over here on this side of the Great Whatever). Bosco Bob had never hit Eddie, but there were a couple of times—once just after some kids lit Woo Kim’s Market on fire—when he felt sure that bluesuit mothafuck *would* have hit him, if Eddie had been stupid

enough to smart off. It wasn't schizophrenia—at least not of the pure Detta/Odetta kind—but it was close. There were two versions of Officer Bosconi. One of them was a nice guy. The other one was a cop.

When Andy spoke again, it no longer sounded like your well-meaning but rather stupid uncle, the one who believed the alligator-boy and Elvis-is-alive-in-Buenos-Aires stories *Inside View* printed were absolutely true. This Andy sounded emotionless and somehow dead.

Like a *real* robot, in other words.

“What's your password, sai Eddie?”

“Huh?”

“Password. You have ten seconds. Nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . ”

Eddie thought of spy movies he'd seen. “You mean I say something like ‘The roses are blooming in Cairo’ and *you* say ‘Only in Mrs. Wilson's garden’ and then *I* say—”

“Incorrect password, sai Eddie . . . two . . . one . . . zero.” From within Andy came a low thudding sound which Eddie found singularly unpleasant. It sounded like the blade of a sharp cleaver passing through meat and into the wood of the chopping block beneath. He found himself thinking for the first time about the Old People, who had surely built Andy (or maybe the people before the Old People, call them the Really Old People—who knew for sure?). Not people Eddie himself would want to meet, if the last remainders in Lud had been any example.

“You may retry once,” said the cold voice. It bore a resemblance to the one that had asked Eddie if Eddie would like his horoscope told, but that was the best you could call it—a resemblance. “Would you retry, Eddie of New York?”

Eddie thought fast. “No,” he said, “that's all right. The info's restricted, huh?”

Several clicks. Then: “*Restricted*: confined, kept within certain set limits, as information in a given document or q-disc; limited to those authorized to use that information; those authorized announce themselves by giving the password.” Another pause to think and then Andy said, “Yes, Eddie. That info's restricted.”

“Why?” Eddie asked.

He expected no answer, but Andy gave him one. "Directive Nineteen."

Eddie clapped him on his steel side. "My friend, that don't surprise me at all. Directive Nineteen it is."

"Would you care to hear an expanded horoscope, Eddie-sai?"

"Think I'll pass."

"What about a tune called 'The Jimmy Juice I Drank Last Night'? It has many amusing verses." The reedy note of a pitch-pipe came from somewhere in Andy's diaphragm.

Eddie, who found the idea of many amusing verses somehow alarming, increased his pace toward the others. "Why don't we just put that on hold?" he said. "Right now I think I need another cup of coffee."

"Give you joy of it, sai," Andy said. To Eddie he sounded rather forlorn. Like Bosco Bob when you told him you thought you'd be too busy for PAL League that summer.

THREE

Roland sat on a stone outcrop, drinking his own cup of coffee. He listened to Eddie without speaking himself, and with only one small change of expression: a minute lift of the eyebrows at the words Directive Nineteen.

Across the clearing from them, Slightman the Younger had produced a kind of bubble-pipe that made extraordinarily tough bubbles. Oy chased them, popped several with his teeth, then began to get the hang of what Slightman seemed to want, which was for him to herd them into a fragile little pile of light. The bubble-pile made Eddie think of the Wizard's Rainbow, those dangerous glass balls. And did Callahan really have one? The worst of the bunch?

Beyond the boys, at the edge of the clearing, Andy stood with his silver arms folded over the stainless-steel curve of his chest. Waiting to clean up the meal he had hauled to them and then cooked, Eddie supposed. The perfect servant. He cooks, he cleans, he tells you about the dark lady you'll meet. Just don't expect him to violate Directive Nineteen. Not without the password, anyway.

“Come over to me, folks, would you?” Roland asked, raising his voice slightly. “Time we had a bit of palaver. Won’t be long, which is good, at least for us, for we’ve already had our own, before sai Callahan came to us, and after awhile talk sickens, so it does.”

They came over and sat near him like obedient children, those from the Calla and those who were from far away and would go beyond here perhaps even farther.

“First I’d hear what you know of these Wolves. Eddie tells me Andy may not say how he comes by what he knows.”

“You say true,” Slightman the Elder rumbled. “Either those who made him or those who came later have mostly gagged him on that subject, although he always warns us of their coming. On most other subjects, his mouth runs everlastingly.”

Roland looked toward the Calla’s big farmer. “Will you set us on, sai Overholser?”

Tian Jaffords looked disappointed not to be called on. His woman looked disappointed for him. Slightman the Elder nodded as if Roland’s choice of speaker was only to be expected. Overholser himself did not puff up as Eddie might have guessed. Instead he looked down at his own crossed legs and scuffed shor’boots for thirty seconds or so, rubbing at the side of his face, thinking. The clearing was so quiet Eddie could hear the minute rasp of the farmer’s palm on two or three days’ worth of bristles. At last he sighed, nodded, and looked up at Roland.

“Say thankee. Ye’re not what I expected, I must say. Nor your tet.” Overholser turned to Tian. “Ye were right to haul us out here, Tian Jaffords. This is a meeting we needed to have, and I say thankee.”

“It wasn’t me got you out here,” Jaffords said. “Was the Old Fella.”

Overholser nodded to Callahan. Callahan nodded back, then sketched the shape of a cross in the air with his scarred hand—as if to say, Eddie thought, that it wasn’t him, either, but God. Maybe so, but when it came to pulling coals out of a hot fire, he’d put two dollars on Roland of Gilead for every one he put on God and the Man Jesus, those heavenly gunslingers.

Roland waited, his face calm and perfectly polite.

Finally Overholser began to talk. He spoke for nearly fifteen minutes, slowly but always to the point. There was the business of the

twins, to begin with. Residents of the Calla realized that children birthed in twos were the exception rather than the rule in other parts of the world and at other times in the past, but in their area of the Grand Crescent it was the singletons, like the Jaffordses' Aaron, who were the rarities. The *great* rarities.

And, beginning perhaps a hundred and twenty years ago (or mayhap a hundred and fifty; with time the way it was, such things were impossible to pin down with any certainty), the Wolves had begun their raids. They did not come exactly once every generation; that would have been each twenty years or so, and it was longer than that. Still, it was *close* to that.

Eddie thought of asking Overholser and Slightman how the Old People could have shut Andy's mouth concerning the Wolves if the Wolves had been raiding out of Thunderclap for less than two centuries, then didn't bother. Asking what couldn't be answered was a waste of time, Roland would have said. Still, it was interesting, wasn't it? Interesting to wonder when someone (or *something*) had last programmed Andy the Messenger (Many Other Functions).

And why.

The children, Overholser said, one of each set between the ages of perhaps three and fourteen, were taken east, into the land of Thunderclap. (Slightman the Elder put his arm around his boy's shoulders during this part of the tale, Eddie noticed.) There they remained for a relatively short period of time—mayhap four weeks, mayhap eight. Then most of them would be returned. The assumption made about those few who did not return was that they had died in the Land of Darkness, that whatever evil rite was performed on them killed a few instead of just ruining them.

The ones who came back were at best biddable idiots. A five-year-old would return with all his hard-won talk gone, reduced to nothing but babble and reaching for the things he wanted. Diapers which had been left forgotten two or three years before would go back on and might stay on until such a roont child was ten or even twelve.

"Yer-bugger, Tia *still* pisses herself one day out of every six, and can be counted on to shit herself once a moon, as well," Jaffords said.

"Hear him," Overholser agreed gloomily. "My own brother, Welland, was much the same until he died. And of course they have to

be watched more or less constant, for if they get something they like, they'll eat it until they bust. Who's watching yours, Tian?"

"My cuz," Zalia said before Tian could speak. "Heddon n Hedda can help a little now, as well; they've come to a likely enough age—" She stopped and seemed to realize what she was saying. Her mouth twisted and she fell silent. Eddie guessed he understood. Heddon and Hedda could help now, yes. Next year, one of them would still be able to help. The other one, though . . .

A child taken at the age of ten might come back with a few rudiments of language left, but would never get much beyond that. The ones who were taken oldest were somehow the worst, for they seemed to come back with some vague understanding of what had been done to them. What had been stolen from them. These had a tendency to cry a great deal, or to simply creep off by themselves and peer into the east, like lost things. As if they might see their poor brains out there, circling like birds in the dark sky. Half a dozen such had even committed suicide over the years. (At this, Callahan once more crossed himself.)

The roont ones remained childlike in stature as well as in speech and behavior until about the age of sixteen. Then, quite suddenly, most of them sprouted to the size of young giants.

"Ye can have no idea what it's like if ye haven't seen it and been through it," Tian said. He was looking into the ashes of the fire. "Ye can have no idea of the pain it causes them. When a babby cuts his teeth, ye ken how they cry?"

"Yes," Susannah said.

Tian nodded. "It's as if their whole bodies are teething, kennit."

"Hear him," Overholser said. "For sixteen or eighteen months, all my brother did was sleep and eat and cry and grow. I can remember him crying even *in* his sleep. I'd get out of my bed and go across to him and there'd be a whispering sound from inside his chest and legs and head. 'Twere the sound of his bones growing in the night, hear me."

Eddie contemplated the horror of it. You heard stories about giants—fee-fi-fo-fum, and all that—but until now he'd never considered what it might be like to *become* a giant. *As if their whole bodies are teething*, Eddie thought, and shivered.

“A year and a half, no longer than that and it were done, but I wonder how long it must seem to them, who’re brought back with no more sense of time than birds or bugs.”

“Endless,” Susannah said. Her face was very pale and she sounded ill. “It must seem endless.”

“The whispering in the nights as their bones grow,” Overholser said. “The headaches as their *skulls* grow.”

“Zalman screamed one time for nine days without stopping,” Zalia said. Her voice was expressionless, but Eddie could see the horror in her eyes; he could see it very well. “His cheekbones pushed up. You could see it happening. His forehead curved out and out, and if you held an ear close to it you could hear the skull creaking as it spread. It sounded like a tree-branch under a weight of ice.

“Nine days he screamed. Nine. Morning, noon, and in the dead of night. Screaming and screaming. Eyes gushing water. We prayed to all the gods there were that he’d go hoarse—that he’d be stricken dumb, even—but none such happened, say thankee. If we’d had a gun, I believe we would have slew him as he lay on his pallet just to end his pain. As it was, my good old da’ was ready to slit ’een’s thr’ut when it stopped. His bones went on yet awhile—his skellington, do ya—but his head was the worst of it and it finally stopped, tell gods thankya, and Man Jesus too.”

She nodded toward Callahan. He nodded back and raised his hand toward her, outstretched in the air for a moment. Zalia turned back to Roland and his friends.

“Now I have five of my own,” she said. “Aaron’s safe, and say thankee, but Heddon and Hedda’s ten, a prime age. Lyman and Lia’s only five, but five’s old enough. Five’s . . .”

She covered her face with her hands and said no more.

FOUR

Once the growth-spurt was finished, Overholser said, some of them could be put to work. Others—the majority—weren’t able to manage even such rudimentary tasks as pulling stumps or digging postholes. You saw these sitting on the steps of Took’s General Store or sometimes walking across the countryside in gangling groups, young

men and women of enormous height, weight, and stupidity, sometimes grinning at each other and babbling, sometimes only goggling up at the sky.

They didn't mate, there was that to be grateful for. While not all of them grew to prodigious size and their mental skills and physical abilities might vary somewhat, there seemed to be one universal: they came back sexually dead. "Beggin your pardon for the crudity," Overholser said, "but I don't b'lieve my brother Welland had so much as a piss-hardon after they brought him back. Zalia? Have you ever seen your brother with a . . . you know . . ."

Zalia shook her head.

"How old were you when they came, sai Overholser?" Roland asked.

"First time, ye mean. Welland and I were nine." Overholser now spoke rapidly. It gave what he said the air of a rehearsed speech, but Eddie didn't think that was it. Overholser was a force in Calla Bryn Sturgis; he was, God save us and stone the crows, the big farmer. It was hard for him to go back in his mind to a time when he'd been a child, small and powerless and terrified. "Our Ma and Pa tried to hide us away in the cellar. So I've been told, anyway. I remember none of it, m'self, to be sure. Taught myself not to, I s'pose. Yar, quite likely. Some remember better'n others, Roland, but all the tales come to the same: one is took, one is left behind. The one took comes back roont, maybe able to work a little but dead in the b'low the waist. Then . . . when they get in their thirties . . ."

When they reached their thirties, the roont twins grew abruptly, shockingly old. Their hair turned white and often fell completely out. Their eyes dimmed. Muscles that had been prodigious (as Tia Jaffords's and Zalman Hoonik's were now) went slack and wasted away. Sometimes they died peacefully, in their sleep. More often, their endings weren't peaceful at all. The sores came, sometimes out on the skin but more often in the stomach or the head. In the brain. All died long before their natural span would have been up, had it not been for the Wolves, and many died as they had grown from the size of normal children to that of giants: screaming in pain. Eddie wondered how many of these idiots, dying of what sounded to him like terminal cancer, were simply smothered or perhaps fed some strong sedative

that would take them far beyond pain, far beyond sleep. It wasn't the sort of question you asked, but he guessed the answer would have been many. Roland sometimes used the word *delah*, always spoken with a light toss of the hand toward the horizon.

Many.

The visitors from the Calla, their tongues and memories untied by distress, might have gone on for some time, piling one sorry anecdote on another, but Roland didn't allow them to. "Now speak of the Wolves, I beg. How many come to you?"

"Forty," Tian Jaffords said.

"Spread across the whole Calla?" Slightman the Elder asked. "Nay, more than forty." And to Tian, slightly apologetic: "You were no more'n nine y'self last time they came, Tian. I were in my young twenties. Forty in town, maybe, but more came to the outlying farms and ranches. I'd say sixty in all, Roland-sai, maybe eighty."

Roland looked at Overholser, eyebrows raised.

"It's been twenty-three years, ye mind," Overholser said, "but I'd call sixty about right."

"You call them Wolves, but what are they really? Are they men? Or something else?"

Overholser, Slightman, Tian, Zalia: for a moment Eddie could feel them sharing khef, could almost hear them. It made him feel lonely and left-out, the way you did when you saw a couple kissing on a streetcorner, wrapped in each other's arms or looking into each other's eyes, totally lost in each other's regard. Well, he didn't have to feel that way anymore, did he? He had his own ka-tet, his own khef. Not to mention his own woman.

Meanwhile, Roland was making the impatient little finger-twirling gesture with which Eddie had become so familiar. *Come on, folks*, it said, *day's wasting*.

"No telling for sure what they are," Overholser said. "They *look* like men, but they wear masks."

"Wolf-masks," Susannah said.

"Aye, lady, wolf-masks, gray as their horses."

"Do you say all come on gray horses?" Roland asked.

The silence was briefer this time, but Eddie still felt that sense of khef and ka-tet, minds consulting via something so elemental it

couldn't even rightly be called telepathy; it was more elemental than telepathy.

"Yer-bugger!" Overholser said, a slang term that seemed to mean *You bet your ass, don't insult me by asking again.* "All on gray horses. They wear gray pants that look like skin. Black boots with cruel big steel spurs. Green cloaks and hoods. And the masks. We know they're masks because they've been found left behind. They look like steel but rot in the sun like flesh, buggerdly things."

"Ah."

Overholser gave him a rather insulting head-cocked-to-one-side look, the sort that asked *Are you foolish or just slow?* Then Slightman said: "Their horses ride like the wind. Some have ta'en one babby before the saddle and another behind."

"Do you say so?" Roland asked.

Slightman nodded emphatically. "Tell gods thankee." He saw Callahan again make the sign of the cross in the air and sighed. "Beg pardon, Old Fella."

Callahan shrugged. "You were here before I was. Call on all the gods you like, so long as you know I think they're false."

"And they come out of Thunderclap," Roland said, ignoring this last.

"Aye," Overholser said. "You can see where it lies over that way about a hundred wheels." He pointed southeast. "For we come out of the woods on the last height of land before the Crescent. Ye can see all the Eastern Plain from there, and beyond it a great darkness, like a rain cloud on the horizon. 'Tis said, Roland, that in the far long ago, you could see mountains over there."

"Like the Rockies from Nebraska," Jake breathed.

Overholser glanced at him. "Beg pardon, Jake-soh?"

"Nothing," Jake said, and gave the big farmer a small, embarrassed smile. Eddie, meanwhile, filed away what Overholser had called him. Not sai but soh. Just something else that was interesting.

"We've heard of Thunderclap," Roland said. His voice was somehow terrifying in its lack of emotion, and when Eddie felt Susannah's hand creep into his, he was glad of it.

" 'Tis a land of vampires, boggarts, and taheen, so the stories say," Zalia told them. Her voice was thin, on the verge of trembling. "Of

course the stories are old—”

“The stories are true,” Callahan said. His own voice was harsh, but Eddie heard the fear in it. Heard it very well. “There *are* vampires—other things as well, very likely—and Thunderclap’s their nest. We might speak more of this another time, gunslinger, if it does ya. For now, only hear me, I beg: of vampires I know a good deal. I don’t know if the Wolves take the Calla’s children to them—I rather think not—but yes, there *are* vampires.”

“Why do you speak as if I doubt?” Roland asked.

Callahan’s eyes dropped. “Because many do. I did myself. I doubted much and . . .” His voice cracked. He cleared his throat, and when he finished, it was almost in a whisper. “. . . and it was my undoing.”

Roland sat quiet for several moments, hunkered on the soles of his ancient boots with his arms wrapped around his bony knees, rocking back and forth a little. Then, to Overholser: “What o’ the clock do they come?”

“When they took Welland, my brother, it was morning,” the farmer said. “Breakfast not far past. I remember, because Welland asked our Ma if he could take his cup of coffee into the cellar with him. But last time . . . the time they come and took Tian’s sister and Zalia’s brother and so many others . . .”

“I lost two nieces and a nephew,” Slightman the Elder said.

“That time wasn’t long after the noon-bell from the Gathering Hall. We know the day because *Andy* knows the day, and that much he tells us. Then we hear the thunder of their hooves as they come out of the east and see the rooster-tail of dust they raise—”

“So you know when they’re coming,” Roland said. “In fact, you know three ways: Andy, the sound of their hoofbeats, the rise of their dust.”

Overholser, taking Roland’s implication, had flushed a dull brick color up the slopes of his plump cheeks and down his neck. “They come armed, Roland, do ya. With guns—rifles as well as the revolvers yer own tet carries, grenados, too—and other weapons, as well. Fearsome weapons of the Old People. Light-sticks that kill at a touch, flying metal buzz-balls called drones or sneetches. The sticks burn the skin black and stop the heart—electrical, maybe, or maybe—”

Eddie heard Overholser's next word as *ant-NOMIC*. At first he thought the man was trying to say "anatomy." A moment later he realized it was probably "atomic."

"Once the drones smell you, they follow no matter how fast you run," Slightman's boy said eagerly, "or how much you twist and turn. Right, Da'?"

"Yer-bugger," Slightman the Elder said. "Then sprout blades that whirl around so fast you can't see em and they cut you apart."

"All on gray horses," Roland mused. "Every one of em the same color. What else?"

Nothing, it seemed. It was all told. They came out of the east on the day Andy foretold, and for a terrible hour—perhaps longer—the Calla was filled with the thunderous hoofbeats of those gray horses and the screams of desolated parents. Green cloaks swirled. Wolf-masks that looked like metal and rotted in the sun like skin snarled. The children were taken. Sometimes a few pair were overlooked and left whole, suggesting that the Wolves' prescience wasn't perfect. Still, it must have been pretty goddam good, Eddie thought, because if the kids were moved (as they often were) or hidden at home (as they almost *always* were), the Wolves found them anyway, and in short order. Even at the bottom of sharproot piles or haystacks they were found. Those of the Calla who tried to stand against them were shot, fried by the light-sticks—lasers of some kind?—or cut to pieces by the flying drones. When trying to imagine these latter, he kept recalling a bloody little film Henry had dragged him to. *Phantasm*, it had been called. Down at the old Majestic. Corner of Brooklyn and Markey Avenue. Like too much of his old life, the Majestic had smelled of piss and popcorn and the kind of wine that came in brown bags. Sometimes there were needles in the aisles. Not good, maybe, and yet sometimes—usually at night, when sleep was long in coming—a deep part of him still cried for the old life of which the Majestic had been a part. Cried for it as a stolen child might cry for his mother.

The children were taken, the hoofbeats receded the way they had come, and that was the end of it.

"No, can't be," Jake said. "They must bring them back, don't they?"

"No," Overholser said. "The roont ones come back on the train, hear me, there's a great junkpile of em I could show'ee, and—What?"

What's wrong?" Jake's mouth had fallen open, and he'd lost most of his color.

"We had a bad experience on a train not so very long ago," Susannah said. "The trains that bring your children back, are they monos?"

They weren't. Overholser, the Jaffordses, and the Slightmans had no idea what a mono was, in fact. (Callahan, who had been to Disneyland as a teenager, did.) The trains which brought the children back were hauled by plain old locomotives (*hopefully none of them named Charlie*, Eddie thought), driverless and attached to one or perhaps two open flatcars. The children were huddled on these. When they arrived they were usually crying with fear (from sunburns as well, if the weather west of Thunderclap was hot and clear), covered with food and their own drying shit, and dehydrated into the bargain. There was no station at the railhead, although Overholser opined there might have been, centuries before. Once the children had been offloaded, teams of horses were used to pull the short trains from the rusty railhead. It occurred to Eddie that they could figure out the number of times the Wolves had come by counting the number of junked engines, sort of like figuring out the age of a tree by counting the rings on the stump.

"How long a trip for them, would you guess?" Roland asked. "Judging from their condition when they arrive?"

Overholser looked at Slightman, then at Tian and Zalia. "Two days? Three?"

They shrugged and nodded.

"Two or three days," Overholser said to Roland, speaking with more confidence than was perhaps warranted, judging from the looks of the others. "Long enough for sunburns, and to eat most of the rations they're left—"

"Or paint themselves with em," Slightman grunted.

"—but not long enough to die of exposure," Overholser finished. "If ye'd judge from that how far they were taken from the Calla, all I can say is I wish'ee joy of the riddle, for no one knows what speed the train draws when it's crossing the plains. It comes slow and stately enough to the far side of the river, but that means little."

“No,” Roland agreed, “it doesn’t.” He considered. “Twenty-seven days left?”

“Twenty-six now,” Callahan said quietly.

“One thing, Roland,” Overholser said. He spoke apologetically, but his jaw was jutting. Eddie thought he’d backslid to the kind of guy you could dislike on sight. If you had a problem with authority figures, that was, and Eddie always had.

Roland raised his eyebrows in silent question.

“We haven’t said yes.” Overholser glanced at Slightman the Elder, as if for support, and Slightman nodded agreement.

“Ye must ken we have no way of knowing y’are who you say y’are,” Slightman said, rather apologetically. “My family had no books growing up, and there’s none out at the ranch—I’m foreman of Eisenhart’s Rocking B—except for the stockline books, but growing up I heard as many tales of Gilead and gunslingers and Arthur Eld as any other boy . . . heard of Jericho Hill and such blood-and-thunder tales of pretend . . . but I never heard of a gunslinger missing two of his fingers, or a brown-skinned woman gunslinger, or one who won’t be old enough to shave for years yet.”

His son looked shocked, and in an agony of embarrassment as well. Slightman looked rather embarrassed himself, but pushed on.

“I cry your pardon if what I say offends, indeed I do—”

“Hear him, hear him well,” Overholser rumbled. Eddie was starting to think that if the man’s jaw juttied out much further, it would snap clean off.

“—but any decision we make will have long echoes. Ye must see it’s so. If we make the wrong one, it could mean the death of our town, and all in it.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing!” Tian Jaffords cried indignantly. “Do you think ’ese’re a fraud? Good gods, man, have’ee not *looked* at him? Do’ee not have—”

His wife grasped his arm hard enough to pinch white marks into his farmer’s tan with the tips of her fingers. Tian looked at her and fell quiet, though his lips were pressed together tightly.

Somewhere in the distance, a crow called and a rustie answered in its slightly shriller voice. Then all was silent. One by one they turned to Roland of Gilead to see how he would reply.

FIVE

It was always the same, and it made him tired. They wanted help, but they also wanted references. A parade of witnesses, if they could get them. They wanted rescue without risk, just to close their eyes and be saved.

Roland rocked slowly back and forth with his arms wrapped around his knees. Then he nodded to himself and raised his head. "Jake," he said. "Come to me."

Jake glanced at Benny, his new friend, then got up and walked across to Roland. Oy walked at his heel, as always.

"Andy," Roland said.

"Sai?"

"Bring me four of the plates we ate from." As Andy did this, Roland spoke to Overholser: "You're going to lose some crockery. When gunslingers come to town, sai, things get broken. It's a simple fact of life."

"Roland, I don't think we need—"

"Hush now," Roland said, and although his voice was gentle, Overholser hushed at once. "You've told your tale; now we tell ours."

Andy's shadow fell over Roland. The gunslinger looked up and took the plates, which hadn't been rinsed and still gleamed with grease. Then he turned to Jake, where a remarkable change had taken place. Sitting with Benny the Kid, watching Oy do his small clever tricks and grinning with pride, Jake had looked like any other boy of twelve—carefree and full of the old Dick, likely as not. Now the smile had fallen away and it was hard to tell just what his age might have been. His blue eyes looked into Roland's, which were of almost the same shade. Beneath his shoulder, the Ruger Jake had taken from his father's desk in another life hung in its docker's clutch. The trigger was secured with a rawhide loop which Jake now loosened without looking. It took only a single tug.

"Say your lesson, Jake, son of Elmer, and be true."

Roland half-expected either Eddie or Susannah to interfere, but neither did. He looked at them. Their faces were as cold and grave as Jake's. Good.

Jake's voice was also without expression, but the words came out hard and sure.

"I do not aim with my hand; he who aims with his hand has forgotten the face of his father. I aim with my eye. I do not shoot with my hand—"

"I don't see what this—" Overholser began.

"Shut up," Susannah said, and pointed a finger at him.

Jake seemed not to have heard. His eyes never left Roland's. The boy's right hand lay on his upper chest, the fingers spread. "He who shoots with his hand has forgotten the face of his father. I shoot with my mind. I do not kill with my gun; he who kills with his gun has forgotten the face of his father."

Jake paused. Drew in breath. And let it out speaking.

"I kill with my heart."

"Kill these," Roland remarked, and with no more warning than that, slung all four of the plates high into the air. They rose, spinning and separating, black shapes against the white sky.

Jake's hand, the one resting on his chest, became a blur. It pulled the Ruger from the docker's clutch, swung it up, and began pulling the trigger while Roland's hand was still in the air. The plates did not seem to explode one after the other but rather all at once. The pieces rained down on the clearing. A few fell into the fire, puffing up ash and sparks. One or two clanged off Andy's steel head.

Roland snatched upward, open hands moving in a blur. Although he had given them no command, Eddie and Susannah did the same, did it even while the visitors from Calla Bryn Sturgis cringed, shocked by the loudness of the gunfire. And the speed of the shots.

"Look here at us, do ya, and say thankee," Roland said. He held out his hands. Eddie and Susannah did the same. Eddie had caught three pottery shards. Susannah had five (and a shallow cut on the pad of one finger). Roland had snatched a full dozen pieces of falling shrapnel. It looked like almost enough to make a whole plate, were the pieces glued back together.

The six from the Calla stared, unbelieving. Benny the Kid still had his hands over his ears; now he lowered them slowly. He was looking at Jake as one might look at a ghost or an apparition from the sky.

“My . . . *God*,” Callahan said. “It’s like a trick in some old Wild West show.”

“It’s no trick,” Roland said, “never think it. It’s the Way of the Eld. We are of that an-tet, khéf and ka, watch and warrant. Gunslingers, do ya. And now I’ll tell you what we will do.” His eyes sought Overholser’s. “What we *will* do, I say, for no man bids us. Yet I think nothing I say will discomfort you too badly. If mayhap it does—” Roland shrugged. *If it does, too bad*, that shrug said.

He dropped the pottery shards between his boots and dusted his hands.

“If those had been Wolves,” he said, “there would have been fifty-six left to trouble you instead of sixty. Four of them lying dead on the ground before you could draw a breath. Killed by a boy.” He gazed at Jake. “What you would *call* a boy, mayhap.” Roland paused. “We’re used to long odds.”

“The young fella’s a breathtaking shot, I’d grant ye,” said Slightman the Elder. “But there’s a difference between clay dishes and Wolves on horseback.”

“For you, sai, perhaps. Not for us. Not once the shooting starts. When the shooting starts, we kill what moves. Isn’t that why you sought us?”

“Suppose they can’t be shot?” Overholser asked. “Can’t be laid low by even the hardest of hard calibers?”

“Why do you waste time when time is short?” Roland asked evenly. “You *know* they can be killed or you never would have come out here to us in the first place. I didn’t ask, because the answer is self-evident.”

Overholser had once more flushed dark red. “Cry your pardon,” he said.

Benny, meanwhile, continued to stare at Jake with wide eyes, and Roland felt a minor pang of regret for both boys. They might still manage some sort of friendship, but what had just happened would change it in fundamental ways, turn it into something quite unlike the usual lighthearted khéf boys shared. Which was a shame, because when Jake wasn’t being called upon to be a gunslinger, he was still only a child. Close to the age Roland himself had been when the test of manhood had been thrust on him. But he would not be young much longer, very likely. And it was a shame.

“Listen to me now,” Roland said, “and hear me very well. We leave you shortly to go back to our own camp and take our own counsel. Tomorrow, when we come to your town, we’ll put up with one of you —”

“Come to Seven-Mile,” Overholser said. “We’ll have you and say thankee, Roland.”

“Our place is much smaller,” Tian said, “but Zalia and I—”

“We’d be so pleased to have’ee,” Zalia said. She had flushed as deeply as Overholser. “Aye, we would.”

Roland said, “Do you have a house as well as a church, sai Callahan?”

Callahan smiled. “I do, and tell God thankya.”

“We might stay with you on our first night in Calla Bryn Sturgis,” Roland said. “Could we do that?”

“Sure, and welcome.”

“You could show us your church. Introduce us to its mysteries.”

Callahan’s gaze was steady. “I’d welcome the chance to do that.”

“In the days after,” Roland said, smiling, “we shall throw ourselves on the hospitality of the town.”

“You’ll not find it wanting,” Tian said. “That I promise ye.” Overholser and Slightman were nodding.

“If the meal we’ve just eaten is any sign, I’m sure that’s true. We say thankee, sai Jaffords; thankee one and all. For a week we four will go about your town, poking our noses here and there. Mayhap a bit longer, but likely a week. We’ll look at the lay of the land and the way the buildings are set on it. Look with an eye to the coming of these Wolves. We’ll talk to folk, and folk will talk to us—those of you here now will see to that, aye?”

Callahan was nodding. “I can’t speak for the Manni, but I’m sure the rest will be more than willing to talk to you about the Wolves. God and Man Jesus knows they’re no secret. And those of the Crescent are frightened to death of them. If they see a chance you might be able to help us, they’ll do all you ask.”

“The Manni will speak to me as well,” Roland said. “I’ve held palaver with them before.”

“Don’t be carried away with the Old Fella’s enthusiasm, Roland,” Overholser said. He raised his plump hands in the air, a gesture of

caution. “There are others in town you’ll have to convince—”

“Vaughn Eisenhart, for one,” said Slightman.

“Aye, and Eben Took, do ya,” Overholser said. “The General Store’s the only thing his name’s on, ye ken, but he owns the boarding house and the restaurant out front of it . . . as well’s a half-interest in the livery . . . and loan-paper on most of the smallholds hereabouts.

“When it comes to the smallholds, ’ee mustn’t neglect Bucky Javier,” Overholser rumbled. “He ain’t the biggest of em, but only because he gave away half of what he had to his young sister when she married.” Overholser leaned toward Roland, his face alight with a bit of town history about to be passed on. “Roberta Javier, Bucky’s sissa, she’s lucky,” he said. “When the Wolves came last time, she and her twin brother were but a year old. So they were passed over.”

“Bucky’s own twin brother was took the time before,” Slightman said. “Bully’s dead now almost four year. Of the sickness. Since then, there ain’t enough Bucky can do for those younger two. But you should talk to him, aye. Bucky’s not got but eighty acre, yet he’s trig.”

Roland thought, *They still don’t see.*

“Thank you,” he said. “What lies directly ahead for us comes down to looking and listening, mostly. When it’s done, we’ll ask that whoever is in charge of the feather take it around so that a meeting can be called. At that meeting, we’ll tell you if the town can be defended and how many men we’ll want to help us, if it can be done.”

Roland saw Overholser puffing up to speak and shook his head at him.

“It won’t be many we’d want, in any case,” he said. “We’re gunslingers, not an army. We think differently, act differently, than armies do. We might ask for as many as five to stand with us. Probably fewer—only two or three. But we might need more to help us prepare.”

“Why?” Benny asked.

Roland smiled. “That I can’t say yet, son, because I haven’t seen how things are in your Calla. But in cases like this, surprise is always the most potent weapon, and it usually takes many people to prepare a good surprise.”

“The greatest surprise to the Wolves,” Tian said, “would be if we fought at all.”

“Suppose you decide the Calla *can't* be defended?” Overholser asked. “Tell me that, I beg.”

“Then I and my friends will thank you for your hospitality and ride on,” Roland said, “for we have our own business farther along the Path of the Beam.” He observed Tian’s and Zalia’s crestfallen faces for a moment, then said: “I don’t think that’s likely, you know. There’s usually a way.”

“May the meeting receive your judgment favorably,” Overholser said.

Roland hesitated. This was the point where he could hammer the truth home, should he want to. If these people still believed a tet of gunslingers would be bound by what farmers and ranchers decided in a public meeting, they really *had* lost the shape of the world as it once was. But was that so bad? In the end, matters would play out and become part of his long history. Or not. If not, he would finish his history and his quest in Calla Bryn Sturgis, moldering beneath a stone. Perhaps not even that; perhaps he’d finish in a dead heap somewhere east of town, he and his friends with him, so much rotting meat to be picked over by the crows and the rusties. Ka would tell. It always did.

Meanwhile, they were looking at him.

Roland stood up, wincing at a hard flare of pain in his right hip as he did so. Taking their cues from him, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake also rose.

“We’re well-met,” Roland said. “As for what lies ahead, there will be water if God wills it.”

Callahan said, “Amen.”

CHAPTER VII:

TODASH

ONE

“Gray horses,” Eddie said.

“Aye,” Roland agreed.

“Fifty or sixty of them, all on gray horses.”

“Aye, so they did say.”

“And didn’t think it the least bit strange,” Eddie mused.

“No. They didn’t seem to.”

“Is it?”

“Fifty or sixty horses, all the same color? I’d say so, yes.”

“These Calla-folk raise horses themselves.”

“Aye.”

“Brought some for us to ride.” Eddie, who had never ridden a horse in his life, was grateful that at least had been put off, but didn’t say so.

“Aye, tethered over the hill.”

“You know that for a fact?”

“Smelled em. I imagine the robot had the keeping of them.”

“Why would these folks take fifty or sixty horses, all the same shade, as a matter of course?”

“Because they don’t really think about the Wolves or anything to do with them,” Roland said. “They’re too busy being afraid, I think.”

Eddie whistled five notes that didn’t quite make a melody. Then he said, “Gray horses.”

Roland nodded. “Gray horses.”

They looked at each other for a moment, then laughed. Eddie loved it when Roland laughed. The sound was dry, as ugly as the calls

of those giant blackbirds he called rusties . . . but he loved it. Maybe it was just that Roland laughed so seldom.

It was late afternoon. Overhead, the clouds had thinned enough to turn a pallid blue that was almost the color of sky. The Overholser party had returned to their camp. Susannah and Jake had gone back along the forest road to pick more muffin-balls. After the big meal they'd packed away, none of them wanted anything heavier. Eddie sat on a log, whittling. Beside him sat Roland, with all their guns broken down and spread out before him on a piece of deerskin. He oiled the pieces one by one, holding each bolt and cylinder and barrel up to the daylight for a final look before setting it aside for reassembly.

"You told them it was out of their hands," Eddie said, "but they didn't ken that any more than they did the business about all those gray horses. And you didn't press it."

"Only would have distressed them," Roland said. "There was a saying in Gilead: Let evil wait for the day on which it must fall."

"Uh-huh," Eddie said. "There was a saying in Brooklyn: You can't get snot off a suede jacket." He held up the object he was making. It would be a top, Roland thought, a toy for a baby. And again he wondered how much Eddie might know about the woman he lay down with each night. The *women*. Not on the top of his mind, but underneath. "If you decide we *can* help them, then we *have* to help them. That's what Eld's Way really boils down to, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Roland said.

"And if we can't get any of them to stand with us, we stand alone."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that," Roland said. He had a saucer filled with light, sweet gun-oil. Now he dipped the corner of a chamois rag into it, picked up the spring-clip of Jake's Ruger, and began to clean it. "Tian Jaffords would stand with us, come to that. Surely he has a friend or two who'd do the same regardless of what their meeting decides. In a pinch, there's his wife."

"And if we get them both killed, what about their kids? They have five. Also, I think there's an old guy in the picture. One of em's Grampy. They probably take care of him, too."

Roland shrugged. A few months ago, Eddie would have mistaken that gesture—and the gunslinger's expressionless face—for

indifference. Now he knew better. Roland was as much a prisoner of his rules and traditions as Eddie had ever been of heroin.

“What if *we* get killed in this little town, screwing around with these Wolves?” Eddie asked. “Isn’t your last thought gonna be something like, ‘I can’t believe what a putz I was, throwing away my chance to get to the Dark Tower in order to take up for a bunch of snotnose brats.’ Or similar sentiments.”

“Unless we stand true, we’ll never get within a thousand miles of the Tower,” Roland said. “Would you tell me you don’t feel that?”

Eddie couldn’t, because he did. He felt something else, as well: a species of bloodthirsty eagerness. He actually wanted to fight again. Wanted to have a few of these Wolves, whatever they were, in the sights of one of Roland’s big revolvers. There was no sense kidding himself about the truth: he wanted to take a few scalps.

Or wolf-masks.

“What’s really troubling you, Eddie? I’d have you speak while it’s just you and me.” The gunslinger’s mouth quirked in a thin, slanted smile. “Do ya, I beg.”

“Shows, huh?”

Roland shrugged and waited.

Eddie considered the question. It was a *big* question. Facing it made him feel desperate and inadequate, pretty much the way he’d felt when faced with the task of carving the key that would let Jake Chambers through into their world. Only then he’d had the ghost of his big brother to blame, Henry whispering deep down in his head that he was no good, never had been, never would be. Now it was just the enormity of what Roland was asking. Because everything was troubling him, everything was wrong. *Everything*. Or maybe *wrong* was the wrong word, and by a hundred and eighty degrees. Because in another way things seemed too *right*, too perfect, too . . .

“Arrrggghh,” Eddie said. He grabbed bunches of hair on both sides of his head and pulled. “I can’t think of a way to say it.”

“Then say the first thing that comes into your mind. Don’t hesitate.”

“Nineteen,” Eddie said. “This whole deal has gone nineteen.”

He fell backward onto the fragrant forest floor, covered his eyes, and kicked his feet like a kid doing a tantrum. He thought: *Maybe*

killing a few Wolves will set me right. Maybe that's all it will take.

TWO

Roland gave him a full minute by count and then said, “Do you feel better?”

Eddie sat up. “Actually I do.”

Roland nodded, smiling a little. “Then can you say more? If you can't, we'll let it go, but I've come to respect your feelings, Eddie—far more than you realize—and if you'd speak, I'd hear.”

What he said was true. The gunslinger's initial feelings for Eddie had wavered between caution and contempt for what Roland saw as his weakness of character. Respect had come more slowly. It had begun in Balazar's office, when Eddie had fought naked. Very few men Roland had known could have done that. It had grown with his realization of how much Eddie was like Cuthbert. Then, on the mono, Eddie had acted with a kind of desperate creativity that Roland could admire but never equal. Eddie Dean was possessed of Cuthbert Allgood's always puzzling and sometimes annoying sense of the ridiculous; he was also possessed of Alain Johns's deep flashes of intuition. Yet in the end, Eddie was like neither of Roland's old friends. He was sometimes weak and self-centered, but possessed of deep reservoirs of courage and courage's good sister, what Eddie himself sometimes called “heart.”

But it was his intuition Roland wanted to tap now.

“All right, then,” Eddie said. “Don't stop me. Don't ask questions. Just listen.”

Roland nodded. And hoped Susannah and Jake wouldn't come back, at least not just yet.

“I look in the sky—up there where the clouds are breaking right this minute—and I see the number nineteen written in blue.”

Roland looked up. And yes, it was there. He saw it, too. But he also saw a cloud like a turtle, and another hole in the thinning dreck that looked like a gunnywagon.

“I look in the trees and see nineteen. Into the fire, see nineteen. Names make nineteen, like Overholser's and Callahan's. But that's just what I can *say*, what I can *see*, what I can get hold of.” Eddie was

speaking with desperate speed, looking directly into Roland's eyes. "Here's another thing. It has to do with todash. I know you guys sometimes think everything reminds me of getting high, and maybe that's right, but Roland, going todash is like being stoned."

Eddie always spoke to him of these things as if Roland had never put anything stronger than graf into his brain and body in all his long life, and that was far from the truth. He might remind Eddie of this at another time, but not now.

"Just being here in your world is like going todash. Because . . . ah, man, this is hard . . . Roland, everything here is real, but it's not."

Roland thought of reminding Eddie this wasn't *his* world, not anymore—for him the city of Lud had been the end of Mid-World and the beginning of all the mysteries that lay beyond—but again kept his mouth closed.

Eddie grasped a handful of duff, scooping up fragrant needles and leaving five black marks in the shape of a hand on the forest floor. "Real," he said. "I can feel it and smell it." He put the handful of needles to his mouth and ran out his tongue to touch them. "I can taste it. And at the same time, it's as unreal as a nineteen you might see in the fire, or that cloud in the sky that looks like a turtle. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand it very well," Roland murmured.

"The people are real. You . . . Susannah . . . Jake . . . that guy Gasher who snatched Jake . . . Overholser and the Slightmans. But the way stuff from my world keeps showing up over here, that's *not* real. It's not sensible or logical, either, but that's not what I mean. *It's just not real.* Why do people over here sing 'Hey Jude'? I don't know. That cyborg bear, Shardik—where do I know that name from? Why did it remind me of rabbits? All that shit about the Wizard of Oz, Roland—all that happened to us, I have no doubt of it, but at the same time it doesn't seem real to me. It seems like todash. Like nineteen. And what happens after the Green Palace? Why, we walk into the woods, just like Hansel and Gretel. There's a road for us to walk on. Muffin-balls for us to pick. Civilization has ended. Everything is coming unraveled. You told us so. We saw it in Lud. Except guess what? It's not! Booya, assholes, gotcha again!"

Eddie gave a short laugh. It sounded shrill and unhealthy. When he brushed his hair back from his forehead, he left a dark smear of forest earth on his brow.

“The joke is that, out here a billion miles from nowhere, we come upon a storybook town. Civilized. Decent. The kind of folks you feel you know. Maybe you don’t like em all—Overholser’s a little hard to swallow—but you feel you know em.”

Eddie was right about that, too, Roland thought. He hadn’t even seen Calla Bryn Sturgis yet, and already it reminded him of Mejis. In some ways that seemed perfectly reasonable—farming and ranching towns the world over bore similarities to each other—but in other ways it was disturbing. Disturbing as *hell*. The sombrero Slightman had been wearing, for instance. Was it possible that here, thousands of miles from Mejis, the men should wear similar hats? He supposed it might be. But was it likely that Slightman’s sombrero should remind Roland so strongly of the one worn by Miguel, the old *mozo* at Seafront in Mejis, all those years before? Or was that only his imagination?

As for that, Eddie says I have none, he thought.

“The storybook town has a fairy-tale problem,” Eddie was continuing. “And so the storybook people call on a band of movie-show heroes to save them from the fairy-tale villains. I know it’s real—people are going to die, very likely, and the blood will be real, the screams will be real, the crying afterward will be real—but at the same time there’s something about it that feels no more real than stage scenery.”

“And New York?” Roland asked. “How did that feel to you?”

“The same,” Eddie said. “I mean, think about it. Nineteen books left on the table after Jake took *Charlie the Choo-Choo* and the riddle book . . . and then, out of all the hoods in New York, *Balazar* shows up! *That fuck!*”

“Here, here, now!” Susannah called merrily from behind them. “No profanity, boys.” Jake was pushing her up the road, and her lap was full of muffin-balls. They both looked cheerful and happy. Roland supposed that eating well earlier in the day had something to do with it.

Roland said, "Sometimes that feeling of unreality goes away, doesn't it?"

"It's not exactly unreality, Roland. It—"

"Never mind splitting nails to make tacks. Sometimes it goes away. Doesn't it?"

"Yes," Eddie said. "When I'm with her."

He went to her. Bent. Kissed her. Roland watched them, troubled.

THREE

The light was fading out of the day. They sat around the fire and let it go. What little appetite they'd been able to muster had been easily satisfied by the muffin-balls Susannah and Jake had brought back to camp. Roland had been meditating on something Slightman had said, and more deeply than was probably healthy. Now he pushed it aside still half-chewed and said, "Some of us or all of us may meet later tonight in the city of New York."

"I only hope I get to go this time," Susannah said.

"That's as ka will," Roland said evenly. "The important thing is that you stay together. If there's only one who makes the journey, I think it's apt to be you who goes, Eddie. If only one makes the journey, that one should stay exactly where he . . . or mayhap *she* . . . is until the bells start again."

"The *kammen*," Eddie said. "That's what Andy called em."

"Do you all understand that?"

They nodded, and looking into their faces, Roland realized that each one of them was reserving the right to decide what to do when the time came, based upon the circumstances. Which was exactly right. They were either gunslingers or they weren't, after all.

He surprised himself by uttering a brief snort of a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Jake asked.

"I was just thinking that long life brings strange companions," Roland said.

"If you mean us," Eddie said, "lemme tell you something, Roland—you're not exactly Norman Normal yourself."

"I suppose not," Roland said. "If it's a group that crosses—two, a trio, perhaps all of us—we should join hands when the chimes start."

“Andy said we had to concentrate on each other,” Eddie said. “To keep from getting lost.”

Susannah surprised them all by starting to sing. Only to Roland, it sounded more like a galley-chorus—a thing made to be shouted out verse by verse—than an actual song. Yet even without a real tune to carry, her voice was melodious enough: “*Children, when ye hear the music of the clarinet . . . Children, when ye hear the music of the flute! Children, when ye hear the music of the tam-bou-rine . . . Ye must bow down and worship the iyyy-DOL!*”

“What is it?”

“A field-chant,” she said. “The sort of thing my grandparents and great-grandparents might have sung while they were picking ole massa’s cotton. But times change.” She smiled. “I first heard it in a Greenwich Village coffee-house, back in 1962. And the man who sang it was a white blues-shouter named Dave Van Ronk.”

“I bet Aaron Deepneau was there, too,” Jake breathed. “Hell, I bet he was sitting at the next damn *table*.”

Susannah turned to him, surprised and considering. “Why do you say so, sugar?”

Eddie said, “Because he overheard Calvin Tower saying this guy Deepneau had been hanging around the Village since . . . what’d he say, Jake?”

“Not the Village, Bleecker Street,” Jake said, laughing a little. “Mr. Tower said Mr. Deepneau was hanging around Bleecker Street back before Bob Dylan knew how to blow more than open G on his Hohner. That must be a harmonica.”

“It is,” Eddie said, “and while I might not bet the farm on what Jake’s saying, I’d go a lot more than pocket-change. Sure, Deepneau was there. It wouldn’t even surprise me to find out that Jack Andolini was tending the bar. Because that’s just how things work in the Land of Nineteen.”

“In any case,” Roland said, “those of us who cross should stay together. And I mean within a hand’s reach, all the time.”

“I don’t think I’ll be there,” Jake said.

“Why do you say so, Jake?” the gunslinger asked, surprised.

“Because I’ll never fall asleep,” Jake said. “I’m too excited.”

But eventually they all slept.

FOUR

He knows it's a dream, something brought on by no more than Slightman's chance remark, and yet he can't escape it. Always look for the back door, Cort used to tell them, but if there's a back door in this dream, Roland cannot find it. I heard of Jericho Hill and such blood-and-thunder tales of pretend, that was what Eisenhart's foreman had said, only Jericho Hill had seemed real enough to Roland. Why would it not? He had been there. It had been the end of them. The end of a whole world.

The day is suffocatingly hot; the sun reaches its roof-peak and then seems to stay there, as if the hours have been suspended. Below them is a long sloping field filled with great gray-black stone faces, eroded statues left by people who are long gone, and Grissom's men advance relentlessly among them as Roland and his final few companions withdraw ever upward, shooting as they go. The gunfire is constant, unending, the sound of bullets whining off the stone faces a shrill counterpoint that sinks into their heads like the bloodthirsty whine of mosquitoes. Jamie DeCurry has been killed by a sniper, perhaps Grissom's eagle-eyed son or Grissom himself. With Alain the end was far worse; he was shot in the dark the night before the final battle by his two best friends, a stupid error, a horrible death. There was no help. DeMullet's column was ambushed and slaughtered at Rimrocks and when Alain rode back after midnight to tell them, Roland and Cuthbert . . . the sound of their guns . . . and oh, when Alain cried out their names—

And now they're at the top and there's nowhere left to run. Behind them to the east is a shale-crumbly drop to the Salt—what five hundred miles south of here is called the Clean Sea. To the west is the hill of the stone faces, and Grissom's screaming, advancing men. Roland and his own men have killed hundreds, but there are still two thousand left, and that's a conservative estimate. Two thousand men, their howling faces painted blue, some armed with guns and even a few with Bolts—against a dozen. That's all that's left of them now, here at the top of Jericho Hill, under the burning sky. Jamie dead, Alain dead under the guns of his best friends—stolid, dependable Alain, who could have ridden on to safety but chose not to—and Cuthbert has been shot. How many times? Five? Six? His shirt is soaked crimson to his skin. One side of his face has been drowned in blood; the eye on that side bulges sightlessly on his cheek. Yet he still has Roland's horn, the one which was blown by Arthur Eld, or so the stories did say. He will not give it back. "For I blow it sweeter

than you ever did," he tells Roland, laughing. "You can have it again when I'm dead. Neglect not to pluck it up, Roland, for it's your property."

Cuthbert Allgood, who had once ridden into the Barony of Mejis with a rook's skull mounted on the pommel of his saddle. "The lookout," he had called it, and talked to it just as though it were alive, for such was his fancy and sometimes he drove Roland half-mad with his foolishness, and here he is under the burning sun, staggering toward him with a smoking revolver in one hand and Eld's Horn in the other, blood-bolted and half-blinded and dying . . . but still laughing. Ah dear gods, laughing and laughing.

"Roland!" he cries. "We've been betrayed! We're outnumbered! Our backs are to the sea! We've got em right where we want em! Shall we charge?"

And Roland understands he is right. If their quest for the Dark Tower is really to end here on Jericho Hill—betrayed by one of their own and then overwhelmed by this barbaric remnant of John Farson's army—then let it end splendidly.

"Aye!" he shouts. "Aye, very well. Ye of the castle, to me! Gunslingers, to me! To me, I say!"

"As for gunslingers, Roland," Cuthbert says, "I am here. And we are the last."

Roland first looks at him, then embraces him under that hideous sky. He can feel Cuthbert's burning body, its suicidal trembling thinness. And yet he's laughing. Bert is still laughing.

"All right," Roland says hoarsely, looking around at his few remaining men. "We're going into them. And will accept no quarter."

"Nope, no quarter, absolutely none," Cuthbert says.

"We will not accept their surrender if offered."

"Under no circumstances!" Cuthbert agrees, laughing harder than ever. "Not even should all two thousand lay down their arms."

"Then blow that fucking horn."

Cuthbert raises the horn to his bloody lips and blows a great blast—the final blast, for when it drops from his fingers a minute later (or perhaps it's five, or ten; time has no meaning in that final battle), Roland will let it lie in the dust. In his grief and bloodlust he will forget all about Eld's Horn.

"And now, my friends—hile!"

"Hile!" the last dozen cry beneath that blazing sun. It is the end of them, the end of Gilead, the end of everything, and he no longer cares. The old red fury,

dry and maddening, is settling over his mind, drowning all thought. One last time, then, he thinks. Let it be so.

“To me!” cries Roland of Gilead. “Forward! For the Tower!”

“The Tower!” Cuthbert cries out beside him, reeling. He holds Eld’s Horn up to the sky in one hand, his revolver in the other.

“No prisoners!” Roland screams. “NO PRISONERS!”

They rush forward and down toward Grissom’s blue-faced horde, he and Cuthbert in the lead, and as they pass the first of the great gray-black faces leaning in the high grass, spears and bolts and bullets flying all around them, the chimes begin. It is a melody far beyond beautiful; it threatens to tear him to pieces with its stark loveliness.

Not now, he thinks, ah, gods, not now—let me finish it. Let me finish it with my friend at my side and have peace at last. Please.

He reaches for Cuthbert’s hand. For one moment he feels the touch of his friend’s blood-sticky fingers, there on Jericho Hill where his brave and laughing existence was snuffed out . . . and then the fingers touching his are gone. Or rather, his have melted clean through Bert’s. He is falling, he is falling, the world is darkening, he is falling, the chimes are playing, the kammen are playing (“Sounds Hawaiian, doesn’t it?”) and he is falling, Jericho Hill is gone, Eld’s Horn is gone, there’s darkness and red letters in the darkness, some are Great Letters, enough so he can read what they say, the words say—

FIVE

They said DON’T WALK. Although, Roland saw, people were crossing the street in spite of the sign. They would take a quick look in the direction of the flowing traffic, and then go for it. One fellow crossed in spite of an oncoming yellow tack-see. The tack-see swerved and blared its horn. The walking man yelled fearlessly at it, then shot up the middle finger of his right hand and shook it after the departing vehicle. Roland had an idea that this gesture probably did not mean long days and pleasant nights.

It was night in New York City, and although there were people moving everywhere, none were of his ka-tet. Here, Roland admitted to himself, was one contingency he had hardly expected: that the one person to show up would be him. Not Eddie, but him. Where in the

name of all the gods was he supposed to go? And what was he supposed to do when he got there?

Remember your own advice, he thought. "If you show up alone," you told them, "stay where you are."

But did that mean to just roost on . . . he looked up at the green street-sign . . . on the corner of Second Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street, doing nothing but watching a sign change from DON'T WALK in red to WALK in white?

While he was pondering this, a voice called out from behind him, high and delirious with joy. *"Roland! Sugarbunch! Turn around and see me! See me very well!"*

Roland turned, already knowing what he would see, but smiling all the same. How terrible to relive that day at Jericho Hill, but what an antidote was this—Susannah Dean, flying down Fifty-fourth Street toward him, laughing and weeping with joy, her arms held out.

"My legs!" She was screaming it at the top of her voice. *"My legs! I have my legs back! Oh Roland, honeydoll, praise the Man Jesus, I HAVE MY LEGS BACK!"*

SIX

She threw herself into his embrace, kissing his cheek, his neck, his brow, his nose, his lips, saying it over and over again: "My legs, oh Roland do you see, I can walk, I can *run*, I have my legs, praise God and all the saints, *I have my legs back.*"

"Give you every joy of them, dear heart," Roland said. Falling into the patois of the place in which he had lately found himself was an old trick of his—or perhaps it was habit. For now it was the patois of the Calla. He supposed if he spent much time here in New York, he'd soon find himself waving his middle finger at tack-sees.

But I'd always be an outsider, he thought. Why, I can't even say "aspirin." Every time I try, the word comes out wrong.

She took his right hand, dragged it down with surprising force, and placed it on her shin. "Do you feel it?" she demanded. "I mean, I'm not just imagining it, am I?"

Roland laughed. "Did you not run to me as if with wings on em like Raf? Yes, Susannah." He put his left hand, the one with all the fingers,

on her left leg. “One leg and two legs, each with a foot below them.” He frowned. “We ought to get you some shoes, though.”

“Why? This is a dream. It has to be.”

He looked at her steadily, and slowly her smile faded.

“Not? Really not?”

“We’ve gone todash. We are really here. If you cut your foot, Mia, you’ll have a cut foot tomorrow, when you wake up aside the campfire.”

The other name had come out almost—but not quite—on its own. Now he waited, all his muscles wire-tight, to see if she would notice. If she did, he’d apologize and tell her he’d gone todash directly from a dream of someone he’d known long ago (although there had only been one woman of any importance after Susan Delgado, and her name had not been Mia).

But she *didn’t* notice, and Roland wasn’t much surprised.

Because she was getting ready to go on another of her hunting expeditions—as Mia—when the kammen rang. And unlike Susannah, Mia has legs. She banquets on rich foods in a great hall, she talks with all her friends, she didn’t go to Morehouse or to no house, and she has legs. So this one has legs. This one is both women, although she doesn’t know it.

Suddenly Roland found himself hoping that they wouldn’t meet Eddie. He might sense the difference even if Susannah herself didn’t. And that could be bad. If Roland had had three wishes, like the foundling prince in a child’s bedtime story, right now all three would have been for the same thing: to get through this business in Calla Bryn Sturgis before Susannah’s pregnancy—*Mia’s* pregnancy—became obvious. Having to deal with both things at the same time would be hard.

Perhaps impossible.

She was looking at him with wide, questioning eyes. Not because he’d called her by a name that wasn’t hers, but because she wanted to know what they should do next.

“It’s your city,” he said. “I would see the bookstore. And the vacant lot.” He paused. “And the rose. Can you take me?”

“Well,” she said, looking around, “it’s my city, no doubt about that, but Second Avenue sure doesn’t look like it did back in the days when Detta got her kicks shoplifting in Macy’s.”

“So you can’t find the bookstore and the vacant lot?” Roland was disappointed but far from desolate. There would be a way. There was always a—

“Oh, no problem there,” she said. “The streets are the same. New York’s just a grid, Roland, with the avenues running one way and the streets the other. Easy as pie. Come on.”

The sign had gone back to DON’T WALK, but after a quick glance uptown, Susannah took his arm and they crossed Fifty-fourth to the other side. Susannah strode fearlessly in spite of her bare feet. The blocks were short but crowded with exotic shops. Roland couldn’t help goggling, but his lack of attention seemed safe enough; although the sidewalks were crowded, no one crashed into them. Roland could hear his boot heels clapping on the sidewalk, however, and could see the shadows they were casting in the light of the display windows.

Almost here, he thought. Were the force that brought us any more powerful, we would be here.

And, he realized, the force might indeed grow stronger, assuming that Callahan was right about what was hidden under the floor of his church. As they drew closer to the town and to the source of the thing doing this . . .

Susannah twitched his arm. Roland stopped immediately. “Is it your feet?” he asked.

“No,” she said, and Roland saw she was frightened. “Why is it so *dark?*”

“Susannah, it’s night.”

She gave his arm an impatient shake. “I know that, I’m not blind. Can’t you . . .” She hesitated. “Can’t you *feel* it?”

Roland realized he could. For one thing, the darkness on Second Avenue really wasn’t dark at all. The gunslinger still couldn’t comprehend the prodigal way in which these people of New York squandered the things those of Gilead had held most rare and precious. Paper; water; refined oil; artificial light. This last was everywhere. There was the glow from the store windows (although most were closed, the displays were still lit), the even harsher glow from a popkin-selling place called Blimpie’s, and over all this, peculiar orange electric lamps that seemed to drench the very air with light. Yet Susannah was right. There was a black feel to the air in spite

of the orange lamps. It seemed to surround the people who walked this street. It made him think about what Eddie had said earlier: *This whole deal has gone nineteen.*

But this darkness, more felt than seen, had nothing to do with nineteen. You had to subtract six in order to understand what was going on here. And for the first time, Roland really believed Callahan was right.

“Black Thirteen,” he said.

“What?”

“It’s brought us here, sent us todash, and we feel it all around us. It’s not the same as when I flew inside the grapefruit, but it’s *like* that.”

“It feels bad,” she said, speaking low.

“It *is* bad,” he said. “Black Thirteen’s very likely the most terrible object from the days of Eld still remaining on the face of the earth. Not that the Wizard’s Rainbow was from then; I’m sure it existed even before—”

“Roland! Hey, Roland! Suze!”

They looked up and in spite of his earlier misgivings, Roland was immensely relieved to see not only Eddie, but Jake and Oy, as well. They were about a block and a half farther along. Eddie was waving. Susannah waved back exuberantly. Roland grabbed her arm before she started to run, which was clearly her intention.

“Mind your feet,” he said. “You don’t need to pick up some sort of infection and carry it back to the other side.”

They compromised at a rapid walk. Eddie and Jake, both shod, ran to meet them. Pedestrians moved out of their way without looking, or even breaking their conversations, Roland saw, and then observed that wasn’t quite true. There was a little boy, surely no older than three, walking sturdily along next to his mother. The woman seemed to notice nothing, but as Eddie and Jake swung around them, the toddler watched with wide, wondering eyes . . . and then actually stretched out a hand, as if to stroke the briskly trotting Oy.

Eddie pulled ahead of Jake and arrived first. He held Susannah out at arm’s length, looking at her. His expression, Roland saw, was really quite similar to that of the tot.

“Well? What do you think, sugar?” Susannah spoke nervously, like a woman who has come home to her husband with some radical new

hairdo.

“A definite improvement,” Eddie said. “I don’t need em to love you, but they’re way beyond good and into the land of excellent. Christ, now you’re an inch taller than I am!”

Susannah saw this was true and laughed. Oy sniffed at the ankle that hadn’t been there the last time he’d seen this woman, and then he laughed, too. It was an odd barky-bark of a sound, but quite clearly a laugh for all that.

“Like your legs, Suze,” Jake said, and the perfunctory quality of this compliment made Susannah laugh again. The boy didn’t notice; he had already turned to Roland. “Do you want to see the bookstore?”

“Is there anything to see?”

Jake’s face clouded. “Actually, not much. It’s closed.”

“I would see the vacant lot, if there’s time before we’re sent back,” Roland said. “And the rose.”

“Do they hurt?” Eddie asked Susannah. He was looking at her closely indeed.

“They feel fine,” she said, laughing. “*Fine.*”

“You look different.”

“I bet!” she said, and executed a little barefoot jig. It had been moons and moons since she had last danced, but the exultancy she so clearly felt made up for any lack of grace. A woman wearing a business suit and swinging a briefcase bore down on the ragged little party of wanderers, then abruptly veered off, actually taking a few steps into the street to get around them. “You bet I do, I got *legs!*”

“Just like the song says,” Eddie told her.

“Huh?”

“Never mind,” he said, and slipped an arm around her waist. But again Roland saw him give her that searching, questioning look. *But with luck he’ll leave it alone*, Roland thought.

And that was what Eddie did. He kissed the corner of her mouth, then turned to Roland. “So you want to see the famous vacant lot and the even more famous rose, huh? Well, so do I. Lead on, Jake.”

SEVEN

Jake led them down Second Avenue, pausing only long enough so they could all take a quick peek into The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. No one was wasting light in this shop, however, and there really wasn't much to see. Roland was hoping for a look at the menu sign, but it was gone.

Reading his mind in the matter-of-fact way of people who share *khef*, Jake said, "He probably changes it every day."

"Maybe," Roland said. He looked in through the window a moment longer, saw nothing but darkened shelves, a few tables, and the counter Jake had mentioned—the one where the old fellows sat drinking coffee and playing this world's version of Castles. Nothing to see, but something to feel, even through the glass: despair and loss. If it had been a smell, Roland thought, it would have been sour and a bit stale. The smell of failure. Maybe of good dreams that never grew. Which made it the perfect lever for someone like Enrico "*Il Roche*" Balazar.

"Seen enough?" Eddie asked.

"Yes. Let's go."

EIGHT

For Roland, the eight-block journey from Second and Fifty-fourth to Second and Forty-sixth was like visiting a country in which he had until that moment only half-believed. *How much stranger must it be for Jake?* he wondered. The bum who'd asked the boy for a quarter was gone, but the restaurant he'd been sitting near was there: Chew Chew Mama's. This was on the corner of Second and Fifty-second. A block farther down was the record store, Tower of Power. It was still open—according to an overhead clock that told the time in large electric dots, it was only fourteen minutes after eight in the evening. Loud sounds were pouring out of the open door. Guitars and drums. This world's music. It reminded him of the sacrificial music played by the Grays, back in the city of Lud, and why not? This *was* Lud, in some twisted, elsewhere-and-when way. He was sure of it.

"It's the Rolling Stones," Jake said, "but not the one that was playing on the day I saw the rose. That one was 'Paint It Black.' "

"Don't you recognize this one?" Eddie asked.

“Yeah, but I can’t remember the title.”

“Oh, but you should,” Eddie said. “It’s ‘Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown.’”

Susannah stopped, looked around. “Jake?”

Jake nodded. “He’s right.”

Eddie, meanwhile, had fished a piece of newspaper from the security-gated doorway next to Tower of Power Records. A section of *The New York Times*, in fact.

“Hon, didn’t your Ma ever teach you that gutter-trolling is generally not practiced by the better class of people?” Susannah asked.

Eddie ignored her. “Look at this,” he said. “All of you.”

Roland bent close, half-expecting to see news of another great plague, but there was nothing so shattering. At least not as far as he could tell.

“Read me what it says,” he asked Jake. “The letters swim in and out of my mind. I think it’s because we’re todash—caught in between—”

“RHODESIAN FORCES TIGHTEN HOLD ON MOZAMBIQUE VILLAGES,” Jake read. “TWO CARTER AIDES PREDICT A SAVING OF BILLIONS IN WELFARE PLAN. And down here, CHINESE DISCLOSE THAT 1976 QUAKE WAS DEADLIEST IN FOUR CENTURIES. Also—”

“Who’s Carter?” Susannah asked. “Is he the President before . . . *Ronald Reagan*?” She garnished the last two words with a large wink. Eddie had so far been unable to convince her that he was serious about Reagan’s being President. Nor would she believe Jake when the boy told her he knew it sounded crazy, but the idea was at least faintly plausible because Reagan had been governor of California. Susannah had simply laughed at this and nodded, as if giving him high marks for creativity. She knew Eddie had talked Jake into backing up his fish story, but she would not be hooked. She supposed she could see Paul Newman as President, maybe even Henry Fonda, who had looked presidential enough in *Fail-Safe*, but the host of *Death Valley Days*? Not on your bottom.

“Never mind Carter,” Eddie said. “Look at the *date*.”

Roland tried, but it kept swimming in and out. It would almost settle into Great Letters that he could read, and then fall back into gibberish. “What is it, for your father’s sake?”

“June second,” Jake said. He looked at Eddie. “But if time’s the same here and over on the other side, shouldn’t it be June *first*?”

“But it’s *not* the same,” Eddie said grimly. “It’s *not*. Time goes by faster on this side. Game on. And the game-clock’s running fast.”

Roland considered. “If we come here again, it’s going to be later each time, isn’t it?”

Eddie nodded.

Roland went on, talking to himself as much as to the others. “Every minute we spend on the other side—the Calla side—a minute and *a half* goes by over here. Or maybe two.”

“No, not two,” Eddie said. “I’m sure it’s not going double-time.” But his uneasy glance back down at the date on the newspaper suggested he wasn’t sure at all.

“Even if you’re right,” Roland said, “all we can do now is go forward.”

“Toward the fifteenth of July,” Susannah said. “When Balazar and his gentlemen stop playing nice.”

“Maybe we ought to just let these Calla-folk do their own thing,” Eddie said. “I hate to say that, Roland, but maybe we should.”

“We can’t do that, Eddie.”

“Why not?”

“Because Callahan’s got Black Thirteen,” Susannah said. “Our help is his price for turning it over. And we need it.”

Roland shook his head. “He’ll turn it over in any case—I thought I was clear about that. He’s terrified of it.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “I got that feeling, too.”

“We have to help them because it’s the Way of Eld,” Roland told Susannah. “And because the way of ka is always the way of duty.”

He thought he saw a glitter far down in her eyes, as though he’d said something funny. He supposed he had, but Susannah wasn’t the one he had amused. It had been either Detta or Mia who found those ideas funny. The question was which one. Or had it been both?

“I hate how it feels here,” Susannah said. “That *dark* feeling.”

“It’ll be better at the vacant lot,” Jake said. He started walking, and the others followed. “The rose makes everything better. You’ll see.”

NINE

When Jake crossed Fiftieth, he began to hurry. On the downtown side of Forty-ninth, he began to jog. At the corner of Second and Forty-eighth, he began to run. He couldn't help it. He got a little WALK help at Forty-eighth, but the sign on the post began to flash red as soon as he reached the far curb.

"Jake, wait up!" Eddie called from behind him, but Jake didn't. Perhaps couldn't. Certainly Eddie felt the pull of the thing; so did Roland and Susannah. There was a hum rising in the air, faint and sweet. It was everything the ugly black feeling around them was not.

To Roland the hum brought back memories of Mejis and Susan Delgado. Of kisses shared in a mattress of sweet grass.

Susannah remembered being with her father when she was little, crawling up into his lap and laying the smooth skin of her cheek against the rough weave of his sweater. She remembered how she would close her eyes and breathe deeply of the smell that was his smell and his alone: pipe tobacco and wintergreen and the Musterole he rubbed into his wrists, where the arthritis first began to bite him at the outrageous age of twenty-five. What these smells meant to her was that everything was all right.

Eddie found himself remembering a trip to Atlantic City when he'd been very young, no more than five or six. Their mother had taken them, and at one point in the day she and Henry had gone off to get ice cream cones. Mrs. Dean had pointed at the boardwalk and had said, *You put your fanny right there, Mister Man, and keep it there until we get back.* And he did. He could have sat there all day, looking down the slope of the beach at the gray pull and flow of the ocean. The gulls rode just above the foam, calling to each other. Each time the waves drew back, they left a slick expanse of wet brown sand so bright he could hardly look at it without squinting. The sound of the waves was both large and lulling. *I could stay here forever,* he remembered thinking. *I could stay here forever because it's beautiful and peaceful and . . . and all right. Everything here is all right.*

That was what all five of them felt most strongly (for Oy felt it, too): the sense of something that was wonderfully and beautifully all right.

Roland and Eddie grasped Susannah by the elbows without so much as an exchanged glance. They lifted her bare feet off the sidewalk and carried her. At Second and Forty-seventh the traffic was against them, but Roland threw up a hand at the oncoming headlights and cried, "*Hile! Stop in the name of Gilead!*"

And they did. There was a scream of brakes, a crump of a front fender meeting a rear one, and the tinkle of falling glass, but they stopped. Roland and Eddie crossed in a spotlight glare of headlights and a cacophony of horns, Susannah between them with her restored (and already very dirty) feet three inches off the ground. Their sense of happiness and rightness grew stronger as they approached the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street. Roland felt the hum of the rose racing deliriously in his blood.

Yes, Roland thought. By all the gods, yes. This is it. Perhaps not just a doorway to the Dark Tower, but the Tower itself. Gods, the strength of it! The pull of it! Cuthbert, Alain, Jamie—if only you were here!

Jake stood on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth, looking at a board fence about five feet high. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. From the darkness beyond the fence came a strong harmonic humming. The sound of many voices, all singing together. Singing one vast open note. *Here is yes, the voices said. Here is you may. Here is the good turn, the fortunate meeting, the fever that broke just before dawn and left your blood calm. Here is the wish that came true and the understanding eye. Here is the kindness you were given and thus learned to pass on. Here is the sanity and clarity you thought were lost. Here, everything is all right.*

Jake turned to them. "Do you feel it?" he asked. "Do you?"

Roland nodded. So did Eddie.

"Suze?" the boy asked.

"It's almost the loveliest thing in the world, isn't it?" she said. *Almost, Roland thought. She said almost.* Nor did he miss the fact that her hand went to her belly and stroked as she said it.

TEN

The posters Jake remembered were there—Olivia Newton-John at Radio City Music Hall, G. Gordon Liddy and the Grots at a place

called the Mercury Lounge, a horror movie called *War of the Zombies*, NO TRESPASSING. But—

“*That’s* not the same,” he said, pointing at a graffito in dusky pink. “It’s the same color, and the printing looks like the same person did it, but when I was here before, it was a poem about the Turtle. ‘See the TURTLE of enormous girth, on his shell he holds the earth.’ And then something about following the Beam.”

Eddie stepped closer and read this: “Oh SUSANNAH-MIO, divided girl of mine, Done parked her RIG in the DIXIE PIG, in the year of ’99.” He looked at Susannah. “What in the hell does *that* mean? Any idea, Suze?”

She shook her head. Her eyes were very large. Frightened eyes, Roland thought. But which woman was frightened? He couldn’t tell. He only knew that Odetta Susannah Holmes had been divided from the beginning, and that “mio” was very close to Mia. The hum coming from the darkness behind the fence made it hard to think of these things. He wanted to go to the source of the hum right now. *Needed* to, as a man dying of thirst needs to go to water.

“Come on,” Jake said. “We can climb right over. It’s easy.”

Susannah looked down at her bare, dirty feet, and took a step backward. “Not me,” she said. “I can’t. Not without shoes.”

Which made perfect sense, but Roland thought there was more to it than that. Mia didn’t *want* to go in there. Mia understood something dreadful might happen if she did. To her, and to her baby. For a moment he was on the verge of forcing the issue, of letting the rose take care of both the thing growing inside her and her troublesome new personality, one so strong that Susannah had shown up here with Mia’s legs.

No, Roland. That was Alain’s voice. Alain, who had always been strongest in the touch. *Wrong time, wrong place.*

“I’ll stay with her,” Jake said. He spoke with enormous regret but no hesitation, and Roland was swept by his love for the boy he had once allowed to die. That vast voice from the darkness beyond the fence sang of that love; he heard it. And of simple forgiveness rather than the difficult forced march of atonement? He thought it was.

“No,” she said. “You go on, honeybunch. I’ll be fine.” She smiled at them. “This is my city too, you know. I can look out for myself. And

besides—” She lowered her voice as if confiding a great secret. “I think we’re kind of invisible.”

Eddie was once again looking at her in that searching way, as if to ask her how she could *not* go with them, bare feet or no bare feet, but this time Roland wasn’t worried. Mia’s secret was safe, at least for the time being; the call of the rose was too strong for Eddie to be able to think of much else. He was wild to get going.

“We should stay together,” Eddie said reluctantly. “So we don’t get lost going back. You said so yourself, Roland.”

“How far is it from here to the rose, Jake?” Roland asked. It was hard to talk with that hum singing in his ears like a wind. Hard to think.

“It’s pretty much in the middle of the lot. Maybe thirty yards, but probably less.”

“The second we hear the chimes,” Roland said, “we run for the fence and Susannah. All three of us. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Eddie said.

“All three of us and Oy,” Jake said.

“No, Oy stays with Susannah.”

Jake frowned, clearly not liking this. Roland hadn’t expected him to. “Jake, Oy also has bare feet . . . and didn’t you say there was broken glass in there?”

“Ye-eahh . . . ” Drawn-out. Reluctant. Then Jake dropped to one knee and looked into Oy’s gold-ringed eyes. “Stay with Susannah, Oy.”

“Oy! Ay!” *Oy stay*. It was good enough for Jake. He stood up, turned to Roland, and nodded.

“Suze?” Eddie asked. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Emphatic. No hesitation. Roland was now almost sure it was Mia in control, pulling the levers and turning the dials. *Almost*. Even now he wasn’t positive. The hum of the rose made it impossible to be positive of anything except that everything—*everything*—could be all right.

Eddie nodded, kissed the corner of her mouth, then stepped to the board fence with its odd poem: Oh SUSANNAH-MIO, divided girl of mine. He laced his fingers together into a step. Jake was into it, up, and gone like a breath of breeze.

“Ake!” Oy cried, and then was silent, sitting beside one of Susannah’s bare feet.

“You next, Eddie,” Roland said. He laced his remaining fingers together, meaning to give Eddie the same step Eddie had given Jake, but Eddie simply grabbed the top of the fence and vaulted over. The junkie Roland had first met in a jet plane coming into Kennedy Airport could never have done that.

Roland said, “Stay where you are. Both of you.” He could have meant the woman and the billy-bumbler, but it was only the woman he looked at.

“We’ll be fine,” she said, and bent to stroke Oy’s silky fur. “Won’t we, big guy?”

“Oy!”

“Go see your rose, Roland. While you still can.”

Roland gave her a last considering look, then grasped the top of the fence. A moment later he was gone, leaving Susannah and Oy alone on the most vital and vibrant streetcorner in the entire universe.

ELEVEN

Strange things happened to her as she waited.

Back the way they’d come, near Tower of Power Records, a bank clock alternately flashed the time and temperature: 8:27, 64. 8:27, 64. 8:27, 64. Then, suddenly, it was flashing 8:34, 64. 8:34, 64. She never took her eyes off it, she would swear to that. Had something gone wrong with the sign’s machinery?

Must’ve, she thought. *What else could it be?* Nothing, she supposed, but why did everything suddenly feel different? Even *look* different? *Maybe it was my machinery that went wrong.*

Oy whined and stretched his long neck toward her. As he did, she realized why things looked different. Besides somehow slipping seven uncounted minutes by her, the world had regained its former, all-too-familiar perspective. A *lower* perspective. She was closer to Oy because she was closer to the ground. The splendid lower legs and feet she’d been wearing when she had opened her eyes on New York were gone.

How had it happened? And when? In the missing seven minutes?

Oy whined again. This time it was almost a bark. He was looking past her, in the other direction. She turned that way. Half a dozen people were crossing Forty-sixth toward them. Five were normal. The sixth was a white-faced woman in a moss-splotched dress. The sockets of her eyes were empty and black. Her mouth hung open seemingly all the way down to her breastbone, and as Susannah watched, a green worm crawled over the lower lip. Those crossing with her gave her her own space, just as the other pedestrians on Second Avenue had given Roland and his friends theirs. Susannah guessed that in both cases, the more normal promenaders sensed something out of the ordinary and steered clear. Only this woman wasn't todash.

This woman was dead.

TWELVE

The hum rose and rose as the three of them stumbled across the trash- and brick-littered wilderness of the vacant lot. As before, Jake saw faces in every angle and shadow. He saw Gasher and Hoots; Tick-Tock and Flagg; he saw Eldred Jonas's gunbunnies, Depape and Reynolds; he saw his mother and father and Greta Shaw, their housekeeper, who looked a little like Edith Bunker on TV and who always remembered to cut the crusts off his sandwiches. Greta Shaw who sometimes called him 'Bama, although that was a secret, just between them.

Eddie saw people from the old neighborhood: Jimmie Polio, the kid with the clubfoot, and Tommy Fredericks, who always got so excited watching the street stickball games that he made faces and the kids called him Halloween Tommy. There was Skipper Brannigan, who would have picked a fight with Al Capone himself, had Capone shown sufficient bad judgment to come to their neighborhood, and Csaba Drabnik, the Mad Fuckin Hungarian. He saw his mother's face in a pile of broken bricks, her glimmering eyes re-created from the broken pieces of a soft-drink bottle. He saw her friend, Dora Bertollo (all the kids on the block called her Tits Bertollo because she had really big ones, big as fuckin watermelons). And of course he saw Henry. Henry standing far back in the shadows, watching him. Only Henry was smiling instead of scowling, and he looked straight.

Holding out one hand and giving Eddie what looked like a thumbs-up. *Go on*, the rising hum seemed to whisper, and now it whispered in Henry Dean's voice. *Go on, Eddie, show em what you're made of. Didn't I tell those other guys? When we were out behind Dahlie's smokin Jimmie Polio's cigarettes, didn't I tell em? "My little bro could talk the devil into settin himself on fire," I said. Didn't I? Yes. Yes he had. And that's the way I always felt,* the hum whispered. *I always loved you. Sometimes I put you down, but I always loved you. You were my little man.*

Eddie began to cry. And these were good tears.

Roland saw all the phantoms of his life in this shadowed, brick-strewn ruin, from his mother and his cradle-amah right up to their visitors from Calla Bryn Sturgis. And as they walked, that sense of rightness grew. A feeling that all his hard decisions, all the pain and loss and spilled blood, had not been for nothing, after all. There was a reason. There was a purpose. There was life and love. He heard it all in the song of the rose, and he too began to cry. Mostly with relief. Getting here had been a hard journey. Many had died. Yet here they lived; here they sang with the rose. His life had not all been a dry dream after all.

They joined hands and stumbled forward, helping each other to avoid the nail-studded boards and the holes into which an ankle could plunge and twist and perhaps break. Roland didn't know if one could break a bone while in the todash state, but he had no urge to find out.

"This is worth everything," he said hoarsely.

Eddie nodded. "I'll never stop now. Might not stop even if I die."

Jake gave him a thumb-and-forefinger circle at that, and laughed. The sound was sweet in Roland's ears. It was darker in here than it had been on the street, but the orange streetlights on Second and Forty-sixth were strong enough to provide at least some illumination. Jake pointed at a sign lying in a pile of boards. "See that? It's the deli sign. I pulled it out of the weeds. That's why it is where it is." He looked around, then pointed in another direction. "And look!"

This sign was still standing. Roland and Eddie turned to read it. Although neither of them had seen it before, they both felt a strong sense of *déjà vu*, nonetheless.

MILLS CONSTRUCTION AND SOMBRA REAL ESTATE
ASSOCIATES ARE CONTINUING TO REMAKE THE FACE OF
MANHATTAN!
COMING SOON TO THIS LOCATION: TURTLE BAY LUXURY
CONDOMINIUMS!
CALL 661-6712 FOR INFORMATION!
YOU WILL BE SO GLAD YOU DID!

As Jake had told them, the sign looked old, in need of either refreshment or outright replacement. Jake had remembered the graffito which had been sprayed across the sign, and Eddie remembered it from Jake's story, not because it meant anything to him but simply because it was odd. And there it was, just as reported: BANGO SKANK. Some long-gone tagger's calling card.

"I think the telephone number on the sign's different," Jake said.

"Yeah?" Eddie asked. "What was the old one?"

"I don't remember."

"Then how can you be sure this one's different?"

In another place and at another time, Jake might have been irritated by these questions. Now, soothed by the proximity of the rose, he smiled, instead. "I don't know. I guess I can't. But it sure seems different. Like the sign in the bookstore window."

Roland barely heard. He was walking forward over the piles of bricks and boards and smashed glass in his old cowboy boots, his eyes brilliant even in the shadows. He had seen the rose. There was something lying beside it, in the spot where Jake had found his version of the key, but Roland paid this no heed. He only saw the rose, growing from a clump of grass that had been stained purple with spilled paint. He dropped to his knees before it. A moment later Eddie joined him on his left, Jake on his right.

The rose was tightly furled against the night. Then, as they knelt there, the petals began to open, as if in greeting. The hum rose all around them, like a song of angels.

THIRTEEN

At first Susannah was all right. She held on despite the fact that she had lost over a foot and a half of herself—the self that had arrived here, anyway—and was now forced into her old familiar (and hatefully subservient) posture, half-kneeling and half-sitting on the filthy sidewalk. Her back was propped against the fence surrounding the vacant lot. A sardonic thought crossed her mind—*All I need's a cardboard sign and a tin cup.*

She held on even after seeing the dead woman cross Forty-sixth Street. The singing helped—what she understood to be the voice of the rose. Oy helped, too, crowding his warmth close to her. She stroked his silky fur, using the reality of him as a steadying-point. She told herself again and again that she was *not* insane. All right, she'd lost seven minutes. *Maybe.* Or maybe the guts inside that newfangled clock down there had just hiccupped. All right, she'd seen a dead woman crossing the street. *Maybe.* Or maybe she'd just seen some strung-out junkie, God knew there was no shortage of them in New York—

A junkie with a little green worm crawling out of her mouth?

“I could have imagined that part,” she said to the bumbler. “Right?”

Oy was dividing his nervous attention between Susannah and the rushing headlights, which might have looked to him like large, predatory animals with shining eyes. He whined nervously.

“Besides, the boys'll be back soon.”

“Oys,” the bumbler agreed, sounding hopeful.

Why didn't I just go in with em? Eddie would have carried me on his back, God knows he's done it before, both with the harness and without it.

“I couldn't,” she whispered. “I just couldn't.”

Because some part of her was frightened of the rose. Of getting too close to it. Had that part been in control during the missing seven minutes? Susannah was afraid it had been. If so, it was gone now. Had taken back its legs and just walked off on them into New York, circa 1977. Not good. But it had taken her fear of the rose with it, and that *was* good. She didn't want to be afraid of something that felt so strong and so wonderful.

Another personality? Are you thinking the lady who brought the legs was another personality?

Another version of Detta Walker, in other words?

The idea made her feel like screaming. She thought she now understood how a woman would feel if, five years or so after an apparently successful cancer operation, the doctor told her a routine X-ray had picked up a shadow on her lung.

“Not again,” she murmured in a low, frantic voice as a fresh group of pedestrians schooled past. They all moved away from the board fence a little, although it reduced the space between them considerably. “No, not again. It can’t be. I’m whole. I’m . . . I’m *fixed*.”

How long had her friends been gone?

She looked downstreet at the flashing clock. It said 8:42, but she wasn’t sure she could trust it. It felt longer than that. Much longer. Maybe she should call to them. Just give a halloo. How y’all doin in there?

No. No such thing. You’re a gunslinger, girl. At least that’s what he says. What he thinks. And you’re not going to change what he thinks by hollering like a school-girl just seen a garter snake under a bush. You’re just going to sit here and wait. You can do it. You’ve got Oy for company and you—

Then she saw the man standing on the other side of the street. Just standing there beside a newsstand. He was naked. A ragged Y-cut, sewn up with large black industrial stitches, began at his groin, rose, and branched at his sternum. His empty eyes gazed at her. Through her. Through the world.

Any possibility that this might only have been a hallucination ended when Oy began to bark. He was staring directly across at the naked dead man.

Susannah gave up her silence and began to scream for Eddie.

FOURTEEN

When the rose opened, disclosing the scarlet furnace within its petals and the yellow sun burning at the center, Eddie saw everything that mattered.

“Oh my Lord,” Jake sighed from beside him, but he might have been a thousand miles away.

Eddie saw great things and near misses. Albert Einstein as a child, not quite struck by a runaway milk-wagon as he crossed a street. A teenage boy named Albert Schweitzer getting out of a bathtub and

not quite stepping on the cake of soap lying beside the pulled plug. A Nazi *Oberleutnant* burning a piece of paper with the date and place of the D-Day invasion written on it. He saw a man who intended to poison the entire water supply of Denver die of a heart attack in a roadside rest stop on I-80 in Iowa with a bag of McDonald's french fries on his lap. He saw a terrorist wired up with explosives suddenly turn away from a crowded restaurant in a city that might have been Jerusalem. The terrorist had been transfixed by nothing more than the sky, and the thought that it arced above the just and unjust alike. He saw four men rescue a little boy from a monster whose entire head seemed to consist of a single eye.

But more important than any of these was the vast, accretive weight of small things, from planes which hadn't crashed to men and women who had come to the correct place at the perfect time and thus founded generations. He saw kisses exchanged in doorways and wallets returned and men who had come to a splitting of the way and chosen the right fork. He saw a thousand random meetings that weren't random, ten thousand right decisions, a hundred thousand right answers, a million acts of unacknowledged kindness. He saw the old people of River Crossing and Roland kneeling in the dust for Aunt Talitha's blessing; again heard her giving it freely and gladly. Heard her telling him to lay the cross she had given him at the foot of the Dark Tower and speak the name of Talitha Unwin at the far end of the earth. He saw the Tower itself in the burning folds of the rose and for a moment understood its purpose: how it distributed its lines of force to all the worlds that were and held them steady in time's great helix. For every brick that landed on the ground instead of some little kid's head, for every tornado that missed the trailer park, for every missile that didn't fly, for every hand stayed from violence, there was the Tower.

And the quiet, singing voice of the rose. The song that promised all might be well, all might be well, that all manner of things might be well.

But something's wrong with it, he thought.

There was a jagged dissonance buried in the hum, like bits of broken glass. There was a nasty flickering purple glare in its hot heart, some cold light that did not belong there.

“There are two hubs of existence,” he heard Roland say. “*Two!*” Like Jake, he could have been a thousand miles away. “The Tower . . . and the rose. Yet they are the same.”

“The same,” Jake agreed. His face was painted with brilliant light, dark red and bright yellow. Yet Eddie thought he could see that other light, as well—a flickering purple reflection like a bruise. Now it danced on Jake’s forehead, now on his cheek, now it swam in the well of his eye; now gone, now reappearing at his temple like the physical manifestation of a bad idea.

“What’s wrong with it?” Eddie heard himself ask, but there was no answer. Not from Roland or Jake, not from the rose.

Jake raised one finger and began to count. Counting petals, Eddie saw. But there was really no need to count. They all knew how many petals there were.

“We *must* have this patch,” Roland said. “Own it and then protect it. Until the Beams are reestablished and the Tower is made safe again. Because while the Tower weakens, this is what holds everything together. And this is weakening, too. It’s sick. Do you feel it?”

Eddie opened his mouth to say of course he felt it, and that was when Susannah began to scream. A moment later Oy joined his voice to hers, barking wildly.

Eddie, Jake, and Roland looked at each other like sleepers awakened from the deepest of dreams. Eddie made it to his feet first. He turned and stumbled back toward the fence and Second Avenue, shouting her name. Jake followed, pausing only long enough to snatch something out of the snarl of burdocks where the key had been before.

Roland spared one final, agonized look at the wild rose growing so bravely here in this tumbled wasteland of bricks and boards and weeds and litter. It had already begun to furl its petals again, hiding the light that blazed within.

I’ll come back, he told it. *I swear by the gods of all the worlds, by my mother and father and my friends that were, that I’ll come back.*

Yet he was afraid.

Roland turned and ran for the board fence, picking his way through the tumbled litter with unconscious agility in spite of the pain in his hip. As he ran, one thought returned to him and beat at

his mind like a heart: *Two. Two hubs of existence. The rose and the Tower. The Tower and the rose.*

All the rest was held between them, spinning in fragile complexity.

FIFTEEN

Eddie threw himself over the fence, landed badly and asprawl, leaped to his feet, and stepped in front of Susannah without even thinking. Oy continued to bark.

“Suze! What? What is it?” He reached for Roland’s gun and found nothing. It seemed that guns did not go todash.

“There!” she cried, pointing across the street. “There! Do you see him? Please, Eddie, *please tell me you see him!*”

Eddie felt the temperature of his blood plummet. What he saw was a naked man who had been cut open and then sewed up again in what could only be an autopsy tattoo. Another man—a living one—bought a paper at the nearby newsstand, checked for traffic, then crossed Second Avenue. Although he was shaking open the paper to look at the headline as he did it, Eddie saw the way he swerved around the dead man. *The way people swerved around us*, he thought.

“There was another one, too,” she whispered. “A woman. She was walking. And there was a worm. I saw a worm c-c-crawling—”

“Look to your right,” Jake said tightly. He was down on one knee, stroking Oy back to quietness. In his other hand he held a crumpled pink something. His face was as pale as cottage cheese.

They looked. A child was wandering slowly toward them. It was only possible to tell it was a girl because of the red-and-blue dress she wore. When she got closer, Eddie saw that the blue was supposed to be the ocean. The red blobs resolved themselves into little candy-colored sailboats. Her head had been squashed in some cruel accident, squashed until it was wider than it was long. Her eyes were crushed grapes. Over one pale arm was a white plastic purse. A little girl’s best I’m-going-to-the-car-accident-and-don’t-know-it purse.

Susannah drew in breath to scream. The darkness she had only sensed earlier was now almost visible. Certainly it was palpable; it pressed against her like earth. Yet she would scream. She *must* scream. Scream or go mad.

“Not a sound,” Roland of Gilead whispered in her ear. “Do not disturb her, poor lost thing. For your life, Susannah!” Susannah’s scream expired in a long, horrified sigh.

“They’re dead,” Jake said in a thin, controlled voice. “Both of them.”

“The vagrant dead,” Roland replied. “I heard of them from Alain Johns’s father. It must have been not long after we returned from Mejis, for after that there wasn’t much more time before everything . . . what is it you say, Susannah? Before everything ‘went to hell in a handbasket.’ In any case, it was Burning Chris who warned us that if we ever went todash, we might see vags.” He pointed across the street where the naked dead man still stood. “Such as him yonder have either died so suddenly they don’t yet understand what’s happened to them, or they simply refuse to accept it. Sooner or later they *do* go on. I don’t think there are many of them.”

“Thank God,” Eddie said. “It’s like something out of a George Romero zombie movie.”

“Susannah, what happened to your legs?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “One minute I had em, and the next minute I was the same as before.” She seemed to become aware of Roland’s gaze and turned toward him. “You see somethin funny, sugar?”

“We are ka-tet, Susannah. Tell us what really happened.”

“What the hell are you trying to imply?” Eddie asked him. He might have said more, but before he could get started, Susannah grasped his arm.

“Caught me out, didn’t you?” she asked Roland. “All right, I’ll tell you. According to that fancy dot-clock down there, I lost seven minutes while I was waiting for you boys. Seven minutes and my fine new legs. I didn’t want to say anything because . . .” She faltered, then went on. “Because I was afraid I might be losing my mind.”

That’s not what you’re afraid of, Roland thought. *Not exactly.*

Eddie gave her a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek. He glanced nervously across the street at the nude corpse (the little girl with the squashed head had, thankfully, wandered off down Forty-sixth Street toward the United Nations), then back at the gunslinger. “If what you said before is true, Roland, this business of time slipping its cogs is

very bad news. What if instead of just seven minutes, it slips three months? What if the next time we get back here, Calvin Tower's sold his lot? We can't let that happen. Because that rose, man . . . that rose . . ." Tears had begun to slip out of Eddie's eyes.

"It's the best thing in the world," Jake said, low.

"In all the worlds," Roland said. Would it ease Eddie and Jake to know that this particular time-slip had probably been in Susannah's head? That Mia had come out for seven minutes, had a look around, and then dived back into her hole like Punxsutawney Phil on Groundhog Day? Probably not. But he saw one thing in Susannah's haggard face: she either knew what was going on, or suspected very strongly. *It must be hellish for her*, he thought.

"We have to do better than this if we're really going to change things," Jake said. "This way we're not much better than vags ourselves."

"We have to get to '64, too," Susannah said. "If we're going to get hold of my dough, that is. Can we, Roland? If Callahan's got Black Thirteen, will it work like a door?"

What it will work is mischief, Roland thought. *Mischief and worse*. But before he could say that (or anything else), the todash chimes began. The pedestrians on Second Avenue heard them no more than they saw the pilgrims gathered by the board fence, but the corpse across the street slowly raised his dead hands and placed them over his dead ears, his mouth turning down in a grimace of pain. And then they could see through him.

"Hold onto each other," Roland said. "Jake, get your hand into Oy's fur, and deep! Never mind if it hurts him!"

Jake did as Roland said, the chimes digging deep into his head. Beautiful but painful.

"Like a root canal without Novocain," Susannah said. She turned her head and for one moment she could see through the board fence. It had become transparent. Beyond it was the rose, its petals now closed but still giving off its own quietly gorgeous glow. She felt Eddie's arm slip around her shoulders.

"Hold on, Suze—whatever you do, hold on."

She grasped Roland's hand. For a moment longer she could see Second Avenue, and then everything was gone. The chimes ate up the

world and she was flying through blind darkness with Eddie's arm around her and Roland's hand squeezing her own.

SIXTEEN

When the darkness let them go, they were almost forty feet down the road from their camp. Jake sat up slowly, then turned to Oy. "You all right, boy?"

"Oy."

Jake patted the bumbler's head. He looked around at the others. All here. He sighed, relieved.

"What's this?" Eddie asked. He had taken Jake's other hand when the chimes began. Now, caught in their interlocked fingers, was a crumpled pink object. It felt like cloth; it also felt like metal.

"I don't know," Jake said.

"You picked it up in the lot, just after Susannah screamed," Roland said. "I saw you."

Jake nodded. "Yeah. I guess maybe I did. Because it was where the key was, before."

"What is it, sugar?"

"Some kind of bag." He held it by the straps. "I'd say it was my bowling bag, but that's back at the lanes, with my ball inside it. Back in 1977."

"What's written on the side?" Eddie asked.

But they couldn't make it out. The clouds had closed in again and there was no moonlight. They walked back to their camp together, slowly, shaky as invalids, and Roland built up the fire. Then they looked at the writing on the side of the rose-pink bowling bag.

NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MID-WORLD LANES

was what it said.

"That's not right," Jake said. "Almost, but not quite. What it says on my bag is **NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MID-TOWN LANES**. Timmy gave it to me one day when I bowled a two-eighty-two. He said I wasn't old enough for him to buy me a beer."

“A bowling gunslinger,” Eddie said, and shook his head. “Wonders never cease, do they?”

Susannah took the bag and ran her hands over it. “What kind of weave is this? Feels like metal. And it’s *heavy*.”

Roland, who had an idea what the bag was for—although not who or what had left it for them—said, “Put it in your knapsack with the books, Jake. And keep it very safe.”

“What do we do next?” Eddie asked.

“Sleep,” Roland said. “I think we’re going to be very busy for the next few weeks. We’ll have to take our sleep when and where we find it.”

“But—”

“Sleep,” Roland said, and spread out his skins.

Eventually they did, and all of them dreamed of the rose. Except for Mia, who got up in the night’s last dark hour and slipped away to feast in the great banquet hall. And there she feasted very well.

She was, after all, eating for two.

PART TWO
TELLING TALES



CHAPTER I: THE PAVILION

ONE

If anything about the ride into Calla Bryn Sturgis surprised Eddie, it was how easily and naturally he took to horseback. Unlike Susannah and Jake, who had both ridden at summer camp, Eddie had never even *petted* a horse. When he'd heard the clop of approaching hooves on the morning after what he thought of as Todash Number Two, he'd felt a sharp pang of dread. It wasn't the riding he was afraid of, or the animals themselves; it was the possibility—hell, the strong *probability*—of looking like a fool. What kind of gunslinger had never ridden a horse?

Yet Eddie still found time to pass a word with Roland before they came. "It wasn't the same last night."

Roland raised his eyebrows.

"It wasn't nineteen last night."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what I mean."

"I don't know, either," Jake put in, "but he's right. Last night New York felt like the real deal. I mean, I know we were todash, but still . . ."

"Real," Roland had mused.

And Jake, smiling, said: "Real as roses."

TWO

The Slightmans were at the head of the Calla's party this time, each leading a pair of mounts by long hacks. There was nothing very

intimidating about the horses of Calla Bryn Sturgis; certainly they weren't much like the ones Eddie had imagined galloping along the Drop in Roland's tale of long-ago Mejis. These beasts were stubby, sturdy-legged creatures with shaggy coats and large, intelligent eyes. They were bigger than Shetland ponies, but a very long cast from the fiery-eyed stallions he had been expecting. Not only had they been saddled, but a proper bedroll had been lashed to each mount.

As Eddie walked toward his (he didn't need to be told which it was, he knew: the roan), all his doubts and worries fell away. He only asked a single question, directed at Ben Slightman the Younger after examining the stirrups. "These are going to be too short for me, Ben—can you show me how to make them longer?"

When the boy dismounted to do it himself, Eddie shook his head. "It'd be best if I learned," he said. And with no embarrassment at all.

As the boy showed him, Eddie realized he didn't really need the lesson. He saw how it was done almost as soon as Benny's fingers flipped up the stirrup, revealing the leather tug in back. This wasn't like hidden, subconscious knowledge, and it didn't strike him as anything supernatural, either. It was just that, with the horse a warm and fragrant reality before him, he understood how everything worked. He'd only had one experience exactly like this since coming to Mid-World, and that had been the first time he'd strapped on one of Roland's guns.

"Need help, sugar?" Susannah asked.

"Just pick me up if I go off on the other side," he grunted, but of course he didn't do any such thing. The horse stood steady, swaying just the slightest bit as Eddie stepped into the stirrup and then swung into the plain black ranchhand's saddle.

Jake asked Benny if he had a poncho. The foreman's son looked doubtfully up at the cloudy sky. "I really don't think it's going to rain," he said. "It's often like this for days around Reaptide—"

"I want it for Oy." Perfectly calm, perfectly certain. *He feels exactly like I do*, Eddie thought. *As if he's done this a thousand times before.*

The boy drew a rolled oilskin from one of his saddlebags and handed it to Jake, who thanked him, put it on, and then tucked Oy into the capacious pocket which ran across the front like a kangaroo's pouch. There wasn't a single protest from the bumbler, either. Eddie

thought: *If I told Jake I'd expected Oy to trot along behind us like a sheepdog, would he say, "He always rides like this"? No . . . but he might think it.*

As they set off, Eddie realized what all this reminded him of: stories he'd heard of reincarnation. He had tried to shake the idea off, to reclaim the practical, tough-minded Brooklyn boy who had grown up in Henry Dean's shadow, and wasn't quite able to do it. The thought of reincarnation might have been less unsettling if it had come to him head-on, but it didn't. What he thought was that he couldn't be from Roland's line, simply couldn't. Not unless Arthur Eld had at some point stopped by Co-Op City, that was. Like maybe for a redhot and a piece of Dahlie Lundgren's fried dough. Stupid to project such an idea from the ability to ride an obviously docile horse without lessons. Yet the idea came back at odd moments through the day, and had followed him down into sleep last night: the Eld. The line of the Eld.

THREE

They nooned in the saddle, and while they were eating popkins and drinking cold coffee, Jake eased his mount in next to Roland's. Oy peered at the gunslinger with bright eyes from the front pocket of the poncho. Jake was feeding the bumbler pieces of his popkin, and there were crumbs caught in Oy's whiskers.

"Roland, may I speak to you as dinh?" Jake sounded slightly embarrassed.

"Of course." Roland drank coffee and then looked at the boy, interested, all the while rocking contentedly back and forth in the saddle.

"Ben—that is, both Slightmans, but mostly the kid—asked if I'd come and stay with them. Out at the Rocking B."

"Do you want to go?" Roland asked.

The boy's cheeks flushed thin red. "Well, what I thought is that if you guys were in town with the Old Fella and I was out in the country—south of town, you ken—then we'd get two different pictures of the place. My Dad says you don't see anything very well if you only look at it from one viewpoint."

"True enough," Roland said, and hoped neither his voice nor his face would give away any of the sorrow and regret he suddenly felt.

Here was a boy who was now ashamed of being a boy. He had made a friend and the friend had invited him to stay over, as friends sometimes do. Benny had undoubtedly promised that Jake could help him feed the animals, and perhaps shoot his bow (or his bah, if it shot bolts instead of arrows). There would be places Benny would want to share, secret places he might have gone to with his twin in other times. A platform in a tree, mayhap, or a fishpond in the reeds special to him, or a stretch of riverbank where pirates of old were reputed to have buried gold and jewels. Such places as boys go. But a large part of Jake Chambers was now ashamed to want to do such things. This was the part that had been despoiled by the doorkeeper in Dutch Hill, by Gasher, by the Tick-Tock Man. And by Roland himself, of course. Were he to say no to Jake's request now, the boy would very likely never ask again. And never resent him for it, which was even worse. Were he to say yes in the wrong way—with even the slightest trace of indulgence in his voice, for instance—the boy would change his mind.

The boy. The gunslinger realized how much he wanted to be able to go on calling Jake that, and how short the time to do so was apt to be. He had a bad feeling about Calla Bryn Sturgis.

“Go with them after they dine us in the Pavilion tonight,” Roland said. “Go and do ya fine, as they say here.”

“Are you sure? Because if you think you might need me—”

“Your father's saying is a good one. My old teacher—”

“Cort or Vannay?”

“Cort. He used to tell us that a one-eyed man sees flat. It takes two eyes, set a little apart from each other, to see things as they really are. So aye. Go with them. Make the boy your friend, if that seems natural. He seems likely enough.”

“Yeah,” Jake said briefly. But the color was going down in his cheeks again. Roland was pleased to see this.

“Spend tomorrow with him. And his friends, if he has a gang he goes about with.”

Jake shook his head. “It's far out in the country. Ben says that Eisenhart's got plenty of help around the place, and there are some kids his age, but he's not allowed to play with them. Because he's the foreman's son, I guess.”

Roland nodded. This did not surprise him. “You’ll be offered graf tonight in the Pavilion. Do you need me to tell you it’s iced tea once we’re past the first toast?”

Jake shook his head.

Roland touched his temple, his lips, the corner of one eye, his lips again. “Head clear. Mouth shut. See much. Say little.”

Jake grinned briefly and gave him a thumbs-up. “What about you?”

“The three of us will stay with the priest tonight. I’m in hopes that tomorrow we may hear his tale.”

“And see . . .” They had fallen a bit behind the others, but Jake still lowered his voice. “See what he told us about?”

“That I don’t know,” Roland said. “The day after tomorrow, we three will ride out to the Rocking B. Perhaps noon with sai Eisenhart and have a bit of palaver. Then, over the next few days, the four of us will have a look at this town, both the inner and the outer. If things go well for you at the ranch, Jake, I’d have you stay there as long as you like and as much as they’ll have you.”

“Really?” Although he kept his face well (as the saying went), the gunslinger thought Jake was very pleased by this.

“Aye. From what I make out—what I *ken*—there’s three big bugs in Calla Bryn Sturgis. Overholser’s one. Took, the storekeeper, is another. The third one’s Eisenhart. I’d hear what you make of him with great interest.”

“You’ll hear,” Jake said. “And thankee-sai.” He tapped his throat three times. Then his seriousness broke into a broad grin. A boy’s grin. He urged his horse into a trot, moving up to tell his new friend that yes, he might stay the night, yes, he could come and play.

FOUR

“Holy wow,” Eddie said. The words came out low and slow, almost the exclamation of an awestruck cartoon character. But after nearly two months in the woods, the view warranted an exclamation. And there was the element of surprise. At one moment they’d just been clopping along the forest trail, mostly by twos (Overholser rode alone at the head of the group, Roland alone at its tail). At the next the trees were gone and the land itself fell away to the north, south, and east. They

were thus presented with a sudden, breathtaking, stomach-dropping view of the town whose children they were supposed to save.

Yet at first, Eddie had no eyes at all for what was spread out directly below him, and when he glanced at Susannah and Jake, he saw they were also looking beyond the Calla. Eddie didn't have to look around at Roland to know he was looking beyond, too. *Definition of a wanderer*, Eddie thought, *a guy who's always looking beyond.*

"Aye, quite the view, we tell the gods thankee," Overholser said complacently; and then, with a glance at Callahan, "Man Jesus as well, a'course, all gods is one when it comes to thanks, so I've heard, and 'tis a good enough saying."

He might have prattled on. Probably did; when you were the big farmer, you usually got to have your say, and all the way to the end. Eddie took no notice. He had returned his attention to the view.

Ahead of them, beyond the village, was a gray band of river running south. The branch of the Big River known as Devar-Tete Whye, Eddie remembered. Where it came out of the forest, the Devar-Tete ran between steep banks, but they lowered as the river entered the first cultivated fields, then fell away entirely. He saw a few stands of palm trees, green and improbably tropical. Beyond the moderate-sized village, the land west of the river was a brilliant green shot through everywhere with more gray. Eddie was sure that on a sunny day, that gray would turn a brilliant blue, and that when the sun was directly overhead, the glare would be too bright to look at. He was looking at rice-fields. Or maybe you called them paddies.

Beyond them and east of the river was desert, stretching for miles. Eddie could see parallel scratches of metal running into it, and made them for railroad tracks.

And beyond the desert—or obscuring the rest of it—was simple blackness. It rose into the sky like a vapory wall, seeming to cut into the low-hanging clouds.

"Yon's Thunderclap, sai," Zalia Jaffords said.

Eddie nodded. "Land of the Wolves. And God knows what else."

"Yer-bugger," Slightman the Younger said. He was trying to sound bluff and matter-of-fact, but to Eddie he looked plenty scared, maybe on the verge of tears. But the Wolves wouldn't take him, surely—if your twin died, that made you a singleton by default, didn't it? Well, it

had certainly worked for Elvis Presley, but of course the King hadn't come from Calla Bryn Sturgis. Or even Calla Lockwood to the south.

"Naw, the King was a Mis'sippi boy," Eddie said, low.

Tian turned in his saddle to look at him. "Beg your pardon, sai?"

Eddie, not aware that he'd spoken aloud, said: "I'm sorry. I was talking to myself."

Andy the Messenger Robot (Many Other Functions) came striding back up the path from ahead of them in time to hear this. "Those who hold conversation with themselves keep sorry company. This is an old saying of the Calla, sai Eddie, don't take it personally, I beg."

"And, as I've said before and will undoubtedly say again, you can't get snot off a suede jacket, my friend. An old saying from Calla Bryn Brooklyn."

Andy's innards clicked. His blue eyes flashed. "*Snot*: mucus from the nose. Also a disrespectful or supercilious person. *Suede*: this is a leather product which—"

"Never mind, Andy," Susannah said. "My friend is just being silly. He does this quite frequently."

"Oh yes," Andy said. "He is a child of winter. Would you like me to tell your horoscope, Susannah-sai? You will meet a handsome man! You will have two ideas, one bad and one good! You will have a dark-haired—"

"Get out of here, idiot," Overholser said. "Right into town, straight line, no wandering. Check that all's well at the Pavilion. No one wants to hear your goddamned horoscopes, begging your pardon, Old Fella."

Callahan made no reply. Andy bowed, tapped his metal throat three times, and set off down the trail, which was steep but comfortingly wide. Susannah watched him go with what might have been relief.

"Kinda hard on him, weren't you?" Eddie asked.

"He's but a piece of machinery," Overholser said, breaking the last word into syllables, as if speaking to a child.

"And he *can* be annoying," Tian said. "But tell me, sais, what do you think of our Calla?"

Roland eased his horse in between Eddie's and Callahan's. "It's very beautiful," he said. "Whatever the gods may be, they have favored

this place. I see corn, sharproot, beans, and . . . potatoes? Are those potatoes?"

"Aye, spuds, do ya," Slightman said, clearly pleased by Roland's eye.

"And yon's all that gorgeous rice," Roland said.

"All smallholds by the river," Tian said, "where the water's sweet and slow. And we know how lucky we are. When the rice comes ready—either to plant or to harvest—all the women go together. There's singing in the fields, and even dancing."

"Come-come-commala," Roland said. At least that was what Eddie heard.

Tian and Zalia brightened with surprise and recognition. The Slightmans exchanged a glance and grinned. "Where did you hear The Rice Song?" the Elder asked. "When?"

"In my home," said Roland. "Long ago. Come-come-commala, rice come a-falla." He pointed to the west, away from the river. "There's the biggest farm, deep in wheat. Yours, sai Overholser?"

"So it is, say thankya."

"And beyond, to the south, more farms . . . and then the ranches. That one's cattle . . . that one sheep . . . that one cattle . . . more cattle . . . more sheep . . ."

"How can you tell the difference from so far away?" Susannah asked.

"Sheep eat the grass closer to the earth, lady-sai," Overholser said. "So where you see the light brown patches of earth, that's sheep-graze land. The others—what you'd call ocher, I guess—that's cattle-graze."

Eddie thought of all the Western movies he'd seen at the Majestic: Clint Eastwood, Paul Newman, Robert Redford, Lee Van Cleef. "In my land, they tell legends of range-wars between the ranchers and the sheep-farmers," he said. "Because, it was told, the sheep ate the grass too close. Took even the roots, you ken, so it wouldn't grow back again."

"That's plain silly, beg your pardon," Overholser said. "Sheep do crop grass close, aye, but then we send the cows over it to water. The manure they drop is full of seed."

"Ah," Eddie said. He couldn't think of anything else. Put that way, the whole idea of range-wars seemed exquisitely stupid.

“Come on,” Overholser said. “Daylight’s wasting, do ya, and there’s a feast laid on for us at the Pavilion. The whole town’ll be there to meet you.”

And to give us a good looking-over, too, Eddie thought.

“Lead on,” Roland said. “We can be there by late day. Or am I wrong?”

“Nup,” Overholser said, then drove his feet into his horse’s sides and yanked its head around (just looking at this made Eddie wince). He headed down the path. The others followed.

FIVE

Eddie never forgot their first encounter with those of the Calla; that was one memory always within easy reach. Because everything that happened had been a surprise, he supposed, and when everything’s a surprise, experience takes on a dreamlike quality. He remembered the way the torches changed when the speaking was done—their strange, varied light. He remembered Oy’s unexpected salute to the crowd. The upturned faces and his suffocating panic and his anger at Roland. Susannah hoisting herself onto the piano bench in what the locals called the *musica*. Oh yeah, that memory always. You bet. But even more vivid than this memory of his beloved was that of the gunslinger.

Of Roland dancing.

But before any of these things came the ride down the Calla’s high street, and his sense of foreboding. His premonition of bad days on the way.

SIX

They reached the town proper an hour before sunset. The clouds parted and let through the day’s last red light. The street was empty. The surface was oiled dirt. The horses’ hooves made muffled thuds on the wheel-marked hardpack. Eddie saw a livery stable, a place called the Travelers’ Rest that seemed a combination lodging-house and eating-house, and, at the far end of the street, a large two-story that just about had to be the Calla’s Gathering Hall. Off to the right

of this was the flare of torches, so he supposed there were people waiting there, but at the north end of town where they entered there were none.

The silence and the empty board sidewalks began to give Eddie the creeps. He remembered Roland's tale of Susan's final ride into Mejis in the back of a cart, standing with her hands tied in front of her and a noose around her neck. *Her* road had been empty, too. At first. Then, not far from the intersection of the Great Road and the Silk Ranch Road, Susan and her captors had passed a single farmer, a man with what Roland had called lamb-slaughterer's eyes. Later she would be pelted with vegetables and sticks, even with stones, but this lone farmer had been first, standing there with his handful of cornshucks, which he had tossed almost gently at her as she passed on her way to . . . well, on her way to *charyou tree*, the Reap Fair of the Old People.

As they rode into Calla Bryn Sturgis, Eddie kept expecting that man, those lamb-slaughterer's eyes, and the handful of cornshucks. Because this town felt bad to him. Not evil—evil as Mejis had likely been on the night of Susan Delgado's death—but bad in a simpler way. Bad as in bad luck, bad choices, bad omens. Bad ka, maybe.

He leaned toward Slightman the Elder. "Where in the heck is everyone, Ben?"

"Yonder," Slightman said, and pointed to the flare of the torches.

"Why are they so quiet?" Jake asked.

"They don't know what to expect," Callahan said. "We're cut off here. The outsiders we *do* see from time to time are the occasional peddler, harrier, gambler . . . oh, and the lake-boat marts sometimes stop in high summer."

"What's a lake-boat mart?" Susannah asked.

Callahan described a wide flatboat, paddlewheel-driven and gaily painted, covered with small shops. These made their slow way down the Devar-Tete Whye, stopping to trade at the Callas of the Middle Crescent until their goods were gone. Shoddy stuff for the most part, Callahan said, but Eddie wasn't sure he trusted him entirely, at least on the subject of the lake-boat marts; he spoke with the almost unconscious distaste of the longtime religious.

"And the other outsiders come to steal their children," Callahan concluded. He pointed to the left, where a long wooden building

seemed to take up almost half the high street. Eddie counted not two hitching rails or four, but eight. *Long* ones. “Took’s General Store, may it do ya fine,” Callahan said, with what might have been sarcasm.

They reached the Pavilion. Eddie later put the number present at seven or eight hundred, but when he first saw them—a mass of hats and bonnets and boots and work-roughened hands beneath the long red light of that day’s evening sun—the crowd seemed enormous, untellable.

They will throw shit at us, he thought. *Throw shit at us and yell “Charyou tree.”* The idea was ridiculous but also strong.

The Calla-folk moved back on two sides, creating an aisle of green grass which led to a raised wooden platform. Ringing the Pavilion were torches caught in iron cages. At that point, they still all flared a quite ordinary yellow. Eddie’s nose caught the strong reek of oil.

Overholser dismounted. So did the others of his party. Eddie, Susannah, and Jake looked at Roland. Roland sat as he was for a moment, leaning slightly forward, one arm cast across the pommel of his saddle, seeming lost in his own thoughts. Then he took off his hat and held it out to the crowd. He tapped his throat three times. The crowd murmured. In appreciation or surprise? Eddie couldn’t tell. Not anger, though, definitely not anger, and that was good. The gunslinger lifted one booted foot across the saddle and lightly dismounted. Eddie left his horse more carefully, aware of all the eyes on him. He’d put on Susannah’s harness earlier, and now he stood next to her mount, back-to. She slipped into the harness with the ease of long practice. The crowd murmured again when they saw her legs were missing from just above the knees.

Overholser started briskly up the path, shaking a few hands along the way. Callahan walked directly behind him, occasionally sketching the sign of the cross in the air. Other hands reached out of the crowd to secure the horses. Roland, Eddie, and Jake walked three abreast. Oy was still in the wide front pocket of the poncho Benny had loaned Jake, looking about with interest.

Eddie realized he could actually smell the crowd—sweat and hair and sunburned skin and the occasional splash of what the characters in the Western movies usually called (with contempt similar to Callahan’s for the lake-boat marts) “foo-foo water.” He could also

smell food: pork and beef, fresh bread, frying onions, coffee and graf. His stomach rumbled, yet he wasn't hungry. No, not really hungry. The idea that the path they were walking would disappear and these people would close in on them wouldn't leave his mind. They were so *quiet!* Somewhere close by he could hear the first nightjars and whippoorwills tuning up for evening.

Overholser and Callahan mounted the platform. Eddie was alarmed to see that none of the others of the party which had ridden out to meet them did. Roland walked up the three broad wooden steps without hesitation, however. Eddie followed, conscious that his knees were a little weak.

"You all right?" Susannah murmured in his ear.

"So far."

To the left of the platform was a round stage with seven men on it, all dressed in white shirts, blue jeans, and sashes. Eddie recognized the instruments they were holding, and although the mandolin and banjo made him think their music would probably be of the shitkicking variety, the sight of them was still reassuring. They didn't hire bands to play at human sacrifices, did they? Maybe just a drummer or two, to wind up the spectators.

Eddie turned to face the crowd with Susannah on his back. He was dismayed to see that the aisle that had begun where the high street ended was indeed gone now. Faces tilted up to look at him. Women and men, old and young. No expression on those faces, and no children among them. These were faces that spent most of their time out in the sun and had the cracks to prove it. That sense of foreboding would not leave him.

Overholser stopped beside a plain wooden table. On it was a large billowy feather. The farmer took it and held it up. The crowd, quiet to begin with, now fell into a silence so disquietingly deep that Eddie could hear the rattling rales in some old party's chest as he or she breathed.

"Put me down, Eddie," Susannah said quietly. He didn't like to, but he did.

"I'm Wayne Overholser of Seven-Mile Farm," Overholser said, stepping to the edge of the stage with the feather held before him. "Hear me now, I beg."

“We say thankee-sai,” they murmured.

Overholser turned and held one hand out to Roland and his tet, standing there in their travel-stained clothes (Susannah didn’t stand, exactly, but rested between Eddie and Jake on her haunches and one propped hand). Eddie thought he had never felt himself studied more eagerly.

“We men of the Calla heard Tian Jaffords, George Telford, Diego Adams, and all others who would speak at the Gathering Hall,” Overholser said. “There I did speak myself. ‘They’ll come and take the children,’ I said, meaning the Wolves, a’course, ‘then they’ll leave us alone again for a generation or more. So ’tis, so it’s been, I say leave it alone.’ I think now those words were mayhap a little hasty.”

A murmur from the crowd, soft as a breeze.

“At this same meeting we heard Pere Callahan say there were gunslingers north of us.”

Another murmur. This one was a little louder. *Gunslingers . . . Mid-World . . . Gilead.*

“It was taken among us that a party should go and see. These are the folk we found, do ya. They claim to be . . . what Pere Callahan said they were.” Overholser now looked uncomfortable. Almost as if he were suppressing a fart. Eddie had seen this expression before, mostly on TV, when politicians faced with some fact they couldn’t squirm around were forced to backtrack. “They claim to be of the gone world. Which is to say . . .”

Go on, Wayne, Eddie thought, get it out. You can do it.

“ . . . which is to say of Eld’s line.”

“Gods be praised!” some woman shrieked. “Gods’ve sent em to save our babbies, so they have!”

There were shushing sounds. Overholser waited for quiet with a pained look on his face, then went on. “They can speak for themselves—and must—but I’ve seen enough to believe they may be able to help us with our problem. They carry good guns—you see em—and they can use em. Set my watch and warrant on it, and say thankya.”

This time the murmur from the crowd was louder, and Eddie sensed goodwill in it. He relaxed a little.

“All right, then, let em stand before’ee one by one, that ye might hear their voices and see their faces very well. This is their dinh.” He

lifted a hand to Roland.

The gunslinger stepped forward. The red sun set his left cheek on fire; the right was painted yellow with torchglow. He put out one leg. The thunk of the worn bootheel on the boards was very clear in the silence; Eddie for no reason thought of a fist knocking on a coffintop. He bowed deeply, open palms held out to them. “Roland of Gilead, son of Steven,” he said. “The Line of Eld.”

They sighed.

“May we be well-met.” He stepped back, and glanced at Eddie.

This part he could do. “Eddie Dean of New York,” he said. “Son of Wendell.” *At least that’s what Ma always claimed,* he thought. And then, unaware he was going to say it: “The Line of Eld. The ka-tet of Nineteen.”

He stepped back, and Susannah moved forward to the edge of the platform. Back straight, looking out at them calmly, she said, “I am Susannah Dean, wife of Eddie, daughter of Dan, the Line of Eld, the ka-tet of Nineteen, may we be well-met and do ya fine.” She curtsied, holding out her pretend skirts.

At this there was both laughter and applause.

While she spoke her piece, Roland bent to whisper a brief something in Jake’s ear. Jake nodded and then stepped forward confidently. He looked very young and very handsome in the day’s end light.

He put out his foot and bowed over it. The poncho swung comically forward with Oy’s weight. “I am Jake Chambers, son of Elmer, the Line of Eld, the ka-tet of the Ninety and Nine.”

Ninety-nine? Eddie looked at Susannah, who offered him a very small shrug. *What’s this ninety-nine shit?* Then he thought what the hell. He didn’t know what the ka-tet of Nineteen was, either, and he’d said it himself.

But Jake wasn’t done. He lifted Oy from the pocket of Benny Slightman’s poncho. The crowd murmured at the sight of him. Jake gave Roland a quick glance—*Are you sure?* it asked—and Roland nodded.

At first Eddie didn’t think Jake’s furry pal was going to do anything. The people of the Calla—the *folken*—had gone completely quiet

again, so quiet that once again the evensong of the birds could be heard clearly.

Then Oy rose up on his rear legs, stuck one of them forward, and actually bowed over it. He wavered but kept his balance. His little black paws were held out with the palms up, like Roland's. There were gasps, laughter, applause. Jake looked thunderstruck.

"Oy!" said the bumbler. "Eld! Thankee!" Each word clear. He held the bow a moment longer, then dropped onto all fours and scurried briskly back to Jake's side. The applause was thunderous. In one brilliant, simple stroke, Roland (for who else, Eddie thought, could have taught the bumbler to do that) had made these people into their friends and admirers. For tonight, at least.

So that was the first surprise: Oy bowing to the assembled *Calla folken* and declaring himself an-tet with his traveling-mates. The second came hard on its heels. "I'm no speaker," Roland said, stepping forward again. "My tongue tangles worse than a drunk's on Reap-night. But Eddie will set us on with a word, I'm sure."

This was Eddie's turn to be thunderstruck. Below them, the crowd applauded and stomped appreciatively on the ground. There were cries of *Thankee-sai* and *Speak you well* and *Hear him, hear him*. Even the band got into the act, playing a flourish that was ragged but loud.

He had time to shoot Roland a single frantic, furious look: *What in the blue fuck are you doing to me?* The gunslinger looked back blandly, then folded his arms across his chest.

The applause was fading. So was his anger. It was replaced by terror. Overholser was watching him with interest, arms crossed in conscious or unconscious imitation of Roland. Below him, Eddie could see a few individual faces at the front of the crowd: the Slightmans, the Jaffordses. He looked in the other direction and there was Callahan, blue eyes narrowed. Above them, the ragged cruciform scar on his forehead seemed to glare.

What the hell am I supposed to say to them?

Better say somethin, Eds, his brother Henry spoke up. *They're waiting.*

"Cry your pardon if I'm a little slow getting started," he said. "We've come miles and wheels and more miles and wheels, and you're the first folks we've seen in many a—"

Many a what? Week, month, year, decade?

Eddie laughed. To himself he sounded like the world's biggest idiot, a fellow who couldn't be trusted to hold his own dick at watering-time, let alone a gun. "In many a blue moon."

They laughed at that, and *hard*. Some even applauded. He had touched the town's funnybone without even realizing it. He relaxed, and when he did he found himself speaking quite naturally. It occurred to him, just in passing, that not so long ago the armed gunslinger standing in front of these seven hundred frightened, hopeful people had been sitting in front of the TV in nothing but a pair of yellowing underpants, eating Chee-tos, done up on heroin, and watching *Yogi Bear*.

"We've come from afar," he said, "and have far yet to go. Our time here will be short, but we'll do what we can, hear me, I beg."

"Say on, stranger!" someone called. "You speak fair!"

Yeah? Eddie thought. *News to me, fella.*

A few cries of *Aye* and *Do ya*.

"The healers in my barony have a saying," Eddie told them. " 'First, do no harm.' " He wasn't sure if this was a lawyer-motto or a doctor-motto, but he'd heard it in quite a few movies and TV shows, and it sounded pretty good. "We would do no harm here, do you ken, but no one ever pulled a bullet, or even a splinter from under a kid's fingernail, without spilling some blood."

There were murmurs of agreement. Overholser, however, was poker-faced, and in the crowd Eddie saw looks of doubt. He felt a surprising flush of anger. He had no right to be angry at these people, who had done them absolutely no harm and had refused them absolutely nothing (at least so far), but he was, just the same.

"We've got another saying in the barony of New York," he told them. " 'There ain't no free lunch.' From what we know of your situation, it's serious. Standing up against these Wolves would be dangerous. But sometimes doing nothing just makes people feel sick and hungry."

"Hear him, hear him!" the same someone at the back of the crowd called out. Eddie saw Andy the robot back there, and near him a large wagon full of men in voluminous cloaks of either black or dark blue. Eddie assumed that these were the Manni-folk.

“We’ll look around,” Eddie said, “and once we understand the problem, we’ll see what can be done. If we think the answer’s nothing, we’ll tip our hats to you and move along.” Two or three rows back stood a man in a battered white cowboy hat. He had shaggy white eyebrows and a white mustache to match. Eddie thought he looked quite a bit like Pa Cartwright on that old TV show, *Bonanza*. This version of the Cartwright patriarch looked less than thrilled with what Eddie was saying.

“If we can help, we’ll help,” he said. His voice was utterly flat now. “But we won’t do it alone, folks. Hear me, I beg. Hear me very well. You better be ready to stand up for what you want. You better be ready to fight for the things you’d keep.”

With that he stuck out a foot in front of him—the moccasin he wore didn’t produce the same fist-on-coffintop thud, but Eddie thought of it, all the same—and bowed. There was dead silence. Then Tian Jaffords began to clap. Zalia joined him. Benny also applauded. His father nudged him, but the boy went on clapping, and after a moment Slightman the Elder joined in.

Eddie gave Roland a burning look. Roland’s own bland expression didn’t change. Susannah tugged the leg of his pants and Eddie bent to her.

“You did fine, sugar.”

“No thanks to *him*.” Eddie nodded at Roland. But now that it was over, he felt surprisingly good. And talking was really not Roland’s thing, Eddie knew that. He could do it when he had no backup, but he didn’t care for it.

So now you know what you are, he thought. *Roland of Gilead’s mouthpiece.*

And yet was that so bad? Hadn’t Cuthbert Allgood had the job long before him?

Callahan stepped forward. “Perhaps we could set them on a bit better than we have, my friends—give them a proper Calla Bryn Sturgis welcome.”

He began to applaud. The gathered *folken* joined in immediately this time. The applause was long and lusty. There were cheers, whistles, stamping feet (the foot-stamping a little less than satisfying without a wood floor to amplify the sound). The musical combo

played not just one flourish but a whole series of them. Susannah grasped one of Eddie's hands. Jake grasped the other. The four of them bowed like some rock group at the end of a particularly good set, and the applause redoubled.

At last Callahan quieted it by raising his hands. "Serious work ahead, folks," he said. "Serious things to think about, serious things to do. But for now, let's eat. Later, let's dance and sing and be merry!" They began to applaud again and Callahan quieted them again. "Enough!" he cried, laughing. "And you Manni at the back, I know you haul your own rations, but there's no reason on earth for you not to eat and drink what you have with us. Join us, do ya! May it do ya fine!"

May it do us all fine, Eddie thought, and still that sense of foreboding wouldn't leave him. It was like a guest standing on the outskirts of the party, just beyond the glow of the torches. And it was like a sound. A bootheel on a wooden floor. A fist on the lid of a coffin.

SEVEN

Although there were benches and long trestle tables, only the old folks ate their dinners sitting down. And a famous dinner it was, with literally two hundred dishes to choose among, most of them homely and delicious. The doings began with a toast to the Calla. It was proposed by Vaughn Eisenhart, who stood with a bumper in one hand and the feather in the other. Eddie thought this was probably the Crescent's version of the National Anthem.

"May she always do fine!" the rancher cried, and tossed off his cup of graf in one long swallow. Eddie admired the man's throat, if nothing else; Calla Bryn Sturgis graf was so hard that just smelling it made his eyes water.

"*DO YA!*" the *folken* responded, and cheered, and drank.

At that moment the torches ringing the Pavilion went the deep crimson of the recently departed sun. The crowd oohed and aahed and applauded. As technology went, Eddie didn't think it was such of a much—certainly not compared to Blaine the Mono, or the dipolar computers that ran Lud—but it cast a pretty light over the crowd and

seemed to be nontoxic. He applauded with the rest. So did Susannah. Andy had brought her wheelchair and unfolded it for her with a compliment (he also offered to tell her about the handsome stranger she would soon meet). Now she wheeled her way amongst the little knots of people with a plate of food on her lap, chatting here, moving on, chatting there and moving on again. Eddie guessed she'd been to her share of cocktail parties not much different from this, and was a little jealous of her aplomb.

Eddie began to notice children in the crowd. Apparently the *folken* had decided their visitors weren't going to just haul out their shooting irons and start a massacre. The oldest kids were allowed to wander about on their own. They traveled in the protective packs Eddie recalled from his own childhood, scoring massive amounts of food from the tables (although not even the appetites of voracious teenagers could make much of a dent in that bounty). They watched the outlanders, but none quite dared approach.

The youngest children stayed close to their parents. Those of the painful 'tween age clustered around the slide, swings, and elaborate monkey-bar construction at the very far end of the Pavilion. A few used the stuff, but most of them only watched the party with the puzzled eyes of those who are somehow caught just wrongways. Eddie's heart went out to them. He could see how many pairs there were—it was eerie—and guessed that it was these puzzled children, just a little too old to use the playground equipment unselfconsciously, who would give up the greatest number to the Wolves . . . if the Wolves were allowed to do their usual thing, that was. He saw none of the "roont" ones, and guessed they had deliberately been kept apart, lest they cast a pall on the gathering. Eddie could understand that, but hoped they were having a party of their own somewhere. (Later he found that this was exactly the case—cookies and ice cream behind Callahan's church.)

Jake would have fit perfectly into the middle group of children, had he been of the Calla, but of course he wasn't. And he'd made a friend who suited him perfectly: older in years, younger in experience. They went about from table to table, grazing at random. Oy trailed at Jake's heels contentedly enough, head always swinging from side to side. Eddie had no doubt whatever that if someone made

an aggressive move toward Jake of New York (or his new friend, Benny of the Calla), that fellow would find himself missing a couple of fingers. At one point Eddie saw the two boys look at each other, and although not a word passed between them, they burst out laughing at exactly the same moment. And Eddie was reminded so forcibly of his own childhood friendships that it hurt.

Not that Eddie was allowed much time for introspection. He knew from Roland's stories (and from having seen him in action a couple of times) that the gunslingers of Gilead had been much more than peace officers. They had also been messengers, accountants, sometimes spies, once in a while even executioners. More than anything else, however, they had been diplomats. Eddie, raised by his brother and his friends with such nuggets of wisdom as *Why can't you eat me like your sister does* and *I fucked your mother and she sure was fine*, not to mention the ever-popular *I don't shut up I grow up, and when I look at you I throw up*, would never have thought of himself as a diplomat, but on the whole he thought he handled himself pretty well. Only Telford was hard, and the band shut him up, say thankya.

God knew it was a case of sink or swim; the Calla-folk might be frightened of the Wolves, but they weren't shy when it came to asking how Eddie and the others of his tet would handle them. Eddie realized Roland had done him a very big favor, making him speak in front of the entire bunch of them. It had warmed him up a little for this.

He told all of them the same things, over and over. It would be impossible to talk strategy until they had gotten a good look at the town. Impossible to tell how many men of the Calla would need to join them. Time would show. They'd peek at daylight. There would be water if God willed it. Plus every other cliché he could think of. (It even crossed his mind to promise them a chicken in every pot after the Wolves were vanquished, but he stayed his tongue before it could wag so far.) A smallhold farmer named Jorge Estrada wanted to know what they'd do if the Wolves decided to light the village on fire. Another, Garrett Strong, wanted Eddie to tell them where the children would be kept safe when the Wolves came. "For we can't leave em here, you must kennit very well," he said. Eddie, who realized he kenned very little, sipped at his graf and was

noncommittal. A fellow named Neil Faraday (Eddie couldn't tell if he was a smallhold farmer or just a hand) approached and told Eddie this whole thing had gone too far. "They never take *all* the children, you know," he said. Eddie thought of asking Faraday what he'd make of someone who said, "Well, only *two* of them raped my wife," and decided to keep the comment to himself. A dark-skinned, mustached fellow named Louis Haycox introduced himself and told Eddie he had decided Tian Jaffords was right. He'd spent many sleepless nights since the meeting, thinking it over, and had finally decided that he would stand and fight. If they wanted him, that was. The combination of sincerity and terror Eddie saw in the man's face touched him deeply. This was no excited kid who didn't know what he was doing but a full-grown man who probably knew all too well.

So here they came with their questions and there they went with no real answers, but looking more satisfied even so. Eddie talked until his mouth was dry, then exchanged his wooden cup of graf for cold tea, not wanting to get drunk. He didn't want to eat any more, either; he was stuffed. But still they came. Cash and Estrada. Strong and Echeverria. Winkler and Spalter (cousins of Overholser's, they said). Freddy Rosario and Farren Posella . . . or was it Freddy Posella and Farren Rosario?

Every ten or fifteen minutes the torches would change color again. From red to green, from green to orange, from orange to blue. The jugs of graf circulated. The talk grew louder. So did the laughter. Eddie began to hear more frequent cries of *Yer-bugger* and something that sounded like *Dive-down!* always followed by laughter.

He saw Roland speaking with an old man in a blue cloak. The old fellow had the thickest, longest, whitest beard Eddie had ever seen outside of a TV Bible epic. He spoke earnestly, looking up into Roland's weatherbeaten face. Once he touched the gunslinger's arm, pulled it a little. Roland listened, nodded, said nothing—not while Eddie was watching him, anyway. *But he's interested*, Eddie thought. *Oh yeah—old long tall and ugly's hearing something that interests him a lot.*

The musicians were trooping back to the bandstand when someone else stepped up to Eddie. It was the fellow who had reminded him of Pa Cartwright.

“George Telford,” he said. “May you do well, Eddie of New York.” He gave his forehead a perfunctory tap with the side of his fist, then opened the hand and held it out. He wore rancher’s headgear—a cowboy hat instead of a farmer’s sombrero—but his palm felt remarkably soft, except for a line of callus running along the base of his fingers. *That’s where he holds the reins, Eddie thought, and when it comes to work, that’s probably it.*

Eddie gave a little bow. “Long days and pleasant nights, sai Telford.” It crossed his mind to ask if Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe were back at the Ponderosa, but he decided again to keep his wiseacre mouth shut.

“May’ee have twice the number, son, twice the number.” He looked at the gun on Eddie’s hip, then up at Eddie’s face. His eyes were shrewd and not particularly friendly. “Your dinh wears the mate of that, I ken.”

Eddie smiled, said nothing.

“Wayne Overholser says yer ka-babby put on quite a shooting exhibition with another ’un. I believe yer wife’s wearing it tonight?”

“I believe she is,” Eddie said, not much caring for that ka-babby thing. He knew very well that Susannah had the Ruger. Roland had decided it would be better if Jake didn’t go armed out to Eisenhart’s Rocking B.

“Four against forty’d be quite a pull, wouldn’t you say?” Telford asked. “Yar, a hard pull that’d be. Or mayhap there might be sixty come in from the east; no one seems to remember for sure, and why would they? Twenty-three years is a long time of peace, tell God aye and Man Jesus thankya.”

Eddie smiled and said a little more nothing, hoping Telford would move along to another subject. Hoping Telford would go away, actually.

No such luck. Pissheads always hung around: it was almost a law of nature. “Of course four *armed* against forty . . . or sixty . . . would be a sight better than three armed and one standing by to raise a cheer. Especially four armed with hard calibers, may you hear me.”

“Hear you just fine,” Eddie said. Over by the platform where they had been introduced, Zalia Jaffords was telling Susannah something. Eddie thought Suze also looked interested. *She gets the farmer’s wife,*

Roland gets the Lord of the fuckin Rings, Jake gets to make a friend, and what do I get? A guy who looks like Pa Cartwright and cross-examines like Perry Mason.

“Do you have more guns?” Telford asked. “Surely you must have more, if you think to make a stand against the Wolves. Myself, I think the idea’s madness; I’ve made no secret of it. Vaughn Eisenhart feels the same—”

“Overholser felt that way and changed his mind,” Eddie said in a just-passing-the-time kind of way. He sipped tea and looked at Telford over the rim of his cup, hoping for a frown. Maybe even a brief look of exasperation. He got neither.

“Wayne the Weathervane,” Telford said, and chuckled. “Yar, yar, swings this way and that. Wouldn’t be too sure of him yet, young sai.”

Eddie thought of saying, *If you think this is an election you better think again*, and then didn’t. Mouth shut, see much, say little.

“Do’ee have speed-shooters, p’raps?” Telford asked. “Or grenados?”

“Oh well,” Eddie said, “that’s as may be.”

“I never heard of a woman gunslinger.”

“No?”

“Or a boy, for that matter. Even a ’prentice. How are we to know you are who you say you are? Tell me, I beg.”

“Well, that’s a hard one to answer,” Eddie said. He had taken a strong dislike to Telford, who looked too old to have children at risk.

“Yet people will want to know,” Telford said. “Certainly before they bring the storm.”

Eddie remembered Roland’s saying *We may be cast on but no man may cast us back*. It was clear they didn’t understand that yet. Certainly Telford didn’t. Of course there were questions that had to be answered, and answered yes; Callahan had mentioned that and Roland had confirmed it. Three of them. The first was something about aid and succor. Eddie didn’t think those questions had been asked yet, didn’t see how they could have been, but he didn’t think they would be asked in the Gathering Hall when the time came. The answers might be given by little people like Posella and Rosario, who didn’t even know what they were saying. People who *did* have children at risk.

“Who are you really?” Telford asked. “Tell me, I beg.”

“Eddie Dean, of New York. I hope you’re not questioning my honesty. I hope to *Christ* you’re not doing that.”

Telford took a step back, suddenly wary. Eddie was grimly glad to see it. Fear wasn’t better than respect, but by God it was better than nothing. “Nay, not at all, my friend! Please! But tell me this—have you ever used the gun you carry? Tell me, I beg.”

Eddie saw that Telford, although nervous of him, didn’t really believe it. Perhaps there was still too much of the old Eddie Dean, the one who really *had* been of New York, in his face and manner for this rancher-sai to believe it, but Eddie didn’t think that was it. Not the bottom of it, anyway. Here was a fellow who’d made up his mind to stand by and watch creatures from Thunderclap take the children of his neighbors, and perhaps a man like that simply couldn’t believe in the simple, final answers a gun allowed. Eddie had come to know those answers, however. Even to love them. He remembered their single terrible day in Lud, racing Susannah in her wheelchair under a gray sky while the god-drums pounded. He remembered Frank and Luster and Topsy the Sailor; thought of a woman named Maud kneeling to kiss one of the lunatics Eddie had shot to death. What had she said? *You shouldn’t’ve shot Winston, for ’twas his birthday.* Something like that.

“I’ve used this one and the other one and the Ruger as well,” he said. “And don’t you ever speak to me that way again, my friend, as if the two of us were on the inside of some funny joke.”

“If I offended in any way, gunslinger, I cry your pardon.”

Eddie relaxed a little. *Gunslinger*. At least the silver-haired son of a bitch had the wit to say so even if he might not believe so.

The band produced another flourish. The leader slipped his guitar-strap over his head and called, “Come on now, you all! That’s enough food! Time to dance it off and sweat it out, so it is!”

Cheers and yipping cries. There was also a rattle of explosions that caused Eddie to drop his hand, as he had seen Roland drop his on a good many occasions.

“Easy, my friend,” Telford said. “Only little bangers. Children setting off Reap-crackers, you ken.”

“So it is,” Eddie said. “Cry your pardon.”

“No need.” Telford smiled. It was a handsome Pa Cartwright smile, and in it Eddie saw one thing clear: this man would never come over to their side. Not, that was, until and unless every Wolf out of Thunderclap lay dead for the town’s inspection in this very Pavilion. And if that happened, he would claim to have been with them from the very first.

EIGHT

The dancing went on until moonrise, and that night the moon showed clear. Eddie took his turn with several ladies of the town. Twice he waltzed with Susannah in his arms, and when they danced the squares, she turned and crossed—allemande left, allemande right—in her wheelchair with pretty precision. By the ever-changing light of the torches, her face was damp and delighted. Roland also danced, gracefully but (Eddie thought) with no real enjoyment or flair for it. Certainly there was nothing in it to prepare them for what ended the evening. Jake and Benny Slightman had wandered off on their own, but once Eddie saw them kneeling beneath a tree and playing a game that looked suspiciously like mumblety-peg.

When the dancing was done, there was singing. This began with the band itself—a mournful love-ballad and then an up-tempo number so deep in the Calla’s patois that Eddie couldn’t follow the lyric. He didn’t have to in order to know it was at least mildly ribald; there were shouts and laughter from the men and screams of glee from the ladies. Some of the older ones covered their ears.

After these first two tunes, several people from the Calla mounted the bandstand to sing. Eddie didn’t think any of them would have gotten very far on *Star Search*, but each was greeted warmly as they stepped to the front of the band and were cheered lustily (and in the case of one pretty young matron, *lustfully*) as they stepped down. Two girls of about nine, obviously identical twins, sang a ballad called “Streets of Campara” in perfect, aching harmony, accompanied by just a single guitar which one of them played. Eddie was struck by the rapt silence in which the *folken* listened. Although most of the men were now deep in drink, not a single one of these broke the attentive quiet. No baby-bangers went off. A good many (the one named

Haycox among them) listened with tears streaming down their faces. If asked earlier, Eddie would have said of course he understood the emotional weight beneath which this town was laboring. He hadn't. He knew that now.

When the song about the kidnapped woman and the dying cowboy ended, there was a moment of utter silence—not even the nightbirds cried. It was followed by wild applause. Eddie thought, *If they showed hands on what to do about the Wolves right now, not even Pa Cartwright would dare vote to stand aside.*

The girls curtsied and leaped nimbly down to the grass. Eddie thought that would be it for the night, but then, to his surprise, Callahan climbed on stage.

He said, “Here’s an even sadder song my mother taught me” and then launched into a cheerful Irish ditty called “Buy Me Another Round You Booger You.” It was at least as dirty as the one the band had played earlier, but this time Eddie could understand most of the words. He and the rest of the town gleefully joined in on the last line of every verse: *Before y’ez put me in the ground, buy me another round, you booger you!*

Susannah rolled her wheelchair over to the gazebo and was helped up during the round of applause that followed the Old Fella’s song. She spoke briefly to the three guitarists and showed them something on the neck of one of the instruments. They all nodded. Eddie guessed they either knew the song or a version of it.

The crowd waited expectantly, none more so than the lady’s husband. He was delighted but not entirely surprised when she voyaged upon “Maid of Constant Sorrow,” which she had sometimes sung on the trail. Susannah was no Joan Baez, but her voice was true, full of emotion. And why not? It was the song of a woman who has left her home for a strange place. When she finished, there was no silence, as after the little girls’ duet, but a round of honest, enthusiastic applause. There were cries of *Yar!* and *Again!* and *More staves!* Susannah offered no more staves (for she’d sung all the ones she knew) but gave them a deep curtsy, instead. Eddie clapped until his hands hurt, then stuck his fingers in the corners of his mouth and whistled.

And then—the wonders of this evening would never end, it seemed—Roland himself was climbing up as Susannah was handed carefully down.

Jake and his new pal were at Eddie's side. Benny Slightman was carrying Oy. Until tonight Eddie would have said the bumbler would have bitten anyone not of Jake's ka-tet who tried that.

"Can he sing?" Jake asked.

"News to me if he can, kiddo," Eddie said. "Let's see." He had no idea what to expect, and was a little amused at how hard his heart was thumping.

NINE

Roland removed his holstered gun and cartridge belt. He handed them down to Susannah, who took them and strapped on the belt high at the waist. The cloth of her shirt pulled tight when she did it, and for a moment Eddie thought her breasts looked bigger. Then he dismissed it as a trick of the light.

The torches were orange. Roland stood in their light, gunless and as slim-hipped as a boy. For a moment he only looked out over the silent, watching faces, and Eddie felt Jake's hand, cold and small, creep into his own. There was no need for the boy to say what he was thinking, because Eddie was thinking it himself. Never had he seen a man who looked so lonely, so far from the run of human life with its fellowship and warmth. To see him here, in this place of fiesta (for it was a fiesta, no matter how desperate the business that lay behind it might be), only underlined the truth of him: he was the last. There was no other. If Eddie, Susannah, Jake, and Oy were of his line, they were only a distant shoot, far from the trunk. Afterthoughts, almost. Roland, however . . . Roland . . .

Hush, Eddie thought. You don't want to think about such things. Not tonight.

Slowly, Roland crossed his arms over his chest, narrow and tight, so he could lay the palm of his right hand on his left cheek and the palm of his left hand on his right cheek. This meant zilch to Eddie, but the reaction from the seven hundred or so Calla-folk was immediate: a jubilant, approving roar that went far beyond mere applause. Eddie

remembered a Rolling Stones concert he'd been to. The crowd had made that same sound when the Stones' drummer, Charlie Watts, began to tap his cowbell in a syncopated rhythm that could only mean "Honky Tonk Woman."

Roland stood as he was, arms crossed, palms on cheeks, until they quieted. "We are well-met in the Calla," he said. "Hear me, I beg."

"*We say thankee!*" they roared. And "*Hear you very well!*"

Roland nodded and smiled. "But I and my friends have been far and we have much yet to do and see. Now while we bide, will you open to us if we open to you?"

Eddie felt a chill. He felt Jake's hand tighten on his own. *It's the first of the questions*, he thought.

Before the thought was completed, they had roared their answer: "*Aye, and thankee!*"

"Do you see us for what we are, and accept what we do?"

There goes the second one, Eddie thought, and now it was him squeezing Jake's hand. He saw Telford and the one named Diego Adams exchange a dismayed, knowing look. The look of men suddenly realizing that the deal is going down right in front of them and they are helpless to do anything about it. *Too late, boys*, Eddie thought.

"Gunslingers!" someone shouted. "Gunslingers fair and true, say thankee! Say thankee in God's name!"

Roars of approval. A thunder of shouts and applause. Cries of *thankee* and *aye* and even *yer-bugger*.

As they quieted, Eddie waited for him to ask the last question, the most important one: Do you seek aid and succor?

Roland didn't ask it. He said merely, "We'd go our way for tonight, and put down our heads, for we're tired. But I'd give'ee one final song and a little step-toe before we leave, so I would, for I believe you know both."

A jubilant roar of agreement met this. They knew it, all right.

"I know it myself, and love it," said Roland of Gilead. "I know it of old, and never expected to hear 'The Rice Song' again from any lips, least of all from my own. I am older now, so I am, and not so limber as I once was. Cry your pardon for the steps I get wrong—"

“Gunslinger, we say thankee!” a woman called. “Such joy we feel, aye!”

“And do I not feel the same?” the gunslinger asked gently. “Do I not give you joy from my joy, and water I carried with the strength of my arm and my heart?”

“*Give you to eat of the green-crop,*” they chanted as one, and Eddie felt his back prickle and his eyes tear up.

“Oh my God,” Jake sighed. “He knows so *much* . . .”

“Give you joy of the rice,” Roland said.

He stood for a moment longer in the orange glow, as if gathering his strength, and then he began to dance something that was caught between a jig and a tap routine. It was slow at first, very slow, heel and toe, heel and toe. Again and again his bootheels made that fist-on-coffintop sound, but now it had rhythm. *Just* rhythm at first, and then, as the gunslinger’s feet began to pick up speed, it was more than rhythm: it became a kind of jive. That was the only word Eddie could think of, the only one that seemed to fit.

Susannah rolled up to them. Her eyes were huge, her smile amazed. She clasped her hands tightly between her breasts. “Oh, Eddie!” she breathed. “Did you know he could do this? Did you have any slightest idea?”

“No,” Eddie said. “No idea.”

TEN

Faster moved the gunslinger’s feet in their battered and broken old boots. Then faster still. The rhythm becoming clearer and clearer, and Jake suddenly realized he *knew* that beat. Knew it from the first time he’d gone todash in New York. Before meeting Eddie, a young black man with Walkman earphones on his head had strolled past him, bopping his sandaled feet and going “Cha-da-ba, cha-da-bow!” under his breath. And that was the rhythm Roland was beating out on the bandstand, each *Bow!* accomplished by a forward kick of the leg and a hard skip of the heel on wood.

Around them, people began to clap. Not on the beat, but on the off-beat. They were starting to sway. Those women wearing skirts held them out and swirled them. The expression Jake saw on all the faces,

oldest to youngest, was the same: pure joy. *Not just that*, he thought, and remembered a phrase his English teacher had used about how some books make us feel: *the ecstasy of perfect recognition*.

Sweat began to gleam on Roland's face. He lowered his crossed arms and started clapping. When he did, the *Calla-folken* began to chant one word over and over on the beat: "Come! . . . Come! . . . Come! . . . Come!" It occurred to Jake that this was the word some kids used for jizz, and he suddenly doubted if that was mere coincidence.

Of course it's not. Like the black guy bopping to that same beat. It's all the Beam, and it's all nineteen.

"Come! . . . Come! . . . Come!"

Eddie and Susannah had joined in. Benny had joined in. Jake abandoned thought and did the same.

ELEVEN

In the end, Eddie had no real idea what the words to "The Rice Song" might have been. Not because of the dialect, not in Roland's case, but because they spilled out too fast to follow. Once, on TV, he'd heard a tobacco auctioneer in South Carolina. This was like that. There were hard rhymes, soft rhymes, off-rhymes, even rape-rhymes—words that didn't rhyme at all but were forced to for a moment within the borders of the song. It *wasn't* a song, not really; it was like a chant, or some delirious streetcorner hip-hop. That was the closest Eddie could come. And all the while, Roland's feet pounded out their entrancing rhythm on the boards; all the while the crowd clapped and chanted *Come, come, come, come*.

What Eddie *could* pick out went like this:

Come-come-commala

Rice come a-falla

I-sissa 'ay a-bralla

Dey come a-folla

Down come a-rivva

Or-i-za we kivva

Rice be a green-o

*See all we seen-o
Seen-o the green-o
Come-come-commala!*

*Come-come-commala
Rice come a-falla
Deep inna walla
Grass come-commala
Under the sky-o
Grass green n high-o
Girl n her fella
Lie down togetha
They slippy 'ay slide-o
Under 'ay sky-o
Come-come-commala
Rice come a-falla!*

At least three more verses followed these two. By then Eddie had lost track of the words, but he was pretty sure he got the idea: a young man and woman, planting both rice and children in the spring of the year. The song's tempo, suicidally speedy to begin with, sped up and up until the words were nothing but a jargon-spew and the crowd was clapping so rapidly their hands were a blur. And the heels of Roland's boots had disappeared entirely. Eddie would have said it was impossible for anyone to dance at that speed, especially after having consumed a heavy meal.

Slow down, Roland, he thought. It's not like we can call 911 if you vapor-lock.

Then, on some signal neither Eddie, Susannah, nor Jake understood, Roland and the Calla-folken stopped in mid-career, threw their hands to the sky, and thrust their hips forward, as if in coitus. "COMMALA!" they shouted, and that was the end.

Roland swayed, sweat pouring down his cheeks and brow . . . and tumbled off the stage into the crowd. Eddie's heart took a sharp upward lurch in his chest. Susannah cried out and began to roll her wheelchair forward. Jake stopped her before she could get far, grabbing one of the push-handles.

“I think it’s part of the show!” he said.

“Yar, I’m pretty sure it is, too,” Benny Slightman said.

The crowd cheered and applauded. Roland was conveyed through them and above them by willing upraised arms. His own arms were raised to the stars. His chest heaved like a bellows. Eddie watched in a kind of hilarious disbelief as the gunslinger rolled toward them as if on the crest of a wave.

“Roland sings, Roland dances, and to top it all off,” he said, “Roland stage-dives like Joey Ramone.”

“What are you talking about, sugar?” Susannah asked.

Eddie shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. But nothing can top that. It’s *got* to be the end of the party.”

It was.

TWELVE

Half an hour later, four riders moved slowly down the high street of Calla Bryn Sturgis. One was wrapped in a heavy *salide*. Frosty plumes came from their mouths and those of their mounts on each exhale. The sky was filled with a cold strew of diamond-chips, Old Star and Old Mother brightest among them. Jake had already gone his way with the Slightmans to Eisenhart’s Rocking B. Callahan led the other three travelers, riding a bit ahead of them. But before leading them anywhere, he insisted on wrapping Roland in the heavy blanket.

“You say it’s not even a mile to your place—” Roland began.

“Never mind your blather,” Callahan said. “The clouds have rolled away, the night’s turned nigh-on cold enough to snow, and you danced a commala such as I’ve never seen in my years here.”

“How many years would that be?” Roland asked.

Callahan shook his head. “I don’t know. Truly, gunslinger, I don’t. I know well enough when I came here—that was the winter of 1983, nine years after I left the town of Jerusalem’s Lot. Nine years after I got this.” He raised his scarred hand briefly.

“Looks like a burn,” Eddie remarked.

Callahan nodded, but said no more on the subject. “In any case, time over here is different, as you all must very well know.”

“It’s in drift,” Susannah said. “Like the points of the compass.”

Roland, already wrapped in the blanket, had seen Jake off with a word . . . and with something else, as well. Eddie heard the clink of metal as something passed from the hand of the gunslinger to that of the 'prentice. A bit of money, perhaps.

Jake and Benny Slightman rode off into the dark side by side. When Jake turned and offered a final wave, Eddie had returned it with a surprising pang. *Christ, you're not his father*, he thought. That was true, but it didn't make the pang go away.

"Will he be all right, Roland?" Eddie had expected no other answer but yes, had wanted nothing more than a bit of balm for that pang. So the gunslinger's long silence alarmed him.

At long last Roland replied, "We'll hope so." And on the subject of Jake Chambers, he would say no more.

THIRTEEN

Now here was Callahan's church, a low and simple log building with a cross mounted over the door.

"What name do you call it, Pere?" Roland asked.

"Our Lady of Serenity."

Roland nodded. "Good enough."

"Do you feel it?" Callahan asked. "Do any of you feel it?" He didn't have to say what he was talking about.

Roland, Eddie, and Susannah sat quietly for perhaps an entire minute. At last Roland shook his head.

Callahan nodded, satisfied. "It sleeps." He paused, then added: "Tell God thankya."

"*Something's* there, though," Eddie said. He nodded toward the church. "It's like a . . . I don't know, a weight, almost."

"Yes," Callahan said. "Like a weight. It's awful. But tonight it sleeps. God be thanked." He sketched a cross in the frosty air.

Down a plain dirt track (but smooth, and bordered with carefully tended hedges) was another log building. Callahan's house, what he called the rectory.

"Will you tell us your story tonight?" Roland said.

Callahan glanced at the gunslinger's thin, exhausted face and shook his head. "Not a word of it, sai. Not even if you were fresh.

Mine is no story for starlight. Tomorrow at breakfast, before you and your friends are off on your errands—would that suit?”

“Aye,” Roland said.

“What if it wakes up in the night?” Susannah asked, and cocked her head toward the church. “Wakes up and sends us todash?”

“Then we’ll go,” Roland said.

“You’ve got an idea what to do with it, don’t you?” Eddie asked.

“Perhaps,” Roland said. They started down the path to the house, including Callahan among them as naturally as breathing.

“Anything to do with that old Manni guy you were talking to?” Eddie asked.

“Perhaps,” Roland repeated. He looked at Callahan. “Tell me, Pere, has it ever sent *you* todash? You know the word, don’t you?”

“I know it,” Callahan said. “Twice. Once to Mexico. A little town called Los Zapatos. And once . . . I think . . . to the Castle of the King. I believe that I was very lucky to get back, that second time.”

“What King are you talking about?” Susannah asked. “Arthur Eld?”

Callahan shook his head. The scar on his forehead glared in the starlight. “Best not to talk about it now,” he said. “Not at night.” He looked at Eddie sadly. “The Wolves are coming. Bad enough. Now comes a young man who tells me the Red Sox lost the World Series again . . . to the *Mets*?”

“Afraid so,” Eddie said, and his description of the final game—a game that made little sense to Roland, although it sounded a bit like Points, called Wickets by some—carried them up to the house. Callahan had a housekeeper. She was not in evidence but had left a pot of hot chocolate on the hob.

While they drank it, Susannah said: “Zalia Jaffords told me something that might interest you, Roland.”

The gunslinger raised his eyebrows.

“Her husband’s grandfather lives with them. He’s reputed to be the oldest man in Calla Bryn Sturgis. Tian and the old man haven’t been on good terms in years—Zalia isn’t even sure what they’re pissed off about, it’s that old—but Zalia gets on with him very well. She says he’s gotten quite senile over the last couple of years, but he still has his bright days. And he claims to have seen one of these Wolves. Dead.” She paused. “He claims to have killed it himself.”

“My soul!” Callahan exclaimed. “You don’t say so!”

“I do. Or rather, Zalia did.”

“That,” Roland said, “would be a tale worth hearing. Was it the last time the Wolves came?”

“No,” Susannah said. “And not the time before, when even Overholser would have been not long out of his clouts. The time before that.”

“If they come every twenty-three years,” Eddie said, “that’s almost seventy years ago.”

Susannah nodded. “But he was a man grown, even then. He told Zalia that a moit of them stood out on the West Road and waited for the Wolves to come. I don’t know how many a moit might be—”

“Five or six,” Roland said. He was nodding over his chocolate.

“Anyway, Tian’s Gran-pere was among them. And they killed one of the Wolves.”

“What was it?” Eddie asked. “What did it look like with its mask off?”

“She didn’t say,” Susannah replied. “I don’t think he told her. But we ought to—”

A snore arose, long and deep. Eddie and Susannah turned, startled. The gunslinger had fallen asleep. His chin was on his breastbone. His arms were crossed, as if he’d drifted off to sleep still thinking of the dance. And the rice.

FOURTEEN

There was only one extra bedroom, so Roland bunked in with Callahan. Eddie and Susannah were thus afforded a sort of rough honeymoon: their first night together by themselves, in a bed and under a roof. They were not too tired to take advantage of it. Afterward, Susannah passed immediately into sleep. Eddie lay awake a little while. Hesitantly, he sent his mind out in the direction of Callahan’s tidy little church, trying to touch the thing that lay within. Probably a bad idea, but he couldn’t resist at least trying. There was nothing. Or rather, a nothing in front of a something.

I could wake it up, Eddie thought. I really think I could.

Yes, and someone with an infected tooth could rap it with a hammer, but why would you?

We'll have to wake it up eventually. I think we're going to need it.

Perhaps, but that was for another day. It was time to let this one go.

Yet for awhile Eddie was incapable of doing that. Images flashed in his mind, like bits of broken mirror in bright sunlight. The Calla, lying spread out below them beneath the cloudy sky, the Devar-Tete Whye a gray ribbon. The green beds at its edge: rice come a-falla. Jake and Benny Slightman looking at each other and laughing without a word passed between them to account for it. The aisle of green grass between the high street and the Pavilion. The torches changing color. Oy, bowing and speaking (*Eld! Thankee!*) with perfect clarity. Susannah singing: "*I've known sorrow all my days.*"

Yet what he remembered most clearly was Roland standing slim and gunless on the boards with his arms crossed at the chest and his hands pressed against his cheeks; those faded blue eyes looking out at the *folken*. Roland asking questions, two of three. And then the sound of his boots on the boards, slow at first, then speeding up. Faster and faster, until they were a blur in the torchlight. Clapping. Sweating. Smiling. Yet his *eyes* didn't smile, not those blue bombardier's eyes; they were as cold as ever.

Yet how he had danced! Great God, how he had danced in the light of the torches.

Come-come-commala, rice come a-falla, Eddie thought.

Beside him, Susannah moaned in some dream.

Eddie turned to her. Slipped his hand beneath her arm so he could cup her breast. His last thought was for Jake. They had better take care of him out at that ranch. If they didn't, they were going to be one sorry-ass bunch of cowpunchers.

Eddie slept. There were no dreams. And beneath them as the night latened and the moon set, this borderland world turned like a dying clock.

CHAPTER II: DRY TWIST

ONE

Roland awoke from another vile dream of Jericho Hill in the hour before dawn. The horn. Something about Arthur Eld's horn. Beside him in the big bed, the Old Fella slept with a frown on his face, as if caught in his own bad dream. It creased his broad brow zigzag, breaking the arms of the cross scarred into the skin there.

It was pain that had wakened Roland, not his dream of the horn spilling from Cuthbert's hand as his old friend fell. The gunslinger was caught in a vise of it from the hips all the way down to his ankles. He could visualize the pain as a series of bright and burning rings. This was how he paid for his outrageous exertions of the night before. If that was all, all would have been well, but he knew there was more to this than just having danced the commala a little too enthusiastically. Nor was it the rheumatiz, as he had been telling himself these last few weeks, his body's necessary period of adjustment to the damp weather of this fall season. He was not blind to the way his ankles, especially the right one, had begun to thicken. He had observed a similar thickening of his knees, and although his hips still looked fine, when he placed his hands on them, he could feel the way the right one was changing under the skin. No, not the rheumatiz that had afflicted Cort so miserably in his last year or so, keeping him inside by his fire on rainy days. This was something worse. It was arthritis, the bad kind, the *dry* kind. It wouldn't be long before it reached his hands. Roland would gladly have fed his right one to the disease, if that would have satisfied it; he had taught it to do a good many things since the lobstrosities had taken the first two fingers, but

it was never going to be what it was. Only ailments didn't work that way, did they? You couldn't placate them with sacrifices. The arthritis would come when it came and go where it wanted to go.

I might have a year, he thought, lying in bed beside the sleeping religious from Eddie and Susannah and Jake's world. *I might even have two.*

No, not two. Probably not even one. What was it Eddie sometimes said? *Quit kidding yourself.* Eddie had a lot of sayings from his world, but that was a particularly good one. A particularly *apt* one.

Not that he would cry off the Tower if Old Bone-Twist Man took his ability to shoot, saddle a horse, cut a strip of rawhide, even to chop wood for a campfire, so simple a thing as that; no, he was in it until the end. But he didn't relish the picture of riding along behind the others, dependent upon them, perhaps tied to his saddle with the reins because he could no longer hold the pommel. Nothing but a drag-anchor. One they wouldn't be able to pull up if and when fast sailing was required.

If it gets to that, I'll kill myself.

But he wouldn't. That was the truth. *Quit kidding yourself.*

Which brought Eddie to mind again. He needed to talk to Eddie about Susannah, and right away. This was the knowledge with which he had awakened, and perhaps worth the pain. It wouldn't be a pleasant talk, but it had to be done. It was time Eddie knew about Mia. She would find it more difficult to slip away now that they were in a town—in a house—but she would have to, just the same. She could argue with her baby's needs and her own cravings no more than Roland could argue with the bright rings of pain which circled his right hip and knee and both ankles but had so far spared his talented hands. If Eddie wasn't warned, there might be terrible trouble. More trouble was something they didn't need now; it might sink them.

Roland lay in the bed, and throbbed, and watched the sky lighten. He was dismayed to see that brightness no longer bloomed dead east; it was a little off to the south, now.

Sunrise was also in drift.

TWO

The housekeeper was good-looking, about forty. Her name was Rosalita Munoz, and when she saw the way Roland walked to the table, she said: "One cup coffee, then you come with me."

Callahan cocked his head at Roland when she went to the stove to get the pot. Eddie and Susannah weren't up yet. The two of them had the kitchen to themselves. "How bad is it with you, sir?"

"It's only the rheumatiz," Roland said. "Goes through all my family on my father's side. It'll work out by noon, given bright sunshine and dry air."

"I know about the rheumatiz," Callahan said. "Tell God thankya it's no worse."

"I do." And to Rosalita, who brought heavy mugs of steaming coffee. "I tell you thankya, as well."

She put down the cups, curtsied, and then regarded him shyly and gravely. "I never saw the rice-dance kicked better, sai."

Roland smiled crookedly. "I'm paying for it this morning."

"I'll fix you," she said. "I've a cat-oil, special to me. It'll first take the pain and then the limp. Ask Pere."

Roland looked at Callahan, who nodded.

"Then I'll take you up on it. Thankee-sai."

She curtsied again, and left them.

"I need a map of the Calla," Roland said when she was gone. "It doesn't have to be great art, but it has to be accurate, and true as to distance. Can you draw one for me?"

"Not at all," Callahan said composedly. "I cartoon a little, but I couldn't draw you a map that would take you as far as the river, not even if you put a gun to my head. It's just not a talent I have. But I know two that could help you there." He raised his voice. "Rosalita! Rosie! Come to me a minute, do ya!"

THREE

Twenty minutes later, Rosalita took Roland by the hand, her grip firm and dry. She led him into the pantry and closed the door. "Drop yer britches, I beg," she said. "Be not shy, for I doubt you've anything I

haven't seen before, unless men are built summat different in Gilead and the Inners."

"I don't believe they are," Roland said, and let his pants fall.

The sun was now up but Eddie and Susannah were still down. Roland was in no hurry to wake them. There would be plenty of early days ahead—and late evenings, too, likely—but this morning let them enjoy the peace of a roof over their heads, the comfort of a feather mattress beneath their bodies, and the exquisite privacy afforded by a door between their secret selves and the rest of the world.

Rosalita, a bottle of pale, oily liquid in one hand, drew in a hiss over her full lower lip. She looked at Roland's right knee, then touched his right hip with her left hand. He flinched away a bit from the touch, although it was gentleness itself.

She raised her eyes to him. They were so dark a brown they were almost black. "This isn't rheumatiz. It's arthritis. The kind that spreads fast."

"Aye, where I come from some call it dry twist," he said. "Not a word of it to the Pere, or to my friends."

Those dark eyes regarded him steadily. "You won't be able to keep this a secret for long."

"I hear you very well. Yet while I can keep the secret, I *will* keep the secret. And you'll help me."

"Aye," she said. "No fear. I'll bide'ee."

"Say thankya. Now, will that help me?"

She looked at the bottle and smiled. "Aye. It's mint and spriggum from the swamp. But the secret's the cat's bile that's in it—not but three drops in each bottle, ye ken. They're the rock-cats that come in out of the desert, from the direction of the great darkness." She tipped up the bottle and poured a little of the oily stuff into her palm. The smell of the mint struck Roland's nose at once, followed by some other smell, a lower smell, which was far less pleasant. Yes, he reckoned that could be the bile of a puma or a cougar or whatever they meant by a rock-cat in these parts.

When she bent and rubbed it into his kneecaps, the heat was immediate and intense, almost too strong to bear. But when it moderated a bit, there was more relief than he would have dared hope for.

When she had finished anointing him, she said: "How be your body now, gunslinger-sai?"

Instead of answering with his mouth, he crushed her against his lean, undressed body and hugged her tightly. She hugged him back with an artless lack of shame and whispered in his ear, "If 'ee are who 'ee say 'ee are, 'ee mustn't let un take the babbies. No, not a single one. Never mind what the big bugs like Eisenhart and Telford might say."

"We'll do the best we can," he said.

"Good. Thankya." She stepped back, looked down. "One part of 'ee has no arthritis, nor rheumatiz, either. Looks quite lively. Perhaps a lady might look at the moon tonight, gunslinger, and pine for company."

"Perhaps she'll find it," Roland said. "Will you give me a bottle of that stuff to take on my travels around the Calla, or is it too dear?"

"Nay, not too dear," she said. In her flirting, she had smiled. Now she looked grave again. "But will only help'ee a little while, I think."

"I know," Roland said. "And no matter. We spread the time as we can, but in the end the world takes it all back."

"Aye," she said. "So it does."

FOUR

When he came out of the pantry, buckling his belt, he finally heard stirring in the other room. The murmur of Eddie's voice followed by a sleepy peal of female laughter. Callahan was at the stove, pouring himself fresh coffee. Roland went to him and spoke rapidly.

"I saw pokeberries on the left of your drive between here and your church."

"Yes, and they're ripe. Your eyes are sharp."

"Never mind my eyes, do ya. I would go out to pick my hat full. I'd have Eddie join me while his wife perhaps cracks an egg or three. Can you manage that?"

"I believe so, but—"

"Good," Roland said, and went out.

FIVE

By the time Eddie came, Roland had already half-filled his hat with the orange berries, and also eaten several good handfuls. The pain in his legs and hips had faded with amazing rapidity. As he picked, he wondered how much Cort would have paid for a single bottle of Rosalita Munoz's cat-oil.

"Man, those look like the wax fruit our mother used to put out on a doily every Thanksgiving," Eddie said. "Can you really eat them?"

Roland picked a pokeberry almost as big as the tip of his own finger and popped it into Eddie's mouth. "Does that taste like wax, Eddie?"

Eddie's eyes, cautious to begin with, suddenly widened. He swallowed, grinned, and reached for more. "Like cranberries, only sweeter. I wonder if Suze knows how to make muffins? Even if she doesn't, I bet Callahan's housekeeper—"

"Listen to me, Eddie. Listen closely and keep a rein on your emotions. For your father's sake."

Eddie had been reaching for a bush that was particularly heavy with pokeberries. Now he stopped and simply looked at Roland, his face expressionless. In this early light, Roland could see how much older Eddie looked. How much he had grown up was really extraordinary.

"What is it?"

Roland, who had held this secret in his own counsel until it seemed more complex than it really was, was surprised at how quickly and simply it was told. And Eddie, he saw, wasn't completely surprised.

"How long have you known?"

Roland listened for accusation in this question and heard none. "For certain? Since I first saw her slip into the woods. Saw her eating . . ." Roland paused. ". . . what she was eating. Heard her speaking with people who weren't there. I've suspected much longer. Since Lud."

"And didn't tell me."

"No." Now the recriminations would come, and a generous helping of Eddie's sarcasm. Except they didn't.

“You want to know if I’m pissed, don’t you? If I’m going to make this a problem.”

“Are you?”

“No. I’m not angry, Roland. Exasperated, maybe, and I’m scared to fuckin’ death for Suze, but why would I be angry with you? Aren’t you the dinh?” It was Eddie’s turn to pause. When he spoke again, he was more specific. It wasn’t easy for him, but he got it out. “Aren’t you *my* dinh?”

“Yes,” Roland said. He reached out and touched Eddie’s arm. He was astounded by his desire—almost his need—to explain. He resisted it. If Eddie could call him not just dinh but *his* dinh, he ought to behave as dinh. What he said was, “You don’t seem exactly stunned by my news.”

“Oh, I’m surprised,” Eddie said. “Maybe not stunned, but . . . well . . .” He picked berries and dropped them into Roland’s hat. “I saw some things, okay? Sometimes she’s too pale. Sometimes she winces and grabs at herself, but if you ask her, she says it’s just gas. And her boobs are bigger. I’m sure of it. But Roland, she’s still having her period! A month or so ago I saw her burying the rags, and they were bloody. *Soaked*. How can that be? If she caught pregnant when we pulled Jake through—while she was keeping the demon of the circle occupied—that’s got to be four months at least, and probably five. Even allowing for the way time slips around now, it’s *gotta* be.”

Roland nodded. “I know she’s been having her monthlies. And that’s proof conclusive it isn’t your baby. The thing she’s carrying scorns her woman’s blood.” Roland thought of her squeezing the frog in her fist, popping it. Drinking its black bile. Licking it from her fingers like syrup.

“Would it . . .” Eddie made as if to eat one of the pokeberries, decided against it, and tossed it into Roland’s hat instead. Roland thought it would be a while before Eddie felt the stirrings of true appetite again. “Roland, would it even *look* like a human baby?”

“Almost surely not.”

“What, then?”

And before he could stay them, the words were out. “Better not to name the devil.”

Eddie winced. What little color remained in his face now left it.

“Eddie? Are you all right?”

“No,” Eddie said. “I am most certainly not all right. But I’m not gonna faint like a girl at an Andy Gibb concert, either. What are we going to do?”

“For the time being, nothing. We have too many other things to do.”

“Don’t we just,” Eddie said. “Over here, the Wolves come in twenty-four days, if I’ve got it figured right. Over there in New York, who knows what day it is? The sixth of June? The tenth? Closer to July fifteenth than it was yesterday, that’s for sure. But Roland—if what she’s got inside her isn’t human, we can’t be sure her pregnancy will go nine months. She might pop it in six. Hell, she might pop it tomorrow.”

Roland nodded and waited. Eddie had gotten this far; surely he would make it the rest of the way.

And he did. “We’re stuck, aren’t we?”

“Yes. We can watch her, but there’s not much else we can do. We can’t even keep her still in hopes of slowing things down, because she’d very likely guess why we were doing it. And we need her. To shoot when the time comes, but before that, we’ll have to train some of these people with whatever weapons they feel comfortable with. It’ll probably turn out to be bows.” Roland grimaced. In the end he had hit the target in the North Field with enough arrows to satisfy Cort, but he had never cared for bow and arrow or bah and bolt. Those had been Jamie DeCurry’s choice of weapons, not his own.

“We’re really gonna go for it, aren’t we?”

“Oh yes.”

And Eddie smiled. Smiled in spite of himself. He was what he was. Roland saw it and was glad.

SIX

As they walked back to Callahan’s rectory-house, Eddie asked: “You came clean with me, Roland, why not come clean with her?”

“I’m not sure I understand you.”

“Oh, I think you do,” Eddie said.

“All right, but you won’t like the answer.”

“I’ve heard all sorts of answers from you, and I couldn’t say I’ve cared for much more than one in five.” Eddie considered. “Nah, that’s too generous. Make it one in fifty.”

“The one who calls herself Mia—which means *mother* in the High Speech—kens she’s carrying a child, although I doubt she kens what kind of a child.”

Eddie considered this in silence.

“Whatever it is, Mia thinks of it as her baby, and she’ll protect it to the limit of her strength and life. If that means taking over Susannah’s body—the way Detta Walker sometimes took over Odetta Holmes—she’ll do it if she can.”

“And probably she could,” Eddie said gloomily. Then he turned directly to Roland. “So what I think you’re saying—correct me if I’ve got it wrong—is that you don’t want to tell Suze she might be growing a monster in her belly because it might impair her efficiency.”

Roland could have quibbled about the harshness of this judgment, but chose not to. Essentially, Eddie was right.

As always when he was angry, Eddie’s street accent became more pronounced. It was almost as though he were speaking through his nose instead of his mouth. “And if anything changes over the next month or so—if she goes into labor and pops out the Creature from the Black Lagoon, for instance—she’s gonna be completely unprepared. Won’t have a clue.”

Roland stopped about twenty feet from the rectory-house. Inside the window, he could see Callahan talking to a couple of young people, a boy and a girl. Even from here he could see they were twins.

“Roland?”

“You say true, Eddie. Is there a point? If so, I hope you’ll get to it. Time is no longer just a face on the water, as you yourself pointed out. It’s become a precious commodity.”

Again he expected a patented Eddie Dean outburst complete with phrases such as *kiss my ass* or *eat shit and die*. Again, no such outburst came. Eddie was looking at him, that was all. Steadily and a little sorrowfully. Sorry for Susannah, of course, but also for the two of them. The two of them standing here and conspiring against one of the tet.

“I’m going to go along with you,” Eddie said, “but not because you’re the dinh, and not because one of those two is apt to come back brainless from Thunderclap.” He pointed to the pair of kids the Old Fella was talking to in his living room. “I’d trade every kid in this town for the one Suze is carrying. If it *was* a kid. My kid.”

“I know you would,” Roland said.

“It’s the rose I care about,” Eddie said. “That’s the only thing worth risking her for. But even so, you’ve got to promise me that if things go wrong—if she goes into labor, or if this Mia chick starts taking over—we’ll try to save her.”

“I would always try to save her,” Roland said, and then had a brief, nightmare image—brief but very clear—of Jake dangling over the drop under the mountains.

“You swear that?” Eddie asked.

“Yes,” Roland said. His eyes met those of the younger man. In his mind, however, he saw Jake falling into the abyss.

SEVEN

They reached the rectory door just as Callahan was ushering the two young people out. They were, Roland thought, very likely the most gorgeous children he had ever seen. Their hair was black as coal, the boy’s shoulder-length, the girl’s bound by a white ribbon and falling all the way to her bottom. Their eyes were dark, perfect blue. Their skin was creamy-pale, their lips a startling, sensuous red. There were faint spatters of freckles on their cheeks. So far as Roland could tell, the spatters were also identical. They looked from him to Eddie and then back to Susannah, who leaned in the kitchen doorway with a dish-wiper in one hand and a coffee cup in the other. Their shared expression was one of curious wonder. He saw caution in their faces, but no fear.

“Roland, Eddie, I’d like you to meet the Tavery twins, Frank and Francine. Rosalita fetched them—the Taverys live not half a mile away, do ya. You’ll have your map by this afternoon, and I doubt if you’ll ever have seen a finer one in all your life. It’s but one of the talents they have.”

The Tavery twins made their manners, Frank with a bow and Francine with a curtsy.

“You do us well and we say thankya,” Roland told them.

An identical blush suffused their astoundingly creamy complexions; they muttered their thanks and prepared to slip away. Before they could, Roland put an arm around each narrow but well-made pair of shoulders and led the twins a little way down the walk. He was taken less by their perfect child’s beauty than by the piercing intelligence he saw in their blue eyes. He had no doubt they would make his map; he also had no doubt that Callahan had had Rosalita fetch them as a kind of object lesson, were one still needed: with no interference, one of these beautiful children would be a grizzling idiot a month from now.

“Sai?” Frank asked. Now there *was* a touch of worry in his voice.

“Fear me not,” Roland said, “but hear me well.”

EIGHT

Callahan and Eddie watched Roland walk the Tavery twins slowly along the rectory’s flagstoned path and toward the dirt drive. Both men shared the same thought: Roland looked like a benevolent gran-pere.

Susannah joined them, watched, then plucked Eddie’s shirt. “Come with me a minute.”

He followed her into the kitchen. Rosalita was gone and they had it to themselves. Susannah’s brown eyes were enormous, shining.

“What is it?” he asked her.

“Pick me up.”

He did.

“Now kiss me quick, while you have the chance.”

“Is that all you want?”

“Isn’t it enough? It better be, Mister Dean.”

He kissed her, and willingly, but couldn’t help marking how much larger her breasts were as they pressed against him. When he drew his face away from hers, he found himself looking for traces of the other one in her face. The one who called herself Mother in the High Speech. He saw only Susannah, but he supposed that from now on he

would be condemned to look. And his eyes kept trying to go to her belly. He tried to keep them away, but it was as if they were weighted. He wondered how much that was between them would change now. It was not a pleasant speculation.

“Is that better?” he asked.

“Much.” She smiled a little, and then the smile faded. “Eddie? Is something wrong?”

He grinned and kissed her again. “You mean other than that we’re all probably gonna die here? Nope. Nothing at all.”

Had he lied to her before? He couldn’t remember, but he didn’t think so. And even if he had, he had never done so with such baldness. With such calculation.

This was bad.

NINE

Ten minutes later, rearmed with fresh mugs of coffee (and a bowl of pokeberries), they went out into the rectory’s small back yard. The gunslinger lifted his face into the sun for a moment, relishing its weight and heat. Then he turned to Callahan. “We three would hear your story now, Pere, if you’d tell it. And then mayhap stroll up to your church and see what’s there.”

“I want you to take it,” Callahan said. “It hasn’t desecrated the church, how could it when Our Lady was never consecrated to begin with? But it’s changed it for the worse. Even when the church was still a-building, I felt the spirit of God inside it. No more. That thing has driven it out. I want you to take it.”

Roland opened his mouth to say something noncommittal, but Susannah spoke before he could. “Roland? You all right?”

He turned to her. “Why, yes. Why would I not be?”

“You keep rubbing your hip.”

Had he been? Yes, he saw, he had. The pain was creeping back already, in spite of the warm sun, in spite of Rosalita’s cat-oil. The dry twist.

“It’s nothing,” he told her. “Just a touch of the rheumatiz.”

She looked at him doubtfully, then seemed to accept. *This is a hell of a way to start*, Roland thought, *with at least two of us keeping secrets. We*

can't go on so. Not for long.

He turned to Callahan. "Tell us your tale. How you came by your scars, how you came here, and how you came by Black Thirteen. We would hear every word."

"Yes," Eddie murmured.

"Every word," Susannah echoed.

All three of them looked at Callahan—the Old Fella, the religious who would allow himself to be called Pere but not priest. His twisted right hand went to the scar on his forehead and rubbed at it. At last he said: "'Twas the drink. That's what I believe now. Not God, not devils, not predestination, not the company of saints. 'Twas the drink." He paused, thinking, then smiled at them. Roland remembered Nort, the weed-eater in Tull who had been brought back from the dead by the man in black. Nort had smiled like that. "But if God made the world, then God made the drink. And that is also His will."

Ka, Roland thought.

Callahan sat quiet, rubbing the scarred crucifix on his forehead, gathering his thoughts. And then he began to tell his story.

CHAPTER III: THE PRIEST'S TALE (NEW YORK)

ONE

It was the drink, that was what he came to believe when he finally stopped it and clarity came. Not God, not Satan, not some deep psychosexual battle between his blessed mither and his blessed Da'. Just the drink. And was it surprising that whiskey should have taken him by the ears? He was Irish, he was a priest, one more strike and you're out.

From seminary in Boston he'd gone to a city parish in Lowell, Massachusetts. His parishioners had loved him (he wouldn't refer to them as his flock, flocks were what you called seagulls on their way to the town dump), but after seven years in Lowell, Callahan had grown uneasy. When talking to Bishop Dugan in the Diocese office, he had used all the correct buzzwords of the time to express this unease: anomie, urban malaise, an increasing lack of empathy, a sense of disconnection from the life of the spirit. He'd had a nip in the bathroom before his appointment (followed by a couple of Wintergreen Life Savers, no fool he), and had been particularly eloquent that day. Eloquence does not always proceed from belief, but often proceeds from the bottle. And he was no liar. He *had* believed what he was saying that day in Dugan's study. Every word. As he believed in Freud, the future of the Mass spoken in English, the nobility of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, and the idiocy of his widening war in Vietnam: waist-deep in the Wide Muddy, and the big fool said to push on, as the old folk-tune had it. He believed in large part because those ideas (if they *were* ideas and not just cocktail-party chatter) had been currently trading high on the intellectual Big

Board. Social Conscience is up two and a third, Hearth and Home down a quarter but still your basic blue-chip stock. Later it all became simpler. Later he came to understand that he wasn't drinking too much because he was spiritually unsettled but spiritually unsettled because he was drinking too much. You wanted to protest, to say *that* couldn't be it, or not *just* that, it was too simple. But it *was* that, just that. God's voice is still and small, the voice of a sparrow in a cyclone, so said the prophet Isaiah, and we all say thankya. It's hard to hear a small voice clearly if you're shitass drunk most of the time. Callahan left America for Roland's world before the computer revolution spawned the acronym GIGO—garbage in, garbage out—but in plenty of time to hear someone at an AA meeting observe that if you put an asshole on a plane in San Francisco and flew him to the east coast, the same asshole got off in Boston. Usually with four or five drinks under his belt. But that was later. In 1964 he had believed what he believed, and plenty of people had been anxious to help him find his way. From Lowell he had gone to Spofford, Ohio, a suburb of Dayton. There he stayed for five years, and then he began to feel restless again. Consequently, he began to talk the talk again. The kind the Diocesan Office listened to. The kind that got you moved on down the line. Anomie. Spiritual disconnection (this time from his suburban parishioners). Yes, they liked him (and he liked them), but something still seemed to be wrong. And there *was* something wrong, mostly in the quiet bar on the corner (where everybody *also* liked him) and in the liquor cabinet in the rectory living room. Beyond small doses, alcohol is a toxin, and Callahan was poisoning himself on a nightly basis. It was the poison in his system, not the state of the world or that of his own soul, which was bringing him down. Had it always been that obvious? Later (at another AA meeting) he'd heard a guy refer to alcoholism and addiction as the elephant in the living room: how could you miss it? Callahan hadn't told him, he'd still been in the first ninety days of sobriety at that point and that meant he was supposed to just sit there and be quiet ("Take the cotton out of your ears and stick it in your mouth," the old-timers advised, and we all say thankya), but he *could* have told him, yes indeed. You could miss the elephant if it was a *magic* elephant, if it had the power—like The Shadow—to cloud men's minds. To actually make you believe that

your problems were spiritual and mental but absolutely not boozical. Good Christ, just the alcohol-related loss of the REM sleep was enough to screw you up righteously, but somehow you never thought of that while you were active. Booze turned your thought-processes into something akin to that circus routine where all the clowns come piling out of the little car. When you looked back in sobriety, the things you'd said and done made you wince ("I'd sit in a bar solving all the problems of the world, then not be able to find my car in the parking lot," one fellow at a meeting remembered, and we all say thankya). The things you *thought* were even worse. How could you spend the morning puking and the afternoon believing you were having a spiritual crisis? Yet he had. And his superiors had, possibly because more than a few of them were having their own problems with the magic elephant. Callahan began thinking that a smaller church, a rural parish, would put him back in touch with God and himself. And so, in the spring of 1969, he found himself in New England again. Northern New England, this time. He had set up shop—bag and baggage, crucifix and chasuble—in the pleasant little town of Jerusalem's Lot, Maine. There he had finally met real evil. Looked it in the face.

And flinched.

TWO

"A writer came to me," he said. "A man named Ben Mears."

"I think I read one of his books," Eddie said. "*Air Dance*, it was called. About a man who gets hung for the murder his brother committed?"

Callahan nodded. "That's the one. There was also a teacher named Matthew Burke, and they both believed there was a vampire at work in 'Salem's Lot, the kind who makes other vampires."

"Is there any other kind?" Eddie asked, remembering about a hundred movies at the Majestic and maybe a thousand comic books purchased at (and sometimes stolen from) Dahlie's.

"There is, and we'll get there, but never mind that now. Most of all, there was a boy who believed. He was about the same age as your Jake. They didn't convince me—not at first—but *they* were convinced, and

it was hard to stand against their belief. Also, *something* was going on in The Lot, that much was certain. People were disappearing. There was an atmosphere of terror in the town. Impossible to describe it now, sitting here in the sun, but it was there. I had to officiate at the funeral of another boy. His name was Daniel Glick. I doubt he was this vampire's first victim in The Lot, and he certainly wasn't the last, but he was the first one who turned up dead. On the day of Danny Glick's burial, my life changed, somehow. And I'm not talking about the quart of whiskey a day anymore, either. Something changed in my *head*. I felt it. Like a switch turning. And although I haven't had a drink in years, that switch is still turned."

Susannah thought: *That's when you went todash, Father Callahan.*

Eddie thought: *That's when you went nineteen, pal. Or maybe it's ninety-nine. Or maybe it's both, somehow.*

Roland simply listened. His mind was clear of reflection, a perfect receiving machine.

"The writer, Mears, had fallen in love with a town girl named Susan Norton. The vampire took her. I believe he did it partly because he could, and partly to punish Mears for daring to form a group—a katet—that would try to hunt him. We went to the place the vampire had bought, an old wreck called the Marsten House. The thing staying there went by the name of Barlow."

Callahan sat, considering, looking through them and back to those old days. At last he resumed.

"Barlow was gone, but he'd left the woman. And a letter. It was addressed to all of us, but was directed principally to me. The moment I saw her lying there in the cellar of the Marsten House I understood it was all true. The doctor with us listened to her chest and took her blood pressure, though, just to be sure. No heartbeat. Blood pressure zero. But when Ben pounded the stake into her, she came alive. The blood flowed. She screamed, over and over. Her hands . . . I remember the shadows of her hands on the wall . . ."

Eddie's hand gripped Susannah's. They listened in a horrified suspension that was neither belief nor disbelief. This wasn't a talking train powered by malfunctioning computer circuits, nor men and women who had reverted to savagery. This was something akin to the

unseen demon that had come to the place where they had drawn Jake. Or the doorkeeper in Dutch Hill.

“What did he say to you in his note, this Barlow?” Roland asked.

“That my faith was weak and I would undo myself. He was right, of course. By then the only thing I really believed in was Bushmills. I just didn’t know it. *He* did, though. Booze is also a vampire, and maybe it takes one to know one.

“The boy who was with us became convinced that this prince of vampires meant to kill his parents next, or turn them. For revenge. The boy had been taken prisoner, you see, but he escaped and killed the vampire’s half-human accomplice, a man named Straker.”

Roland nodded, thinking this boy sounded more and more like Jake. “What was his name?”

“Mark Petrie. I went with him to his house, and with all the considerable power my church affords: the cross, the stole, the holy water, and of course the Bible. But I had come to think of these things as symbols, and that was my Achilles’ heel. Barlow was there. He had Petrie’s parents. And then he had the boy. I held up my cross. It glowed. It hurt him. He screamed.” Callahan smiled, recalling that scream of agony. The look of it chilled Eddie’s heart. “I told him that if he hurt Mark, I’d destroy him, and at that moment I could have done it. He knew it, too. His response was that before I did, he’d rip the child’s throat out. And *he* could have done it.”

“Mexican standoff,” Eddie murmured, remembering a day by the Western Sea when he had faced Roland in a strikingly similar situation. “Mexican standoff, baby.”

“What happened?” Susannah asked.

Callahan’s smile faded. He was rubbing his scarred right hand the way the gunslinger had rubbed his hip, without seeming to realize it. “The vampire made a proposal. He would let the boy go if I’d put down the crucifix I held. We’d face each other unarmed. His faith against mine. I agreed. God help me, I agreed. The boy”

THREE

The boy is gone, like an eddy of dark water.

Barlow seems to grow taller. His hair, swept back from his brow in the European manner, seems to float around his skull. He's wearing a dark suit and a bright red tie, impeccably knotted, and to Callahan he seems part of the darkness that surrounds him. Mark Petrie's parents lie dead at his feet, their skulls crushed.

"Fulfill your part of the bargain, shaman."

But why should he? Why not drive him off, settle for a draw this night? Or kill him outright? Something is wrong with the idea, terribly wrong, but he cannot pick out just what it is. Nor will any of the buzzwords that have helped him in previous moments of crisis be of any help to him here. This isn't anomie, lack of empathy, or the existential grief of the twentieth century; this is a vampire. And—

And his cross, which had been glowing fiercely, is growing dark.

Fear leaps into his belly like a confusion of hot wires. Barlow is walking toward him across the Petrie kitchen, and Callahan can see the thing's fangs very clearly because Barlow is smiling. It is a winner's smile.

Callahan takes a step backward. Then two. Then his buttocks strike the edge of the table, and the table pushes back against the wall, and then there is nowhere left to go.

"Sad to see a man's faith fail," says Barlow, and reaches out.

Why should he not reach out? The cross Callahan is holding up is now dark. Now it's nothing but a piece of plaster, a cheap piece of rickrack his mother bought in a Dublin souvenir shop, probably at a scalper's price. The power it had sent ramming up his arm, enough spiritual voltage to smash down walls and shatter stone, is gone.

Barlow plucks it from his fingers. Callahan cries out miserably, the cry of a child who suddenly realizes the bogeyman has been real all along, waiting patiently in the closet for its chance. And now comes a sound that will haunt him for the rest of his life, from New York and the secret highways of America to the AA meetings in Topeka where he finally sobered up to the final stop in Detroit to his life here, in Calla Bryn Sturgis. He will remember that sound when his forehead is scarred and he fully expects to be killed. He will remember it when he is killed. The sound is two dry snaps as Barlow breaks the arms of the cross, and the meaningless thump as he throws what remains on the floor. And he'll also remember the cosmically ludicrous thought which came, even as Barlow reached for him: God, I need a drink.

FOUR

The Pere looked at Roland, Eddie, and Susannah with the eyes of one who is remembering the absolute worst moment of his life. “You hear all sorts of sayings and slogans in Alcoholics Anonymous. There’s one that recurs to me whenever I think of that night. Of Barlow taking hold of my shoulders.”

“What?” Eddie asked.

“Be careful what you pray for,” Callahan said. “Because you just might get it.”

“You got your drink,” Roland said.

“Oh yes,” Callahan said. “I got my drink.”

FIVE

Barlow’s hands are strong, implacable. As Callahan is drawn forward, he suddenly understands what is going to happen. Not death. Death would be a mercy compared to this.

No, please no, he tries to say, but nothing comes out of his mouth but one small, whipped moan.

“Now, priest,” the vampire whispers.

Callahan’s mouth is pressed against the reeking flesh of the vampire’s cold throat. There is no anomie, no social dysfunction, no ethical or racial ramifications. Only the stink of death and one vein, open and pulsing with Barlow’s dead, infected blood. No sense of existential loss, no postmodern grief for the death of the American value system, not even the religio-psychological guilt of Western man. Only the effort to hold his breath forever, or twist his head away, or both. He cannot. He holds on for what seems like aeons, smearing the blood across his cheeks and forehead and chin like war paint. To no avail. In the end he does what all alcoholics must do once the booze has taken them by the ears: he drinks.

Strike three. You’re out.

SIX

“The boy got away. There was that much. And Barlow let me go. Killing me wouldn’t have been any fun, would it? No, the fun was in

letting me live.

“I wandered for an hour or more, through a town that was less and less there. There aren’t many Type One vampires, and that’s a blessing because a Type One can cause one hell of a lot of mayhem in an extremely short period of time. The town was already half-infected, but I was too blind—too *shocked*—to realize it. And none of the new vampires approached me. Barlow had set his mark on me as surely as God set his mark on Cain before sending him off to dwell in the land of Nod. His watch and his warrant, as you’d say, Roland.

“There was a drinking fountain in the alley beside Spencer’s Drugs, the sort of thing no Public Health Office would have sanctioned a few years later, but back then there was one or two in every small town. I washed Barlow’s blood off my face and neck there. Tried to wash it out of my hair, too. And then I went to St. Andrews, my church. I’d made up my mind to pray for a second chance. Not to the God of the theologians who believe that everything holy and unholy ultimately comes from inside us, but to the old God. The one who proclaimed to Moses that he should not suffer a witch to live and gave unto his own son the power to raise from the dead. A second chance is all I wanted. My life for that.

“By the time I got to St. Andrews, I was almost running. There were three doors going inside. I reached for the middle one. Somewhere a car backfired, and someone laughed. I remember those sounds very clearly. It’s as if they mark the border of my life as a priest of the Holy Roman Catholic Church.”

“What happened to you, sugar?” Susannah asked.

“The door rejected me,” Callahan said. “It had an iron handle, and when I touched it, fire came out of it like a reverse stroke of lightning. It knocked me all the way down the steps and onto the cement path. It did this.” He raised his scarred right hand.

“And that?” Eddie asked, and pointed to his forehead.

“No,” Callahan said. “That came later. I picked myself up. Walked some more. Wound up at Spencer’s again. Only this time I went in. Bought a bandage for my hand. And then, while I was paying, I saw the sign. Ride The Big Grey Dog.”

“He means Greyhound, sugar,” Susannah told Roland. “It’s a nationwide bus company.”

Roland nodded and twirled a finger in his go-on gesture.

“Miss Coogan told me the next bus went to New York, so I bought a ticket on that one. If she’d told me it went to Jacksonville or Nome or Hot Burgoo, South Dakota, I would have gone to one of those places. All I wanted to do was get out of that town. I didn’t care that people were dying and worse than dying, some of them my friends, some of them my parishioners. I just wanted to get *out*. Can you understand that?”

“Yes,” Roland said with no hesitation. “Very well.”

Callahan looked into his face, and what he saw there seemed to reassure him a little. When he continued, he seemed calmer.

“Loretta Coogan was one of the town spinsters. I must have frightened her, because she said I’d have to wait for the bus outside. I went out. Eventually the bus came. I got on and gave the driver my ticket. He took his half and gave me my half. I sat down. The bus started to roll. We went under the flashing yellow blinker at the middle of town, and that was the first mile. The first mile on the road that took me here. Later on—maybe four-thirty in the morning, still dark outside—the bus stopped in”

SEVEN

“Hartford,” the bus driver says. “This is Hartford, Mac. We got a twenty-minute rest stop. Do you want to go in and get a sandwich or something?”

Callahan fumbles his wallet out of his pocket with his bandaged hand and almost drops it. The taste of death is in his mouth, a moronic, mealy taste like a spoiled apple. He needs something to take away that taste, and if nothing will take it away something to change it, and if nothing will change it at least something to cover it up, the way you might cover up an ugly gouge in a wood floor with a piece of cheap carpet.

He holds out a twenty to the bus driver and says, “Can you get me a bottle?”

“Mister, the rules—”

“And keep the change, of course. A pint would be fine.”

“I don’t need nobody cutting up on my bus. We’ll be in New York in two hours. You can get anything you want once we’re there.” The bus driver tries to smile. “It’s Fun City, you know.”

Callahan—he's no longer Father Callahan, the flash of fire from the doorhandle answered that question, at least—adds a ten to the twenty. Now he's holding out thirty dollars. Again he tells the driver a pint would be fine, and he doesn't expect any change. This time the driver, not an idiot, takes the money. "But don't you go cutting up on me," he repeats. "I don't need nobody cutting up on my bus."

Callahan nods. *No cutting up, that's a big ten-four. The driver goes into the combination grocery store—liquor store—short-order restaurant that exists here on the rim of Hartford, on the rim of morning, under yellow hi-intensity lights. There are secret highways in America, highways in hiding. This place stands at one of the entrance ramps leading into that network of darkside roads, and Callahan senses it. It's in the way the Dixie cups and crumpled cigarette packs blow across the tarmac in the pre-dawn wind. It whispers from the sign on the gas pumps, the one that says PAY FOR GAS IN ADVANCE AFTER SUNDOWN. It's in the teenage boy across the street, sitting on a porch stoop at four-thirty in the morning with his head in his arms, a silent essay in pain. The secret highways are out close, and they whisper to him. "Come on, buddy," they say. "Here is where you can forget everything, even the name they tied on you when you were nothing but a naked, blating baby still smeared with your mother's blood. They tied a name to you like a can to a dog's tail, didn't they? But you don't need to drag it around here. Come. Come on."* But he goes nowhere. He's waiting for the bus driver, and pretty soon the bus driver comes back, and he's got a pint of Old Log Cabin in a brown paper sack. This is a brand Callahan knows well, a pint of the stuff probably goes for two dollars and a quarter out here in the boonies, which means the bus driver has just earned himself a twenty-eight-dollar tip, give or take. Not bad. But it's the American way, isn't it? Give a lot to get a little. And if the Log Cabin will take that terrible taste out of his mouth—much worse than the throbbing in his burned hand—it will be worth every penny of the thirty bucks. Hell, it would be worth a C-note.

"No cutting up," the driver says. "I'll put you out right in the middle of the Cross Bronx Expressway if you start cutting up. I swear to God I will."

By the time the Greyhound pulls into the Port Authority, Don Callahan is drunk. But he doesn't cut up; he simply sits quietly until it's time to get off and join the flow of six o'clock humanity under the cold fluorescent lights: the junkies, the cabbies, the shoeshine boys, the girls who'll blow you for ten dollars, the boys dressed up as girls who'll blow you for five dollars, the cops twirling their nightsticks, the dope dealers carrying their transistor radios, the blue-

collar guys who are just coming in from New Jersey. Callahan joins them, drunk but quiet; the nightstick-twirling cops do not give him so much as a second glance. The Port Authority air smells of cigarette smoke and joysticks and exhaust. The docked buses rumble. Everyone here looks cut loose. Under the cold white fluorescents, they all look dead.

No, he thinks, walking under a sign reading *TO STREET*. Not dead, that's wrong. Undead.

EIGHT

“Man,” Eddie said. “You been to the wars, haven’t you? Greek, Roman, and Vietnam.”

When the Old Fella began, Eddie had been hoping he’d gallop through his story so they could go into the church and look at whatever was stashed there. He hadn’t expected to be touched, let alone shaken, but he had been. Callahan knew stuff Eddie thought no one else could possibly know: the sadness of Dixie cups rolling across the pavement, the rusty hopelessness of that sign on the gas pumps, the look of the human eye in the hour before dawn.

Most of all about how sometimes you had to have it.

“The wars? I don’t know,” Callahan said. Then he sighed and nodded. “Yes, I suppose so. I spent that first day in movie theaters and that first night in Washington Square Park. I saw that the other homeless people covered themselves up with newspapers, so that’s what I did. And here’s an example of how life—the quality of life and the texture of life—seemed to have changed for me, beginning on the day of Danny Glick’s burial. You won’t understand right away, but bear with me.” He looked at Eddie and smiled. “And don’t worry, son, I’m not going to talk the day away. Or even the morning.”

“You go on and tell it any old way it does ya fine,” Eddie said.

Callahan burst out laughing. “Say thankya! Aye, say thankya big! What I was going to tell you is that I’d covered my top half with the *Daily News* and the headline said *HITLER BROTHERS STRIKE IN QUEENS*.”

“Oh my God, the Hitler Brothers,” Eddie said. “I remember them. Couple of morons. They beat up . . . what? Jews? Blacks?”

“Both,” Callahan said. “And carved swastikas on their foreheads. They didn’t have a chance to finish mine. Which is good, because

what they had in mind after the cutting was a lot more than a simple beating. And that was years later, when I came back to New York.”

“Swastika,” Roland said. “The sigul on the plane we found near River Crossing? The one with David Quick inside it?”

“Uh-huh,” Eddie said, and drew one in the grass with the toe of his boot. The grass sprang up almost immediately, but not before Roland saw that yes, the mark on Callahan’s forehead could have been meant to be one of those. If it had been finished.

“On that day in late October of 1975,” Callahan said, “the Hitler Brothers were just a headline I slept under. I spent most of that second day in New York walking around and fighting the urge to score a bottle. There was part of me that wanted to fight instead of drink. To try and atone. At the same time, I could feel Barlow’s blood working into me, getting in deeper and deeper. The world smelled different, and not better. Things *looked* different, and not better. And the taste of him came creeping back into my mouth, a taste like dead fish or rotten wine.

“I had no hope of salvation. Never think it. But atonement isn’t about salvation, anyway. Not about heaven. It’s about clearing your conscience here on earth. And you can’t do it drunk. I didn’t think of myself as an alcoholic, not even then, but I *did* wonder if he’d turned me into a vampire. If the sun would start to burn my skin, and I’d start looking at ladies’ necks.” He shrugged, laughed. “Or maybe gentlemen’s. You know what they say about the priesthood; we’re just a bunch of closet queers running around and shaking the cross in people’s faces.”

“But you weren’t a vampire,” Eddie said.

“Not even a Type Three. Nothing but unclean. On the outside of everything. Cast away. Always smelling his stink and always seeing the world the way things like him must see it, in shades of gray and red. Red was the only bright color I was allowed to see for years. Everything else was just a whisper.

“I guess I was looking for a Manpower office—you know, the day-labor company? I was still pretty rugged in those days, and of course I was a lot younger, as well.

“I didn’t find Manpower. What I *did* find was a place called Home. This was on First Avenue and Forty-seventh Street, not far from the

U.N.”

Roland, Eddie, and Susannah exchanged a look. Whatever Home was, it had existed only two blocks from the vacant lot. *Only it wouldn't have been vacant back then*, Eddie thought. *Not back in 1975. In '75 it would still have been Tom and Jerry's Artistic Deli, Party Platters Our Specialty*. He suddenly wished Jake were here. Eddie thought that by now the kid would have been jumping up and down with excitement.

“What kind of shop was Home?” Roland asked.

“Not a shop at all. A shelter. A *wet* shelter. I can't say for sure that it was the only one in Manhattan, but I bet it was one of the very few. I didn't know much about shelters then—just a little bit from my first parish—but as time went by, I learned a great deal. I saw the system from both sides. There were times when I was the guy who ladled out the soup at six P.M. and passed out the blankets at nine; at other times I was the guy who drank the soup and slept under the blankets. After a head-check for lice, of course.

“There are shelters that won't let you in if they smell booze on your breath. And there are ones where they'll let you in if you claim you're at least two hours downstream from your last drink. There are places—a few—that'll let you in pissyassed drunk, as long as they can search you at the door and get rid of all your hooch. Once that's taken care of, they put you in a special locked room with the rest of the low-bottom guys. You can't slip out to get another drink if you change your mind, and you can't scare the folks who are less soaked than you are if you get the dt's and start seeing bugs come out of the walls. No women allowed in the lockup; they're too apt to get raped. It's just one of the reasons more homeless women die in the streets than homeless men. That's what Lupe used to say.”

“Lupe?” Eddie asked.

“I'll get to him, but for now, suffice it to say that he was the architect of Home's alcohol policy. At Home, they kept the *booze* in lockup, not the drunks. You could get a shot if you needed one, and if you promised to be quiet. Plus a sedative chaser. This isn't recommended medical procedure—I'm not even sure it was legal, since neither Lupe nor Rowan Magruder were doctors—but it seemed to work. I came in sober on a busy night, and Lupe put me to work. I worked free for the first couple of days, and then Rowan called me

into his office, which was roughly the size of a broom closet. He asked me if I was an alcoholic. I said no. He asked me if I was wanted by the police. I said no. He asked if I was on the run from anything. I said yes, from myself. He asked me if I wanted to work, and I started to cry. He took that as a yes.

“I spent the next nine months—until June of 1976—working at Home. I made the beds, I cooked in the kitchen, I went on fund-raising calls with Lupe or sometimes Rowan, I took drunks to AA meetings in the Home van, I gave shots of booze to guys that were shaking too badly to hold the glasses themselves. I took over the books because I was better at it than Magruder or Lupe or any of the other guys who worked there. Those weren’t the happiest days of my life, I’d never go that far, and the taste of Barlow’s blood never left my mouth, but they were days of grace. I didn’t think a lot. I just kept my head down and did whatever I was asked to do. I started to heal.

“Sometime during that winter, I realized that I’d started to change. It was as if I’d developed a kind of sixth sense. Sometimes I heard chiming bells. Horrible, yet at the same time sweet. Sometimes, when I was on the street, things would start to look dark even if the sun was shining. I can remember looking down to see if my shadow was still there. I’d be positive it wouldn’t be, but it always was.”

Roland’s ka-tet exchanged a glance.

“Sometimes there was an olfactory element to these fugues. It was a bitter smell, like strong onions all mixed with hot metal. I began to suspect that I had developed a form of epilepsy.”

“Did you see a doctor?” Susannah asked.

“I did not. I was afraid of what else he might find. A brain tumor seemed most likely. What I did was keep my head down and keep working. And then one night I went to a movie in Times Square. It was a revival of two Clint Eastwood Westerns. What they used to call Spaghetti Westerns?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said.

“I started hearing the bells. The chimes. And smelling that smell, stronger than ever. All this was coming from in front of me, and to the left. I looked there and saw two men, one rather elderly, the other younger. They were easy enough to pick out, because the place was three-quarters empty. The younger man leaned close to the older

man. The older man never took his eyes off the screen, but he put his arm around the younger man's shoulders. If I'd seen that on any other night, I would have been pretty positive what was going on, but not that night. I watched. And I started to see a kind of dark blue light, first just around the younger man, then around both of them. It was like no other light I'd ever seen. It was like the darkness I felt sometimes on the street, when the chimes started to play in my head. Like the smell. You knew those things weren't there, and yet they were. And I understood. I didn't accept it—that came later—but I understood. The younger man was a vampire."

He stopped, thinking about how to tell his tale. How to lay it out.

"I believe there are at least three types of vampires at work in our world. I call them Types One, Two, and Three. Type Ones are rare. Barlow was a Type One. They live very long lives, and may spend extended periods—fifty years, a hundred, maybe two hundred—in deep hibernation. When they're active, they're capable of making new vampires, what we call the undead. These undead are Type Twos. They are also capable of making new vampires, but they aren't cunning." He looked at Eddie and Susannah. "Have you seen *Night of the Living Dead*?"

Susannah shook her head. Eddie nodded.

"The undead in that movie were zombies, utterly brain-dead. Type Two vampires are more intelligent than that, but not much. They can't go out during the daylight hours. If they try, they are blinded, badly burned, or killed. Although I can't say for sure, I believe their life-spans are usually short. Not because the change from living and human to undead and vampire shortens life, but because the existences of Type Two vampires are extremely perilous.

"In most cases—this is what I believe, not what I know—Type Two vampires create other Type Two vampires, in a relatively small area. By this phase of the disease—and it *is* a disease—the Type One vampire, the king vampire, has usually moved on. In 'Salem's Lot, they actually killed the son of a bitch, one of what might have been only a dozen in the entire world.

"In other cases, Type Twos create Type Threes. Type Threes are like mosquitoes. They can't create more vampires, but they can feed. And feed. And feed."

“Do they catch AIDS?” Eddie asked. “I mean, you know what that is, right?”

“I know, although I never heard the term until the spring of 1983, when I was working at the Lighthouse Shelter in Detroit and my time in America had grown short. Of course we’d known for almost ten years that there was *something*. Some of the literature called it GRID—Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. In 1982 there started to be newspaper articles about a new disease called ‘Gay Cancer,’ and speculations that it might be catching. On the street some of the men called it Fucksore Disease, after the blemishes it left. I don’t believe that vampires die of it, or even get sick from it. But they can have it. And they can pass it on. Oh, yes. And I have *reason* to think that.” Callahan’s lips quivered, then firmed.

“When this vampire-demon made you drink his blood, he gave you the ability to see these things,” Roland said.

“Yes.”

“All of them, or just the Threes? The little ones?”

“The little ones,” Callahan mused, then voiced a brief and humorless laugh. “Yes. I like that. In any case, Threes are all I’ve ever seen, at least since leaving Jerusalem’s Lot. But of course Type Ones like Barlow are very rare, and Type Twos don’t last long. Their very hunger undoes them. They’re always ravenous. Type Threes, however, can go out in daylight. And they take their principal sustenance from food, just as we do.”

“What did you do that night?” Susannah asked. “In the theater?”

“Nothing,” Callahan said. “My whole time in New York—my *first* time in New York—I did nothing until April. I wasn’t sure, you see. I mean, my *heart* was sure, but my head refused to go along. And all the time, there was interference from the most simple thing of all: I was a dry alcoholic. An alcoholic is also a vampire, and that part of me was getting thirstier and thirstier, while the rest of me was trying to deny my essential nature. So I told myself I’d seen a couple of homosexuals canoodling in the movies, nothing more than that. As for the rest of it—the chimes, the smell, the dark-blue light around the young one—I convinced myself it was epilepsy, or a holdover from what Barlow had done to me, or both. And of course about Barlow I was right. His blood was awake inside me. It *saw*.”

“It was more than that,” Roland said.

Callahan turned to him.

“You went todash, Pere. Something was calling you from this world. The thing in your church, I suspect, although it would not have been in your church when you first knew of it.”

“No,” Callahan said. He was regarding Roland with wary respect. “It was not. How do you know? Tell me, I beg.”

Roland did not. “Go on,” he said. “What happened to you next?”

“Lupe happened next,” Callahan said.

NINE

His last name was Delgado.

Roland registered only a moment of surprise at this—a widening of the eyes—but Eddie and Susannah knew the gunslinger well enough to understand that even this was extraordinary. At the same time they had become almost used to these coincidences that could not possibly be coincidences, to the feeling that each one was the click of some great turning cog.

Lupe Delgado was thirty-two, an alcoholic almost five one-day-at-a-time years from his last drink, and had been working at Home since 1974. Magruder had founded the place, but it was Lupe Delgado who invested it with real life and purpose. During his days, he was part of the maintenance crew at the Plaza Hotel, on Fifth Avenue. Nights, he worked at the shelter. He had helped to craft Home’s “wet” policy, and had been the first person to greet Callahan when he walked in.

“I was in New York a little over a year that first time,” Callahan said, “but by March of 1976, I had . . .” He paused, struggling to say what all three of them understood from the look on his face. His skin had flushed rosy except for where the scar lay; that seemed to glow an almost preternatural white by comparison.

“Oh, okay, I suppose you’d say that by March I’d fallen in love with him. Does that make me a queer? A faggot? I don’t know. They say we all are, don’t they? Some do, anyway. And why not? Every month or two there seemed to be another story in the paper about a priest with a penchant for sticking his hand up the altar boys’ skirts. As for myself, I had no reason to think of myself as queer. God knows I

wasn't immune to the turn of a pretty female leg, priest or not, and molesting the altar boys never crossed my mind. Nor was there ever anything physical between Lupe and me. But I loved him, and I'm not just talking about his mind or his dedication or his ambitions for Home. Not just because he'd chosen to do his real work among the poor, like Christ, either. There was a physical attraction."

Callahan paused, struggled, then burst out: "God, he was beautiful. *Beautiful!*"

"What happened to him?" Roland asked.

"He came in one snowy night in late March. The place was full, and the natives were restless. There had already been one fistfight, and we were still picking up from that. There was a guy with a full-blown fit of the dt's, and Rowan Magruder had him in back, in his office, feeding him coffee laced with whiskey. As I think I told you, we had no lockup room at Home. It was dinnertime, half an hour past, actually, and three of the volunteers hadn't come in because of the weather. The radio was on and a couple of women were dancing. 'Feeding time in the zoo,' Lupe used to say.

"I was taking off my coat, heading for the kitchen . . . this fellow named Frank Spinelli collared me . . . wanted to know about a letter of recommendation I'd promised to write him . . . there was a woman, Lisa somebody, who wanted help with one of the AA steps, 'Make a list of those we had harmed' . . . there was a young guy who wanted help with a job application, he could read a little but not write . . . something starting to burn on the stove . . . complete confusion. And I liked it. It had a way of sweeping you up and carrying you along. But in the middle of it all, I stopped. There were no bells and the only aromas were drunk's b.o. and burning food . . . but that light was around Lupe's neck like a collar. And I could see marks there. Just little ones. No more than nips, really.

"I stopped, and I must have reeled, because Lupe came hurrying over. And then I *could* smell it, just faintly: strong onions and hot metal. I must have lost a few seconds, too, because all at once the two of us were in the corner by the filing cabinet where we keep the AA stuff and he was asking me when I last ate. He knew I sometimes forgot to do that.

“The smell was gone. The blue glow around his neck was gone. And those little nips, where something had bitten him, they were gone, too. Unless the vampire’s a real guzzler, the marks go in a hurry. But I knew. It was no good asking him who he’d been with, or when, or where. Vampires, even Type Threes—*especially* Type Threes, maybe—have their protective devices. Pond-leeches secrete an enzyme in their saliva that keeps the blood flowing while they’re feeding. It also numbs the skin, so unless you actually see the thing on you, you don’t know what’s happening. With these Type Three vampires, it’s as if they carry a kind of selective, short-term amnesia in their saliva.

“I passed it off somehow. Told him I’d just felt light-headed for a second or two, blamed it on coming out of the cold and into all the noise and light and heat. He accepted it but told me I had to take it easy. ‘You’re too valuable to lose, Don,’ he said, and then he kissed me. Here.” Callahan touched his right cheek with his scarred right hand. “So I guess I lied when I said there was nothing physical between us, didn’t I? There was that one kiss. I can still remember exactly how it felt. Even the little prickle of fine stubble on his upper lip . . . here.”

“I’m so very sorry for you,” Susannah said.

“Thank you, my dear,” he said. “I wonder if you know how much that means? How wonderful it is to have condolence from one’s own world? It’s like being a castaway and getting news from home. Or fresh water from a spring after years of stale bottled stuff.” He reached out, took her hand in both of his, and smiled. To Eddie, something in that smile looked forced, or even false, and he had a sudden ghastly idea. What if Pere Callahan was smelling a mixture of bitter onions and hot metal right now? What if he was seeing a blue glow, not around Susannah’s neck like a collar, but around her stomach like a belt?

Eddie looked at Roland, but there was no help there. The gunslinger’s face was expressionless.

“He had AIDS, didn’t he?” Eddie asked. “Some gay Type Three vampire bit your friend and passed it on to him.”

“Gay,” Callahan said. “Do you mean to tell me that stupid word actually . . .” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“Yep,” Eddie said. “The Red Sox still haven’t won the Series and homos are gays.”

“Eddie!” Susannah said.

“Hey,” Eddie said, “do you think it’s easy being the one who left New York last and forgot to turn off the lights? Cause it’s not. And let me tell you, I’m feeling increasingly out of date myself.” He turned back to Callahan. “Anyway, that *is* what happened, isn’t it?”

“I think so. You have to remember that I didn’t know a great deal myself at that time, and was denying and repressing what I *did* know. With great vigor, as President Kennedy used to say. I saw the first one—the first ‘little one’—in that movie theater in the week between Christmas and New Year’s of 1975.” He gave a brief, barking laugh. “And now that I think back, that theater was called the Gaiety. Isn’t that surprising?” He paused, looking into their faces with some puzzlement. “It’s not. You’re not surprised at all.”

“Coincidence has been cancelled, honey,” Susannah said. “What we’re living in these days is more like the Charles Dickens version of reality.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“You don’t need to, sug. Go on. Tell your tale.”

The Old Fella took a moment to find the dropped thread, then went on.

“I saw my first Type Three in late December of 1975. By that night about three months later when I saw the blue glow around Lupe’s neck, I’d come across half a dozen more. Only one of them at prey. He was down in an East Village alley with another guy. He—the vampire—was standing like this.” Callahan rose and demonstrated, arms out, palms propped against an invisible wall. “The other one—the victim—was between his propped arms, facing him. They could have been talking. They could have been kissing. But I knew—I *knew*—that it wasn’t either one.

“The others . . . I saw a couple in restaurants, both of them eating alone. That glow was all over their hands and their faces—smeared across their lips like . . . like electric blueberry juice—and the burned-onion smell hung around them like some kind of perfume.” Callahan smiled briefly. “It strikes me how every description I try to make has some kind of simile buried in it. Because I’m not just trying to

describe them, you know, I'm trying to understand them. Still trying to understand them. To figure out how there could have been this other world, this secret world, there all the time, right beside the one I'd always known."

Roland's right, Eddie thought. It's todash. Got to be. He doesn't know it, but it is. Does that make him one of us? Part of our ka-tet?

"I saw one in line at Marine Midland Bank, where Home did its business," Callahan said. "Middle of the day. I was in the Deposit line, this woman was in Withdrawals. That light was all around her. She saw me looking at her and smiled. Fearless eye contact. Flirty." He paused. "Sexy."

"You knew them, because of the vampire-demon's blood in you," Roland said. "Did they know you?"

"No," Callahan said promptly. "If they'd been able to see me—to isolate me—my life wouldn't have been worth a dime. Although they *came* to know about me. That was later, though.

"My point is, I saw them. I knew they were there. And when I saw what had happened to Lupe, I knew what had been at him. They see it, too. Smell it. Probably hear the chimes, as well. Their victims are marked, and after that more are apt to come, like bugs to a light. Or dogs, all determined to piss on the same telephone pole.

"I'm sure that night in March was the first time Lupe was bitten, because I never saw that glow around him before . . . or the marks on the side of his throat, which looked like no more than a couple of shaving nicks. But he was bitten repeatedly after that. It had something to do with the nature of the business we were in, working with transients. Maybe drinking alcohol-laced blood is a cheap high for them. Who knows?

"In any case, it was because of Lupe that I made my first kill. The first of many. This was in April . . ."

TEN

This is April and the air has finally begun to feel and smell like spring. Callahan has been at Home since five, first writing checks to cover end-of-the-month bills, then working on his culinary specialty, which he calls Toads n

Dumplings Stew. The meat is actually stewing beef, but the colorful name amuses him.

He has been washing the big steel pots as he goes along, not because he needs to (one of the few things there's no shortage of at Home is cooking gear) but because that's the way his mother taught him to operate in the kitchen: clean as you go.

He takes a pot to the back door, holds it against his hip with one hand, turns the knob with his other hand. He goes out into the alley, meaning to toss the soapy water into the sewer grating out there, and then he stops. Here is something he has seen before, down in the Village, but then the two men—the one standing against the wall, the one in front of him, leaning forward with his hands propped against the bricks—were only shadows. These two he can see clearly in the light from the kitchen, and the one leaning back against the wall, seemingly asleep with his head turned to the side, exposing his neck, is someone Callahan knows.

It is Lupe.

Although the open door has lit up this part of the alley, and Callahan has made no effort to be quiet—has, in fact, been singing Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side"—neither of them notices him. They are entranced. The man in front of Lupe looks to be about fifty, well dressed in a suit and a tie. Beside him, an expensive Mark Cross briefcase rests on the cobbles. This man's head is thrust forward and tilted. His open lips are sealed against the right side of Lupe's neck. What's under there? Jugular? Carotid? Callahan doesn't remember, nor does it matter. The chimes don't play this time, but the smell is overwhelming, so rank that tears burst from his eyes and clear mucus immediately begins to drip from his nostrils. The two men opposite him blaze with that dark blue light, and Callahan can see it swirling in rhythmic pulses. That's their breathing, he thinks. It's their breathing, stirring that shit around. Which means it's real.

Callahan can hear, very faintly, a liquid smooching sound. It's the sound you hear in a movie when a couple is kissing passionately, really pouring it on.

He doesn't think about what he does next. He puts down the potful of sudsy, greasy water. It clanks loudly on the concrete stoop, but the couple leaning against the alley wall opposite don't stir; they remain lost in their dream. Callahan takes two steps backward into the kitchen. On the counter is the cleaver he's been using to cube the stew-beef. Its blade gleams brightly. He can see his face in it and thinks, Well at least I'm not one; my reflection's still

there. Then he closes his hand around the rubber grip. He walks back out into the alley. He steps over the pot of soapy water. The air is mild and damp. Somewhere water is dripping. Somewhere a radio is blaring "Someone Saved My Life Tonight." Moisture in the air makes a halo around the light on the far side of the alley. It's April in New York, and ten feet from where Callahan—not long ago an ordained priest of the Catholic Church—stands, a vampire is taking blood from his prey. From the man with whom Donald Callahan has fallen in love.

"Almost had your hooks in me, din'tcha, dear?" Elton John sings, and Callahan steps forward, raising the cleaver. He brings it down and it sinks deep into the vampire's skull. The sides of the vampire's face push out like wings. He raises his head suddenly, like a predator that has just heard the approach of something bigger and more dangerous than he is. A moment later he dips slightly at the knees, as if meaning to pick up the briefcase, then seems to decide he can do without it. He turns and walks slowly toward the mouth of the alley. Toward the sound of Elton John, who is now singing "Someone saved, someone saved, someone saved my lii-iife tonight." The cleaver is still sticking out of the thing's skull. The handle waggles back and forth with each step like a stiff little tail. Callahan sees some blood, but not the ocean he would have expected. At that moment he is too deep in shock to wonder about this, but later he will come to believe that there is precious little liquid blood in these beings; whatever keeps them moving, it's more magical than the miracle of blood. Most of what was their blood has coagulated as firmly as the yolk of a hard-cooked egg.

It takes another step, then stops. Its shoulders slump. Callahan loses sight of its head when it sags forward. And then, suddenly, the clothes are collapsing, crumpling in on themselves, drifting down to the wet surface of the alley.

Feeling like a man in a dream, Callahan goes forward to examine them. Lupe Delgado stands against the wall, head back, eyes shut, still lost in whatever dream the vampire has cast over him. Blood trickles down his neck in small and unimportant streams.

Callahan looks at the clothes. The tie is still knotted. The shirt is still inside the suit-coat, and still tucked into the suit-pants. He knows that if he unzipped the fly of those suit-pants, he would see the underwear inside. He picks up one arm of the coat, mostly to confirm its emptiness by touch as well as sight, and the vampire's watch tumbles out of the sleeve and lands with a clink beside what looks like a class ring.

There is hair. There are teeth, some with fillings. Of the rest of Mr. Mark Cross Briefcase, there is no sign.

Callahan gathers up the clothes. Elton John is still singing "Someone Saved My Life Tonight," but maybe that's not surprising. It's a pretty long song, one of those four-minute jobs, must be. He puts the watch on his own wrist and the ring on one of his own fingers, just for temporary safekeeping. He takes the clothes inside, walking past Lupe. Lupe's still lost in his dream. And the holes in his neck, little bigger than pinpricks to start with, are disappearing.

The kitchen is miraculously empty. Off it, to the left, is a door marked STORAGE. Beyond it is a short hall with compartments on both sides. These are behind locked gates made of heavy chickenwire, to discourage pilferage. Canned goods on one side, dry goods on the other. Then clothes. Shirts in one compartment. Pants in another. Dresses and skirts in another. Coats in yet another. At the very end of the hall is a beat-up wardrobe marked MISCELLANY. Callahan finds the vampire's wallet and sticks it in his pocket, on top of his own. The two of them together make quite a lump. Then he unlocks the wardrobe and tosses in the vampire's unsorted clothes. It's easier than trying to take his ensemble apart, although he guesses that when the underwear is found inside the pants, there will be grumbling. At Home, used underwear is not accepted.

"We may cater to the low-bottom crowd," Rowan Magruder has told Callahan once, "but we do have our standards."

Never mind their standards now. There's the vampire's hair and teeth to think about. His watch, his ring, his wallet . . . and God, his briefcase and his shoes! They must still be out there!

Don't you dare complain, he tells himself. Not when ninety-five per cent of him is gone, just conveniently disappeared like the monster in the last reel of a horror movie. God's been with you so far—I think it's God—so don't you dare complain.

Nor does he. He gathers up the hair, the teeth, the briefcase, and takes them to the end of the alley, splashing through puddles, and tosses them over the fence. After a moment's consideration he throws the watch, wallet, and ring over, too. The ring sticks on his finger for a moment and he almost panics, but at last it comes off and over it goes—plink. Someone will take care of this stuff for him. This is New York, after all. He goes back to Lupe and sees the shoes. They are too good to throw away, he thinks; there are years of wear left in those babies. He picks them up and walks back into the kitchen with them dangling

from the first two fingers of his right hand. He's standing there with them by the stove when Lupe comes walking into the kitchen from the alley.

"Don?" he asks. His voice is a little furry, the voice of someone who has just awakened from a sound sleep. It also sounds amused. He points at the shoes hooked over the tips of Callahan's fingers. "Were you going to put those in the stew?"

"It might improve the flavor, but no, just in storage," Callahan says. He is astounded by the calmness of his own voice. And his heart! Beating along at a nice regular sixty or seventy beats a minute. "Someone left them out back. What have you been up to?"

Lupe gives him a smile, and when he smiles, he is more beautiful than ever. "Just out there, having a smoke," he says. "It was too nice to come in. Didn't you see me?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," Callahan said. "You looked lost in your own little world, and I didn't want to interrupt you. Open the storage-room door for me, would you?"

Lupe opens the door. "That looks like a really nice pair," he says. "Bally. What's someone doing, leaving Bally shoes for the drunks?"

"Someone must have changed his mind about them," Callahan says. He hears the bells, that poison sweetness, and grits his teeth against the sound. The world seems to shimmer for a moment. Not now, he thinks. Ah, not now, please.

It's not a prayer, he prays little these days, but maybe something hears, because the sound of the chimes fades. The world steadies. From the other room someone is bawling for supper. Someone else is cursing. Same old same old. And he wants a drink. That's the same, too, only the craving is fiercer than it's ever been. He keeps thinking about how the rubber grip felt in his hand. The weight of the cleaver. The sound it made. And the taste is back in his mouth. The dead taste of Barlow's blood. That, too. What did the vampire say in the Petries' kitchen, after it had broken the crucifix his mother had given him? That it was sad to see a man's faith fail.

I'll sit in on the AA meeting tonight, he thinks, putting a rubber band around the Bally loafers and tossing them in with the rest of the footwear. Sometimes the meetings help. He never says, "I'm Don and I'm an alcoholic," but sometimes they help.

Lupe is so close behind him when he turns around that he gasps a little.

“Easy, boy,” Lupe says, laughing. He scratches his throat casually. The marks are still there, but they’ll be gone in the morning. Still, Callahan knows the vampires see something. Or smell it. Or some damn thing.

“Listen,” he says to Lupe, “I’ve been thinking about getting out of the city for a week or two. A little R and R. Why don’t we go together? We could go upstate. Do some fishing.”

“Can’t,” Lupe says. “I don’t have any vacation time coming at the hotel until June, and besides, we’re shorthanded here. But if you want to go, I’ll square it with Rowan. No problem.” Lupe looks at him closely. “You could use some time off, looks like. You look tired. And you’re jumpy.”

“Nah, it was just an idea,” Callahan says. He’s not going anywhere. If he stays, maybe he can watch out for Lupe. And he knows something now. Killing them is no harder than swatting bugs on a wall. And they don’t leave much behind. E-Z Kleen-Up, as they say in the TV ads. Lupe will be all right. The Type Threes like Mr. Mark Cross Briefcase don’t seem to kill their prey, or even change them. At least not that he can see, not over the short term. But he will watch, he can do that much. He will mount a guard. It will be one small act of atonement for Jerusalem’s Lot. And Lupe will be all right.

ELEVEN

“Except he wasn’t,” Roland said. He was carefully rolling a cigarette from the crumbs at the bottom of his poke. The paper was brittle, the tobacco really not much more than dust.

“No,” Callahan agreed. “He wasn’t. Roland, I have no cigarette papers, but I can do you better for a smoke than that. There’s good tobacco in the house, from down south. I don’t use it, but Rosalita sometimes likes a pipe in the evening.”

“I’ll take you up on that later and say thankya,” the gunslinger said. “I don’t miss it as much as coffee, but almost. Finish your tale. Leave nothing out, I think it’s important we hear it all, but—”

“I know. Time is short.”

“Yes,” Roland said. “Time is short.”

“Then briefly put, my friend contracted this disease—AIDS became the name of choice?”

He was looking at Eddie, who nodded.

“All right,” Callahan said. “It’s as good a name as any, I guess, although the first thing I think of when I hear that word is a kind of diet candy. You may know it doesn’t always spread fast, but in my friend’s case, it moved like a fire in straw. By mid-May of 1976, Lupe Delgado was very ill. He lost his color. He was feverish a lot of the time. He’d sometimes spend the whole night in the bathroom, vomiting. Rowan would have banned him from the kitchen, but he didn’t need to—Lupe banned himself. And then the blemishes began to show up.”

“They called those Kaposi’s sarcoma, I think,” Eddie said. “A skin disease. Disfiguring.”

Callahan nodded. “Three weeks after the blemishes started showing up, Lupe was in New York General. Rowan Magruder and I went to see him one night in late June. Up until then we’d been telling each other he’d turn it around, come out of it better than ever, hell, he was young and strong. But that night we knew the minute we were in the door that he was all through. He was in an oxygen tent. There were IV lines running into his arms. He was in terrible pain. He didn’t want us to get close to him. It might be catching, he said. In truth, no one seemed to know much about it.”

“Which made it scarier than ever,” Susannah said.

“Yes. He said the doctors believed it was a blood disease spread by homosexual activity, or maybe by sharing needles. And what he wanted us to know, what he kept saying over and over again, was that he was clean, all the drug tests came back negative. ‘Not since nineteen-seventy,’ he kept saying. ‘Not one toke off one joint. I swear to God.’ We said we knew he was clean. We sat on either side of his bed and he took our hands.”

Callahan swallowed. There was an audible click in his throat.

“Our hands . . . he made us wash them before we left. Just in case, he said. And he thanked us for coming. He told Rowan that Home was the best thing that ever happened to him. That as far as he was concerned, it really *was* home.

“I never wanted a drink as badly as I did that night, leaving New York General. I kept Rowan right beside me, though, and the two of us walked past all the bars. That night I went to bed sober, but I lay there knowing it was really just a matter of time. The first drink is the

one that gets you drunk, that's what they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, and mine was somewhere close. Somewhere a bartender was just waiting for me to come in so he could pour it out.

"Two nights later, Lupe died.

"There must have been three hundred people at the funeral, almost all of them people who'd spent time in Home. There was a lot of crying and a lot of wonderful things said, some by folks who probably couldn't have walked a chalk line. When it was over, Rowan Magruder took me by the arm and said, 'I don't know who you are, Don, but I know *what* you are—one hell of a good man and one hell of a bad drunk who's been dry for . . . how long has it been?'

"I thought about going on with the bullshit, but it just seemed like too much work. 'Since October of last year,' I said.

" 'You want one now,' he said. 'That's all over your face. So I tell you what: if you think taking a drink will bring Lupe back, you have my permission. In fact, come get me and we'll go down to the Blarney Stone together and drink up what's in my wallet first. Okay?'

" 'Okay,' I said.

"He said, 'You getting drunk today would be the worst memorial to Lupe I could think of. Like pissing in his dead face.'

"He was right, and I knew it. I spent the rest of that day the way I spent my second one in New York, walking around, fighting that taste in my mouth, fighting the urge to score a bottle and stake out a park bench. I remember being on Broadway, then over on Tenth Avenue, then way down at Park and Thirtieth. By then it was getting dark, cars going both ways on Park with their lights on. The sky all orange and pink in the west, and the streets full of this gorgeous long light.

"A sense of peace came over me, and I thought, 'I'm going to win. Tonight at least, I'm going to win.' And that was when the chimes started. The loudest ever. I felt as if my head would burst. Park Avenue shimmered in front of me and I thought, *Why, it's not real at all. Not Park Avenue, not any of it. It's just a gigantic swatch of canvas. New York is nothing but a backdrop painted on that canvas, and what's behind it? Why, nothing. Nothing at all. Just blackness.*

"Then things steadied again. The chimes faded . . . faded . . . finally gone. I started to walk, very slowly. Like a man walking on thin ice. What I was afraid of was that if I stepped too heavily, I might plunge

right out of the world and into the darkness behind it. I know that makes absolutely no sense—hell, I knew it then—but knowing a thing doesn't always help. Does it?"

"No," Eddie said, thinking of his days snorting heroin with Henry.

"No," said Susannah.

"No," Roland agreed, thinking of Jericho Hill. Thinking of the fallen horn.

"I walked one block, then two, then three. I started to think it was going to be okay. I mean, I might get the bad smell, and I might see a few Type Threes, but I could handle those things. Especially since the Type Threes didn't seem to recognize me. Looking at them was like looking through one-way glass at suspects in a police interrogation room. But that night I saw something much, much worse than a bunch of vampires."

"You saw someone who was actually dead," Susannah said.

Callahan turned to her with a look of utter, flabbergasted surprise. "How . . . how do you . . ."

"I know because I've been *todash* in New York, too," Susannah said. "We all have. Roland says those are people who either don't know they've passed on or refuse to accept it. They're . . . what'd you call em, Roland?"

"The vagrant dead," the gunslinger replied. "There aren't many."

"There were enough," Callahan said, "and *they* knew I was there. Mangled people on Park Avenue, one of them a man without eyes, one a woman missing the arm and leg on the right side of her body and burned all over, both of them looking at *me*, as if they thought I could . . . *fix* them, somehow.

"I ran. And I must have run one hell of a long way, because when I came back to something like sanity, I was sitting on the curb at Second Avenue and Nineteenth Street, head hung down, panting like a steam engine.

"Some old geezer came along and asked if I was all right. By then I'd caught enough of my breath to tell him that I was. He said that in that case I'd better move along, because there was an NYPD radio-car just a couple of blocks away and it was coming in our direction. They'd roust me for sure, maybe bust me. I looked the old guy in the eyes and said, 'I've seen vampires. Killed one, even. And I've seen the

walking dead. Do you think I'm afraid of a couple of cops in a radio-car?'

"He backed off. Said to keep away from him. Said I'd looked okay, so he tried to do me a favor. Said this was what he got. 'In New York, no good deed goes unpunished,' he said, and stomped off down the street like a kid having a tantrum.

"I started laughing. I got up off the curb and looked down at myself. My shirt was untucked all the way around. I had crud on my pants from running into something, I couldn't even remember what. I looked around, and there by all the saints and all the sinners was the Americano Bar. I found out later there are several of them in New York, but I thought then that one had moved down from the Forties just for me. I went inside, took the stool at the end of the bar, and when the bartender came down, I said, 'You've been keeping something for me.'

" 'Is that so, my pal?' he said.

" 'Yes,' I said.

" 'Well,' he said, 'you tell me what it is, and I'll get it for you.'

" 'It's Bushmills, and since you've had it since last October, why don't you add the interest and make it a double.'

Eddie winced. "Bad idea, man."

"Right then it seemed like the finest idea ever conceived by the mind of mortal man. I'd forget Lupe, stop seeing dead people, perhaps even stop seeing the vampires . . . the mosquitoes, as I came to think of them.

"By eight o'clock I was drunk. By nine, I was very drunk. By ten, I was as drunk as I'd ever been. I have a vague memory of the barman throwing me out. A slightly better one of waking up the next morning in the park, under a blanket of newspapers."

"Back to the beginning," Susannah murmured.

"Aye, lady, back to the beginning, you say true, I say thankya. I sat up. I thought my head was going to split wide open. I put it down between my knees, and when it didn't explode, I raised it again. There was an old woman sitting on a bench about twenty yards away from me, just an old lady with a kerchief on her head feeding the squirrels from a paper bag filled with nuts. Only that blue light was crawling all over her cheeks and brow, going into and out of her

mouth when she breathed. She was one of *them*. A mosquito. The walking dead were gone, but I could still see the Type Threes.

“Getting drunk again seemed like a logical response to this, but I had one small problem: no money. Someone had apparently rolled me while I was sleeping it off under my newspaper blanket, and there goes your ballgame.” Callahan smiled. There was nothing pleasant about it.

“That day I *did* find Manpower. I found it the next day, too, and the day after that. Then I got drunk. That became my habit during the Summer of the Tall Ships: work three days sober, usually shoving a wheelbarrow on some construction site or lugging big boxes for some company moving floors, then spend one night getting enormously drunk and the next day recovering. Then start all over again. Take Sundays off. That was my life in New York that summer. And everywhere I went, it seemed that I heard that Elton John song, ‘Someone Saved My Life Tonight.’ I don’t know if that was the summer it was popular or not. I only know I heard it everywhere. Once I worked five days straight for Covay Movers. The Brother Outfit, they called themselves. For sobriety, that was my personal best that July. The guy in charge came up to me on the fifth day and asked me how I’d like to hire on full-time.

“ ‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘The day-labor contracts specifically forbid their guys from taking a steady job with any outside company for a month.’

“ ‘Ah, fuck that,’ he says, ‘everyone winks at that bullshit. What do you say, Donnie? You’re a good man. And I got an idea you could do a little more than buck furniture up on the truck. You want to think about it tonight?’

“I thought about it, and thinking led back to drinking, as it always did that summer. As it always does for those of the alcoholic persuasion. Back to me sitting in some little bar across from the Empire State Building, listening to Elton John on the juke-box. ‘Almost had your hooks in me, din’tcha, dear?’ And when I went back to work, I checked in with a different day-labor company, one that had never heard of the fucking Brother Outfit.”

Callahan spat out the word *fucking* in a kind of desperate snarl, as men do when vulgarity has become for them a kind of linguistic court of last resort.

“You drank, you drifted, you worked,” Roland said. “But you had at least one other piece of business that summer, did you not?”

“Yes. It took me a little while to get going. I saw several of them—the woman feeding the squirrels in the park was only the first—but they weren’t doing anything. I mean, I knew what they were, but it was still hard to kill them in cold blood. Then, one night in Battery Park, I saw another one feeding. I had a fold-out knife in my pocket by then, carried it everywhere. I walked up behind him while he was eating and stabbed him four times: once in the kidneys, once between the ribs, once high up in the back, once in the neck. I put all my strength into the last one. The knife came out the other side with the thing’s Adam’s apple skewered on it like a piece of steak on a shish kebab. Made a kind of ripping sound.”

Callahan spoke matter-of-factly, but his face had grown very pale.

“What had happened in the alley behind Home happened again—the guy disappeared right out of his clothes. I’d expected it, but of course I couldn’t be sure until it actually happened.”

“One swallow does not make a summer,” Susannah said.

Callahan nodded. “The victim was this kid of about fifteen, looked Puerto Rican or maybe Dominican. He had a boombox between his feet. I don’t remember what it was playing, so it probably wasn’t ‘Someone Saved My Life Tonight.’ Five minutes went by. I was about to start snapping my fingers under his nose or maybe patting his cheeks, when he blinked, staggered, shook his head, and came around. He saw me standing there in front of him and the first thing he did was grab his boombox. He held it to his chest, like it was a baby. Then he said, ‘What *joo* want, man?’ I said I didn’t want anything, not a single thing, no harm and no foul, but I *was* curious about those clothes lying beside him. The kid looked, then knelt down and started going through the pockets. I thought he’d find enough to keep him occupied—more than enough—and so I just walked away. And that was the second one. The third one was easier. The fourth one, easier still. By the end of August, I’d gotten half a dozen. The sixth was the woman I’d seen in the Marine Midland Bank. Small world, isn’t it?

“Quite often I’d go down to First and Forty-seventh and stand across from Home. Sometimes I’d find myself there in the late

afternoon, watching the drunks and the homeless people showing up for dinner. Sometimes Rowan would come out and talk to them. He didn't smoke, but he always kept cigarettes in his pockets, a couple of packs, and he'd pass them out until they were gone. I never made any particular effort to hide from him, but if he ever pegged me, I never saw any sign of it."

"You'd probably changed by then," Eddie said.

Callahan nodded. "Hair down to my shoulders, and coming in gray. A beard. And of course I no longer took any pains about my clothes. Half of what I was wearing by then came from the vampires I'd killed. One of them was a bicycle messenger guy, and he had a *great* pair of motorcycle boots. Not Bally loafers, but almost new, and my size. Those things last forever. I've still got them." He nodded toward the house. "But I don't think any of that was why he didn't recognize me. In Rowan Magruder's business, dealing with drunks and hypes and homeless people who've got one foot in reality and the other in the Twilight Zone, you get used to seeing big changes in people, and usually not changes for the better. You teach yourself to see who's under the new bruises and the fresh coats of dirt. I think it was more like I'd become one of what you call the vagrant dead, Roland. Invisible to the world. But I think those people—those *former* people—must be tied to New York—"

"They never go far," Roland agreed. His cigarette was done; the dry paper and crumbles of tobacco had disappeared up to his fingernails in two puffs. "Ghosts always haunt the same house."

"Of course they do, poor things. And I wanted to leave. Every day the sun would set a little earlier, and every day I'd feel the call of those roads, those highways in hiding, a little more strongly. Some of it might have been the fabled geographic cure, to which I believe I have already alluded. It's a wholly illogical but nonetheless powerful belief that things will change for the better in a new place; that the urge to self-destruct will magically disappear. Some of it was undoubtedly the hope that in another place, a *wider* place, there would be no more vampires or walking dead people to cope with. But mostly it was other things. Well . . . one very big thing." Callahan smiled, but it was no more than a stretch of the lips exposing the gums. "Someone had begun hunting me."

“The vampires,” Eddie said.

“Ye-ess . . . ” Callahan bit at his lip, then repeated it with a little more conviction. “Yes. But not *just* the vampires. Even when that had to be the most logical idea, it didn’t seem entirely right. I knew it wasn’t the dead, at least; they could see me, but didn’t care about me one way or another, except maybe for the hope that I might be able to fix them or put them out of their misery. But the Type Threes *couldn’t* see me, as I’ve told you—not as the thing hunting them, anyway. And their attention spans are short, as if they’re infected to some degree by the same amnesia they pass on to their victims.

“I first became aware that I was in trouble one night in Washington Square Park, not long after I killed the woman from the bank. That park had become a regular haunt of mine, although God knows I wasn’t the only one. In the summer it was a regular open-air dormitory. I even had my own favorite bench, although I didn’t get it every night . . . didn’t even *go* there every night.

“On this particular evening—thundery and sultry and close—I got there around eight o’clock. I had a bottle in a brown bag and a book of Ezra Pound’s Cantos. I approached the bench, and there, spray-painted across the back of another bench near mine, I saw a graffito that said HE COMES HERE. HE HAS A BURNED HAND.”

“Oh my Lord God,” Susannah said, and put a hand to her throat.

“I left the park at once and slept in an alley twenty blocks away. There was no doubt in my mind that I was the subject of that graffito. Two nights later I saw one on the sidewalk outside a bar on Lex where I liked to drink and sometimes have a sandwich if I was, as they say, in funds. It had been done in chalk and the foot-traffic had rubbed it to a ghost, but I could still read it. It said the same thing: HE COMES HERE. HE HAS A BURNED HAND. There were comets and stars around the message, as if whoever wrote it had actually tried to dress it up. A block down, spray-painted on a No Parking sign: HIS HAIR IS MOSTLY WHITE NOW. The next morning, on the side of a cross-town bus: HIS NAME MIGHT BE COLLINGWOOD. Two or three days after that, I started to see lost-pet posters around a lot of the places that had come to be my places—Needle Park, the Central Park West side of The Ramble, the City Lights bar on Lex, a couple of folk music and poetry clubs down in the Village.”

“*Pet* posters,” Eddie mused. “You know, in a way that’s brilliant.”

“They were all the same,” Callahan said. “HAVE YOU SEEN OUR IRISH SETTER? HE IS A STUPID OLD THING BUT WE LOVE HIM. BURNED RIGHT FOREPAW. ANSWERS TO THE NAME OF KELLY, COLLINS, OR COLLINGWOOD. WE WILL PAY A VERY LARGE REWARD. And then a row of dollar signs.”

“Who would posters like that be aimed at?” Susannah asked.

Callahan shrugged. “Don’t know, exactly. The vampires, perhaps.”

Eddie was rubbing his face wearily. “All right, let’s see. We’ve got the Type Three vampires . . . and the vagrant dead . . . and now this third group. The ones that went around putting up lost-pet posters that weren’t about pets and writing stuff on buildings and sidewalks. Who were they?”

“The low men,” Callahan said. “They call themselves that, sometimes, although there are women among them. Sometimes they call themselves regulators. A lot of them wear long yellow coats . . . but not all. A lot of them have blue coffins tattooed on their hands . . . but not all.”

“Big Coffin Hunters, Roland,” Eddie murmured.

Roland nodded but never took his eyes from Callahan. “Let the man talk, Eddie.”

“What they are—what they *really* are—is soldiers of the Crimson King,” Callahan said. And he crossed himself.

TWELVE

Eddie started. Susannah’s hand went back to her belly and began to rub. Roland found himself remembering their walk through Gage Park after they had finally escaped Blaine. The dead animals in the zoo. The run-to-riot rose garden. The carousel and the toy train. Then the metal road leading up to the even larger metal road which Eddie, Susannah, and Jake called a turnpike. There, on one sign, someone had slashed *WATCH FOR THE WALKIN DUDE*. And on another sign, decorated with the crude drawing of an eye, this message: *ALL HAIL THE CRIMSON KING!*

“You’ve heard of the gentleman, I see,” Callahan said dryly.

“Let’s say he’s left his mark where we could see it, too,” Susannah said.

Callahan nodded his head in the direction of Thunderclap. “If your quest takes you there,” he said, “you’re going to see a hell of a lot more than a few signs spray-painted on a few walls.”

“What about you?” Eddie asked. “What did you do?”

“First, I sat down and considered the situation. And decided that, no matter how fantastic or paranoid it might sound to an outsider, I really was being stalked, and not necessarily by Type Three vampires. Although of course I did realize that the people leaving the graffiti around and putting up the lost-pet posters wouldn’t scruple to use the vampires against me.

“At this point, remember, I had no idea who this mysterious group could be. Back in Jerusalem’s Lot, Barlow moved into a house that had seen terrible violence and was reputed to be haunted. The writer, Mears, said that an evil house had drawn an evil man. My best thinking in New York took me back to that idea. I began to think I’d drawn another king vampire, another Type One, the way the Marsten House had drawn Barlow. Right idea or wrong one (it turned out to be wrong), I found it comforting to know my brain, booze-soaked or not, was still capable of some logic.

“The first thing I had to decide was whether to stay in New York or run away. I knew if I *didn’t* run, they’d catch up to me, and probably sooner rather than later. They had a description, with this as an especially good marker.” Callahan raised his burned hand. “They *almost* had my name; would have it for sure in another week or two. They’d stake out all my regular stops, places where my scent had collected. They’d find people I’d talked to, hung out with, played checkers and cribbage with. People I’d worked with on my Manpower and Brawny Man jobs, too.

“This led me to a place I should have gotten to much sooner, even after a month of binge drinking. I realized they’d find Rowan Magruder and Home and all sorts of other people who knew me there. Part-time workers, volunteers, dozens of clients. Hell, after nine months, *hundreds* of clients.

“On top of that, there was the lure of those roads.” Callahan looked at Eddie and Susannah. “Do you know there’s a footbridge over the Hudson River to New Jersey? It’s practically in the shadow of

the GWB, a plank footbridge that still has a few wooden drinking troughs for cows and horses along one side.”

Eddie laughed the way a man will when he realizes one of his lower appendages is being shaken briskly. “Sorry, Father, but that’s impossible. I’ve been over the George Washington Bridge maybe five hundred times in my life. Henry and I used to go to Palisades Park all the time. There’s no plank bridge.”

“There is, though,” Callahan said calmly. “It goes back to the early nineteenth century, I should say, although it’s been repaired quite a few times since then. In fact, there’s a sign halfway across that says BICENTENNIAL REPAIRS COMPLETED 1975 BY LAMERK INDUSTRIES. I recalled that name the first time I saw Andy the robot. According to the plate on his chest, that’s the company that made him.”

“We’ve seen the name before, too,” Eddie said. “In the city of Lud. Only there it said LaMerk *Foundry*.”

“Different divisions of the same company, probably,” Susannah said.

Roland said nothing, only made that impatient twirling gesture with the remaining two fingers of his right hand: hurry up, hurry up.

“It’s there, but it’s hard to see,” Callahan said. “It’s in hiding. And it’s only the first of the secret ways. From New York they radiate out like a spider’s web.”

“Todash turnpikes,” Eddie murmured. “Dig the concept.”

“I don’t know if that’s right or not,” Callahan said. “I only know I saw extraordinary things in my wanderings over the next few years, and I also met a lot of good people. It seems almost an insult to call them normal people, or ordinary people, but they were both. And certainly they give such words as *normal* and *ordinary* a feel of nobility for me.

“I didn’t want to leave New York without seeing Rowan Magruder again. I wanted him to know that maybe I *had* pissed in Lupe’s dead face—I’d gotten drunk, surely enough—but I hadn’t dropped my pants all the way down and done the other thing. Which is my too-clumsy way of saying I hadn’t given up entirely. And that I’d decided not just to cower like a rabbit in a flashlight beam.”

Callahan had begun to weep again. He wiped at his eyes with the sleeves of his shirt. “Also, I suppose I wanted to say goodbye to

someone, and have someone say goodbye to me. The goodbyes we speak and the goodbyes we hear are the goodbyes that tell us we're still alive, after all. I wanted to give him a hug, and pass along the kiss Lupe had given me. Plus the same message: You're too valuable to lose. I—"

He saw Rosalita hurrying down the lawn with her skirt twitched up slightly at the ankle, and broke off. She handed him a flat piece of slate upon which something had been chalked. For a wild moment Eddie imagined a message flanked by stars and moons: LOST! ONE STRAY DOG WITH MANGLED FRONT PAW! ANSWERS TO THE NAME OF *ROLAND!* BAD-TEMPERED, PRONE TO BITE, *BUT WE LOVE HIM ANYWAY!!!*

"It's from Eisenhart," Callahan said, looking up. "If Overholser's the big farmer in these parts, and Eben Took's the big businessman, then you'd have to call Vaughn Eisenhart the big rancher. He says that he, Slightman Elder and Younger, and your Jake would meet us at Our Lady falls noon, if it do ya fine. It's hard to make out his shorthand, but I think he'd have you visit farms, smallholds, and ranches on your way back out to the Rocking B, where you'd spend the night. Does it do ya?"

"Not quite," Roland said. "I'd much like to have my map before I set off."

Callahan considered this, then looked at Rosalita. Eddie decided the woman was probably a lot more than just a housekeeper. She had withdrawn out of earshot, but not all the way back to the house. *Like a good executive secretary*, he thought. The Old Fella didn't need to beckon her; she came forward at his glance. They spoke, and then Rosalita set off.

"I think we'll take our lunch on the church lawn," Callahan said. "There's a pleasant old ironwood there that'll shade us. By the time we're done, I'm sure the Tavery twins will have something for you."

Roland nodded, satisfied.

Callahan stood up with a wince, put his hands in the small of his back, and stretched. "And I have something to show you now," he said.

"You haven't finished your story," Susannah said.

"No," Callahan agreed, "but time has grown short. I can walk and talk at the same time, if you fellows can walk and listen."

“We can do that,” Roland said, getting up himself. There was pain, but not a great deal of it. Rosalita’s cat-oil was something to write home about. “Just tell me two things before we go.”

“If I can, gunslinger, and do’ee fine.”

“They of the signs: did you see them in your travels?”

Callahan nodded slowly. “Aye, gunslinger, so I did.” He looked at Eddie and Susannah. “Have you ever seen a color photo of people—one taken with a flash—where everyone’s eyes are red?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said.

“Their eyes are like that. Crimson eyes. And your second question, Roland?”

“Are they the Wolves, Pere? These low men? These soldiers of the Crimson King? Are they the Wolves?”

Callahan hesitated a long time before replying. “I can’t say for sure,” he said at last. “Not a hundred per cent, kennit. But I don’t think so. Yet certainly they’re kidnappers, although it’s not just children they take.” He thought over what he’d said. “Wolves of a kind, perhaps.” He hesitated, thought it over some more, then said it again: “Aye, Wolves of a kind.”

CHAPTER IV: THE PRIEST'S TALE CONTINUED (HIGHWAYS IN HIDING)

ONE

The walk from the back yard of the rectory to the front door of Our Lady of Serenity was a short one, taking no more than five minutes. That was surely not enough time for the Old Fella to tell them about the years he had spent on the bum before seeing a news story in the *Sacramento Bee* which had brought him back to New York in 1981, and yet the three gunslingers heard the entire tale, nevertheless. Roland suspected that Eddie and Susannah knew what this meant as well as he did: when they moved on from Calla Bryn Sturgis—always assuming they didn't die here—there was every likelihood that Donald Callahan would be moving on with them. This was not just storytelling but *khef*, the sharing of water. And, leaving the touch, which was a different matter, to one side, *khef* could only be shared by those whom destiny had welded together for good or for ill. By those who were *ka-tet*.

Callahan said, "Do you know how folks say, 'We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto'?"

"The phrase has some vague resonance for us, sugar, yes," Susannah said dryly.

"Does it? Yes, I see just looking at you that it does. Perhaps you'll tell me your own story someday. I have an idea it would put mine to shame. In any case, I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore as I approached the far end of the footbridge. And it seemed that I wasn't entering New Jersey, either. At least not the one I'd always expected to

find on the other side of the Hudson. There was a newspaper crumpled against the”

TWO

footrail of the bridge—which seems completely deserted except for him, although vehicle traffic on the big suspension bridge to his left is heavy and constant—and Callahan bends to pick it up. The cool wind blowing along the river ruffles his shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair.

There’s only one folded sheet, but the top of it’s the front page of the Leabrook Register. Callahan has never heard of Leabrook. No reason he should have, he’s no New Jersey scholar, hasn’t even been over there since arriving in Manhattan the previous year, but he always thought the town on the other side of the GWB was Fort Lee.

Then his mind is taken over by the headlines. The one across the top seems right enough; RACIAL TENSIONS IN MIAMI EASE, it reads. The New York papers have been full of these troubles over the last few days. But what to make of WAR OF KITES CONTINUES IN TEANECK, HACKENSACK, complete with a picture of a burning building? There’s a photo of firemen arriving on a pumper, but they are all laughing! What to make of PRESIDENT AGNEW SUPPORTS NASA TERRAFORM DREAM? What to make of the item at the bottom, written in Cyrillic?

What has happened to me? Callahan asks himself. All through the business of the vampires and the walking dead—even through the appearance of lost-pet posters which clearly refer to him—he has never questioned his sanity. Now, standing on the New Jersey end of this humble (and most remarkable!) footbridge across the Hudson—this footbridge which is being utilized by no one except himself—he finally does. The idea of Spiro Agnew as President is enough all by itself, he thinks, to make anyone with a speck of political sense doubt his sanity. The man resigned in disgrace years ago, even before his boss did.

What has happened to me? he wonders, but if he’s a raving lunatic imagining all of this, he really doesn’t want to know.

“Bombs away,” he says, and tosses the four-page remnant of the Leabrook Register over the railing of the bridge. The breeze catches it and carries it away toward the George Washington. That’s reality, he thinks, right over there. Those cars, those trucks, those Peter Pan charter buses. But then, among them, he sees a red vehicle that appears to be speeding along on a

number of circular treads. Above the vehicle's body—it's about as long as a medium-sized schoolbus—a crimson cylinder is turning. BANDY, it says on one side. BROOKS, it says on the other. BANDY BROOKS. Or BANDYBROOKS. What the hell's Bandy Brooks? He has no idea. Nor has he ever seen such a vehicle in his life, and would not have believed such a thing—look at the treads, for heaven's sake—would have been allowed on a public highway.

So the George Washington Bridge isn't the safe world, either. Or not anymore.

Callahan grabs the railing of the footbridge and squeezes down tightly as a wave of dizziness courses through him, making him feel unsteady on his feet and unsure of his balance. The railing feels real enough, wood warmed by the sun and engraved with thousands of interlocking initials and messages. He sees DK L MB in a heart. He sees FREDDY & HELENA = TRU LUV. He sees KILL ALL SPIX AND NIGERS, the message flanked by swastikas, and wonders at verbal depletion so complete the sufferer cannot even spell his favorite epithets. Messages of hate, messages of love, and all of them as real as the rapid beating of his heart or the weight of the few coins and bills in the right front pocket of his jeans. He takes a deep breath of the breeze, and that's real, too, right down to the tang of diesel fuel.

This is happening to me, I know it is, he thinks. I am not in some psychiatric hospital's Ward 9. I am me, I am here, and I'm even sober—at least for the time being—and New York is at my back. So is the town of Jerusalem's Lot, Maine, with its uneasy dead. Before me is the weight of America, with all its possibilities.

This thought lifts him, and is followed by one that lifts him even higher: not just one America, perhaps, but a dozen . . . or a thousand . . . or a million. If that's Leabrook over there instead of Fort Lee, maybe there's another version of New Jersey where the town on the other side of the Hudson is Leeman or Leighman or Lee Bluffs or Lee Palisades or Leghorn Village. Maybe instead of forty-two continental United States on the other side of the Hudson, there are forty-two hundred, or forty-two thousand, all of them stacked in vertical geographies of chance.

And he understands instinctively that this is almost certainly true. He has stumbled upon a great, possibly endless, confluence of worlds. They are all America, but they are all different. There are highways which lead through them, and he can see them.

He walks rapidly to the Leabrook end of the footbridge, then pauses again. Suppose I can't find my way back? he thinks. Suppose I get lost and wander and never find my way back to the America where Fort Lee is on the west side of the George Washington Bridge and Gerald Ford (of all people!) is the President of the United States?

And then he thinks: So what if I do? So fucking what?

When he steps off on the Jersey side of the footbridge he's grinning, truly lighthearted for this first time since the day he presided over Danny Glick's grave in the town of Jerusalem's Lot. A couple of boys with fishing poles are walking toward him. "Would one of you young fellows care to welcome me to New Jersey?" Callahan asks, grinning more widely than ever.

"Welcome to En-Jay, man," one of them says, willingly enough, but both of them give Callahan a wide berth and a careful look. He doesn't blame them, but it doesn't cut into his splendid mood in the slightest. He feels like a man who has been let out of a gray and cheerless prison on a sunny day. He begins to walk faster, not turning around to give the skyline of Manhattan a single goodbye glance. Why would he? Manhattan is the past. The multiple Americas which lie ahead of him, those are the future.

He is in Leabrook. There are no chimes. Later there will be chimes and vampires; later there will be more messages chalked on sidewalks and sprayed on brick walls (not all about him, either). Later he will see the low men in their outrageous red Cadillacs and green Lincolns and purple Mercedes-Benz sedans, low men with red flashgun eyes, but not today. Today there is sunshine in a new America on the west side of a restored footbridge across the Hudson.

On Main Street he stops in front of the Leabrook Homestyle Diner and there is a sign in the window reading SHORT-ORDER COOK WANTED. Don Callahan short-ordered through most of his time at seminary and did more than his share of the same at Home on the East Side of Manhattan. He thinks he might fit right in here at the Leabrook Homestyle. Turns out he's right, although it takes three shifts before the ability to crack a pair of eggs one-handed onto the grill comes swimming back to him. The owner, a long drink of water named Dicky Rudebacher, asks Callahan if he has any medical problems—"catching stuff," he calls it—and nods simple acceptance when Callahan says he doesn't. He doesn't ask Callahan for any paperwork, not so much as a Social Security number. He wants to pay his new short-order off the books, if that's not a problem. Callahan assures him it is not.

“One more thing,” says Dicky Rudebacher, and Callahan waits for the shoe to drop. Nothing would surprise him, but all Rudebacher says is: “You look like a drinking man.”

Callahan allows as how he has been known to take a drink.

“So have I,” Rudebacher says. “In this business it’s the way you protect your gahdam sanity. I ain’t gonna smell your breath when you come in . . . if you come in on time. Miss coming in on time twice, though, and you’re on your way to wherever. I ain’t going to tell you that again.”

Callahan short-orders at the Leabrook Homestyle Diner for three weeks, and stays two blocks down at the Sunset Motel. Only it’s not always the Homestyle, and it’s not always the Sunset. On his fourth day in town, he wakes up in the Sunrise Motel, and the Leabrook Homestyle Diner is the Fort Lee Homestyle Diner. The Leabrook Register which people have been leaving behind on the counter becomes the Fort Lee Register-American. He is not exactly relieved to discover Gerald Ford has reassumed the Presidency.

When Rudebacher pays him at the end of his first week—in Fort Lee—Grant is on the fifties, Jackson is on the twenties, and Alexander Hamilton is on the single ten in the envelope the boss hands him. At the end of the second week—in Leabrook—Abraham Lincoln is on the fifties and someone named Chadbourne is on the ten. It’s still Andrew Jackson on the twenties, which is something of a relief. In Callahan’s motel room, the bedcover is pink in Leabrook and orange in Fort Lee. This is handy. He always knows which version of New Jersey he’s in as soon as he wakes up.

Twice he gets drunk. The second time, after closing, Dicky Rudebacher joins him and matches him drink for drink. “This used to be a great country,” the Leabrook version of Rudebacher mourns, and Callahan thinks how great it is that some things don’t change; the fundamental bitch-and-moans apply as time goes by.

But his shadow starts getting longer earlier each day, he has seen his first Type Three vampire waiting in line to buy a ticket at the Leabrook Twin Cinema, and one day he gives notice.

“Thought you told me you didn’t have anything,” Rudebacher says to Callahan.

“Beg your pardon?”

“You’ve got a bad case of itchy-foot, my friend. It often goes with the other thing.” Rudebacher makes a bottle-tipping gesture with one dishwasher-reddened hand. “When a man catches itchy-foot late in life, it’s often incurable. Tell you

what, if I didn't have a wife that's still a pretty good lay and two kids in college, I might just pack me a bindle and join you."

"Yeah?" Callahan asks, fascinated.

"September and October are always the worst," Rudebacher says dreamily. "You just hear it calling. The birds hear it, too, and go."

"It?"

Rudebacher gives him a look that says don't be stupid. "With them it's the sky. Guys like us, it's the road. Call of the open fuckin road. Guys like me, kids in school and a wife that still likes it more than just on Saturday night, they turn up the radio a little louder and drown it out. You're not gonna do that." He pauses, looks at Callahan shrewdly. "Stay another week? I'll bump you twenty-five bucks. You make a gahdam fine Monte Cristo."

Callahan considers, then shakes his head. If Rudebacher was right, if it was only one road, maybe he would stay another week . . . and another . . . and another. But it's not just one. It's all of them, all those highways in hiding, and he remembers the name of his third-grade reader and bursts out laughing. It was called Roads to Everywhere.

"What's so funny?" Rudebacher asks sourly.

"Nothing," Callahan says. "Everything." He claps his boss on the shoulder. "You're a good man, Dicky. If I get back this way, I'll stop in."

"You won't get back this way," Dicky Rudebacher says, and of course he is right.

THREE

"I was five years on the road, give or take," Callahan said as they approached his church, and in a way that was all he said on the subject. Yet they heard more. Nor were they surprised later to find that Jake, on his way into town with Eisenhart and the Slightmans, had heard some of it, too. It was Jake, after all, who was strongest in the touch.

Five years on the road, no more than that.

And all the rest, do ya ken: a thousand lost worlds of the rose.

FOUR

He's five years on the road, give or take, only there's a lot more than one road and maybe, under the right circumstances, five years can be forever.

There is Route 71 through Delaware and apples to pick. There's a little boy named Lars with a broken radio. Callahan fixes it and Lars's mother packs him a great and wonderful lunch to go on with, a lunch that seems to last for days. There is Route 317 through rural Kentucky, and a job digging graves with a fellow named Pete Petacki who won't shut up. A girl comes to watch them, a pretty girl of seventeen or so, sitting on a rock wall with yellow leaves raining down all around her, and Pete Petacki speculates on what it would be like to have those long thighs stripped of the corduroys they're wearing and wrapped around his neck, what it would be like to be tongue-deep in jailbait. Pete Petacki doesn't see the blue light around her, and he certainly doesn't see the way her clothes drift to the ground like feathers later on, when Callahan sits beside her, then draws her close as she slips a hand up his leg and her mouth onto his throat, then thrusts his knife unerringly into the bulge of bone and nerve and gristle at the back of her neck. This is a shot he's getting very good at.

There is Route 19 through West Virginia, and a little road-dusty carnival that's looking for a man who can fix the rides and feed the animals. "Or the other way around," says Greg Chumm, the carny's greasy-haired owner. "You know, feed the rides and fix the animals. Whatever floats ya boat." And for awhile, when a strep infection leaves the carny shorthanded (they are swinging down south by now, trying to stay ahead of winter), he finds himself also playing Menso the ESP Wonder, and with surprising success. It is also as Menso that he first sees them, not vampires and not bewildered dead people but tall men with pale, watchful faces that are usually hidden under old-fashioned hats with brims or new-fashioned baseball hats with extra-long bills. In the shadows thrown by these hats, their eyes flare a dusky red, like the eyes of coons or polecats when you catch them in the beam of a flashlight, lurking around your trash barrels. Do they see him? The vampires (the Type Threes, at least) do not. The dead people do. And these men, with their hands stuffed into the pockets of their long yellow coats and their hardcase faces peering out from beneath their hats? Do they see? Callahan doesn't know for sure but decides to take no chances. Three days later, in the town of Yazoo City, Mississippi, he hangs up his black Menso tophat, leaves his greasy coverall on the floor of a pickup truck's camper cap, and blows Chumm's Traveling Wonder Show, not bothering with the formality of his final paycheck. On his

way out of town, he sees a number of those pet posters nailed to telephone poles. A typical one reads:

*LOST! SIAMESE CAT, 2 YRS OLD
ANSWERS TO THE NAME OF RUTA
SHE IS NOISY BUT FULL OF FUN
LARGE REWARD OFFERED
\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$
DIAL 764, WAIT FOR BEEP, GIVE YOUR NUMBER
GOD BLESS YOU FOR HELPING*

Who is Ruta? Callahan doesn't know. All he knows is that she is NOISY but FULL OF FUN. Will she still be noisy when the low men catch up to her? Will she still be full of fun?

Callahan doubts it.

But he has his own problems and all he can do is pray to the God in whom he no longer strictly believes that the men in the yellow coats won't catch up to her.

Later that day, thumbing on the side of Route 3 in Issaquena County under a hot gunmetal sky that knows nothing of December and approaching Christmas, the chimes come again. They fill his head, threatening to pop his eardrums and blow pinprick hemorrhages across the entire surface of his brain. As they fade, a terrible certainty grips him: they are coming. The men with the red eyes and big hats and long yellow coats are on their way.

Callahan bolts from the side of the road like a chaingang runaway, clearing the pond-scummy ditch like Superman: at a single bound. Beyond is an old stake fence overgrown with drifts of kudzu and what might be poison sumac. He doesn't care if it's poison sumac or not. He dives over the fence, rolls over in high grass and burdocks, and peers out at the highway through a hole in the foliage.

For a moment or two there's nothing. Then a white-over-red Cadillac comes pounding down Highway 3 from the direction of Yazoo City. It's doing seventy easy, and Callahan's peephole is small, but he still sees them with supernatural clarity: three men, two in what appear to be yellow dusters, the third in what might be a flight-jacket. All three are smoking; the Cadillac's closed cabin fumes with it.

They'll see me they'll hear me they'll sense me, Callahan's mind yammers, and he forces it away from its own panicky wretched certainty, yanks it away. He forces himself to think of that Elton John song—"Someone saved, someone saved, someone saved my li-iife tonight . . ." and it seems to work. There is one terrible, heart-stopping moment when he thinks the Caddy is slowing—long enough for him to imagine them chasing him through this weedy, forgotten field, chasing him down, dragging him into an abandoned shed or barn—and then the Caddy roars over the next hill, headed for Natchez, maybe. Or Copiah. Callahan waits another ten minutes. "Got to make sure they're not trickin on you, man," Lupe might have said. But even as he waits, he knows this is only a formality. They're not trickin on him; they flat missed him. How? Why?

The answer dawns on him slowly—an answer, at least, and he's damned if it doesn't feel like the right one. They missed him because he was able to slip into a different version of America as he lay behind the tangle of kudzu and sumac, peering out at Route 3. Maybe different in only a few small details—Lincoln on the one and Washington on the five instead of the other way around, let us say—but enough. Just enough. And that's good, because these guys aren't brain-blasted, like the dead folks, or blind to him, like the bloodsucking folks. These people, whoever they are, are the most dangerous of all.

Finally, Callahan goes back out to the road. Eventually a black man in a straw hat and overalls comes driving along in an old beat-up Ford. He looks so much like a Negro farmer from a thirties movie that Callahan almost expects him to laugh and slap his knee and give out occasional cries of "Yassuh, boss! Ain't dat de troof!" Instead, the black man engages him in a discussion about politics prompted by an item on National Public Radio, to which he is listening. And when Callahan leaves him, in Shady Grove, the black man gives him five dollars and a spare baseball cap.

"I have money," Callahan says, trying to give back the five.

"A man on the run never has enough," says the black man. "And please don't tell me you're not on the run. Don't insult my intelligence."

"I thank you," Callahan says.

"De nada, " says the black man. "Where are you going? Roughly speaking?"

"I don't have a clue," Callahan replies, then smiles. "Roughly speaking."

FIVE

Picking oranges in Florida. Pushing a broom in New Orleans. Mucking out horse-stalls in Lufkin, Texas. Handing out real estate brochures on streetcorners in Phoenix, Arizona. Working jobs that pay cash. Observing the ever-changing faces on the bills. Noting the different names in the papers. Jimmy Carter is elected President, but so are Ernest "Fritz" Hollings and Ronald Reagan. George Bush is also elected President. Gerald Ford decides to run again and he is elected President. The names in the papers (those of the celebrities change the most frequently, and there are many he has never heard of) don't matter. The faces on the currency don't matter. What matters is the sight of a weathervane against a violent pink sunset, the sound of his heels on an empty road in Utah, the sound of the wind in the New Mexico desert, the sight of a child skipping rope beside a junked-out Chevrolet Caprice in Fossil, Oregon. What matters is the whine of the powerlines beside Highway 50 west of Elko, Nevada, and a dead crow in a ditch outside Rainbarrel Springs. Sometimes he's sober and sometimes he gets drunk. Once he lays up in an abandoned shed—this is just over the California state line from Nevada—and drinks for four days straight. It ends with seven hours of off-and-on vomiting. For the first hour or so, the puking is so constant and so violent he is convinced it will kill him. Later on, he can only wish it would. And when it's over, he swears to himself that he's done, no more booze for him, he's finally learned his lesson, and a week later he's drunk again and staring up at the strange stars behind the restaurant where he has hired on as a dishwasher. He is an animal in a trap and he doesn't care. Sometimes there are vampires and sometimes he kills them. Mostly he lets them live, because he's afraid of drawing attention to himself—the attention of the low men. Sometimes he asks himself what he thinks he's doing, where the hell he's going, and such questions are apt to send him in search of the next bottle in a hurry. Because he's really not going anywhere. He's just following the highways in hiding and dragging his trap along behind him, he's just listening to the call of those roads and going from one to the next. Trapped or not, sometimes he is happy; sometimes he sings in his chains like the sea. He wants to see the next weathervane standing against the next pink sunset. He wants to see the next silo crumbling at the end of some disappeared farmer's long-abandoned north field and see the next droning truck with TONOPAH GRAVEL or ASPLUNDH HEAVY CONSTRUCTION written on the side. He's in hobo heaven, lost in the split personalities of America. He wants

to hear the wind in canyons and know that he's the only one who hears it. He wants to scream and hear the echoes run away. When the taste of Barlow's blood is too strong in his mouth, he wants to drink. And, of course, when he sees the lost-pet posters or the messages chalked on the sidewalks, he wants to move on. Out west he sees fewer of them, and neither his name nor his description is on any of them. From time to time he sees vampires cruising—give us this day our daily blood—but he leaves them be. They're mosquitoes, after all, no more than that.

In the spring of 1981 he finds himself rolling into the city of Sacramento in the back of what may be the oldest International Harvester stake-bed truck still on the road in California. He's crammed in with roughly three dozen Mexican illegals, there is mescal and tequila and pot and several bottles of wine, they're all drunk and done up and Callahan is perhaps the drunkest of them all. The names of his companions come back to him in later years like names spoken in a haze of fever: Escobar . . . Estrada . . . Javier . . . Esteban . . . Rosario . . . Echeverria . . . Caverria. Are they all names he will later encounter in the Calla, or is that just a booze-hallucination? For that matter, what is he to make of his own name, which is so close to that of the place where he finishes up? Calla, Callahan. Calla, Callahan. Sometimes, when he's long getting to sleep in his pleasant rectory bed, the two names chase each other in his head like the tigers in Little Black Sambo.

Sometimes a line of poetry comes to him, a paraphrase from (he thinks) Archibald MacLeish's "Epistle to Be Left in Earth." It was not the voice of God but only the thunder. That's not right, but it's how he remembers it. Not God but the thunder. Or is that only what he wants to believe? How many times has God been denied just that way?

In any case, all of that comes later. When he rolls into Sacramento he's drunk and he's happy. There are no questions in his mind. He's even halfway happy the next day, hangover and all. He finds a job easily; jobs are everywhere, it seems, lying around like apples after a windstorm has gone through the orchard. As long as you don't mind getting your hands dirty, that is, or scalded by hot water or sometimes blistered by the handle of an ax or a shovel; in his years on the road no one has ever offered him a stockbroker's job.

The work he gets in Sacramento is unloading trucks at a block-long bed-and-mattress store called Sleepy John's. Sleepy John is preparing for his once-yearly Mattre\$\$ Ma\$\$acre, and all morning long Callahan and a crew of five

other men haul in the kings and queens and doubles. Compared to some of the day-labor he's done over the last years, this job is a tit.

At lunch, Callahan and the rest of the men sit in the shade of the loading dock. So far as he can tell, there's no one in this crew from the International Harvester, but he wouldn't swear to it; he was awfully drunk. All he knows for sure is that he's once again the only guy present with a white skin. All of them are eating enchiladas from Crazy Mary's down the road. There's a dirty old boombox sitting on a pile of crates, playing salsa. Two young men tango together while the others—Callahan included—put aside their lunches so they can clap along.

A young woman in a skirt and blouse comes out, watches the men dance disapprovingly, then looks at Callahan. "You're anglo, right?" she says.

"Anglo as the day is long," Callahan agrees.

"Then maybe you'd like this. Certainly no good to the rest of them." She hands him the newspaper—the Sacramento Bee—then looks at the dancing Mexicans. "Beaners," she says, and the subtext is in the tone: What can you do?

Callahan considers rising to his feet and kicking her narrow can't-dance anglo ass for her, but it's noon, too late in the day to get another job if he loses this one. And even if he doesn't wind up in the calabozo for assault, he won't get paid. He settles for giving her turned back the finger, and laughs when several of the men applaud. The young woman wheels, looks at them suspiciously, then goes back inside. Still grinning, Callahan shakes open the paper. The grin lasts until he gets to the page marked NATIONAL BRIEFS, then fades in a hurry. Between a story about a train derailment in Vermont and a bank robbery in Missouri, he finds this:

AWARD-WINNING "STREET ANGEL" CRITICAL

NEW YORK (AP) Rowan R. Magruder, owner and Chief Supervisor of what may be America's most highly regarded shelter for the homeless, alcoholic, and drug-addicted, is in critical condition after being assaulted by the so-called Hitler Brothers. The Hitler Brothers have been operating in the five boroughs of New York for at least eight years. According to police, they are believed responsible for over three dozen assaults and the deaths of two men. Unlike their other victims,

Magruder is neither black nor Jewish, but he was found in a doorway not far from Home, the shelter he founded in 1968, with the Hitler Brothers' trademark swastika cut into his forehead. Magruder had also suffered multiple stab-wounds.

Home gained nationwide notice in 1977, when Mother Teresa visited, helped to serve dinner, and prayed with the clients. Magruder himself was the subject of a *Newsweek* cover story in 1980, when the East Side's so-called "Street Angel" was named Manhattan's Man of the Year by Mayor Ed Koch.

A doctor familiar with the case rated Magruder's chances of pulling through as "no higher than three in ten." He said that, as well as being branded, Magruder was blinded by his assailants. "I think of myself as a merciful man," the doctor said, "but in my opinion, the men who did this should be beheaded."

Callahan reads the article again, wondering if this is "his" Rowan Magruder or another one—a Rowan Magruder from a world where a guy named Chadbourne is on some of the greenbacks, say. He's somehow sure that it's his, and that he was meant to see this particular item. Certainly he is in what he thinks of as the "real world" now, and it's not just the thin sheaf of currency in his wallet that tells him so. It's a feeling, a kind of tone. A truth. If so (and it is so, he knows it), how much he has missed out here on the hidden highways. Mother Teresa came to visit! Helped to ladle out soup! Hell, for all Callahan knows, maybe she cooked up a big old mess of Toads n Dumplings! Could've; the recipe was right there, Scotch-taped to the wall beside the stove. And an award! The cover of Newsweek! He's pissed he didn't see that, but you don't see the news magazines very regularly when you're traveling with the carnival and fixing the Krazy Kups or mucking out the bull-stalls behind the rodeo in Enid, Oklahoma.

He is so deeply ashamed that he doesn't even know he's ashamed. Not even when Juan Castillo says, "Why joo crine, Donnie?"

"Am I?" he asks, and wipes underneath his eyes, and yeah, he is. He is crying. But he doesn't know it's for shame, not then. He assumes it's shock, and probably part of it is. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Where joo goan?" Juan persists. "Lunch break's almost over, man."

"I have to leave," Callahan says. "I have to go back east."

"You take off, they ain goan pay joo."

*"I know," Callahan says. "It's okay."
And what a lie that is. Because nothing's okay.
Nothing.*

SIX

"I had a couple of hundred dollars sewn into the bottom of my backpack," Callahan said. They were now sitting on the steps of the church in the bright sunshine. "I bought an airplane ticket back to New York. Speed was of the essence—of course—but that really wasn't the only reason. I had to get off those highways in hiding." He gave Eddie a small nod. "The todash turnpikes. They're as addictive as the booze—"

"More," Roland said. He saw three figures coming toward them: Rosalita, shepherding the Tavery twins, Frank and Francine. The girl had a large sheet of paper in her hands and was carrying it out in front of her with an air of reverence that was almost comic. "Wandering's the most addictive drug there is, I think, and every hidden road leads on to a dozen more."

"You say true, I say thankya," Callahan replied. He looked gloomy and sad and, Roland thought, a little lost.

"Pere, we'd hear the rest of your tale, but I'd have you save it until evening. Or tomorrow evening, if we don't get back until then. Our young friend Jake will be here shortly—"

"You know that, do you?" Callahan asked, interested but not disbelieving.

"Aye," Susannah said.

"I'd see what you have in there before he comes," Roland said. "The story of how you came by it is part of *your* story, I think—"

"Yes," Callahan said. "It is. The *point* of my story, I think."

"—and must wait its place. As for now, things are stacking up."

"They have a way of doing that," Callahan said. "For months—sometimes even years, as I tried to explain to you—time hardly seems to exist. Then everything comes in a gasp."

"You say true," Roland said. "Step over with me to see the twins, Eddie. I believe the young lady has her eye on you."

“She can look as much as she wants,” Susannah said good-humoredly. “Lookin’s free. I might just sit here in the sun on these steps, Roland, if it’s all the same to you. Been a long time since I rode, and I don’t mind telling you that I’m saddle-sore. Not having any lower pins seems to put everything else out of whack.”

“Do ya either way,” Roland said, but he didn’t mean it and Eddie knew he didn’t. The gunslinger wanted Susannah to stay right where she was, for the time being. He could only hope Susannah wasn’t catching the same vibe.

As they walked toward the children and Rosalita, Roland spoke to Eddie, low and quick. “I’m going into the church with him by myself. Just know that it’s not the both of you I want to keep away from whatever’s in there. If it *is* Black Thirteen—and I believe it must be—it’s best she not go near it.”

“Given her delicate condition, you mean. Roland, I would have thought Suze having a miscarriage would almost be something you’d want.”

Roland said: “It’s not a miscarriage that concerns me. I’m worried about Black Thirteen making the thing inside her even stronger.” He paused again. “*Both* things, mayhap. The baby and the baby’s keeper.”

“Mia.”

“Yes, her.” Then he smiled at the Tavery twins. Francine gave him a perfunctory smile in return, saving full wattage for Eddie.

“Let me see what you’ve made, if you would,” Roland said.

Frank Tavery said, “We hope it’s all right. Might not be. We were afraid, do ya. It’s such a wonderful piece of paper the missus gave us, we were afraid.”

“We drew on the ground first,” Francine said. “Then in lightest char. ’Twas Frank did the final; my hands were all a-shake.”

“No fear,” Roland said. Eddie drew close and looked over his shoulder. The map was a marvel of detail, with the Town Gathering Hall and the common at the center and the Big River/Devar-Tete running along the left side of the paper, which looked to Eddie like an ordinary mimeo sheet. The kind available by the ream at any office supply store in America.

“Kids, this is absolutely terrific,” Eddie said, and for a moment he thought Francine Tavery might actually faint.

“Aye,” Roland said. “You’ve done a great service. And now I’m going to do something that will probably look like blasphemy to you. You know the word?”

“Yes,” Frank said. “We’re Christians. ‘Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God or His Son, the Man Jesus, in vain.’ But blasphemy is also to commit a rude act upon a thing of beauty.”

His tone was deeply serious, but he looked interested to see what blasphemy the outworlder meant to commit. His sister did, too.

Roland folded the paper—which they had almost dared not touch, in spite of their obvious skill—in half. The children gasped. So did Rosalita Munoz, although not quite as loudly.

“It’s not blasphemy to treat it so because it’s no longer just paper,” Roland said. “It has become a tool, and tools must be protected. D’ye ken?”

“Yes,” they said, but doubtfully. Their confidence was at least partly restored by the care with which Roland stowed the folded map in his purse.

“Thankya big-big,” Roland said. He took Francine’s hand in his left, Frank’s in his diminished right. “You may have saved lives with your hands and eyes.”

Francine burst into tears. Frank held his own back until he grinned. Then they overspilled and ran down his freckled cheeks.

SEVEN

Walking back to the church steps, Eddie said: “Good kids. Talented kids.”

Roland nodded.

“Can you see one of them coming back from Thunderclap a drooling idiot?”

Roland, who could see it all too well, made no reply.

EIGHT

Susannah accepted Roland’s decision that she and Eddie should stay outside the church with no argument, and the gunslinger found

himself remembering her reluctance to enter the vacant lot. He wondered if part of her was afraid of the same thing he was. If that was the case, the battle—*her* battle—had already begun.

“How long before I come in and drag you out?” Eddie asked.

“Before *we* come in and drag you out?” Susannah corrected him.

Roland considered. It was a good question. He looked at Callahan, who stood on the top step in blue jeans and a plaid shirt rolled to the elbows. His hands were clasped in front of him. Roland saw good muscle on those forearms.

The Old Fella shrugged. “It sleeps. There should be no problem. But—” He unlocked one of his gnarled hands and pointed at the gun on Roland’s hip. “I sh’d ditch that. Mayhap it sleeps with one eye open.”

Roland unbuckled the gunbelt and handed it to Eddie, who was wearing the other one. Then he unslung his purse and handed it to Susannah. “Five minutes,” he said. “If there’s trouble, I might be able to call.” *Or I might not*, he didn’t add.

“Jake should be here by then,” Eddie said.

“If they come, hold them out here,” Roland told him.

“Eisenhart and the Slightmans won’t try to come in,” Callahan said. “What worship they have is for Oriza. Lady Rice.” He grimaced to show what he thought of Lady Rice and the rest of the Calla’s second-rate gods.

“Let’s go, then,” Roland said.

NINE

It had been a long time since Roland Deschain had been afraid in the deeply superstitious way that goes with a believed religion. Since his childhood, perhaps. But fear fell upon him as soon as Pere Callahan opened the door of his modest wooden church and held it, gesturing for Roland to precede him inside.

There was a foyer with a faded rug on the floor. On the other side of the foyer, two doors stood open. Beyond them was a largish room with pews on each side and kneelers on the floor. At the room’s far end was a raised platform and what Roland thought of as a lectern flanked by pots of white flowers. Their mild scent pervaded the still

air. There were narrow windows of clear glass. Behind the lectern, on the far wall, was an ironwood cross.

He could hear the Old Fella's secret treasure, not with his ears but with his bones. A steady low hum. Like the rose, that hum conveyed a sense of power, but it was like the rose in no other way. This hum spoke of colossal emptiness. A void like the one they had all sensed behind the surface reality of todash New York. A void that could become a voice.

Yes, this is what took us, he thought. It took us to New York—one New York of many, according to Callahan's story—but it could take us anywhere or anywhen. It could take us . . . or it could fling us.

He remembered the conclusion of his long palaver with Walter, in the place of the bones. He had gone todash then, too; he understood that now. And there had been a sense of growing, of *swelling*, until he had been bigger than the earth, the stars, the very universe itself. That power was here, in this room, and he was afraid of it.

Gods grant it sleep, he thought, but the thought was followed by an even more dismaying one: sooner or later they would have to wake it up. Sooner or later they would have to use it to get back to the New York whens they needed to visit.

There was a bowl of water on a stand beside the door. Callahan dipped his fingers, then crossed himself.

"You can do that now?" Roland murmured in what was little more than a whisper.

"Aye," Callahan said. "God has taken me back, gunslinger. Although I think only on what might be called 'a trial basis.' Do you ken?"

Roland nodded. He followed Callahan into the church without dipping his fingers in the font.

Callahan led him down the center aisle, and although he moved swiftly and surely, Roland sensed the man was as frightened as Roland was himself, perhaps more. The religious wanted to be rid of the thing, of course, there was that, but Roland still gave him high marks for courage.

On the far right side of the preacher's cove was a little flight of three steps. Callahan mounted them. "No need for you to come up,

Roland; you can see well enough from where you are. You'd not have it this minute, I ken?"

"Not at all," Roland said. Now they *were* whispering.

"Good." Callahan dropped to one knee. There was an audible pop as the joint flexed, and they both started at the sound. "I'd not even touch the box it's in, if I don't have to. I haven't since I put it here. The hidey-hole I made myself, asking God's pardon for using a saw in His house."

"Take it up," Roland said. He was on complete alert, every sense drawn fine, feeling and listening for any slightest change in that endless void hum. He missed the weight of the gun on his hip. Did the people who came here to worship not sense the terrible thing the Old Fella had hidden here? He supposed they must not, or they'd stay away. And he supposed there was really no better place for such a thing; the simple faith of the parishioners might neutralize it to some degree. Might even soothe it and thus deepen its doze.

But it could wake up, Roland thought. Wake up and send them all to the nineteen points of nowhere in the blink of an eye. This was an especially terrible thought, and he turned his mind from it. Certainly the idea of using it to secure protection for the rose seemed more and more like a bitter joke. He had faced both men and monsters in his time, but had never been close to anything like this. The sense of its evil was terrible, almost unmaning. The sense of its malevolent emptiness was far, far worse.

Callahan pressed his thumb into the groove between two boards. There was a faint click and a section of the preacher's cove popped out of place. Callahan pulled the boards free, revealing a square hole roughly fifteen inches long and wide. He rocked back on his haunches, holding the boards across his chest. The hum was much louder now. Roland had a brief image of a gigantic hive with bees the size of waggons crawling sluggishly over it. He bent forward and looked into the Old Fella's hidey-hole.

The thing inside was wrapped in white cloth, fine linen from the look of it.

"An altar boy's surplice," Callahan said. Then, seeing Roland didn't know the word: "A thing to wear." He shrugged. "My heart said to wrap it up, and so I did."

“Your heart surely said true,” Roland whispered. He was thinking of the bag Jake had brought out of the vacant lot, the one with NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MID-WORLD LANES on the side. They would need it, aye and aye, but he didn’t like to think of the transfer.

Then he put thought aside—fear as well—and folded back the cloth. Beneath the surplice, wrapped in it, was a wooden box.

Despite his fear, Roland reached out to touch that dark, heavy wood. *It will be like touching some lightly oiled metal*, he thought, and it was. He felt an erotic shiver shake itself deep inside him; it kissed his fear like an old lover and then was gone.

“This is black ironwood,” Roland whispered. “I have heard of it but never seen it.”

“In my *Tales of Arthur*, it’s called ghostwood,” Callahan whispered back.

“Aye? Is it so?”

Certainly the box had a ghostly air to it, as of something derelict which had come to rest, however temporarily, after long wandering. The gunslinger very much would have liked to give it a second caress—the dark, dense wood begged his hand—but he had heard the vast hum of the thing inside rise a notch before falling back to its former drone. *The wise man doesn’t poke a sleeping bear with a stick*, he told himself. It was true, but it didn’t change what he wanted. He did touch the wood once more, lightly, with just the tips of his fingers, then smelled them. There was an aroma of camphor and fire and—he would have sworn it—the flowers of the far north country, the ones that bloom in the snow.

Three objects had been carved on top of the box: a rose, a stone, and a door. Beneath the door was this:



Roland reached out again. Callahan made a move forward, as if to stop him, and then subsided. Roland touched the carving beneath the image of the door. Again the hum beneath it rose—the hum of the black ball hidden inside the box.

“Un . . . ?” he whispered, and ran the ball of his thumb across the raised symbols again. “Un . . . found?” Not what he read but what his

fingertips heard.

“Yes, I’m sure that’s what it says,” Callahan whispered back. He looked pleased, but still grasped Roland’s wrist and pushed it, wanting the gunslinger’s hand away from the box. A fine sweat had broken on his brow and forearms. “It makes sense, in a way. A leaf, a stone, an unfound door. They’re symbols in a book from my side. *Look Homeward, Angel*, it’s called.”

A leaf, a stone, a door, Roland thought. *Only substitute rose for leaf. Yes. That feels right.*

“Will you take it?” Callahan asked. Only his voice rose slightly now, out of its whisper, and the gunslinger realized he was begging.

“You’ve actually seen it, Pere, have you?”

“Aye. Once. It’s horrible beyond telling. Like the slick eye of a monster that grew outside God’s shadow. Will you take it, gunslinger?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

Faintly, Roland heard the chime of bells—a sound so beautifully hideous it made you want to grind your teeth against it. For a moment the walls of Pere Callahan’s church wavered. It was as if the thing in the box had spoken to them: *Do you see how little it all matters? How quickly and easily I can take it all away, should I choose to do so? Beware, gunslinger! Beware, shaman! The abyss is all around you. You float or fall into it at my whim.*

Then the *kammen* were gone.

“When?” Callahan reached over the box in its hole and grasped Roland’s shirt. “When?”

“Soon,” Roland said.

Too soon, his heart replied.

CHAPTER V: THE TALE OF GRAY DICK

ONE

Now it's twenty-three, Roland thought that evening as he sat behind Eisenhart's Rocking B, listening to the boys shout and Oy bark. Back in Gilead, this sort of porch behind the main house, facing the barns and the fields, would have been called the work-stoop. *Twenty-three days until the Wolves. And how many until Susannah foals?*

A terrible idea concerning that had begun to form in his head. Suppose Mia, the new *she* inside Susannah's skin, were to give birth to her monstrosity on the very day the Wolves appeared? One wouldn't think that likely, but according to Eddie, coincidence had been cancelled. Roland thought he was probably right about that. Certainly there was no way to gauge the thing's period of gestation. Even if it had been a human child, nine months might no longer be nine months. Time had grown soft.

"Boys!" Eisenhart bawled. "What in the name of the Man Jesus am I going to tell my wife if you kill yer sad selfs jumpin out of that barn?"

"We're okay!" Benny Slightman called. "Andy won't let us get hurt!" The boy, dressed in bib overalls and barefooted, was standing in the open bay of the barn, just above the carved letters which said ROCKING B. "Unless . . . do you really want us to stop, sai?"

Eisenhart glanced toward Roland, who saw Jake standing just behind Benny, impatiently awaiting his chance to risk his bones. Jake was also dressed in bib overalls—a pair of his new friend's, no doubt—and the look of them made Roland smile. Jake wasn't the sort of boy you imagined in such clothes, somehow.

“It’s nil to me, one way or the other, if that’s what you want to know,” Roland said.

“Garn, then!” the rancher called. Then he turned his attention to the bits and pieces of hardware spread out on the boards. “What do’ee think? Will any of em shoot?”

Eisenhart had produced all three of his guns for Roland’s inspection. The best was the rifle the rancher had brought to town on the night Tian Jaffords had called the meeting. The other two were pistols of the sort Roland and his friends had called “barrel-shooters” as children, because of the oversized cylinders which had to be revolved with the side of the hand after each shot. Roland had disassembled Eisenhart’s shooting irons with no initial comment. Once again he had set out gun-oil, this time in a bowl instead of a saucer.

“I said—”

“I heard you, sai,” Roland said. “Your rifle is as good as I’ve seen this side of the great city. The barrel-shooters . . .” He shook his head. “That one with the nickel plating might fire. The other you might as well stick in the ground. Maybe it’ll grow something better.”

“Hate to hear you speak so,” Eisenhart said. “These were from my Da’ and his Da’ before him and on back at least this many.” He raised seven fingers and one thumb. “That’s back to before the Wolves, ye ken. They was always kept together and passed to the likeliest son by dead-letter. When I got em instead of my elder brother, I was some pleased.”

“Did you have a twin?” Roland asked.

“Aye, Verna,” Eisenhart said. He smiled easily and often and did so now beneath his great graying bush of a mustache, but it was painful—the smile of a man who doesn’t want you to know he’s bleeding somewhere inside his clothes. “She was lovely as dawn, so she was. Passed on these ten year or more. Went painful early, as the roont ones often do.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Say thankya.”

The sun was going down red in the southwest, turning the yard the color of blood. There was a line of rockers on the porch. Eisenhart was settled in one of them. Roland sat cross-legged on the boards,

housekeeping Eisenhart's inheritance. That the pistols would probably never fire meant nothing to the gunslinger's hands, which had been trained to this work long ago and still found it soothing.

Now, with a speed that made the rancher blink, Roland put the weapons back together in a rapid series of clicks and clacks. He set them aside on a square of sheepskin, wiped his fingers on a rag, and sat in the rocker next to Eisenhart's. He guessed that on more ordinary evenings, Eisenhart and his wife sat out here side by side, watching the sun abandon the day.

Roland rummaged through his purse for his tobacco pouch, found it, and built himself a cigarette with Callahan's fresh, sweet tobacco. Rosalita had added her own present, a little stack of delicate cornshuck wraps she called "pulls." Roland thought they wrapped as good as any cigarette paper, and he paused a moment to admire the finished product before tipping the end into the match Eisenhart had popped alight with one horny thumbnail. The gunslinger dragged deep and exhaled a long plume that rose but slowly in the evening air, which was still and surprisingly muggy for summer's end. "Good," he said, and nodded.

"Aye? May it do ya fine. I never got the taste for it myself."

The barn was far bigger than the ranchhouse, at least fifty yards long and fifty feet high. The front was festooned with reap-charms in honor of the season; stuffy-guys with huge sharproot heads stood guard. From above the open bay over the main doors, the butt of the head-beam jutted. A rope had been fastened around this. Below, in the yard, the boys had built a good-sized stack of hay. Oy stood on one side of it, Andy on the other. They were both looking up as Benny Slightman grabbed the rope, gave it a tug, then retreated back into the loft and out of sight. Oy began to bark in anticipation. A moment later Benny came pelting forward with the rope wrapped in his fists and his hair flying out behind him.

"*Gilead and the Eld!*" he cried, and leaped from the bay. He swung into the red sunset air with his shadow trailing behind him.

"*Ben-Ben!*" Oy barked. "*Ben-Ben-Ben!*"

The boy let go, flew into the haystack, disappeared, then popped up laughing. Andy offered him a metal hand but Benny ignored it,

flopping out onto the hardpacked earth. Oy ran around him, barking.

“Do they always call so at play?” Roland asked.

Eisenhart snorted laughter. “Not at all! Usually it’s a cry of Oriza, or Man Jesus, or ‘hail the Calla,’ or all three. Your boy’s been filling Slightman’s boy full of tales, thinks I.”

Roland ignored the slightly disapproving note in this and watched Jake reel in the rope. Benny lay on the ground, playing dead, until Oy licked his face. Then he sat up, giggling. Roland had no doubt that if the boy had gone off-course, Andy would have snagged him.

To one side of the barn was a remuda of work-horses, perhaps twenty in all. A trio of cowpokes in chaps and battered shor’boots were leading the last half-dozen mounts toward it. On the other side of the yard was a slaughter-pen filled with steers. In the following weeks they would be butchered and sent downriver on the trading boats.

Jake retreated into the loft, then came pelting forward. “*New York!*” he shouted. “*Times Square! Empire State Building! Twin Towers! Statue of Liberty!*” And he launched himself into space along the arc of the rope. They watched him disappear, laughing, into the pile of hay.

“Any particular reason you wanted your other two to stay with the Jaffordses?” Eisenhart asked. He spoke idly, but Roland thought this was a question that interested him more than a little.

“Best we spread ourselves around. Let as many as possible get a good look at us. Time is short. Decisions must be made.” All of which was true, but there was more, and Eisenhart probably knew it. He was shrewder than Overholser. He was also dead set against standing up to the Wolves—at least so far. This didn’t keep Roland from liking the man, who was big and honest and possessed of an earthy countryman’s sense of humor. Roland thought he might come around, if he could be shown they had a chance to win.

On their way out to the Rocking B, they had visited half a dozen smallhold farms along the river, where rice was the main crop. Eisenhart had performed the introductions good-naturedly enough. At each stop Roland had asked the two questions he had asked the previous night, at the Pavilion: *Will you open to us, if we open to you? Do you see us for what we are, and accept us for what we do?* All of them had

answered yes. Eisenhart had also answered yes. But Roland knew better than to ask the third question of any. There was no need to, not yet. They still had over three weeks.

“We bide, gunslinger,” Eisenhart said. “Even in the face of the Wolves, we bide. Once there was Gilead and now there’s Gilead nummore—none knows better’n you—but still we bide. If we stand against the Wolves, all that may change. To you and yours, what happens along the Crescent might not mean s’much as a fart in a high wind one way or t’other. If ye win and survive, you’ll move along. If ye lose and die, we have nowhere to go.”

“But—”

Eisenhart raised his hand. “Hear me, I beg. Would’ee hear me?”

Roland nodded, resigned to it. And for him to speak was probably for the best. Beyond them, the boys were running back into the barn for another leap. Soon the coming dark would put an end to their game. The gunslinger wondered how Eddie and Susannah were making out. Had they spoken to Tian’s Gran-pere yet? And if so, had he told them anything of value?

“Suppose they send fifty or even sixty, as they have before, many and many-a? And suppose we wipe them out? And then, suppose that a week or a month later, after you’re gone, they send five *hundred* against us?”

Roland considered the question. As he was doing so, Margaret Eisenhart joined them. She was a slim woman, fortyish, small-breasted, dressed in jeans and a shirt of gray silk. Her hair, pulled back in a bun against her neck, was black threaded with white. One hand hid beneath her apron.

“That’s a fair question,” she said, “but this might not be a fair time to ask it. Give him and his friends a week, why don’t you, to peek about and see what they may see.”

Eisenhart gave his sai a look that was half humorous and half irritated. “Do I tell’ee how to run your kitchen, woman? When to cook and when to wash?”

“Only four times a week,” said she. Then, seeing Roland rise from the rocker next to her husband’s: “Nay, sit still, I beg you. I’ve been in a chair this last hour, peeling sharproot with Edna, yon’s auntie.” She nodded in Benny’s direction. “It’s good to be on my feet.” She

watched, smiling, as the boys swung out into the pile of hay and landed, laughing, while Oy danced and barked. “Vaughn and I have never had to face the full horror of it before, Roland. We had six, all twins, but all grown in the time between. So we may not have all the understanding needed to make such a decision as you ask.”

“Being lucky doesn’t make a man stupid,” Eisenhart said. “Quite the contrary, is what I think. Cool eyes see clear.”

“Perhaps,” she said, watching the boys run back into the barn. They were bumping shoulders and laughing, each trying to get to the ladder first. “Perhaps, aye. But the heart must call for its rights, too, and a man or woman who doesn’t listen is a fool. Sometimes ’tis best to swing on the rope, even if it’s too dark to see if the hay’s there or not.”

Roland reached out and touched her hand. “I couldn’t have said better myself.”

She gave him a small, distracted smile. It was only a moment before she returned her attention to the boys, but it was long enough for Roland to see that she was frightened. Terrified, in fact.

“Ben, Jake!” she called. “Enough! Time to wash and then come in! There’s pie for those can eat it, and cream to go on top!”

Benny came to the open bay. “My Da’ says we can sleep in my tent over on the bluff, sai, if it’s all right with you.”

Margaret Eisenhart looked at her husband. Eisenhart nodded. “All right,” she said, “tent it is and give you joy of it, but come in now if you’d have pie. Last warning! And wash first, mind’ee! Hands *and* faces!”

“Aye, say thankya,” Benny said. “Can Oy have pie?”

Margaret Eisenhart thudded the pad of her left hand against her brow, as if she had a headache. The right, Roland was interested to note, stayed beneath her apron. “Aye,” she said, “pie for the bumbler, too, as I’m sure he’s Arthur Eld in disguise and will reward me with jewels and gold and the healing touch.”

“Thankee-sai,” Jake called. “Could we have one more swing first? It’s the quickest way down.”

“I’ll catch them if they fly wrong, Margaret-sai,” Andy said. His eyes flashed blue, then dimmed. He appeared to be smiling. To Roland, the robot seemed to have two personalities, one old-maidish, the

other harmlessly cozening. The gunslinger liked neither, and understood why perfectly. He'd come to mistrust machinery of all kinds, and especially the kind that walked and talked.

"Well," Eisenhart said, "the broken leg usually hides in the last caper, but have on, if ye must."

They had on, and there were no broken legs. Both boys hit the haypile squarely, popped up laughing and looking at each other, then footraced for the kitchen with Oy running behind them. Appearing to herd them.

"It's wonderful how quickly children can become friends," Margaret Eisenhart said, but she didn't look like one contemplating something wonderful. She looked sad.

"Yes," Roland said. "Wonderful it is." He laid his purse across his lap, seemed on the verge of pulling the knot that anchored the laces, then didn't. "Which are your men good with?" he asked Eisenhart. "Bow or bah? For I know it's surely not the rifle or revolver."

"We favor the bah," Eisenhart said. "Fit the bolt, wind it, aim it, fire it, 'tis done."

Roland nodded. It was as he had expected. Not good, because the bah was rarely accurate at a distance greater than twenty-five yards, and that only on a still day. On one when a strong breeze was kicking up . . . or, gods help us, a gale . . .

But Eisenhart was looking at his wife. Looking at her with a kind of reluctant admiration. She stood with her eyebrows raised, looking back at her man. Looking him back a question. What was this? It surely had to do with the hand under the apron.

"Garn, tell im," Eisenhart said. Then he pointed an almost-angry finger at Roland, like the barrel of a pistol. "It changes nothing, though. Nothing! Say thankya!" This last with the lips drawn back in a kind of savage grin. Roland was more puzzled than ever, but he felt a faint stirring of hope. It might be false hope, probably would be, but anything was better than the worries and confusions—and the aches—that had beset him lately.

"Nay," Margaret said with maddening modesty. "'Tis not my place to tell. To show, perhaps, but not to tell."

Eisenhart sighed, considered, then turned to Roland. "Ye danced the rice-dance," he said, "so ye know Lady Oriza."

Roland nodded. The Lady of the Rice, in some places considered a goddess, in others a heroine, in some, both.

“And ye know how she did away with Gray Dick, who killed her father?”

Roland nodded again.

TWO

According to the story—a good one that he must remember to tell Eddie, Susannah, and Jake, when (and if) there was once more time for storytelling—Lady Oriza invited Gray Dick, a famous outlaw prince, to a vast dinner party in Waydon, her castle by the River Send. She wanted to forgive him for the murder of her father, she said, for she had accepted the Man Jesus into her heart and such was according to His teachings.

Ye’ll get me there and kill me, be I stupid enough to come, said Gray Dick.

Nay, nay, said the Lady Oriza, never think it. All weapons will be left outside the castle. And when we sit in the banqueting hall below, there will be only me, at one end of the table, and thee, at the other.

You’ll conceal a dagger in your sleeve or a *bola* beneath your dress, said Gray Dick. And if you don’t, I will.

Nay, nay, said the Lady Oriza, never think it, for we shall both be naked.

At this Gray Dick was overcome with lust, for Lady Oriza was fair. It excited him to think of his prick getting hard at the sight of her bare breasts and bush, and no breeches on him to conceal his excitement from her maiden’s eye. And he thought he understood why she would make such a proposal. *His haughty heart will undo him*, Lady Oriza told her maid (whose name was Marian and who went on to have many fanciful adventures of her own).

The Lady was right. *I’ve killed Lord Grenfall, wiliest lord in all the river baronies*, Gray Dick told himself. *And who is left to avenge him but one weak daughter?* (Oh, but she was fair.) *So she sues for peace. And maybe even for marriage, if she has audacity and imagination as well as beauty.*

So he accepted her offer. His men searched the banquet hall downstairs before he arrived and found no weapons—not on the

table, not under the table, not behind the tapestries. What none of them could know was that for weeks before the banquet, Lady Oriza had practiced throwing a specially weighted dinner-plate. She did this for hours a day. She was athletically inclined to begin with, and her eyes were keen. Also, she hated Gray Dick with all her heart and had determined to make him pay no matter what the cost.

The dinner-plate wasn't just weighted; its rim had been sharpened. Dick's men overlooked this, as she and Marian had been sure they would. And so they banqueted, and what a strange banquet that must have been, with the laughing, handsome outlaw naked at one end of the table and the demurely smiling but exquisitely beautiful maiden thirty feet from him at the other end, equally naked. They toasted each other with Lord Grenfall's finest rough red. It infuriated the Lady to the point of madness to watch him slurp that exquisite country wine down as though it were water, scarlet drops rolling off his chin and splashing to his hairy chest, but she gave no sign; simply smiled coquettishly and sipped from her own glass. She could feel the weight of his eyes on her breasts. It was like having unpleasant bugs lumbering to and fro on her skin.

How long did this charade go on? Some tale-tellers had her putting an end to Gray Dick after the second toast. (His: *May your beauty ever increase.* Hers: *May your first day in hell last ten thousand years, and may it be the shortest.*) Others—the sort of spinners who enjoyed drawing out the suspense—recounted a meal of a dozen courses before Lady Oriza gripped the special plate, looking Gray Dick in the eyes and smiling at him while she turned it, feeling for the dull place on the rim where it would be safe to grip.

No matter how long the tale, it always ended the same way, with Lady Oriza flinging the plate. Little fluted channels had been carved on its underside, beneath the sharpened rim, to help it fly true. As it did, humming weirdly as it went, casting its fleeting shadow on the roast pork and turkey, the heaping bowls of vegetables, the fresh fruit piled on crystal serving dishes.

A moment after she flung the plate on its slightly rising course—her arm was still outstretched, her first finger and cocked thumb pointing at her father's assassin—Gray Dick's head flew out through the open door and into the foyer behind him. For a moment longer

Gray Dick's body stood there with its penis pointing at her like an accusing finger. Then the dick shriveled and the Dick behind it crashed forward onto a huge roast of beef and a mountain of herbed rice.

Lady Oriza, whom Roland would hear referred to as the Lady of the Plate in some of his wanderings, raised her glass of wine and toasted the body. She said

THREE

"May your first day in hell last ten thousand years," Roland murmured.

Margaret nodded. "Aye, and let that one be the shortest. A terrible toast, but one I'd gladly give each of the Wolves. Each and every one!" Her visible hand clenched. In the fading red light she looked feverish and ill. "We had six, do ya. An even half-dozen. Has he told you why none of them are here, to help with the Reaptide slaughtering and penning? Has he told you that, gunslinger?"

"Margaret, there's no need," Eisenhart said. He shifted uncomfortably in his rocker.

"Ah, but mayhap there is. It goes back to what we were saying before. Mayhap ye pay a price for leaping, but sometimes ye pay a higher one for looking. Our children grew up free and clear, with no Wolves to worry about. I gave birth to my first two, Tom and Tessa, less than a month before they came last time. The others followed along, neat as peas out of a pod. The youngest be only fifteen, do ya not see it."

"Margaret—"

She ignored him. "But they'd not be s'lucky with their own children, and they knew it. And so they're gone. Some far north along the Arc, some far south. Looking for a place where the Wolves don't come."

She turned to Eisenhart, and although she spoke to Roland, it was her husband she looked at as she had her final word.

"One of every two; that's the Wolves' bounty. That's what they take every twenty-some, for many and many-a. Except for us. They took *all* of our children. Every . . . single . . . one." She leaned forward and

tapped Roland's leg just above the knee with great emphasis. *"Do ya not see it."*

Silence fell on the back porch. The condemned steers in the slaughter-pen moomed moronically. From the kitchen came the sound of boy-laughter following some comment of Andy's.

Eisenhart had dropped his head. Roland could see nothing but the extravagant bush of his mustache, but he didn't need to see the man's face to know that he was either weeping or struggling very hard not to.

"I'd not make'ee feel bad for all the rice of the Arc," she said, and stroked her husband's shoulder with infinite tenderness. "And they come back betimes, aye, which is more than the dead do, except in our dreams. They're not so old that they don't miss their mother, or have how-do-ye-do-it questions for their Da'. But they're gone, nevertheless. And that's the price of safety, as ye must ken." She looked down at Eisenhart for a moment, one hand on his shoulder and the other still beneath her apron. "Now tell how angry with me you are," she said, "for I'd know."

Eisenhart shook his head. "Not angry," he said in a muffled voice.

"And have'ee changed your mind?"

Eisenhart shook his head again.

"Stubborn old thing," she said, but she spoke with good-humored affection. "Stubborn as a stick, aye, and we all say thankya."

"I'm thinking about it," he said, still not looking up. "Still thinking, which is more than I expected at this late date—usually I make up my mind and there's the end of it.

"Roland, I understand young Jake showed Overholser and the rest of em some shooting out in the woods. Might be we could show you something right here that'd raise your eyebrows. Maggie, go in and get your Oriza."

"No need," she said, at last taking her hand from beneath her apron, "for I brought it out with me, and here 'tis."

FOUR

It was a plate both Detta and Mia would have recognized, a blue plate with a delicate webbed pattern. A forspecial plate. After a moment

Roland recognized the webbing for what it was: young oriza, the seedling rice plant. When sai Eisenhart tapped her knuckles on the plate, it gave out a peculiar high ringing. It looked like china, but wasn't. Glass, then? Some sort of glass?

He held his hand out for it with the solemn, respectful mien of one who knows and respects weapons. She hesitated, biting the corner of her lip. Roland reached into his holster, which he'd strapped back on before the noon meal outside the church, and pulled his revolver. He held it out to her, butt first.

"Nay," she said, letting the word out on a long breath of sigh. "No need to offer me your shooter as a hostage, Roland. I reckon if Vaughn trusts you at the house, I c'n trust you with my Oriza. But mind how you touch, or you'll lose another finger, and I think you could ill afford that, for I see you're already two shy on your right hand."

A single look at the blue plate—the sai's Oriza—made it clear how wise that warning was. At the same time, Roland felt a bright spark of excitement and appreciation. It had been long years since he'd seen a new weapon of worth, and never one like this.

The plate was metal, not glass—some light, strong alloy. It was the size of an ordinary dinner-plate, a foot (and a bit more) in diameter. Three quarters of the edge had been sharpened to suicidal keenness.

"There's never a question of where to grip, even if ye're in a hurry," Margaret said. "For, do'ee see—"

"Yes," Roland said in a tone of deepest admiration. Two of the rice-stalks crossed in what could have been the Great Letter **zn**, which by itself means both *zi* (eternity) and *now*. At the point where these stalks crossed (only a sharp eye would pick them out of the bigger pattern to begin with), the rim of the plate was not only dull but slightly thicker. Good to grip.

Roland turned the plate over. Beneath, in the center, was a small metal pod. To Jake, it might have looked like the plastic pencil-sharpener he'd taken to school in his pocket as a first-grader. To Roland, who had never seen a pencil-sharpener, it looked a little like the abandoned egg-case of some insect.

"That makes the whistling noise when the plate flies, do ya ken," she said. She had seen Roland's honest admiration and was reacting

to it, her color high and her eye bright. Roland had heard that tone of eager explanation many times before, but not for a long time now.

“It has no other purpose?”

“None,” she said. “But it must whistle, for it’s part of the story, isn’t it?”

Roland nodded. Of course it was.

The Sisters of Oriza, Margaret Eisenhart said, was a group of women who liked to help others—

“And gossip amongst theirselves,” Eisenhart growled, but he sounded good-humored.

“Aye, that too,” she allowed.

They cooked for funerals and festivals (it was the Sisters who had put on the previous night’s banquet at the Pavilion). They sometimes held sewing circles and quilting bees after a family had lost its belongings to fire or when one of the river-floods came every six or eight years and drowned the smallholders closest to Devar-Tete Whye. It was the Sisters who kept the Pavilion well-tended and the Town Gathering Hall well-swept on the inside and well-kept on the outside. They put on dances for the young people, and chaperoned them. They were sometimes hired by the richer folk (“Such as the Tooks and their kin, do ya,” she said) to cater wedding celebrations, and such affairs were always fine, the talk of the Calla for months afterward, sure. Among themselves they *did* gossip, aye, she’d not deny it; they also played cards, and Points, and Castles.

“And you throw the plate,” Roland said.

“Aye,” said she, “but ye must understand we only do it for the fun of the thing. Hunting’s men’s work, and they do fine with the bah.” She was stroking her husband’s shoulder again, this time a bit nervously, Roland thought. He also thought that if the men really did do fine with the bah, she never would have come out with that pretty, deadly thing held under her apron in the first place. Nor would Eisenhart have encouraged her.

Roland opened his tobacco-pouch, took out one of Rosalita’s cornshuck pulls, and drifted it toward the plate’s sharp edge. The square of cornshuck fluttered to the porch a moment later, cut neatly in two. *Only for the fun of the thing*, Roland thought, and almost smiled.

“What metal?” he asked. “Does thee know?”

She raised her eyebrows slightly at this form of address but didn't comment on it. "Titanium is what Andy calls it. It comes from a great old factory building, far north, in Calla Sen Chre. There are many ruins there. I've never been, but I've heard the tales. It sounds spooky."

Roland nodded. "And the plates—how are they made? Does Andy do it?"

She shook her head. "He can't or won't, I know not which. It's the ladies of Calla Sen Chre who make them, and send them to the Callas all round about. Although Divine is as far south as that sort of trading reaches, I think."

"The ladies make these," Roland mused. "The *ladies*."

"Somewhere there's a machine that still makes em, that's all it is," Eisenhart said. Roland was amused at his tone of stiff defensiveness. "Comes down to no more than pushing a button, I 'magine."

Margaret, looking at him with a woman's smile, said nothing to this, either for or against. Perhaps she didn't know, but she certainly knew the politics that keep a marriage sweet.

"So there are Sisters north and south of here along the Arc," Roland said. "And all of them throw the plate."

"Aye—from Calla Sen Chre to Calla Divine south of us. Farther south or north, I don't know. We like to help and we like to talk. We throw our plates once a month, in memory of how Lady Oriza did for Gray Dick, but few of us are any good at it."

"Are *you* good at it, sai?"

She was silent, biting at the corner of her lip again.

"Show him," Eisenhart growled. "Show him and be done."

FIVE

They walked down the steps, the rancher's wife leading the way, Eisenhart behind her, Roland third. Behind them the kitchen door opened and banged shut.

"Gods-a-glory, missus Eisenhart's gonna throw the dish!" Benny Slightman cried gleefully. "Jake! You won't believe it!"

"Send em back in, Vaughn," she said. "They don't need to see this."

“Nar, let em look,” Eisenhart said. “Don’t hurt a boy to see a woman do well.”

“Send them back, Roland, aye?” She looked at him, flushed and flustered and very pretty. To Roland she looked ten years younger than when she’d come out on the porch, but he wondered how she’d fling in such a state. It was something he much wanted to see, because ambushing was brutal work, quick and emotional.

“I agree with your husband,” he said. “I’d let them stay.”

“Have it as you like,” she said. Roland saw she was actually pleased, that she *wanted* an audience, and his hope grew. He thought it increasingly likely that this pretty middle-aged wife with her small breasts and salt-and-pepper hair had a hunter’s heart. Not a gunslinger’s heart, but at this point he would settle for a few hunters—a few *killers*—male or female.

She marched toward the barn. When they were fifty yards from the stuffy-guys flanking the barn door, Roland touched her shoulder and made her stop.

“Nay,” she said, “this is too far.”

“I’ve seen you fling as far and half again,” her husband said, and stood firm in the face of her angry look. “So I have.”

“Not with a gunslinger from the Line of Eld standing by my right elbow, you haven’t,” she said, but she stood where she was.

Roland went to the barn door and took the grinning sharproot head from the stuffy on the left side. He went into the barn. Here was a stall filled with freshly picked sharproot, and beside it one of potatoes. He took one of the potatoes and set it atop the stuffy-guy’s shoulders, where the sharproot had been. It was a good-sized spud, but the contrast was still comic; the stuffy-guy now looked like Mr. Tinyhead in a carnival show or street-fair.

“Oh, Roland, no!” she cried, sounding genuinely shocked. “I could never!”

“I don’t believe you,” he said, and stood aside. “Throw.”

For a moment he thought she wouldn’t. She looked around for her husband. If Eisenhart had still been standing beside her, Roland thought, she would have thrust the plate into his hands and run for the house and never mind if he cut himself on it, either. But Vaughn Eisenhart had withdrawn to the foot of the steps. The boys stood

above him, Benny Slightman watching with mere interest, Jake with closer attention, his brows drawn together and the smile now gone from his face.

“Roland, I—”

“None of it, missus, I beg. Your talk of leaping was all very fine, but now I’d see you do it. *Throw.*”

She recoiled a little, eyes widening, as if she had been slapped. Then she turned to face the barn door and drew her right hand above her left shoulder. The plate glimmered in the late light, which was now more pink than red. Her lips had thinned to a white line. For a moment all the world held still.

“*Riza!*” she cried in a shrill, furious voice, and cast her arm forward. Her hand opened, the index finger pointing precisely along the path the plate would take. Of all of them in the yard (the cowpokes had also stopped to watch), only Roland’s eyes were sharp enough to follow the flight of the dish.

True! he exulted. *True as ever was!*

The plate gave a kind of moaning howl as it bolted above the dirt yard. Less than two seconds after it had left her hand, the potato lay in two pieces, one by the stuffy-guy’s gloved right hand and the other by its left. The plate itself stuck in the side of the barn door, quivering.

The boys raised a cheer. Benny hoisted his hand as his new friend had taught him, and Jake slapped him a high five.

“Great going, sai Eisenhart!” Jake called.

“Good hit! Say thankya!” Benny added.

Roland observed the way the woman’s lips drew back from her teeth at this hapless, well-meant praise—she looked like a horse that has seen a snake. “Boys,” he said, “I’d go inside now, were I you.”

Benny was bewildered. Jake, however, took another look at Margaret Eisenhart and understood. You did what you had to . . . and then the reaction set in. “Come on, Ben,” he said.

“But—”

“Come *on.*” Jake took his new friend by the shirt and tugged him back toward the kitchen door.

Roland let the woman stay where she was for a moment, head down, trembling with reaction. Strong color still blazed in her cheeks,

but everywhere else her skin had gone as pale as milk. He thought she was struggling not to vomit.

He went to the barn door, grasped the plate at the grasping-place, and pulled. He was astounded at how much effort it took before the plate first wiggled and then pulled loose. He brought it back to her, held it out. “Thy tool.”

For a moment she didn’t take it, only looked at him with a species of bright hate. “Why do you mock me, Roland? How do’ee know Vaughn took me from the Manni Clan? Tell us that, I beg.”

It was the rose, of course—an intuition left by the touch of the rose—and it was also the tale of her face, which was a womanly version of the old Henschick’s. But how he knew what he knew was no part of this woman’s business, and he only shook his head. “Nay. But I do not mock thee.”

Margaret Eisenhart abruptly seized Roland by the neck. Her grip was dry and so hot her skin felt feverish. She pulled his ear to her uneasy, twitching mouth. He thought he could smell every bad dream she must have had since deciding to leave her people for Calla Bryn Sturgis’s big rancher.

“I saw thee speak to Henschick last night,” she said. “Will’ee speak to him more? Ye will, won’t you?”

Roland nodded, transfixed by her grip. The strength of it. The little puffs of air against his ear. Did a lunatic hide deep down inside everyone, even such a woman as this? He didn’t know.

“Good. Say thankya. Tell him Margaret of the Redpath Clan does fine with her heathen man, aye, fine still.” Her grip tightened. “Tell him she regrets *nothing*! Will’ee do that for me?”

“Aye, lady, if you like.”

She snatched the plate from him, fearless of its lethal edge. Having it seemed to steady her. She looked at him from eyes in which tears swam, unshed. “Is it the cave ye spoke of with my Da’? The Doorway Cave?”

Roland nodded.

“What would ye visit on us, ye chary gunstruck man?”

Eisenhart joined them. He looked uncertainly at his wife, who had endured exile from her people for his sake. For a moment she looked at him as though she didn’t know him.

“I only do as ka wills,” Roland said.

“Ka!” she cried, and her lip lifted. A sneer transformed her good looks to an ugliness that was almost startling. It would have frightened the boys. “Every troublemaker’s excuse! Put it up your bum with the rest of the dirt!”

“I do as ka wills and so will you,” Roland said.

She looked at him, seeming not to comprehend. Roland took the hot hand that had gripped him and squeezed it, not quite to the point of pain.

“And so will you.”

She met his gaze for a moment, then dropped her eyes. “Aye,” she muttered. “Oh aye, so do we all.” She ventured to look at him again. “Will ye give Henchick my message?”

“Aye, lady, as I said.”

The darkening dooryard was silent except for the distant call of a rustie. The cowpokes still leaned at the remuda fence. Roland ambled over to them.

“Evening, gents.”

“Hope ya do well,” one said, and touched his forehead.

“May you do better,” Roland said. “Missus threw the plate, and she threw it well, say aye?”

“Say thankya,” another of them agreed. “No rust on the missus.”

“No rust,” Roland agreed. “And will I tell you something now, gents? A word to tuck beneath your hats, as we do say?”

They looked at him warily.

Roland looked up, smiled at the sky. Then looked back at them. “Set my watch and warrant on’t. You might want to speak of it. Tell what you saw.”

They watched him cautiously, not liking to admit to this.

“Speak of it and I’ll kill every one of you,” Roland said. “Do you understand me?”

Eisenhart touched his shoulder. “Roland, surely—”

The gunslinger shrugged his hand off without looking at him. “Do you understand me?”

They nodded.

“And believe me?”

They nodded again. They looked frightened. Roland was glad to see it. They were right to be afraid. "Say thankya."

"Say thanks," one of them repeated. He had broken a sweat.

"Aye," said the second.

"Thankya big-big," said the third, and shot a nervous stream of tobacco to one side.

Eisenhart tried again. "Roland, hear me, I beg—"

But Roland didn't. His mind was alight with ideas. All at once he saw their course with perfect clarity. Their course on *this* side, at least. "Where's the robot?" he asked the rancher.

"Andy? Went in the kitchen with the boys, I think."

"Good. Do you have a stockline office in there?" He nodded toward the barn.

"Aye."

"Let's go there, then. You, me, and your missus."

"I'd like to take her into the house a bit," Eisenhart said. *I'd like to take her anywhere that's away from you*, Roland read in his eyes.

"Our palaver won't be long," Roland said, and with perfect honesty. He'd already seen everything he needed.

SIX

The stockline office only had a single chair, the one behind the desk. Margaret took it. Eisenhart sat on a footstool. Roland squatted on his hunkers with his back to the wall and his purse open before him. He had shown them the twins' map. Eisenhart hadn't immediately grasped what Roland had pointed out (might not grasp it even now), but the woman did. Roland thought it no wonder she hadn't been able to stay with the Manni. The Manni were peaceful. Margaret Eisenhart was not. Not once you got below her surface, at any rate.

"You'll keep this to yourselves," he said.

"Or thee'll kill us, like our cowpokes?" she asked.

Roland gave her a patient look, and she colored beneath it.

"I'm sorry, Roland. I'm upset. It comes of throwing the plate in hot blood."

Eisenhart put an arm around her. This time she accepted it gladly, and laid her head on his shoulder.

“Who else in your group can throw as well as that?” Roland asked. “Any?”

“Zalia Jaffords,” she said at once.

“Say true?”

She nodded emphatically. “Zalia could have cut that tater in two ten-for-ten, at twenty paces farther back.”

“Others?”

“Sarey Adams, wife of Diego. And Rosalita Munoz.”

Roland raised his eyebrows at that.

“Aye,” she said. “Other than Zalia, Rosie’s best.” A brief pause. “And me, I suppose.”

Roland felt as if a huge weight had rolled off his back. He’d been convinced they’d somehow have to bring back weapons from New York or find them on the east side of the river. Now it looked as if that might not be necessary. Good. They had other business in New York—business involving Calvin Tower. He didn’t want to mix the two unless he absolutely had to.

“I’d see you four women at the Old Fella’s rectory-house. And *just* you four.” His eyes flicked briefly to Eisenhart, then back to Eisenhart’s sai. “No husbands.”

“Now wait just a damn minute,” Eisenhart said.

Roland held up his hand. “Nothing’s been decided yet.”

“It’s the *way* it’s not been decided I don’t care for,” Eisenhart said.

“Hush a minute,” Margaret said. “When would you see us?”

Roland calculated. Twenty-four days left, perhaps only twenty-three, and still much left to see. And there was the thing hidden in the Old Fella’s church, that to deal with, too. And the old Mani, Henchick . . .

Yet in the end, he knew, the day would come and things would play out with shocking suddenness. They always did. Five minutes, ten at most, and all would be finished, for good or ill.

The trick was to be ready when those few minutes came around.

“Ten days from now,” he said. “In the evening. I’d see the four of you in competition, turn and turn about.”

“All right,” she said. “That much we can do. But Roland . . . I’ll not throw so much as a single plate or raise a single finger against the Wolves if my husband still says no.”

“I understand,” Roland said, knowing she would do as he said, like it or not. When the time came they all would.

There was one small window in the office wall, dirty and festooned with cobwebs but clear enough for them to be able to see Andy marching across the yard, his electric eyes flashing on and off in the deepening twilight. He was humming to himself.

“Eddie says robots are programmed to do certain tasks,” he said. “Andy does the tasks you bid him?”

“Mostly, yes,” Eisenhart said. “Not always. And he’s not always around, ye ken.”

“Hard to believe he was built to do no more than sing foolish songs and tell horoscopes,” Roland mused.

“Perhaps the Old People gave him hobbies,” Margaret Eisenhart said, “and now that his main tasks are gone—lost in time, do ya ken—he concentrates on the hobbies.”

“You think the Old People made him.”

“Who else?” Vaughn Eisenhart asked. Andy was gone now, and the back yard was empty.

“Aye, who else,” Roland said, still musing. “Who else would have the wit and the tools? But the Old People were gone two thousand years before the Wolves began raiding into the Calla. Two thousand or more. So what I’d like to know is who or what programmed Andy not to talk about them, *except to tell you folks when they’re coming*. And here’s another question, not as interesting as that but still curious: why does he tell you that much if he cannot—or will not—tell you anything else?”

Eisenhart and his wife were looking at each other, thunderstruck. They’d not gotten past the first part of what Roland had said. The gunslinger wasn’t surprised, but he was a little disappointed in them. Really, there was much here that was obvious. If, that was, one set one’s wits to work. In fairness to the Eisenharts, Jaffordses, and Overholsters of the Calla, he supposed, straight thinking wasn’t so easy when your babbies were at stake.

There was a knock at the door. Eisenhart called, “Come!”

It was Ben Slightman. “Stock’s all put to bed, boss.” He took off his glasses and polished them on his shirt. “And the boys’re off with Benny’s tent. Andy was stalkin em close, so that’s well.” Slightman

looked at Roland. "It's early for rock-cats, but if one *were* to come, Andy'd give my boy at least one shot at it with his bah—he's been told so and comes back 'Order recorded.' If Benny were to miss, Andy'd get between the boys and the cat. He's programmed strictly for defense and we've never been able to change that, but if the cat were to keep coming—"

"Andy'd rip it to pieces," Eisenhart said. He spoke with a species of gloomy satisfaction.

"Fast, is he?" Roland asked.

"Yer-bugger," Slightman said. "Don't look it, do he, all tall and gangly like he is? But aye, he can move like greased lightning when he wants to. Faster than any rock-cat. We believe he must run on ant-nomics."

"Very likely," Roland said absently.

"Never mind that," Eisenhart said, "but listen, Ben—why d'you suppose it is that Andy won't talk about the Wolves?"

"His programming—"

"Aye, but it's as Roland pointed out to us just before'ee came in—and we should have seen it for ourselves long before this—if the Old People set him a-going and then the Old People died out or moved on . . . *long* before the Wolves showed themselves . . . do you see the problem?"

Slightman the Elder nodded, then put his glasses back on. "Must have been something like the Wolves in the elden days, don't you think? Enough like em so Andy can't tell em apart. It's all I can figure."

Is it really? Roland thought.

He produced the Tavery twins' map, opened it, and tapped an arroyo in the hill country northeast of town. It wound its way deeper and deeper into those hills before ending in one of the Calla's old garnet mines. This one was a shaft that went thirty feet into a hillside and then stopped. The place wasn't really much like Eyebolt Canyon in Mejis (there was no thinny in the arroyo, for one thing), but there was one crucial similarity: both were dead ends. And, Roland knew, a man will try to take service again from that which has served him once. That he should pick this arroyo, this dead-end mineshaft, for his ambush of the Wolves made perfect sense. To Eddie, to Susannah,

to the Eisenharts, and now to the Eisenharts' foreman. It would make sense to Sarey Adams and Rosalita Munoz. It would make sense to the Old Fella. He would disclose this much of his plan to others, and it would make sense to them, as well.

And if things were left out? If some of what he said was a lie?

If the Wolves got wind of the lie and believed it?

That would be good, wouldn't it? Good if they lunged and snapped in the right direction, but at the wrong thing?

Yes, but I'll need to trust someone with the whole truth eventually. Who?

Not Susannah, because Susannah was now two again, and he didn't trust the other one.

Not Eddie, because Eddie might let something crucial slip to Susannah, and then Mia would know.

Not Jake, because Jake had become fast friends with Benny Slightman.

He was on his own again, and this condition had never felt more lonely to him.

"Look," he said, tapping the arroyo. "Here's a place you might think of, Slightman. Easy to get in, not so easy to get back out. Suppose we were to take all the children of a certain age and tuck them away safe in this little bit of a mine?"

He saw understanding begin to dawn in Slightman's eyes. Something else, too. Hope, maybe.

"If we hide the children, they know where," Eisenhart said. "It's as if they smell em, like ogres in a kid's cradle-story."

"So I'm told," Roland said. "What I suggest is that we could use that."

"Make em bait, you mean. Gunslinger, that's hard."

Roland, who had no intention of putting the Calla's children in the abandoned garnet mine—or anywhere near it—nodded his head. "Hard world sometimes, Eisenhart."

"Say thankya," Eisenhart replied, but his face was grim. He touched the map. "Could work. Aye, could work . . . *if ye could suck all the Wolves in.*"

Wherever the children wind up, I'll need help putting them there, Roland thought. There'll have to be people who know where to go and what to do. A

plan. But not yet. For now I can play the game I'm playing. It's like Castles. Because someone's hiding.

Did he *know* that? He did not.

Did he smell it? Aye, he did.

Now it's twenty-three, Roland thought. Twenty-three days until the Wolves.

It would have to be enough.

CHAPTER VI: GRAN-PERE'S TALE

ONE

Eddie, a city boy to the core, was almost shocked by how much he liked the Jaffords place on the River Road. *I could live in a place like this*, he thought. *That'd be okay. It'd do me fine.*

It was a long log cabin, craftily built and chinked against the winter winds. Along one side there were large windows which gave a view down a long, gentle hill to the rice-fields and the river. On the other side was the barn and the dooryard, beaten dirt that had been prettied up with circular islands of grass and flowers and, to the left of the back porch, a rather exotic little vegetable garden. Half of it was filled with a yellow herb called madrigal, which Tian hoped to grow in quantity the following year.

Susannah asked Zalia how she kept the chickens out of the stuff, and the woman laughed ruefully, blowing hair back from her forehead. "With great effort, that's how," she said. "Yet the madrigal *does* grow, you see, and where things grow, there's always hope."

What Eddie liked was the way it all seemed to work together and produce a feeling of home. You couldn't exactly say what caused that feeling, because it was no one thing, but—

Yeah, there is one thing. And it doesn't have anything to do with the rustic log-cabin look of the place or the vegetable garden and the pecking chickens or the beds of flowers, either.

It was the kids. At first Eddie had been a little stunned by the number of them, produced for his and Suze's inspection like a platoon of soldiers for the eye of a visiting general. And by God, at

first glance there looked like almost enough of them to *fill* a platoon . . . or a squad, at least.

“Them on the end’re Heddon and Hedda,” Zalia said, pointing to the pair of dark blonds. “They’re ten. Make your manners, you two.”

Heddon sketched a bow, at the same time tapping his grimy forehead with the side of an even grimier fist. *Covering all the bases*, Eddie thought. The girl curtsied.

“Long nights and pleasant days,” said Heddon.

“That’s *pleasant days* and *long lives*, dummikins,” Hedda stage-whispered, then curtsied and repeated the sentiment in what she felt was the correct manner. Heddon was too overawed by the outworlders to glower at his know-it-all sister, or even really to notice her.

“The two young’uns is Lyman and Lia,” Zalia said.

Lyman, who appeared all eyes and gaping mouth, bowed so violently he nearly fell in the dirt. Lia actually did tumble over while making her curtsy. Eddie had to struggle to keep a straight face as Hedda picked her sister out of the dust, hissing.

“And this ’un,” she said, kissing the large baby in her arms, “is Aaron, my little love.”

“Your singleton,” Susannah said.

“Aye, lady, so he is.”

Aaron began to struggle, kicking and twisting. Zalia put him down. Aaron hitched up his diaper and trotted off toward the side of the house, yelling for his Da’.

“Heddon, go after him and mind him,” Zalia said.

“Maw-Maw, *no!*” He sent her frantic eye-signals to the effect that he wanted to stay right here, listening to the strangers and eating them up with his eyes.

“Maw-Maw, *yes,*” Zalia said. “Garn and mind your brother, Heddon.”

The boy might have argued further, but at that moment Tian Jaffords came around the corner of the cabin and swept the little boy up into his arms. Aaron crowed, knocked off his Da’s straw hat, pulled at his Da’s sweaty hair.

Eddie and Susannah barely noticed this. They had eyes only for the overall-clad giants following along in Jaffords’s wake. Eddie and Susannah had seen maybe a dozen extremely large people on their

tour of the smallhold farms along the River Road, but always at a distance. (“Most of em’re shy of strangers, do ye ken,” Eisenhart had said.) These two were less than ten feet away.

Man and woman or boy and girl? *Both at the same time*, Eddie thought. *Because their ages don’t matter.*

The female, sweaty and laughing, had to be six-six, with breasts that looked twice as big as Eddie’s head. Around her neck on a string was a wooden crucifix. The male had at least six inches on his sister-in-law. He looked at the newcomers shyly, then began sucking his thumb with one hand and squeezing his crotch with the other. To Eddie the most amazing thing about them wasn’t their size but their eerie resemblance to Tian and Zalia. It was like looking at the clumsy first drafts of some ultimately successful work of art. They were so clearly idiots, the both of them, and so clearly, so *closely*, related to people who weren’t. *Eerie* was the only word for them.

No, Eddie thought, *the word is roont.*

“This is my brother, Zalman,” Zalia said, her tone oddly formal.

“And my sister, Tia,” Tian added. “Make your manners, you two galoots.”

Zalman just went ahead sucking one piece of himself and kneading the other. Tia, however, gave a huge (and somehow ducklike) curtsy. “Long days long nights long earth!” she cried. “*WE GET TATERS AND GRAVY!*”

“Good,” Susannah said quietly. “Taters and gravy is good.”

“*TATERS AND GRAVY IS GOOD!*” Tia wrinkled her nose, pulling her upper lip away from her teeth in a piglike sneer of good fellowship. “*TATERS AND GRAVY! TATERS AND GRAVY! GOOD OL’ TATERS AND GRAVY!*”

Hedda touched Susannah’s hand hesitantly. “She go on like that all day unless you tell her shush, missus-sai.”

“Shush, Tia,” Susannah said.

Tia gave a honk of laughter at the sky, crossed her arms over her prodigious bosom, and fell silent.

“Zal,” Tian said. “You need to go pee-pee, don’t you?”

Zalia’s brother said nothing, only continued squeezing his crotch.

“Go pee-pee,” Tian said. “You go on behind the barn. Water the sharproot, say thankya.”

For a moment nothing happened. Then Zalman set off, moving in a wide, shambling gait.

“When they were young—” Susannah began.

“Bright as polished agates, the both of em,” Zalia said. “Now she’s bad and my brother’s even worse.”

She abruptly put her hands over her face. Aaron gave a high laugh at this and covered his own face in imitation (“Peet-a-boo!” he called through his fingers), but both sets of twins looked grave. Alarmed, even.

“What’s wrong ’it Maw-Maw?” Lyman asked, tugging at his father’s pantsleg. Zalman, heedless of all, continued toward the barn, still with one hand in his mouth and the other in his crotch.

“Nothing, son. Your Maw-Maw’s all right.” Tian put the baby down, then ran his arm across his eyes. “Everything’s fine. Ain’t it, Zee?”

“Aye,” she said, lowering her hands. The rims of her eyes were red, but she wasn’t crying. “And with the blessing, what ain’t fine will be.”

“From your lips to God’s ear,” Eddie said, watching the giant shamble toward the barn. “From your lips to God’s ear.”

TWO

“Is he having one of his bright days, your Granpere?” Eddie asked Tian a few minutes later. They had walked around to where Tian could show Eddie the field he called Son of a Bitch, leaving Zalia and Susannah with all children great and small.

“Not so’s you’d notice,” Tian said, his brow darkening. “He ain’t half-addled these last few years, and won’t have nobbut to do with me, anyway. *Her*, aye, because she’ll hand-feed him, then wipe the drool off his chin for him and tell him thankya. Ain’t enough I got two great roont galoots to feed, is it? I’ve got to have that bad-natured old man, as well. Head’s gone as rusty as an old hinge. Half the time he don’t even know where he is, say any small-small!”

They walked, high grass swishing against their pants. Twice Eddie almost tripped over rocks, and once Tian seized his arm and led him around what looked like a right leg-smasher of a hole. *No wonder he calls it Son of a Bitch*, Eddie thought. And yet there were signs of

cultivation. Hard to believe anyone could pull a plow through this mess, but it looked as if Tian Jaffords had been trying.

“If your wife’s right, I think I need to talk to him,” Eddie said. “Need to hear his story.”

“My Granda’s got stories, all right. Half a thousand! Trouble is, most of em was lies from the start and now he gets em all mixed up together. His accent were always thick, and these last three years he’s missing his last three teeth as well. Likely you won’t be able to understand his nonsense to begin with. I wish you joy of him, Eddie of New York.”

“What the hell did he do to you, Tian?”

“ ’Twasn’t what he did to me but what he did to my Da’. That’s a long story and nothing to do with this business. Leave it.”

“No, *you* leave it,” Eddie said, coming to a stop.

Tian looked at him, startled. Eddie nodded, unsmiling: you heard me. He was twenty-five, already a year older than Cuthbert Allgood on his last day at Jericho Hill, but in this day’s failing light he could have passed for a man of fifty. One of harsh certainty.

“If he’s seen a dead Wolf, we need to debrief him.”

“I don’t kennit, Eddie.”

“Yeah, but I think you ken my *point* just fine. Whatever you’ve got against him, put it aside. If we settle up with the Wolves, you have my permission to bump him into the fireplace or push him off the goddam roof. But for now, keep your sore ass to yourself. Okay?”

Tian nodded. He stood looking out across his troublesome north field, the one he called Son of a Bitch, with his hands in his pockets. When he studied it so, his expression was one of troubled greed.

“Do you think his story about killing a Wolf is so much hot air? If you really do, I won’t waste my time.”

Grudgingly, Tian said: “I’m more apt to believe that ’un than most of the others.”

“Why?”

“Well, he were tellin it ever since I were old enough to listen, and *that* ’un never changes much. Also . . .” Tian’s next words squeezed down, as if he were speaking them through gritted teeth. “My Granpere never had no shortage of thorn and bark. If anyone would have had guts enough to go out on the East Road and stand against the

Wolves—not to mention enough trum to get others to go with him—I'd bet my money on Jamie Jaffords.”

“Trum?”

Tian thought about how to explain it. “If 'ee was to stick your head in a rock-cat's mouth, that'd take courage, wouldn't it?”

It would take idiocy was what Eddie thought, but he nodded.

“If 'ee was the sort of man could convince someone *else* to stick his head in a rock-cat's mouth, that'd make you trum. Your dinh's trum, ain't he?”

Eddie remembered some of the stuff Roland had gotten him to do, and nodded. Roland was trum, all right. He was trum as hell. Eddie was sure the gunslinger's old mates would have said the same.

“Aye,” Tian said, turning his gaze back to his field. “In any case, if ye'd get something halfway sensible out of the old man, I'd wait until after supper. He brightens a bit once he's had his rations and half a pint of graf. And make sure my wife's sitting right beside you, where he can get an eyeful. I 'magine he'd try to have a good deal more than his eye on her, were he a younger man.” His face had darkened again.

Eddie clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, he's not younger. *You* are. So lighten up, all right?”

“Aye.” Tian made a visible effort to do just that. “What do 'ee think of my field, gunslinger? I'm going to plant it with madrigal next year. The yellow stuff ye saw out front.”

What Eddie thought was that the field looked like a heartbreak waiting to happen. He suspected that down deep Tian thought about the same; you didn't call your only unplanted field Son of a Bitch because you expected good things to happen there. But he knew the look on Tian's face. It was the one Henry used to get when the two of them were setting off to score. It was always going to be the best stuff this time, the best stuff ever. China White and never mind that Mexican Brown that made your head ache and your bowels run. They'd get high for a week, the best high ever, *mellow*, and then quit the junk for good. That was Henry's scripture, and it could have been Henry here beside him, telling Eddie what a fine cash crop madrigal was, and how the people who'd told him you couldn't grow it this far north would be laughing on the other side of their faces come next

reap. And then he'd buy Hugh Anselm's field over on the far side of yon ridge . . . hire a couple of extra men come reap, for the land'd be gold for as far as you could see . . . why, he might even quit the rice altogether and become a madrigal monarch.

Eddie nodded toward the field, which was hardly half-turned. "Looks like slow plowing, though. You must have to be damned careful with the mules."

Tian gave a short laugh. "I'd not risk a mule out here, Eddie."

"Then what—?"

"I plow my sister."

Eddie's jaw dropped. "You're shitting me!"

"Not at all. I'd plow Zal, too—he's bigger, as ye saw, and even stronger—but not as bright. More trouble than it's worth. I've tried."

Eddie shook his head, feeling dazed. Their shadows ran out long over the lumpy earth, with its crop of weed and thistle. "But . . . man . . . she's your *sister!*"

"Aye, and what else would she do all day? Sit outside the barn door and watch the chickens? Sleep more and more hours, and only get up for her taters and gravy? This is better, believe me. She don't mind it. It's tur'ble hard to get her to plow straight, even when there ain't a plow-buster of a rock or a hole every eight or ten steps, but she pulls like the devil and laughs like a loon."

What convinced Eddie was the man's earnestness. There was no defensiveness in it, not that he could detect.

"Sides, she'll likely be dead in another ten year, anyway. Let her help while she can, I say. And Zalia feels the same."

"Okay, but why don't you get Andy to do at least some of the plowing? I bet it'd go faster if you did. All you guys with the smallhold farms could share him, ever think of that? He could plow your fields, dig your wells, raise a barn roofbeam all by himself. And you'd save on taters and gravy." He clapped Tian on the shoulder again. "That's *got* to do ya fine."

Tian's mouth quirked. "It's a lovely dream, all right."

"Doesn't work, huh? Or rather, *he* doesn't work."

"Some things he'll do, but plowing fields and digging wells ain't among em. You ask him, and he'll ask *you* for your password. When

you have no password to give him, he'll ask you if you'd like to retry. And then—”

“Then he tells you you're shit out of luck. Because of Directive Nineteen.”

“If you knew, why did you ask?”

“I knew he was that way about the Wolves, because I asked him. I didn't know it extended to all this other stuff.”

Tian nodded. “He's really not much help, and he can be tiresome—if'ee don't ken that now, ye will if'ee stay long—but he *does* tell us when the Wolves are on their way, and for that we all say thankya.”

Eddie actually had to bite off the question that came to his lips. Why did they thank him when his news was good for nothing except making them miserable? Of course this time there might be more to it; this time Andy's news might actually lead to a change. Was that what Mr. You-Will-Meet-An-Interesting-Stranger had been angling for all along? Getting the *folken* to stand up on their hind legs and fight? Eddie recalled Andy's decidedly smarmy smile and found such altruism hard to swallow. It wasn't fair to judge people (or even robots, maybe) by the way they smiled or talked, and yet everybody did it.

Now that I think about it, what about his voice? What about that smug little I-know-and-you-don't thing he's got going on? Or am I imagining that, too?

The hell of it was, he didn't know.

THREE

The sound of Susannah's singing voice accompanied by the giggles of the children—all children great and small—drew Eddie and Tian back around to the other side of the house.

Zalman was holding one end of what looked like a stock-rope. Tia had the other. They were turning it in lazy loops with large, delighted grins on their faces while Susannah, sitting propped on the ground, recited a skip-rope rhyme Eddie vaguely remembered. Zalia and her four older children were jumping in unison, their hair rising and falling. Baby Aaron stood by, his diaper now sagging almost to his

knees. On his face was a huge, delighted grin. He made rope-twirling motions with one chubby fist.

“ ‘Pinky Pauper came a-calling! Into sin that boy be falling! I caught him creeping, one-two-three, he’s as wicked as can be!’ Faster, Zalman! Faster, Tia! Come on, make em really jump to it!”

Tia spun her end of the rope faster at once, and a moment later Zalman caught up with her. This was apparently something he could do. Laughing, Susannah chanted faster.

“ ‘Pinky Pauper took her measure! That bad boy done took her treasure! Four-five-six, we’re up to seven, that bad boy won’t go to heaven!’ Yow, Zalia, I see your knees, girl! Faster, you guys! Faster!”

The four twins jumped like shuttlecocks, Heddon tucking his fists into his armpits and doing a buck and wing. Now that they had gotten over the awe which had made them clumsy, the two younger kids jumped in limber spooky harmony. Even their hair seemed to fly up in the same clumps. Eddie found himself remembering the Tavery twins, whose very freckles had looked the same.

“ ‘Pinky . . . Pinky Pauper . . . ’ ” Then she stopped. “Shoo-fly, Eddie! I can’t remember any more!”

“Faster, you guys,” Eddie said to the giants turning the skip-rope. They did as he said, Tia hee-hawing up at the fading sky. Eddie measured the spin of the rope with his eyes, moving backward and forward at the knees, timing it. He put his hand on the butt of Roland’s gun to make sure it wouldn’t fly free.

“Eddie Dean, you cain’t *never!*” Susannah cried, laughing.

But the next time the rope flew up he did, jumping in between Hedda and Hedda’s mother. He faced Zalia, whose face was flushed and sweating, jumping with her in perfect harmony, Eddie chanted the one verse that survived in his memory. To keep it in time, he had to go almost as fast as a county fair auctioneer. He didn’t realize until later that he had changed the bad boy’s name, giving it a twist that was pure Brooklyn.

“ ‘Piggy Pecker pick my pocket, took my baby’s silver locket, caught im sleepin eightnineten, stole that locket back again!’ *Go, you guys! Spin it!*”

They did, twirling the rope so fast it was almost a blur. In a world that now appeared to be going up and down on an invisible pogo-

stick, he saw an old man with fly-away hair and grizzled sideburns come out on the porch like a hedgehog out of its hole, thumping along on an ironwood cane. *Hello, Grandpere*, he thought, then dismissed the old man for the time being. All he wanted to do right now was keep his footing and not be the one who fucked the spin. As a little kid, he'd always loved jumping rope and always hated the idea that he had to give it over to the girls once he went to Roosevelt Elementary or be damned forever as a sissy. Later, in high school phys ed, he had briefly rediscovered the joys of jump-rope. But never had there been anything like this. It was as if he had discovered (or rediscovered) some practical magic that bound his and Susannah's New York lives to this other life in a way that required no magic doors or magic balls, no todash state. He laughed deliriously and began to scissor his feet back and forth. A moment later Zalia Jaffords was doing the same, mimicking him step for step. It was as good as the rice-dance. Maybe better, because they were all doing it in unison.

Certainly it was magic for Susannah, and of all the wonders ahead and behind, those few moments in the Jaffordses' dooryard always maintained their own unique luster. Not two of them jumping in tandem, not even four, but *six* of them, while the two great grinning idiots spun the rope as fast as their slab-like arms would allow.

Tian laughed and stomped his shor'boots and cried: "That beats the drum! Don't it just! *Yer-bugger!*" And from the porch, his grandfather gave out a laugh so rusty that Susannah had to wonder how long ago he had laid that sound away in mothballs.

For another five seconds or so, the magic held. The jump-rope spun so rapidly the eye lost it and it existed as nothing but a whirring sound like a wing. The half-dozen within that whirring—from Eddie, the tallest, at Zalman's end, to pudgy little Lyman, at Tia's—rose and fell like pistons in a machine.

Then the rope caught on someone's heel—Heddon's, it looked like to Susannah, although later all would take the blame so none had to feel bad—and they sprawled in the dust, gasping and laughing. Eddie, clutching his chest, caught Susannah's eye. "I'm havin a heart attack, sweetheart, you better call 911."

She hoisted herself over to where he lay and put her head down so she could kiss him. "No, you're not," she said, "but you're attacking

my heart, Eddie Dean. I love you.”

He gazed up at her seriously from the dust of the dooryard. He knew that however much she might love him, he would always love her more. And as always when he thought these things, the premonition came that ka was not their friend, that it would end badly between them.

If it's so, then your job is to make it as good as it can be for as long as it can be. Will you do your job, Eddie?

“With greatest pleasure,” he said.

She raised her eyebrows. “Do ya?” she said, Calla-talk for *Beg pardon?*

“I do,” he said, grinning. “Believe me, I do.” He put an arm around her neck, pulled her down, kissed her brow, her nose, and finally her lips. The twins laughed and clapped. The baby chortled. And on the porch, old Jamie Jaffords did the same.

FOUR

All of them were hungry after their exercise, and with Susannah helping from her chair, Zalia Jaffords laid a huge meal on the long trestle table out behind the house. The view was a winner, in Eddie’s opinion. At the foot of the hill was what he took to be some especially hardy type of rice, now grown to the height of a tall man’s shoulder. Beyond it, the river glowed with sunset light.

“Set us on with a word, Zee, if’ee would,” Tian said.

She looked pleased at that. Susannah told Eddie later that Tian hadn’t thought much of his wife’s religion, but that seemed to have changed since Pere Callahan’s unexpected support of Tian at the Town Gathering Hall.

“Bow your heads, children.”

Four heads dropped—six, counting the big ’uns. Lyman and Lia had their eyes squinched so tightly shut that they looked like children suffering terrible headaches. They held their hands, clean and glowing pink from the pump’s cold gush, out in front of them.

“Bless this food to our use, Lord, and make us grateful. Thank you for our company, may we do em fine and they us. Deliver us from the

terror that flies at noonday and the one that creeps at night. We say thankee.”

“*Thankee!*” cried the children, Tia almost loudly enough to rattle the windows.

“Name of God the Father and His Son, the Man Jesus,” she said.

“*Man Jesus!*” cried the children. Eddie was amused to see that Granpere, who sported a crucifix nearly as large as those worn by Zalman and Tia, sat with his eyes open, peacefully picking his nose during the prayers.

“Amen.”

“*Amen!*”

“*TATERS!*” cried Tia.

FIVE

Tian sat at one end of the long table, Zalia at the other. The twins weren't shunted off to the ghetto of a “kiddie table” (as Susannah and her cousins always had been at family gatherings, and how she had hated that) but seated a-row on one side, with the older two flanking the younger pair. Heddon helped Lia; Hedda helped Lyman. Susannah and Eddie were seated side by side across from the kids, with one young giant to Susannah's left and the other to Eddie's right. The baby did fine first on his mother's lap and then, when he grew bored with that, on his father's. The old man sat next to Zalia, who served him, cut his meat small-small, and did indeed wipe his chin when the gravy ran down. Tian glowered at this in a sulky way which Eddie felt did him little credit, but he kept his mouth shut, except once to ask his grandfather if he wanted more bread.

“My arm still wuks if Ah do,” the old man said, and snatched up the bread-basket to prove it. He did this smartly for a gent of advanced years, then spoiled the impression of briskness by overturning the jam-cruet. “Slaggit!” he cried.

The four children looked at each other with round eyes, then covered their mouths and giggled. Tia threw back her head and honked at the sky. One of her elbows caught Eddie in the ribs and almost knocked him off his chair.

“Wish’ee wouldn’t speak so in front of the children,” Zalia said, righting the cruet.

“Cry’er pardon,” Gran-pere said. Eddie wondered if he would have managed such winning humility if his grandson had been the one to reprimand him.

“Let me help you to a little of that, Gran-pere,” Susannah said, taking the jam from Zalia. The old man watched her with moist, almost worshipful eyes.

“Ain’t seen a true brown woman in oh Ah’d have to say forty year,” Gran-pere told her. “Uster be they’d come on the lake-mart boats, but nummore.” When Gran-pere said *boats*, it came out *butts*.

“I hope it doesn’t come as too much of a shock to find out we’re still around,” Susannah said, and gave him a smile. The old fellow responded with a goaty, toothless grin.

The steak was tough but tasty, the corn almost as good as that in the meal Andy had prepared near the edge of the woods. The bowl of taters, although almost the size of a washbasin, needed to be refilled twice, the gravy boat three times, but to Eddie the true revelation was the rice. Zalia served three different kinds, and as far as Eddie was concerned, each one was better than the last. The Jaffordses, however, ate it almost absentmindedly, the way people drink water in a restaurant. The meal ended with an apple cobbler, and then the children were sent off to play. Gran-pere put on the finishing touch with a ringing belch. “Say thankee,” he told Zalia, and tapped his throat three times. “Fine as ever was, Zee.”

“It does me good to see you eat so, Dad,” she said.

Tian grunted, then said, “Dad, these two would speak to you of the Wolves.”

“Just Eddie, if it do ya,” Susannah said with quick decisiveness. “I’ll help you clear the table and wash the dishes.”

“There’s no need,” Zalia said. Eddie thought the woman was sending Susannah a message with her eyes—*Stay, he likes you*—but Susannah either didn’t see it or elected to ignore it.

“Not at all,” she said, transferring herself to her wheelchair with the ease of long experience. “You’ll talk to my man, won’t you, sai Jaffords?”

“All that ’us long ago and by the way,” the old man said, but he didn’t look unwilling. “Don’t know if Ah kin. My mind dun’t hold a tale like it uster.”

“But I’d hear what you do remember,” Eddie said. “Every word.”

Tia honked laughter as if this were the funniest thing she’d ever heard. Zal did likewise, then scooped the last bit of mashed potato out of the bowl with a hand nearly as big as a cutting board. Tian gave it a brisk smack. “Never do it, ye great galoot, how many times have’ee been told?”

“Arright,” Gran-pere said. “Ah’d talk a bit if ye’d listen, boy. What else kin Ah do ’ith meself these days ’cept clabber? Help me git back on the porch, fur them steps is a strake easier comin down than they is goin up. And if ye’d fatch my pipe, daughter-girl, that’d do me fine, for a pipe helps a man think, so it does.”

“Of course I will,” Zalia said, ignoring another sour look from her husband. “Right away.”

SIX

“This were all long ago, ye must ken,” Gran-pere said once Zalia Jaffords had him settled in his rocker with a pillow at the small of his back and his pipe drawing comfortably. “I canna say for a certain if the Wolves have come twice since or three times, for although I were nineteen reaps on earth then, I’ve lost count of the years between.”

In the northwest, the red line of sunset had gone a gorgeous ashes-of-roses shade. Tian was in the barn with the animals, aided by Heddon and Hedda. The younger twins were in the kitchen. The giants, Tia and Zalman, stood at the far edge of the dooryard, looking off toward the east, not speaking or moving. They might have been monoliths in a *National Geographic* photograph of Easter Island. Looking at them gave Eddie a moderate case of the creeps. Still, he counted his blessings. Gran-pere seemed relatively bright and aware, and although his accent was thick—almost a burlesque—he’d had no trouble following what the old man was saying, at least so far.

“I don’t think the years between matter that much, sir,” Eddie said.

Gran-pere’s eyebrows went up. He uttered his rusty laugh. “Sir, yet! Been long and long sin’ Ah heerd that! Ye must be from the northern

folk!”

“I guess I am, at that,” Eddie said.

Gran-pere lapsed into a long silence, looking at the fading sunset. Then he looked around at Eddie again with some surprise. “Did we eat yet? Wittles n rations?”

Eddie’s heart sank. “Yes, sir. At the table on the other side of the house.”

“Ah ask because if Ah’m gonna shoot some dirt, Ah usually shoot it d’reclly after the night meal. Don’t feel no urge, so Ah thought Ah’d ask.”

“No. We ate.”

“Ah. And what’s your name?”

“Eddie Dean.”

“Ah.” The old man drew on his pipe. Twin curls of smoke drifted from his nose. “And the brownie’s yours?” Eddie was about to ask for clarification when Gran-pere gave it. “The woman.”

“Susannah. Yes, she’s my wife.”

“Ah.”

“Sir . . . Gran-pere . . . the Wolves?” But Eddie no longer believed he was going to get anything from the old guy. Maybe Suze could—

“As Ah recall, there was four of us,” Gran-pere said.

“Not five?”

“Nar, nar, although close enow so you could say a moit.” His voice had become dry, matter-of-fact. The accent dropped away a little. “We ’us young and wild, didn’t give a rat’s red ass if we lived or died, do ya kennit. Just pissed enow to take a stand whether the rest of ’un said yes, no, or maybe. There ’us me . . . Pokey Slidell . . . who ’us my best friend . . . and there ’us Eamon Doolin and his wife, that redheaded Molly. She was the very devil when it came to throwin the dish.”

“The dish?”

“Aye, the Sisters of Oriza throw it. Zee’s one. Ah’ll make her show’ee. They have plates sharpened all the way around except fer where the women hold on, do’ee ken. Nasty wittit, they are, aye! Make a man witta bah look right stupid. You ort to see.”

Eddie made a mental note to tell Roland. He didn’t know if there was anything to this dish-throwing or not, but he *did* know they were extremely short of weapons.

“ ’Twas Molly killed the Wolf—”

“Not you?” Eddie was bemused, thinking of how truth and legend twisted together until there was no untangling them.

“Nar, nar, although”—Gran-pere’s eyes gleamed—“Ah might have said ’twas me on one time or another, mayhap to loosen a young lady’s knees when they’d otherwise have stuck together, d’ye ken?”

“I think so.”

“ ’Twas Red Molly did for it witter dish, that’s the truth of it, but that’s getting the cart out front of the horse. We seen their dust-cloud on the come. Then, mebbe six wheel outside of town, it split throg.”

“What’s that? I don’t understand.”

Gran-pere held up three warped fingers to show that the Wolves had gone three different ways.

“The biggest bunch—judgin by the dust, kennit—headed into town and went for Took’s, which made sense because there were some’d thought to hide their babbies in the storage bin out behind. Tooky had a secret room way at the back where he kep’ cash and gems and a few old guns and other outright tradeables he’d taken in; they don’t call em Tooks for nothin, ye know!” Again the rusty, cackling chuckle. “It were a good cosy, not even the folk who worked fer the old buzzard knew it were there, yet when the time come the Wolves went right to it and took the babbies and kilt anyone tried to stand in their way or even speak a word o’ beggary to em. And then they whopped at the store with their light-sticks when they rode out and set it to burn. Burnt flat, it did, and they was lucky not to’ve lost the whole town, young sai, for the flames started out of them sticks the Wolves carry ain’t like other fire, that can be put out with enough water. T’row water on these ’uns, they feed on it! Grow higher! Higher and hotter! Yer-bugger!”

He spat over the rail for emphasis, then looked at Eddie shrewdly.

“All of which Ah’m sayin is this: no matter how many in these parts my grandson convinces to stand up and fight, or you and yer brownie, Eben Took won’t never be among em. Tooks has kep’ that store since time was toothless, and they don’t ever mean to see it burned flat again. Once ’us enough for them cowardy custards, do’ee foller?”

“Yes.”

“The other two dust-clouds, the biggest of em hied sout’ for the ranches. The littlest come down East Rud toward the smallholds, which was where we were, and where we made our stand.”

The old man’s face gleamed, memory-bound. Eddie did not glimpse the young man who had been (Gran-pere was too old for that), but in his rheumy eyes he saw the mixture of excitement and determination and sick fear which must have filled him that day. Must have filled them all. Eddie felt himself reaching out for it the way a hungry man will reach for food, and the old man must have seen some of this on his face, for he seemed to swell and gain vigor. Certainly this wasn’t a reaction the old man had ever gotten from his grandson; Tian did not lack for bravery, say thankya, but he was a sodbuster for all that. *This* man, however, this Eddie of New York . . . he might live a short life and die with his face in the dirt, but he was no sodbuster, by ’Riza.

“Go on,” Eddie said.

“Aye. So Ah will. Some of those comin toward us split off on River Rud, toward the little rice-manors that’re there—you c’d see the dust—and a few more split off on Peaberry Road. Ah ’member Pokey Slidell turned to me, had this kind of sick smile on his face, and he stuck out his hand (the one didn’t have his bah in it), and he said . . .”

SEVEN

What Pokey Slidell says under a burning autumn sky with the sound of the season’s last crickets rising from the high white grass on either side of them is “It’s been good to know ya, Jamie Jaffords, say true.” He’s got a smile on his face like none Jamie has ever seen before, but being only nineteen and living way out here on what some call the Rim and others call the Crescent, there’s plenty he’s never seen before. Or will ever see, way it looks now. It’s a sick smile, but there’s no cowardice in it. Jamie guesses he’s wearing one just like it. Here they are under the sun of their fathers, and the darkness will soon have them. They’ve come to their dying hour.

Nonetheless, his grip is strong when he seizes Pokey’s hand. “You ain’t done knowin me yet, Pokey,” he says.

“Hope you’re right.”

The dust-cloud moils toward them. In a minute, maybe less, they will be able to see the riders throwing it. And, more important, the riders throwing it will be able to see them.

Eamon Doolin says, "You know, I believe we ort to get in that ditch"—he points to the right side of the road—"an' snay down small-small. Then, soon's they go by, we can jump out and have at em."

Molly Doolin is wearing tight black silk pants and a white silk blouse open at the throat to show a tiny silver reap charm: Oriza with her fist raised. In her own right hand, Molly holds a sharpened dish, cool blue titanium steel painted over with a delicate lacework of green spring rice. Slung over her shoulder is a reed pouch lined with silk. In it are five more plates, two of her own and three of her mother's. Her hair is so bright in the bright light that it looks as if her head is on fire. Soon enough it will be burning, say true.

"You can do what you like, Eamon Doolin," she tells him. "As for me, I'm going to stand right here where they can see me and shout my twin sister's name so they'll hear it plain. They may ride me down but I'll kill one of 'un or cut the legs out from under one of their damn horses before they do, of that much I'll be bound."

There's no time for more. The Wolves come out of the dip that marks the entrance to Arra's little smallhold patch, and the four Calla-folken can see them at last and there is no more talk of hiding. Jamie almost expected Eamon Doolin, who is mild-mannered and already losing his hair at twenty-three, to drop his bah and go pelting into the high grass with his hands raised to show his surrender. Instead, he moves into place next to his wife and nocks a bolt. There is a low whirring sound as he winds the cord tight-tight.

They stand across the road with their boots in the floury dust. They stand blocking the road. And what fills Jamie like a blessing is a sense of grace. This is the right thing to do. They're going to die here, but that's all right. Better to die than stand by while they take more children. Each one of them has lost a twin, and Pokey—who is by far the oldest of them—has lost both a brother and a young son to the Wolves. This is right. They understand that the Wolves may exact a toll of vengeance on the rest for this stand they're making, but it doesn't matter. This is right.

"Come on!" Jamie shouts, and winds his own bah—once and twice, then click. "Come on, 'ee buzzards! 'Ee cowardy custards, come on and have some! Say Calla! Say Calla Bryn Sturgis!"

There is a moment in the heat of the day when the Wolves seem to draw no closer but only to shimmer in place. Then the sound of their horses' hooves, previously dull and muffled, grows sharp. And the Wolves seem to leap forward through the swarming air. Their pants are as gray as the hides of their horses. Dark-green cloaks flow out behind them. Green hoods surround masks (they must be masks) that turn the heads of the four remaining riders into the heads of snarling, hungry wolves.

"Four agin' four!" Jamie screams. "Four agin' four, even up, stand yer ground, cullies! Never run a step!"

The four Wolves sweep toward them on their gray horses. The men raise their bahs. Molly—sometimes called Red Molly, for her famous temper even more than her hair—raises her dish over her left shoulder. She looks not angry now but cool and calm.

The two Wolves on the end have light-sticks. They raise them. The two in the middle draw back their fists, which are clad in green gloves, to throw something. Sneetches, Jamie thinks coldly. That's what them are.

"Hold, boys . . ." Pokey says. "Hold . . . hold . . . now!"

He lets fly with a twang, and Jamie sees Pokey's bah-bolt pass just over the head of the Wolf second to the right. Eamon's strikes the neck of the horse on the far left. The beast gives a crazy whinnying cry and staggers just as the Wolves begin to close the final forty yards of distance. It crashes into its neighbor horse just as that second horse's rider throws the thing in his hand. It is indeed one of the sneetches, but it sails far off course and none of its guidance systems can lock onto anything.

Jamie's bolt strikes the chest of the third rider. Jamie begins a scream of triumph that dies in dismay before it ever gets out of his throat. The bolt bounces off the thing's chest just as it would have bounced off Andy's, or a stone in the Son of a Bitch field.

Wearing armor, oh you buggardly thing, you're wearing armor under that twice-damned—

The other sneetch flies true, striking Eamon Doolin square in the face. His head explodes in a spray of blood and bone and mealy gray stuff. The sneetch flies on maybe thirty grop, then whirls and comes back. Jamie ducks and hears it flash over his head, giving off a low, hard hum as it flies.

Molly has never moved, not even when she is showered with her husband's blood and brains. Now she screams, "THIS IS FOR MINNIE, YOU SONS OF WHORES!" and throws her plate. The distance is very short by now—hardly

any distance at all—but she throws it hard and the plate rises as soon as it leaves her hand.

Too hard, dear, Jamie thinks as he ducks the swipe of a light-stick (the light-stick is also giving off that hard, savage buzz). Too hard, yer-bugger.

But the Wolf at which Molly has aimed actually rides into the rising dish. It strikes at just the point where the thing's green hood crosses the wolf-mask it wears. There is an odd, muffled sound—chump!—and the thing falls backward off its horse with its green-gauntleted hands flying up.

Pokey and Jamie raise a wild cheer, but Molly just reaches coolly into her pouch for another dish, all of them nestled neatly in there with the blunt gripping arcs pointed up. She is pulling it out when one of the light-sticks cuts the arm off her body. She staggers, teeth peeling back from her lips in a snarl, and goes to one knee as her blouse bursts into flame. Jamie is amazed to see that she is reaching for the plate in her severed hand as it lies in the dust of the road.

The three remaining Wolves are past them. The one Molly caught with her dish lies in the dust, jerking crazily, those gauntleted hands flying up and down into the sky as if it's trying to say, "What can you do? What can you do with these damned sobbusters?"

The other three wheel their mounts as neatly as a drill-team of cavalry soldiers and race back toward them. Molly pries the dish from her own dead fingers, then falls backward, engulfed in fire.

"Stand, Pokey!" Jamie cries hysterically as their death rushes toward them under the burning steel sky, "Stand, gods damn you!" And still that feeling of grace as he smells the charring flesh of the Doolins. This is what they should have done all along, aye, all of them, for the Wolves can be brought down, although they'll probably not live to tell and these will take their dead compadre with them so none will know.

There's a twang as Pokey fires another bolt and then a sneetch strikes him dead center and he explodes inside his clothes, belching blood and torn flesh from his sleeves, his cuffs, from the busted buttons of his fly. Again Jamie is drenched, this time by the hot stew that was his friend. He fires his own bah, and sees it groove the side of a gray horse. He knows it's useless to duck but he ducks anyway and something whirs over his head. One of the horses strikes him hard as it passes, knocking him into the ditch where Eamon proposed they hide. His bah flies from his hand. He lies there, open-eyed, not moving, knowing as they wheel their horses around again that there is nothing for it now but to play

dead and hope they pass him by. They won't, of course they won't, but it's the only thing to do and so he does it, trying to give his eyes the glaze of death. In another few seconds, he knows, he won't have to pretend. He smells dust, he hears the crickets in the grass, and he holds onto these things, knowing they are the last things he will ever smell and hear, that the last thing he sees will be the Wolves, bearing down on him with their frozen snarls.

They come pounding back.

One of them turns in its saddle and throws a sneetch from its gloved hand as it passes. But as it throws, the rider's horse leaps the body of the downed Wolf, which still lies twitching in the road, although now its hands barely rise. The sneetch flies above Jamie, just a little too high. He can almost feel it hesitate, searching for prey. Then it soars on, out over the field.

The Wolves ride east, pulling dust behind them. The sneetch doubles back and flies over Jamie again, this time higher and slower. The gray horses sweep around a curve in the road fifty yards east and are lost to view. The last he sees of them are three green cloaks, pulled out almost straight and fluttering.

Jamie stands up in the ditch on legs that threaten to buckle beneath him. The sneetch makes another loop and comes back, this time directly toward him, but now it is moving slowly, as if whatever powers it is almost exhausted. Jamie scrambles back into the road, falls to his knees next to the burning remains of Pokey's body, and seizes his bah. This time he holds it by the end, as one might hold a Points mallet. The sneetch cruises toward him. Jamie draws the bah to his shoulder, and when the thing comes at him, he bats it out of the air as if it were a giant bug. It falls into the dust beside one of Pokey's torn-off shor'boots and lies there buzzing malevolently, trying to rise.

"There, you bastard!" Jamie screams, and begins to scoop dust over the thing. He is weeping. "There, you bastard! There! There!" At last it's gone, buried under a heap of white dust that buzzes and shakes and at last becomes still.

Without rising—he doesn't have the strength to find his feet again, not yet, can still hardly believe he is alive—Jamie Jaffords knee-walks toward the monster Molly has killed . . . and it is dead now, or at least lying still. He wants to pull off its mask, see it plain. First he kicks at it with both feet, like a child doing a tantrum. The Wolf's body rocks from side to side, then lies still again. A pungent, reeky smell is coming from it. A rotten-smelling smoke is rising from the mask, which appears to be melting.

Dead, *thinks the boy who will eventually become Gran-pere, the oldest living human in the Calla.* Dead, aye, never doubt it. So garn, ye gutless! Garn and unmask it!

He does. Under the burning autumn sun he takes hold of the rotting mask, which feels like some sort of metal mesh, and he pulls it off, and he sees . . .

EIGHT

For a moment Eddie wasn't even aware that the old guy had stopped talking. He was still lost in the story, mesmerized. He saw everything so clearly it could have been *him* out there on the East Road, kneeling in the dust with the bah cocked to his shoulder like a baseball bat, ready to knock the oncoming sneetch out of the air.

Then Susannah rolled past the porch toward the barn with a bowl of chickenfeed in her lap. She gave them a curious look on her way by. Eddie woke up. He hadn't come here to be entertained. He supposed the fact that he *could* be entertained by such a story said something about him.

"And?" Eddie asked the old man when Susannah had gone into the barn. "What did you see?"

"Eh?" Gran-pere gave him a look of such perfect vacuity that Eddie despaired.

"What did you *see*? When you took off the mask?"

For a moment that look of emptiness—the lights are on but no one's home—held. And then (by pure force of will, it seemed to Eddie) the old man came back. He looked behind him, at the house. He looked toward the black maw of the barn, and the lick of phosphor-light deep inside. He looked around the yard itself.

Frightened, Eddie thought. Scared to death.

Eddie tried to tell himself this was only an old man's paranoia, but he felt a chill, all the same.

"Lean close," Gran-pere muttered, and when Eddie did: "The only one Ah ever told was my boy Luke . . . Tian's Da', do'ee ken. Years and years later, this was. He told me never to speak of it to anyone else. Ah said, 'But Lukey, what if it could help? What if it could help t'next time they come?'"

Gran-pere's lips barely moved, but his thick accent had almost entirely departed, and Eddie could understand him perfectly.

"And he said to me, 'Da', if'ee really b'lieved knowin c'd help, why have'ee not told afore now?' And Ah couldn't answer him, young fella, cos 'twas nothing but intuition kep' my gob shut. Besides, what good *could* it do? What do it *change*?"

"I don't know," Eddie said. Their faces were close. Eddie could smell beef and gravy on old Jamie's breath. "How can I, when you haven't told me what you saw?"

" 'The Red King always finds 'is henchmen,' my boy said. 'It'd be good if no one ever knew ye were out there, better still if no one ever heard what ye *saw* out there, lest it get back to em, aye, even in Thunderclap.' And Ah seen a sad thing, young fella."

Although he was almost wild with impatience, Eddie thought it best to let the old guy unwind it in his own way. "What was that, Gran-pere?"

"Ah seen Luke didn't entirely believe me. Thought his own Da' might just be a-storyin, tellin a wild tale about bein a Wolf-killer t'look tall. Although ye'd think even a halfwit would see that if Ah was goingt'er make a tale, Ah'd make it me that killed the Wolf, and not Eamon Doolin's wife."

That made sense, Eddie thought, and then remembered Gran-pere at least hinting that he *had* taken credit more than once-upon-a, as Roland sometimes said. He smiled in spite of himself.

"Lukey were afraid someone else might hear my story and believe it. That it'd get on to the Wolves and Ah might end up dead fer no more than tellin a make-believe story. Not that it were." His rheumy old eyes begged at Eddie's face in the growing dark. "*You* believe me, don't ya?"

Eddie nodded. "I know you say true, Gran-pere. But who . . ." Eddie paused. *Who would rat you out?* was how the question came to mind, but Gran-pere might not understand. "But who would tell? Who did you suspect?"

Gran-pere looked around the darkening yard, seemed about to speak, then said nothing.

"Tell me," Eddie said. "Tell me what you—"

A large dry hand, a-tremor with age but still amazingly strong, gripped his neck and pulled him close. Bristly whiskers rasped against the shell of Eddie's ear, making him shudder all over and break out in gooseflesh.

Gran-pere whispered nineteen words as the last light died out of the day and night came to the Calla.

Eddie Dean's eyes widened. His first thought was that he now understood about the horses—all the gray horses. His second was *Of course. It makes perfect sense. We should have known.*

The nineteenth word was spoken and Gran-pere's whisper ceased. The hand gripping Eddie's neck dropped back into Gran-pere's lap. Eddie turned to face him. "Say true?"

"Aye, gunslinger," said the old man. "True as ever was. Ah canna' say for all of em, for many sim'lar masks may cover many dif'runt faces, but—"

"No," Eddie said, thinking of gray horses. Not to mention all those sets of gray pants. All those green cloaks. It made perfect sense. What was that old song his mother used to sing? *You're in the army now, you're not behind the plow. You'll never get rich, you son of a bitch, you're in the army now.*

"I'll have to tell this story to my dinh," Eddie said.

Gran-pere nodded slowly. "Aye," he said, "as ye will. Ah dun't git along well witta boy, ye kennit. Lukey tried to put t'well where Tian pointed wit' t' drotta stick, y'ken."

Eddie nodded as if he understood this. Later, Susannah translated it for him: *I don't get along well with the boy, you understand. Lukey tried to put the well where Tian pointed with the dowsing stick, you see.*

"A dowser?" Susannah asked from out of the darkness. She had returned quietly and now gestured with her hands, as if holding a wishbone.

The old man looked at her, surprised, then nodded. "The drotta, yar. Any ro', I argued agin' it, but after the Wolves came and tuk his sister, Tia, Lukey done whatever the boy wanted. Can'ee imagine, lettin a boy nummore'n seventeen site the well, drotta or no? But Lukey put it there and there *were* water, Ah'll give'ee that, we all seen it gleam and smelt it before the clay sides give down and buried my

boy alive. We dug him out but he were gone to the clearing, thrut and lungs all full of clay and muck.”

Slowly, slowly, the old man took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes with it.

“The boy and I en’t had a civil word between us since; that well’s dug between us, do ya not see it. But he’s right about wantin t’stand agin the Wolves, and if you tell him anything for me, tell him his Gran-pere salutes him damn proud, salutes him big-big, yer-bugger! He got the sand o’ Jaffords in his craw, aye! We stood our stand all those years agone, and now the blood shows true.” He nodded, this time even more slowly. “Garn and tell yer dinh, aye! Every word! And if it seeps out . . . if the Wolves were to come out of Thunderclap early fer one dried-up old turd like me . . .”

He bared his few remaining teeth in a smile Eddie found extraordinarily gruesome.

“Ah can still wind a bah,” he said, “and sumpin tells me yer brownie could be taught to throw a dish, shor’ legs or no.”

The old man looked off into the darkness.

“Let ’un come,” he said softly. “Last time pays fer all, yer-bugger. Last time pays fer all.”

CHAPTER VII:

NOCTURNE, HUNGER

ONE

Mia was in the castle again, but this time was different. This time she did not move slowly, toying with her hunger, knowing that soon it would be fed and fed completely, that both she and her chap would be satisfied. This time what she felt inside was ravenous desperation, as if some wild animal had been caged up inside her belly. She understood that what she had felt on all those previous expeditions hadn't been hunger at all, not true hunger, but only healthy appetite. This was different.

His time is coming, she thought. He needs to eat more, in order to get his strength. And so do I.

Yet she was afraid—she was *terrified*—that it wasn't just a matter of needing to eat more. There was something she needed to eat, something forspecial. The chap needed it in order to . . . well, to . . .

To finish the becoming.

Yes! Yes, that was it, the becoming! And surely she would find it in the banquet hall, because *everything* was in the banquet hall—a thousand dishes, each more succulent than the last. She would graze the table, and when she found the right thing—the right vegetable or spice or meat or fish-roe—her guts and nerves would cry out for it and she would eat . . . oh she would *gobble* . . .

She began to hurry along faster yet, and then to run. She was vaguely aware that her legs were swishing together because she was wearing pants. Denim pants, like a cowboy. And instead of slippers she was wearing boots.

Shor'boots, her mind whispered to her mind. *Shor'boots, may they do ya fine.*

But none of this mattered. What mattered was eating, *gorging* (oh she was so hungry), and finding the right thing for the chap. Finding the thing that would both make him strong and bring on her labor.

She pelted down the broad staircase, into the steady beating murmur of the slo-trans engines. Wonderful smells should have overwhelmed her by now—roasted meats, barbecued poultry, herbed fish—but she couldn't smell food at all.

Maybe I have a cold, she thought as her *shor'boots* stut-tut-tuttered on the stairs. *That must be it, I must have a cold. My sinuses are all swollen and I can't smell anything—*

But she *could*. She could smell the dust and age of this place. She could smell damp seepage, and the faint tang of engine oil, and the mildew eating relentlessly into tapestries and curtains hung in the rooms of ruin.

Those things, but no food.

She dashed along the black marble floor toward the double doors, unaware that she was again being followed—not by the gunslinger this time but by a wide-eyed, tousle-haired boy in a cotton shirt and a pair of cotton shorts. Mia crossed the foyer with its red and black marble squares and the statue of smoothly entwined marble and steel. She didn't stop to curtsy, or even nod her head. That *she* should be so hungry was bearable. But not her chap. Never her chap.

What halted her (and only for a space of seconds) was her own reflection, milky and irresolute, in the statue's chrome steel. Above her jeans was a plain white shirt (*You call this kind a tee-shirt*, her mind whispered) with some writing on it, and a picture.

The picture appeared to be of a pig.

Never mind what's on your shirt, woman. The chap's what matters. You must feed the chap!

She burst into the dining hall and stopped with a gasp of dismay. The room was full of shadows now. A few of the electric torches still glowed, but most had gone out. As she looked, the only one still burning at the far end of the room stuttered, buzzed, and fell dark. The white forspecial plates had been replaced with blue ones decorated with green tendrils of rice. The rice plants formed the

Great Letter **Zn**, which, she knew, meant *eternity* and *now* and also *come*, as in *come-commala*. But plates didn't matter. Decorations didn't matter. What mattered was that the plates and beautiful crystal glassware were empty and dull with dust.

No, not everything was empty; in one goblet she saw a dead black widow spider lying with its many legs curled against the red hourglass on its midsection.

She saw the neck of a wine-bottle poking from a silver pail and her stomach gave an imperative cry. She snatched it up, barely registering the fact that there was no water in the bucket, let alone ice; it was entirely dry. At least the bottle had weight, and enough liquid inside to slosh—

But before Mia could close her lips over the neck of the bottle, the smell of vinegar smote her so strongly that her eyes filled with water.

“Mutha-*fuck!*” she screamed, and threw the bottle down. “You mutha-*fuckah!*”

The bottle shattered on the stone floor. Things ran in squeaking surprise beneath the table.

“Yeah, you *bettah* run!” she screamed. “Get ye gone, whatever y’are! Here’s Mia, daughter of none, and not in a good mood! Yet I *will* be fed! Yes! Yes I will!”

This was bold talk, but at first she saw nothing on the table that she *could* eat. There was bread, but the one piece she bothered to pick up had turned to stone. There was what appeared to be the remains of a fish, but it had putrefied and lay in a greenish-white simmer of maggots.

Her stomach growled, undeterred by this mess. Worse, something *below* her stomach turned restlessly, and kicked, and cried out to be fed. It did this not with its voice but by turning certain switches inside her, back in the most primitive sections of her nervous system. Her throat grew dry; her mouth puckered as if she had drunk the turned wine; her vision sharpened as her eyes widened and bulged outward in their sockets. Every thought, every sense, and every instinct tuned to the same simple idea: *food*.

Beyond the far end of the table was a screen showing Arthur Eld, sword held high, riding through a swamp with three of his knight-gunslingers behind him. Around his neck was Saita, the great snake,

which presumably he had just slain. Another successful quest! Do ya fine! Men and their quests! Bah! What was slaying a magical snake to her? She had a chap in her belly, and the chap was hungry.

Hongry, she thought in a voice that wasn't her own. *It's be hongry.*

Behind the screen were double doors. She shoved through them, still unaware of the boy Jake standing at the far end of the dining hall in his underwear, looking at her, afraid.

The kitchen was likewise empty, likewise dusty. The counters were tattooed with critter-tracks. Pots and pans and cooking-racks were jumbled across the floor. Beyond this litter were four sinks, one filled with stagnant water that had grown a scum of algae. The room was lit by fluorescent tubes. Only a few still glowed steadily. Most of them flickered on and off, giving these shambles a surreal and nightmarish aspect.

She worked her way across the kitchen, kicking aside the pots and pans that were in her way. Here stood four huge ovens all a-row. The door of the third was ajar. From it came a faint shimmer of heat, as one might feel coming from a hearth six or eight hours after the last embers have burned out, and a smell that set her stomach clamoring all over again. It was the smell of freshly roasted meat.

Mia opened the door. Inside was indeed some sort of roast. Feeding on it was a rat the size of a tomcat. It turned its head at the clunk of the opening oven door and looked at her with black, fearless eyes. Its whiskers, bleary with grease, twitched. Then it turned back to the roast. She could hear the muttering smack of its lips and the sound of tearing flesh.

Nay, Mr. Rat. It wasn't left for you. It was left for me and my chap.

"One chance, my friend!" she sang as she turned toward the counters and storage cabinets beneath them. "Better go while you can! Fair warning!" Not that it would. Mr. Rat be hongry, too.

She opened a drawer and found nothing but breadboards and a rolling pin. She considered the rolling pin briefly, but had no wish to baste her dinner with more rat-blood than she absolutely had to. She opened the cabinet beneath and found tins for muffins and molds for fancy desserts. She moved to her left, opened another drawer, and here was what she was looking for.

Mia considered the knives, took one of the meat-forks instead. It had two six-inch steel tines. She took it back to the row of ovens, hesitated, and checked the other three. They were empty, as she had known they would be. Something—some fate some providence some ka—had left fresh meat, but only enough for one. Mr. Rat thought it was his. Mr. Rat had made a mistake. She did not think he would make another. Not this side of the clearing, anyway.

She bent and once again the smell of freshly cooked pork filled her nose. Her lips spread and drool ran from the corners of her smile. This time Mr. Rat didn't look around. Mr. Rat had decided she was no threat. That was all right. She bent further forward, drew a breath, and impaled it on the meat-fork. Rat-kebab! She drew it out and held it up in front of her face. It squealed furiously, its legs spinning in the air, its head lashing back and forth, blood running down the meat-fork's handle to pool around her fist. She carried it, still writhing, to the sinkful of stagnant water and flipped it off the fork. It splashed into the murk and disappeared. For a moment the tip of its twitching tail stuck up, and then that was gone, too.

She went down the line of sinks, trying the faucets, and from the last one got a feeble trickle of water. She rinsed her bloody hand under it until the trickle subsided. Then she walked back to the oven, wiping her hand dry on the seat of her britches. She did not see Jake, now standing just inside the kitchen doors and watching her, although he made no attempt to hide; she was totally fixated on the smell of the meat. It wasn't enough, and not precisely what her chap needed, but it would do for the time being.

She reached in, grasped the sides of the roasting pan, then pulled back with a gasp, shaking her fingers and grinning. It was a grin of pain, yet not entirely devoid of humor. Mr. Rat had either been a trifle more immune to the heat than she was, or maybe hongrier. Although it was hard to believe anyone or anything could be hongrier than she was right now.

"I'se *hongry!*" she yelled, laughing, as she went down the line of drawers, opening and closing them swiftly. "Mia's one *hongry* lady, yessir! Didn't go to Morehouse, didn't go to *no* house, but I'se *hongry!* And my chap's hongry, too!"

In the last drawer (wasn't that always the way), she found the hotpads she'd been looking for. She hurried back to the oven with them in her hands, bent down, and pulled the roast out. Her laughter died in a sudden shocked gasp . . . and then burst out again, louder and stronger than ever. What a goose she was! What a damned silly-billy! For one instant she'd thought the roast, which had been done to a skin-crackling turn and only gnawed by Mr. Rat in one place, was the body of a child. And yes, she supposed that a roasted pig *did* look a little bit like a child . . . a baby . . . someone's chap . . . but now that it was out and she could see the closed eyes and the charred ears and the baked apple in the open mouth, there was no question about what it was.

As she set it on the counter, she thought again about the reflection she'd seen in the foyer. But never mind that now. Her gut was a roar of famishment. She plucked a butcher's knife out of the drawer from which she had taken the meat-fork and cut off the place where Mr. Rat had been eating the way you'd cut a wormhole out of an apple. She tossed this piece back over her shoulder, then picked up the roast entire and buried her face in it.

From the door, Jake watched her.

When the keenest edge had been taken off her hunger, Mia looked around the kitchen with an expression that wavered between calculation and despair. What was she supposed to do when the roast was gone? What was she supposed to eat the next time this sort of hunger came? And where was she supposed to find what her chap really wanted, really needed? She'd do anything to locate that stuff and secure a good supply of it, that special food or drink or vitamin or whatever it was. The pork was close (close enough to put him to sleep again, thank all the gods and the Man Jesus), but not close enough.

She banged sai Piggy back into the roasting pan for the nonce, pulled the shirt she was wearing off over her head, and turned it so she could look at the front. There was a cartoon pig, roasted bright red but seeming not to mind; it was smiling blissfully. Above it, in rustic letters made to look like barnboard, was this: THE DIXIE PIG, LEX AND 61ST. Below it: "BEST RIBS IN NEW YORK"—GOURMET MAGAZINE.

The Dixie Pig, she thought. *The Dixie Pig*. *Where have I heard that before?*

She didn't know, but she believed she could find Lex if she had to. "It be right there between Third and Park," she said. "That's right, ain't it?"

The boy, who had slipped back out but left the door ajar, heard this and nodded miserably. That was where it was, all right.

Well-a-well, Mia thought. *It all does fine for now, good as it can do, anyway, and like that woman in the book said, tomorrow's another day. Worry about it then. Right?*

Right. She picked up the roast again and began to eat. The smacking sounds she made were really not much different from those made by the rat. Really not much different at all.

TWO

Tian and Zalia had tried to give Eddie and Susannah their bedroom. Convincing them that their guests really didn't *want* their bedroom—that sleeping there would actually make them uncomfortable—hadn't been easy. It was Susannah who finally turned the trick, telling the Jaffordses in a hesitant, confiding voice that something awful had happened to them in the city of Lud, something so traumatic that neither of them could sleep easily in a house anymore. A barn, where you could see the door open to the outside world any time you wanted to take a look, was much better.

It was a good tale, and well told. Tian and Zalia listened with a sympathetic credulity that made Eddie feel guilty. A lot of bad things had happened to them in Lud, that much was true, but nothing which made either of them nervous about sleeping indoors. At least he guessed not; since leaving their own world, the two of them had only spent a single night (the previous) under the actual roof of an actual house.

Now he sat cross-legged on one of the blankets Zalia had given them to spread on the hay, the other two cast aside. He was looking out into the yard, past the porch where Gran-pere had told his tale, and toward the river. The moon flitted in and out of the clouds, first brightening the scene to silver, then darkening it. Eddie hardly saw

what he was looking at. His ears were trained on the floor of the barn below him, where the stalls and pens were. She was down there somewhere, he was sure she was, but God, she was so *quiet*.

And by the way, who is she? Mia, Roland says, but that's just a name. Who is she really?

But it *wasn't* just a name. *It means mother in the High Speech*, the gunslinger had said.

It means *mother*.

Yeah. But she's not the mother of my kid. The chap is not my son.

A soft clunk from below him, followed by the creak of a board. Eddie stiffened. She was down there, all right. He'd begun to have his doubts, but she was.

He had awakened after perhaps six hours of deep and dreamless sleep to discover she was gone. He went to the barn's bay door, which they'd left open, and looked out. There she was. Even by moonlight he'd known that wasn't really Susannah down there in the wheelchair; not his Suze, not Odetta Holmes or Detta Walker, either. Yet she wasn't entirely unfamiliar. She—

You saw her in New York, only then she had legs and she knew how to use them. She had legs and she didn't want to go too close to the rose. She had her reasons for that, and they were good reasons, but you know what I think the real reason was? I think she was afraid it would hurt whatever it is she's carrying in her belly.

Yet he felt sorry for the woman below. No matter who she was or what she was carrying, she'd gotten herself into this situation while saving Jake Chambers. She'd held off the demon of the circle, trapping it inside her just long enough for Eddie to finish whittling the key he'd made.

If you'd finished it earlier—if you hadn't been such a damned little chickenshit—she might not even be in this mess, did you ever think of that?

Eddie had pushed the thought away. There was some truth to it, of course—he *had* lost his confidence while whittling the key, which was why it hadn't been finished when the time of Jake's drawing came—but he was done with that kind of thinking. It was good for nothing but creating a truly excellent array of self-inflicted wounds.

Whoever she was, his heart had gone out to the woman he saw below him. In the sleeping silence of the night, through the

alternating shutters of moonlight and dark, she pushed Susannah's wheelchair first across the yard . . . then back . . . then across again . . . then left . . . then right. She reminded him a little of the old robots in Shardik's clearing, the ones Roland had made him shoot. And was that so surprising? He'd drifted off to sleep thinking of those robots, and what Roland had said of them: *They are creatures of great sadness, I think, in their own way. Eddie is going to put them out of their misery.* And so he had, after some persuasion: the one that looked like a many-jointed snake, the one that looked like the Tonka tractor he'd once gotten as a birthday present, the ill-tempered stainless-steel rat. He'd shot them all except for the last, some sort of mechanical flying thing. Roland had gotten that one.

Like the old robots, the woman in the yard below wanted to go someplace, but didn't know where. She wanted to get something, but didn't know what. The question was, what was he supposed to do?

Just watch and wait. Use the time to think up some other bullshit story in case one of them wakes up and sees her in the dooryard, pacing around in her wheelchair. More post-traumatic stress syndrome from Lud, maybe.

"Hey, it works for me," he murmured, but just then Susannah had turned and wheeled back toward the barn, now moving with a purpose. Eddie had lain down, prepared to feign sleep, but instead of hearing her coming upstairs, he'd heard a faint cling, a grunt of effort, then the creak of boards going away toward the rear of the barn. In his mind's eye he saw her getting out of her chair and heading back there at her usual speedy crawl . . . for what?

Five minutes of silence. He was just beginning to get really nervous when there was a single squeal, short and sharp. It was so much like the cry of an infant that his balls pulled up tight and his skin broke out in gooseflesh. He looked toward the ladder leading down to the barn floor and made himself wait some more.

That was a pig. One of the young ones. Just a shoat, that's all.

Maybe, but what he kept picturing was the younger set of twins. Especially the girl. Lia, rhymes with Mia. No more than babies, and it was crazy to think of Susannah cutting a child's throat, totally insane, but . . .

But that's not Susannah down there, and if you start thinking it is, you're apt to get hurt, the way you almost got hurt before.

Hurt, hell. Almost *killed* was what he'd been. Almost gotten his face chewed off by the lobstrosities.

It was Detta who threw me to the creepy-crawlies. This one isn't her.

Yes, and he had an idea—only an intuition, really—that this one might be a hell of a lot nicer than Detta, but he'd be a fool to bet his life on it.

Or the lives of the children? Tian and Zalia's children?

He sat there sweating, not knowing what to do.

Now, after what seemed an interminable wait, there were more squeaks and creaks. The last came from directly beneath the ladder leading to the loft. Eddie lay back again and closed his eyes. Not quite all the way, though. Peering through his lashes, he saw her head appear above the loft floor. At that moment the moon sailed out from behind a cloud and flooded the loft with light. He saw blood at the corners of her mouth, as dark as chocolate, and reminded himself to wipe it off her in the morning. He didn't want any of the Jafford clan seeing it.

What I want to see is the twins, Eddie thought. Both sets, all four, alive and well. Especially Lia. What else do I want? For Tian to come out of the barn with a frown on his face. For him to ask us if we heard anything in the night, maybe a fox or even one of those rock-cats they talk about. Because, see, one of the shoats has gone missing. Hope you hid whatever was left of it, Mia or whoever you are. Hope you hid it well.

She came to him, lay down, turned over once and fell asleep—he could tell by the sound of her breathing. Eddie turned his head and looked toward the sleeping Jaffords home place.

She didn't go anywhere near the house.

No, not unless she'd wheeled her chair all the way through the barn and right out the back, that was. Gone around that way . . . slipped in a window . . . taken one of the younger twins . . . taken the little girl . . . taken her back to the barn . . . and . . .

She didn't do that. Didn't have the time, for one thing.

Maybe not, but he'd feel a lot better in the morning, just the same. When he saw all the kids at breakfast. Including Aaron, the little boy with the chubby legs and the little sticking-out belly. He thought of

what his mother sometimes said when she saw a mother wheeling a little one like that along the street: *So cute! Looks good enough to eat!*

Quit it. Go to sleep!

But it was a long time before Eddie got back to sleep.

THREE

Jake awoke from his nightmare with a gasp, not sure where he was. He sat up, shivering, arms wrapped around himself. He was wearing nothing but a plain cotton shirt—too big for him—and flimsy cotton shorts, sort of like gym shorts, that were also too big for him. What . . . ?

There was a grunt, followed by a muffled fart. Jake looked toward these sounds, saw Benny Slightman buried up to the eyes under two blankets, and everything fell into place. He was wearing one of Benny's undershirts and a pair of Benny's undershorts. They were in Benny's tent. They were on the bluff overlooking the river. The riverbanks out here were stony, Benny had said, no good for rice but plenty good for fishing. If they were just a little bit lucky, they'd be able to catch their own breakfast out of the Devar-Tete Whye. And although Benny knew Jake and Oy would have to return to the Old Fella's house to be with their dinh and their ka-mates for a day or two, maybe longer, perhaps Jake could come back later on. There was good fishing here, good swimming a little way upstream, and caves where the walls glowed in the dark and the lizards glowed, too. Jake had gone to sleep well satisfied by the prospect of these wonders. He wasn't crazy about being out here without a gun (he had seen too much and done too much to ever feel entirely comfortable without a gun these days), but he was pretty sure Andy was keeping an eye on them, and he'd allowed himself to sleep deep.

Then the dream. The horrible dream. Susannah in the huge, dirty kitchen of an abandoned castle. Susannah holding up a squirming rat impaled on a meat-fork. Holding it up and laughing while blood ran down the fork's wooden handle and pooled around her hand.

That was no dream and you know it. You have to tell Roland.

The thought which followed this was somehow even more disturbing: *Roland already knows. So does Eddie.*

Jake sat with his knees against his chest and his arms linked around his shins, feeling more miserable than at any time since getting a good look at his Final Essay in Ms. Avery's English Comp class. *My Understanding of the Truth*, it had been called, and although he understood it a lot better now—understood how much of it must have been called forth by what Roland called the touch—his first reaction had been pure horror. What he felt now wasn't so much horror as it was . . . well . . .

Sadness, he thought.

Yes. They were supposed to be ka-tet, one from many, but now their unity had been lost. Susannah had become another person and Roland didn't want her to know, not with Wolves on the way both here and in the other world.

Wolves of the Calla, Wolves of New York.

He wanted to be angry, but there seemed no one to be angry *at*. Susannah had gotten pregnant helping *him*, after all, and if Roland and Eddie weren't telling her stuff, it was because they wanted to protect her.

Yeah, right, a resentful voice spoke up. *They also want to make sure she's able to help out when the Wolves come riding out of Thunderclap. It'd be one less gun if she was busy having a miscarriage or a nervous breakdown or something.*

He knew that wasn't fair, but the dream had shaken him badly. The rat was what he kept coming back to; that rat writhing on the meat-fork. Her holding it up. And grinning. Don't want to forget that. *Grinning*. He'd touched the thought in her mind at that moment, and the thought had been *rat-kebab*.

"Christ," he whispered.

He guessed he understood why Roland wasn't telling Susannah about Mia—and about the baby, what Mia called the chap—but didn't the gunslinger understand that something far more important had been lost, and was getting more lost every day this was allowed to go on?

They know better than you, they're grown-ups.

Jake thought that was bullshit. If being a grown-up really meant knowing better, why did his father go on smoking three packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day and snorting cocaine until his nose bled? If

being a grown-up gave you some sort of special knowledge of the right things to do, how come his mother was sleeping with her masseuse, who had huge biceps and no brains? Why had neither of them noticed, as the spring of 1977 marched toward summer, that their kid (who had a nickname—'Bama—known only to the housekeeper) was losing his fucking mind?

This isn't the same thing.

But what if it was? What if Roland and Eddie were so close to the problem they couldn't see the truth?

What is the truth? What is your understanding of the truth?

That they were no longer ka-tet, that was his understanding of the truth.

What was it Roland had said to Callahan, at that first palaver? *We are round, and roll as we do.* That had been true then, but Jake didn't think it was true now. He remembered an old joke people told when they got a blowout: *Well, it's only flat on the bottom.* That was them now, flat on the bottom. No longer truly ka-tet—how could they be, when they were keeping secrets? And were Mia and the child growing in Susannah's stomach the only secrets? Jake thought not. There was something else, as well. Something Roland was keeping back not just from Susannah but from all of them.

We can beat the Wolves if we're together, he thought. *If we're ka-tet. But not the way we are now. Not over here, not in New York, either. I just don't believe it.*

Another thought came on the heels of that, one so terrible he first tried to push it away. Only he couldn't do that, he realized. Little as he wanted to, this was an idea that had to be considered.

I could take matters into my own hands. I could tell her myself.

And then what? What would he tell Roland? How would he explain?

I couldn't. There'd be no explanation I could make or that he'd listen to. The only thing I could do—

He remembered Roland's story of the day he'd stood against Cort. The battered old squireen with his stick, the untried boy with his hawk. If he, Jake, were to go against Roland's decision and tell Susannah what had so far been held back from her, it would lead directly to his own manhood test.

And I'm not ready. Maybe Roland was—barely—but I'm not him. Nobody is. He'd best me and I'd be sent east into Thunderclap alone. Oy would try to come with me, but I couldn't let him. Because it's death over there. Maybe for our whole ka-tet, surely for a kid all by himself.

And yet still, the secrets Roland was keeping, that was *wrong*. And so? They'd be together again, all of them, to hear the rest of Callahan's story and—maybe—to deal with the thing in Callahan's church. What should he do then?

Talk to him. Try to persuade him he's doing the wrong thing.

All right. He could do that. It would be hard, but he could do it. Should he talk to Eddie as well? Jake thought not. Adding Eddie would complicate things even more. Let Roland decide what to tell Eddie. Roland, after all, was the *dinh*.

The flap of the tent shivered and Jake's hand went to his side, where the Ruger would have hung if he had been wearing the docker's clutch. Not there, of course, but this time that was all right. It was only Oy, poking his snout under the flap and tossing it up so he could get his head into the tent.

Jake reached out to pat the bumbler's head. Oy seized his hand gently in his teeth and tugged. Jake went with him willingly enough; he felt as if sleep were a thousand miles away.

Outside the tent, the world was a study in severe blacks and whites. A rock-studded slope led down to the river, which was broad and shallow at this point. The moon burned in it like a lamp. Jake saw two figures down there on the rocky strand and froze. As he did, the moon went behind a cloud and the world darkened. Oy's jaws closed on his hand again and pulled him forward. Jake went with him, found a four-foot drop, and eased himself down. Oy now stood above and just behind him, panting into his ear like a little engine.

The moon came out from behind its cloud. The world brightened again. Jake saw Oy had led him to a large chunk of granite that came jutting out of the earth like the prow of a buried ship. It was a good hiding place. He peered around it and down at the river.

There was no doubt about one of them; its height and the moonlight gleaming on metal were enough to identify Andy the Messenger Robot (Many Other Functions). The other one, though . . . who was the other one? Jake squinted but at first couldn't

tell. It was at least two hundred yards from his hiding place to the riverbank below, and although the moonlight was brilliant, it was also tricky. The man's face was raised so he could look at Andy, and the moonlight fell squarely on him, but the features seemed to swim. Only the hat the guy was wearing . . . he knew the *hat* . . .

You could be wrong.

Then the man turned his head slightly, the moonlight sent twin glints back from his face, and Jake knew for sure. There might be lots of cowpokes in the Calla who wore round-crowned hats like the one yonder, but Jake had only seen a single guy so far who wore spectacles.

Okay, it's Benny's Da'. What of it? Not all parents are like mine, some of them get worried about their kids, especially if they've already lost one the way Mr. Slightman lost Benny's twin sister. To hot-lung, Benny said, which probably means pneumonia. Six years ago. So we come out here camping, and Mr. Slightman sends Andy to keep an eye on us, only then he wakes up in the middle of the night and decides to check on us for himself. Maybe he had his own bad dream.

Maybe so, but that didn't explain why Andy and Mr. Slightman were having their palaver way down there by the river, did it?

Well, maybe he was afraid of waking us up. Maybe he'll come up to check on the tent now—in which case I better get back inside it—or maybe he'll take Andy's word that we're all right and head back to the Rocking B.

The moon went behind another cloud, and Jake thought it best to stay where he was until it came back out. When it did, what he saw filled him with the same sort of dismay he'd felt in his dream, following Mia through that deserted castle. For a moment he clutched at the possibility that this *was* a dream, that he'd simply gone from one to another, but the feel of the pebbles biting into his feet and the sound of Oy panting in his ear were completely undreamlike. This was happening, all right.

Mr. Slightman wasn't coming up toward where the boys had pitched their tent, and he wasn't heading back toward the Rocking B, either (although Andy was, in long strides along the bank). No, Benny's father was wading *across* the river. He was heading dead east.

He could have a reason for going over there. He could have a perfectly good reason.

Really? What might that perfectly good reason be? It wasn't the Calla anymore over there, Jake knew that much. Over there was nothing but waste ground and desert, a buffer between the borderlands and the kingdom of the dead that was Thunderclap.

First something wrong with Susannah—his friend Susannah. Now, it seemed, something wrong with the father of his new friend. Jake realized he had begun to gnaw at his nails, a habit he'd picked up in his final weeks at Piper School, and made himself stop.

"This isn't fair, you know," he said to Oy. "This isn't fair at all."

Oy licked his ear. Jake turned, put his arms around the bumbler, and pressed his face against his friend's lush coat. The bumbler stood patiently, allowing this. After a little while, Jake pulled himself back up to the more level ground where Oy stood. He felt a little better, a little comforted.

The moon went behind another cloud and the world darkened. Jake stood where he was. Oy whined softly. "Just a minute," Jake murmured.

The moon came out again. Jake looked hard at the place where Andy and Ben Slightman had palavered, marking it in his memory. There was a large round rock with a shiny surface. A dead log had washed up against it. Jake was pretty sure he could find this spot again, even if Benny's tent was gone.

Are you going to tell Roland?

"I don't know," he muttered.

"Know," Oy said from beside his ankle, making Jake jump a little. Or was it *no*? Was that what the bumbler had actually said?

Are you crazy?

He wasn't. There was a time when he'd thought he *was* crazy—crazy or going there in one hell of a hurry—but he didn't think that anymore. And sometimes Oy *did* read his mind, he knew it.

Jake slipped back into the tent. Benny was still fast asleep. Jake looked at the other boy—older in years but younger in a lot of the ways that mattered—for several seconds, biting his lip. He didn't want to get Benny's father in trouble. Not unless he had to.

Jake lay down and pulled his blankets up to his chin. He had never in his life felt so undecided about so many things, and he wanted to

cry. The day had begun to grow light before he was able to get back to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII: TOOK'S STORE; THE UNFOUND DOOR

ONE

For the first half hour after leaving the Rocking B, Roland and Jake rode east toward the smallholds in silence, their horses ambling side by side in perfect good fellowship. Roland knew Jake had something serious on his mind; that was clear from his troubled face. Yet the gunslinger was still astounded when Jake curled his fist, placed it against the left side of his chest, and said: "Roland, before Eddie and Susannah join up with us, may I speak to you dandinh?"

May I open my heart to your command. But the subtext was more complicated than that, and ancient—pre-dating Arthur Eld by centuries, or so Vannay had claimed. It meant to turn some insoluble emotional problem, usually having to do with a love affair, over to one's dinh. When one did this, he or she agreed to do exactly as the dinh suggested, immediately and without question. But surely Jake Chambers didn't have love problems—not unless he'd fallen for the gorgeous Francine Tavery, that was—and how had he known such a phrase in the first place?

Meanwhile Jake was looking at him with a wide-eyed, pale-cheeked solemnity that Roland didn't much like.

"Dan-dinh—where did you hear that, Jake?"

"Never did. Picked it up from your mind, I think." Jake added hastily: "I don't go snooping in there, or anything like that, but sometimes stuff just comes. Most of it isn't very important, I don't think, but sometimes there are phrases."

"You pick them up like a crow or a rustie picks up the bright things that catch its eye from the wing."

“I guess so, yeah.”

“What others? Tell me a few.”

Jake looked embarrassed. “I can’t remember many. Dan-dinh, that means I open my heart to you and agree to do what you say.”

It was more complicated than that, but the boy had caught the essence. Roland nodded. The sun felt good on his face as they clopped along. Margaret Eisenhart’s exhibition with the plate had soothed him, he’d had a good meeting with the lady-sai’s father later on, and he had slept quite well for the first time in many nights. “Yes.”

“Let’s see. There’s tell-a-me, which means—I think—to gossip about someone you shouldn’t gossip about. It stuck in my head, because that’s what gossip sounds like: tell-a-me.” Jake cupped a hand to his ear.

Roland smiled. It was actually *telamei*, but Jake had of course picked it up phonetically. This was really quite amazing. He reminded himself to guard his deep thoughts carefully in the future. There *were* ways that could be done, thank the gods.

“There’s dash-dinh, which means some sort of religious leader. You’re thinking about that this morning, I think, because of . . . is it because of the old Manni guy? Is he a dash-dinh?”

Roland nodded. “Very much so. And his name, Jake?” The gunslinger concentrated on it. “Can you see his name in my mind?”

“Sure, Henschick,” Jake said at once, and almost offhandedly. “You talked to him . . . when? Late last night?”

“Yes.” That he *hadn’t* been concentrating on, and he would have felt better had Jake not known of it. But the boy was strong in the touch, and Roland believed him when he said he hadn’t been snooping. At least not on purpose.

“Mrs. Eisenhart thinks she hates him, but you think she’s only afraid of him.”

“Yes,” Roland said. “You’re strong in the touch. Much more so than Alain ever was, and much more than you were. It’s because of the rose, isn’t it?”

Jake nodded. The rose, yes. They rode in silence a little longer, their horses’ hooves raising a thin dust. In spite of the sun the day was chilly, promising real fall.

“All right, Jake. Speak to me dan-dinh if you would, and I say thanks for your trust in such wisdom as I have.”

But for the space of almost two minutes Jake said nothing. Roland pried at him, trying to get inside the boy’s head as the boy had gotten inside his (and with such ease), but there was nothing. Nothing at a—

But there was. There was a rat . . . squirming, impaled on something . . .

“Where is the castle she goes to?” Jake asked. “Do you know?”

Roland was unable to conceal his surprise. His astonishment, really. And he supposed there was an element of guilt there, as well. Suddenly he understood . . . well, not everything, but much.

“There is no castle and never was,” he told Jake. “It’s a place she goes to in her mind, probably made up of the stories she’s read and the ones I’ve told by the campfire, as well. She goes there so she won’t have to see what she’s really eating. What her baby needs.”

“I saw her eating a roasted pig,” Jake said. “Only before she came, a rat was eating it. She stabbed it with a meat-fork.”

“Where did you see this?”

“In the castle.” He paused. “In her dream. I was in her dream.”

“Did she see you there?” The gunslinger’s blue eyes were sharp, almost blazing. His horse clearly felt some change, for it stopped. So did Jake’s. Here they were on East Road, less than a mile from where Red Molly Doolin had once killed a Wolf out of Thunderclap. Here they were, facing each other.

“No,” Jake said. “She didn’t see me.”

Roland was thinking of the night he had followed her into the swamp. He had known she was someplace else in her mind, had sensed that much, but not quite where. Whatever visions he’d taken from her mind had been murky. Now he knew. He knew something else as well: Jake was troubled by his dinh’s decision to let Susannah go on this way. And perhaps he was right to be troubled. But—

“It’s not Susannah you saw, Jake.”

“I know. It’s the one who still has her legs. She calls herself Mia. She’s pregnant and she’s scared to death.”

Roland said, “If you would speak to me dan-dinh, tell me everything you saw in your dream and everything that troubled you

about it upon waking. Then I'll give you the wisdom of my heart, such wisdom as I have."

"You won't . . . Roland, you won't scold me?"

This time Roland was unable to conceal his astonishment. "No, Jake. Far from it. Perhaps I should ask you not to scold *me*."

The boy smiled wanly. The horses began to amble again, this time a little faster, as if they knew there had almost been trouble and wanted to leave the place of it behind.

TWO

Jake wasn't entirely sure how much of what was on his mind was going to come out until he actually began to talk. He had awakened undecided all over again concerning what to tell Roland about Andy and Slightman the Elder. In the end he took his cue from what Roland had just said—*Tell me everything you saw in your dream and everything that troubled you about it upon waking*—and left out the meeting by the river entirely. In truth, that part seemed far less important to him this morning.

He told Roland about the way Mia had run down the stairs, and about her fear when she'd seen there was no food left in the dining room or banqueting hall or whatever it was. Then the kitchen. Finding the roast with the rat battened on it. Killing the competition. Gorging on the prize. Then him, waking with the shivers and trying not to scream.

He hesitated and glanced at Roland. Roland made his impatient twirling gesture—go on, hurry up, finish.

Well, he thought, he promised not to scold and he keeps his word.

That was true, but Jake was still unable to tell Roland he'd actually considered spilling the beans to Susannah himself. He did articulate his principal fear, however: that with three of them knowing and one of them not, their ka-tet was broken just when it needed to be the most solid. He even told Roland the old joke, guy with a blowout saying *It's only flat on the bottom*. He didn't expect Roland to laugh, and his expectations were met admirably in this regard. But he sensed Roland was to some degree ashamed, and Jake found this frightening.

He had an idea shame was pretty much reserved for people who didn't know what they were doing.

"And until last night it was even worse than three in and one out," Jake said. "Because you were trying to keep *me* out, as well. Weren't you?"

"No," Roland said.

"No?"

"I simply let things be as they were. I told Eddie because I was afraid that, once they were sharing a room together, he'd discover her wanderings and try to wake her up. I was afraid of what might happen to both of them if he did."

"Why not just tell her?"

Roland sighed. "Listen to me, Jake. Cort saw to our physical training when we were boys. Vannay saw to our mental training. Both of them tried to teach us what they knew of ethics. But in Gilead, our fathers were responsible for teaching us about ka. And because each child's father was different, each of us emerged from our childhood with a slightly different idea of what ka is and what it does. Do you understand?"

I understand that you're avoiding a very simple question, Jake thought, but nodded.

"My father told me a good deal on the subject, and most of it has left my mind, but one thing remains very clear. He said that when you are unsure, you must let ka alone to work itself out."

"So it's ka." Jake sounded disappointed. "Roland, that isn't very helpful."

Roland heard worry in the boy's voice, but it was the disappointment that stung him. He turned in the saddle, opened his mouth, realized that some hollow justification was about to come spilling out, and closed it again. Instead of justifying, he told the truth.

"I don't know what to do. Would you like to tell me?"

The boy's face flushed an alarming shade of red, and Roland realized Jake thought he was being sarcastic, for the gods' sake. That he was angry. Such lack of understanding was frightening. *He's right,* the gunslinger thought. *We are broken. Gods help us.*

“Be not so,” Roland said. “Hear me, I beg—listen well. In Calla Bryn Sturgis, the Wolves are coming. In New York, Balazar and his ‘gentlemen’ are coming. Both are bound to arrive soon. Will Susannah’s baby wait until these matters have been resolved, one way or the other? I don’t know.”

“She doesn’t even look pregnant,” Jake said faintly. Some of the red had gone out of his cheeks, but he still kept his head down.

“No,” Roland said, “she doesn’t. Her breasts are a trifle fuller—perhaps her hips, as well—but those are the only signs. And so I have some reason to hope. I must hope, and so must you. For, on top of the Wolves and the business of the rose in your world, there’s the question of Black Thirteen and how to deal with it. I think I know—I hope I know—but I must speak to Henchick again. And we must hear the rest of Pere Callahan’s story. Have you thought of saying something to Susannah on your own?”

“I . . .” Jake bit his lip and fell silent.

“I see you have. Put the thought out of your mind. If anything other than death could break our fellowship for good, to tell without my sanction would do it, Jake. I am your dinh.”

“I know it!” Jake nearly shouted. “Don’t you think I know it?”

“And do you think I like it?” Roland asked, almost as heatedly. “Do you not see how much easier all this was before . . .” He trailed off, appalled by what he had nearly said.

“Before we came,” Jake said. His voice was flat. “Well guess what? We didn’t *ask* to come, none of us.” *And I didn’t ask you to drop me into the dark, either. To kill me.*

“Jake . . .” The gunslinger sighed, raised his hands, dropped them back to his thighs. Up ahead was the turning which would take them to the Jaffords smallhold, where Eddie and Susannah would be waiting for them. “All I can do is say again what I’ve said already: when one isn’t sure about ka, it’s best to let ka work itself out. If one meddles, one almost always does the wrong thing.”

“That sounds like what folks in the Kingdom of New York call a copout, Roland. An answer that isn’t an answer, just a way to get people to go along with what you want.”

Roland considered. His lips firmed. “You asked me to command your heart.”

Jake nodded warily.

“Then here are the two things I say to you dandin. First, I say that the three of us—you, me, Eddie—will speak an-tet to Susannah before the Wolves come, and tell her everything we know. That she’s pregnant, that her baby is almost surely a demon’s child, and that she’s created a woman named Mia to mother that child. Second, I say that we discuss this no more until the time to tell her has come.”

Jake considered these things. As he did, his face gradually brightened with relief. “Do you mean it?”

“Yes.” Roland tried not to show how much this question hurt and angered him. He understood, after all, why the boy would ask. “I promise and swear to my promise. Does it do ya?”

“Yes! It does me fine!”

Roland nodded. “I’m not doing this because I’m convinced it’s the right thing but because *you* are, Jake. I—”

“Wait a second, whoa, wait,” Jake said. His smile was fading. “Don’t try to put all this on me. I never—”

“Spare me such nonsense.” Roland used a dry and distant tone Jake had seldom heard. “You ask part of a man’s decision. I allow it—*must* allow it—because ka has decreed you take a man’s part in great matters. You opened this door when you questioned my judgment. Do you deny that?”

Jake had gone from pale to flushed to pale once more. He looked badly frightened, and shook his head without speaking a single word. *Ah, gods, Roland thought, I hate every part of this. It stinks like a dying man’s shit.*

In a quieter tone he said, “No, you didn’t ask to be brought here. Nor did I wish to rob you of your childhood. Yet here we are, and ka stands to one side and laughs. We must do as it wills or pay the price.”

Jake lowered his head and spoke two words in a trembling whisper: “I know.”

“You believe Susannah should be told. I, on the other hand, don’t know *what* to do—in this matter I’ve lost my compass. When one knows and one does not, the one who does not must bow his head and the one who does must take responsibility. Do you understand me, Jake?”

“Yes,” Jake whispered, and touched his curled hand to his brow.

“Good. We’ll leave that part and say thankya. You’re strong in the touch.”

“I wish I wasn’t!” Jake burst out.

“Nevertheless. Can you touch her?”

“Yes. I don’t pry—not into her or any of you—but sometimes I do touch her. I get little snatches of songs she’s thinking of, or thoughts of her apartment in New York. She misses it. Once she thought, ‘I wish I’d gotten a chance to read that new Allen Drury novel that came from the book club.’ I think Allen Drury must be a famous writer from her when.”

“Surface things, in other words.”

“Yes.”

“But you could go deeper.”

“I could probably watch her undress, too,” Jake said glumly, “but it wouldn’t be right.”

“Under these circumstances, it *is* right, Jake. Think of her as a well where you must go every day and draw a single dipperful to make sure the water’s still sweet. I want to know if she changes. In particular I want to know if she’s planning alleyo.”

Jake looked at him, round-eyed. “To run away? Run away where?”

Roland shook his head. “I don’t know. Where does a cat go to drop her litter? In a closet? Under the barn?”

“What if we tell her and the other one gets the upper hand? What if *Mia* goes alleyo, Roland, and drags Susannah along with her?”

Roland didn’t reply. This, of course, was exactly what he was afraid of, and Jake was smart enough to know it.

Jake was looking at him with a certain understandable resentment . . . but also with acceptance. “Once a day. No more than that.”

“More if you sense a change.”

“All right,” Jake said. “I hate it, but I asked you dan-dinh. Guess you got me.”

“It’s not an arm-wrestle, Jake. Nor a game.”

“I know.” Jake shook his head. “It feels like you turned it around on me somehow, but okay.”

I did turn it around on you, Roland thought. He supposed it was good none of them knew how lost he was just now, how absent the

intuition that had carried him through so many difficult situations. *I did . . . but only because I had to.*

“We keep quiet now, but we tell her before the Wolves come,” Jake said. “Before we have to fight. That’s the deal?”

Roland nodded.

“If we have to fight Balazar first—in the other world—we still have to tell her before we do. Okay?”

“Yes,” Roland said. “All right.”

“I hate this,” Jake said morosely.

Roland said, “So do I.”

THREE

Eddie was sittin and whittlin on the Jaffordses’ porch, listening to some confused story of Granpere’s and nodding in what he hoped were the right places, when Roland and Jake rode up. Eddie put away his knife and sauntered down the steps to meet them, calling back over his shoulder for Suze.

He felt extraordinarily good this morning. His fears of the night before had blown away, as our most extravagant night-fears often do; like the Pere’s Type One and Type Two vampires, those fears seemed especially allergic to daylight. For one thing, all the Jaffords children had been present and accounted for at breakfast. For another, there was indeed a shoat missing from the barn. Tian had asked Eddie and Susannah if they’d heard anything in the night, and nodded with gloomy satisfaction when both of them shook their heads.

“Aye. The mutie strains’ve mostly run out in our part of the world, but not in the north. There are packs of wild dogs that come down every fall. Two weeks ago they was likely in Calla Amity; next week we’ll be shed of em and they’ll be Calla Lockwood’s problem. Silent, they are. It’s not quiet I mean, but mute. Nothin in here.” Tian patted a hand against his throat. “Sides, it ain’t like they didn’t do me at least *some* good. I found a hell of a big barn-rat out there. Dead as a rock. One of em tore its head almost clean off.”

“Nasty,” Hedda had said, pushing her bowl away with a theatrical grimace.

“You eat that porridge, miss,” Zalia said. “It’ll warm’ee while you’re hanging out the clothes.”

“Maw-Maw, *why-y-yy?*”

Eddie had caught Susannah’s eye and tipped her a wink. She winked back, and everything was all right. Okay, so she’d done a little wandering in the night. Had a little midnight snack. Buried the leavings. And yes, this business of her being pregnant had to be addressed. Of course it did. But it would come out all right, Eddie felt sure of it. And by daylight, the idea that Susannah could ever hurt a child seemed flat-out ridiculous.

“Hile, Roland. Jake.” Eddie turned to where Zalia had come out onto the porch. She dropped a curtsy. Roland took off his hat, held it out to her, and then put it back on.

“Sai,” he asked her, “you stand with your husband in the matter of fighting the Wolves, aye?”

She sighed, but her gaze was steady enough. “I do, gunslinger.”

“Do you ask aid and succor?”

The question was spoken without ostentation—almost conversationally, in fact—but Eddie felt his heart gave a lurch, and when Susannah’s hand crept into his, he squeezed it. Here was the third question, the key question, and it hadn’t been asked of the Calla’s big farmer, big rancher, or big businessman. It had been asked of a sodbuster’s wife with her mousy brown hair pulled back in a bun, a smallhold farmer’s wife whose skin, although naturally dark, had even so cracked and coarsened from too much sun, whose housedress had been faded by many washings. And it was right that it should be so, perfectly right. Because the soul of Calla Bryn Sturgis was in four dozen smallhold farms just like this, Eddie reckoned. Let Zalia Jaffords speak for all of them. Why the hell not?

“I seek it and say thankya,” she told him simply. “Lord God and Man Jesus bless you and yours.”

Roland nodded as if he’d been doing no more than passing the time of day. “Margaret Eisenhart showed me something.”

“Did she?” Zalia asked, and smiled slightly. Tian came plodding around the corner, looking tired and sweaty, although it was only nine in the morning. Over one shoulder was a busted piece of harness. He

wished Roland and Jake a good day, then stood by his wife, a hand around her waist and resting on her hip.

“Aye, and told us the tale of Lady Oriza and Gray Dick.”

“ ’Tis a fine tale,” she said.

“It is,” Roland said. “I’ll not fence, lady-sai. Will’ee come out on the line with your dish when the time comes?”

Tian’s eyes widened. He opened his mouth, then shut it again. He looked at his wife like a man who has suddenly been visited by a great revelation.

“Aye,” Zalia said.

Tian dropped the harness and hugged her. She hugged him back, briefly and hard, then turned to Roland and his friends once more.

Roland was smiling. Eddie was visited by a faint sense of unreality, as he always was when he observed this phenomenon. “Good. And will you show Susannah how to throw it?”

Zalia looked thoughtfully at Susannah. “Would she learn?”

“I don’t know,” Susannah said. “Is it something I’m supposed to learn, Roland?”

“Yes.”

“When, gunslinger?” Zalia asked.

Roland calculated. “Three or four days from now, if all goes well. If she shows no aptitude, send her back to me and we’ll try Jake.”

Jake started visibly.

“I think she’ll do fine, though. I never knew a gunslinger who didn’t take to new weapons like birds to a new pond. And I must have at least one who can either throw the dish or shoot the bah, for we are four with only three guns we can rely on. And I like the dish. I like it very well.”

“I’ll show what I can, sure,” Zalia said, and gave Susannah a shy look.

“Then, in nine days’ time, you and Margaret and Rosalita and Sarey Adams will come to the Old Fella’s house and we’ll see what we’ll see.”

“You have a plan?” Tian asked. His eyes were hot with hope.

“I will by then,” Roland said.

FOUR

They rode toward town four abreast at that same ambling gait, but where the East Road crossed another, this one going north and south, Roland pulled up. "Here I leave you for a little while," he told them. He pointed north, toward the hills. "Two hours from here is what some of the Seeking Folk call Manni Calla and others call Manni Redpath. It's their place by either name, a little town within the larger one. I'll meet with Henchick there."

"Their dinh," Eddie said.

Roland nodded. "Beyond the Manni village, another hour or less, are a few played-out mines and a lot of caves."

"The place you pointed out on the Tavery twins' map?" Susannah asked.

"No, but close by. The cave I'm interested in is the one they call Doorway Cave. We'll hear of it from Callahan tonight when he finishes his story."

"Do you know that for a fact, or is it intuition?" Susannah asked.

"I know it from Henchick. He spoke of it last night. He also spoke of the Pere. I could tell you, but it's best we hear it from Callahan himself, I think. In any case, that cave will be important to us."

"It's the way back, isn't it?" Jake said. "You think it's the way back to New York."

"More," the gunslinger said. "With Black Thirteen, I think it might be the way to everywhere and everywhen."

"Including the Dark Tower?" Eddie asked. His voice was husky, barely more than a whisper.

"I can't say," Roland replied, "but I believe Henchick will show me the cave, and I may know more then. Meanwhile, you three have business in Took's, the general store."

"Do we?" Jake asked.

"You do." Roland balanced his purse on his lap, opened it, and dug deep. At last he came out with a leather drawstring bag none of them had seen before.

"My father gave me this," he said absently. "It's the only thing I have now, other than the ruins of my younger face, that I had when I rode into Mejis with my ka-mates all those years ago."

They looked at it with awe, sharing the same thought: if what the gunslinger said was true, the little leather bag had to be hundreds of years old. Roland opened it, looked in, nodded. "Susannah, hold out your hands."

She did. Into her cupped palms he poured perhaps ten pieces of silver, emptying the bag.

"Eddie, hold out yours."

"Uh, Roland, I think the cupboard's bare."

"Hold out your hands."

Eddie shrugged and did so. Roland tipped the bag over them and poured out a dozen gold pieces, emptying the bag.

"Jake?"

Jake held out his hands. From the pocket in the front of the poncho, Oy looked on with interest. This time the bag disgorged half a dozen bright gemstones before it was empty. Susannah gasped.

"They're but garnets," Roland said, almost apologetically. "A fair medium of exchange out here, from what they say. They won't buy much, but they *will* buy a boy's needs, I think."

"Cool!" Jake was grinning broadly. "Say thankya! Big-big!"

They looked at the empty sack with silent wonder, and Roland smiled. "Most of the magic I once knew or had access to is gone, but you see a little lingers. Like soaked leaves in the bottom of a teapot."

"Is there even more stuff inside?" Jake asked.

"No. In time, there might be. It's a grow-bag." Roland returned the ancient leather sack to his purse, came out with the fresh supply of tobacco Callahan had given him, and rolled a smoke. "Go in the store. Buy what you fancy. A few shirts, perhaps—and one for me, if it does ya; I could use one. Then you'll go out on the porch and take your ease, as town folk do. Sai Took won't care much for it, there's nothing he'd like to see so well as our backs going east toward Thunderclap, but he'll not shoo you off."

"Like to see him try," Eddie grunted, and touched the butt of Roland's gun.

"You won't need that," Roland said. "Custom alone will keep him behind his counter, minding his till. That, and the temper of the town."

"It's going our way, isn't it?" Susannah said.

“Yes, Susannah. If you asked them straight on, as I asked sai Jaffords, they’d not answer, so it’s best not to ask, not yet. But yes. They mean to fight. Or to let us fight for them. Which can’t be held against them. Fighting for those who can’t fight for themselves is our job.”

Eddie opened his mouth to tell Roland what Gran-pere had told him, then closed it again. Roland hadn’t asked him, although that had been the reason he had sent them to the Jaffordses’. Nor, he realized, had Susannah asked him. She hadn’t mentioned his conversation with old Jamie at all.

“Will you ask Henchick what you asked Mrs. Jaffords?” Jake asked.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Him I’ll ask.”

“Because you know what he’ll say.”

Roland nodded and smiled again. This was not a smile that held any comfort; it was as cold as sunlight on snow. “A gunslinger never asks that question until he knows what the answer will be,” he said. “We meet at the Pere’s house for the evening meal. If all goes well, I’ll be there just when the sun comes a-horizon. Are you all well? Eddie? Jake?” A slight pause. “Susannah?”

They all nodded. Oy nodded, too.

“Then until evening. Do ya fine, and may the sun never fall in your eyes.”

He gigged his horse and turned off on the neglected little road leading north. They watched him go until he was out of sight, and as always when he was gone and they were on their own, the three of them shared a complex feeling that was part fear, part loneliness, and part nervous pride.

They rode on toward town with their horses a little closer together.

FIVE

“Nayyup, nayyup, don’tchee bring that dairty bumble-beast in ’ere, don’tchee never!” Eben Took cried from his place behind the counter. He had a high, almost womanish voice; it scratched the dozy quiet of the mercantile like splinters of glass. He was pointing at Oy, who was peering from the front pocket of Jake’s poncho. A dozen

desultory shoppers, most of them women dressed in homespun, turned to look.

Two farm workers, dressed in plain brown shirts, dirty white pants, and zoris, had been standing at the counter. They backed away in a hurry, as if expecting the two outworlders carrying guns to immediately slap leather and blow sai Took all the way to Calla Boot Hill.

“Yessir,” Jake said mildly. “Sorry.” He lifted Oy from the pocket of the poncho and set him down on the sunny porch, just outside the door. “Stay, boy.”

“Oy stay,” the bumbler said, and curled his clockspring of a tail around his haunches.

Jake rejoined his friends and they made their way into the store. To Susannah, it smelled like ones she’d been in during her time in Mississippi: a mingled aroma of salted meat, leather, spice, coffee, mothballs, and aged cozenry. Beside the counter was a large wooden barrel with the top slid partway aside and a pair of tongs hanging on a nail nearby. From the keg came the strong and tearful smell of pickles in brine.

“No credit!” Took cried in that same shrill, annoying voice. “Ah en’t ever give credit to no one from away and Ah never will! Say true! Say thankya!”

Susannah grasped Eddie’s hand and gave it a warning squeeze. Eddie shook it off impatiently, but when he spoke, his voice was as mild as Jake’s had been. “Say thankya, sai Took, we’d not ask it.” And recalled something he’d heard from Pere Callahan: “Never in life.”

There was a murmur of approval from some of those in the store. None of them was any longer making even the slightest pretense of shopping. Took flushed. Susannah took Eddie’s hand again and this time gave him a smile to go with the squeeze.

At first they shopped in silence, but before they finished, several people—all of whom had been at the Pavilion two nights before—said hello and asked (timidly) how they did. All three said they did fine. They got shirts, including two for Roland, denim pants, underwear singlets, and three sets of shor’boots which looked ugly but serviceable. Jake got a bag of candy, picking it out by pointing while Took put it in a bag of woven grass with grudging and disagreeable

slowness. When he tried to buy a sack of tobacco and some rolling papers for Roland, Took refused him with all too evident pleasure. “Nayyup, nayyup, Ah’ll not sell smokweed to a boy. Never have done.”

“Good idea, too,” Eddie said. “One step below devil grass, and the Surgeon General says thankya. But you’ll sell it to me, won’t you, sai? Our dinh enjoys a smoke in the evening, while he’s planning out new ways to help folks in need.”

There were a few titters at this. The store had begun to fill up quite amazingly. They were playing to a real audience now, and Eddie didn’t mind a bit. Took was coming off as a shithead, which wasn’t surprising. Took clearly *was* a shithead.

“Never seen no one dance a better commala than he did!” a man called from one of the aisles, and there were murmurs of assent.

“Say thankya,” Eddie said. “I’ll pass it on.”

“And your lady sings well,” said another.

Susannah dropped a skirtless curtsy. She finished her own shopping by pushing the lid a little further off the pickle barrel and dipping out an enormous specimen with the tongs. Eddie leaned close and said, “I might have gotten something that green from my nose once, but I can’t really remember.”

“Don’t be grotesque, dear one,” Susannah replied, smiling sweetly all the while.

Eddie and Jake were content to let her assume responsibility for the dickering, which Susannah did with relish. Took tried his very best to overcharge her for their gunna, but Eddie had an idea this wasn’t aimed at them specifically but was just part of what Eben Took saw as his job (or perhaps his sacred calling). Certainly he was smart enough to gauge the temperature of his clientele, for he had pretty much laid off nagging them by the time the trading was finished. This did not keep him from ringing their coins on a special square of metal which seemed reserved for that sole purpose, and holding Jake’s garnets up to the light and rejecting one of them (which looked like all the others, so far as Eddie, Jake, and Susannah could see).

“How long’ll ’ee be here, folks?” he asked in a marginally cordial voice when the dickering was done. Yet his eyes were shrewd, and Eddie had no doubt that whatever they said would reach the ears of

Eisenhart, Overholser, and anyone else who mattered before the day was done.

“Ah, well, that depends on what we see,” Eddie said. “And what we see depends on what folks show us, wouldn’t you say?”

“Aye,” Took agreed, but he looked mystified. There were now perhaps fifty people in the roomy mercantile-and-grocery, most of them simply gawking. There was a powdery sort of excitement in the air. Eddie liked it. He didn’t know if that was right or wrong, but yes, he liked it very well.

“Also depends on what folks want,” Susannah amplified.

“Ah’ll tell you what they ’unt, brownie!” Took said in his shrill shards-of-glass voice. “They ’unt peace, same as ever! They ’unt t’town t’sstill be here arter you four—”

Susannah seized the man’s thumb and bent it back. It was dextrously done. Jake doubted if more than two or three *folken*, those closest to the counter, saw it, but Took’s face went a dirty white and his eyes bulged from their sockets.

“I’ll take that word from an old man who’s lost most of his sense,” she said, “but I won’t take it from you. Call me brownie again, fatso, and I’ll pull your tongue out of your head and wipe your ass with it.”

“Cry pardon!” Took gasped. Now sweat broke on his cheeks in large and rather disgusting drops. “Cry’er pardon, so Ah do!”

“Fine,” Susannah said, and let him go. “Now we might just go out and sit on your porch for a bit, for shopping’s tiring work.”

SIX

Took’s General Store featured no Guardians of the Beam such as Roland had told of in Mejis, but rockers were lined up the long length of the porch, as many as two dozen of them. And all three sets of steps were flanked by stuffy-guys in honor of the season. When Roland’s ka-mates came out, they took three rockers in the middle of the porch. Oy lay down contentedly between Jake’s feet and appeared to go to sleep with his nose on his paws.

Eddie cocked a thumb back over his shoulder in Eben Took’s general direction. “Too bad Detta Walker wasn’t here to shoplift a few things from the son of a bitch.”

“Don’t think I wasn’t tempted on her behalf,” Susannah said.

“Folks coming,” Jake said. “I think they want to talk to us.”

“Sure they do,” Eddie said. “It’s what we’re here for.” He smiled, his handsome face growing handsomer still. Under his breath he said, “Meet the gunslingers, folks. Come-come-commala, shootin’s gonna folla.”

“Hesh up that bad mouth of yours, son,” Susannah said, but she was laughing.

They’re crazy, Jake thought. But if he was the exception, why was he laughing, too?

SEVEN

Henchick of the Manni and Roland of Gilead nooned in the shadow of a massive rock outcrop, eating cold chicken and rice wrapped in tortillas and drinking sof’ cider from a jug which they passed back and forth between them. Henchick set them on with a word to what he called both The Force and The Over, then fell silent. That was fine with Roland. The old man had answered aye to the one question the gunslinger had needed to ask.

By the time they’d finished their meal, the sun had gone behind the high cliffs and escarpments. Thus they walked in shadow, making their way up a path that was strewn with rubble and far too narrow for their horses, which had been left in a grove of yellow-leaf quaking aspen below. Scores of tiny lizards ran before them, sometimes darting into cracks in the rocks.

Shady or not, it was hotter than the hinges of hell out here. After a mile of steady climbing, Roland began to breathe hard and use his bandanna to wipe the sweat from his cheeks and throat. Henchick, who appeared to be somewhere in the neighborhood of eighty, walked ahead of him with steady serenity. He breathed with the ease of a man strolling in a park. He’d left his cloak below, laid over the branch of a tree, but Roland could see no patches of sweat spreading on his black shirt.

They reached a bend in the path, and for a moment the world to the north and west opened out below them in gauzy splendor. Roland could see the huge taupe rectangles of graze-land, and tiny toy cattle.

To the south and east, the fields grew greener as they marched toward the river lowlands. He could see the Calla village, and even—in the dreaming western distance—the edge of great forest through which they had come to get here. The breeze that struck them on this stretch of the path was so cold it made Roland gasp. Yet he raised his face into it gratefully, eyes mostly closed, smelling all the things that were the Calla: steers, horses, grain, river water, and rice rice rice.

Henchick had doffed his broad-brimmed, flat-crowned hat and also stood with his head raised and his eyes mostly closed, a study in silent thanksgiving. The wind blew back his long hair and playfully divided his waist-length beard into forks. They stood so for perhaps three minutes, letting the breeze cool them. Then Henchick clapped his hat back on his head. He looked at Roland. “Do’ee say the world will end in fire or in ice, gunslinger?”

Roland considered this. “Neither,” he said at last. “I think in darkness.”

“Do’ee say so?”

“Aye.”

Henchick considered a moment, then turned to continue on up the path. Roland was impatient to get to where they were going, but he touched the Manni’s shoulder, nevertheless. A promise was a promise. Especially one made to a lady.

“I stayed with one of the forgetful last night,” Roland said. “Isn’t that what you call those who choose to leave thy ka-tet?”

“We speak of the forgetful, aye,” Henchick said, watching him closely, “but not of ka-tet. We know that word, but it is not our word, gunslinger.”

“In any case, I—”

“In any case, thee slept at the Rocking B with Vaughn Eisenhart and our daughter, Margaret. And she threw the dish for’ee. I didn’t speak of these things when we talked last night, for I knew them as well as you did. Any ro’, we had other matters to discuss, did we not? Caves, and such.”

“We did.” Roland tried not to show his surprise. He must have failed, because Henchick nodded slightly, the lips just visible within his beard curving in a slight smile.

“The Manni have ways of knowing, gunslinger; always have.”

“Will you not call me Roland?”

“Nay.”

“She said to tell thee that Margaret of the Redpath Clan does fine with her heathen man, fine still.”

Henchick nodded. If he felt pain at this, it didn't show. Not even in his eyes. “She's damned,” he said. His tone was that of a man saying *Looks like it might come off sunny by afternoon.*

“Are you asking me to tell her that?” Roland asked. He was amused and aghast at the same time.

Henchick's blue eyes had faded and grown watery with age, but there was no mistaking the surprise that came into them at this question. His bushy eyebrows went up. “Why would I bother?” he asked. “She knows. She'll have time to repent her heathen man at leisure in the depths of Na'ar. She knows that, too. Come, gunslinger. Another quarter-wheel and we're there. But it's upsy.”

EIGHT

Upsy it was, very upsy indeed. Half an hour later, they came to a place where a fallen boulder blocked most of the path. Henchick eased his way around it, dark pants rippling in the wind, beard blowing out sideways, long-nailed fingers clutching for purchase. Roland followed. The boulder was warm from the sun, but the wind was now so cold he was shivering. He sensed the heels of his worn boots sticking out over a blue drop of perhaps two thousand feet. If the old man decided to push him, all would end in a hurry. And in decidedly undramatic fashion.

But it wouldn't, he thought. Eddie would carry on in my place, and the other two would follow until they fell.

On the far side of the boulder, the path ended in a ragged, dark hole nine feet high and five wide. A draft blew out of it into Roland's face. Unlike the breeze that had played with them as they climbed the path, this air was smelly and unpleasant. Coming with it, carried upon it, were cries Roland couldn't make out. But they were the cries of human voices.

“Is it the cries of folks in Na'ar we're hearing?” he asked Henchick.

No smile touched the old man's mostly hidden lips now. "Speak not in jest," he said. "Not here. For you are in the presence of the infinite."

Roland could believe it. He moved forward cautiously, boots gritting on the rubbly scree, his hand dropping to the butt of his gun—he always wore the left one now, when he wore any; below the hand that was whole.

The stench breathing from the cave's open mouth grew stronger yet. Noxious if not outright toxic. Roland held his bandanna against his mouth and nose with his diminished right hand. Something inside the cave, there in the shadows. Bones, yes, the bones of lizards and other small animals, but something else as well, a shape he knew—

"Be careful, gunslinger," Henchick said, but stood aside to let Roland enter the cave if he so desired.

My desires don't matter, Roland thought. This is just something I have to do. Probably that makes it simpler.

The shape in the shadows grew clearer. He wasn't surprised to see it was a door exactly like those he'd come to on the beach; why else would this have been called Doorway Cave? It was made of ironwood (or perhaps ghostwood), and stood about twenty feet inside the entrance to the cave. It was six and a half feet high, as the doors on the beach had been. And, like those, it stood freely in the shadows, with hinges that seemed fastened to nothing.

Yet it would turn on those hinges easily, he thought. Will turn. When the time comes.

There was no keyhole. The knob appeared to be crystal. Etched upon it was a rose. On the beach of the Western Sea, the three doors had been marked with the High Speech: THE PRISONER on one, THE LADY OF THE SHADOWS on another, THE PUSHER on the third. Here were the hieroglyphs he had seen on the box hidden in Callahan's church:



"It means 'unfound,' " Roland said.

Henchick nodded, but when Roland moved to walk around the door, the old man took a step forward and held out a hand. "Be

careful, or'ee may be able to discover who those voices belong to for yourself."

Roland saw what he meant. Eight or nine feet beyond the door, the floor of the cave sloped down at an angle of fifty or even sixty degrees. There was nothing to hold onto, and the rock looked smooth as glass. Thirty feet down, this slippery-slide disappeared into a chasm. Moaning, intertwined voices rose from it. And then one came clear. It was that of Gabrielle Deschain.

"*Roland, don't!*" his dead mother shrieked up from the darkness. "*Don't shoot, it's me! It's your m—*" But before she could finish, the overlapping crash of pistol shots silenced her. Pain shot up into Roland's head. He was pressing the bandanna against his face almost hard enough to break his own nose. He tried to ease the muscles in his arm and at first was unable to do so.

Next from that reeking darkness came the voice of his father.

"I've known since you toddled that you were no genius," Steven Deschain said in a tired voice, "but I never believed until yestereve that you were an idiot. To let him drive you like a cow in a chute! Gods!"

Never mind. These are not even ghosts. I think they're only echoes, somehow taken from deep inside my own head and projected.

When he stepped around the door (minding the drop now to his right), the door was gone. There was only the silhouette of Henchick, a severe man-shape cut from black paper standing in the cave's mouth.

The door's still there, but you can only see it from one side. And in that way it's like the other doors, too.

"A trifle upsetting, isn't it?" tittered the voice of Walter from deep in the Doorway Cave's gullet. "Give it over, Roland! Better to give it over and die than to discover the room at the top of the Dark Tower is empty."

Then came the urgent blare of Eld's Horn, raising gooseflesh on Roland's arms and hackles on the back of his neck: Cuthbert Allgood's final battle-cry as he ran down Jericho Hill toward his death at the hands of the barbarians with the blue faces.

Roland lowered the bandanna from his own face and began walking again. One pace; two; three. Bones crunched beneath his

booth heels. At the third pace the door reappeared, at first side-to, with its latch seeming to bite into thin air, like the hinges on its other side. He stopped for a moment, gazing at this thickness, relishing the strangeness of the door just as he had relished the strangeness of the ones he'd encountered on the beach. And on the beach he had been sick almost to the point of death. If he moved his head forward slightly, the door disappeared. If he pulled it back again, it was there. The door never wavered, never shimmered. It was always a case of either/or, there/not there.

He stepped all the way back, put his splayed palms on the ironwood, leaned on them. He could feel a faint but perceptible vibration, like the feel of powerful machinery. From the dark gullet of the cave, Rhea of the Cöos screamed up at him, calling him a brat who'd never seen his true father's face, telling him his bit o' tail burst her throat with her screams as she burned. Roland ignored it and grasped the crystal doorknob.

"Nay, gunslinger, ye dare not!" Henchick cried in alarm.

"I dare," Roland said. And he did, but the knob wouldn't turn in either direction. He stepped back from it.

"But the door was open when you found the priest?" he asked Henchick. They had spoken of this the previous night, but Roland wanted to hear more.

"Aye. 'Twas I and Jemmin who found him. Thee knows we elder Manni seek the other worlds? Not for treasure but for enlightenment?"

Roland nodded. He also knew that some had come back from their travels insane. Others never came back at all.

"These hills are magnetic, and riddled with many ways into many worlds. We'd gone out to a cave near the old garnet mines and there we found a message."

"What kind of message?"

"'Twas a machine set in the cave's mouth," Henchick said. "Push a button and a voice came out of it. The voice told us to come here."

"You knew of this cave before?"

"Aye, but before the Pere came, it were called the Cave of Voices. For which reason thee now knows."

Roland nodded and motioned for Henchick to go on.

“The voice from the machine spoke in accents like those of your ka-mates, gunslinger. It said that we should come here, Jemmin and I, and we’d find a door and a man and a wonder. So we did.”

“Someone left you instructions,” Roland mused. It was Walter he was thinking of. The man in black, who had also left them the cookies Eddie called Keeblers. Walter was Flagg and Flagg was Marten and Marten . . . was he Maerlyn, the old rogue wizard of legend? On that subject Roland remained unsure. “And spoke to you by name?”

“Nay, he did not know s’much. Only called us the Manni-folk.”

“How did this someone know where to leave the voice machine, do you think?”

Henchick’s lips thinned. “Why must thee think it was a person? Why not a god speaking in a man’s voice? Why not some agent of The Over?”

Roland said, “Gods leave siguls. Men leave machines.” He paused. “In my own experience, of course, Pa.”

Henchick made a curt gesture, as if to tell Roland to spare him the flattery.

“Was it general knowledge that thee and thy friend were exploring the cave where you found the speaking machine?”

Henchick shrugged rather sullenly. “People see us, I suppose. Some mayhap watch over the miles with their spyglasses and binoculars. Also, there’s the mechanical man. He sees much and prattles everlastingly to all who will listen.”

Roland took this for a yes. He thought someone had known Pere Callahan was coming. And that he would need help when he arrived on the outskirts of the Calla.

“How far open was the door?” Roland asked.

“These are questions for Callahan,” Henchick said. “I promised to show thee this place. I have. Surely that’s enough for ye.”

“Was he conscious when you found him?”

There was a reluctant pause. Then: “Nay. Only muttering, as one does in his sleep if he dreams badly.”

“Then he can’t tell me, can he? Not this part. Henchick, you seek aid and succor. This thee told me on behalf of all your clans. Help me, then! Help me to help you!”

“I do na’ see how this helps.”

And it might not help, not in the matter of the Wolves which so concerned this old man and the rest of Calla Bryn Sturgis, but Roland had other worries and other needs; other fish to fry, as Susannah sometimes said. He stood looking at Henchick, one hand still on the crystal doorknob.

“It were open a bit,” Henchick said finally. “So were the box. Both just a bit. The one they call the Old Fella, he lay facedown, there.” He pointed to the rubble- and bone-littered floor where Roland’s boots were now planted. “The box were by his right hand, open about this much.” Henchick held his thumb and forefinger perhaps two inches apart. “Coming from it was the sound of the *kammen*. I’ve heard em before, but never s’strong. They made my very eyes ache and gush water. Jemmin cried out and begun walking toward the door. The Old Fella’s hands were spread out on the ground and Jemmin treaded on one of em and never noticed.

“The door were only ajar, like the box, but a terrible light was coming through it. I’ve traveled much, gunslinger, to many *wheres* and many *whens*; I’ve seen other doors and I’ve seen todash takhen, the holes in reality, but never any light like that. It were black, like all the emptiness that ever was, but there were something red in it.”

“The Eye,” Roland said.

Henchick looked at him. “An eye? Do’ee say so?”

“I *think* so,” Roland said. “The blackness you saw is cast by Black Thirteen. The red might have been the Eye of the Crimson King.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know,” Roland said. “Only that he bides far east of here, in Thunderclap or beyond it. I believe he may be a Guardian of the Dark Tower. He may even think he owns it.”

At Roland’s mention of the Tower, the old man covered his eyes with both hands, a gesture of deep religious dread.

“What happened next, Henchick? Tell me, I beg.”

“I began to reach for Jemmin, then recalled how he stepped on the man’s hand with his bootheel, and thought better of it. Thought, ‘Henchick, if thee does that, he’ll drag you through with him.’ ” The old man’s eyes fastened on Roland’s. “Traveling is what we do, I know ye ken as much, and rarely are we afraid, for we trust The Over. Yet I

were afraid of that light and the sound of those chimes.” He paused. “Terrified of them. I’ve never spoken of that day.”

“Not even to Pere Callahan?”

Henchick shook his head.

“Did he not speak to you when he woke up?”

“He asked if he were dead. I told him that if he were so, so were we all.”

“What about Jemmin?”

“Died two years later.” Henchick tapped the front of his black shirt. “Heart.”

“How many years since you found Callahan here?”

Henchick shook his head slowly back and forth in wide arcs, a Manni gesture so common it might have been genetic. “Gunslinger, I know not. For time is—”

“Yes, in drift,” Roland said impatiently. “How long would you *say*?”

“More than five years, for he has his church and superstitious fools to fill it, ye ken.”

“What did you do? How did thee save Jemmin?”

“Fell on my knees and closed the box,” Henchick said. “’Twas all I could think to do. If I’d hesitated even a single second I do believe I would ha’ been lost, for the same black light were coming out of it. It made me feel weak and . . . and *dim*.”

“I’ll bet it did,” Roland said grimly.

“But I moved fast, and when the lid of the box clicked down, the door swung shut. Jemmin banged his fists against it and screamed and begged to be let through. Then he fell down in a faint. I dragged him out of the cave. I dragged them both out. After a little while in the fresh air, both came to.” Henchick raised his hands, then lowered them again, as if to say *There you are*.

Roland gave the doorknob a final try. It moved in neither direction. But with the ball—

“Let’s go back,” he said. “I’d like to be at the Pere’s house by dinnertime. That means a fast walk back down to the horses and an even faster ride once we get there.”

Henchick nodded. His bearded face was good at hiding expression, but Roland thought the old man was relieved to be going. Roland was a little relieved, himself. Who would enjoy listening to the

accusing screams of one's dead mother and father rising out of the dark? Not to mention the cries of one's dead friends?

"What happened to the speaking device?" Roland asked as they started back down.

Henchick shrugged. "Do ye ken bayderies?"

Batteries. Roland nodded.

"While they worked, the machine played the same message over and over, the one telling us that we should go to the Cave of Voices and find a man, a door, and a wonder. There was also a song. We played it once for the Pere, and he wept. You must ask him about it, for that truly is his part of the tale."

Roland nodded again.

"Then the bayderies died." Henchick's shrug showed a certain contempt for machines, the gone world, or perhaps both. "We took them out. They were Duracell. Does thee ken Duracell, gunslinger?"

Roland shook his head.

"We took them to Andy and asked if he could recharge them, mayhap. He took them into himself, but when they came out again they were as useless as before. Andy said sorry. We said thankya." Henchick rolled his shoulders in that same contemptuous shrug. "We opened the machine—another button did that—and the tongue came out. It were this long." Henchick held his hands four or five inches apart. "Two holes in it. Shiny brown stuff inside, like string. The Pere called it a 'cassette tape.' "

Roland nodded. "I want to thank you for taking me up to the cave, Henchick, and for telling me all thee knows."

"I did what I had to," Henchick said. "And you'll do as'ee promise. Wont'chee?"

Roland of Gilead nodded. "Let God pick a winner."

"Aye, so we do say. Ye speak as if ye knew us, once upon a season." He paused, eyeing Roland with a certain sour shrewdness. "Or is it just makin up to me that ye does? For anyone who's ever read the Good Book can thee and thou till the crows fly home."

"Does thee ask if I play the toady, up here where there's no one to hear us but them?" Roland nodded toward the babbling darkness. "Thou knows better, I hope, for if thee doesn't, thee's a fool."

The old man considered, then put out his gnarled, long-fingered hand. "Do'ee well, Roland. 'Tis a good name, and a fair."

Roland put out his right hand. And when the old man took it and squeezed it, he felt the first deep twinge of pain where he wanted to feel it least.

No, not yet. Where I'd feel it least is in the other one. The one that's still whole.

"Mayhap this time the Wolves'll kill us all," said Henchick.

"Perhaps so."

"Yet still, perhaps we're well-met."

"Perhaps we are," the gunslinger replied.

CHAPTER IX: THE PRIEST'S TALE CONCLUDED (UNFOUND)

ONE

"Beds're ready," Rosalita Munoz said when they got back.

Eddie was so tired that he believed she'd said something else entirely—*Time to weed the garden*, perhaps, or *There's fifty or sixty more people'd like t'meet ye waitin up to the church*. After all, who spoke of beds at three in the afternoon?

"Huh?" Susannah asked blearily. "What-say, hon? Didn't quite catch it."

"Beds're ready," the Pere's woman of work repeated. "You two'll go where ye slept night before last; young soh's to have the Pere's bed. And the bumbler can go in with ye, Jake, if ye'd like; Pere said for me to tell'ee so. He'd be here to tell you himself, but it's his afternoon for sick-rounds. He takes the Communion to em." She said this last with unmistakable pride.

"Beds," Eddie said. He couldn't quite get the sense of this. He looked around, as if to confirm that it was still midafternoon, the sun still shining brightly. "Beds?"

"Pere saw'ee at the store," Rosalita amplified, "and thought ye'd want naps after talking to all those people."

Eddie understood at last. He supposed that at some point in his life he must have felt more grateful for a kindness, but he honestly couldn't remember when or what that kindness might have been. At first those approaching them as they sat in the rockers on the porch of Took's had come slowly, in hesitant little clusters. But when no one turned to stone or took a bullet in the head—when there was, in fact, animated conversation and actual laughter—more and more came.

As the trickle became a flood, Eddie at last discovered what it was to be a public person. He was astounded by how difficult it was, how draining. They wanted simple answers to a thousand difficult questions—where the gunslingers came from and where they were going were only the first two. Some of their questions could be answered honestly, but more and more Eddie heard himself giving weaselly politicians' answers, and heard his two friends doing the same. These weren't lies, exactly, but little propaganda capsules that sounded like answers. And everyone wanted a look straight in the face and a *Do ya fine* that sounded straight from the heart. Even Oy came in for his share of the work; he was petted over and over again, and made to speak until Jake got up, went into the store, and begged a bowl of water from Eben Took. That gentleman gave him a tin cup instead, and told him he could fill it at the trough out front. Jake was surrounded by townsfolk who questioned him steadily even as he did this simple chore. Oy lapped the cup dry, then faced his own gaggle of curious questioners while Jake went back to the trough to fill the cup again.

All in all, they had been five of the longest hours Eddie had ever put in, and he thought he would never regard celebrity in quite the same way again. On the plus side, before finally leaving the porch and heading back to the Old Fella's residence, Eddie reckoned they must have talked to everyone who lived in town and a good number of farmers, ranchers, cowpokes, and hired hands who lived beyond it. Word traveled fast: the outworlders were sitting on the porch of the General Store, and if you wanted to talk to them, they would talk to you.

And now, by God, this woman—this *angel*—was speaking of beds.

"How long have we got?" he asked Rosalita.

"Pere should be back by four," she said, "but we won't eat until six, and that's only if your dinh gets back in time. Why don't I wake you at five-thirty? That'll give ye time to wash. Does it do ya?"

"Yeah," Jake said, and gave her a smile. "I didn't know just talking to folks could make you so tired. And thirsty."

She nodded. "There's a jug of cool water in the pantry."

"I ought to help you get the meal ready," Susannah said, and then her mouth opened in a wide yawn.

“Sarey Adams is coming in to help,” Rosalita said, “and it’s nobbut a cold meal, in any case. Go on, now. Take your rest. You’re all in, and it shows.”

TWO

In the pantry, Jake drank long and deep, then poured water into a bowl for Oy and carried it into Pere Callahan’s bedroom. He felt guilty about being in here (and about having a billy-bumbler in here with him), but the bedcovers on Callahan’s narrow bed had been turned down, the pillow had been plumped up, and both beckoned him. He put down the bowl and Oy quietly began to lap water. Jake undressed down to his new underwear, then lay back and closed his eyes.

Probably won’t be able to actually sleep, he thought, I wasn’t ever any good at taking naps, even back when Mrs. Shaw used to call me ’Bama.

Less than a minute later he was snoring lightly, with one arm slung over his eyes. Oy slept on the floor beside him with his nose on one paw.

THREE

Eddie and Susannah sat side by side on the bed in the guest room. Eddie could still hardly believe this: not only a nap, but a nap in an actual bed. Luxury piled on luxury. He wanted nothing more than to lie down, take Suze in his arms, and sleep that way, but one matter needed to be addressed first. It had been nagging him all day, even during the heaviest of their impromptu politicking.

“Suze, about Tian’s Gran-pere—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” she said at once.

He raised his eyebrows, surprised. Although he supposed he’d known.

“We could get into this,” she said, “but I’m tired. I want to go to sleep. Tell Roland what the old guy told you, and tell Jake if you want to, but don’t tell me. Not yet.” She sat next to him, her brown thigh touching his white one, her brown eyes looking steadily into his hazel ones. “Do you hear me?”

“Hear you very well.”

“Say thankya big-big.”

He laughed, took her in his arms, kissed her.

And shortly they were also asleep with their arms around each other and their foreheads touching. A rectangle of light moved steadily up their bodies as the sun sank. It had moved back into the true west, at least for the time being. Roland saw this for himself as he rode slowly down the drive to the Old Fella’s rectory-house with his aching legs kicked free of the stirrups.

FOUR

Rosalita came out to greet him. “Hile, Roland—long days and pleasant nights.”

He nodded. “May you have twice the number.”

“I ken ye might ask some of us to throw the dish against the Wolves, when they come.”

“Who told you so?”

“Oh . . . some little bird whispered it in my ear.”

“Ah. And would you? If asked?”

She showed her teeth in a grin. “Nothing in this life would give me more pleasure.” The teeth disappeared and the grin softened into a true smile. “Although perhaps the two of us together could discover some pleasure that comes close. Would’ee see my little cottage, Roland?”

“Aye. And would you rub me with that magic oil of yours again?”

“Is it rubbed ye’d be?”

“Aye.”

“Rubbed hard, or rubbed soft?”

“I’ve heard a little of both best eases an aching joint.”

She considered this, then burst into laughter and took his hand. “Come. While the sun shines and this little corner of the world sleeps.”

He came with her willingly, and went where she took him. She kept a secret spring surrounded by sweet moss, and there he was refreshed.

FIVE

Callahan finally returned around five-thirty, just as Eddie, Susannah, and Jake were turning out. At six, Rosalita and Sarey Adams served out a dinner of greens and cold chicken on the screened-in porch behind the rectory. Roland and his friends ate hungrily, the gunslinger taking not just seconds but thirds. Callahan, on the other hand, did little but move his food from place to place on his plate. The tan on his face gave him a certain look of health, but didn't hide the dark circles under his eyes. When Sarey—a cheery, jolly woman, fat but light on her feet—brought out a spice cake, Callahan only shook his head.

When there was nothing left on the table but cups and the coffee pot, Roland brought out his tobacco and raised his eyebrows.

“Do ya,” Callahan said, then raised his voice. “Rosie, bring this guy something to tap into!”

“Big man, I could listen to you all day,” Eddie said.

“So could I,” Jake agreed.

Callahan smiled. “I feel the same way about you boys, at least a little.” He poured himself half a cup of coffee. Rosalita brought Roland a pottery cup for his ashes. When she had gone, the Old Fella said, “I should have finished this story yesterday. I spent most of last night tossing and turning, thinking about how to tell the rest.”

“Would it help if I told you I already know some of it?” Roland asked.

“Probably not. You went up to the Doorway Cave with Henschick, didn't you?”

“Yes. He said there was a song on the speaking machine that sent them up there to find you, and that you wept when you heard it. Was it the one you spoke of?”

“‘Someone Saved My Life Tonight,’ yes. And I can't tell you how strange it was to be sitting in a Manni cabin in Calla Bryn Sturgis, looking toward the darkness of Thunderclap and listening to Elton John.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Susannah said. “You're way ahead of us, Pere. Last we knew, you were in Sacramento, it was 1981, and you'd just found out your friend got cut up by these so-called Hitler Brothers.” She

looked sternly from Callahan to Jake and finally to Eddie. “I have to say, gentlemen, that you don’t seem to have made much progress in the matter of peaceful living since the days when I left America.”

“Don’t blame it on me,” Jake said. “I was in school.”

“And I was stoned,” Eddie said.

“All right, I’ll take the blame,” Callahan said, and they all laughed.

“Finish your story,” Roland said. “Maybe you’ll sleep better tonight.”

“Maybe I will,” Callahan said. He thought for a minute, then said: “What I remember about the hospital—what I guess everyone remembers—is the smell of the disinfectant and the sound of the machines. Mostly the machines. The way they beep. The only other stuff that sounds like that is the equipment in airplane cockpits. I asked a pilot once, and he said the navigational gear makes that sound. I remember thinking that night that there must be a hell of a lot of navigating going on in hospital ICUs.

“Rowan Magruder wasn’t married when I worked at Home, but I guessed that must have changed, because there was a woman sitting in the chair by his bed, reading a paperback. Well-dressed, nice green suit, hose, low-heeled shoes. At least I felt okay about facing her; I’d cleaned up and combed up as well as I could, and I hadn’t had a drink since Sacramento. But once we were actually face-to-face, I wasn’t okay at all. She was sitting with her back to the door, you see. I knocked on the jamb, she turned toward me, and my so-called self-possession took a hike. I took a step back and crossed myself. First time since the night Rowan and I visited Lupe in that same joint. Can you guess why?”

“Of course,” Susannah said. “Because the pieces fit together. The pieces *always* fit together. We’ve seen it again and again and again. We just don’t know what the picture is.”

“Or can’t grasp it,” Eddie said.

Callahan nodded. “It was like looking at Rowan, only with long blond hair and breasts. His twin sister. And she laughed. She asked me if I thought I’d seen a ghost. I felt . . . surreal. As if I’d slipped into another of those other worlds, *like* the real one—if there is such a thing—but not quite the same. I felt this mad urge to drag out my wallet and see who was on the bills. It wasn’t just the resemblance; it

was her laughing. Sitting there beside a man who had her face, assuming he had any face left at all under the bandages, and laughing.”

“Welcome to Room 19 of the Todash Hospital,” Eddie said.

“Beg pardon?”

“I only meant I know the feeling, Don. We all do. Go on.”

“I introduced myself and asked if I could come in. And when I asked it, I was thinking back to Barlow, the vampire. Thinking, *You have to invite them in the first time. After that, they can come and go as they please.* She told me of course I could come in. She said she’d come from Chicago to be with him in what she called ‘his closing hours.’ Then, in that same pleasant voice, she said, ‘I knew who you were right away. It’s the scar on your hand. In his letters, Rowan said he was quite sure you were a religious man in your other life. He used to talk about people’s other lives all the time, meaning before they started drinking or taking drugs or went insane or all three. This one was a carpenter in his other life. That one was a model in her other life. Was he right about you?’ All in that pleasant voice. Like a woman making conversation at a cocktail party. And Rowan lying there with his head covered in bandages. If he’d been wearing sunglasses, he would have looked like Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man*.

“I came in. I said I’d once been a religious man, yes, but that was all in the past. She put out her hand. I put out mine. Because, you see, I thought . . .”

SIX

He puts out his hand because he has made the assumption that she wants to shake with him. The pleasant voice has fooled him. He doesn’t realize that what Rowena Magruder Rawlings is actually doing is raising her hand, not putting it out. At first he doesn’t even realize he has been slapped, and hard enough to make his left ear ring and his left eye water; he has a confused idea that the sudden warmth rising in his left cheek must be some sort of cockamamie allergy thing, perhaps a stress reaction. Then she is advancing on him with tears streaming down her weirdly Rowan-like face.

“Go on and look at him,” she says. “Because guess what? This is my brother’s other life! The only one he has left! Get right up close and get a good

look at it. They poked out his eyes, they took off one of his cheeks—you can see the teeth in there, peekaboo! The police showed me photographs. They didn't want to, but I made them. They poked a hole in his heart, but I guess the doctors plugged that. It's his liver that's killing him. They poked a hole in that, too, and it's dying."

"Miss Magruder, I—"

"It's Mrs. Rawlings," she tells him, "not that it's anything to you, one way or the other. Go on. Get a good look. See what you've done to him."

"I was in California . . . I saw it in the paper . . ."

"Oh, I'm sure," she says. "I'm sure. But you're the only one I can get hold of, don't you see? The only one who was close to him. His other pal died of the Queer's Disease, and the rest aren't here. They're eating free food down at his flophouse, I suppose, or talking about what happened at their meetings. How it makes them feel. Well, Reverend Callahan—or is it Father? I saw you cross yourself—let me tell you how this makes me feel. It . . . makes . . . me . . . FURIOUS." She is still speaking in the pleasant voice, but when he opens his mouth to speak again she puts a finger across his lips and there is so much force pressing back against his teeth in that single finger that he gives up. Let her talk, why not? It's been years since he's heard a confession, but some things are like riding a bicycle.

"He graduated from NYU cum laude, " she says. "Did you know that? He took second in the Beloit Poetry Prize Competition in 1949, did you know that? As an undergraduate! He wrote a novel . . . a beautiful novel . . . and it's in my attic, gathering dust."

Callahan can feel soft warm dew settling on his face. It is coming from her mouth.

"I asked him—no, begged him—to go on with his writing and he laughed at me, said he was no good. 'Leave that to the Mailers and O'Haras and Irwin Shaws,' he said, 'people who can really do it. I'll wind up in some ivory-tower office, puffing on a meerschaum pipe and looking like Mr. Chips.'

"And that would have been all right, too," she says, "but then he got involved in the Alcoholics Anonymous program, and from there it was an easy jump to running the flophouse. And hanging with his friends. Friends like you."

Callahan is amazed. He has never heard the word friends invested with such contempt.

“But where are they now that he’s down and going out?” Rowena Magruder Rawlings asks him. “Hmmm? Where are all the people he cured, all the newspaper feature reporters who called him a genius? Where’s Jane Pauley? She interviewed him on the Today show, you know. Twice! Where’s that fucking Mother Teresa? He said in one of his letters they were calling her the little saint when she came to Home, well he could use a saint now, my brother could use a saint right now, some laying-on of hands, so where the hell is she?”

Tears rolling down her cheeks. Her bosom rising and falling. She is beautiful and terrible. Callahan thinks of a picture he saw once of Shiva, the Hindu destroyer-god. Not enough arms, he thinks, and has to fight a crazy, suicidal urge to laugh.

“They’re not here. There’s just you and me, right? And him. He could have won a Nobel Prize for literature. Or he could have taught four hundred students a year for thirty years. Could have touched twelve thousand minds with his. Instead, he’s lying here in a hospital bed with his face cut off, and they’ll have to take up a subscription from his fucking flophouse to pay for his last illness—if you call getting cut to pieces an illness—and his coffin, and his burial.”

She looks at him, face naked and smiling, her cheeks gleaming with moisture and runners of snot hanging from her nose.

“In his previous other life, Father Callahan, he was the Street Angel. But this is his final other life. Glamorous, isn’t it? I’m going down the hall to the canteen for coffee and a danish. I’ll be there for ten minutes or so. Plenty of time for you to have your little visit. Do me a favor and be gone when I get back. You and all the rest of his do-gooders make me sick.”

She leaves. Her sensible low heels go clicking away along the hall. It’s not until they’ve faded completely and left him with the steady beeping of the machines that he realizes he’s trembling all over. He doesn’t think it’s the onset of the dt’s, but by God that’s what it feels like.

When Rowan speaks from beneath his stiff veil of bandages, Callahan nearly screams. What his old friend says is pretty mushy, but Callahan has no trouble figuring it out.

“She’s given that little sermon at least eight times today, and she never bothers to tell anyone that the year I took second in the Beloit, only four other people entered. I guess the war knocked a lot of the poetry out of folks. How you doing, Don?”

The diction is bad, the voice driving it little more than a rasp, but it's Rowan, all right. Callahan goes to him and takes the hands that lie on the counterpane. They curl over his with surprising firmness.

"As far as the novel goes . . . man, it was third-rate James Jones, and that's bad."

"How you doing, Rowan?" Callahan asks. Now he's crying himself. The goddam room will be floating soon.

"Oh, well, pretty sucky," says the man under the bandages. Then: "Thanks for coming."

"Not a problem," Callahan says. "What do you need from me, Rowan? What can I do?"

"You can stay away from Home," Rowan says. His voice is fading, but his hands still clasp Callahan's. "They didn't want me. It was you they were after. Do you understand me, Don? They were looking for you. They kept asking me where you were, and by the end I would have told them if I'd known, believe me. But of course I didn't."

One of the machines is beeping faster, the beeps running toward a merge that will trip an alarm. Callahan has no way of knowing this but knows it anyway. Somehow.

"Rowan—did they have red eyes? Were they wearing . . . I don't know . . . long coats? Like trenchcoats? Did they come in big fancy cars?"

"Nothing like that," Rowan whispers. "They were probably in their thirties but dressed like teenagers. They looked like teenagers, too. These guys'll look like teenagers for another twenty years—if they live that long—and then one day they'll just be old."

Callahan thinks, Just a couple of punks. Is that what he's saying? It is, it almost certainly is, but that doesn't mean the Hitler Brothers weren't hired by the low men for this particular job. It makes sense. Even the newspaper article, brief as it was, pointed out that Rowan Magruder wasn't much like the Brothers' usual type of victim.

"Stay away from Home," Rowan whispers, but before Callahan can promise, the alarm does indeed go off. For a moment the hands holding his tighten, and Callahan feels a ghost of this man's old energy, that wild fierce energy that somehow kept Home's doors open in spite of all the times the bank account went absolutely flat-line, the energy that attracted men who could do all the things Rowan Magruder himself couldn't.

Then the room begins filling up with nurses, there's a doctor with an arrogant face yelling for the patient's chart, and pretty soon Rowan's twin sister will be back, this time possibly breathing fire. Callahan decides it's time to blow this pop-shop, and the greater pop-shop that is New York City. The low men are still interested in him, it seems, very interested indeed, and if they have a base of operations, it's probably right here in Fun City, USA. Consequently, a return to the West Coast would probably be an excellent idea. He can't afford another plane ticket, but he has enough cash to ride the Big Grey Dog. Won't be for the first time, either. Another trip west, why not? He can see himself with absolute clarity, the man in Seat 29-C: a fresh, unopened package of cigarettes in his shirt pocket; a fresh, unopened bottle of Early Times in a paper bag; the new John D. MacDonald novel, also fresh and unopened, lying on his lap. Maybe he'll be on the far side of the Hudson and riding through Fort Lee, deep into Chapter One and nipping his second drink before they finally turn off all the machines in Room 577 and his old friend goes out into the darkness and toward whatever waits for us there.

SEVEN

"577," Eddie said.

"Nineteen," Jake said.

"Beg pardon?" Callahan asked again.

"Five, seven, and seven," Susannah said. "Add them, you get nineteen."

"Does that mean something?"

"Put them all together, they spell mother, a word that means the world to me," Eddie said with a sentimental smile.

Susannah ignored him. "We don't know," she said. "You didn't leave New York, did you? If you had, you'd have never gotten that." She pointed to the scar on his forehead.

"Oh, I left," Callahan said. "Just not quite as soon as I intended. My intention when I left the hospital really was to go back down to Port Authority and buy a ticket on the Forty bus."

"What's that?" Jake asked.

"Hobo-speak for the farthest you can go. If you buy a ticket to Fairbanks, Alaska, you're riding on the Forty bus."

"Over here, it'd be Bus Nineteen," Eddie said.

“As I was walking, I got thinking about all the old times. Some of them were funny, like when a bunch of the guys at Home put on a circus show. Some of them were scary, like one night just before dinner when one guy says to this other one, ‘Stop picking your nose, Jeffy, it’s making me sick’ and Jeffy goes ‘Why don’t you pick this, homeboy,’ and he pulls out this giant spring-blade knife and before any of us can move or even figure out what’s happening, Jeffy cuts the other guy’s throat. Lupe’s screaming and I’m yelling ‘Jesus! Holy Jesus!’ and the blood is spraying everywhere because he got the guy’s carotid—or maybe it was the jugular—and then Rowan comes running out of the bathroom holding his pants up with one hand and a roll of toilet paper in the other, and do you know what he did?”

“Used the paper,” Susannah said.

Callahan grinned. It made him a younger man. “Yer-bugger, he did. Slapped the whole roll right against the place where the blood was spurting and yelled for Lupe to call 211, which got you an ambulance in those days. And I’m standing there, watching that white toilet paper turn red, working its way in toward the cardboard core. Rowan said ‘Just think of it as the world’s biggest shaving cut’ and we started laughing. We laughed until the tears came out of our eyes.

“I was running through a lot of old times, do ya. The good, the bad, and the ugly. I remember—vaguely—stopping in at a Smiler’s Market and getting a couple of cans of Bud in a paper sack. I drank one of them and kept on walking. I wasn’t thinking about where I was going—not in my conscious mind, at least—but my feet must have had a mind of their own, because all at once I looked around and I was in front of this place where we used to go to supper sometimes if we were—as they say—in funds. It was on Second and Fifty-second.”

“Chew Chew Mama’s,” Jake said.

Callahan stared at him with real amazement, then looked at Roland. “Gunslinger, you boys are starting to scare me a little.”

Roland only twirled his fingers in his old gesture: *Keep going, partner.*

“I decided to go in and get a hamburger for old times’ sake,” Callahan said. “And while I was eating the burger, I decided I didn’t want to leave New York without at least looking into Home through the front window. I could stand across the street, like the times when I

swung by there after Lupe died. Why not? I'd never been bothered there before. Not by the vampires, not by the low men, either." He looked at them. "I can't tell you if I really believed that, or if it was some kind of elaborate, suicidal mind-game. I can recapture a lot of what I felt that night, what I said and how I thought, but not that.

"In any case, I never got to Home. I paid up and I went walking down Second Avenue. Home was at First and Forty-seventh, but I didn't want to walk directly in front of it. So I decided to go down to First and Forty-sixth and cross over there."

"Why not Forty-eighth?" Eddie asked him quietly. "You could have turned down Forty-eighth, that would have been quicker. Saved you doubling back a block."

Callahan considered the question, then shook his head. "If there was a reason, I don't remember."

"There was a reason," Susannah said. "You wanted to walk past the vacant lot."

"Why would I—"

"For the same reason people want to walk past a bakery when the doughnuts are coming out of the oven," Eddie said. "Some things are just nice, that's all."

Callahan received this doubtfully, then shrugged. "If you say so."

"I do, sai."

"In any case, I was walking along, sipping my other beer. I was almost at Second and Forty-sixth when—"

"What was there?" Jake asked eagerly. "What was on that corner in 1981?"

"I don't . . ." Callahan began, and then he stopped. "A fence," he said. "Quite a high one. Ten, maybe twelve feet."

"Not the one we climbed over," Eddie said to Roland. "Not unless it grew five feet on its own."

"There was a picture on it," Callahan said. "I do remember that. Some sort of street mural, but I couldn't see what it was, because the street-lights on the corner were out. And all at once it hit me that wasn't right. All at once an alarm started going off in my head. Sounded a lot like the one that brought all the people into Rowan's room at the hospital, if you want to know the truth. All at once I

couldn't believe I was where I was. It was nuts. But at the same time I'm thinking . . . ”

EIGHT

At the same time he's thinking It's all right, just a few lights out is all it is, if there were vampires you'd see them and if there were low men you'd hear the chimes and smell rancid onions and hot metal. All the same he decides to vacate this area, and immediately. Chimes or no chimes, every nerve in his body is suddenly out on his skin, sparking and sizzling.

He turns and there are two men right behind him. There is a space of seconds when they are so surprised by his abrupt change of direction that he probably could have darted between them like an aging running back and gone sprinting back up Second Avenue. But he is surprised, too, and for a further space of seconds the three of them only stand there, staring.

There's a big Hitler Brother and a little Hitler Brother. The little one is no more than five-two. He's wearing a loose chambray shirt over black slacks. On his head is a baseball cap turned around backwards. His eyes are as black as drops of tar and his complexion is bad. Callahan immediately thinks of him as Lennie. The big one is maybe six-feet-six, wearing a Yankees sweatshirt, blue jeans, and sneakers. He's got a sandy mustache. He's wearing a fanny-pack, only around in front so it's actually a belly-pack. Callahan names this one George.

Callahan turns around, planning to flee down Second Avenue if he's got the light or if it looks like he can beat the traffic. If that's impossible, he'll go down Forty-sixth to the U.N. Plaza Hotel and duck into their lob—

The big one, George, grabs him by the shirt and yanks him back by his collar. The collar rips, but unfortunately not enough to set him free.

“No you don't, doc,” the little one says. “No you don't.” Then bustles forward, quick as an insect, and before Callahan's clear on what's happening, Lennie has reached between his legs, seized his testicles, and squeezed them violently together. The pain is immediate and enormous, a swelling sickness like liquid lead.

“Like-at, niggah-lovvah?” Lennie asks him in a tone that seems to convey genuine concern, that seems to say “We want this to mean as much to you as it does to us.” Then he yanks Callahan's testicles forward and the pain trebles. Enormous rusty saw-teeth sink into Callahan's belly and he thinks, He'll rip

them off, he's already turned them to jelly and now he's going to rip them right off, there's nothing holding them on but a little loose skin and he's going to—

He begins to scream and George clamps a hand over his mouth. "Quit it!" he snarls at his partner. "We're on the fucking street, did you forget that?"

Even while the pain is eating him alive, Callahan is mulling the situation's queerly inverted quality: George is the Hitler Brother in charge, not Lennie. George is the big Hitler Brother. It's certainly not the way Steinbeck would have written it.

Then, from his right, a humming sound arises. At first he thinks it's the chimes, but the humming is sweet. It's strong, as well. George and Lennie feel it. And they don't like it.

"Whazzat?" Lennie asks. "Did you hear sumpun?"

"I don't know. Let's get him back to the place. And keep your hands off his balls. Later you can yank em all you want, but for now just help me."

One on either side of him, and all at once he is being propelled back up Second Avenue. The high board fence runs past on their right. That sweet, powerful humming sound is coming from behind it. If I could get over that fence, I'd be all right, Callahan thinks. There's something in there, something powerful and good. They wouldn't dare go near it.

Perhaps this is so, but he doubts he could scramble over a board fence ten feet high even if his balls weren't blasting out enormous bursts of their own painful Morse Code, even if he couldn't feel them swelling in his underwear. All at once his head lolls forward and he vomits a hot load of half-digested food down the front of his shirt and pants. He can feel it soaking through to his skin, warm as piss.

Two young couples, obviously together, are headed the other way. The young men are big, they could probably mop up the street with Lennie and perhaps even give George a run for his money if they ganged up on him, but right now they are looking disgusted and clearly want nothing more than to get their dates out of Callahan's general vicinity as quickly as they possibly can.

"He just had a little too much to drink," George says, smiling sympathetically, "and then whoopsy-daisy. Happens to the best of us from time to time."

They're the Hitler Brothers! Callahan tries to scream. These guys are the Hitler Brothers! They killed my friend and now they're going to kill me! Get the police! But of course nothing comes out, in nightmares like

this it never does, and soon the couples are headed the other way. George and Lennie continue to move Callahan briskly along the block of Second Avenue between Forty-sixth and Forty-seventh. His feet are barely touching the concrete. His Chew Chew Mama Swissburger is now steaming on his shirt. Oh boy, he can even smell the mustard he put on it.

“Lemme see his hand,” George says as they near the next intersection, and when Lennie grabs Callahan’s left hand, George says, “No, dipstick, the other one.”

Lennie holds out Callahan’s right hand. Callahan couldn’t stop him if he tried. His lower belly has been filled with hot, wet cement. His stomach, meanwhile, seems to be quivering at the back of his throat like a small, frightened animal.

George looks at the scar on Callahan’s right hand and nods. “Yuh, it’s him, all right. Never hurts to be sure. Come on, let’s go, Faddah. Double-time, hup-hup!”

When they get to Forty-seventh, Callahan is swept off the main thoroughfare. Down the hill on the left is a pool of bright white light: Home. He can even see a few slope-shouldered silhouettes, men standing on the corner, talking Program and smoking. I might even know some of them, he thinks confusedly. Hell, probably do.

But they don’t go that far. Less than a quarter of the way down the block between Second Avenue and First, George drags Callahan into the doorway of a deserted storefront with a FOR SALE OR LEASE sign in both of its soaped-over windows. Lennie just kind of circles them, like a yapping terrier around a couple of slow-moving cows.

“Gonna fuck you up, niggah-lovvah!” he’s chanting. “We done a thousand just like you, gonna do a million before we’re through, we can cut down any niggah, even when the niggah’s biggah, that’s from a song I’m writin, it’s a song called ‘Kill All Niggah-Lovin Fags,’ I’m gonna send it to Merle Haggard when I’m done, he’s the best, he’s the one told all those hippies to squat n shit in their hats, fuckin Merle’s for America, I got a Mustang 380 and I got Hermann Goering’s Luger, you know that, niggah-lovvah?”

“Shut up, ya little punkass,” George says, but he speaks with fond absentmindedness, reserving his real attention for finding the key he wants on a fat ring of them and then opening the door of the empty storefront. Callahan thinks, To him Lennie’s like the radio that’s always playing in an auto

repair shop or the kitchen of a fast-food restaurant, he doesn't even hear him anymore, he's just part of the background noise.

"Yeah, Nort," Lennie says, and then goes right on. "Fuckin Goering's fuckin Luger, that's right, and I might blow your fuckin balls off with it, because we know the truth about what niggah-lovvahs like you are doin to this country, right, Nort?"

"Told you, no names," George/Nort says, but he speaks indulgently and Callahan knows why: he'll never be able to give any names to the police, not if things go the way these douchebags plan.

"Sorry Nort but you niggah-lovvahs you fuckin Jewboy intellectuals are the ones fuckin this country up, so I want you to think about that when I pull your fuckin balls right off your fuckin scrote—"

"The balls are the scrote, numbwit," George/Nort says in a weirdly scholarly voice, and then: "Bingo!"

The door opens. George/Nort shoves Callahan through it. The storefront is nothing but a dusty shadowbox smelling of bleach, soap, and starch. Thick wires and pipes stick out of two walls. He can see cleaner squares on the walls where coin-op washing machines and dryers once stood. On the floor is a sign he can just barely read in the dimness: TURTLE BAY WASHATERIA U WASH OR WE WASH EITHER WAY IT ALL COMES KLEEN!

All comes kleen, right, Callahan thinks. He turns toward them and isn't very surprised to see George/Nort pointing a gun at him. It's not Hermann Goering's Luger, looks more to Callahan like the sort of cheap .32 you'd buy for sixty dollars in a bar uptown, but he's sure it would do the job. George/Nort unzips his belly-pack without taking his eyes from Callahan—he's done this before, both of them have, they are old hands, old wolves who have had a good long run for themselves—and pulls out a roll of duct tape. Callahan remembers Lupe's once saying America would collapse in a week without duct tape. "The secret weapon," he called it. George/Nort hands the roll to Lennie, who takes it and scurries forward to Callahan with that same insectile speed.

"Putcha hands behind ya, niggah-reebop," Lennie says.

Callahan doesn't.

George/Nort waggles the pistol at him. "Do it or I put one in your gut, Faddah. You ain't never felt pain like that, I promise you."

Callahan does it. He has no choice. Lennie darts behind him.

"Put em togetha, niggah-reebop," Lennie says. "Don'tchoo know how this is done? Ain'tchoo ever been to the movies?" He laughs like a loon.

Callahan puts his wrists together. There comes a low snarling sound as Lennie pulls duct tape off the roll and begins taping Callahan's arms behind his back. He stands taking deep breaths of dust and bleach and the comforting, somehow childlike perfume of fabric softener.

"Who hired you?" he asks George/Nort. "Was it the low men?"

George/Nort doesn't answer, but Callahan thinks he sees his eyes flicker. Outside, traffic passes in bursts. A few pedestrians stroll by. What would happen if he screamed? Well, he supposes he knows the answer to that, doesn't he? The Bible says the priest and the Levite passed by the wounded man, and heard not his cries, "but a certain Samaritan . . . had compassion on him." Callahan needs a good Samaritan, but in New York they are in short supply.

"Did they have red eyes, Nort?"

Nort's own eyes flicker again, but the barrel of the gun remains pointed at Callahan's midsection, steady as a rock.

"Did they drive big fancy cars? They did, didn't they? And how much do you think your life and this little shitpoke's life will be worth, once—"

Lennie grabs his balls again, squeezes them, twists them, pulls them down like windowshades. Callahan screams and the world goes gray. The strength runs out of his legs and his knees come totally unbuckled.

"Annnd hee's DOWN!" Lennie cries gleefully. "Mo-Hammerhead A-Lee is DOWN! THE GREAT WHITE HOPE HAS PULLED THE TRIGGAH ON THAT LOUDMOUTH NIGGAH AND PUT 'IM ON THE CANVAS! I DON'T BE-LEEEVEE IT!" It's a Howard Cosell imitation, and so good that even in his agony Callahan feels like laughing. He hears another wild purring sound and now it's his ankles that are being taped together.

George/Nort brings a knapsack over from the corner. He opens it and rummages out a Polaroid One-Shot. He bends over Callahan and suddenly the world goes dazzle-bright. In the immediate aftermath, Callahan can see nothing but phantom shapes behind a hanging blue ball at the center of his vision. From it comes George/Nort's voice.

"Remind me to get another one, after. They wanted both."

"Yeah, Nort, yeah!" The little one sounds almost rabid with excitement now, and Callahan knows the real hurting's about to start. He remembers an old Dylan song called "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and thinks, It fits. Better than "Someone Saved My Life Tonight," that's for sure.

He's enveloped by a fog of garlic and tomatoes. Someone had Italian for dinner, possibly while Callahan was getting his face slapped in the hospital. A shape looms out of the dazzle. The big guy. "Doesn't matter to you who hired us," says George/Nort. "Thing is, we were hired, and as far as anyone's ever gonna be concerned, Faddah, you're just another niggah-lovvah like that guy Magruder and the Hitler Brothers done cleaned your clock. Mostly we're dedicated, but we will work for a dollar, like any good American." He pauses, and then comes the ultimate, existential absurdity: "We're popular in Queens, you know."

"Fuck yourself," Callahan says, and then the entire right side of his face explodes in agony. Lennie has kicked him with a steel-toed workboot, breaking his jaw in what will turn out to be a total of four places.

"Nice talk," he hears Lennie say dimly from the insane universe where God has clearly died and lies stinking on the floor of a pillaged heaven. "Nice talk for a Faddah." Then his voice goes up, becomes the excited, begging whine of a child: "Let me, Nort! C'mon, let me! I wanna do it!"

"No way," George/Nort says. "I do the forehead swastikas, you always fuck them up. You can do the ones on his hands, okay?"

"He's tied up! His hands're covered in that fuckin—"

"After he's dead," George/Nort explains with a terrible patience. "We'll unwrap his hands after he's dead and you can—"

"Nort, please! I'll do that thing you like. And listen!" Lennie's voice brightens. "Tell you what! If I start to fuck up, you tell me and I'll stop! Please, Nort? Please?"

"Well . . ." Callahan has heard this tone before, too. The indulgent father who can't deny a favorite, if mentally challenged, child. "Well, okay."

His vision is clearing. He wishes to God it wasn't. He sees Lennie remove a flashlight from the backpack. George has pulled a folded scalpel from his fanny-pack. They exchange tools. George trains the flashlight on Callahan's rapidly swelling face. Callahan winces and slits his eyes. He has just enough vision to see Lennie swing the scalpel out with his tiny yet dexterous fingers.

"Ain't this gonna be good!" Lennie cries. He is rapturous with excitement. "Ain't this gonna be so good!"

"Just don't fuck it up," George says.

Callahan thinks, If this was a movie, the cavalry would come just about now. Or the cops. Or fucking Sherlock Holmes in H. G. Wells's time machine.

But Lennie kneels in front of him, the hardon in his pants all too visible, and the cavalry doesn't come. He leans forward with the scalpel outstretched, and the cops don't come. Callahan can smell not garlic and tomatoes on this one but sweat and cigarettes.

"Wait a second, Bill," George/Nort says, "I got an idea, let me draw it on for you first. I got a pen in my pocket."

"Fuck that," Lennie/Bill breathes. He stretches out the scalpel. Callahan can see the razor-sharp blade trembling as the little man's excitement is communicated to it, and then it passes from his field of vision. Something cold traces his brow, then turns hot, and Sherlock Holmes doesn't come. Blood pours into his eyes, dousing his vision, and neither does James Bond Perry Mason Travis McGee Hercule Poirot Miss Fucking Marple.

The long white face of Barlow rises in his mind. The vampire's hair floats around his head. Barlow reaches out. "Come, false priest," he's saying, "learn of a true religion." There are two dry snapping sounds as the vampire's fingers break off the arms of the cross his mother gave him.

"Oh you fuckin nutball," George/Nort groans, "that ain't a swastika, that's a fuckin cross! Gimme that!"

"Stop it, Nort, gimme a chance, I ain't done!"

Squabbling over him like a couple of kids while his balls ache and his broken jaw throbs and his sight drowns in blood. All those seventies-era arguments about whether or not God was dead, and Christ, look at him! Just look at him! How could there be any doubt?

And that is when the cavalry arrives.

NINE

"What exactly do you mean?" Roland asked. "I would hear this part very well, Pere."

They were still sitting at the table on the porch, but the meal was finished, the sun was down, and Rosalita had brought 'seners. Callahan had broken his story long enough to ask her to sit with them and so she had. Beyond the screens, in the rectory's dark yard, bugs hummed, thirsty for the light.

Jake touched what was in the gunslinger's mind. And, suddenly impatient with all this secrecy, he put the question himself: "Were *we* the cavalry, Pere?"

Roland looked shocked, then actually amused. Callahan only looked surprised.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

“You didn’t see them, did you?” Roland asked. “You never actually saw the people who rescued you.”

“I told you the Hitler Brothers had a flashlight,” Callahan said. “Say true. But these other guys, the cavalry . . .”

TEN

Whoever they are, they have a searchlight. It fills the abandoned Washateria with a glare brighter than the flash of the cheapie Polaroid, and unlike the Polaroid, it’s constant. George/Nort and Lennie/Bill cover their eyes. Callahan would cover his, if his arms weren’t duct-taped behind him.

“Nort, drop the gun! Bill, drop the scalpel!” The voice coming from the huge light is scary because it’s scared. It’s the voice of someone who might do damn near anything. “I’m gonna count to five and then I’m gonna shoot the both of yez, which is what’chez deserve.” And then the voice behind the light begins to count not slowly and portentously but with alarming speed. “Onetwothreefour—” It’s as if the owner of the voice wants to shoot, wants to hurry up and get the bullshit formality over with. George/Nort and Lennie/Bill have no time to consider their options. They throw down the pistol and the scalpel and the pistol goes off when it hits the dusty lino, a loud BANG like a kid’s toy pistol that’s been loaded with double caps. Callahan has no idea where the bullet goes. Maybe even into him. Would he even feel it if it did? Doubtful.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!” Lennie/Bill shrieks. “We ain’t, we ain’t, we ain’t—” Ain’t what? Lennie/Bill doesn’t seem to know.

“Hands up!” It’s a different voice, but also coming from behind the sun-gun dazzle of the light. “Reach for the sky! Right now, you momzers!”

Their hands shoot up.

“Nah, belay that,” says the first one. They may be great guys, Callahan’s certainly willing to put them on his Christmas card list, but it’s clear they’ve never done anything like this before. “Shoes off! Pants off! Now! Right now!”

“What the fuck—” George/Nort begins. “Are you guys the cops? If you’re the cops, you gotta give us our rights, our fuckin Miranda—”

From behind the glaring light, a gun goes off. Callahan sees an orange flash of fire. It’s probably a pistol, but it is to the Hitler Brothers’ modest

barroom .32 as a hawk is to a hummingbird. The crash is gigantic, immediately followed by a crunch of plaster and a puff of stale dust. George/Nort and Lennie/Bill both scream. Callahan thinks one of his rescuers—probably the one who didn't shoot—also screams.

“Shoes off and pants off! Now! Now! You better have em off before I get to thirty, or you're dead. Onetwothreefourfi—”

Again, the speed of the count leaves no time for consideration, let alone remonstrance. George/Nort starts to sit down and Voice Number Two says: “Sit down and we'll kill you.”

And so the Hitler Brothers stagger around the knapsack, the Polaroid, the gun, and the flashlight like spastic cranes, pulling off their footgear while Voice Number One runs his suicidally rapid count. The shoes come off and the pants go down. George is a boxers guy while Lennie favors briefs of the pee-stained variety. There is no sign of Lennie's hardon; Lennie's hardon has decided to take the rest of the night off.

“Now get out,” Voice Number One says.

George faces into the light. His Yankees sweatshirt hangs down over his underwear shorts, which billow almost to his knees. He's still wearing his fanny-pack. His calves are heavily muscled, but they are trembling. And George's face is long with sudden dismayed realization.

“Listen, you guys,” he says, “if we go out of here without finishing this guy, they'll kill us. These are very bad—”

“If you schmucks aren't out of here by the time I get to ten,” says Voice Number One, “I'll kill you myself.”

To which Voice Number Two adds, with a kind of hysterical contempt: “Gai cocknif en yom, you cowardly motherfuckers! Stay, get shot, who cares?”

Later, after repeating this phrase to a dozen Jews who only shake their heads in bewilderment, Callahan will happen on an elderly fellow in Topeka who translates gai cocknif en yom for him. It means go shit in the ocean.

Voice Number One starts reeling them off again: “Onetwothreefour—”

George/Nort and Lennie/Bill exchange a cartoon look of indecision, then bolt for the door in their underwear. The big searchlight turns to follow them. They are out; they are gone.

“Follow,” Voice Number One says gruffly to his partner. “If they get the idea to turn back—”

“Yeahyeah,” says Voice Number Two, and he's gone.

The brilliant light clicks off. "Turn over on your stomach," says Voice Number One.

Callahan tries to tell him he doesn't think he can, that his balls now feel roughly the size of teapots, but all that comes from his mouth is mush, because of his broken jaw. He compromises by rolling over on his left side as far as he can.

"Hold still," says Voice Number One. "I don't want to cut you." It's not the voice of a man who does stuff like this for a living. Even in his current state, Callahan can tell that. The guy's breathing in rapid wheezes that sometimes catch in an alarming way and then start up again. Callahan wants to thank him. It's one thing to save a stranger if you're a cop or a fireman or a lifeguard, he supposes. Quite another when you're just an ordinary member of the greater public. And that's what his rescuer is, he thinks, both his rescuers, although how they came so well prepared he doesn't know. How could they know the Hitler Brothers' names? And exactly where were they waiting? Did they come in from the street, or were they in the abandoned laundrymat the whole time? Other stuff Callahan doesn't know. And doesn't really care. Because someone saved, someone saved, someone saved his life tonight, and that's the big thing, the only thing that matters. George and Lennie almost had their hooks in him, didn't they, dear, but the cavalry came at the last minute, just like in a John Wayne movie.

What Callahan wants to do is thank this guy. Where Callahan wants to be is safe in an ambulance and on his way to the hospital before the punks blindside the owner of Voice Number Two outside, or the owner of Voice Number One has an excitement-induced heart attack. He tries and more mush comes out of his mouth. Drunkspeak, what Rowan used to call gubbish. It sounds like fann-ou.

His hands are cut free, then his feet. The guy doesn't have a heart attack. Callahan rolls over onto his back again, and sees a pudgy white hand holding the scalpel. On the third finger is a signet ring. It shows an open book. Below it are the words Ex Libris. Then the searchlight goes on again and Callahan raises an arm over his eyes. "Christ, man, why are you doing that?" It comes out Crymah, I-oo oonnat, but the owner of Voice Number One seems to understand.

"I should think that would be obvious, my wounded friend," he says. "Should we meet again, I'd like it to be for the first time. If we pass on the street, I would as soon go unrecognized. Safer that way."

Gritting footsteps. The light is backing away.

“We’re going to call an ambulance from the pay phone across the street—”

“No! Don’t do that! What if they come back?” In his quite genuine terror, these words come out with perfect clarity.

“We’ll be watching,” says Voice Number One. The wheeze is fading now. The guy’s getting himself back under control. Good for him. “I think it is possible that they’ll come back, the big one was really quite distressed, but if the Chinese are correct, I’m now responsible for your life. It’s a responsibility I intend to live up to. Should they reappear, I’ll throw a bullet at them. Not over their heads, either.” The shape pauses. He looks like a fairly big man himself. Got a gut on him, that much is for sure. “Those were the Hitler Brothers, my friend. Do you know who I’m talking about?”

“Yes,” Callahan whispers. “And you won’t tell me who you are?”

“Better you not know,” says Mr. Ex Libris.

“Do you know who I am?”

A pause. Gritting steps. Mr. Ex Libris is now standing in the doorway of the abandoned laundrymat. “No,” he says. Then, “A priest. It doesn’t matter.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Wait for the ambulance,” says Voice Number One. “Don’t try to move on your own. You’ve lost a lot of blood, and you may have internal injuries.”

Then he’s gone. Callahan lies on the floor, smelling bleach and detergent and sweet departed fabric softener. U wash or we wash, he thinks, either way it all comes kleen. His testicles throb and swell. His jaw throbs and there’s swelling there, too. He can feel his whole face tightening as the flesh puffs up. He lies there and waits for the ambulance and life or the return of the Hitler Brothers and death. For the lady or the tiger. For Diana’s treasure or the deadly biter-snake. And some interminable, uncountable time later, red pulses of light wash across the dusty floor and he knows this time it’s the lady. This time it’s the treasure.

This time it’s life.

ELEVEN

“And that,” Callahan said, “is how I ended up in Room 577 of that same hospital that same night.”

Susannah looked at him, wide-eyed. “Are you serious?”

“Serious as a heart attack,” he said. “Rowan Magruder died, I got the living shit beaten out of me, and they slammed me back into the same bed. They must have had just about enough time to remake it, and until the lady came with the morphine-cart and put me out, I lay there wondering if maybe Magruder’s sister might not come back and finish what the Hitler Brothers had started. But why should such things surprise you? There are dozens of these odd crossings in both our stories, do ya. Have you not thought about the coincidence of Calla Bryn Sturgis and my own last name, for instance?”

“Sure we have,” Eddie said.

“What happened next?” Roland asked.

Callahan grinned, and when he did, the gunslinger realized the two sides of the man’s face didn’t quite line up. He’d been jaw-broke, all right. “The storyteller’s favorite question, Roland, but I think what I need to do now is speed my tale up a bit, or we’ll be here all night. The important thing, the part you really want to hear, is the end part, anyway.”

Well, you may think so, Roland mused, and wouldn’t have been surprised to know all three of his friends were harboring versions of the same thought.

“I was in the hospital for a week. When they let me out, they sent me to a welfare rehab in Queens. The first place they offered me was in Manhattan and a lot closer, but it was associated with Home—we sent people there sometimes. I was afraid that if I went there, I might get another visit from the Hitler Brothers.”

“And did you?” Susannah asked.

“No. The day I visited Rowan in Room 577 of Riverside Hospital and then ended up there myself was May 19th, 1981,” Callahan said. “I went out to Queens in the back of a van with three or four other walking-wounded guys on May 25th. I’m going to say it was about six days after that, just before I checked out and hit the road again, that I saw the story in the *Post*. It was in the front of the paper, but not on the front page. TWO MEN FOUND SHOT TO DEATH IN CONEY ISLAND, the headline said. COPS SAY ‘IT LOOKS LIKE A MOB JOB.’ That was because the faces and hands had been burned with acid. Nevertheless, the cops ID’d both of them: Norton Randolph and William Garton, both of

Brooklyn. There were photos. Mug shots; both of them had long records. They were my guys, all right. George and Lennie.”

“You think the low men got them, don’t you?” Jake asked.

“Yes. Payback’s a bitch.”

“Did the papers ever ID them as the Hitler Brothers?” Eddie asked. “Because, man, we were still scarin each other with those guys when I came along.”

“There was some speculation about that possibility in the tabloids,” Callahan said, “and I’ll bet that in their hearts the reporters who covered the Hitler Brothers murders and mutilations knew it was Randolph and Garton—there was nothing afterward but a few halfhearted copycat cuttings—but no one in the tabloid press wants to kill the bogeyman, because the bogeyman sells papers.”

“Man,” Eddie said. “You *have* been to the wars.”

“You haven’t heard the last act yet,” Callahan said. “It’s a dilly.”

Roland made the twirling go-on gesture, but it didn’t look urgent. He’d rolled himself a smoke and looked about as content as his three companions had ever seen him. Only Oy, sleeping at Jake’s feet, looked more at peace with himself.

“I looked for my footbridge when I left New York for the second time, riding across the GWB with my paperback and my bottle,” Callahan said, “but my footbridge was gone. Over the next couple of months I saw occasional flashes of the highways in hiding—and I remember getting a ten-dollar bill with Chadbourne on it a couple of times—but mostly they were gone. I saw a lot of Type Three Vampires and remember thinking that they were spreading. But I did nothing about them. I seemed to have lost the urge, the way Thomas Hardy lost the urge to write novels and Thomas Hart Benton lost the urge to paint his murals. ‘Just mosquitoes,’ I’d think. ‘Let them go.’ My job was getting into some town, finding the nearest Brawny Man or Manpower or Job Guy, and also finding a bar where I felt comfortable. I favored places that looked like the Americano or the Blarney Stone in New York.”

“You liked a little steam-table with your booze, in other words,” Eddie said.

“That’s right,” Callahan said, looking at Eddie as one does at a kindred spirit. “Do ya! And I’d protect those places until it was time to

move on. By which I mean I'd get tipsy in my favorite neighborhood bar, then finish up the evening—the crawling, screaming, puking-down-the-front-of-your-shirt part—somewhere else. *Al fresco*, usually.”

Jake began, “What—”

“Means he got drunk outdoors, sug,” Susannah told him. She ruffled his hair, then winced and put the hand on her own midsection, instead.

“All right, sai?” Rosalita asked.

“Yes, but if you had somethin with bubbles in it, I surely would drink it.”

Rosalita rose, tapping Callahan on the shoulder as she did so. “Go on, Pere, or it'll be two in the morning and the cats tuning up in the badlands before you're done.”

“All right,” he said. “I drank, that's what it comes down to. I drank every night and raved to anyone who'd listen about Lupe and Rowan and Rowena and the black man who picked me up in Issaquena County and Ruta, who really might have been full of fun but who sure wasn't a Siamese cat. And finally I'd pass out.

“This went on until I got to Topeka. Late winter of 1982. That was where I hit my bottom. Do you folks know what that means, to hit a bottom?”

There was a long pause, and then they nodded. Jake was thinking of Ms. Avery's English class, and his Final Essay. Susannah was recalling Oxford, Mississippi, Eddie the beach by the Western Sea, leaning over the man who had become his dinh, meaning to cut his throat because Roland wouldn't let him go through one of those magic doors and score a little H.

“For me, the bottom came in a jail cell,” Callahan said. “It was early morning, and I was actually relatively sober. Also, it was no drunk tank but a cell with a blanket on the cot and an actual seat on the toilet. Compared to some of the places I'd been in, I was farting through satin. The only bothersome things were the name guy . . . and that song.”

TWELVE

The light falling through the cell's small chickenwire-reinforced window is gray, which consequently makes his skin gray. Also his hands are dirty and covered with scratches. The crud under some of his nails is black (dirt) and under some it's maroon (dried blood). He vaguely remembers tussling with someone who kept calling him sir, so he guesses that he might be here on the ever-popular Penal Code 48, Assaulting an Officer. All he wanted—Callahan has a slightly clearer memory of this—was to try on the kid's cap, which was very spiffy. He remembers trying to tell the young cop (from the look of this one, pretty soon they'll be hiring kids who aren't even toilet-trained as police officers, at least in Topeka) that he's always on the lookout for funky new lids, he always wears a cap because he's got the Mark of Cain on his forehead. "Looksh like a crossh," he remembers saying (or trying to say), "but it'sh rilly the Marga-Gain." Which, in his cups, is about as close as he can come to saying Mark of Cain.

Was really drunk last night, but he doesn't feel so bad as he sits here on the bunk, rubbing a hand through his crazy hair. Mouth doesn't taste so good—sort of like Ruta the Siamese Cat took a dump in it, if you wanted the truth—but his head isn't aching too badly. If only the voices would shut up! Down the hall someone's droning out a seemingly endless list of names in alphabetical order. Closer by, someone is singing his least favorite song: "Someone saved, someone saved, someone saved my li-ife tonight . . ."

"Nailor! . . . Naughton! . . . O'Connor! . . . O'Shaugnessy! . . . Oskowski! . . . Osmer!"

He is just beginning to realize that he is the one singing when the trembling begins in his calves. It works its way up to his knees, then to his thighs, deepening and strengthening as it comes. He can see the big muscles in his legs popping up and down like pistons. What is happening to him?

"Palmer! . . . Palmgren!"

The trembling hits his crotch and lower belly. His underwear shorts darken as he sprays them with piss. At the same time his feet start snapping out into the air, as if he's trying to punt invisible footballs with both of them at the same time. I'm seizing, he thinks. This is probably it. I'm probably going out. Bye-bye blackbird. He tries to call for help and nothing comes out of his mouth but a low chugging sound. His arms begin to fly up and down. Now he's punting invisible footballs with his feet while his arms shout hallelujah, and the guy down the hall is going to go on until the end of the century, maybe until the next Ice Age.

“Peschier! . . . Peters! . . . Pike! . . . Polovik! . . . Rance! . . . Rancourt
!”

Callahan’s upper body begins to snap back and forth. Each time it snaps forward he comes closer to losing his balance and falling on the floor. His hands fly up. His feet fly out. There is a sudden spreading pancake of warmth on his ass and he realizes he has just shot the chocolate.

“Ricupero! . . . Robillard! . . . Rossi!”

He snaps backward, all the way to the whitewashed concrete wall where someone has scrawled BANGO SKANK and JUST HAD MY 19TH NERVOUS BREAKDOWN! Then forward, this time with the full-body enthusiasm of a Muslim at morning prayers. For a moment he’s staring at the concrete floor from between his naked knees and then he overbalances and goes down on his face. His jaw, which has somehow healed in spite of the nightly binges, rebreaks in three of the original four places. But, just to bring things back into perfect balance—four’s the magic number—this time his nose breaks, too. He lies jerking on the floor like a hooked fish, his body fingerpainting in the blood, shit, and piss. Yeah, I’m going out, he thinks.

“Ryan! . . . Sannelli! . . . Scher!”

But gradually the extravagant grand mal jerks of his body moderate to petit mal, and then to little more than twitches. He thinks someone must come, but no one does, not at first. The twitches fade away and now he’s just Donald Frank Callahan, lying on the floor of a jail cell in Topeka, Kansas, where somewhere farther down the hall a man continues working his way through the alphabet.

“Seavey! . . . Sharrow! . . . Shatzer!”

Suddenly, for the first time in months, he thinks of how the cavalry came when the Hitler Brothers were getting ready to carve him up there in that deserted laundrymat on East Forty-seventh. And they were really going to do it—the next day or the day after, someone would have found one Donald Frank Callahan, dead as the fabled mackerel and probably wearing his balls for earrings. But then the cavalry came and—

That was no cavalry, he thinks as he lies on the floor, his face swelling up again, meet the new face, same as the old face. That was Voice Number One and Voice Number Two. Only that isn’t right, either. That was two men, middle-aged at the least, probably getting a little on the old side. That was Mr. Ex Libris and Mr. Gai Cocknif En Yom, whatever that means. Both of them scared to death. And right to be scared. The Hitler Brothers might not

have done a thousand as Lennie had boasted, but they had done plenty and killed some of them, they were a couple of human copperheads, and yes, Mr. Ex Libris and Mr. Gai Cocknif were absolutely right to be scared. It had turned out all right for them, but it might not have done. And if George and Lennie had turned the tables, what then? Why, instead of finding one dead man in the Turtle Bay Washateria, whoever happened in there first would have found three. That would have made the front page of the Post for sure! So those guys had risked their lives, and here was what they'd risked it for, six or eight months on down the line: a dirty emaciated busted up asshole drunk, his underwear drenched with piss on one side and full of shit on the other. A daily drinker and a nightly drunk.

And that is when it happens. Down the hall, the steady slow-chanting voice has reached Sprang, Steward, and Sudby; in this cell up the hall, a man lying on a dirty floor in the long light of dawn finally reaches his bottom, which is, by definition, that point from which you can descend no lower unless you find a shovel and actually start to dig.

Lying as he is, staring directly along the floor, the dust-bunnies look like ghostly groves of trees and the lumps of dirt look like the hills in some sterile mining country. He thinks: What is it, February? February of 1982? Something like that. Well, I tell you what. I'll give myself one year to try and clean up my act. One year to do something—anything—to justify the risk those two guys took. If I can do something, I'll go on. But if I'm still drinking in February of 1983, I'll kill myself.

Down the corridor, the chanting voice has finally reached Targenfield.

THIRTEEN

Callahan was silent for a moment. He sipped at his coffee, grimaced, and poured himself a knock of sweet cider, instead.

“I knew how the climb back starts,” he said. “I'd taken enough low-bottom drunks to enough AA meetings on the East Side, God knows. So when they let me out, I found AA in Topeka and started going every day. I never looked ahead, never looked behind. ‘The past is history, the future's a mystery,’ they say. Only this time, instead of sitting in the back of the room and saying nothing, I forced myself to go right down front, and during the introductions I'd say, ‘I'm Don C. and I don't want to drink anymore.’ I *did* want to, every day I wanted

to, but in AA they have sayings for everything, and one of them is 'Fake it till you make it.' And little by little, I *did* make it. I woke up one day in the fall of 1982 and realized I really didn't want to drink anymore. The compulsion, as they say, had been lifted.

"I moved on. You're not supposed to make any big changes in the first year of sobriety, but one day when I was in Gage Park—the Reinisch Rose Garden, actually . . ." He trailed off, looking at them. "What? Do you know it? Don't tell me you know the Reinisch!"

"We've been there," Susannah said quietly. "Seen the toy train."

"That," Callahan said, "is amazing."

"It's nineteen o'clock and all the birds are singing," Eddie said. He wasn't smiling.

"Anyway, the Rose Garden was where I spotted the first poster. HAVE YOU SEEN CALLAHAN, OUR IRISH SETTER. SCAR ON PAW, SCAR ON FOREHEAD. GENEROUS REWARD. Et cetera, et cetera. They'd finally gotten the name right. I decided it was time to move on while I still could. So I went to Detroit, and there I found a place called The Lighthouse Shelter. It was a wet shelter. It was, in fact, Home without Rowan Magruder. They were doing good work there, but they were barely staggering along. I signed on. And that's where I was in December of 1983, when it happened."

"When what happened?" Susannah asked.

It was Jake Chambers who answered. He knew, was perhaps the only one of them who *could* know. It had happened to him, too, after all.

"That was when you died," Jake said.

"Yes, that's right," Callahan said. He showed no surprise at all. They might have been discussing rice, or the possibility that Andy ran on ant-nomics. "That's when I died. Roland, I wonder if you'd roll me a cigarette? I seem to need something a little stronger than apple cider."

FOURTEEN

There's an old tradition at Lighthouse, one that goes back . . . jeez, must be all of four years (The Lighthouse Shelter has only been in existence for five). It's Thanksgiving in the gym of Holy Name High School on West Congress Street.

A bunch of the drunks decorate the place with orange and brown crepe paper, cardboard turkeys, plastic fruit and vegetables. American reap-charms, in other words. You had to have at least two weeks' continuous sobriety to get on this detail. Also—this is something Ward Huckman, Al McCowan, and Don Callahan have agreed to among themselves—no wet brains are allowed on Decoration Detail, no matter how long they've been sober.

On Turkey Day, nearly a hundred of Detroit's finest albies, hypes, and half-crazed homeless gather at Holy Name for a wonderful dinner of turkey, taters, and all the trimmings. They are seated at a dozen long tables in the center of the basketball court (the legs of the tables are protected by swags of felt, and the diners eat in their stocking feet). Before they dig in—this is part of the custom—they go swiftly around the tables (“Take more than ten seconds, boys, and I'm cutting you off,” Al has warned) and everyone says one thing they're grateful for. Because it's Thanksgiving, yes, but also because one of the principal tenets of the AA program is that a grateful alcoholic doesn't get drunk and a grateful addict doesn't get stoned.

It goes fast, and because Callahan is just sitting there, not thinking of anything in particular, when it's his turn he almost blurts out something that could have caused him trouble. At the very least, he would have been tabbed as a guy with a bizarre sense of humor.

“I'm grateful I haven't . . . ” he begins, then realizes what he's about to say, and bites it back. They're looking at him expectantly, stubble-faced men and pale, doughy women with limp hair, all carrying about them the dirty-breeze subway station aroma that's the smell of the streets. Some already call him Faddah, and how do they know? How could they know? And how would they feel if they knew what a chill it gives him to hear that? How it makes him remember the Hitler Brothers and the sweet, childish smell of fabric softener? But they're looking at him. “The clients.” Ward and Al are looking at him, too.

“I'm grateful I haven't had a drink or a drug today,” he says, falling back on the old faithful, there's always that to be grateful for. They murmur their approval, the man next to Callahan says he's grateful his sister's going to let him come for Christmas, and no one knows how close Callahan has come to saying “I'm grateful I haven't seen any Type Three vampires or lost-pet posters lately.”

He thinks it's because God has taken him back, at least on a trial basis, and the power of Barlow's bite has finally been cancelled. He thinks he's lost the cursed gift of seeing, in other words. He doesn't test this by trying to go into a

church, however—the gym of Holy Name High is close enough for him, thanks. It never occurs to him—at least in his conscious mind—that they want to make sure the net’s all the way around him this time. They may be slow learners, Callahan will eventually come to realize, but they’re not no learners.

Then, in early December, Ward Huckman receives a dream letter. “Christmas done come early, Don! Wait’ll you see this, Al!” Waving the letter triumphantly. “Play our cards right, and boys, our worries about next year are over!”

Al McCowan takes the letter, and as he reads it his expression of conscious, careful reserve begins to melt. By the time he hands the letter to Don, he’s grinning from ear to ear.

The letter is from a corporation with offices in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. It’s on rag bond so luxurious you want to cut it into a shirt and wear it next to your skin. It says that the corporation is planning to give away twenty million dollars to twenty charitable organizations across the United States, a million each. It says that the corporation must do this before the end of the calendar year 1983. Potential recipients include food pantries, homeless shelters, two clinics for the indigent, and a prototype AIDS testing program in Spokane. One of the shelters is Lighthouse. The signature is Richard P. Sayre, Executive Vice President, Detroit. It all looks on the up-and-up, and the fact that all three of them have been invited to the corporation’s Detroit offices to discuss this gift also seems on the up-and-up. The date of the meeting—what will be the date of Donald Callahan’s death—is December 19th, 1983. A Monday.

The name on the letterhead is THE SOMBRA CORPORATION.

FIFTEEN

“You went,” Roland said.

“We all went,” Callahan said. “If the invitation had been for me alone, I never would’ve. But, since they were asking for all three of us . . . and wanted to give us a million dollars . . . do you have any idea what a million bucks would have meant to a fly-by-night outfit like Home or Lighthouse? Especially during the Reagan years?”

Susannah gave a start at this. Eddie shot her a nakedly triumphant look. Callahan clearly wanted to ask the reason for this byplay, but Roland was twirling his finger in that hurry-up gesture again, and now

it really *was* getting late. Pressing on for midnight. Not that any of Roland's ka-tet looked sleepy; they were tightly focused on the Pere, marking every word.

"Here is what I've come to believe," Callahan said, leaning forward. "There is a loose league of association between the vampires and the low men. I think if you traced it back, you'd find the roots of their association in the dark land. In Thunderclap."

"I've no doubt," Roland said. His blue eyes flashed out of his pale and tired face.

"The vampires—those who aren't Type Ones—are stupid. The low men are smarter, but not by a whole lot. Otherwise I never would have been able to escape them for as long as I did. But then—finally—someone else took an interest. An agent of the Crimson King, I should think, whoever or whatever he is. The low men were drawn away from me. So were the vampires. There were no posters during those last months, not that I saw; no chalked messages on the sidewalks of West Fort Street or Jefferson Avenue, either. Someone giving the orders, that's what I think. Someone a good deal smarter. And a million dollars!" He shook his head. A small and bitter smile touched his face. "In the end, that was what blinded me. Nothing but money. 'Oh yes, but it's to do good!' I told myself . . . and we told each other, of course. 'It'll keep us independent for at least five years! No more going to the Detroit City Council, begging with our hats in our hands!' All true. It didn't occur to me until later that there's another truth, very simple: greed in a good cause is still greed."

"What happened?" Eddie asked.

"Why, we kept our appointment," the Pere said. His face wore a rather ghastly smile. "The Tishman Building, 982 Michigan Avenue, one of the finest business addresses in the D. December 19th, 4:20 P.M."

"Odd time for an appointment," Susannah said.

"We thought so, too, but who questions such minor matters with a million dollars at stake? After some discussion, we agreed with Al—or rather Al's mother. According to her, one should show up for important appointments five minutes early, no more and no less. So we walked into the lobby of the Tishman Building at 4:10 P.M., dressed

in our best, found Sombra Corporation on the directory board, and went on up to the thirty-third floor.”

“Had you checked this corporation out?” Eddie asked.

Callahan looked at him as if to say *duh*. “According to what we could find in the library, Sombra was a closed corporation—no public stock issue, in other words—that mostly bought other companies. They specialized in high-tech stuff, real estate, and construction. That seemed to be all anyone knew. Assets were a closely guarded secret.”

“Incorporated in the U.S.?” Susannah asked.

“No. Nassau, the Bahamas.”

Eddie started, remembering his days as a cocaine mule and the sallow thing from whom he had bought his last load of dope. “Been there, done that,” he said. “Didn’t see anyone from the Sombra Corporation, though.”

But did he know that was true? Suppose the sallow thing with the British accent worked for Sombra? Was it so hard to believe that they were involved in the dope trade, along with whatever else they were into? Eddie supposed not. If nothing else, it suggested a tie to Enrico Balazar.

“Anyway, they were there in all the right reference books and yearlies,” Callahan said. “Obscure, but there. And rich. I don’t know exactly what Sombra is, and I’m at least half-convinced that most of the people we saw in their offices on the thirty-third floor were nothing but extras . . . stage-dressing . . . but there probably is an actual Sombra Corporation.

“We took the elevator up there. Beautiful reception area—French Impressionist paintings on the walls, what else?—and a beautiful receptionist to go with it. The kind of woman—say pardon, Susannah—if you’re a man, you can almost believe that if you were allowed to touch her breast, you’d live forever.”

Eddie burst out laughing, looked sideways at Susannah, and stopped in a hurry.

“It was 4:17. We were invited to sit down. Which we did, feeling nervous as hell. People came and went. Every now and then a door to our left would open and we’d see a floor filled with desks and cubicles. Phones ringing, secretaries flitting hither and yon with files, the sound of a big copier. If it was a set-up—and I think it was—it was

as elaborate as a Hollywood movie. I was nervous about our appointment with Mr. Sayre, but no more than that. Extraordinary, really. I'd been on the run more or less constantly since leaving 'Salem's Lot eight years previous, and I'd developed a pretty good early-warning system, but it never so much as chirruped that day. I suppose if you could reach him via the Ouija board, John Dillinger would say much the same about his night at the movies with Anna Sage.

“At 4:19, a young man in a striped shirt and tie that looked just oh so Hugo Boss came out and got us. We were whisked down a corridor past some very upscale offices—with an upscale executive beavering away in every one, so far as I could see—and to double doors at the end of the hall. This was marked CONFERENCE ROOM. Our escort opened the doors. He said, ‘God luck, gentlemen.’ I remember that very clearly. Not *good* luck, but *god* luck. That was when my perimeter alarms started to go off, and by then it was far too late. It happened fast, you see. They didn't . . . ”

SIXTEEN

It happens fast. They have been after Callahan for a long time now, but they waste little time gloating. The doors slam shut behind them, much too loudly and hard enough to shiver in their frames. Executive assistants who drag down eighteen thousand a year to start with close doors a certain way—with respect for money and power—and this isn't it. This is the way angry drunks and addicts on the jones close doors. Also crazy people, of course. Crazy people are ace doorslammers.

Callahan's alarm systems are fully engaged now, not pinging but howling, and when he looks around the executive conference room, dominated at the far end by a large window giving a terrific view of Lake Michigan, he sees there's good reason for this and has time to think Dear Christ—Mary, mother of God—how could I have been so foolish? He can see thirteen people in the room. Three are low men, and this is his first good look at their heavy, unhealthy-looking faces, red-glinting eyes, and full, womanish lips. All three are smoking. Nine are Type Three vampires. The thirteenth person in the conference room is wearing a loud shirt and clashing tie, low-men attire for

certain, but his face has a lean and foxy look, full of intelligence and dark humor. On his brow is a red circle of blood that seems neither to ooze nor to clot.

There is a bitter crackling sound. Callahan wheels and sees Al and Ward drop to the floor. Standing to either side of the door through which they entered are numbers fourteen and fifteen, a low man and a low woman, both of them holding electrical stunners.

“Your friends will be all right, Father Callahan.”

He whirls around again. It’s the man with the blood-spot on his forehead. He looks about sixty, but it’s hard to tell. He’s wearing a garish yellow shirt and a red tie. When his thin lips part in a smile, they reveal teeth that come to points. It’s Sayre, Callahan thinks. Sayre, or whoever signed that letter. Whoever thought this little sting up.

“You, however, won’t,” he continues.

The low men look at him with a kind of dull avidity: here he is, finally, their lost pooch with the burned paw and the scarred forehead. The vampires are more interested. They almost thrum within their blue auras. And all at once Callahan can hear the chimes. They’re faint, somehow damped down, but they’re there. Calling him.

Sayre—if that’s his name—turns to the vampires. “He’s the one,” he says in a matter-of-fact tone. “He’s killed hundreds of you in a dozen versions of America. My friends”—he gestures to the low men—“were unable to track him down, but of course they seek other, less suspecting prey in the ordinary course of things. In any case, he’s here now. Go on, have at him. But don’t kill him!”

He turns to Callahan. The hole in his forehead fills and gleams but never drips. It’s an eye, Callahan thinks, a bloody eye. What is looking out of it? What is watching, and from where?

Sayre says, “These particular friends of the King all carry the AIDS virus. You surely know what I mean, don’t you? We’ll let that kill you. It will take you out of the game forever, in this world and all the others. This is no game for a fellow like you, anyway. A false priest like you.”

Callahan doesn’t hesitate. If he hesitates, he will be lost. It’s not AIDS he’s afraid of, but of letting them put their filthy lips on him in the first place, to kiss him as the one was kissing Lupe Delgado in the alley. They don’t get to win. After all the way he’s come, after all the jobs, all the jail cells, after finally getting sober in Kansas, they don’t get to win.

He doesn’t try to reason with them. There is no palaver. He just sprints down the right side of the conference room’s extravagant mahogany table. The

man in the yellow shirt, suddenly alarmed, shouts “Get him! Get him!” Hands slap at his jacket—specially bought at Grand River Menswear for this auspicious occasion—but slip off. He has time to think The window won’t break, it’s made of some tough glass, anti-suicide glass, and it won’t break . . . and he has just time enough to call on God for the first time since Barlow forced him to take of his poisoned blood.

“Help me! Please help me!” Father Callahan cries, and runs shoulder-first into the window. One more hand slaps at his head, tries to tangle itself in his hair, and then it is gone. The window shatters all around him and suddenly he is standing in cold air, surrounded by flurries of snow. He looks down between black shoes which were also specially purchased for this auspicious occasion, and he sees Michigan Avenue, with cars like toys and people like ants.

He has a sense of them—Sayre and the low men and the vampires who were supposed to infect him and take him out of the game forever—clustered at the broken window, staring with disbelief.

He thinks, This does take me out of it forever . . . doesn’t it?

And he thinks, with the wonder of a child: This is the last thought I’ll ever have. This is goodbye.

Then he is falling.

SEVENTEEN

Callahan stopped and looked at Jake, almost shyly. “Do you remember it?” he asked. “The actual . . . ” He cleared his throat. “The dying?”

Jake nodded gravely. “You don’t?”

“I remember looking at Michigan Avenue from between my new shoes. I remember the sensation of standing there—seeming to, anyway—in the middle of a snow flurry. I remember Sayre behind me, yelling in some other language. Cursing. Words that guttural just about had to be curses. And I remember thinking, *He’s frightened*. That was actually my last thought, that Sayre was frightened. Then there was an interval of darkness. I floated. I could hear the chimes, but they were distant. Then they came closer. As if they were mounted on some engine that was rushing toward me at terrible speed.

“There was light. I saw light in the darkness. I thought I was having the Kübler-Ross death experience, and I went toward it. I didn’t care

where I came out, as long as it wasn't on Michigan Avenue, all smashed and bleeding, with a crowd standing around me. But I didn't see how that could happen. You don't fall thirty-three stories, then regain consciousness.

"And I wanted to get away from the chimes. They kept getting louder. My eyes started to water. My ears hurt. I was glad I still had eyes and ears, but the chimes made any gratitude I might have felt pretty academic.

"I thought, *I have to get into the light*, and I lunged for it. I . . ."

EIGHTEEN

He opens his eyes, but even before he does, he is aware of a smell. It's the smell of hay, but very faint, almost exhausted. A ghost of its former self, you might say. And he? Is he a ghost?

He sits up and looks around. If this is the afterlife, then all the holy books of the world, including the one from which he himself used to preach, are wrong. Because he's not in heaven or hell; he's in a stable. There are white wisps of ancient straw on the floor. There are cracks in the board walls through which brilliant light streams. It's the light he followed out of the darkness, he thinks. And he thinks, It's desert light. Is there any concrete reason to think so? Perhaps. The air is dry when he pulls it into his nostrils. It's like drawing the air of a different planet.

Maybe it is, *he thinks*. Maybe this is the Planet Afterlife.

The chimes are still there, both sweet and horrible, but now fading . . . fading . . . and gone. He hears the faint snuffle of hot wind. Some of it finds its way through the gaps between the boards, and a few bits of straw lift off from the floor, do a tired little dance, then settle back.

Now there is another noise. An arrhythmic thudding noise. Some machine, and not in the best of shape, from the sound. He stands up. It's hot in here, and sweat breaks immediately on his face and hands. He looks down at himself and sees his fine new Grand River Menswear clothes are gone. He is now wearing jeans and a blue chambray shirt, faded thin from many washings. On his feet is a pair of battered boots with rundown heels. They look like they have walked many a thirsty mile. He bends and feels his legs for breaks. There appear to be none. Then his arms. None. He tries snapping his fingers. They do the job easily, making little dry sounds like breaking twigs.

He thinks: Was my whole life a dream? Is this the reality? If so, who am I and what am I doing here?

And from the deeper shadows behind him comes that weary cycling sound: thud-THUD-thud-THUD-thud-THUD.

He turns in that direction, and gasps at what he sees. Standing behind him in the middle of the abandoned stable is a door. It's set into no wall, only stands free. It has hinges, but as far as he can see they connect the door to nothing but air. Hieroglyphs are etched upon it halfway up. He cannot read them. He steps closer, as if that would aid understanding. And in a way it does. Because he sees that the doorknob is made of crystal, and etched upon it is a rose. He has read his Thomas Wolfe: a stone, a rose, an unfound door; a stone, a rose, a door. There's no stone, but perhaps that is the meaning of the hieroglyph.

No, he thinks. No, the word is UNFOUND. Maybe I'm the stone.

He reaches out and touches the crystal knob. As though it were a signal (a sigil, he thinks)

the thudding machinery ceases. Very faint, very distant—far and wee—he hears the chimes. He tries the knob. It moves in neither direction. There's not even the slightest give. It might as well be set in concrete. When he takes his hand away, the sound of the chimes ceases.

He walks around the door and the door is gone. Walks the rest of the way around and it's back. He makes three slow circles, noting the exact point at which the thickness of the door disappears on one side and reappears on the other. He reverses his course, now going widdershins. Same deal. What the hell?

He looks at the door for several moments, pondering, then walks deeper into the stable, curious about the machine he heard. There's no pain when he walks, if he just took a long fall his body hasn't yet got the news, but Kee-rist is it ever hot in here!

There are horse stalls, long abandoned. There's a pile of ancient hay, and beside it a neatly folded blanket and what looks like a breadboard. On the board is a single scrap of dried meat. He picks it up, sniffs it, smells salt. Jerky, he thinks, and pops it into his mouth. He's not very worried about being poisoned. How can you poison a man who's already dead?

Chewing, he continues his explorations. At the rear of the stable is a small room like an afterthought. There are a few chinks in the walls of this room, too, enough for him to see a machine squatting on a concrete pad. Everything in the stable whispers of long years and abandonment, but this gadget, which

looks sort of like a milking machine, appears brand new. No rust, no dust. He goes closer. There's a chrome pipe jutting from one side. Beneath it is a drain. The steel collar around it looks damp. On top of the machine is a small metal plate. Next to the plate is a red button. Stamped on the plate is this:

LaMERK INDUSTRIES
834789-AA-45-776019

DO NOT REMOVE SLUG
ASK FOR ASSISTANCE

The red button is stamped with the word ON. Callahan pushes it. The weary thudding sound resumes, and after a moment water gushes from the chrome pipe. He puts his hands under it. The water is numbingly cold, shocking his overheated skin. He drinks. The water is neither sweet nor sour and he thinks, Such things as taste must be for gotten at great depths. This—

“Hello, Faddah.”

Callahan screams in surprise. His hands fly up and for a moment jewels of water sparkle in a dusty sunray falling between two shrunken boards. He wheels around on the eroded heels of his boots. Standing just outside the door of the pump-room is a man in a hooded robe.

Sayre, he thinks. It's Sayre, he's followed me, he came through that damn door—

“Calm down,” says the man in the robe. “‘Cool your jets,’ as the gunslinger's new friend might say.” Confidingly: “His name is Jake, but the housekeeper calls him 'Bama.” And then, in the bright tone of one just struck by a fine idea, he says, “I would show him to you! Both of them! Perhaps it's not too late! Come!” He holds out a hand. The fingers emerging from the robe's sleeve are long and white, somehow unpleasant. Like wax. When Callahan makes no move to come forward, the man in the robe speaks reasonably. “Come. You can't stay here, you know. This is only a way station, and nobody stays here for long. Come.”

“Who are you?”

The man in the robe makes an impatient tsking sound. “No time for all that, Faddah. Name, name, what's in a name, as someone or other said.

Shakespeare? Virginia Woolf? Who can remember? Come, and I'll show you a wonder. And I won't touch you; I'll walk ahead of you. See?"

He turns. His robe swirls like the skirt of an evening dress. He walks back into the stable, and after a moment Callahan follows. The pump-room is no good to him, after all; the pump-room is a dead end. Outside the stable, he might be able to run.

Run where?

Well, that's to see, isn't it?

The man in the robe raps on the free-standing door as he passes it. "Knock on wood, Donnie be good!" he says merrily, and as he steps into the brilliant rectangle of light falling through the stable door, Callahan sees he's carrying something in his left hand. It's a box, perhaps a foot long and wide and deep. It looks like it might be made of the same wood as the door. Or perhaps it's a heavier version of that wood. Certainly it's darker, and even closer-grained.

Watching the robed man carefully, meaning to stop if he stops, Callahan follows into the sun. The heat is even stronger once he's in the light, the sort of heat he's felt in Death Valley. And yes, as they step out of the stable he sees that they are in a desert. Off to one side is a ramshackle building that rises from a foundation of crumbling sandstone blocks. It might once have been an inn, he supposes. Or an abandoned set from a Western movie. On the other side is a corral where most of the posts and rails have fallen. Beyond it he sees miles of rocky, stony sand. Nothing else but—

Yes! Yes, there is something! Two somethings! Two tiny moving dots at the far horizon!

"You see them! How excellent your eyes must be, Faddah!"

The man in the robe—it's black, his face within the hood nothing but a pallid suggestion—stands about twenty paces from him. He titters. Callahan cares for the sound no more than for the waxy look of his fingers. It's like the sound of mice scampering over bones. That makes no actual sense, but—

"Who are they?" Callahan asks in a dry voice. "Who are you? Where is this place?"

The man in black sighs theatrically. "So much back-story, so little time," he says. "Call me Walter, if you like. As for this place, it's a way station, just as I told you. A little rest stop between the hoot of your world and the holler of the next. Oh, you thought you were quite the far wanderer, didn't you? Following all those hidden highways of yours? But now, Faddah, you're on a real journey."

“Stop calling me that!” Callahan shouts. His throat is already dry. The sunny heat seems to be accumulating on top of his head like actual weight.

“Faddah, Faddah, Faddah!” the man in black says. He sounds petulant, but Callahan knows he’s laughing inside. He has an idea this man—if he is a man—spends a great deal of time laughing on the inside. “Oh well, no need to be pissy about it, I suppose. I’ll call you Don. Do you like that better?”

The black specks in the distance are wavering now; the rising thermals cause them to levitate, disappear, then reappear again. Soon they’ll be gone for good.

“Who are they?” he asks the man in black.

“Folks you’ll almost certainly never meet,” the man in black says dreamily. The hood shifts; for a moment Callahan can see the waxy blade of a nose and the curve of an eye, a small cup filled with dark fluid. “They’ll die under the mountains. If they don’t die under the mountains, there are things in the Western Sea that will eat them alive. Dod-a-chock!” He laughs again. But—

But all at once you don’t sound completely sure of yourself, my friend, Callahan thinks.

“If all else fails,” Walter says, “this will kill them.” He raises the box. Again, faintly, Callahan hears the unpleasant ripple of the chimes. “And who will bring it to them? Ka, of course, yet even ka needs a friend, a kai-mai. That would be you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No,” the man in black agrees sadly, “and I don’t have time to explain. Like the White Rabbit in Alice, I’m late, I’m late, for a very important date. They’re following me, you see, but I needed to double back and talk to you. Busy-busy-busy! Now I must get ahead of them again—how else will I draw them on? You and I, Don, must be done with our palaver, regrettably short though it has been. Back into the stable with you, amigo. Quick as a bunny!”

“What if I don’t want to?” Only there’s really no what-if about it. He’s never wanted to go anyplace less. Suppose he asks this fellow to let him go and try to catch up with those wavering specks? What if he tells the man in black, “That’s where I’m supposed to be, where what you call ka wants me to be”? He guesses he knows. Might as well spit in the ocean.

As if to confirm this, Walter says, “What you want hardly matters. You’ll go where the King decrees, and there you will wait. If you two die on their course—as they almost certainly must—you will live a life of rural serenity in the place to which I send you, and there you too will die, full of years and possibly

with a false but undoubtedly pleasing sense of redemption. You'll live on your level of the Tower long after I'm bone-dust on mine. This I promise you, Faddah, for I have seen it in the glass, say true! And if they keep coming? If they reach you in the place to which you are going? Why, in that unlikely case you'll aid them in every way you can and kill them by doing so. It's a mind-blower, isn't it? Wouldn't you say it's a mind-blower?"

He begins to walk toward Callahan. Callahan backs toward the stable where the unfound door awaits. He doesn't want to go there, but there's nowhere else. "Get away from me," he says.

"Nope," says Walter, the man in black. "I can't go for that, no can do." He holds the box out toward Callahan. At the same time he reaches over the top of it and grasps the lid.

"Don't!" Callahan says sharply. Because the man in the black robe mustn't open the box. There's something terrible inside the box, something that would terrify even Barlow, the wily vampire who forced Callahan to drink his blood and then sent him on his way into the prisms of America like a fractious child whose company has become tiresome.

"Keep moving and perhaps I won't have to," Walter teases.

Callahan backs into the stable's scant shadow. Soon he'll be inside again. No help for it. And he can feel that strange only-there-on-one-side door waiting like a weight. "You're cruel!" he bursts out.

Walter's eyes widen, and for a moment he looks deeply hurt. This may be absurd, but Callahan is looking into the man's deep eyes and feels sure the emotion is nonetheless genuine. And the surety robs him of any last hope that all this might be a dream, or a final brilliant interval before true death. In dreams—his, at least—the bad guys, the scary guys, never have complex emotions.

"I am what ka and the King and the Tower have made me. We all are. We're caught."

Callahan remembers the dream-west through which he traveled: the forgotten silos, the neglected sunsets and long shadows, his own bitter joy as he dragged his trap behind him, singing until the jingle of the very chains that held him became sweet music.

"I know," he says.

"Yes, I see you do. Keep moving."

Callahan's back in the stable now. Once again he can smell the faint, almost exhausted aroma of old hay. Detroit seems impossible, a hallucination.

So do all his memories of America.

“Don’t open that thing,” Callahan says, “and I will.”

“What an excellent Faddah you are, Faddah.”

“You promised not to call me that.”

“Promises are made to be broken, Faddah.”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to kill him,” Callahan said.

Walter grimaces. “That’s ka’s business, not mine.”

“Maybe not ka, either. Suppose he’s above ka?”

Walter recoils, as if struck. I’ve blasphemed, Callahan thinks. And with this guy, I’ve an idea that’s no mean feat.

“No one’s above ka, false priest,” the man in black spits at him. “And the room at the top of the Tower is empty. I know it is.”

Although Callahan is not entirely sure what the man is talking about, his response is quick and sure. “You’re wrong. There is a God. He waits and sees all from His high place. He—”

Then a great many things happen at exactly the same time. The water pump in the alcove goes on, starting its weary thudding cycle. And Callahan’s ass bumps into the heavy, smooth wood of the door. And the man in black thrusts the box forward, opening it as he does so. And his hood falls back, revealing the pallid, snarling face of a human weasel. (It’s not Sayre, but upon Walter’s forehead like a Hindu caste-mark is the same welling red circle, an open wound that never clots or flows.) And Callahan sees what’s inside the box: he sees Black Thirteen crouched on its red velvet like the slick eye of a monster that grew outside God’s shadow. And Callahan begins to shriek at the sight of it, for he senses its endless power: it may fling him anywhere or to the farthest blind alley of nowhere. And the door clicks open. And even in his panic—or perhaps below his panic—Callahan is able to think Opening the box has opened the door. And he is stumbling backward into some other place. He can hear shrieking voices. One of them is Lupe’s, asking Callahan why Callahan let him die. Another belongs to Rowena Magruder and she is telling him this is his other life, this is it, and how does he like it? And his hands come up to cover his ears even as one ancient boot trips over the other and he begins to fall backward, thinking it’s Hell the man in black has pushed him into, actual Hell. And when his hands come up, the weasel-faced man thrusts the open box with its terrible glass ball into them. And the ball moves. It rolls like an actual eye in an invisible socket. And Callahan thinks, It’s alive, it’s the stolen eye

of some awful monster from beyond the world, and oh God, oh dear God, it is seeing me.

But he takes the box. It's the last thing in life he wants to do, but he is powerless to stop himself. Close it, you have to close it, he thinks, but he is falling, he has tripped himself (or the robed man's ka has tripped him) and he's falling, twisting around as he goes down. From somewhere below him all the voices of his past are calling to him, reproaching him (his mother wants to know why he allowed that filthy Barlow to break the cross she brought him all the way from Ireland), and incredibly, the man in black cries "Bon voyage, Faddah!" merrily after him.

Callahan strikes a stone floor. It's littered with the bones of small animals. The lid of the box closes and he feels a moment of sublime relief . . . but then it opens again, very slowly, disclosing the eye.

"No," Callahan whispers. "Please, no."

But he's not able to close the box—all his strength seems to have deserted him—and it will not close itself. Deep down in the black eye, a red speck forms, glows . . . grows. Callahan's horror swells, filling his throat, threatening to stop his heart with its chill. It's the King, he thinks. It's the Eye of the Crimson King as he looks down from his place in the Dark Tower. And he is seeing me.

"NO!" Callahan shrieks as he lies on the floor of a cave in the northern arroyo country of Calla Bryn Sturgis, a place he will eventually come to love. "NO! NO! DON'T LOOK AT ME! OH FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, DON'T LOOK AT ME!"

But the Eye does look, and Callahan cannot bear its insane regard. That is when he passes out. It will be three days before he opens his own eyes again, and when he does he'll be with the Manni.

NINETEEN

Callahan looked at them wearily. Midnight had come and gone, we all say thankya, and now it was twenty-two days until the Wolves would come for their bounty of children. He drank off the final two inches of cider in his glass, grimaced as if it had been corn whiskey, then set the empty tumbler down. "And all the rest, as they say, you know. It was Henschick and Jemmin who found me. Henschick closed the box,

and when he did, the door closed. And now what was the Cave of the Voices is Doorway Cave.”

“And you, Pere?” Susannah asked. “What did they do with you?”

“Took me to Henchick’s cabin—his *kra*. That’s where I was when I opened my eyes. During my unconsciousness, his wives and daughters fed me water and chicken broth, squeezing drops from a rag, one by one.”

“Just out of curiosity, how many wives does he have?” Eddie asked.

“Three, but he may have relations with only one at a time,” Callahan said absently. “It depends on the stars, or something. They nursed me well. I began to walk around the town; in those days they called me the Walking Old Fella. I couldn’t quite get the sense of where I was, but in a way my previous wanderings had prepared me for what had happened. Had toughened me mentally. I had days, God knows, when I thought all of this was happening in the second or two it would take me to fall from the window I’d broken through down to Michigan Avenue—that the mind prepares itself for death by offering some wonderful final hallucination, the actual semblance of an entire life. And I had days when I decided that *I* had finally become what we all dreaded most at both Home and Lighthouse: a wet brain. I thought maybe I’d been socked away in a moldy institution somewhere, and was imagining the whole thing. But mostly, I just accepted it. And was glad to have finished up in a good place, real or imagined.

“When I got my strength back, I reverted to making a living the way I had during my years on the road. There was no Manpower or Brawny Man office in Calla Bryn Sturgis, but those were good years and there was plenty of work for a man who wanted to work—they were big-rice years, as they do say, although stockline and the rest of the crops also did fine. Eventually I began to preach again. There was no conscious decision to do so—it wasn’t anything I prayed over, God knows—and when I did, I discovered these people knew all about the Man Jesus.” He laughed. “Along with The Over, and Oriza, and Buffalo Star . . . do you know Buffalo Star, Roland?”

“Oh yes,” the gunslinger said, remembering a preacher of the Buff whom he had once been forced to kill.

“But they listened,” Callahan said. “A lot did, anyway, and when they offered to build me a church, I said thankya. And that’s the Old Fella’s story. As you see, you were in it . . . two of you, anyway. Jake, was that after you died?”

Jake lowered his head. Oy, sensing his distress, whined uneasily. But when Jake answered, his voice was steady enough. “After the first death. Before the second.”

Callahan looked visibly startled, and he crossed himself. “You mean it can happen more than once? Mary save us!”

Rosalita had left them. Now she came back, holding a ’sener high. Those which had been placed on the table had almost burned down, and the porch was cast in a dim and failing glow that was both eerie and a little sinister.

“Beds is ready,” she said. “Tonight the boy sleeps with Pere. Eddie and Susannah, as you were night before last.”

“And Roland?” asked Callahan, his bushy brows raising.

“I have a cosy for him,” she said stolidly. “I showed it to him earlier.”

“Did you,” Callahan said. “Did you, now. Well, then, that’s settled.” He stood. “I can’t remember the last time I was so tired.”

“We’ll stay another few minutes, if it does ya,” Roland said. “Just we four.”

“As you will,” Callahan said.

Susannah took his hand and impulsively kissed it. “Thank you for your story, Pere.”

“It’s good to have finally told it, sai.”

Roland asked, “The box stayed in the cave until the church was built? Your church?”

“Aye. I can’t say how long. Maybe eight years; maybe less. ’Tis hard to tell with certainty. But there came a time when it began to call to me. As much as I hated and feared that Eye, part of me wanted to see it again.”

Roland nodded. “All the pieces of the Wizard’s Rainbow are full of glammer, but Black Thirteen was ever told to be the worst. Now I think I understand why that is. It’s this Crimson King’s actual watching Eye.”

“Whatever it is, I felt it calling me back to the cave . . . and further. Whispering that I should resume my wanderings, and make them endless. I knew I could open the door by opening the box. The door would take me anywhere I wanted to go. And any *when!* All I had to do was concentrate.” Callahan considered, then sat down again. He leaned forward, looking at them in turn over the gnarled carving of his clasped hands. “Hear me, I beg. We had a President, Kennedy was his name. He was assassinated some thirteen years before my time in ‘Salem’s Lot . . . assassinated in the West—”

“Yes,” Susannah said. “Jack Kennedy. God love him.” She turned to Roland. “He was a gunslinger.”

Roland’s eyebrows rose. “Do you say so?”

“Aye. And I say true.”

“In any case,” Callahan said, “there’s always been a question as to whether the man who killed him acted alone, or whether he was part of a larger conspiracy. And sometimes I’d wake in the middle of the night and think, ‘Why don’t you go and see? Why don’t you stand in front of that door with the box in your arms and think, “Dallas, November 22nd, 1963”? Because if you do that the door will open and you can go there, just like the man in Mr. Wells’s story of the time machine. And perhaps you could change what happened that day. If there was ever a watershed moment in American life, that was it. Change that, change everything that came after. Vietnam . . . the race riots . . . everything.’”

“Jesus,” Eddie said respectfully. If nothing else, you had to respect the ambition of such an idea. It was right up there with the peg-legged sea captain chasing the white whale. “But Pere . . . what if you did it and changed things for the *worse?*”

“Jack Kennedy was not a bad man,” Susannah said coldly. “Jack Kennedy was a good man. A *great* man.”

“Maybe so. But do you know what? I think it takes a great man to make a great mistake. And besides, someone who came after him might have been a really bad guy. Some Big Coffin Hunter who never got a chance because of Lee Harvey Oswald, or whoever it was.”

“But the ball doesn’t allow such thoughts,” Callahan said. “I believe it lures people on to acts of terrible evil by whispering to them that

they will do good. That they'll make things not just a little better but *all* better."

"Yes," Roland said. His voice was as dry as the snap of a twig in a fire.

"Do you think such traveling might actually be possible?" Callahan asked him. "Or was it only the thing's persuasive lie? Its glammer?"

"I believe it's so," Roland said. "And I believe that when we leave the Calla, it will be by that door."

"Would that I could come with you!" Callahan said. He spoke with surprising vehemence.

"Mayhap you will," Roland said. "In any case, you finally put the box—and the ball within—inside your church. To quiet it."

"Yes. And mostly it's worked. Mostly it sleeps."

"Yet you said it sent you todash twice."

Callahan nodded. The vehemence had flared like a pine-knot in a fireplace and disappeared just as quickly. Now he only looked tired. And very old, indeed. "The first time was to Mexico. Do you remember way back to the beginning of my story? The writer and the boy who believed?"

They nodded.

"One night the ball reached out to me when I slept and took me todash to Los Zapatos, Mexico. It was a funeral. The writer's funeral."

"Ben Mears," Eddie said. "The *Air Dance* guy."

"Yes."

"Did folks see you?" Jake asked. "Because they didn't see us."

Callahan shook his head. "No. But they sensed me. When I walked toward them, they moved away. It was as if I'd turned into a cold draft. In any case, the boy was there—Mark Petrie. Only he wasn't a boy any longer. He was in his young manhood. From that, and from the way he spoke of Ben—'There was a time when I would have called fifty-nine old' is how he began his eulogy—I'd guess that this might have been the mid-1990s. In any case, I didn't stay long . . . but long enough to decide that my young friend from all that long time ago had turned out fine. Maybe I did something right in 'Salem's Lot, after all." He paused a moment and then said, "In his eulogy, Mark referred to Ben as his father. That touched me very, very deeply."

“And the second time the ball sent you todash?” Roland asked. “The time it sent you to the Castle of the King?”

“There were birds. Great fat black birds. And beyond that I’ll not speak. Not in the middle of the night.” Callahan spoke in a dry voice that brooked no argument. He stood up again. “Another time, perhaps.”

Roland bowed acceptance of this. “Say thankya.”

“Will’ee not turn in, folks?”

“Soon,” Roland said.

They thanked him for his story (even Oy added a single, sleepy bark) and bade him goodnight. They watched him go and for several seconds after, they said nothing.

TWENTY

It was Jake who broke the silence. “That guy Walter was *behind* us, Roland! When we left the way station, he was *behind* us! Pere Callahan, too!”

“Yes,” Roland said. “As far back as that, Callahan was in our story. It makes my stomach flutter. As though I’d lost gravity.”

Eddie dabbed at the corner of his eye. “Whenever you show emotion like that, Roland,” he said, “I get all warm and squashy inside.” Then, when Roland only looked at him, “Ah, come on, quit laughin. You know I love it when you get the joke, but you’re embarrassing me.”

“Cry pardon,” Roland said with a faint smile. “Such humor as I have turns in early.”

“Mine stays up all night,” Eddie said brightly. “Keeps me awake. Tells me jokes. Knock-knock, who’s there, icy, icy who, icy your underwear, yock-yock-yock!”

“Is it out of your system?” Roland asked when he had finished.

“For the time being, yeah. But don’t worry, Roland, it always comes back. Can I ask you something?”

“Is it foolish?”

“I don’t think so. I hope not.”

“Then ask.”

“Those two men who saved Callahan’s bacon in the laundrymat on the East Side—were they who I think they were?”

“Who *do* you think they were?”

Eddie looked at Jake. “What about you, O son of Elmer? Got any ideas?”

“Sure,” Jake said. “It was Calvin Tower and the other guy from the bookshop, his friend. The one who told me the Samson riddle and the river riddle.” He snapped his fingers once, then twice, then grinned. “Aaron Deepneau.”

“What about the ring Callahan mentioned?” Eddie asked him. “The one with *Ex Libris* on it? I didn’t see either of them wearing a ring like that.”

“Were you looking?” Jake asked him.

“No, not really. But—”

“And remember that we saw him in 1977,” Jake said. “Those guys saved Pere’s life in 1981. Maybe someone gave Mr. Tower the ring during the four years between. As a present. Or maybe he bought it himself.”

“You’re just guessing,” Eddie said.

“Yeah,” Jake agreed. “But Tower owns a bookshop, so him having a ring with *Ex Libris* on it fits. Can you tell me it doesn’t feel right?”

“No. I’d have to put it in the ninetieth percentile, at least. But how could they know that Callahan . . .” Eddie trailed off, considered, then shook his head decisively. “Nah, I’m not even gonna get into it tonight. Next thing *we’ll* be discussing the Kennedy assassination, and I’m tired.”

“We’re all tired,” Roland said, “and we have much to do in the days ahead. Yet the Pere’s story has left me in a strangely disturbed frame of mind. I can’t tell if it answers more questions than it raises, or if it’s the other way around.”

None of them responded to this.

“We are ka-tet, and now we sit together an-tet,” Roland said. “In council. Late as it is, is there anything else we need to discuss before we part from one another? If so, you must say.” When there was no response, Roland pushed back his chair. “All right, then I wish you all —”

“Wait.”

It was Susannah. It had been so long since she'd spoken that they had nearly forgotten her. And she spoke in a small voice not much like her usual one. Certainly it didn't seem to belong to the woman who had told Eben Took that if he called her brownie again, she'd pull the tongue out of his head and wipe his ass with it.

"There might be something."

That same small voice.

"Something else."

And smaller still.

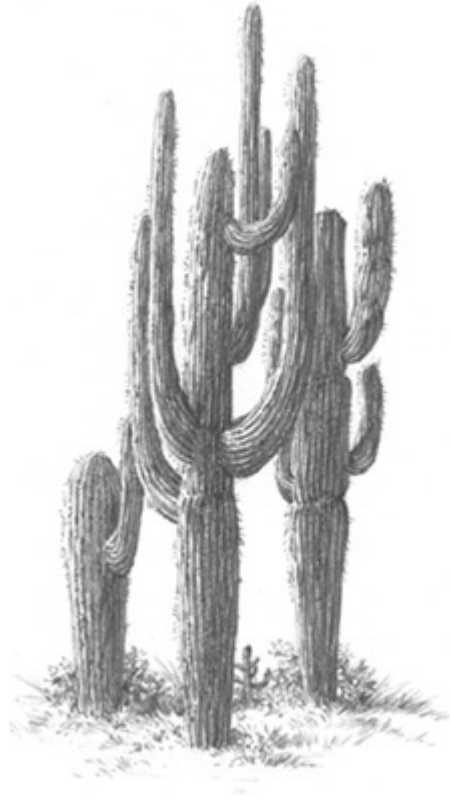
"I—"

She looked at them, each in turn, and when she came to the gunslinger he saw sorrow in those eyes, and reproach, and weariness. He saw no anger. *If she'd been angry, he thought later, I might not have felt quite so ashamed.*

"I think I might have a little problem," she said. "I don't see how it can be . . . how it can possibly be . . . but boys, I think I might be a little bit in the family way."

Having said that, Susannah Dean/Odetta Holmes/Detta Walker/Mia daughter of none put her hands over her face and began to cry.

PART THREE
THE WOLVES



CHAPTER I: SECRETS

ONE

Behind the cottage of Rosalita Munoz was a tall privy painted sky-blue. Jutting from the wall to the left as the gunslinger entered, late on the morning after Pere Callahan had finished his story, was a plain iron band with a small disc of steel set eight inches or so beneath. Within this skeletal vase was a double sprig of saucy susan. Its lemony, faintly astringent smell was the privy's only aroma. On the wall above the seat of ease, in a frame and beneath glass, was a picture of the Man Jesus with his praying hands held just below his chin, his reddish locks spilling over his shoulders, and his eyes turned up to His Father. Roland had heard there were tribes of slow mutants who referred to the Father of Jesus as Big Sky Daddy.

The image of the Man Jesus was in profile, and Roland was glad. Had He been facing him full on, the gunslinger wasn't sure he could have done his morning business without closing his eyes, full though his bladder was. *Strange place to put a picture of God's Son*, he thought, and then realized it wasn't strange at all. In the ordinary course of things, only Rosalita used this privy, and the Man Jesus would have nothing to look at but her prim back.

Roland Deschain burst out laughing, and when he did, his water began to flow.

TWO

Rosalita had been gone when he awoke, and not recently: her side of the bed had been cold. Now, standing outside her tall blue oblong of

a privy and buttoning his flies, Roland looked up at the sun and judged the time as not long before noon. Judging such things without a clock, glass, or pendulum had become tricky in these latter days, but it was still possible if you were careful in your calculations and willing to allow for some error in your result. Cort, he thought, would be aghast if he saw one of his pupils—one of his *graduated* pupils, a gunslinger—beginning such a business as this by sleeping almost until midday. And this *was* the beginning. All the rest had been ritual and preparation, necessary but not terribly helpful. A kind of dancing the rice-song. Now that part was over. And as for sleeping late . . .

“No one ever deserved a late lying-in more,” he said, and walked down the slope. Here a fence marked the rear of Callahan’s patch (or perhaps the Pere thought of it as God’s patch). Beyond it was a small stream, babbling as excitedly as a little girl telling secrets to her best friend. The banks were thick with saucy susan, so there was another mystery (a minor one) solved. Roland breathed deeply of the scent.

He found himself thinking of ka, which he rarely did. (Eddie, who believed Roland thought of little else, would have been astounded.) Its only true rule was *Stand aside and let me work*. Why in God’s name was it so hard to learn such a simple thing? Why always this stupid need to meddle? Every one of them had done it; every one of them had known Susannah Dean was pregnant. Roland himself had known almost since the time of her kindling, when Jake had come through from the house in Dutch Hill. Susannah herself had known, in spite of the bloody rags she had buried at the side of the trail. So why had it taken them so long to have the palaver they’d had last night? Why had they made such a *business* of it? And how much might have suffered because of it?

Nothing, Roland hoped. But it was hard to tell, wasn’t it?

Perhaps it was best to let it go. This morning that seemed like good advice, because he felt very well. Physically, at least. Hardly an ache or a—

“I thought’ee meant to turn in not long after I left ye, gunslinger, but Rosalita said you never came in until almost the dawn.”

Roland turned from the fence and his thoughts. Callahan was today dressed in dark pants, dark shoes, and a dark shirt with a notched collar. His cross lay upon his bosom and his crazy white hair

had been partially tamed, probably with some sort of grease. He bore the gunslinger's regard for a little while and then said, "Yesterday I gave the Holy Communion to those of the smallholds who take it. And heard their confessions. Today's my day to go out to the ranches and do the same. There's a goodish number of cowboys who hold to what they mostly call the Cross-way. Rosalita drives me in the buckboard, so when it comes to lunch and dinner, you must shift for yourselves."

"We can do that," Roland said, "but do you have a few minutes to talk to me?"

"Of course," Callahan said. "A man who can't stay a bit shouldn't approach in the first place. Good advice, I think, and not just for priests."

"Would you hear *my* confession?"

Callahan raised his eyebrows. "Do'ee hold to the Man Jesus, then?"

Roland shook his head. "Not a bit. Will you hear it anyway, I beg? And keep it to yourself?"

Callahan shrugged. "As to keeping what you say to myself, that's easy. It's what we do. Just don't mistake discretion for absolution." He favored Roland with a wintry smile. "We Catholics save that for ourselves, may it do ya."

The thought of absolution had never crossed Roland's mind, and he found the idea that he might need it (or that this man could give it) almost comic. He rolled a cigarette, doing it slowly, thinking of how to begin and how much to say. Callahan waited, respectfully quiet.

At last Roland said, "There was a prophecy that I should draw three and that we should become katet. Never mind who made it; never mind anything that came before. I won't worry that old knot, never again if I can help it. There were three doors. Behind the second was the woman who became Eddie's wife, although she did not at that time call herself Susannah . . ."

THREE

So Roland told Callahan the part of their story which bore directly upon Susannah and the women who had been before her. He

concentrated on how they'd saved Jake from the doorkeeper and drawn the boy into Mid-World, telling how Susannah (or perhaps at that point she had been Detta) had held the demon of the circle while they did their work. He had known the risks, Roland told Callahan, and he had become certain—even while they were still riding Blaine the Mono—that she had not survived the risk of pregnancy. He had told Eddie, and Eddie hadn't been all that surprised. Then Jake had told *him*. Scolded him with it, actually. And he had taken the scolding, he said, because he felt it was deserved. What none of them had fully realized until last night on the porch was that Susannah herself had known, and perhaps for almost as long as Roland. She had simply fought harder.

“So, Pere—what do you think?”

“You say her husband agreed to keep the secret,” Callahan replied. “And even Jake—who sees clearly—”

“Yes,” Roland said. “He does. He did. And when he asked me what we should do, I gave him bad advice. I told him we'd be best to let ka work itself out, and all the time I was holding it in my hands, like a caught bird.”

“Things always look clearer when we see them over our shoulder, don't they?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell her last night that she's got a demon's spawn growing in her womb?”

“She knows it's not Eddie's.”

“So you didn't. And Mia? Did you tell her about Mia, and the castle banqueting hall?”

“Yes,” Roland said. “I think hearing that depressed her but didn't surprise her. There was the other—Detta—ever since the accident when she lost her legs.” It had been no accident, but Roland hadn't gone into the business of Jack Mort with Callahan, seeing no reason to do so. “Detta Walker hid herself well from Odetta Holmes. Eddie and Jake say she's a schizophrenic.” Roland pronounced this exotic word with great care.

“But you cured her,” Callahan said. “Brought her face-to-face with her two selves in one of those doorways. Did you not?”

Roland shrugged. “You can burn away warts by painting them with silver metal, Pere, but in a person prone to warts, they’ll come back.”

Callahan surprised him by throwing his head back to the sky and bellowing laughter. He laughed so long and hard he finally had to take his handkerchief from his back pocket and wipe his eyes with it. “Roland, you may be quick with a gun and as brave as Satan on Saturday night, but you’re no psychiatrist. To compare schizophrenia to *warts* . . . oh, my!”

“And yet Mia is real, Pere. I’ve seen her myself. Not in a dream, as Jake did, but with my own two eyes.”

“Exactly my point,” Callahan said. “She’s not an aspect of the woman who was born Odetta Susannah Holmes. She is *she*.”

“Does it make a difference?”

“I think it does. But here is one thing I can tell you for sure: no matter how things lie in your fellowship—your ka-tet—this must be kept a dead secret from the people of Calla Bryn Sturgis. Today, things are going your way. But if word got out that the female gunslinger with the brown skin might be carrying a demon-child, the *folken*’d go the other way, and in a hurry. With Eben Took leading the parade. I know that in the end you’ll decide your course of action based on your own assessment of what the Calla needs, but the four of you can’t beat the Wolves without help, no matter how good you are with such calibers as you carry. There’s too much to manage.”

Reply was unnecessary. Callahan was right.

“What is it you fear most?” Callahan asked.

“The breaking of the tet,” Roland said at once.

“By that you mean Mia’s taking control of the body they share and going off on her own to have the child?”

“If that happened at the wrong time, it would be bad, but all might still come right. *If* Susannah came back. But what she carries is nothing but poison with a heartbeat.” Roland looked bleakly at the religious in his black clothes. “I have every reason to believe it would begin its work by slaughtering the mother.”

“The breaking of the tet,” Callahan mused. “Not the death of your friend, but the breaking of the tet. I wonder if your friends know what sort of man you are, Roland?”

“They know,” Roland said, and on that subject said no more.

“What would you have of me?”

“First, an answer to a question. It’s clear to me that Rosalita knows a good deal of rough doctoring. Would she know enough to turn the baby out before its time? And the stomach for what she might find?”

They would all have to be there, of course—he and Eddie, Jake, too, as little as Roland liked the thought of it. Because the thing inside her had surely quickened by now, and even if its time hadn’t come, it would be dangerous. *And its time is almost certainly close*, he thought. *I don’t know it for sure, but I feel it. I—*

The thought broke off as he became aware of Callahan’s expression: horror, disgust, and mounting anger.

“Rosalita would never do such a thing. Mark well what I say. She’d die first.”

Roland was perplexed. “Why?”

“Because she’s a Catholic!”

“I don’t understand.”

Callahan saw the gunslinger really did not, and the sharpest edge of his anger was blunted. Yet Roland sensed that a great deal remained, like the bolt behind the head of an arrow. “It’s abortion you’re talking about!”

“Yes?”

“Roland . . . Roland.” Callahan lowered his head, and when he raised it, the anger appeared to be gone. In its place was a stony obduracy the gunslinger had seen before. Roland could no more break it than he could lift a mountain with his bare hands. “My church divides sins into two: venial sins, which are bearable in the sight of God, and mortal ones, which are not. Abortion is a mortal sin. It is murder.”

“Pere, we are speaking of a demon, not a human being.”

“So you say. That’s God’s business, not mine.”

“And if it kills her? Will you say the same then and so wash your hands of her?”

Roland had never heard the tale of Pontius Pilate and Callahan knew it. Still, he winced at the image. But his reply was firm enough. “You who spoke of the breaking of your tet before you spoke of the taking of her life! Shame on you. *Shame.*”

“My quest—the quest of my ka-tet—is the Dark Tower, Pere. It’s not saving this world we’re about, or even this universe, but all universes. All of existence.”

“I don’t care,” Callahan said. “I *can’t* care. Now listen to me, Roland son of Steven, for I would have you hear me very well. Are you listening?”

Roland sighed. “Say thankya.”

“Rosa won’t give the woman an abortion. There are others in town who could, I have no doubt—even in a place where children are taken every twenty-some years by monsters from the dark land, such filthy arts are undoubtedly preserved—but if you go to one of them, you won’t need to worry about the Wolves. I’ll raise every hand in Calla Bryn Sturgis against you long before they come.”

Roland gazed at him unbelievably. “Even though you know, as I’m sure you do, that we may be able to save a hundred other children? Human children, whose first task on earth would not be to eat their mothers?”

Callahan might not have heard. His face was very pale. “I’ll have more, do it please ya . . . and even if it don’t. I’ll have your word, sworn upon the face of your father, that you’ll never suggest an abortion to the woman herself.”

A queer thought came to Roland: Now that this subject had arisen—had pounced upon them, like Jilly out of her box—Susannah was no longer Susannah to this man. She had become *the woman*. And another thought: How many monsters had Pere Callahan slain himself, with his own hand?

As often happened in times of extreme stress, Roland’s father spoke to him. *This situation is not quite beyond saving, but should you carry on much further—should you give voice to such thoughts—it will be.*

“I want your promise, Roland.”

“Or you’ll raise the town.”

“Aye.”

“And suppose Susannah decides to abort herself? Women do it, and she’s very far from stupid. She knows the stakes.”

“Mia—the baby’s true mother—will prevent it.”

“Don’t be so sure. Susannah Dean’s sense of self-preservation is very strong. And I believe her dedication to our quest is even

stronger.”

Callahan hesitated. He looked away, lips pressed together in a tight white line. Then he looked back. “*You will prevent it,*” he said. “As her dinh.”

Roland thought, *I have just been Castled.*

“All right,” he said. “I will tell her of our talk and make sure she understands the position you’ve put us in. And I’ll tell her that she must not tell Eddie.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’d kill you, Pere. He’d kill you for your interference.”

Roland was somewhat gratified by the widening of Callahan’s eyes. He reminded himself again that he must raise no feelings in himself against this man, who simply was what he was. Had he not already spoken to them of the trap he carried with him wherever he went?

“Now listen to me as I’ve listened to you, for you now have a responsibility to all of us. Especially to ‘the woman.’ ”

Callahan winced a little, as if struck. But he nodded. “Tell me what you’d have.”

“For one thing, I’d have you watch her when you can. Like a hawk! In particular I’d have you watch for her working her fingers here.” Roland rubbed above his left eyebrow. “Or here.” Now he rubbed at his left temple. “Listen to her way of speaking. Be aware if it speeds up. Watch for her to start moving in little jerks.” Roland snapped a hand up to his head, scratched it, snapped it back down. He tossed his head to the right, then looked back at Callahan. “You see?”

“Yes. These are the signs that Mia is coming?”

Roland nodded. “I don’t want her left alone anymore when she’s Mia. Not if I can help it.”

“I understand,” Callahan said. “But Roland, it’s hard for me to believe that a newborn, no matter who or what the father might have been—”

“Hush,” Roland said. “Hush, do ya.” And when Callahan had duly hushed: “What you think or believe is nothing to me. You’ve yourself to look out for, and I wish you well. But if Mia or Mia’s get harms Rosalita, Pere, I’ll hold you responsible for her injuries. You’ll pay to my good hand. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Roland.” Callahan looked both abashed and calm. It was an odd combination.

“All right. Now here’s the other thing you can do for me. Comes the day of the Wolves, I’m going to need six *folken* I can absolutely trust. I’d like to have three of each sex.”

“Do you care if some are parents with children at risk?”

“No. But not all. And none of the ladies who may be throwing the dish—Sarey, Zalia, Margaret Eisenhart, Rosalita. They’ll be somewhere else.”

“What do you want these six for?”

Roland was silent.

Callahan looked at him a moment longer, then sighed. “Reuben Caverra,” he said. “Reuben’s never forgot his sister and how he loved her. Diane Caverra, his wife . . . or do’ee not want couples?”

No, a couple would be all right. Roland twirled his fingers, gesturing for the Pere to continue.

“Cantab of the Manni, I sh’d say; the children follow him like he was the Pied Piper.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to. They follow him, that’s the important part. Bucky Javier and his wife . . . and what would you say to your boy, Jake? Already the town children follow him with their eyes, and I suspect a number of the girls are in love with him.”

“No, I need him.”

Or can’t bear to have him out of your sight? Callahan wondered . . . but did not say. He had pushed Roland as far as was prudent, at least for one day. Further, actually.

“What of Andy, then? The children love him, too. And he’d protect them to the death.”

“Aye? From the Wolves?”

Callahan looked troubled. Actually it had been rock-cats he’d been thinking of. Them, and the sort of wolves that came on four legs. As for the ones that came out of Thunderclap . . .

“No,” Roland said. “Not Andy.”

“Why not? For ’t isn’t to fight the Wolves you want these six for, is it?”

“Not Andy,” Roland repeated. It was just a feeling, but his feelings were his version of the touch. “There’s time to think about it, Pere . . . and we’ll think, too.”

“You’re going out into the town.”

“Aye. Today and every day for the next few.”

Callahan grinned. “Your friends and I would call it ‘schmoozing.’ It’s a Yiddish word.”

“Aye? What tribe are they?”

“An unlucky one, by all accounts. Here, schmoozing is called commala. It’s their word for damned near everything.” Callahan was a little amused by how badly he wanted to regain the gunslinger’s regard. A little disgusted with himself, as well. “In any case, I wish you well with it.”

Roland nodded. Callahan started up toward the rectory, where Rosalita already had harnessed the horses to the buckboard and now waited impatiently for Callahan to come, so they could be about God’s work. Halfway up the slope, Callahan turned back.

“I do not apologize for my beliefs,” he said, “but if I have complicated your work here in the Calla, I’m sorry.”

“Your Man Jesus seems to me a bit of a son of a bitch when it comes to women,” Roland said. “Was He ever married?”

The corners of Callahan’s mouth quirked. “No,” he said, “but His girlfriend was a whore.”

“Well,” Roland said, “that’s a start.”

FOUR

Roland went back to leaning on the fence. The day called out to him to begin, but he wanted to give Callahan a head start. There was no more reason for this than there had been for rejecting Andy out of hand; just a feeling.

He was still there, and rolling another smoke, when Eddie came down the hill with his shirt flapping out behind him and his boots in one hand.

“Hile, Eddie,” Roland said.

“Hile, boss. Saw you talking with Callahan. Give us this day, our Wilma and Fred.”

Roland raised his eyebrows.

“Never mind,” Eddie said. “Roland, in all the excitement I never got a chance to tell you Granpere’s story. And it’s important.”

“Is Susannah up?”

“Yep. Having a wash. Jake’s eating what looks like a twelve-egg omelet.”

Roland nodded. “I’ve fed the horses. We can saddle them while you tell me the old man’s tale.”

“Don’t think it’ll take that long,” Eddie said, and it didn’t. He came to the punchline—which the old man had whispered into his ear—just as they reached the barn. Roland turned toward him, the horses forgotten. His eyes were blazing. The hands he clamped on Eddie’s shoulders—even the diminished right—were powerful.

“Repeat it!”

Eddie took no offense. “He told me to lean close. I did. He said he’d never told anyone but his son, which I believe. Tian and Zalia know he was out there—or says he was—but they don’t know what he saw when he pulled the mask off the thing. I don’t think they even know Red Molly was the one who dropped it. And then he whispered . . .” Once again Eddie told Roland what Tian’s Granpere claimed to have seen.

Roland’s glare of triumph was so brilliant it was frightening. “Gray horses!” he said. “All those horses the exact same shade! Do you understand now, Eddie? Do you?”

“Yep,” Eddie said. His teeth appeared in a grin. It was not particularly comforting, that grin. “As the chorus girl said to the businessman, we’ve been here before.”

FIVE

In standard American English, the word with the most gradations of meaning is probably *run*. The Random House unabridged dictionary offers one hundred and seventy-eight options, beginning with “to go quickly by moving the legs more rapidly than at a walk” and ending with “melted or liquefied.” In the Crescent-Callas of the borderlands between Mid-World and Thunderclap, the blue ribbon for most meanings would have gone to *commala*. If the word were listed in the

Random House unabridged, the first definition (assuming they were assigned, as is common, in order of widest usage), would have been “a variety of rice grown at the furthest eastern edge of All-World.” The second one, however would have been “sexual intercourse.” The third would have been “sexual orgasm,” as in *Did’ee come commala?* (The hoped-for reply being *Aye, say thankya, commala big-big.*) To wet the commala is to irrigate the rice in a dry time; it is also to masturbate. Commala is the commencement of some big and joyful meal, like a family feast (not the meal itself, do ya, but the moment of beginning to eat). A man who is losing his hair (as Garrett Strong was that season), is coming commala. Putting animals out to stud is damp commala. Gelded animals are dry commala, although no one could tell you why. A virgin is green commala, a menstruating woman is red commala, an old man who can no longer make iron before the forge is—say sorry—sof’ commala. To stand commala is to stand belly-to-belly, a slang term meaning “to share secrets.” The sexual connotations of the word are clear, but why should the rocky arroyos north of town be known as the commala draws? For that matter, why is a fork sometimes a commala, but never a spoon or a knife? There aren’t a hundred and seventy-eight meanings for the word, but there must be seventy. Twice that, if one were to add in the various shadings. One of the meanings—it would surely be in the top ten—is that which Pere Callahan defined as *schmoozing*. The actual phrase would be something like “come Sturgis commala,” or “come Bryn-a commala.” The literal meaning would be to stand belly-to-belly with the community as a whole.

During the following five days, Roland and his ka-tet attempted to continue this process, which the outworlders had begun at Took’s General Store. The going was difficult at first (“Like trying to light a fire with damp kindling,” Susannah said crossly after their first night), but little by little, the *folken* came around. Or at least warmed up to them. Each night, Roland and the Deans returned to the Pere’s rectory. Each late afternoon or evening, Jake returned to the Rocking B Ranch. Andy took to meeting him at the place where the B’s ranch-road split off from East Road and escorting him the rest of the way, each time making his bow and saying, “Good evening, soh! Would you like your horoscope? This time of year is sometimes called Charyou

Reap! You will see an old friend! A young lady thinks of you warmly!”
And so on.

Jake had asked Roland again why he was spending so much time with Benny Slightman.

“Are you complaining?” Roland asked. “Don’t like him anymore?”

“I like him fine, Roland, but if there’s something I’m supposed to be doing besides jumping in the hay, teaching Oy to do somersaults, or seeing who can skip a flat rock on the river the most times, I think you ought to tell me what it is.”

“There’s nothing else,” Roland said. Then, as an afterthought: “And get your sleep. Growing boys need plenty of sleep.”

“Why am I out there?”

“Because it seems right to me that you should be,” Roland said. “All I want is for you to keep your eyes open and tell me if you see something you don’t like or don’t understand.”

“Anyway, kiddo, don’t you see enough of us during the days?” Eddie asked him.

They *were* together during those next five days, and the days were long. The novelty of riding sai Overholser’s horses wore off in a hurry. So did complaints of sore muscles and blistered butts. On one of these rides, as they approached the place where Andy would be waiting, Roland asked Susannah bluntly if she had considered abortion as a way of solving her problem.

“Well,” she said, looking at him curiously from her horse, “I’m not going to tell you the thought never crossed my mind.”

“Banish it,” he said. “No abortion.”

“Any particular reason why not?”

“Ka,” said Roland.

“Kaka,” Eddie replied promptly. This was an old joke, but the three of them laughed, and Roland was delighted to laugh with them. And with that, the subject was dropped. Roland could hardly believe it, but he was glad. The fact that Susannah seemed so little disposed to discuss Mia and the coming of the baby made him grateful indeed. He supposed there were things—quite a few of them—which she felt better off not knowing.

Still, she had never lacked for courage. Roland was sure the questions would have come sooner or later, but after five days of

canvassing the town as a quartet (a quintet counting Oy, who always rode with Jake), Roland began sending her out to the Jaffords smallhold at midday to try her hand with the dish.

Eight days or so after their long palaver on the rectory porch—the one that had gone on until four in the morning—Susannah invited them out to the Jaffords smallhold to see her progress. “It’s Zalia’s idea,” she said. “I guess she wants to know if I pass.”

Roland knew he only had to ask Susannah herself if he wanted an answer to that question, but he was curious. When they arrived, they found the entire family gathered on the back porch, and several of Tian’s neighbors, as well: Jorge Estrada and his wife, Diego Adams (in chaps), the Javiers. They looked like spectators at a Points practice. Zalman and Tia, the roont twins, stood to one side, goggling at all the company with wide eyes. Andy was also there, holding baby Aaron (who was sleeping) in his arms.

“Roland, if you wanted all this kept secret, guess what?” Eddie said.

Roland was not put out of countenance, although he realized now that his threat to the cowboys who’d seen sai Eisenhart throw the dish had been utterly useless. Country-folk talked, that was all. Whether in the borderlands or the baronies, gossip was ever the chief sport. *And at the very least, he mused, those humpies will spread the news that Roland’s a hard boy, strong commala, and not to be trifled with.*

“It is what it is,” he said. “The Calla-folken have known for donkey’s years that the Sisters of Oriza throw the dish. If they know Susannah throws it, too—and well—maybe it’s to the good.”

Jake said, “I just hope she doesn’t, you know, mess up.”

There were respectful greetings for Roland, Eddie, and Jake as they mounted the porch. Andy told Jake a young lady was pining for him. Jake blushed and said he’d just as soon not know about stuff like that, if that did Andy all right.

“As you will, soh.” Jake found himself studying the words and numbers stamped on Andy’s midsection like a steel tattoo and wondering again if he was really in this world of robots and cowboys, or if it was all some sort of extraordinarily vivid dream. “I hope this baby will wake up soon, so I do. And cry! Because I know several soothing cradle-songs—”

“Hush up, ye creakun steel bandit!” Gran-pere said crossly, and after crying the old man’s pardon (in his usual complacent, not-a-bit-sorry tone of voice), Andy did. *Messenger, Many Other Functions*, Jake thought. *Is one of your other functions teasing folks, Andy, or is that just my imagination?*

Susannah had gone into the house with Zalia. When they came out, Susannah was wearing not one reed pouch, but two. They hung to her hips on a pair of woven straps. There was another strap, too, Eddie saw, running around her waist and holding the pouches snug. Like holster tie-downs.

“That’s quite the hookup, say thankya,” Diego Adams remarked.

“Susannah thought it up,” Zalia said as Susannah got into her wheelchair. “She calls it a docker’s clutch.”

It wasn’t, Eddie thought, not quite, but it was close. He felt an admiring smile lift the corners of his mouth, and saw a similar one on Roland’s. And Jake’s. By God, even Oy appeared to be grinning.

“Will it draw water, that’s what *I* wonder,” Bucky Javier said. That such a question should even be asked, Eddie thought, only emphasized the difference between the gunslingers and the *Callafolken*. Eddie and his mates had known from first look what the hookup was and how it would work. Javier, however, was a smallhold farmer, and as such, saw the world in a very different way.

You need us, Eddie thought toward the little cluster of men standing on the porch—the farmers in their dirty white pants, Adams in his chaps and manure-splattered shor’boots. *Boy, do you ever.*

Susannah wheeled to the front of the porch and folded her stumps beneath her so she appeared almost to be standing in her chair. Eddie knew how much this posture hurt her, but no discomfort showed on her face. Roland, meanwhile, was looking down into the pouches she wore. There were four dishes in each, plain things with no pattern on them. Practice-dishes.

Zalia walked across to the barn. Although Roland and Eddie had noted the blanket tacked up there as soon as they arrived, the others noticed it for the first time when Zalia pulled it down. Drawn in chalk on the barnboards was the outline of a man—or a manlike being—with a frozen grin on his face and the suggestion of a cloak fluttering out behind him. This wasn’t work of the quality produced by the

Tavery twins, nowhere near, but those on the porch recognized a Wolf when they saw one. The older children oohed softly. The Estradas and the Javiers applauded, but looked apprehensive even as they did so, like people who fear they may be whistling up the devil. Andy complimented the artist (“whoever she may be,” he added archly), and Gran-pere told him again to shut his trap. Then he called out that the Wolves *he’d* seen were quite a spot bigger. His voice was shrill with excitement.

“Well, I drew it to man-size,” Zalia said (she had actually drawn it to *husband-size*). “If the real thing turns out to make a bigger target, all to the good. Hear me, I beg.” This last came out uncertainly, almost as a question.

Roland nodded. “We say thankya.”

Zalia shot him a grateful look, then stepped away from the outline on the wall. Then she looked at Susannah. “When you will, lady.”

For a moment Susannah only remained where she was, about sixty yards from the barn. Her hands lay between her breasts, the right covering the left. Her head was lowered. Her ka-mates knew exactly what was going on in that head: *I aim with my eye, shoot with my hand, kill with my heart*. Their own hearts went out to her, perhaps carried by Jake’s touch or Eddie’s love, encouraging her, wishing her well, sharing their excitement. Roland watched fiercely. Would one more dab hand with the dish turn things in their favor? Perhaps not. But he was what he was, and so was she, and he wished her true aim with every last bit of his will.

She raised her head. Looked at the shape chalked on the barn wall. Still her hands lay between her breasts. Then she cried out shrilly, as Margaret Eisenhart had cried out in the yard of the Rocking B, and Roland felt his hard-beating heart rise. In that moment he had a clear and beautiful memory of David, his hawk, folding his wings in a blue summer sky and dropping at his prey like a stone with eyes.

“*Riza!*”

Her hands dropped and became a blur. Only Roland, Eddie, and Jake were able to mark how they crossed at the waist, the right hand seizing a dish from the left pouch, the left hand seizing one from the right. Sai Eisenhart had thrown from the shoulder, sacrificing time in order to gain force and accuracy. Susannah’s arms crossed below her

ribcage and just above the arms of her wheelchair, the dishes finishing their cocking arc at about the height of her shoulderblades. Then they flew, crisscrossing in midair a moment before thudding into the side of the barn.

Susannah's arms finished straight out before her; for a moment she looked like an impresario who has just introduced the featured act. Then they dropped and crossed, seizing two more dishes. She flung them, dipped again, and flung the third set. The first two were still quivering when the last two bit into the side of the barn, one high and one low.

For a moment there was utter silence in the Jaffordses' yard. Not even a bird called. The eight plates ran in a perfectly straight line from the throat of the chalked figure to what would have been its upper midsection. They were all two and a half to three inches apart, descending like buttons on a shirt. And she had thrown all eight in no more than three seconds.

"Do'ee mean to use the dish against the Wolves?" Bucky Javier asked in a queerly breathless voice. "Is that it?"

"Nothing's been decided," Roland said stolidly.

In a barely audible voice that held both shock and wonder, Deelie Estrada said: "But if that'd been a man, hear me, he'd be cutlets."

It was Gran-pere who had the final word, as perhaps gran-peres should: "Yer-*bugger!*"

SIX

On their way back out to the main road (Andy walked at a distance ahead of them, carrying the folded wheelchair and playing something bagpipey through his sound system), Susannah said musingly: "I may give up the gun altogether, Roland, and just concentrate on the dish. There's an elemental satisfaction to giving that scream and then throwing."

"You reminded me of my hawk," Roland admitted.

Susannah's teeth flashed white in a grin. "I *felt* like a hawk. Riza! O-*Riza!* Just saying the word puts me in a throwing mood."

To Jake's mind this brought some obscure memory of Gasher ("Yer old pal, Gasher," as the gentleman himself had been wont to say), and

he shivered.

“Would you really give up the gun?” Roland asked. He didn’t know if he was amused or aghast.

“Would you roll your own smokes if you could get tailor-mades?” she asked, and then, before he could answer: “No, not really. Yet the dish is a lovely weapon. When they come, I hope to throw two dozen. And bag my limit.”

“Will there be a shortage of plates?” Eddie asked.

“Nope,” she said. “There aren’t very many fancy ones—like the one sai Eisenhart threw for you, Roland—but they’ve hundreds of practice-plates. Rosalita and Sarey Adams are sorting through them, culling out any that might fly crooked.” She hesitated, lowered her voice. “They’ve all been out here, Roland, and although Sarey’s brave as a lion and would stand fast against a tornado . . .”

“Hasn’t got it, huh?” Eddie asked sympathetically.

“Not quite,” Susannah agreed. “She’s good, but not like the others. Nor does she have quite the same ferocity.”

“I may have something else for her,” Roland said.

“What would that be, sugar?”

“Escort duty, mayhap. We’ll see how they shoot, day after tomorrow. A little competition always livens things up. Five o’ the clock, Susannah, do they know?”

“Yes. Most of the Calla would turn up, if you allowed them.”

This *was* discouraging . . . but he should have expected it. *I’ve been too long out of the world of people*, he thought. *So I have.*

“No one but the ladies and ourselves,” Roland said firmly.

“If the Calla-*folken* saw the women throw well, it could swing a lot of people who are on the fence.”

Roland shook his head. He didn’t *want* them to know how well the women threw, that was very nearly the whole point. But that the town knew they *were* throwing . . . that might not be such a bad thing. “How good are they, Susannah? Tell me.”

She thought about it, then smiled. “Killer aim,” she said. “Every one.”

“Can you teach them that crosshand throw?”

Susannah considered the question. You could teach anyone just about anything, given world enough and time, but they had neither.

Only thirteen days left now, and by the day the Sisters of Oriza (including their newest member, Susannah of New York) met for the exhibition in Pere Callahan's back yard, there would be only a week and a half. The crosshand throw had come naturally to her, as everything about shooting had. But the others . . .

"Rosalita will learn it," she said at last. "Margaret Eisenhart *could* learn it, but she might get flustered at the wrong time. Zalia? No. Best she throw one plate at a time, always with her right hand. She's a little slower, but I guarantee every plate she throws will drink something's blood."

"Yeah," Eddie said. "Until a sneetch homes in on her and blows her out of her corset, that is."

Susannah ignored this. "We can hurt them, Roland. Thou knows we can."

Roland nodded. What he'd seen had encouraged him mightily, especially in light of what Eddie had told him. Susannah and Jake also knew Granpere's ancient secret now. And, speaking of Jake . . .

"You're very quiet today," Roland said to the boy. "Is everything all right?"

"I do fine, thankya," Jake said. He had been watching Andy. Thinking of how Andy had rocked the baby. Thinking that if Tian and Zalia and the other kids all died and Andy was left to raise Aaron, baby Aaron would probably die within six months. Die, or turn into the weirdest kid in the universe. Andy would diaper him, Andy would feed him all the correct stuff, Andy would change him when he needed changing and burp him if he needed burping, and there would be all sorts of cradle-songs. Each would be sung perfectly and none would be propelled by a mother's love. Or a father's. Andy was just Andy, Messenger Robot, Many Other Functions. Baby Aaron would be better off being raised by . . . well, by wolves.

This thought led him back to the night he and Benny had tented out (they hadn't done so since; the weather had turned chilly). The night he had seen Andy and Benny's Da' palavering. Then Benny's Da' had gone wading across the river. Headed east.

Headed in the direction of Thunderclap.

"Jake, are you sure you're okay?" Susannah asked.

“Yessum,” Jake said, knowing this would probably make her laugh. It did, and Jake laughed with her, but he was still thinking of Benny’s Da’. The spectacles Benny’s Da’ wore. Jake was pretty sure he was the only one in town who had them. Jake had asked him about that one day when the three of them had been riding in one of the Rocking B’s two north fields, looking out strays. Benny’s Da’ had told him a story about trading a beautiful true-threaded colt for the specs—from one of the lake-mart boats it had been, back when Benny’s sissa had been alive, Oriza bless her. He had done it even though all of the cowpokes—even Vaughn Eisenhart himself, do ya not see—had told him such spectacles never worked; they were no more useful than Andy’s fortunes. But Ben Slightman had tried them on, and they had changed everything. All at once, for the first time since he’d been maybe seven, he’d been able to really see the world.

He had polished his specs on his shirt as they rode, held them up to the sky so that twin spots of light swam on his cheeks, then put them back on. “If I ever lose em or break em, I don’t know what I’d do,” he’d said. “I got along without such just fine for twenty years or more, but a person gets used to something better in one rip of a hurry.”

Jake thought it was a good story. He was sure Susannah would have believed it (assuming the singularity of Slightman’s spectacles had occurred to her in the first place). He had an idea Roland would have believed it, too. Slightman told it in just the right way: a man who still appreciated his good fortune and didn’t mind letting folks know that he’d been right about something while quite a number of other people, his boss among them, had been wide of the mark. Even Eddie might have swallowed it. The only thing wrong with Slightman’s story was that it wasn’t true. Jake didn’t know what the real deal was, his touch didn’t go that deep, but he knew that much. And it worried him.

Probably nothing, you know. Probably he just got them in some way that wouldn’t sound so good. For all you know, one of the Manni brought them back from some other world, and Benny’s Da’ stole them.

That was one possibility; if pressed, Jake could have come up with half a dozen more. He was an imaginative boy.

Still, when added to what he'd seen by the river, it worried him. What kind of business could Eisenhart's foreman have on the far side of the Whye? Jake didn't know. And still, each time he thought to raise this subject with Roland, something kept him quiet.

And after giving him a hard time about keeping secrets!

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But—

But what, little trailhand?

But Benny, that was what. Benny was the problem. Or maybe it was Jake himself who was actually the problem. He'd never been much good at making friends, and now he had a good one. A real one. The thought of getting Benny's Da' in trouble made him feel sick to his stomach.

SEVEN

Two days later, at five o' the clock, Rosalita, Zalia, Margaret Eisenhart, Sarey Adams, and Susannah Dean gathered in the field just west of Rosa's neat privy. There were a lot of giggles and not a few bursts of nervous, shrieky laughter. Roland kept his distance, and instructed Eddie and Jake to do the same. Best to let them get it out of their systems.

Set against the rail fence, ten feet apart from each other, were stuffies with plump sharproot heads. Each head was wrapped in a gunnysack which had been tied to make it look like the hood of a cloak. At the foot of each guy were three baskets. One was filled with more sharproot. Another was filled with potatoes. The contents of the third had elicited groans and cries of protest. These three were filled with radishes. Roland told them to quit their mewling; he'd considered peas, he said. None of them (even Susannah) was entirely sure he was joking.

Callahan, today dressed in jeans and a stockman's vest of many pockets, ambled out onto the porch, where Roland sat smoking and waiting for the ladies to settle down. Jake and Eddie were playing draughts close by.

"Vaughn Eisenhart's out front," the Pere told Roland. "Says he'll go on down to Tooky's and have a beer, but not until he passes a word with'ee."

Roland sighed, got up, and walked through the house to the front. Eisenhart was sitting on the seat of a one-horse fly, shor'boots propped on the splashboard, looking moodily off toward Callahan's church.

"G'day to ya, Roland," he said.

Wayne Overholser had given Roland a cowboy's broad-brimmed hat some days before. He tipped it to the rancher and waited.

"I guess you'll be sending the feather soon," Eisenhart said. "Calling a meeting, if it please ya."

Roland allowed as how that was so. It was not the town's business to tell knights of Eld how to do their duty, but Roland would tell them what duty was to be done. That much he owed them.

"I want you to know that when the time comes, I'll touch it and send it on. And come the meeting, I'll say aye."

"Say thankya," Roland replied. He was, in fact, touched. Since joining with Jake, Eddie, and Susannah, it seemed his heart had grown. Sometimes he was sorry. Mostly he wasn't.

"Took won't do neither."

"No," Roland agreed. "As long as business is good, the Tooks of the world never touch the feather. Nor say aye."

"Overholser's with him."

This was a blow. Not an entirely unexpected one, but he'd hoped Overholser would come around. Roland had all the support he needed, however, and supposed Overholser knew it. If he was wise, the farmer would just sit and wait for it to be over, one way or the other. If he meddled, he would likely not see another year's crops into his barns.

"I wanted ye to know one thing," Eisenhart said. "I'm in with'ee because of my wife, and my wife's in with'ee because she's decided she wants to hunt. This is what all such things as the dish-throwing comes to in the end, a woman telling her man what'll be and what won't. It ain't the natural way. A man's meant to rule his woman. Except in the matter of the babbies, o'course."

"She gave up everything she was raised to when she took you to husband," Roland said. "Now it's your turn to give a little."

"Don't ye think I know that? But if you get her killed, Roland, you'll take my curse with you when ye leave the Calla. If'ee do. No

matter how many children ye save.”

Roland, who had been cursed before, nodded. “If ka wills, Vaughn, she’ll come back to you.”

“Aye. But remember what I said.”

“I will.”

Eisenhart slapped the reins on the horse’s back and the fly began to roll.

EIGHT

Each woman halved a sharproot head at forty yards, fifty yards, and sixty.

“Hit the head as high up into the hood as you can get,” Roland said. “Hitting them low will do no good.”

“Armor, I suppose?” Rosalita asked.

“Aye,” Roland said, although that was not the entire truth. He wouldn’t tell them what he now understood to be the entire truth until they needed to know it.

Next came the taters. Sarey Adams got hers at forty yards, clipped it at fifty, and missed entirely at sixty; her dish sailed high. She uttered a curse that was far from ladylike, then walked head-down to the side of the privy. Here she sat to watch the rest of the competition. Roland went over and sat beside her. He saw a tear trickling from the corner of her left eye and down her wind-roughened cheek.

“I’ve let ye down, stranger. Say sorry.”

Roland took her hand and squeezed it. “Nay, lady, nay. There’ll be work for you. Just not in the same place as these others. And you may yet throw the dish.”

She gave him a wan smile and nodded her thanks.

Eddie put more sharproot “heads” on the stuffy-guys, then a radish on top of each. The latter were all but concealed in the shadows thrown by the gunnysack hoods. “Good luck, girls,” he said. “Better you than me.” Then he stepped away.

“Start from ten yards this time!” Roland called.

At ten, they all hit. And at twenty. At thirty yards, Susannah threw her plate high, as Roland had instructed her to do. He wanted one of the Calla women to win this round. At forty yards, Zalia Jaffords

hesitated too long, and the dish she flung chopped the sharproot head in two rather than the radish sitting on top.

"Fuck-commala!" she cried, then clapped her hands to her mouth and looked at Callahan, who was sitting on the back steps. That fellow only smiled and waved cheerfully, affecting deafness.

She stamped over to Eddie and Jake, blushing to the tips of her ears and furious. "Ye must tell him to give me another chance, say will ya please," she told Eddie. "I can do it, I know I can do it—"

Eddie put a hand on her arm, stemming the flood. "He knows it, too, Zee. You're in."

She looked at him with burning eyes, lips pressed so tightly together they were almost gone. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Eddie said. "You could pitch for the Mets, darlin'."

Now it was down to Margaret and Rosalita. They both hit the radishes at fifty yards. To Jake, Eddie murmured: "Buddy, I would have told you that was impossible if I hadn't just seen it."

At sixty yards, Margaret Eisenhart missed cleanly. Rosalita raised her plate over her right shoulder—she was a lefty—hesitated, then screamed *"Riza!"* and threw. Sharp-eyed though he was, Roland wasn't entirely sure if the plate's edge clipped the side of the radish or if the wind toppled it over. In either case, Rosalita raised her fists over her head and shook them, laughing.

"Fair-day goose! Fair-day goose!" Margaret began calling. The others joined in. Soon even Callahan was chanting.

Roland went to Rosa and gave her a hug, brief but strong. As he did so he whispered in her ear that while he had no goose, he might be able to find a certain long-necked gander for her, come evening.

"Well," she said, smiling, "when we get older, we take our prizes where we find them. Don't we?"

Zalia glanced at Margaret. "What did he say to her? Did'ee kennit?"

Margaret Eisenhart was smiling. "Nothing you haven't heard yourself, I'm sure," she said.

NINE

Then the ladies were gone. So was the Pere, on some errand or other. Roland of Gilead sat on the bottom porch step, looking downhill

toward the site of the competition so lately completed. When Susannah asked him if he was satisfied, he nodded. "Yes, I think all's well there. We have to hope it is, because time's closing now. Things will happen fast." The truth was that he had never experienced such a confluence of events . . . but since Susannah had admitted her pregnancy, he had calmed nevertheless.

You've recalled the truth of ka to your truant mind, he thought. And it happened because this woman showed a kind of bravery the rest of us couldn't quite muster up.

"Roland, will I be going back out to the Rocking B?" Jake asked.

Roland considered, then shrugged. "Do you want to?"

"Yes, but this time I want to take the Ruger." Jake's face pinked a little, but his voice remained steady. He had awakened with this idea, as if the dreamgod Roland called Nis had brought it to him in his sleep. "I'll put it at the bottom of my bedroll and wrap it in my extra shirt. No one needs to know it's there." He paused. "I don't want to show it off to Benny, if that's what you're thinking."

The idea had never crossed Roland's mind. But what was in *Jake's* mind? He posed the question, and Jake's answer was the sort one gives when one has charted the likely course of a discussion well in advance.

"Do you ask as my dinh?"

Roland opened his mouth to say yes, saw how closely Eddie and Susannah were watching him, and reconsidered. There was a difference between keeping secrets (as each of them had in his own way kept the secret of Susannah's pregnancy) and following what Eddie called "a hunch." The request under Jake's request was to be on a longer rope. Simple as that. And surely Jake had earned the right to a little more rope. This was not the same boy who had come into Mid-World shivering and terrified and nearly naked.

"Not as your dinh," he said. "As for the Ruger, you may take it anywhere, and at any time. Did you not bring it to the tet in the first place?"

"Stole it," Jake said in a low voice. He was staring at his knees.

"You took what you needed to survive," Susannah said. "There's a big difference. Listen, sugar—you're not planning to shoot anyone, are you?"

“Not planning to, no.”

“Be careful,” she said. “I don’t know what you’ve got in your head, but you be careful.”

“And whatever it is, you better get it settled in the next week or so,” Eddie told him.

Jake nodded, then looked at Roland. “When are you planning to call the town meeting?”

“According to the robot, we have ten days left before the Wolves come. So . . .” Roland calculated briefly. “Town gathering in six days. Will that suit you?”

Jake nodded again.

“Are you sure you don’t want to tell us what’s on your mind?”

“Not unless you ask as dinh,” Jake said. “It’s probably nothing, Roland. Really.”

Roland nodded dubiously and began rolling another smoke. Having fresh tobacco was wonderful. “Is there anything else? Because, if there isn’t—”

“There is, actually,” Eddie said.

“What?”

“I need to go to New York,” Eddie said. He spoke casually, as if proposing no more than a trip to the mercantile to buy a pickle or a licorice stick, but his eyes were dancing with excitement. “And this time I’ll have to go in the flesh. Which means using the ball more directly, I guess. Black Thirteen. I hope to hell you know how to do it, Roland.”

“Why do you need to go to New York?” Roland asked. “This I *do* ask as dinh.”

“Sure you do,” Eddie said, “and I’ll tell you. Because you’re right about time getting short. And because the Wolves of the Calla aren’t the only ones we have to worry about.”

“You want to see how close to July fifteenth it’s getting,” Jake said. “Don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “We know from when we all went todash that time is going faster in that version of New York, 1977. Remember the date on the piece of *The New York Times* I found in the doorway?”

“June second,” Susannah said.

“Right. We’re also pretty sure that we can’t double back in time in that world; it’s later every time we go there. Right?”

Jake nodded emphatically. “Because that world’s not like the others . . . unless maybe it was just being sent todash by Black Thirteen that made us feel that way?”

“I don’t think so,” Eddie said. “That little piece of Second Avenue between the vacant lot and maybe on up to Sixtieth is a very important place. I think it’s a doorway. One big doorway.”

Jake Chambers was looking more and more excited. “Not all the way up to Sixtieth. Not that far. Second Avenue between Forty-sixth and Fifty-fourth, that’s what I think. On the day I left Piper, I felt something change when I got to Fifty-fourth Street. It’s those eight blocks. The stretch with the record store on it, and Chew Chew Mama, and The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. And the vacant lot, of course. That’s the other end. It . . . I don’t know . . .”

Eddie said, “Being there takes you into a different world. Some kind of *key* world. And I think that’s why time always runs one way—”

Roland held up his hand. “Stop.”

Eddie stopped, looking at Roland expectantly, smiling a little. Roland was not smiling. Some of his previous sense of well-being had passed away. Too much to do, gods damn it. And not enough time in which to do it.

“You want to see how near time has run to the day the agreement becomes null and void,” he said. “Have I got that right?”

“You do.”

“You don’t need to go to New York physically to do that, Eddie. Todash would serve nicely.”

“Todash would do fine to check the day and the month, sure, but there’s more. We’ve been dumb about that vacant lot, you guys. I mean *really* dumb.”

TEN

Eddie believed they could own the vacant lot without ever touching Susannah’s inherited fortune; he thought Callahan’s story showed quite clearly how it could be done. Not the rose; the rose was not to

be owned (by them or anyone) but to be protected. And they could do it. Maybe.

Frightened or not, Calvin Tower had been waiting in that deserted laundrymat to save Pere Callahan's bacon. And frightened or not, Calvin Tower had refused—as of May 31st, 1977, anyway—to sell his last piece of real property to the Sombra Corporation. Eddie thought that Calvin Tower was, in the words of the song, holding out for a hero.

Eddie had also been thinking about the way Callahan had hidden his face in his hands the first time he mentioned Black Thirteen. He wanted it the hell out of his church . . . but so far he'd kept it anyway. Like the bookshop owner, the Pere had been holding out. How stupid they had been to assume Calvin Tower would ask millions for his lot! He *wanted* to be shed of it. But not until the right person came along. Or the right ka-tet.

"Suziella, you can't go because you're pregnant," Eddie said. "Jake, you can't go because you're a kid. All other questions aside, I'm pretty sure you couldn't sign the kind of contract I've been thinking about ever since Callahan told us his story. I could take you with me, but it sounds like you've got something you want to check into over here. Or am I wrong about that?"

"You're not wrong," Jake said. "But I'd almost go with you, anyway. This sounds really good."

Eddie smiled. "Almost only counts with grenados and horseshoes, kid. As for sending Roland, no offense, boss, but you're not all that suave in our world. You . . . um . . . lose something in the translation."

Susannah burst out laughing.

"How much are you thinking of offering him?" Jake asked. "I mean, it has to be *something*, doesn't it?"

"A buck," Eddie said. "I'll probably have to ask Tower to loan it to me, but—"

"No, we can do better than that," Jake said, looking serious. "I've got five or six dollars in my knapsack, I'm pretty sure." He grinned. "And we can offer him more, later on. When things kind of settle down on this side."

"If we're still alive," Susannah said, but she also looked excited. "You know what, Eddie? You just might be a genius."

“Balazar and his friends won’t be happy if sai Tower sells us his lot,” Roland said.

“Yeah, but maybe we can persuade Balazar to leave him alone,” Eddie said. A grim little smile was playing around the corners of his mouth. “When it comes right down to it, Roland, Enrico Balazar’s the kind of guy I wouldn’t mind killing twice.”

“When do you want to go?” Susannah asked him.

“The sooner the better,” Eddie said. “For one thing, not knowing how late it is over there in New York is driving me nuts. Roland? What do you say?”

“I say tomorrow,” Roland said. “We’ll take the ball up to the cave, and then we’ll see if you can go through the door to Calvin Tower’s where and when. Your idea is a good one, Eddie, and I say thankya.”

Jake said, “What if the ball sends you to the wrong place? The wrong version of 1977, or . . .” He hardly knew how to finish. He was remembering how *thin* everything had seemed when Black Thirteen had first taken them todash, and how endless darkness seemed to be waiting behind the painted surface realities around them. “. . . or someplace even farther?” he finished.

“In that case, I’ll send back a postcard.” Eddie said it with a shrug and a laugh, but for just a moment Jake saw how frightened he was. Susannah must have seen it, too, because she took Eddie’s hand in both of hers and squeezed it.

“Hey, I’ll be fine,” Eddie said.

“You better be,” Susannah replied. “You just better.”

CHAPTER II: THE DOGAN, PART 1

ONE

When Roland and Eddie entered Our Lady of Serenity the following morning, daylight was only a distant rumor on the northeast horizon. Eddie lit their way down the center aisle with a 'sener, his lips pressed tightly together. The thing they had come for was humming. It was a sleepy hum, but he hated the sound of it just the same. The church itself felt freaky. Empty, it seemed too big, somehow. Eddie kept expecting to see ghostly figures (or perhaps a complement of the vagrant dead) sitting in the pews and looking at them with otherworldly disapproval.

But the hum was worse.

When they reached the front, Roland opened his purse and took out the bowling bag which Jake had kept in his knapsack until yesterday. The gunslinger held it up for a moment and they could both read what was printed on the side: NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MID-WORLD LANES.

“Not a word from now until I tell you it’s all right,” Roland said. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Roland pressed his thumb into the groove between two of the floorboards and the hidey-hole in the preacher’s cove sprang open. He lifted the top aside. Eddie had once seen a movie on TV about guys disposing of live explosives during the London Blitz—*UXB*, it had been called—and Roland’s movements now recalled that film strongly to his mind. And why not? If they were right about what was

in this hiding place—and Eddie knew they were—then it *was* an unexploded bomb.

Roland folded back the white linen surplice, exposing the box. The hum rose. Eddie's breath stopped in his throat. He felt the skin all over his body grow cold. Somewhere close, a monster of nearly unimaginable malevolence had half-opened one sleeping eye.

The hum dropped back to its former sleepy pitch and Eddie breathed again.

Roland handed him the bowling bag, motioning for Eddie to hold it open. With misgivings (part of him wanted to whisper in Roland's ear that they should forget the whole thing), Eddie did as he was bidden. Roland lifted the box out, and once again the hum rose. In the rich, if limited, glow of the 'sener, Eddie could see sweat on the gunslinger's brow. He could feel it on his own. If Black Thirteen awoke and pitched them out into some black limbo . . .

I won't go. I'll fight to stay with Susannah.

Of course he would. But he was still relieved when Roland slipped the elaborately carved ghostwood box into the queer metallic bag they'd found in the vacant lot. The hum didn't disappear entirely, but subsided to a barely audible drone. And when Roland gently pulled the drawstring running around the top of the bag, closing its mouth, the drone became a distant whisper. It was like listening to a seashell.

Eddie sketched the sign of the cross in front of himself. Smiling faintly, Roland did the same.

Outside the church, the northeast horizon had brightened appreciably—there would be real daylight after all, it seemed.

“Roland.”

The gunslinger turned toward him, eyebrows raised. His left fist was closed around the bag's throat; he was apparently not willing to trust the weight of the box to the bag's drawstring, stout as it looked.

“If we were todash when we found that bag, how could we have picked it up?”

Roland considered this. Then he said, “Perhaps the bag is todash, too.”

“Still?”

Roland nodded. “Yes, I think so. Still.”

“Oh.” Eddie thought about it. “That's spooky.”

“Changing your mind about revisiting New York, Eddie?”

Eddie shook his head. He was scared, though. Probably more scared than he'd been at any time since standing up in the aisle of the Barony Coach to riddle Blaine.

TWO

By the time they were halfway along the path leading to the Doorway Cave (*It's upsy*, Henchick had said, and so it had been, and so it was), it was easily ten o' the clock and remarkably warm. Eddie stopped, wiped the back of his neck with his bandanna, and looked out over the twisting arroyos to the north. Here and there he could see black, gaping holes and asked Roland if they were the garnet mines. The gunslinger told him they were.

“And which one have you got in mind for the kiddies? Can we see it from here?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Roland drew the single gun he was wearing and pointed it. “Look over the sight.”

Eddie did and saw a deep draw which made the shape of a jagged double S. It was filled to the top with velvety shadows; he guessed there might be only half an hour or so at midday when the sun reached the bottom. Farther to the north, it appeared to dead-end against a massive rock-face. He supposed the mine entrance was there, but it was too dark to make out. To the southeast this arroyo opened on a dirt track that wound its way back to East Road. Beyond East Road were fields sloping down to fading but still green plots of rice. Beyond the rice was the river.

“Makes me think of the story you told us,” Eddie said. “Eyebolt Canyon.”

“Of course it does.”

“No thinny to do the dirty work, though.”

“No,” Roland agreed. “No thinny.”

“Tell me the truth: Are you really going to stick this town's kids in a mine at the end of a dead-end arroyo?”

“No.”

“The *folken* think you . . . that *we* mean to do that. Even the dish-throwing ladies think that.”

“I know they do,” Roland said. “I want them to.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t believe there’s anything supernatural about the way the Wolves find the children. After hearing Gran-pere Jaffords’s story, I don’t think there’s anything supernatural about the *Wolves*, for that matter. No, there’s a rat in this particular corn-crib. Someone who goes squealing to the powers that be in Thunderclap.”

“Someone different each time, you mean. Each twenty-three or twenty-four years.”

“Yes.”

“Who’d do that?” Eddie asked. “Who *could* do that?”

“I’m not sure, but I have an idea.”

“Took? Kind of a handed-down thing, from father to son?”

“If you’re rested, Eddie, I think we’d better press on.”

“Overholser? Maybe that guy Telford, the one who looks like a TV cowboy?”

Roland walked past him without speaking, his new shor’boots gritting on the scattered pebbles and rock-splinters. From his good left hand, the pink bag swung back and forth. The thing inside was still whispering its unpleasant secrets.

“Chatty as ever, good for you,” Eddie said, and followed him.

THREE

The first voice which arose from the depths of the cave belonged to the great sage and eminent junkie.

“Oh, wookit the wittle sissy!” Henry moaned. To Eddie, he sounded like Ebenezer Scrooge’s dead partner in *A Christmas Carol*, funny and scary at the same time. “Does the wittle sissy think he’s going back to Noo-Ork? You’ll go a lot farther than that if you try it, bro. Better hunker where you are . . . just do your little carvings . . . be a good little homo . . .” The dead brother laughed. The live one shivered.

“Eddie?” Roland asked.

“Listen to your brother, Eddie!” his mother cried from the cave’s dark and sloping throat. On the rock floor, scatters of small bones gleamed. “He gave up his life for you, his *whole life*, the least you could do is listen to him!”

“Eddie, are you all right?”

Now came the voice of Csaba Drabnik, known in Eddie’s crowd as the Mad Fuckin Hungarian. Csaba was telling Eddie to give him a cigarette or he’d pull Eddie’s fuckin pants down. Eddie tore his attention away from this frightening but fascinating gabble with an effort.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess so.”

“The voices are coming from your own head. The cave finds them and amplifies them somehow. Sends them on. It’s a little upsetting, I know, but it’s meaningless.”

“Why’d you let em kill me, bro?” Henry sobbed. “I kept thinking you’d come, but you never did!”

“Meaningless,” Eddie said. “Okay, got it. What do we do now?”

“According to both stories I’ve heard of this place—Callahan’s and Henchick’s—the door will open when I open the box.”

Eddie laughed nervously. “I don’t even want you to take the box out of the *bag*, how’s that for chickenshit?”

“If you’ve changed your mind . . .”

Eddie was shaking his head. “No. I want to go through with it.” He flashed a sudden, bright grin. “You’re not worried about me scoring, are you? Finding the man and getting high?”

From deep in the cave, Henry exulted, “It’s China White, bro! Them niggers sell the *best!*”

“Not at all,” Roland said. “There are plenty of things I *am* worried about, but you returning to your old habits isn’t one of them.”

“Good.” Eddie stepped a little farther into the cave, looking at the free-standing door. Except for the hieroglyphics on the front and the crystal knob with the rose etched on it, this one looked exactly like the ones on the beach. “If you go around—?”

“If you go around, the door’s gone,” Roland said. “There *is* a hell of a drop-off, though . . . all the way to Na’ar, for all I know. I’d mind that, if I were you.”

“Good advice, and Fast Eddie says thankya.” He tried the crystal doorknob and found it wouldn’t budge in either direction. He had expected that, too. He stepped back.

Roland said, “You need to think of New York. Of Second Avenue in particular, I think. And of the time. The year of nineteen and seven-

seven.”

“How do you think of a *year*?”

When Roland spoke, his voice betrayed a touch of impatience. “Think of how it was on the day you and Jake followed Jake’s earlier self, I suppose.”

Eddie started to say that was the wrong day, it was too early, then closed his mouth. If they were right about the rules, he *couldn’t* go back to that day, not todash, not in the flesh, either. If they were right, time over there was somehow hooked to time over here, only running a little faster. If they were right about the rules . . . if there *were* rules . . .

Well, why don’t you just go and see?

“Eddie? Do you want me to try hypnotizing you?” Roland had drawn a shell from his gunbelt. “It can make you see the past more clearly.”

“No. I think I better do this straight and wide-awake.”

Eddie opened and closed his hands several times, taking and releasing deep breaths as he did so. His heart wasn’t running particularly fast—was going slow, if anything—but each beat seemed to shiver through his entire body. Christ, all this would have been so much easier if there were just some controls you could set, like in Professor Peabody’s Wayback Machine or that movie about the Morlocks!

“Hey, do I look all right?” he asked Roland. “I mean, if I land on Second Avenue at high noon, how much attention am I going to attract?”

“If you appear in front of people,” Roland said, “probably quite a lot. I’d advise you to ignore anyone who wants to palaver with you on the subject and vacate the area immediately.”

“That much I know. I meant how do I look clotheswise?”

Roland gave a small shrug. “I don’t know, Eddie. It’s your city, not mine.”

Eddie could have demurred. *Brooklyn* was his city. Had been, anyway. As a rule he hadn’t gone into Manhattan from one month to the next, thought of it almost as another country. Still, he supposed he knew what Roland meant. He inventoried himself and saw a plain flannel shirt with horn buttons above dark-blue jeans with burnished

nickel rivets instead of copper ones, and a button-up fly. (Eddie had seen zippers in Lud, but none since.) He reckoned he would pass for normal on the street. New York normal, at least. Anyone who gave him a second look would think café waiter/artist-wannabe playing hippie on his day off. He didn't think most people would even bother with the first look, and that was absolutely to the good. But there *was* one thing he could add—

“Have you got a piece of rawhide?” he asked Roland.

From deep in the cave, the voice of Mr. Tubther, his fifth-grade teacher, cried out with lugubrious intensity. “You had potential! You were a wonderful student, and look at what you turned into! Why did you let your brother spoil you?”

To which Henry replied, in sobbing outrage: “He let me die! He *killed me!*”

Roland swung his purse off his shoulder, put it on the floor at the mouth of the cave beside the pink bag, opened it, rummaged through it. Eddie had no idea how many things were in there; he only knew he'd never seen the bottom of it. At last the gunslinger found what Eddie had asked for and held it out.

While Eddie tied back his hair with the hank of rawhide (he thought it finished off the artistic-hippie look quite nicely), Roland took out what he called his swag-bag, opened it, and began to empty out its contents. There was the partially depleted sack of tobacco Callahan had given him, several kinds of coin and currency, a sewing kit, the mended cup he had turned into a rough compass not far from Shardik's clearing, an old scrap of map, and the newer one the Tavery twins had drawn. When the bag was empty, he took the big revolver with the sandalwood grip from the holster on his left hip. He rolled the cylinder, checked the loads, nodded, and snapped the cylinder back into place. Then he put the gun into the swag-bag, yanked the lacings tight, and tied them in a clove hitch that would come loose at a single pull. He held the bag out to Eddie by the worn strap.

At first Eddie didn't want to take it. “Nah, man, that's yours.”

“These last weeks you've worn it as much as I have. Probably more.”

“Yeah, but this is New York we're talking about, Roland. In New York, everybody steals.”

“They won’t steal from you. Take the gun.”

Eddie looked into Roland’s eyes for a moment, then took the swag-bag and slung the strap over his shoulder. “You’ve got a feeling.”

“A hunch, yes.”

“Ka at work?”

Roland shrugged. “It’s always at work.”

“All right,” Eddie said. “And Roland—if I don’t make it back, take care of Suze.”

“Your job is to make sure I don’t have to.”

No, Eddie thought. My job is to protect the rose.

He turned to the door. He had a thousand more questions, but Roland was right, the time to ask them was done.

“Eddie, if you really don’t want to—”

“No,” he said. “I *do* want to.” He raised his left hand and gave a thumbs-up. “When you see me do that, open the box.”

“All right.”

Roland speaking from behind him. Because now it was just Eddie and the door. The door with UNFOUND written on it in some strange and lovely language. Once he’d read a novel called *The Door Into Summer*, by . . . who? One of the science-fiction guys he was always dragging home from the library, one of his old reliables, perfect for the long afternoons of summer vacation. Murray Leinster, Poul Anderson, Gordon Dickson, Isaac Asimov, Harlan Ellison . . . Robert Heinlein. He thought it was Heinlein who’d written *The Door Into Summer*. Henry always ragging him about the books he brought home, calling him the wittle sissy, the wittle bookworm, asking him if he could read and jerk off at the same time, wanting to know how he could sit fuckin still for so long with his nose stuck in some made-up piece of shit about rockets and time machines. Henry older than him. Henry covered with pimples that were always shiny with Noxzema and Stri-Dex. Henry getting ready to go into the Army. Eddie younger. Eddie bringing books home from the library. Eddie thirteen years old, almost the age Jake is now. It’s 1977 and he’s thirteen and on Second Avenue and the taxis are shiny yellow in the sun. A black man wearing Walkman earphones is walking past Chew Chew Mama’s, Eddie can see him, Eddie knows the black man is listening to Elton John singing—what else?—“Someone Saved My Life Tonight.” The sidewalk is

crowded. It's late afternoon and people are going home after another day in the steel arroyos of Calla New York, where they grow money instead of rice, can ya say prime rate. Women looking amiably weird in expensive business suits and sneakers; their high heels are in their gunna because the workday is done and they're going home. Everyone seems to be smiling because the light is so bright and the air is so warm, it's summer in the city and somewhere there's the sound of a jackhammer, like on that old Lovin' Spoonful song. Before him is a door into the summer of '77, the cabbies are getting a buck and a quarter on the drop and thirty cents every fifth of a mile thereafter, it was less before and it'll be more after but this is now, the dancing point of now. The space shuttle with the teacher on board hasn't blown up. John Lennon is still alive, although he won't be much longer if he doesn't stop messing with that wicked heroin, that China White. As for Eddie Dean, Edward Cantor Dean, he knows nothing about heroin. A few cigarettes are his only vice (other than trying to jack off, at which he will not be successful for almost another year). He's thirteen. It's 1977 and he has exactly four hairs on his chest, he counts them religiously each morning, hoping for big number five. It's the summer after the Summer of the Tall Ships. It's a late afternoon in the month of June and he can hear a happy tune. The tune is coming from the speakers over the doorway of the Tower of Power record shop, it's Mungo Jerry singing "In the Summertime," and—

Suddenly it was all real to him, or as real as he thought he needed it to be. Eddie raised his left hand and popped up his thumb: *let's go*. Behind him, Roland had sat down and eased the box out of the pink bag. And when Eddie gave him the thumbs-up, the gunslinger opened the box.

Eddie's ears were immediately assaulted by a sweetly dissonant jangle of chimes. His eyes began to water. In front of him, the free-standing door clicked open and the cave was suddenly illuminated by strong sunlight. There was the sound of beeping horns and the rat-a-tat-tat of a jackhammer. Not so long ago he had wanted a door like this so badly that he'd almost killed Roland to get it. And now that he had it, he was scared to death.

The todash chimes felt as if they were tearing his head apart. If he listened to that for long, he'd go insane. *Go if you're going*, he thought.

He stepped forward, through his gushing eyes seeing three hands reach out and grasp four doorknobs. He pulled the door toward him and golden late-day sunlight dazzled his eyes. He could smell gasoline and hot city air and someone's aftershave.

Hardly able to see anything, Eddie stepped through the unfound door and into the summer of a world from which he was now fan-gon, the exiled one.

FOUR

It was Second Avenue, all right; here was the Blimpie's, and from behind him came the cheery sound of that Mungo Jerry song with the Caribbean beat. People moved around him in a flood—uptown, downtown, all around the town. They paid no attention to Eddie, partly because most of them were only concentrating on getting *out* of town at the end of another day, mostly because in New York, not noticing other people was a way of life.

Eddie shrugged his right shoulder, settling the strap of Roland's swag-bag there more firmly, then looked behind him. The door back to Calla Bryn Sturgis was there. He could see Roland sitting at the mouth of the cave with the box open on his lap.

Those fucking chimes must be driving him crazy, Eddie thought. And then, as he watched, he saw the gunslinger remove a couple of bullets from his gunbelt and stick them in his ears. Eddie grinned. *Good move, man*. At least it had helped to block out the warble of the thinny back on I-70. Whether it worked now or whether it didn't, Roland was on his own. Eddie had things to do.

He turned slowly on his little spot of the sidewalk, then looked over his shoulder again to verify the door had turned with him. It had. If it was like the other ones, it would now follow him everywhere he went. Even if it didn't, Eddie didn't foresee a problem; he wasn't planning on going far. He noticed something else, as well: that sense of darkness lurking behind everything was gone. Because he was really here, he supposed, and not just todash. If there were vagrant dead lurking in the vicinity, he wouldn't be able to see them.

Once more shrugging the swag-bag's strap further up on his shoulder, Eddie set off for The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind.

FIVE

People moved aside for him as he walked, but that wasn't quite enough to prove he was really here; people did that when you were todash, too. At last Eddie provoked an actual collision with a young guy toting not one briefcase but *two*—a Big Coffin Hunter of the business world if Eddie had ever seen one.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" Mr. Businessman squawked when their shoulders collided.

"Sorry, man, sorry," Eddie said. He was here, all right. "Say, could you tell me what day—"

But Mr. Businessman was already gone, chasing the coronary he'd probably catch up to around the age of forty-five or fifty, from the look of him. Eddie remembered the punchline of an old New York joke: "Pardon me, sir, can you tell me how to get to City Hall, or should I just go fuck myself?" He burst out laughing, couldn't help it.

Once he had himself back under control, he got moving again. On the corner of Second and Fifty-fourth, he saw a man looking into a shop window at a display of shoes and boots. This guy was also wearing a suit, but looked considerably more relaxed than the one Eddie had bumped into. Also he was carrying only a single briefcase, which Eddie took to be a good omen.

"Cry your pardon," Eddie said, "but could you tell me what day it is?"

"Thursday," the window-shopper said. "The twenty-third of June."

"1977?"

The window-shopper gave Eddie a little half-smile, both quizzical and cynical, plus a raised eyebrow. "1977, that's correct. Won't be 1978 for . . . gee, another six months. Think of that."

Eddie nodded. "Thankee-sai."

"Thankee-*what*?"

"Nothing," Eddie said, and hurried on.

Only three weeks to July fifteenth, give or take, he thought. That's cutting it too goddam close for comfort.

Yes, but if he could persuade Calvin Tower to sell him the lot today, the whole question of time would be moot. Once, a long time ago, Eddie's brother had boasted to some of his friends that his little bro could talk the devil into setting himself on fire, if he really set his mind to it. Eddie hoped he still had some of that persuasiveness. Do a little deal with Calvin Tower, invest in some real estate, then maybe take a half-hour time-out and actually enjoy that New York groove a little bit. Celebrate. Maybe get a chocolate egg-cream, or—

The run of his thoughts broke off and he stopped so suddenly that someone bumped into him and then swore. Eddie barely felt the bump or heard the curse. The dark-gray Lincoln Town Car was parked up there again—not in front of the fire hydrant this time, but a couple of doors down.

Balazar's Town Car.

Eddie started walking again. He was suddenly glad Roland had talked him into taking one of his revolvers. And that the gun was fully loaded.

SIX

The chalkboard was back in the window (today's special was a New England Boiled Dinner consisting of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Robert Frost—for dessert, your choice of Mary McCarthy or Grace Metalious), but the sign hanging in the door read SORRY WE'RE CLOSED. According to the digital bank-clock up the street from Tower of Power Records, it was 3:14 P.M. Who shut up shop at quarter past three on a weekday afternoon?

Someone with a special customer, Eddie reckoned. That was who.

He cupped his hands to the sides of his face and looked into The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. He saw the small round display table with the children's books on it. To the right was the counter that looked as if it might have been filched from a turn-of-the-century soda fountain, only today no one was sitting there, not even Aaron Deepneau. The cash register was likewise unattended, although Eddie could read the words on the orange tab sticking up in its window: NO SALE.

Place was empty. Calvin Tower had been called away, maybe there'd been a family emergency—

He's got an emergency, all right, the gunslinger's cold voice spoke up in Eddie's head. *It came in that gray auto-carriage. And look again at the counter, Eddie. Only this time why don't you actually use your eyes instead of just letting the light pour through them?*

Sometimes he thought in the voices of other people. He guessed lots of people did that—it was a way of changing perspective a little, seeing stuff from another angle. But this didn't feel like that kind of pretending. This felt like old long, tall, and ugly actually talking to him inside his head.

Eddie looked at the counter again. This time he saw the strew of plastic chessmen on the marble, and the overturned coffee cup. This time he saw the spectacles lying on the floor between two of the stools, one of the lenses cracked.

He felt the first pulse of anger deep in the middle of his head. It was dull, but if past experience was any indicator, the pulses were apt to come faster and harder, growing sharper as they did. Eventually they would blot out conscious thought, and God help anyone who wandered within range of Roland's gun when that happened. He had once asked Roland if this happened to him, and Roland had replied, *It happens to all of us.* When Eddie had shaken his head and responded that he wasn't like Roland—not him, not Suze, not Jake—the gunslinger had said nothing.

Tower and his special customers were out back, he thought, in that combination storeroom and office. And this time talking probably wasn't what they had in mind. Eddie had an idea this was a little refresher course, Balazar's gentlemen reminding Mr. Tower that the fifteenth of July was coming, reminding Mr. Tower of what the most prudent decision would be once it came.

When the word *gentlemen* crossed Eddie's mind, it brought another pulse of anger with it. That was quite a word for guys who'd break a fat and harmless bookstore owner's glasses, then take him out back and terrorize him. Gentlemen! Fuck-commala!

He tried the bookshop door. It was locked, but the lock wasn't such of a much; the door rattled in its jamb like a loose tooth. Standing there in the recessed doorway, looking (he hoped) like a fellow who

was especially interested in some book he'd glimpsed inside, Eddie began to increase his pressure on the lock, first using just his hand on the knob, then leaning his shoulder against the door in a way he hoped would look casual.

Chances are ninety-four in a hundred that no one's looking at you, anyway. This is New York, right? Can you tell me how to get to City Hall or should I just go fuck myself?

He pushed harder. He was still a good way from exerting maximum pressure when there was a snap and the door swung inward. Eddie entered without hesitation, as if he had every right in the world to be there, then closed the door again. It wouldn't latch. He took a copy of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* off the children's table, ripped out the last page (*Never liked the way this one ended, anyway*, he thought), folded it three times, and stuck it into the crack between the door and the jamb. Good enough to keep it closed. Then he looked around.

The place was empty, and now, with the sun behind the skyscrapers of the West Side, shadowy. No sound—

Yes. Yes, there was. A muffled cry from the back of the shop. *Caution, gentlemen at work*, Eddie thought, and felt another pulse of anger. This one was sharper.

He yanked the tie on Roland's swag-bag, then walked toward the door at the back, the one marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. Before he got there, he had to skirt an untidy heap of paperbacks and an overturned display rack, the old-fashioned drugstore kind that turned around and around. Calvin Tower had grabbed at it as Balazar's gents hustled him toward the storage area. Eddie hadn't seen it happen, didn't need to.

The door at the back wasn't locked. Eddie took Roland's revolver out of the swag-bag and set the bag itself aside so it wouldn't get in his way at a crucial moment. He eased the storage-room door open inch by inch, reminding himself of where Tower's desk was. If they saw him he'd charge, screaming at the top of his lungs. According to Roland, you *always* screamed at the top of your lungs when and if you were discovered. You might startle your enemy for a second or two, and sometimes a second or two made all the difference in the world.

This time there was no need for screaming or for charging. The men he was looking for were in the office area, their shadows once

more climbing high and grotesque on the wall behind them. Tower was sitting in his office chair, but the chair was no longer behind the desk. It had been pushed into the space between two of the three filing cabinets. Without his glasses, his pleasant face looked naked. His two visitors were facing him, which meant their backs were to Eddie. Tower could have seen him, but Tower was looking up at Jack Andolini and George Biondi, concentrating on them alone. At the sight of the man's naked terror, another of those pulses went through Eddie's head.

There was the tang of gasoline in the air, a smell which Eddie guessed would frighten even the most stout-hearted shopowner, especially one presiding over an empire of paper. Beside the taller of the two men—Andolini—was a glass-fronted bookcase about five feet high. The door was swung open. Inside were four or five shelves of books, all the volumes wrapped in what looked like clear plastic dust-covers. Andolini was holding up one of them in a way that made him look absurdly like a TV pitchman. The shorter man—Biondi—was holding up a glass jar full of amber liquid in much the same way. Not much question about what it was.

"Please, Mr. Andolini," Tower said. He spoke in a humble, shaken voice. "Please, that's a very valuable book."

"Of course it is," Andolini said. "All the ones in the case are valuable. I understand you've got a signed copy of *Ulysses* that's worth twenty-six thousand dollars."

"What's that about, Jack?" George Biondi asked. He sounded awed. "What kind of book's worth twenty-six large?"

"I don't know," Andolini said. "Why don't you tell us, Mr. Tower? Or can I call you Cal?"

"My *Ulysses* is in a safe-deposit box," Tower said. "It's not for sale."

"But these are," Andolini said. "Aren't they? And I see the number 7500 on the flyleaf of this one in pencil. No twenty-six grand, but still the price of a new car. So here's what I'm going to do, Cal. Are you listening?"

Eddie was moving closer, and although he strove to be quiet, he made no effort whatever to conceal himself. And still none of them saw him. Had he been this stupid when he'd been of this world? This vulnerable to what was not even an ambush, properly speaking? He

supposed he had been, and knew it was no wonder Roland had at first held him in contempt.

“I . . . I’m listening.”

“You’ve got something Mr. Balazar wants as badly as you want your copy of *Ulysses*. And although these books in the glass cabinet are technically for sale, I bet you sell damned few of them, because you just . . . can’t . . . bear . . . to part with them. The way you can’t bear to part with that vacant lot. So here’s what’s going to happen. George is going to pour gasoline over this book with 7500 on it, and I’m going to light it on fire. Then I’m going to take *another* book out of your little case of treasures, and I’m going to ask you for a verbal commitment to sell that lot to the Sombra Corporation at high noon on July fifteenth. Got that?”

“I—”

“If you give me that verbal commitment, this meeting will come to an end. If you *don’t* give me that verbal commitment, I’m going to burn the second book. Then a third. Then a fourth. After four, sir, I believe my associate here is apt to lose patience.”

“You’re fucking A,” George Biondi said. Eddie was now almost close enough to reach out and touch Big Nose, and still they didn’t see him.

“At that point I think we’ll just pour gasoline inside your little glass cabinet and set all your valuable books on f—”

Movement at last snagged Jack Andolini’s eye. He looked beyond his partner’s left shoulder and saw a young man with hazel eyes looking out of a deeply tanned face. The man was holding what looked like the world’s oldest, biggest prop revolver. *Had* to be a prop.

“Who the fuck’re—” Jack began.

Before he could get any further, Eddie Dean’s face lit up with happiness and good cheer, a look that vaulted him way past handsome and into the land of beauty. “*George!*” he cried. It was the tone of one greeting his oldest, fondest friend after a long absence. “*George Biondi!* Man, you *still* got the biggest beak on this side of the Hudson! Good to see you, man!”

There is a certain hardwiring in the human animal that makes us respond to strangers who call us by name. When the summoning call is affectionate, we seem almost compelled to respond in kind. In spite

of the situation they were in back here, George “Big Nose” Biondi turned, with the beginning of a grin, toward the voice that had hailed him with such cheerful familiarity. That grin was in fact still blooming when Eddie struck him savagely with the butt of Roland’s gun. Andolini’s eyes were sharp, but he saw little more than a blur as the butt came down three times, the first blow between Biondi’s eyes, the second above his right eye, the third into the hollow of his right temple. The first two blows provoked hollow thudding sounds. The last one yielded a soft, sickening smack. Biondi went down like a sack of mail, eyes rolling up to show the whites, lips puckering in a restless way that made him look like a baby who wanted to nurse. The jar tumbled out of his relaxing hand, hit the cement floor, shattered. The smell of gasoline was suddenly much stronger, rich and cloying.

Eddie gave Biondi’s partner no time to react. While Big Nose was still twitching on the floor in the spilled gas and broken glass, Eddie was on Andolini, forcing him backward.

SEVEN

For Calvin Tower (who had begun life as Calvin Toren), there was no immediate sense of relief, no *Thank God I’m saved* feeling. His first thought was *They’re bad; this new one is worse.*

In the dim light of the storage room, the newcomer seemed to merge with his own leaping shadow and become an apparition ten feet tall. One with burning eyeballs starting from their sockets and a mouth pulled down to reveal jaws lined with glaring white teeth that almost looked like fangs. In one hand was a pistol that appeared to be the size of a blunderbuss, the kind of weapon referred to in seventeenth-century tales of adventure as a machine. He grabbed Andolini by the top of his shirt and the lapel of his sport-coat and threw him against the wall. The hoodlum’s hip struck the glass case and it toppled over. Tower gave a cry of dismay to which neither of the two men paid the slightest attention.

Balazar’s man tried to wriggle away to his left. The new one, the snarling man with his black hair tied back behind him, let him get going, then tripped him and went down on top of him, one knee on the hoodlum’s chest. He shoved the muzzle of the blunderbuss, the

machine, into the soft shelf under the hoodlum's chin. The hoodlum twisted his head, trying to get rid of it. The new one only dug it in deeper.

In a choked voice that made him sound like a cartoon duck, Balazar's torpedo said, "Don't make me laugh, slick—that ain't no real gun."

The new one—the one who had seemed to merge with his own shadow and become as tall as a giant—pulled his machine out from under the hoodlum's chin, cocked it with his thumb, and pointed it deep into the storage area. Tower opened his mouth to say something, God knew what, but before he could utter a word there was a deafening crash, the sound of a mortar shell going off five feet from some hapless G.I.'s foxhole. Bright yellow flame shot from the machine's muzzle. A moment later, the barrel was back under the hoodlum's chin.

"What do you think now, Jack?" the new one panted. "Still think it's a fake? Tell you what *I* think: the next time I pull this trigger, your brains are going all the way to Hoboken."

EIGHT

Eddie saw fear in Jack Andolini's eyes, but no panic. This didn't surprise him. It had been Jack Andolini who'd collared him after the cocaine mule-delivery from Nassau had gone wrong. This version of him was younger—ten years younger—but no prettier. Andolini, once dubbed Old Double-Ugly by the great sage and eminent junkie Henry Dean, had a bulging caveman's forehead and a jutting Alley Oop jaw to match. His hands were so huge they looked like caricatures. Hair sprouted from the knuckles. He looked like Old Double-Stupid as well as Old Double-Ugly, but he was far from dumb. Dummies didn't work their way up to become the second-in-command to guys like Enrico Balazar. And while Jack might not be that yet in this when, he *would* be by 1986, when Eddie would come flying back into JFK with about two hundred thousand dollars' worth of Bolivian marching-powder under his shirt. In that world, that where and when, Andolini had become *Il Roche's* field-marshal. In this one, Eddie thought there

was a very good chance he was going to take early retirement. From *everything*. Unless, that was, he played it perfectly.

Eddie shoved the barrel of the pistol deeper under Andolini's chin. The smell of gas and gunpowder was strong in the air, for the time being overwhelming the smell of books. Somewhere in the shadows there was an angry hiss from Sergio, the bookstore cat. Sergio apparently didn't approve of loud noises in his domain.

Andolini winced and twisted his head to the left. "Don't, man . . . that thing's hot!"

"Not as hot as where you'll be five minutes from now," Eddie said. "Unless you listen to me, Jack. Your chances of getting out of this are slim, but not quite none. Will you listen?"

"I don't know you. How do you know us?"

Eddie took the gun out from beneath Old Double-Ugly's chin and saw a red circle where the barrel of Roland's revolver had pressed. *Suppose I told you that it's your ka to meet me again, ten years from now? And to be eaten by lobstrosities? That they'll start with the feet inside your Gucci loafers and work their way up?* Andolini wouldn't believe him, of course, any more than he'd believed Roland's big old revolver would work until Eddie had demonstrated the truth. And along this track of possibility—on this level of the Tower—Andolini might *not* be eaten by lobstrosities. Because this world was different from all the others. This was Level Nineteen of the Dark Tower. Eddie felt it. Later he would ruminate on it, but not now. Now the very act of thinking was difficult. What he wanted right now was to kill both of these men, then head over to Brooklyn and tune up on the rest of Balazar's tet. Eddie tapped the barrel of the revolver against one of Andolini's jutting cheekbones. He had to restrain himself from really going to work on that ugly mug, and Andolini saw it. He blinked and wet his lips. Eddie's knee was still on his chest. Eddie could feel it going up and down like a bellows.

"You didn't answer my question," Eddie said. "What you did instead was ask a question of your own. The next time you do that, Jack, I'm going to use the barrel of this gun to break your face. Then I'll shoot out one of your kneecaps, turn you into a jackhopper for the rest of your life. I can shoot off a good many parts of you and still leave you able to talk. And don't play dumb with me. You're not dumb—except

maybe in your choice of employer—and I know it. So let me ask you again: Will you listen to me?”

“What choice do I have?”

Moving with that same blurry, spooky speed, Eddie swept Roland’s gun across Andolini’s face. There was a sharp crack as his cheekbone snapped. Blood began to flow from his right nostril, which to Eddie looked about the size of the Queens Midtown Tunnel. Andolini cried out in pain, Tower in shock.

Eddie socked the muzzle of the pistol back into the soft place under Andolini’s chin. Without looking away from him, Eddie said: “Keep an eye on the other one, Mr. Tower. If he starts to stir, you let me know.”

“Who *are* you?” Tower almost bleated.

“A friend. The only one you’ve got who can save your bacon. Now watch him and let me work.”

“A-All right.”

Eddie Dean turned his full attention back to Andolini. “I laid George out because George is stupid. Even if he could carry the message I need carried, he wouldn’t believe it. And how can a man convince others of what he doesn’t believe himself?”

“Got a point there,” Andolini said. He was looking up at Eddie with a kind of horrified fascination, perhaps finally seeing this stranger with the gun for what he really was. For what Roland had known he was from the very beginning, even when Eddie Dean had been nothing but a wetnose junkie shivering his way through heroin withdrawal. Jack Andolini was seeing a gunslinger.

“You bet I do,” Eddie said. “And here’s the message I want you to carry: Tower’s off-limits.”

Jack was shaking his head. “You don’t understand. Tower has something somebody wants. My boss agreed to get it. He promised. And my boss always—”

“Always keeps his promises, I know,” Eddie said. “Only this time he won’t be able to, and that’s not going to be his fault. Because Mr. Tower has decided not to sell his vacant lot up the street to the Sombra Corporation. He’s going to sell it to the . . . mmm . . . to the Tet Corporation, instead. Got that?”

“Mister, I don’t know you, but I know my boss. He won’t stop.”

“He will. Because Tower won’t have anything to sell. The lot will no longer be his. And now listen even more closely, Jack. Listen ka-me, not ka-mai.” Wisely, not foolishly.

Eddie leaned down. Jack stared up at him, fascinated by the bulging eyes—hazel irises, bloodshot whites—and the savagely grinning mouth which was now the distance of a kiss from his own.

“Mr. Calvin Tower has come under the protection of people more powerful and more ruthless than you could ever imagine, Jack. People who make *Il Roche* look like a hippie flower-child at Woodstock. You have to convince him that he has nothing to gain by continuing to harass Calvin Tower, and everything to lose.”

“I can’t—”

“As for you, know that the mark of Gilead is on this man. If you ever touch him again—if you ever even step foot in this shop again—I’ll come to Brooklyn and kill your wife and children. Then I’ll find your mother and father, and I’ll kill them. Then I’ll kill your mother’s sisters and your father’s brothers. Then I’ll kill your grandparents, if they’re still alive. You I’ll save for last. Do you believe me?”

Jack Andolini went on staring into the face above him—the bloodshot eyes, the grinning, snarling mouth—but now with mounting horror. The fact was, he *did* believe. And whoever he was, he knew a great deal about Balazar and about this current deal. About the current deal, he might know more than Andolini knew himself.

“There’s more of us,” Eddie said, “and we’re all about the same thing: protecting . . .” He almost said *protecting the rose*. “. . . protecting Calvin Tower. We’ll be watching this place, we’ll be watching Tower, we’ll be watching Tower’s friends—guys like Deepneau.” Eddie saw Andolini’s eyes flicker with surprise at that, and was satisfied. “Anybody who comes here and even raises his voice to Tower, we’ll kill their whole families and them last. That goes for George, for ’Cimi Dretto, Tricks Postino . . . for your brother Claudio, too.”

Andolini’s eyes widened at each name, then winced momentarily shut at the name of his brother. Eddie thought that maybe he’d made his point. Whether or not Andolini could convince Balazar was another question. *But in a way it doesn’t even matter*, he thought coldly. *Once Tower’s sold us the lot, it doesn’t really matter what they do to him, does it?*

“How do you know so *much*?” Andolini asked.

“That doesn’t matter. Just pass on the message. Tell Balazar to tell his friends at Sombra that the lot is no longer for sale. Not to them, it isn’t. And tell him that Tower is now under the protection of folk from Gilead who carry hard calibers.”

“Hard—?”

“I mean folk more dangerous than any Balazar has ever dealt with before,” Eddie said, “*including* the people from the Sombra Corporation. Tell him that if he persists, there’ll be enough corpses in Brooklyn to fill Grand Army Plaza. And many of them will be women and children. Convince him.”

“I . . . man, I’ll try.”

Eddie stood up, then backed up. Curled in the puddles of gasoline and the strews of broken glass, George Biondi was beginning to stir and mutter deep in his throat. Eddie gestured to Jack with the barrel of Roland’s pistol, telling him to get up.

“You better try hard,” he said.

NINE

Tower poured them each a cup of black coffee, then couldn’t drink his. His hands were shaking too badly. After watching him try a couple of times (and thinking about a bomb-disposal character in *UXB* who lost his nerve), Eddie took pity on him and poured half of Tower’s coffee into his own cup.

“Try now,” he said, and pushed the half-cup back to the bookshop owner. Tower had his glasses on again, but one of the bows had been twisted and they sat crookedly on his face. Also, there was the crack running across the left lens like a lightning bolt. The two men were at the marble counter, Tower behind it, Eddie perched on one of the stools. Tower had carried the book Andolini had threatened to burn first out here with him, and put it down beside the coffee-maker. It was as if he couldn’t bear to let it out of his sight.

Tower picked up the cup with his shaking hand (no rings on it, Eddie noticed—no rings on either hand) and drained it. Eddie couldn’t understand why the man would choose to drink such so-so brew black. As far as Eddie himself was concerned, the really good

taste was the Half and Half. After the months he had spent in Roland's world (or perhaps whole years had been sneaking by), it tasted as rich as heavy cream.

"Better?" Eddie asked.

"Yes." Tower looked out the window, as if expecting the return of the gray Town Car that had jerked and swayed away just ten minutes before. Then he looked back at Eddie. He was still frightened of the young man, but the last of his outright terror had departed when Eddie stowed the huge pistol back inside what he called "my friend's swag-bag." The bag was made of a scuffed, no-color leather, and closed along the top with lacings rather than a zipper. To Calvin Tower, it seemed that the young man had stowed the more frightening aspects of his personality in the "swag-bag" along with the oversized revolver. That was good, because it allowed Tower to believe that the kid had been bluffing about killing whole hoodlum families as well as the hoodlums themselves.

"Where's your pal Deepneau today?" Eddie asked.

"Oncologist. Two years ago, Aaron started seeing blood in the toilet bowl when he moved his bowels. A younger man, he thinks 'Goddam hemorrhoids' and buys a tube of Preparation H. Once you're in your seventies, you assume the worst. In his case it was bad but not terrible. Cancer moves slower when you get to be his age; even the Big C gets old. Funny to think of, isn't it? Anyway, they baked it with radiation and they say it's gone, but Aaron says you don't turn your back on cancer. He goes back every three months, and that's where he is. I'm glad. He's an old *cockuh* but still a hothead."

I should introduce Aaron Deepneau to Jamie Jaffords, Eddie thought. They could play Castles instead of chess, and yarn away the days of the Goat Moon.

Tower, meanwhile, was smiling sadly. He adjusted his glasses on his face. For a moment they stayed straight, and then they tilted again. The tilt was somehow worse than the crack; made Tower look slightly crazy as well as vulnerable. "He's a hothead and I'm a coward. Perhaps that's why we're friends—we fit around each other's wrong places, make something that's almost whole."

"Say maybe you're a little hard on yourself," Eddie said.

“I don’t think so. My analyst says that anyone who wants to know how the children of an A-male father and a B-female mother turn out would only have to study my case-history. He also says—”

“Cry your pardon, Calvin, but I don’t give much of a shit about your analyst. You held onto the lot up the street, and that’s good enough for me.”

“I don’t take any credit for that,” Calvin Tower said morosely. “It’s like this”—he picked up the book that he’d put down beside the coffee-maker—“and the other ones he threatened to burn. I just have a problem letting things go. When my first wife said she wanted a divorce and I asked why, she said, ‘Because when I married you, I didn’t understand. I thought you were a man. It turns out you’re a packrat.’”

“The lot is different from the books,” Eddie said.

“Is it? Do you really think so?” Tower was looking at him, fascinated. When he raised his coffee cup, Eddie was pleased to see that the worst of his shakes had subsided.

“Don’t you?”

“Sometimes I dream about it,” Tower said. “I haven’t actually been in there since Tommy Graham’s deli went bust and I paid to have it knocked down. And to have the fence put up, of course, which was almost as expensive as the men with the wrecking ball. I dream there’s a field of flowers in there. A field of roses. And instead of just to First Avenue, it goes on forever. Funny dream, huh?”

Eddie was sure that Calvin Tower did indeed have such dreams, but he thought he saw something else in the eyes hiding behind the cracked and tilted glasses. He thought Tower was letting this dream stand for all the dreams he would not tell.

“Funny,” Eddie agreed. “I think you better pour me another slug of that mud, beg ya I do. We’ll have us a little palaver.”

Tower smiled and once more raised the book Andolini had meant to charbroil. “Palaver. It’s the kind of thing they’re always saying in here.”

“Do you say so?”

“Uh-huh.”

Eddie held out his hand. “Let me see.”

At first Tower hesitated, and Eddie saw the bookshop owner's face briefly harden with a misery mix of emotions.

"Come on, Cal, I'm not gonna wipe my ass with it."

"No. Of course not. I'm sorry." And at that moment Tower *looked* sorry, the way an alcoholic might look after a particularly destructive bout of drunkenness. "I just . . . certain books are very important to me. And this one is a true rarity."

He passed it to Eddie, who looked at the plastic-protected cover and felt his heart stop.

"What?" Tower asked. He set his coffee cup down with a bang. "What's wrong?"

Eddie didn't reply. The cover illustration showed a small rounded building like a Quonset hut, only made of wood and thatched with pine boughs. Standing off to one side was an Indian brave wearing buckskin pants. He was shirtless, holding a tomahawk to his chest. In the background, an old-fashioned steam locomotive was charging across the prairie, boiling gray smoke into a blue sky.

The title of this book was *The Dogan*. The author was Benjamin Slightman Jr.

From some great distance, Tower was asking him if he was going to faint. From only slightly closer by, Eddie said that he wasn't. Benjamin Slightman Jr. Ben Slightman the Younger, in other words. And—

He pushed Tower's pudgy hand away when it tried to take the book back. Then Eddie used his own finger to count the letters in the author's name. There were, of course, nineteen.

TEN

He swallowed another cup of Tower's coffee, this time without the Half and Half. Then he took the plastic-wrapped volume in hand once more.

"What makes it special?" he asked. "I mean, it's special to me because I met someone recently whose name is the same as the name of the guy who wrote this. But—"

An idea struck Eddie, and he turned to the back flap, hoping for a picture of the author. What he found instead was a curt two-line author bio: "BENJAMIN SLIGHTMAN JR. is a rancher in Montana. This is

his second novel." Below this was a drawing of an eagle, and a slogan: BUY WAR BONDS!

"But why's it special to *you*? What makes it worth seventy-five hundred bucks?"

Tower's face kindled. Fifteen minutes before he had been in mortal terror for his life, but you'd never know it looking at him now, Eddie thought. Now he was in the grip of his obsession. Roland had his Dark Tower; this man had his rare books.

He held it so Eddie could see the cover. "*The Dogan*, right?"

"Right."

Tower flipped the book open and pointed to the inner flap, also under plastic, where the story was summarized. "And here?"

"'*The Dogan*,' " Eddie read. "A thrilling tale of the old west and one Indian brave's heroic effort to survive.' So?"

"Now look at *this*!" Tower said triumphantly, and turned to the title page. Here Eddie read:

The Hogan Benjamin Slightman Jr.

"I don't get it," Eddie said. "What's the big deal?"

Tower rolled his eyes. "Look again."

"Why don't you just tell me what—"

"No, look again. I insist. The joy is in the discovery, Mr. Dean. Any collector will tell you the same. Stamps, coins, or books, the joy is in the discovery."

He flipped back to the cover again, and this time Eddie saw it. "The title on the front's misprinted, isn't it? *Dogan* instead of *Hogan*."

Tower nodded happily. "A hogan is an Indian home of the type illustrated on the front. A dogan is . . . well, nothing. The misprinted cover makes the book somewhat valuable, but now . . . look at this . . ."

He turned to the copyright page and handed the book to Eddie. The copyright date was 1943, which of course explained the eagle and the slogan on the author-bio flap. The title of the book was given as *The Hogan*, so that seemed all right. Eddie was about to ask when he got it for himself.

"They left the 'Jr.' off the author's name, didn't they?"

“Yes! *Yes!*” Tower was almost hugging himself. “As if the book had actually been written by the author’s *father!* In fact, once when I was at a bibliographic convention in Philadelphia, I explained this book’s particular situation to an attorney who gave a lecture on copyright law, and this guy said that Slightman Jr.’s father might actually be able to assert right of ownership over this book because of a simple typographical error! Amazing, don’t you think?”

“Totally,” Eddie said, thinking *Slightman the Elder*. Thinking *Slightman the Younger*. Thinking about how Jake had become fast friends with the latter and wondering why this gave him such a bad feeling now, sitting here and drinking coffee in little old Calla New York.

At least he took the Ruger, Eddie thought.

“Are you telling me that’s all it takes to make a book valuable?” he asked Tower. “One misprint on the cover, a couple more inside, and all at once the thing’s worth seventy-five hundred bucks?”

“Not at all,” Tower said, looking shocked. “But Mr. Slightman wrote three really excellent Western novels, all taking the Indians’ point of view. *The Hogan* is the middle one. He became a big bug in Montana after the war—some job having to do with water and mineral rights—and then, here is the irony, a group of Indians killed him. Scalped him, actually. They were drinking outside a general store—”

A general store named Took’s, Eddie thought. *I’d bet my watch and warrant on it.*

“—and apparently Mr. Slightman said something they took objection to, and . . . well, there goes your ballgame.”

“Do all your really valuable books have similar stories?” Eddie asked. “I mean, some sort of coincidence makes them valuable, and not just the stories themselves?”

Tower laughed. “Young man, most people who collect rare books won’t even open their purchases. Opening and closing a book damages the spine. Hence damaging the resale price.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as slightly sick behavior?”

“Not at all,” Tower said, but a telltale red blush was climbing his cheeks. Part of him apparently took Eddie’s point. “If a customer spends eight thousand dollars for a signed first edition of Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, it makes perfect sense to put that book away in a

safe place where it can be admired but not touched. If the fellow actually wants to read the story, let him buy a Vintage paperback.”

“You believe that,” Eddie said, fascinated. “You actually believe that.”

“Well . . . yes. Books can be objects of great value. That value is created in different ways. Sometimes just the author’s signature is enough to do it. Sometimes—as in this case—it’s a misprint. Sometimes it’s a first print-run—a first edition—that’s extremely small. And does any of this have to do with why you came here, Mr. Dean? Is it what you wanted to . . . to palaver about?”

“No, I suppose not.” But what exactly *had* he wanted to palaver about? He’d known—it had all been perfectly clear to him as he’d herded Andolini and Biondi out of the back room, then stood in the doorway watching them stagger to the Town Car, supporting each other. Even in cynical, mind-your-own-business New York, they had drawn plenty of looks. Both of them had been bleeding, and both had had the same stunned *What the hell HAPPENED to me?* look in their eyes. Yes, then it had been clear. The book—and the name of the author—had muddied up his thinking again. He took it from Tower and set it facedown on the counter so he wouldn’t have to look at it. Then he went to work regathering his thoughts.

“The first and most important thing, Mr. Tower, is that you have to get out of New York until July fifteenth. Because they’ll be back. Probably not those guys specifically, but some of the other guys Balazar uses. And they’ll be more eager than ever to teach you and me a lesson. Balazar’s a despot.” This was a word Eddie had learned from Susannah—she had used it to describe the Tick-Tock Man. “His way of doing business is to always escalate. You slap him, he slaps back twice as hard. Punch him in the nose, he breaks your jaw. You toss a grenade, he tosses a bomb.”

Tower groaned. It was a theatrical sound (although probably not meant that way), and under other circumstances, Eddie might have laughed. Not under these. Besides, everything he’d wanted to say to Tower was coming back to him. He could do this dicker, by God. He *would* do this dicker.

“Me they probably won’t be able to get at. I’ve got business elsewhere. Over the hills and far away, may ya say so. Your job is to

make sure they won't be able to get at you, either."

"But surely . . . after what you just did . . . and even if they didn't believe you about the women and children . . ." Tower's eyes, wide behind his crooked spectacles, begged Eddie to say that he had really *not* been serious about creating enough corpses to fill Grand Army Plaza. Eddie couldn't help him there.

"Cal, listen. Guys like Balazar don't believe or disbelieve. What they do is test the limits. Did I scare Big Nose? No, just knocked him out. Did I scare Jack? Yes. And it'll stick, because Jack's got a little bit of imagination. Will Balazar be impressed that I scared Ugly Jack? Yes . . . but just enough to be cautious."

Eddie leaned over the counter, looking at Tower earnestly.

"I don't want to kill kids, okay? Let's get that straight. In . . . well, in another place, let's leave it at that, in another place me and my friends are going to put our lives on the line to *save* kids. But they're *human* kids. People like Jack and Tricks Postino and Balazar himself, they're animals. Wolves on two legs. And do wolves raise human beings? No, they raise more wolves. Do male wolves mate with human women? No, they mate with female wolves. So if I had to go in there—and I would if I had to—I'd tell myself I was cleaning out a pack of wolves, right down to the smallest cub. No more than that. And no less."

"My God he means it," Tower said. He spoke low, and all in a breath, and to the thin air.

"I absolutely do, but it's neither here nor there," Eddie said. "The point is, they'll come after you. Not to kill you, but to turn you around in their direction again. If you stay here, Cal, I think you can look forward to a serious maiming at the very least. Is there a place you can go until the fifteenth of next month? Do you have enough money? I don't have any, but I guess I could get some."

In his mind, Eddie was already in Brooklyn. Balazar guardian-angled a poker game in the back room of Bernie's Barber Shop, everybody knew that. The game might not be going on during a weekday, but there'd be somebody back there with cash. Enough to—

"Aaron has some money," Tower was saying reluctantly. "He's offered a good many times. I've always told him no. He's also always telling me I need to go on a vacation. I think by this he means I

should get away from the fellows you just turned out. He is curious about what they want, but he doesn't ask. A hothead, but a *gentleman* hothead." Tower smiled briefly. "Perhaps Aaron and I could go on a vacation together, young sir. After all, we might not get another chance."

Eddie was pretty sure the chemo and radiation treatments were going to keep Aaron Deepneau up and on his feet for at least another four years, but this was probably not the time to say so. He looked toward the door of The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind and saw the other door. Beyond it was the mouth of the cave. Sitting there like a comic-strip yogi, just a cross-legged silhouette, was the gunslinger. Eddie wondered how long he'd been gone over there, how long Roland had been listening to the muffled but still maddening sound of the todash chimes.

"Would Atlantic City be far enough, do you think?" Tower asked timidly.

Eddie Dean almost shuddered at the thought. He had a brief vision of two plump sheep—getting on in years, yes, but still quite tasty—wandering into not just a pack of wolves but a whole city of them.

"Not there," Eddie said. "Anyplace but there."

"What about Maine or New Hampshire? Perhaps we could rent a cottage on a lake somewhere until the fifteenth of July."

Eddie nodded. He was a city boy. It was hard for him to imagine the bad guys way up in northern New England, wearing those checkered caps and down vests as they chomped their pepper sandwiches and drank their Ruffino. "That'd be better," he said. "And while you're there, you might see if you could find a lawyer."

Tower burst out laughing. Eddie looked at him, head cocked, smiling a little himself. It was always good to make folks laugh, but it was better when you knew what the fuck they were laughing *at*.

"I'm sorry," Tower said after a moment or two. "It's just that Aaron *was* a lawyer. His sister and two brothers, all younger, are *still* lawyers. They like to boast that they have the most unique legal letterhead in New York, perhaps in the entire United States. It reads simply 'DEEPNEAU.' "

"That speeds things up," Eddie said. "I want you to have Mr. Deepneau draw up a contract while you're vacationing in New

England—”

“*Hiding* in New England,” Tower said. He suddenly looked morose. “*Holed up* in New England.”

“Call it whatcha wanna,” Eddie said, “but get that paper drawn up. You’re going to sell that lot to me and my friends. To the Tet Corporation. You’re just gonna get a buck to start with, but I can almost guarantee you that in the end you’ll get fair market value.”

He had more to say, lots, but stopped there. When he’d held his hand out for the book, *The Dogan* or *The Hogan* or whatever it was, an expression of miserly reluctance had come over Tower’s face. What made the look unpleasant was the undercurrent of stupidity in it . . . and not very far under, either. *Oh God, he’s gonna fight me on this. After everything that’s happened, he’s still gonna fight me on it. And why? Because he really is a packrat.*

“You can trust me, Cal,” he said, knowing trust was not exactly the issue. “I set my watch and warrant on it. Hear me, now. Hear me, I beg.”

“I don’t know you from Adam. You walk in off the street—”

“—and save your life, don’t forget that part.”

Tower’s face grew set and stubborn. “They weren’t going to kill me. You said that yourself.”

“They *were* gonna burn your favorite books. Your most valuable ones.”

“Not my *most* valuable. Also, that might have been a bluff.”

Eddie took a deep breath and let it out, hoping his suddenly strong desire to lean across the counter and sink his fingers into Tower’s fat throat would depart or at least subside. He reminded himself that if Tower *hadn’t* been stubborn, he probably would have sold the lot to Sombra long before now. The rose would have been plowed under. And the Dark Tower? Eddie had an idea that when the rose died, the Dark Tower would simply fall like the one in Babel when God had gotten tired of it and wiggled His finger. No waiting around another hundred or thousand years for the machinery running the Beams to quit. Just ashes, ashes, we all fall down. And then? Hail the Crimson King, lord of todash darkness.

“Cal, if you sell me and my friends your vacant lot, you’re off the hook. Not only that, but you’ll eventually have enough money to run

your little shop for the rest of your life.” He had a sudden thought. “Hey, do you know a company called Holmes Dental?”

Tower smiled. “Who doesn’t? I use their floss. *And* their toothpaste. I tried the mouthwash, but it’s too strong. Why do you ask?”

“Because Odetta Holmes is my wife. I may look like Froggy the Gremlin, but in truth I’m Prince Fuckin Charming.”

Tower was quiet for a long time. Eddie curbed his impatience and let the man think. At last Tower said, “You think I’m being foolish. That I’m being Silas Marner, or worse, Ebenezer Scrooge.”

Eddie didn’t know who Silas Marner was, but he took Tower’s point from the context of the discussion. “Let’s put it this way,” he said. “After what you’ve just been through, you’re too smart not to know where your best interests lie.”

“I feel obligated to tell you that this isn’t just mindless miserliness on my part; there’s an element of caution, as well. I know that piece of New York is valuable, *any* piece of Manhattan is, but it’s not just that. I have a safe out back. There’s something in it. Something perhaps even more valuable than my copy of *Ulysses*.”

“Then why isn’t it in your safe-deposit box?”

“Because it’s supposed to be here,” Tower said. “It’s *always* been here. Perhaps waiting for you, or someone like you. Once, Mr. Dean, my family owned almost all of Turtle Bay, and . . . well, wait. Will you wait?”

“Yes,” Eddie said.

What choice?

ELEVEN

When Tower was gone, Eddie got off the stool and went to the door only he could see. He looked through it. Dimly, he could hear chimes. More clearly he could hear his mother. “Why don’t you get out of there?” she called dolorously. “You’ll only make things worse, Eddie—you always do.”

That’s my Ma, he thought, and called the gunslinger’s name.

Roland pulled one of the bullets from his ear. Eddie noted the oddly clumsy way he handled it—almost pawing at it, as if his fingers were stiff—but there was no time to think about it now.

“Are you all right?” Eddie called.

“Do fine. And you?”

“Yeah, but . . . Roland, can you come through? I might need a little help.”

Roland considered, then shook his head. “The box might close if I did. Probably *would* close. Then the door would close. And we’d be trapped on that side.”

“Can’t you prop the damn thing open with a stone or a bone or something?”

“No,” Roland said. “It wouldn’t work. The ball is powerful.”

And it’s working on you, Eddie thought. Roland’s face looked haggard, the way it had when the lobstrosities’ poison had been inside him.

“All right,” he said.

“Be as quick as you can.”

“I will.”


TWELVE

When he turned around, Tower was looking at him quizzically. “Who were you talking to?”

Eddie stood aside and pointed at the doorway. “Do you see anything there, sai?”

Calvin Tower looked, started to shake his head, then looked longer. “A shimmer,” he said at last. “Like hot air over an incinerator. Who’s there? *What’s there?*”

“For the time being, let’s say nobody. What have you got in your hand?”

Tower held it up. It was an envelope, very old. Written on it in copperplate were the words *Stefan Foren and Dead Letter*. Below, carefully drawn in ancient ink, were the same symbols that were on the door and the box: . *Now we might be getting somewhere,* Eddie thought.

“Once this envelope held the will of my great-great-great grandfather,” Calvin Tower said. “It was dated March 19th, 1846. Now there’s nothing but a single piece of paper with a name written upon it. If you can tell me what that name is, young man, I’ll do as you ask.”

And so, Eddie mused, it comes down to another riddle. Only this time it wasn't four lives that hung upon the answer, but all of existence.

Thank God it's an easy one, he thought.

"It's Deschain," Eddie said. "The first name will be either Roland, the name of my dinh, or Steven, the name of his father."

All the blood seemed to fall out of Calvin Tower's face. Eddie had no idea how the man was able to keep his feet. "My dear God in heaven," he said.

With trembling fingers, he removed an ancient and brittle piece of paper from the envelope, a time traveler that had voyaged over a hundred and thirty-one years to this where and when. It was folded. Tower opened it and put it on the counter, where they could both read the words Stefan Toren had written in the same firm copperplate hand:

Roland Deschain, of Gilead
The line of ELD
GUNSLINGER

THIRTEEN

There was more talk, about fifteen minutes' worth, and Eddie supposed at least some of it was important, but the real deal had gone down when he'd told Tower the name his three-times-great-grandfather had written on a slip of paper fourteen years before the Civil War got rolling.

What Eddie had discovered about Tower during their palaver was dismaying. He harbored some respect for the man (for *any* man who could hold out for more than twenty seconds against Balazar's goons), but didn't like him much. There was a kind of willful stupidity about him. Eddie thought it was self-created and maybe propped up by his analyst, who would tell him about how he had to take care of himself, how he had to be the captain of his own ship, the author of his own destiny, respect his own desires, all that blah-blah. All the little code words and terms that meant it was all right to be a selfish fuck. That it was noble, even. When Tower told Eddie that Aaron Deepneau was

his only friend, Eddie wasn't surprised. What surprised him was that Tower had any friends at all. Such a man could never be ka-tet, and it made Eddie uneasy to know that their destinies were so tightly bound together.

You'll just have to trust to ka. It's what ka's for, isn't it?

Sure it was, but Eddie didn't have to like it.

FOURTEEN

Eddie asked if Tower had a ring with *Ex Liveris* on it. Tower looked puzzled, then laughed and told Eddie he must mean *Ex Libris*. He rummaged on one of his shelves, found a book, showed Eddie the plate in front. Eddie nodded.

"No," Tower said. "But it'd be just the thing for a guy like me, wouldn't it?" He looked at Eddie keenly. "Why do you ask?"

But Tower's future responsibility to save a man now exploring the hidden highways of multiple Americas was a subject Eddie didn't feel like getting into right now. He'd come as close to blowing the guy's mind as he wanted to, and he had to get back through the unfound door before Black Thirteen wore Roland away to a frazzle.

"Never mind. But if you see one, you ought to pick it up. One more thing and then I'm gone."

"What's that?"

"I want your promise that as soon as *I* leave, *you'll* leave."

Tower once more grew shifty. It was the side of him Eddie knew he could come to outright loathe, given time. "Why . . . to tell you the truth, I don't know if I can do that. Early evenings are often a very busy time for me . . . people are much more prone to browse once the workday's over . . . and Mr. Brice is coming in to look at a first of *The Troubled Air*, Irwin Shaw's novel about radio and the McCarthy era . . . I'll have to at least skim through my appointment calendar, and . . ."

He droned on, actually gathering steam as he descended toward trivialities.

Eddie said, very mildly: "Do you like your balls, Calvin? Are you maybe as attached to them as they are to you?"

Tower, who'd been wondering about who would feed Sergio if he just pulled up stakes and ran, now stopped and looked at him, puzzled, as if he had never heard this simple one-syllable word before.

Eddie nodded helpfully. "Your nuts. Your sack. Your stones. Your *cojones*. The old sperm-firm. Your *testicles*."

"I don't see what—"

Eddie's coffee was gone. He poured some Half and Half into the cup and drank that, instead. It was very tasty. "I told you that if you stayed here, you could look forward to a serious maiming. That's what I meant. That's probably where they'll start, with your balls. To teach you a lesson. As to when it happens, what that mostly depends on is traffic."

"Traffic." Tower said it with a complete lack of vocal expression.

"That's right," Eddie said, sipping his Half and Half as if it were a thimble of brandy. "Basically how long it takes Jack Andolini to drive back out to Brooklyn and then how long it takes Balazar to load up some old beater of a van or panel truck with guys to come back here. I'm hoping Jack's too dazed to just phone. Did you think Balazar'd wait until tomorrow? Convene a little brain-trust of guys like Kevin Blake and 'Cimi Dretto to discuss the matter?" Eddie raised first one finger and then two. The dust of another world was beneath the nails. "First, they *got* no brains; second, Balazar doesn't trust em.

"What he'll do, Cal, is what any successful despot does: he'll react right away, quick as a flash. The rush-hour traffic will hold em up a little, but if you're still here at six, half past at the latest, you can say goodbye to your balls. They'll hack them off with a knife, then cauterize the wound with one of those little torches, those Bernz-O-Matics—"

"Stop," Tower said. Now instead of white, he'd gone green. Especially around the gills. "I'll go to a hotel down in the Village. There are a couple of cheap ones that cater to writers and artists down on their luck, ugly rooms but not that bad. I'll call Aaron, and we'll go north tomorrow morning."

"Fine, but first you have to pick a town to go to," Eddie said. "Because I or one of my friends may need to get in touch with you."

"How am I supposed to do that? I don't know any towns in New England north of Westport, Connecticut!"

“Make some calls once you get to the hotel in the Village,” Eddie said. “You pick the town, and then tomorrow morning, before you leave New York, send your pal Aaron up to your vacant lot. Have him write the zip code on the board fence.” An unpleasant thought struck Eddie. “You *have* zip codes, don’t you? I mean, they’ve been invented, right?”

Tower looked at him as if he were crazy. “Of course they have.”

“ ’Kay. Have him put it on the Forty-sixth street side, all the way down where the fence ends. Have you got that?”

“Yes, but—”

“They probably won’t have your bookshop staked out tomorrow morning—they’ll assume you got smart and blew—but if they do, they won’t have the lot staked out, and if they have the lot staked out, it’ll be the Second Avenue side. And if they have the Forty-sixth Street side staked out, they’ll be looking for you, not him.”

Tower was smiling a little bit in spite of himself. Eddie relaxed and smiled back. “But . . . ? If they’re also looking for Aaron?”

“Have him wear the sort of clothes he doesn’t usually wear. If he’s a blue jeans man, have him wear a suit. If he’s a suit man—”

“Have him wear blue jeans.”

“Correct. And sunglasses wouldn’t be a bad idea, assuming the day isn’t cloudy enough to make them look odd. Have him use a black felt-tip. Tell him it doesn’t have to be artistic. He just walks to the fence, as if to read one of the posters. Then he writes the numbers and off he goes. And tell him for Christ’s sake don’t fuck up.”

“And how are you going to find us once you get to Zip Code Whatever?”

Eddie thought of Took’s, and their palaver with the *folken* as they sat in the big porch rockers. Letting anyone who wanted to have a look and ask a question.

“Go to the local general store. Have a little conversation, tell anyone who’s interested that you’re in town to write a book or paint pictures of the lobster-pots. I’ll find you.”

“All right,” Tower said. “It’s a good plan. You do this well, young man.”

I was made for it, Eddie thought but didn’t say. What he said was, “I have to be going. I’ve stayed too long as it is.”

“There’s one thing you have to help me do before you go,” Tower said, and explained.

Eddie’s eyes widened. When Tower had finished—it didn’t take long—Eddie burst out, “Aw, you’re *shittin!*”

Tower tipped his head toward the door to his shop, where he could see that faint shimmer. It made the passing pedestrians on Second Avenue look like momentary mirages. “There’s a door there. You as much as said so, and I believe you. I can’t see it, but I can see *something.*”

“You’re insane,” Eddie said. “Totally gonzo.” He didn’t mean it—not precisely—but less than ever he liked having his fate so firmly woven into the fate of a man who’d make such a request. Such a *demand.*

“Maybe I am and maybe I’m not,” Tower said. He folded his arms over his broad but flabby chest. His voice was soft but the look in his eyes was adamant. “In either case, this is my condition for doing all that you say. For falling in with *your* madness, in other words.”

“Aw, Cal, for God’s sake! God and the Man Jesus! I’m only asking you to do what Stefan Toren’s will *told* you to do.”

The eyes did not soften or cut aside as they did when Tower was waffling or preparing to fib. If anything, they grew stonier yet. “Stefan Toren’s dead and I’m not. I’ve told you my condition for doing what you want. The only question is whether or not—”

“Yeah, *yeah, YEAH!*” Eddie cried, and drank off the rest of the white stuff in his cup. Then he picked up the carton and drained that, for good measure. It looked like he was going to need the strength. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

FIFTEEN

Roland could see into the bookshop, but it was like looking at things on the bottom of a fast-running stream. He wished Eddie would hurry. Even with the bullets buried deep in his ears he could hear the todash chimes, and nothing blocked the terrible smells: now hot metal, now rancid bacon, now ancient melting cheese, now burning onions. His eyes were watering, which probably accounted for at least some of the wavery look of things seen beyond the door.

Far worse than the sound of the chimes or the smells was the way the ball was insinuating itself into his already compromised joints, filling them up with what felt like splinters of broken glass. So far he'd gotten nothing but a few twinges in his good left hand, but he had no illusions; the pain there and everywhere else would continue to increase for as long as the box was open and Black Thirteen shone out unshielded. Some of the pain from the dry twist might go away once the ball was hidden again, but Roland didn't think all of it would. And this might only be the beginning.

As if to congratulate him on his intuition, a baleful flare of pain settled into his right hip and began to throb there. To Roland it felt like a bag filled with warm liquid lead. He began to massage it with his right hand . . . as if *that* would do any good.

"Roland!" The voice was bubbly and distant—like the things he could see beyond the door, it seemed to be underwater—but it was unmistakably Eddie's. Roland looked up from his hip and saw that Eddie and Tower had carried some sort of case over to the unfound door. It appeared to be filled with books. "Roland, can you help us?"

The pain had settled so deeply into his hips and knees that Roland wasn't even sure he could get up . . . but he did it, and fluidly. He didn't know how much of his condition Eddie's sharp eyes might have already seen, but Roland didn't want them to see any more. Not, at least, until their adventures in Calla Bryn Sturgis were over.

"When we push it, you pull!"

Roland nodded his understanding, and the bookcase slid forward. There was one strange and vertiginous moment when the half in the cave was firm and clear and the half still back in The Manhattan Bookstore of the Mind shimmered unsteadily. Then Roland took hold of it and pulled it through. It juddered and squalled across the floor of the cave, pushing aside little piles of pebbles and bones.

As soon as it was out of the doorway, the lid of the ghostwood box began to close. So did the door itself.

"No, you don't," Roland murmured. "No, you don't, you bastard." He slipped the remaining two fingers of his right hand into the narrowing space beneath the lid of the box. The door stopped moving and remained ajar when he did. And enough was enough. Now even his *teeth* were buzzing. Eddie was having some last little bit

of palaver with Tower, but Roland no longer cared if they were the secrets of the universe.

“Eddie!” he roared. “Eddie, to me!”

And, thankfully, Eddie grabbed his swag-bag and came. The moment he was through the door, Roland closed the box. The unfound door shut a second later with a flat and undramatic clap. The chimes ceased. So did the jumble of poison pain pouring into Roland’s joints. The relief was so tremendous that he cried out. Then, for the next ten seconds or so, all he could do was lower his chin to his chest, close his eyes, and struggle not to sob.

“Say thankya,” he managed at last. “Eddie, say thankya.”

“Don’t mention it. Let’s get out of this cave, what do you think?”

“I think yes,” Roland said. “Gods, yes.”

SIXTEEN

“Didn’t like him much, did you?” Roland asked.

Ten minutes had passed since Eddie’s return. They had moved a little distance down from the cave, then stopped where the path twisted through a small rocky inlet. The roaring gale that had tossed back their hair and plastered their clothes against their bodies was here reduced to occasional prankish gusts. Roland was grateful for them. He hoped they would excuse the slow and clumsy way he was building his smoke. Yet he felt Eddie’s eyes upon him, and the young man from Brooklyn—who had once been almost as dull and unaware as Andolini and Biondi—now saw much.

“Tower, you mean.”

Roland tipped him a sardonic glance. “Of whom else would I speak? The cat?”

Eddie gave a brief grunt of acknowledgment, almost a laugh. He kept pulling in long breaths of the clean air. It was good to be back. Going to New York in the flesh had been better than going todash in one way—that sense of lurking darkness had been gone, and the accompanying sense of *thinness*—but God, the place *stank*. Mostly it was cars and exhaust (the oily clouds of diesel were the worst), but there were a thousand other bad smells, too. Not the least of them was the aroma of too many human bodies, their essential polecat odor

not hidden at all by the perfumes and sprays the *folken* put on themselves. Were they unconscious of how bad they smelled, all huddled up together as they were? Eddie supposed they must be. Had been himself, once upon a time. Once upon a time he couldn't wait to get back to New York, would have killed to get there.

"Eddie? Come back from Nis!" Roland snapped his fingers in front of Eddie Dean's face.

"I'm sorry," he said. "As for Tower . . . no, I didn't like him much. God, sending his *books* through like that! Making his lousy first editions part of his condition for helping to save the fucking universe!"

"He doesn't think of it in those terms . . . unless he does so in his dreams. And you know they'll burn his shop when they get there and find him gone. Almost surely. Pour gasoline under the door and light it. Break his window and toss in a grenado, either manufactured or homemade. Do you mean to tell me that never occurred to you?"

Of course it had. "Well, maybe."

It was Roland's turn to utter the humorous grunting sound. "Not much *may* in that *be*. So he saved his best books. And now, in Doorway Cave, we have something to hide the Pere's treasure behind. Although I suppose it must be counted our treasure now."

"His courage didn't strike me as real courage," Eddie said. "It was more like greed."

"Not all are called to the way of the sword or the gun or the ship," Roland said, "but all serve ka."

"Really? Does the Crimson King? Or the low men and women Callahan talked about?"

Roland didn't reply.

Eddie said, "He may do well. Tower, I mean. Not the cat."

"Very amusing," Roland said dryly. He scratched a match on the seat of his pants, cupped the flame, lit his smoke.

"Thank you, Roland. You're growing in that respect. Ask me if I think Tower and Deepneau can get out of New York City clean."

"Do you?"

"No, I think they'll leave a trail. *We* could follow it, but I'm hoping Balazar's men won't be able to. The one I worry about is Jack

Andolini. He's creepy-smart. As for Balazar, he made a contract with this Sombra Corporation."

"Took the king's salt."

"Yeah, I guess somewhere up the line he did," Eddie said. He had heard King instead of king, as in *Crimson King*. "Balazar knows that when you make a contract, you have to fill it or have a damned good reason why not. Fail and word gets out. Stories start to circulate about how so-and-so's going soft, losing his shit. They've still got three weeks to find Tower and force him to sell the lot to Sombra. They'll use it. Balazar's not the FBI, but he *is* a connected guy, and . . . Roland, the worst thing about Tower is that in some ways, none of this is real to him. It's like he's mistaken his life for a life in one of his storybooks. He thinks things have *got* to turn out all right because the writer's under contract."

"You think he'll be careless."

Eddie voiced a rather wild laugh. "Oh, I *know* he'll be careless. The question is whether or not Balazar will catch him at it."

"We're going to have to monitor Mr. Tower. Mind him for safety's sake. That's what you think, isn't it?"

"Yer-bugger!" Eddie said, and after a moment's silent consideration, both of them burst out laughing. When the fit had passed, Eddie said: "I think we ought to send Callahan, if he'll go. You probably think I'm crazy, but—"

"Not at all," Roland said. "He's one of us . . . or *could* be. I felt that from the first. And he's used to traveling in strange places. I'll put it to him today. Tomorrow I'll come up here with him and see him through the doorway—"

"Let me do it," Eddie said. "Once was enough for you. At least for awhile."

Roland eyed him carefully, then pitched his cigarette over the drop. "Why do you say so, Eddie?"

"Your hair's gotten whiter up around here." Eddie patted the crown of his own head. "Also, you're walking a little stiff. It's better now, but I'd guess the old rheumatiz kicked in on you a little. Fess up."

"All right, I fess," Roland said. If Eddie thought it was no more than old Mr. Rheumatiz, that was not so bad.

“Actually, I could bring him up tonight, long enough to get the zip code,” Eddie said. “It’ll be day again over there, I bet.”

“None of us is coming up this path in the dark. Not if we can help it.”

Eddie looked down the steep incline to where the fallen boulder jutted out, turning fifteen feet of their course into a tightrope-walk. “Point taken.”

Roland started to get up. Eddie reached out and took his arm. “Stay a couple of minutes longer, Roland. Do ya.”

Roland sat down again, looking at him.

Eddie took a deep breath, let it out. “Ben Slightman’s dirty,” he said. “He’s the tattletale. I’m almost sure of it.”

“Yes, I know.”

Eddie looked at him, wide-eyed. “You *know*? How could you possibly—”

“Let’s say I suspected.”

“*How*?”

“His spectacles,” Roland said. “Ben Slightman the Elder’s the only person in Calla Bryn Sturgis with spectacles. Come on, Eddie, day’s waiting. We can talk as we walk.”

SEVENTEEN

They couldn’t, though, not at first, because the path was too steep and narrow. But later, as they approached the bottom of the mesa, it grew wider and more forgiving. Talk once more became practical, and Eddie told Roland about the book, *The Dogan* or *The Hogan*, and the author’s oddly disputable name. He recounted the oddity of the copyright page (not entirely sure that Roland grasped this part), and said it had made him wonder if something was pointing toward the son, too. That seemed like a crazy idea, but—

“I think that if Benny Slightman was helping his father inform on us,” Roland said, “Jake would know.”

“Are you sure he doesn’t?” Eddie asked.

This gave Roland some pause. Then he shook his head. “Jake suspects the father.”

“He told you that?”

“He didn’t have to.”

They had almost reached the horses, who raised their heads alertly and seemed glad to see them.

“He’s out there at the Rocking B,” Eddie said. “Maybe we ought to take a ride out there. Invent some reason to bring him back to the Pere’s . . .” He trailed off, looking at Roland closely. “No?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is Jake’s part of it.”

“That’s hard, Roland. He and Benny Slightman like each other. A lot. If Jake ends up being the one to show the Calla what his Dad’s been doing—”

“Jake will do what he needs to do,” Roland said. “So will we all.”

“But he’s still just a boy, Roland. Don’t you see that?”

“He won’t be for much longer,” Roland said, and mounted up. He hoped Eddie didn’t see the momentary wince of pain that cramped his face when he swung his right leg over the saddle, but of course Eddie did.

CHAPTER III: THE DOGAN, PART 2

ONE

Jake and Benny Slightman spent the morning of that same day moving hay bales from the upper lofts of the Rocking B's three inner barns to the lower lofts, then breaking them open. The afternoon was for swimming and water-fighting in the Whye, which was still pleasant enough if one avoided the deep pools; those had grown cold with the season.

In between these two activities they ate a huge lunch in the bunkhouse with half a dozen of the hands (not Slightman the Elder; he was off at Telford's Buckhead Ranch, working a stock-trade). "I en't seen that boy of Ben's work s'hard in my life," Cookie said as he put fried chops down on the table and the boys dug in eagerly. "You'll wear him plumb out, Jake."

That was Jake's intention, of course. After haying in the morning, swimming in the afternoon, and a dozen or more barn-jumps for each of them by the red light of evening, he thought Benny would sleep like the dead. The problem was he might do the same himself. When he went out to wash at the pump—sunset come and gone by then, leaving ashes of roses deepening to true dark—he took Oy with him. He splashed his face clean and flicked drops of water for the animal to catch, which he did with great alacrity. Then Jake dropped to one knee and gently took hold of the sides of the billy-bumbler's face. "Listen to me, Oy."

"Oy!"

"I'm going to go to sleep, but when the moon rises, I want you to wake me up. Quietly, do'ee ken?"

“Ken!” Which might mean something or nothing. If someone had been taking wagers on it, Jake would have bet on something. He had great faith in Oy. Or maybe it was love. Or maybe those things were the same.

“When the moon rises. Say moon, Oy.”

“Moon!”

Sounded good, but Jake would set his own internal alarm clock to wake him up at moonrise. Because he wanted to go out to where he’d seen Benny’s Da’ and Andy that other time. That queer meeting worried at his mind more rather than less as time went by. He didn’t want to believe Benny’s Da’ was involved with the Wolves—Andy, either—but he had to make sure. Because it was what Roland would do. For that reason if no other.

TWO

The two boys lay in Benny’s room. There was one bed, which Benny had of course offered to his guest, but Jake had refused it. What they’d come up with instead was a system by which Benny took the bed on what he called “even-hand” nights, and Jake took it on “odd-hand” nights. This was Jake’s night for the floor, and he was glad. Benny’s goosedown-filled mattress was far too soft. In light of his plan to rise with the moon, the floor was probably better. Safer.

Benny lay with his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. He had coaxed Oy up onto the bed with him and the bumbler lay sleeping in a curled comma, his nose beneath his cartoon squiggle of a tail.

“Jake?” A whisper. “You asleep?”

“No.”

“Me neither.” A pause. “It’s been great, having you here.”

“It’s been great for me,” Jake said, and meant it.

“Sometimes being the only kid gets lonely.”

“Don’t I know it . . . and I was *always* the only one.” Jake paused. “Bet you were sad after your sissa died.”

“Sometimes I’m still sad.” At least he said it in a matter-of-fact tone, which made it easier to hear. “Reckon you’ll stay after you beat the Wolves?”

“Probably not long.”

“You’re on a quest, aren’t you?”

“I guess so.”

“For what?”

The quest was to save the Dark Tower in this where and the rose in the New York where he and Eddie and Susannah had come from, but Jake did not want to say this to Benny, much as he liked him. The Tower and the rose were kind of secret things. The ka-tet’s business. But neither did he want to lie.

“Roland doesn’t talk about stuff much,” he said.

A longer pause. The sound of Benny shifting, doing it quietly so as not to disturb Oy. “He scares me a little, your dinh.”

Jake thought about that, then said: “He scares me a little, too.”

“He scares my Pa.”

Jake was suddenly very alert. “Really?”

“Yes. He says it wouldn’t surprise him if, after you got rid of the Wolves, you turned on us. Then he said he was just joking, but that the old cowboy with the hard face scared him. I reckon that must have been your dinh, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Jake said.

Jake had begun thinking Benny had gone to sleep when the other boy asked, “What was your room like back where you came from?”

Jake thought of his room and at first found it surprisingly hard to picture. It had been a long time since he’d thought of it. And now that he did, he was embarrassed to describe it too closely to Benny. His friend lived well indeed by Calla standards—Jake guessed there were very few smallhold kids Benny’s age with their own rooms—but he would think a room such as Jake could describe that of an enchanted prince. The television? The stereo, with all his records, and the headphones for privacy? His posters of Stevie Wonder and The Jackson Five? His microscope, which showed him things too small to see with the naked eye? Was he supposed to tell this boy about such wonders and miracles?

“It was like this, only I had a desk,” Jake said at last.

“A *writing* desk?” Benny got up on one elbow.

“Well *yeah*,” Jake said, the tone implying *Sheesh, what else?*

“Paper? Pens? Quill pens?”

“Paper,” Jake agreed. Here, at least, was a wonder Benny could understand. “And pens. But not quill. Ball.”

“Ball pens? I don’t understand.”

So Jake began to explain, but halfway through he heard a snore. He looked across the room and saw Benny still facing him, but now with his eyes closed.

Oy opened *his* eyes—they were bright in the darkness—then winked at Jake. After that, he appeared to go back to sleep.

Jake looked at Benny for a long time, deeply troubled in ways he did not precisely understand . . . or want to.

At last, he went to sleep himself.

THREE

Some dark, dreamless time later, he came back to a semblance of wakefulness because of pressure on his wrist. Something pulling there. Almost painful. Teeth. Oy’s.

“Oy, no, quittit,” he mumbled, but Oy would not stop. He had Jake’s wrist in his jaws and continued to shake it gently from side to side, stopping occasionally to administer a brisk tug. He only quit when Jake finally sat up and stared dopily out into the silver-flooded night.

“Moon,” Oy said. He was sitting on the floor beside Jake, jaws open in an unmistakable grin, eyes bright. They *should* have been bright; a tiny white stone burned deep down in each one. “*Moon!*”

“Yeah,” Jake whispered, and then closed his fingers around Oy’s muzzle. “Hush!” He let go and looked over at Benny, who was now facing the wall and snoring deeply. Jake doubted if a howitzer shell would wake him.

“Moon,” Oy said, much more quietly. Now he was looking out the window. “Moon, moon. Moon.”

FOUR

Jake would have ridden bareback, but he needed Oy with him, and that made bareback difficult, maybe impossible. Luckily, the little

border-pony sai Overholser had loaned him was as tame as a tabby-cat, and there was a scuffy old practice saddle in the barn's tackroom that even a kid could handle with ease.

Jake saddled the horse, then tied his bedroll behind, to the part Calla cowboys called the boat. He could feel the weight of the Ruger inside the roll—and, if he squeezed, the shape of it, as well. The duster with the commodious pocket in the front was hanging on a nail in the tackroom. Jake took it, whipped it into something like a fat belt, and cinched it around his middle. Kids in his school had sometimes worn their outer shirts that way on warm days. Like those of his room, this memory seemed far away, part of a circus parade that had marched through town . . . and then left.

That life was richer, a voice deep in his mind whispered.

This one is truer, whispered another, even deeper.

He believed that second voice, but his heart was still heavy with sadness and worry as he led the border-pony out through the back of the barn and away from the house. Oy padded along at his heel, occasionally looking up at the sky and muttering "Moon, moon," but mostly sniffing the crisscrossing scents on the ground. This trip was dangerous. Just crossing Devar-Tete Whye—going from the Calla side of things to the Thunderclap side—was dangerous, and Jake knew it. Yet what really troubled him was the sense of looming heartache. He thought of Benny, saying it had been great to have Jake at the Rocking B to chum around with. He wondered if Benny would feel the same way a week from now.

"Doesn't matter," he sighed. "It's ka."

"Ka," Oy said, then looked up. "Moon. Ka, moon. Moon, ka."

"Shut up," Jake said, not unkindly.

"Shut up ka," Oy said amiably. "Shut up moon. Shut up Ake. Shut up Oy." It was the most he'd said in months, and once it was out he fell silent. Jake walked his horse another ten minutes, past the bunkhouse and its mixed music of snores, grunts, and farts, then over the next hill. At that point, with the East Road in sight, he judged it safe to ride. He unrolled the duster, put it on, then deposited Oy in the pouch and mounted up.

FIVE

He was pretty sure he could go right to the place where Andy and Slightman had crossed the river, but reckoned he'd only have one good shot at this, and Roland would've said pretty sure wasn't good enough in such a case. So he went back to the place where he and Benny had tented instead, and from there to the jut of granite which had reminded him of a partially buried ship. Once again Oy stood panting into his ear. Jake had no problem sighting on the round rock with the shiny surface. The dead log that had washed up against it was still there, too, because the river hadn't done anything but fall over the last weeks. There had been no rain whatever, and this was something Jake was counting on to help him.

He scrambled back up to the flat place where he and Benny had tented out. Here he'd left his pony tethered to a bush. He led it down to the river, then scooped up Oy and rode across. The pony wasn't big, but the water still didn't come up much higher than his fetlocks. In less than a minute, they were on the far bank.

It looked the same on this side, but wasn't. Jake knew it right away. Moonlight or no moonlight, it was darker somehow. Not exactly the way todash—New York had been dark, and there were no chimes, but there was a similarity, just the same. A sense of something waiting, and eyes that could turn in his direction if he was foolish enough to alert their owners to his presence. He had come to the edge of End-World. Jake's flesh broke out in goosebumps and he shivered. Oy looked up at him.

"S'all right," Jake whispered. "Just had to get it out of my system."

He dismounted, put Oy down, and stowed the duster in the shadow of the round rock. He didn't think he'd need a coat for this part of his excursion; he was sweating, nervous. The babble of the river was loud, and he kept shooting glances across to the other side, wanting to make sure no one was coming. He didn't want to be surprised. That sense of presence, of *others*, was both strong and unpleasant. There was nothing good about what lived on this side of the Devar-Tete Whye; of that much Jake was sure. He felt better when he'd taken the docker's clutch out of the bedroll, cinched it in place, and then added the Ruger. The Ruger made him into a different person,

one he didn't always like. But here, on the far side of the Whye, he was delighted to feel gunweight against his ribs, and delighted to be that person; that *gunslinger*.

Something farther off to the east screamed like a woman in life-ending agony. Jake knew it was only a rock-cat—he'd heard them before, when he'd been at the river with Benny, either fishing or swimming—but he still put his hand on the butt of the Ruger until it stopped. Oy had assumed the bowing position, front paws apart, head lowered, rump pointed skyward. Usually this meant he wanted to play, but there was nothing playful about his bared teeth.

"S'okay," Jake said. He rummaged in his bedroll again (he hadn't bothered to bring a saddlebag) until he found a red-checked cloth. This was Slightman the Elder's neckerchief, stolen four days previous from beneath the bunkhouse table, where the foreman had dropped it during a game of Watch Me and then forgotten it.

Quite the little thief I am, Jake thought. My Dad's gun, now Benny's Dad's snotrag. I can't tell if I'm working my way up or down.

It was Roland's voice that replied. *You're doing what you were called here to do. Why don't you stop beating your breast and get started?*

Jake held the neckerchief between his hands and looked down at Oy. "This always works in the movies," he said to the bumbler. "I have no idea if it works in real life . . . especially after weeks have gone by." He lowered the neckerchief to Oy, who stretched out his long neck and sniffed it delicately. "Find this smell, Oy. Find it and follow it."

"Oy!" But he just sat there, looking up at Jake.

"This, Dumbo," Jake said, letting him smell it again. "Find it! Go on!"

Oy got up, turned around twice, then began to saunter north along the bank of the river. He lowered his nose occasionally to the rocky ground, but seemed a lot more interested in the occasional dying-woman howl of the rock-cat. Jake watched his friend with steadily diminishing hope. Well, he'd seen which way Slightman had gone. He could go in that direction himself, course around a little, see what there was to see.

Oy turned around, came back toward Jake, then stopped. He sniffed a patch of ground more closely. The place where Slightman had come out of the water? It could have been. Oy made a thoughtful

hoofing sound far back in his throat and then turned to his right—east. He slipped sinuously between two rocks. Jake, now feeling at least a tickle of hope, mounted up and followed.

SIX

They hadn't gone far before Jake realized Oy was following an actual path that wound through the hilly, rocky, arid land on this side of the river. He began to see signs of technology: a cast-off, rusty electrical coil, something that looked like an ancient circuit-board poking out of the sand, tiny shards and shatters of glass. In the black moonlight-created shadow of a large boulder, he spied what looked like a whole bottle. He dismounted, picked it up, poured out God knew how many decades (or centuries) of accumulated sand, and looked at it. Written on the side in raised letters was a word he recognized: Nozz-A-La.

"The drink of finer bumhugs everywhere," Jake murmured, and put the bottle down again. Beside it was a crumpled-up cigarette pack. He smoothed it out, revealing a picture of a red-lipped woman wearing a jaunty red hat. She was holding a cigarette between two glamorously long fingers. PARTI appeared to be the brand name.

Oy, meanwhile, was standing ten or twelve yards farther along and looking back at him over one low shoulder.

"Okay," Jake said. "I'm coming."

Other paths joined the one they were on, and Jake realized this was a continuation of the East Road. He could see only a few scattered bootprints and smaller, deeper footprints. These were in places guarded by high rocks—wayside coves the prevailing winds didn't often reach. He guessed the bootprints were Slightman's, the deep footprints Andy's. There were no others. But there *would* be, and not many days from now, either. The prints of the Wolves' gray horses, coming out of the east. They would also be deep prints, Jake reckoned. Deep like Andy's.

Up ahead, the path breasted the top of a hill. On either side were fantastically misshapen organ-pipe cactuses with great thick barrel arms that seemed to point every which way. Oy was standing there, looking down at something, and once more seeming to grin. As Jake

approached him, he could smell the cactus-plants. The odor was bitter and tangy. It reminded him of his father's martinis.

He sat astride his pony beside Oy, looking down. At the bottom of the hill on the right was a shattered concrete driveway. A sliding gate had been frozen half-open ages ago, probably long before the Wolves started raiding the borderland Callas for children. Beyond it was a building with a curved metal roof. Small windows lined the side Jake could see, and his heart lifted at the sight of the steady white glow that came through them. Not 'seners, and not lightbulbs, either (what Roland called "sparklights"). Only fluorescents threw that kind of white light. In his New York life, fluorescent lights made him think mostly of unhappy, boring things: giant stores where everything was always on sale and you could never find what you wanted, sleepy afternoons at school when the teacher droned on and on about the trade routes of ancient China or the mineral deposits of Peru and rain poured endlessly down outside and it seemed the Closing Bell would never ring, doctors' offices where you always wound up sitting on a tissue-covered exam table in your underpants, cold and embarrassed and somehow positive that you would be getting a shot.

Tonight, though, those lights cheered him up.

"Good boy!" he told the bumbler.

Instead of responding as he usually did, by repeating his name, Oy looked past Jake and commenced a low growl. At the same moment the pony shifted and gave a nervous whinny. Jake reined him, realizing that bitter (but not entirely unpleasant) smell of gin and juniper had gotten stronger. He looked around and saw two spiny barrels of the cactus-tangle on his right swiveling slowly and blindly toward him. There was a faint grinding sound, and dribbles of white sap were running down the cactus's central barrel. The needles on the arms swinging toward Jake looked long and wicked in the moonlight. The thing had smelled him, and it was hungry.

"Come on," he told Oy, and booted the pony's sides lightly. The pony needed no further urging. It hurried downhill, not quite trotting, toward the building with the fluorescent lights. Oy gave the moving cactus a final mistrustful look, then followed them.

SEVEN

Jake reached the driveway and stopped. About fifty yards farther down the road (it was now very definitely a road, or had been once upon a time), train-tracks crossed and then ran on toward the Devar-Tete Whye, where a low bridge took them across. The *folken* called that bridge “the causeway.” The older *folken*, Callahan had told them, called it the *devil’s* causeway.

“The trains that bring the roont ones back from Thunderclap come on those tracks,” he murmured to Oy. And did he feel the tug of the Beam? Jake was sure he did. He had an idea that when they left Calla Bryn Sturgis—if they left Calla Bryn Sturgis—it would be along those tracks.

He stood where he was a moment longer, feet out of the stirrups, then headed the pony up the crumbling driveway toward the building. To Jake it looked like a Quonset hut on a military base. Oy, with his short legs, was having hard going on the broken-up surface. That busted-up paving would be dangerous for his horse, too. Once the frozen gate was behind them, he dismounted and looked for a place to tether his mount. There were bushes close by, but something told him they were *too* close. Too visible. He led the pony out onto the hardpan, stopped, and looked around at Oy. “Stay!”

“Stay! Oy! Ake!”

Jake found more bushes behind a pile of boulders like a strew of huge and eroded toy blocks. Here he felt satisfied enough to tether the pony. Once it was done, he stroked the long, velvety muzzle. “Not long,” he said. “Can you be good?”

The pony blew through his nose and appeared to nod. Which meant exactly nothing, Jake knew. And it was probably a needless precaution, anyway. Still, better safe than sorry. He went back to the driveway and bent to scoop the bumbler up. As soon as he straightened, a row of brilliant lights flashed on, pinning him like a bug on a microscope stage. Holding Oy in the curve of one arm, Jake raised the other to shield his eyes. Oy whined and blinked.

There was no warning shout, no stern request for identification, only the faint snuffle of the breeze. The lights were turned on by motion-sensors, Jake guessed. What came next? Machine-gun fire

directed by dipolar computers? A scurry of small but deadly robots like those Roland, Eddie, and Susannah had dispatched in the clearing where the Beam they were following had begun? Maybe a big net dropping from overhead, like in this jungle movie he'd seen once on TV?

Jake looked up. There was no net. No machine-guns, either. He started walking forward again, picking his way around the deepest of the potholes and jumping over a washout. Beyond this latter, the driveway was tilted and cracked but mostly whole. "You can get down now," he told Oy. "Boy, you're heavy. Watch out or I'll have to stick you in Weight Watchers."

He looked straight ahead, squinting and shielding his eyes from the fierce glare. The lights were in a row running just beneath the Quonset's curved roof. They threw his shadow out behind him, long and black. He saw rock-cat corpses, two on his left and two more on his right. Three of them were little more than skeletons. The fourth was in a high state of decomposition, but Jake could see a hole that looked too big for a bullet. He thought it had been made by a bah-bolt. The idea was comforting. No weapons of super-science at work here. Still, he was crazy not to be hightailing it back toward the river and the Calla beyond it. Wasn't he?

"Crazy," he said.

"Razy," Oy said, once more padding along at Jake's heel.

A minute later they reached the door of the hut. Above it, on a rusting steel plate, was this:

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.

Northeast Corridor

Arc Quadrant

OUTPOST 16

Medium Security

VERBAL ENTRY CODE REQUIRED

On the door itself, now hanging crooked by only two screws, was another sign. A joke? Some sort of nickname? Jake thought it might be a little of both. The letters were choked with rust and eroded by God knew how many years of blowing sand and grit, but he could still read them:

WELCOME TO THE DOGAN

EIGHT

Jake expected the door to be locked and wasn't disappointed. The lever handle moved up and down only the tiniest bit. He guessed that when it had been new, there'd been no give in it at all. To the left of the door was a rusty steel panel with a button and a speaker grille. Beneath it was the word **VERBAL**. Jake reached for the button, and suddenly the lights lining the top of the building went out, leaving him in what at first seemed like utter darkness. *They're on a timer*, he thought, waiting for his eyes to adjust. *A pretty short one. Or maybe they're just getting tired, like everything else the Old People left behind.*

His eyes readapted to the moonlight and he could see the entry-box again. He had a pretty good idea of what the verbal entry code must be. He pushed the button.

"WELCOME TO ARC QUADRANT OUTPOST 16," said a voice. Jake jumped back, stifling a cry. He had expected a voice, but not one so eerily like that of Blaine the Mono. He almost expected it to drop into a John Wayne drawl and call him little trailhand. "THIS IS A MEDIUM SECURITY OUTPOST. PLEASE GIVE THE VERBAL ENTRY CODE. YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS. NINE . . . EIGHT . . ."

"Nineteen," Jake said.

"INCORRECT ENTRY CODE. YOU MAY RETRY ONCE. FIVE . . . FOUR . . . THREE . . ."

"Ninety-nine," Jake said.

"THANK YOU."

The door clicked open.

NINE

Jake and Oy walked into a room that reminded him of the vast control-area Roland had carried him through beneath the city of Lud, as they had followed the steel ball which had guided them to Blaine's cradle. This room was smaller, of course, but many of the dials and panels looked the same. There were chairs at some of the consoles, the kind that would roll along the floor so that the people who worked here could move from place to place without getting to their feet. There was a steady sigh of fresh air, but Jake could hear occasional rough rattling sounds from the machinery driving it. And while three-quarters of the panels were lighted, he could see a good many that were dark. Old and tired: he had been right about that. In one corner was a grinning skeleton in the remains of a brown khaki uniform.

On one side of the room was a bank of TV monitors. They reminded Jake a little bit of his father's study at home, although his father had had only three screens—one for each network—and here there were . . . he counted. Thirty. Three of them were fuzzy, showing pictures he couldn't really make out. Two were rolling rapidly up and up, as if the vertical hold had fritzed out. Four were entirely dark. The other twenty-one were projecting pictures, and Jake looked at these with growing wonder. Half a dozen showed various expanses of desert, including the hilltop guarded by the two misshapen cactuses. Two more showed the outpost—the Dogan—from behind and from the driveway side. Under these were three screens showing the Dogan's interior. One showed a room that looked like a galley or kitchen. The second showed a small bunkhouse that looked equipped to sleep eight (in one of the bunks, an upper, Jake spied another skeleton). The third inside-the-Dogan screen presented this room, from a high angle. Jake could see himself and Oy. There was a screen with a stretch of the railroad tracks on it, and one showing the Little Whye from this side, moonstruck and beautiful. On the far right was the causeway with the train-tracks crossing it.

It was the images on the other eight operating screens that astounded Jake. One showed Took's General Store, now dark and deserted, closed up till daylight. One showed the Pavilion. Two

showed the Calla high street. Another showed Our Lady of Serenity Church, and one showed the living room of the rectory . . . *inside* the rectory! Jake could actually see the Pere's cat, Snugglebutt, lying asleep on the hearth. The other two showed angles of what Jake assumed was the Manni village (he had not been there).

Where in hell's name are the cameras? Jake wondered. *How come nobody sees them?*

Because they were too small, he supposed. And because they'd been hidden. *Smile, you're on Candid Camera.*

But the church . . . the rectory . . . those were buildings that hadn't even *existed* in the Calla until a few years previous. And *inside?* *Inside* the rectory? Who had put a camera there, and when?

Jake didn't know when, but he had a terrible idea that he knew who. Thank God they'd done most of their palavering on the porch, or outside on the lawn. But still, how much must the Wolves—or their masters—know? How much had the infernal machines of this place, the infernal *fucking* machines of this place, recorded?

And transmitted?

Jake felt pain in his hands and realized they were tightly clenched, the nails biting into his palms. He opened them with an effort. He kept expecting the voice from the speaker-grille—the voice so much like Blaine's—to challenge him, ask him what he was doing here. But it was mostly silent in this room of not-quite-ruin; no sounds but the low hum of the equipment and the occasionally raspy whoosh of the air-exchangers. He looked over his shoulder at the door and saw it had closed behind him on a pneumatic hinge. He wasn't worried about that; from this side it would probably open easily. If it didn't, good old ninety-nine would get him out again. He remembered introducing himself to the *folken* that first night in the Pavilion, a night that already seemed a long time ago. *I am Jake Chambers, son of Elmer, the Line of Eld*, he had told them. *The ka-tet of the Ninety and Nine*. Why had he said that? He didn't know. All he knew was that things kept showing up again. In school, Ms. Avery had read them a poem called "The Second Coming," by William Butler Yeats. There had been something in it about a hawk turning and turning in a widening gyre, which was—according to Ms. Avery—a kind of circle. But here things were in a spiral, not a circle. For the Ka-Tet of Nineteen (or of

the Ninety and Nine; Jake had an idea they were really the same), things were tightening up even as the world around them grew old, grew loose, shut down, shed pieces of itself. It was like being in the cyclone which had carried Dorothy off to the Land of Oz, where witches were real and bumhugs ruled. To Jake's heart it made perfect sense that they should be seeing the same things over and over, and more and more often, because—

Movement on one of the screens caught his eye. He looked at it and saw Benny's Da' and Andy the Messenger Robot coming over the hilltop guarded by the cactus sentries. As he watched, the spiny barrel arms swung inward to block the road—and, perhaps, impale the prey. Andy, however, had no reason to fear cactus spines. He swung an arm and broke one of the barrels off halfway down its length. It fell into the dust, spurting white goo. Maybe it wasn't sap at all, Jake thought. Maybe it was blood. In any case, the cactus on the other side swiveled away in a hurry. Andy and Ben Slightman stopped for a moment, perhaps to discuss this. The screen's resolution wasn't clear enough to show if the human's mouth was moving or not.

Jake was seized by an awful, throat-closing panic. His body suddenly seemed too heavy, as if it were being tugged by the gravity of a giant planet like Jupiter or Saturn. He couldn't breathe; his chest lay perfectly flat. *This is what Goldilocks would have felt like*, he thought in a faint and distant way, *if she had awakened in the little bed that was just right to hear the Three Bears coming back in downstairs*. He hadn't eaten the porridge, he hadn't broken Baby Bear's chair, but he now knew too many secrets. They boiled down to *one* secret. One monstrous secret.

Now they were coming down the road. Coming to the Dogan.

Oy was looking up at him anxiously, his long neck stretched to the max, but Jake could barely see him. Black flowers were blooming in front of his eyes. Soon he would faint. They would find him stretched out here on the floor. Oy might try to protect him, but if Andy didn't take care of the bumbler, Ben Slightman would. There were four dead rock-cats out there and Benny's Da' had dispatched at least one of them with his trusty bah. One small barking billy-bumbler would be no problem for him.

Would you be so cowardly, then? Roland asked inside his head. *But why would they kill such a coward as you? Why would they not just send you west*

with the broken ones who have forgotten the faces of their fathers?

That brought him back. Most of the way, at least. He took a huge breath, yanking in air until the bottoms of his lungs hurt. He let it out in an explosive whoosh. Then he slapped himself across the face, good and hard.

“*Ake!*” Oy cried in a reproving—almost shocked—voice.

“S’okay,” Jake said. He looked at the monitors showing the galley and the bunkroom and decided on the latter. There was nothing to hide behind or under in the galley. There might be a closet, but what if there wasn’t? He’d be screwed.

“Oy, to me,” he said, and crossed the humming room beneath the bright white lights.

TEN

The bunkroom held the ghostly aroma of ancient spices: cinnamon and clove. Jake wondered—in a distracted, back-of-the-mind way—if the tombs beneath the Pyramids had smelled this way when the first explorers had broken into them. From the upper bunk in the corner, the reclining skeleton grinned at him, as if in welcome. *Feel like a nap, little trailhand? I’m taking a long one!* Its ribcage shimmered with silky overlays of spiderweb, and Jake wondered in that same distracted way how many generations of spider-babies had been born in that empty cavity. On another pillow lay a jawbone, prodding a ghostly, ghastly memory from the back of the boy’s mind. Once, in a world where he had died, the gunslinger had found a bone like that. And used it.

The forefront of his mind pounded with two cold questions and one even colder resolve. The questions were how long it would take them to get here and whether or not they would discover his pony. If Slightman had been riding a horse of his own, Jake was sure the amiable little pony would have whinnied a greeting already. Luckily, Slightman was on foot, as he had been last time. Jake would have come on foot himself, had he known his goal was less than a mile east of the river. Of course, when he’d snuck away from the Rocking B, he hadn’t even been sure that he *had* a goal.

The resolve was to kill both the tin-man and the flesh-and-blood man if he was discovered. If he could, that was. Andy might be tough,

but those bulging blue-glass eyes looked like a weak point. If he could blind him—

There'll be water if God wills it, said the gunslinger who now always lived in his head, for good and ill. *Your job now is to hide if you can. Where?*

Not in the bunks. All of them were visible in the monitor covering this room and there was no way he could impersonate a skeleton. Under one of the two bunk-stacks at the rear? Risky, but it would serve . . . unless . . .

Jake spied another door. He sprang forward, depressed the lever-handle, and pulled the door open. It was a closet, and closets made fine hiding places, but this one was filled with jumbles of dusty electronic equipment, top to bottom. Some of it fell out.

“Beans!” he whispered in a low, urgent voice. He picked up what had fallen, tossed it high and low, then shut the closet door again. Okay, it would have to be under one of the beds—

“WELCOME TO ARC QUADRANT OUTPOST 16,” boomed the recorded voice. Jake flinched, and saw another door, this one to his left and standing partway open. Try the door or squeeze under one of the two tiers of bunks at the rear of the room? He had time to try one bolthole or the other, but not both. “THIS IS A MEDIUM SECURITY OUTPOST.”

Jake went for the door, and it was just as well he went when he did, because Slightman didn't let the recording finish its spiel. “Ninety-nine,” came his voice from the loudspeakers, and the recording thanked him.

It was another closet, this one empty except for two or three moldering shirts in one corner and a dust-caked poncho slumped on a hook. The air was almost as dusty as the poncho, and Oy uttered three fast, delicate sneezes as he padded in.

Jake dropped to one knee and put an arm around Oy's slender neck. “No more of that unless you want to get us both killed,” he said. “You be quiet, Oy.”

“Kiyit Oy,” the bumbler whispered back, and winked. Jake reached up and pulled the door back to within two inches of shut, as it had been before. He hoped.

ELEVEN

He could hear them quite clearly—*too* clearly. Jake realized there were mikes and speakers all over this place. The idea did nothing for his peace of mind. Because if he and Oy could hear *them* . . .

It was the cactuses they were talking about, or rather that Slightman was talking about. He called them boom-flurry, and wanted to know what had gotten them all fashed.

“Almost certainly more rock-cats, sai,” Andy said in his complacent, slightly prissy voice. Eddie said Andy reminded him of a robot named C3PO in *Star Wars*, a movie to which Jake had been looking forward. He had missed it by less than a month. “It’s their mating season, you know.”

“Piss on that,” Slightman said. “Are you telling me boom-flurry don’t know rock-cats from something they can actually catch and eat? Someone’s been out here, I tell you. And not long since.”

A cold thought slipped into Jake’s mind: had the floor of the Dogan been dusty? He’d been too busy gawking at the control panels and TV monitors to notice. If he and Oy had left tracks, those two might have noticed already. They might only be pretending to have a conversation about the cactuses while they actually crept toward the bunkroom door.

Jake took the Ruger out of the docker’s clutch and held it in his right hand with his thumb on the safety.

“A guilty conscience doth make cowards of us all,” Andy said in his complacent, just-thought-you’d-like-to-know voice. “That’s my free adaptation of a—”

“Shut up, you bag of bolts and wires,” Slightman snarled. “I—” Then he screamed. Jake felt Oy stiffen against him, felt his fur begin to rise. The bumbler started to growl. Jake slipped a hand around his snout.

“Let go!” Slightman cried out. “Let go of me!”

“Of course, sai Slightman,” Andy said, now sounding solicitous. “I only pressed a small nerve in your elbow, you know. There would be no lasting damage unless I applied at least twenty foot-pounds of pressure.”

“Why in the hell would you do that?” Slightman sounded injured, almost whiny. “En’t I doing all you could want, and more? En’t I risking my life for my boy?”

“Not to mention a few little extras,” Andy said silkily. “Your spectacles . . . the music machine you keep deep down in your saddlebag . . . and, of course—”

“You know why I’m doing it and what’d happen to me if I was found out,” Slightman said. The whine had gone out of his voice. Now he sounded dignified and a little weary. Jake listened to that tone with growing dismay. If he got out of this and had to squeal on Benny’s Da’, he wanted to squeal on a villain. “Yar, I’ve taken a few little extras, you say true, I say thankya. Glasses, so I can see better to betray the people I’ve known all my life. A music machine so I won’t have to hear the conscience you prate about so easy and can get to sleep at night. Then you pinch something in my arm that makes me feel like my by-Riza eyes are going to fall right out of my by-Riza *head*.”

“I allow it from the rest of them,” Andy said, and now his voice had changed. Jake once more thought of Blaine, and once more his dismay grew. What if Tian Jaffords heard *this* voice? What if Vaughn Eisenhart heard it? Overholser? The rest of the *folken*? “They heap contumely on my head like hot coals and never do I raise a word o’ protest, let alone a hand. ‘Go here, Andy. Go there, Andy. Stop yer foolish singing, Andy. Stuff yer prattle. Don’t tell us of the future, because we don’t want to hear it.’ So I don’t, except of the Wolves, because they’d hear what makes em sad and I’d tell em, yes I would; to me each tear’s a drop of gold. ‘You’re nobbut a stupid pile of lights n wires,’ they say. ‘Tell us the weather, sing the babby to sleep, then get t’hell out o’ here.’ And I allow it. Foolish Andy am I, every child’s toy and always fair game for a tongue-whipping. But I won’t take a tongue-whipping from *you*, sai. You hope to have a future in the Calla after the Wolves are done with it for another few years, don’t you?”

“You know I do,” Slightman said, so low Jake could barely hear him. “And I deserve it.”

“You and your son, both say thankya, passing your days in the Calla, both say commala! And that can happen, but it depends on more than the death of the outworlders. *It depends on my silence*. If you want it, I demand respect.”

“That’s absurd,” Slightman said after a brief pause. From his place in the closet, Jake agreed wholeheartedly. A robot demanding respect *was* absurd. But so was a giant bear patrolling an empty forest, a Morlock thug trying to unravel the secrets of dipolar computers, or a train that lived only to hear and solve new riddles. “And besides, hear me I beg, how can I respect you when I don’t even respect myself?”

There was a mechanical click in response to this, very loud. Jake had heard Blaine make a similar sound when he—or it—had felt the absurd closing in, threatening to fry his logic circuits. Then Andy said: “No answer, nineteen. Connect and report, sai Slightman. Let’s have done with this.”

“All right.”

There were thirty or forty seconds’ worth of keyboard-clatter, then a high, warbling whistle that made Jake wince and Oy whine far back in his throat. Jake had never heard a sound quite like it; he was from the New York of 1977, and the word *modem* would have meant nothing to him.

The shriek cut off abruptly. There was a moment’s silence. Then: “THIS IS ALGUL SIENTO. FINLI O’ TEGO HERE. PLEASE GIVE YOUR PASSWORD. YOU HAVE TEN SEC—”

“Saturday,” Slightman replied, and Jake frowned. Had he ever heard that happy weekend word on this side? He didn’t think so.

“THANK YOU. ALGUL SIENTO ACKNOWLEDGES. WE ARE ONLINE.” There was another brief, shrieking whistle. Then: “REPORT, SATURDAY.”

Slightman told of watching Roland and “the younger one” going up to the Cave of the Voices, where there was now some sort of door, very likely conjured by the Manni. He said he’d used the far-seer and thus gotten a very good look—

“Telescope,” Andy said. He had reverted to his slightly prissy, complacent voice. “Such are called telescopes.”

“Would *you* care to make my report, Andy?” Slightman inquired with cold sarcasm.

“Cry pardon,” Andy said in a long-suffering voice. “Cry pardon, cry pardon, go on, go on, as ye will.”

There was a pause. Jake could imagine Slightman glaring at the robot, the glare robbed of its ferocity by the way the foreman would

have to crane his neck in order to deliver it. Finally he went on.

“They left their horses below and walked up. They carried a pink sack which they passed from hand to hand, as if ’twere heavy. Whatever was in it had square edges; I could make that out through the telescope far-seer. May I offer two guesses?”

“YES.”

“First, they might have been putting two or three of the Pere’s most valuable books in safekeeping. If that’s the case, a Wolf should be sent to destroy them after the main mission’s accomplished.”

“WHY?” The voice was perfectly cold. Not a human being’s voice, Jake was sure of that. The sound of it made him feel weak and afraid.

“Why, as an example, do it please ya,” Slightman said, as if this should have been obvious. “As an example to the priest!”

“CALLAHAN WILL VERY SOON BE BEYOND EXAMPLES,” the voice said. “WHAT IS YOUR OTHER GUESS?”

When Slightman spoke again, he sounded shaken. Jake hoped the traitor son of a bitch *was* shaken. He was protecting his son, sure, his only son, but why he thought that gave him the right—

“It may have been maps,” Slightman said. “I’ve thought long and long that a man who has books is apt to have maps. He may have given em maps of the Eastern Regions leading into Thunderclap—they haven’t been shy about saying that’s where they plan to head next. If it is maps they took up there, much good may they do em, even if they live. Next year north’ll be east, and likely the year after it’ll swap places with south.”

In the dusty darkness of the closet Jake could suddenly see Andy watching Slightman make his report. Andy’s blue electric eyes were flashing. Slightman didn’t know—no one in the Calla knew—but that rapid flashing was the way DNF-44821-V-63 expressed humor. He was, in fact, laughing at Slightman.

Because he knows better, Jake thought. Because he knows what’s really in that bag. Bet a box of cookies that he does.

Could he be so sure of that? Was it possible to use the touch on a robot?

If it can think, the gunslinger in his head spoke up, then you can touch it.

Well . . . maybe.

“Whatever it was, it’s a damn good indication they really do plan to take the kids into the arroyos,” Slightman was saying. “Not that they’d put em in *that* cave.”

“No, no, not *that* cave,” Andy said, and although his voice was as prissy-serious as ever, Jake could imagine his blue eyes flashing even faster. Almost stuttering, in fact. “Too many voices in *that* cave, they’d scare the children! Yer-bugger!”

DNF-44821-V-63, Messenger Robot. *Messenger!* You could accuse Slightman of treachery, but how could anyone accuse Andy of it? What he did, what he *was*, had been stamped on his chest for the whole world to see. There it had been, in front of all of them. Gods!

Benny’s Da’, meanwhile, was plodding stolidly on with his report to Finli o’ Tego, who was in some place called Algul Siento.

“The mine he showed us on the map the Taverys drew is the Gloria, and the Gloria en’t but a mile off from the Cave of the Voices. But the bastard’s trig. Can I give another guess?”

“YES.”

“The arroyo that leads to the Gloria Mine splits off to the south about a quarter-mile in. There’s another old mine at the end of the spur. The Redbird Two, it’s called. Their dinh is telling folks he means to put the kids in the Gloria, and I think he’ll tell em the same at the meeting he’s going to call later this week, the one where he asks leave to stand against the Wolves. But I b’lieve that when the time comes, he’ll stick em in the Redbird instead. He’ll have the Sisters of Oriza standing guard—in front and up above, as well—and ye’d do well not to underestimate those ladies.”

“HOW MANY?”

“I think five, if he puts Sarey Adams among em. Plus some men with bahs. He’ll have the brownie throwing with em, kennit, and I hear she’s good. Maybe best of all. But one way or the other, we know where the kids are going to be. Putting them in such a place is a mistake, but he don’t know it. He’s dangerous, but grown old in his thinking. Probably such a strategy has worked for him before.”

And it had, of course. In Eyebolt Canyon, against Latigo’s men.

“The important thing now is finding out where he and the boy and the younger man are going to be when the Wolves come. He may tell at the meeting. If he don’t, he may tell Eisenhart afterward.”

“OR OVERHOLSER?”

“No. Eisenhart will stand with him. Overholser won’t.”

“YOU MUST FIND OUT WHERE THEY’LL BE.”

“I know,” Slightman said. “We’ll find out, Andy and I, and then make one more trip to this unblessed place. After that, I swear by the Lady Oriza and the Man Jesus, I’ve done my part. Now can we get out of here?”

“In a moment, sai,” Andy said. “I have my own report to make, you know.”

There was another of those long, whistling shrieks. Jake ground his teeth and waited for it to be over, and finally it was. Finli o’ Tego signed off.

“Are we done?” Slightman asked.

“Unless you have some reason to linger, I believe we are,” Andy said.

“Does anything in here seem different to you?” Slightman asked suddenly, and Jake felt his blood turn cold.

“No,” Andy said, “but I have great respect for human intuition. Are you having intuition, sai?”

There was a pause that seemed to go on for at least a full minute, although Jake knew it must have been much shorter than that. He held Oy’s head against his thigh and waited.

“No,” Slightman said at last. “Guess I’m just getting jumpy, now that it’s close. God, I wish it was over! I hate this!”

“You’re doing the right thing, sai.” Jake didn’t know about Slightman, but Andy’s plummily sympathetic tone made him feel like gnashing his teeth. “The *only* thing, really. ’Tisn’t your fault that you’re father to the only mateless twin in Calla Bryn Sturgis, is it? I know a song that makes this point in particularly moving fashion. Perhaps you’d like to hear—”

“Shut up!” Slightman cried in a choked voice. “Shut up, you mechanical devil! I’ve sold my goddam soul, isn’t that enough for you? Must I be made sport of, as well?”

“If I’ve offended, I apologize from the bottom of my admittedly hypothetical heart,” Andy said. “In other words, I cry your pardon.” Sounding sincere. Sounding as though he meant every word.

Sounding as though butter wouldn't melt. Yet Jake had no doubt that Andy's eyes were flashing out in gales of silent blue laughter.

TWELVE

The conspirators left. There was an odd, meaningless jingle of melody from the overhead speakers (meaningless to Jake, at least), and then silence. He waited for them to discover his pony, come back, search for him, find him, kill him. When he had counted to a hundred and twenty and they hadn't returned to the Dogan, he got to his feet (the overdose of adrenaline in his system left him feeling as stiff as an old man) and went back into the control room. He was just in time to see the motion-sensor lights in front of the place switch off. He looked at the monitor showing the top of the rise and saw the Dogan's most recent visitors walking between the boom-flurry. This time the cactuses didn't move. They had apparently learned their lesson. Jake watched Slightman and Andy go, bitterly amused by the difference in their heights. Whenever his father saw such a Mutt-and-Jeff duo on the street, he inevitably said *Put em in vaudeville*. It was about as close to a joke as Elmer Chambers could get.

When this particular duo was out of sight, Jake looked down at the floor. No dust, of course. No dust and no tracks. He should have seen that when he came in. Certainly *Roland* would have seen that. Roland would have seen everything.

Jake wanted to leave but made himself wait. If they saw the motion-lights glare back on behind them, they'd *probably* assume it was a rock-cat (or maybe what Benny called "an armydillo"), but probably wasn't good enough. To pass the time, he looked at the various control panels, many of which had the LaMerk Industries name on them. Yet he also saw the familiar GE and IBM logos, plus one he didn't know—Microsoft. All of these latter gadgets were stamped MADE IN USA. The LaMerk products bore no such mark.

He was pretty sure some of the keyboards he saw—there were at least two dozen—controlled computers. What other gadgetry was there? How much was still up and running? Were there weapons stored here? He somehow thought the answer to this last question was no—if there *had* been weapons, they had no doubt been

decommissioned or appropriated, very likely by Andy the Messenger Robot (Many Other Functions).

At last he decided it was safe to leave . . . if, that was, he was extremely careful, rode slowly back to the river, and took pains to approach the Rocking B the back way. He was nearly to the door when another question occurred to him. Was there a record of his and Oy's visit to the Dogan? Were they on videotape somewhere? He looked at the operating TV screens, sparing his longest stare for the one showing the control room. He and Oy were on it again. From the camera's high angle, anyone in the room would have to be in that picture.

Let it go, Jake, the gunslinger in his head advised. There's nothing you can do about it, so just let it go. If you try poking and prying, you're apt to leave sign. You might even set off an alarm.

The idea of tripping an alarm convinced him. He picked up Oy—as much for comfort as anything else—and got the hell out. His pony was exactly where Jake had left him, cropping dreamily at the bushes in the moonlight. There were no tracks in the hardpan . . . but, Jake saw, he wasn't leaving any himself. Andy would have broken through the crusty surface enough to leave tracks, but not him. He wasn't heavy enough. Probably Benny's Da' wasn't, either.

Quit it. If they'd smelled you, they would have come back.

Jake supposed that was true, but he still felt more than a little like Goldilocks tiptoeing away from the house of the Three Bears. He led his pony back to the desert road, then put on the duster and slipped Oy into the wide front pocket. As he mounted up, he thumped the bumbler a fairly good one on the saddle-horn.

"Ouch, Ake!" Oy said.

"Quit it, ya baby," Jake said, turning his pony back in the direction of the river. "Gotta be quiet, now."

"Kiyit," Oy agreed, and gave him a wink. Jake worked his fingers down through the bumbler's heavy fur and scratched the place Oy liked the best. Oy closed his eyes, stretched his neck to an almost comical length, and grinned.

When they got back to the river, Jake dismounted and peered over a boulder in both directions. He saw nothing, but his heart was in his throat all the way across to the other side. He kept trying to think

what he would say if Benny's Da' hailed him and asked him what he was doing out here in the middle of the night. Nothing came. In English class, he'd almost always gotten A's on his creative-writing assignments, but now he was discovering that fear and invention did not mix. If Benny's Da' hailed him, Jake would be caught. It was as simple as that.

There was no hail—not crossing the river, not going back to the Rocking B, not unsaddling the horse and rubbing him down. The world was silent, and that was just fine with Jake.

THIRTEEN

Once Jake was back on his pallet and pulling the covers to his chin, Oy jumped up on Benny's bed and lay down, nose once more under his tail. Benny made a deep-sleep muttering sound, reached out, and gave the bumbler's flank a single stroke.

Jake lay looking at the sleeping boy, troubled. He liked Benny—his openness, his appetite for fun, his willingness to work hard when there were chores that needed doing. He liked Benny's yodeling laugh when something struck him funny, and the way they were evenly matched in so many things, and—

And until tonight, Jake had liked Benny's Da', too.

He tried to imagine how Benny would look at him when he found out that (a) his father was a traitor and (b) his friend had squealed on him. Jake thought he could bear anger. It was hurt that would be hard.

You think hurt's all it'll be? Simple hurt? You better think again. There aren't many props under Benny Slightman's world, and this is going to knock them all out from under him. Every single one.

Not my fault that his father's a spy and a traitor.

But it wasn't Benny's, either. If you asked Slightman, he'd probably say it wasn't even *his* fault, that he'd been forced into it. Jake guessed that was almost true. *Completely* true, if you looked at things with a father's eye. What was it that the Calla's twins made and the Wolves needed? Something in their brains, very likely. Some sort of enzyme or secretion not produced by singleton children; maybe the enzyme or secretion that created the supposed phenomenon of "twin

telepathy.” Whatever it was, they could take it from Benny Slightman, because Benny Slightman only *looked* like a singleton. Had his sister died? Well, that was tough titty, wasn’t it? *Very* tough titty, especially for the father who loved the only one left. Who couldn’t bear to let him go.

Suppose Roland kills him? How will Benny look at you then?

Once, in another life, Roland had promised to take care of Jake Chambers and then let him drop into the darkness. Jake had thought there could be no worse betrayal than that. Now he wasn’t so sure. No, not so sure at all. These unhappy thoughts kept him awake for a long time. Finally, half an hour or so before the first hint of dawn touched the horizon, he fell into a thin and troubled sleep.

CHAPTER IV: THE PIED PIPER

ONE

“We are ka-tet,” said the gunslinger. “We are one from many.” He saw Callahan’s doubtful look—it was impossible to miss—and nodded. “Yes, Pere, you’re one of us. I don’t know for how long, but I know it’s so. And so do my friends.”

Jake nodded. So did Eddie and Susannah. They were in the Pavilion today; after hearing Jake’s story, Roland no longer wanted to meet at the rectory-house, not even in the back yard. He thought it all too likely that Slightman or Andy—maybe even some other as yet unsuspected friend of the Wolves—had placed listening devices as well as cameras there. Overhead the sky was gray, threatening rain, but the weather remained remarkably warm for so late in the season. Some civic-minded ladies or gents had raked away the fallen leaves in a wide circle around the stage where Roland and his friends had introduced themselves not so long ago, and the grass beneath was as green as summer. There were *folken* flying kites, couples promenading hand in hand, two or three outdoor tradesmen keeping one eye out for customers and the other on the low-bellied clouds overhead. On the bandstand, the group of musicians who had played them into Calla Bryn Sturgis with such brio were practicing a few new tunes. On two or three occasions, townsfolk had started toward Roland and his friends, wanting to pass a little time, and each time it happened, Roland shook his head in an unsmiling way that turned them around in a hurry. The time for so-good-to-meet-you politics had passed. They were almost down to what Susannah called the real nitty-gritty.

Roland said, "In four days comes the meeting, this time I think of the entire town, not just the men."

"Damn well told it ought to be the whole town," Susannah said. "If you're counting on the ladies to throw the dish and make up for all the guns we don't have, I don't think it's too much to let em into the damn hall."

"Won't be in the Gathering Hall, if it's everyone," Callahan said. "There won't be room enough. We'll light the torches and have it right out here."

"And if it rains?" Eddie asked.

"If it rains, people will get wet," Callahan said, and shrugged.

"Four days to the meeting and nine to the Wolves," Roland said. "This will very likely be our last chance to palaver as we are now—sitting down, with our heads clear—until this is over. We won't be here long, so let's make it count." He held out his hands. Jake took one, Susannah the other. In a moment all five were joined in a little circle, hand to hand. "Do we see each other?"

"See you very well," Jake said.

"Very well, Roland," said Eddie.

"Clear as day, sug," Susannah agreed, smiling.

Oy, who was sniffing in the grass nearby, said nothing, but he *did* look around and tip a wink.

"Pere?" Roland asked.

"I see and hear you very well," Callahan agreed with a small smile, "and I'm glad to be included. So far, at least."

TWO

Roland, Eddie, and Susannah had heard most of Jake's tale; Jake and Susannah had heard most of Roland's and Eddie's. Now Callahan got both—what he later called "the double feature." He listened with his eyes wide and his mouth frequently agape. He crossed himself when Jake told of hiding in the closet. To Eddie the Pere said, "You didn't mean it about killing the wives and children, of course? That was just a bluff?"

Eddie looked up at the heavy sky, considering this with a faint smile. Then he looked back at Callahan. "Roland tells me that for a

guy who doesn't want to be called Father, you have taken some very Fatherly stands just lately."

"If you're speaking about the idea of terminating your wife's pregnancy—"

Eddie raised a hand. "Let's say I'm not speaking of any one thing in particular. It's just that we've got a job to do here, and we need you to help us do it. The *last* thing we need is to get sidetracked by a lot of your old Catholic blather. So let's just say yes, I was bluffing, and move on. Will that serve? *Father?*"

Eddie's smile had grown strained and exasperated. There were bright smudges of color on his cheekbones. Callahan considered the look of him with great care, and then nodded. "Yes," he said. "You were bluffing. By all means let's leave it at that and move on."

"Good," Eddie said. He looked at Roland.

"The first question is for Susannah," Roland said. "It's a simple one: how are you feeling?"

"Just fine," she replied.

"Say true?"

She nodded. "Say true, say thankya."

"No headaches here?" Roland rubbed above his left temple.

"No. And the jittery feelings I used to get—just after sunset, just before dawn—have quit. And look at me!" She ran a hand down the swell of her breasts, to her waist, to her right hip. "I've lost some of the fullness. Roland . . . I've read that sometimes animals in the wild—carnivores like wildcats, herbivores like deer and rabbits—reabsorb their babies if the conditions to have them are adverse. You don't suppose . . ." She trailed off, looking at him hopefully.

Roland wished he could have supported this charming idea, but he couldn't. And withholding the truth within the ka-tet was no longer an option. He shook his head. Susannah's face fell.

"She's been sleeping quietly, so far as I can tell," Eddie said. "No sign of Mia."

"Rosalita says the same," Callahan added.

"You got dat jane watchin me?" Susannah said in a suspiciously Detta-like tone. But she was smiling.

"Every now and then," Callahan admitted.

“Let’s leave the subject of Susannah’s chap, if we may,” Roland said. “We need to speak of the Wolves. Them and little else.”

“But Roland—” Eddie began.

Roland held up his hand. “I know how many other matters there are. I know how pressing they are. I also know that if we become distracted, we’re apt to die here in Calla Bryn Sturgis, and dead gunslingers can help no one. Nor do they go their course. Do you agree?” His eyes swept them. No one replied. Somewhere in the distance was the sound of many children singing. The sound was high and gleeful and innocent. Something about commala.

“There *is* one other bit of business that we must address,” Roland said. “It involves you, Pere. And what’s now called the Doorway Cave. Will you go through that door, and back to your country?”

“Are you kidding?” Callahan’s eyes were bright. “A chance to go back, even for a little while? You just say the word.”

Roland nodded. “Later today, mayhap you and I will take a little *pasear* on up there, and I’ll see you through the door. You know where the vacant lot is, don’t you?”

“Sure. I must have been past it a thousand times, back in my other life.”

“And you understand about the zip code?” Eddie asked.

“If Mr. Tower did as you requested, it’ll be written at the end of the board fence, Forty-sixth Street side. That was brilliant, by the way.”

“Get the number . . . and get the date, too,” Roland said. “We have to keep track of the time over there if we can, Eddie’s right about that. Get it and come back. Then, after the meeting in the Pavilion, we’ll need you to go through the door again.”

“This time to wherever Tower and Deepneau are in New England,” Callahan guessed.

“Yes,” Roland said.

“If you find them, you’ll want to talk mostly to Mr. Deepneau,” Jake said. He flushed when they all turned to him, but kept his eyes trained on Callahan’s. “Mr. Tower might be stubborn—”

“That’s the understatement of the century,” Eddie said. “By the time you get there, he’ll probably have found twelve used bookstores and God knows how many first editions of *Indiana Jones’s Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown*.”

“—but Mr. Deepneau will listen,” Jake went on.

“Issen, Ake,” Oy said, and rolled over onto his back. “Issen kiyet!”

Scratching Oy’s belly, Jake said: “If anyone can convince Mr. Tower to do something, it’ll be Mr. Deepneau.”

“Okay,” Callahan replied, nodding. “I hear you well.”

The singing children were closer now. Susannah turned but couldn’t see them yet; she assumed they were coming up River Street. If so, they’d be in view once they cleared the livery and turned down the high street at Took’s General Store. Some of the *folken* on the porch over there were already getting up to look.

Roland, meanwhile, was studying Eddie with a small smile. “Once when I used the word *assume*, you told me a saying about it from your world. I’d hear it again, if you remember.”

Eddie grinned. “*Assume* makes an ass out of u *and* me—is that the one you mean?”

Roland nodded. “It’s a good saying. All the same, I’m going to make an assumption now—pound it like a nail—then hang all our hopes of coming out of this alive on it. I don’t like it but see no choice. The assumption is that only Ben Slightman and Andy are working against us. That if we take care of them when the time comes, we can move in secrecy.”

“Don’t kill him,” Jake said in a voice almost too low to hear. He had drawn Oy close and was petting the top of his head and his long neck with a kind of compulsive, darting speed. Oy bore this patiently.

“Cry pardon, Jake,” Susannah said, leaning forward and tipping a hand behind one ear. “I didn’t—”

“Don’t *kill* him!” This time his voice was hoarse and wavering and close to tears. “Don’t kill Benny’s Da’. *Please*.”

Eddie reached out and cupped the nape of the boy’s neck gently. “Jake, Benny Slightman’s Da’ is willing to send a hundred kids off into Thunderclap with the Wolves, just to spare his own. And you know how they’d come back.”

“Yeah, but in his eyes he doesn’t have any choice because—”

“His choice could have been to stand with us,” Roland said. His voice was dull and dreadful. Almost dead.

“But—”

But what? Jake didn't know. He had been over this and over this and he still didn't know. Sudden tears spilled from his eyes and ran down his cheeks. Callahan reached out to touch him. Jake pushed his hand away.

Roland sighed. "We'll do what we can to spare him. That much I promise you. I don't know if it will be a mercy or not—the Slightmans are going to be through in this town, if there's a town left after the end of next week—but perhaps they'll go north or south along the Crescent and start some sort of new life. And Jake, listen: there's no need for Ben Slightman to ever know you overheard Andy and his father last night."

Jake was looking at him with an expression that didn't quite dare to be hope. He didn't care a hill of beans about Slightman the Elder, but he didn't want Benny to know it was him. He supposed that made him a coward, but he didn't want Benny to know. "Really? For sure?"

"Nothing about this is for sure, but—"

Before he could finish, the singing children swept around the corner. Leading them, silver limbs and golden body gleaming mellowly in the day's subdued light, was Andy the Messenger Robot. He was walking backward. In one hand was a bah-bolt wrapped in banners of bright silk. To Susannah he looked like a parade-marshal on the Fourth of July. He waved his baton extravagantly from side to side, leading the children in their song while a reedy bagpipe accompaniment issued from the speakers in his chest and head.

"Holy shit," Eddie said. "It's the Pied Piper of Hamelin."

THREE

*"Commala-come-one!
Mamma had a son!
Dass-a time 'at Daddy
Had d'mos' fun!"*

Andy sang this part alone, then pointed his baton at the crowd of children. They joined in boisterously.

"Commala-come-come!"

*Daddy had one!
Dass-a time 'at Mommy
Had d'mos' fun!"*

Gleeful laughter. There weren't as many kids as Susannah would have thought, given the amount of noise they were putting out. Seeing Andy there at their head, after hearing Jake's story, chilled her heart. At the same time, she felt an angry pulse begin to beat in her throat and her left temple. That he should lead them down the street like this! Like the Pied Piper, Eddie was right—like the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Now he pointed his makeshift baton at a pretty girl who looked thirteen or fourteen. Susannah thought she was one of the Anselm kids, from the smallhold just south of Tian Jaffords's place. She sang out the next verse bright and clear to that same heavily rhythmic beat, which was almost (but not quite) a skip-rope chant:

*"Commala-come-two!
You know what to do!
Plant the rice commala,
Don't ye be . . . no . . . foo'!"*

Then, as the others joined in again, Susannah realized that the group of children was bigger than she'd thought when they came around the corner, quite a bit bigger. Her ears had told her truer than her eyes, and there was a perfectly good reason for that.

*"Commala-come-two! [they sang]
Daddy no foo'!
Mommy plant commala
cause she know jus' what to do!"*

The group looked smaller at first glance because so many of the faces were the same—the face of the Anselm girl, for instance, was nearly the face of the boy next to her. Her twin brother. Almost all the kids in Andy's group were twins. Susannah suddenly realized how eerie this was, like all the strange doublings they'd encountered caught in a bottle. Her stomach turned over. And she felt the first

twinge of pain above her left eye. Her hand began to rise toward the tender spot.

No, she told herself, *I don't feel that*. She made the hand go back down. There was no need to rub her brow. No need to rub what didn't hurt.

Andy pointed his baton at a strutting, pudgy little boy who couldn't have been more than eight. He sang the words out in a high and childish treble that made the other kids laugh.

*“Commala-come-t'ree!
You know what t'be
Plant d'rice commala
and d'rice'll make ya free!”*

To which the chorus replied:

*“Commala-come-t'ree!
Rice'll make ya free!
When ya plant the rice commala
You know jus' what to be!”*

Andy saw Roland's ka-tet and waved his baton cheerily. So did the children . . . half of whom would come back drooling and roont if the parade-marshal had his way. They would grow to the size of giants, screaming with pain, and then die early.

“Wave back,” Roland said, and raised his hand. “Wave back, all of you, for the sake of your fathers.”

Eddie flashed Andy a happy, toothy grin. “How you doing, you cheapshit Radio Shack dickweed?” he asked. The voice coming through his grin was low and savage. He gave Andy a double thumbs-up. “How you doing, you robot psycho? Say fine? Say thankya! Say bite my bag!”

Jake burst out laughing at that. They all continued waving and smiling. The children waved and smiled back. Andy also waved. He led his merry band down the high street, chanting *Commala-come-four!
River's at the door!*

“They love him,” Callahan said. There was a strange, sick expression of disgust on his face. “Generations of children have loved Andy.”

“That,” Roland remarked, “is about to change.”

FOUR

“Further questions?” Roland asked when Andy and the children were gone. “Ask now if you will. It could be your last chance.”

“What about Tian Jaffords?” Callahan asked. “In a very real sense it was Tian who started this. There ought to be a place for him at the finish.”

Roland nodded. “I have a job for him. One he and Eddie will do together. Pere, that’s a fine privy down below Rosalita’s cottage. Tall. Strong.”

Callahan raised his eyebrows. “Aye, say thankya. ’Twas Tian and his neighbor, Hugh Anselm, who built it.”

“Could you put a lock on the outside of it in the next few days?”

“I could but—”

“If things go well no lock will be necessary, but one can never be sure.”

“No,” Callahan said. “I suppose one can’t. But I can do as you ask.”

“What’s your plan, sugar?” Susannah asked. She spoke in a quiet, oddly gentle voice.

“There’s precious little plan in it. Most times that’s all to the good. The most important thing I can tell you is not to believe anything I say once we get up from here, dust off our bottoms, and rejoin the *folken*. Especially nothing I say when I stand up at the meeting with the feather in my hand. Most of it will be lies.” He gave them a smile. Above it, his faded blue eyes were as hard as rocks. “My Da’ and Cuthbert’s Da’ used to have a rule between em: first the smiles, then the lies. Last comes gunfire.”

“We’re almost there, aren’t we?” Susannah asked. “Almost to the shooting.”

Roland nodded. “And the shooting will happen so fast and be over so quick that you’ll wonder what all the planning and palaver was for, when in the end it always comes down to the same five minutes’ worth

of blood, pain, and stupidity.” He paused, then said: “I always feel sick afterward. Like I did when Bert and I went to see the hanged man.”

“I have a question,” Jake said.

“Ask it,” Roland told him.

“Will we win?”

Roland was quiet for such a long time that Susannah began to be afraid. Then he said: “We know more than they think we know. *Far* more. They’ve grown complacent. If Andy and Slightman are the only rats in the woodpile, and if there aren’t too many in the Wolfpack—if we don’t run out of plates and cartridges—then yes, Jake, son of Elmer. We’ll win.”

“How many is too many?”

Roland considered, his faded blue eyes looking east. “More than you’d believe,” he said at last. “And, I hope, many more than *they* would.”

FIVE

Late that afternoon, Donald Callahan stood in front of the unfound door, trying to concentrate on Second Avenue in the year 1977. What he fixed upon was Chew Chew Mama’s, and how sometimes he and George and Lupe Delgado would go there for lunch.

“I ate the beef brisket whenever I could get it,” Callahan said, and tried to ignore the shrieking voice of his mother, rising from the cave’s dark belly. When he’d first come in with Roland, his eyes had been drawn to the books Calvin Tower had sent through. So many books! Callahan’s mostly generous heart grew greedy (and a bit smaller) at the sight of them. His interest didn’t last, however—just long enough to pull one at random and see it was *The Virginian*, by Owen Wister. It was hard to browse when your dead friends and loved ones were shrieking at you and calling you names.

His mother was currently asking him why he had allowed a vampire, a filthy bloodsucker, to break the cross she had given him. “You was always weak in faith,” she said dolorously. “Weak in the faith and strong for the drink. I bet you’d like one right now, wouldn’t you?”

Dear God, would he ever. Whiskey. Ancient Age. Callahan felt sweat break on his forehead. His heart was beating double-time. No, *triple-time*.

“The brisket,” he muttered. “With some of that brown mustard splashed on top of it.” He could even see the plastic squeeze-bottle the mustard came in, and remember the brand name. Plochman’s.

“What?” Roland asked from behind him.

“I said I’m ready,” Callahan said. “If you’re going to do it, for God’s love do it now.”

Roland cracked open the box. The chimes at once bolted through Callahan’s ears, making him remember the low men in their loud cars. His stomach shriveled inside his belly and outraged tears burst from his eyes.

But the door clicked open, and a wedge of bright sunshine slanted through, dispelling the gloom of the cave’s mouth.

Callahan took a deep breath and thought, *Oh Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee*. And stepped into the summer of ’77.

SIX

It was noon, of course. Lunchtime. And of course he was standing in front of Chew Chew Mama’s. No one seemed to notice his arrival. The chalked specials on the easel just outside the restaurant door read:

**HEY YOU, WELCOME
TO CHEW-CHEW!
SPECIALS FOR JUNE 24**

**BEEF STROGANOFF
BEEF BRISKET (W/CABBAGE)
RANCHO GRANDE TACOS
CHICKEN SOUP**

TRY OUR DUTCH APPLE PIE!

All right, one question was answered. It was the day after Eddie had come here. As for the next one . . .

Callahan put Forty-sixth Street at his back for the time being, and walked up Second Avenue. Once he looked behind him and saw the doorway to the cave following him as faithfully as the billy-bumbler followed the boy. He could see Roland sitting there, putting something in his ears to block the maddening tinkle of the chimes.

He got exactly two blocks before stopping, his eyes growing wide with shock, his mouth dropping open. They had said to expect this, both Roland *and* Eddie, but in his heart Callahan hadn't believed it. He'd thought he would find The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind perfectly intact on this perfect summer's day, which was so different from the overcast Calla autumn he'd left. Oh, there might be a sign in the window reading GONE ON VACATION, CLOSED UNTIL AUGUST—something like that—but it would *be* there. Oh yes.

It wasn't, though. At least not much of it. The storefront was a burnt-out husk surrounded by yellow tape reading POLICE INVESTIGATION. When he stepped a little closer, he could smell charred lumber, burnt paper, and . . . very faint . . . the odor of gasoline.

An elderly shoeshine-boy had set up shop in front of Station Shoes & Boots, nearby. Now he said to Callahan, "Shame, ain't it? Thank God the place was empty."

"Aye, say thankya. When did it happen?"

"Middle of the night, when else? You think them goombars is gonna come t'row their Molly Coh'tails in broad daylight? They ain't geniuses, but they're smarter than that."

"Couldn't it have been faulty wiring? Or maybe spontaneous combustion?"

The elderly shine-boy gave Callahan a cynical look. *Oh, please*, it said. He cocked a polish-smear'd thumb at the smoldering ruin. "You see that yella tape? You think they put yella tape says PERLICE INVESTIGATION around a place that spontaneously combust-you-lated? No way, my friend. No way José. Cal Tower was in hock to the bad boys. Up to his eyebrows. Everybody on the block knew it." The shine-boy wagged his own eyebrows, which were lush and white and tangled. "I hate to think about his loss. He had some very vallable books in the back, there. Ver-ry vallable."

Callahan thanked the shine-boy for his insights, then turned and started back down Second Avenue. He kept touching himself furtively, trying to convince himself that this was really happening. He kept taking deep breaths of the city air with its tang of hydrocarbons, and relished every city sound, from the snore of the buses (there were ads for *Charlie's Angels* on some of them) to the pounding of the jackhammers and the incessant honking of horns. As he approached Tower of Power Records, he paused for a moment, transfixed by the music pouring from the speakers over the doors. It was an oldie he hadn't heard in years, one that had been popular way back in his Lowell days. Something about following the Pied Piper.

"Crispian St. Peters," he murmured. "That was his name. Good God, say Man Jesus, I'm really here. *I'm really in New York!*"

As if to confirm this, a harried-sounding woman said, "Maybe some people can stand around all day, but some of us are walking here. Think yez could move it along, or at least get over to the side?"

Callahan spoke an apology which he doubted was heard (or appreciated if it was), and moved along. That sense of being in a dream—an extraordinarily *vivid* dream—persisted until he neared Forty-sixth Street. Then he began to hear the rose, and everything in his life changed.

SEVEN

At first it was little more than a murmur, but as he drew closer, he thought he could hear many voices, *angelic* voices, singing. Raising their confident, joyful psalms to God. He had never heard anything so sweet, and he began to run. He came to the fence and laid his hands against it. He began to weep, couldn't help it. He supposed people were looking at him, but he didn't care. He suddenly understood a great deal about Roland and his friends, and for the first time felt a part of them. No wonder they were trying so hard to survive, and to go on! No wonder, when *this* was at stake! There was something on the other side of this fence with its tattered overlay of posters . . . something so utterly and completely *wonderful* . . .

A young man with his long hair held back in a rubber band and wearing a tipped-back cowboy hat stopped and clapped him briefly on

the shoulder. “It’s nice here, isn’t it?” the hippie cowboy said. “I don’t know just why, but it really is. I come once a day. You want to know something?”

Callahan turned toward the young man, wiping at his streaming eyes. “Yes, I guess so.”

The young man brushed a hand across his brow, then his cheek. “I used to have the world’s worst acne. I mean, pizza-face wasn’t even in it, I was *roadkill*-face. Then I started coming here in late March or early April, and . . . everything cleared up.” The young man laughed. “The dermo guy my Dad sent me to says it’s the zinc oxide, but I think it’s this place. Something about this place. Do you hear it?”

Although Callahan’s voice was ringing with sweetly singing voices—it was like being in Notre Dame cathedral, and surrounded by choirs—he shook his head. Doing so was nothing more than instinct.

“Nah,” said the hippie in the cowboy hat, “me neither. But sometimes I *think* I do.” He raised his right hand to Callahan, the first two fingers extended in a V. “Peace, brother.”

“Peace,” Callahan said, and returned the sign.

When the hippie cowboy was gone, Callahan ran his hand across the splintery boards of the fence, and a tattered poster advertising *War of the Zombies*. What he wanted more than anything was to climb over and see the rose . . . possibly to fall on his knees and adore it. But the sidewalks were packed with people, and already he had attracted too many curious looks, some no doubt from people who, like the hippie cowboy, knew a bit about the power of this place. He would best serve the great and singing force behind this fence (was it a rose? could it be no more than that?) by protecting it. And that meant protecting Calvin Tower from whoever had burned down his store.

Still trailing his hand along the rough boards, he turned onto Forty-sixth Street. Down at the end on this side was the glassy-green bulk of the U.N. Plaza Hotel. *Calla, Callahan*, he thought, and then: *Calla, Callahan, Calvin*. And then: *Calla-come-four, there’s a rose behind the door, Calla-come-Callahan, Calvin’s one more!*

He reached the end of the fence. At first he saw nothing, and his heart sank. Then he looked down, and there it was, at knee height: five numbers written in black. Callahan reached into his pocket for the stub of pencil he always kept there, then pulled off a corner of a

poster for an off-Broadway play called *Dungeon Plunger, A Revue*. On this he scribbled five numbers.

He didn't want to leave, but knew he had to; clear thinking this close to the rose was impossible.

I'll be back, he told it, and to his delighted amazement, a thought came back, clear and true: *Yes, Father, anytime. Come-commala*.

On the corner of Second and Forty-sixth, he looked behind him. The door to the cave was still there, the bottom floating about three inches off the sidewalk. A middle-aged couple, tourists judging by the guide-books in their hands, came walking up from the direction of the hotel. Chatting to each other, they reached the door and swerved around it. *They don't see it, but they feel it*, Callahan thought. And if the sidewalk had been crowded and swerving had been impossible? He thought in that case they would have walked right through the place where it hung and shimmered, perhaps feeling nothing but a momentary coldness and sense of vertigo. Perhaps hearing, faintly, the sour tang of chimes and catching a whiff of something like burnt onions or seared meat. And that night, perhaps, they'd have transient dreams of places far stranger than Fun City.

He could step back through, probably should; he'd gotten what he'd come for. But a brisk walk would take him to the New York Public Library. There, behind the stone lions, even a man with no money in his pocket could get a little information. The location of a certain zip code, for instance. And—tell the truth and shame the devil—he didn't want to leave just yet.

He waved his hands in front of him until the gunslinger noticed what he was doing. Ignoring the looks of the passersby, Callahan raised his fingers in the air once, twice, three times, not sure the gunslinger would get it. Roland seemed to. He gave an exaggerated nod, then thumbs-up for good measure.

Callahan set off, walking so fast he was nearly jogging. It wouldn't do to linger, no matter how pleasant a change New York made. It couldn't be pleasant where Roland was waiting. And, according to Eddie, it might be dangerous, as well.

EIGHT

The gunslinger had no problem understanding Callahan's message. Thirty fingers, thirty minutes. The Pere wanted another half an hour on the other side. Roland surmised he had thought of a way to turn the number written on the fence into an actual place. If he could do that, it would be all to the good. Information was power. And sometimes, when time was tight, it was speed.

The bullets in his ears blocked the voices completely. The chimes got in, but even they were dulled. A good thing, because the sound of them was far worse than the warble of the thinny. A couple of days listening to that sound and he reckoned he'd be ready for the lunatic asylum, but for thirty minutes he'd be all right. If worse came to worst, he might be able to pitch something through the door, attract the Pere's attention, and get him to come back early.

For a little while Roland watched the street unroll before Callahan. The doors on the beach had been like looking through the eyes of his three: Eddie, Odetta, Jack Mort. This one was a little different. He could always see Callahan's back in it, or his face if he turned around to look, as he often did.

To pass the time, Roland got up to look at a few of the books which had meant so much to Calvin Tower that he'd made their safety a condition for his cooperation. The first one Roland pulled out had the silhouette of a man's head on it. The man was smoking a pipe and wearing a sort of gamekeeper's hat. Cort had had one like it, and as a boy, Roland had thought it much more stylish than his father's old dayrider with its sweat-stains and frayed tugstring. The words on the book were of the New York world. Roland was sure he could have read them easily if he'd been on that side, but he wasn't. As it was, he could read some, and the result was almost as maddening as the chimes.

"Sir-lock Hones," he read aloud. "No, *Holmes*. Like Odetta's fathername. Four . . . short . . . movels. Movels?" No, this one *was* an. "Four short *novels* by Sirlock Holmes." He opened the book, running a respectful hand over the title page and then smelling it: the spicy, faintly sweet aroma of good old paper. He could make out the name of one of the four short novels—*The Sign of the Four*. Other than the words *Hound* and *Study*, the titles of the others were gibberish to him.

"A sign is a sigul," he said. When he found himself counting the number of letters in the title, he had to laugh at himself. Besides,

there were only sixteen. He put the book back and took up another, this one with a drawing of a soldier on the front. He could make out one word of the title: *Dead*. He looked at another. A man and woman kissing on the cover. Yes, there were always men and women kissing in stories; folks liked that. He put it back and looked up to check on Callahan's progress. His eyes widened slightly as he saw the Pere walking into a great room filled with books and what Eddie called Magda-seens . . . although Roland was still unsure what Magda had seen, or why there should be so much written about it.

He pulled out another book, and smiled at the picture on the cover. There was a church, with the sun going down red behind it. The church looked a bit like Our Lady of Serenity. He opened it and thumbed through it. A delah of words, but he could only make out one in every three, if that. No pictures. He was about to put it back when something caught his eye. *Leaped* at his eye. Roland stopped breathing for a moment.

He stood back, no longer hearing the todash chimes, no longer caring about the great room of books Callahan had entered. He began reading the book with the church on the front. Or trying to. The words swam maddeningly in front of his eyes, and he couldn't be sure. Not quite. But, gods! If he was seeing what he thought he was seeing—

Intuition told him that this was a key. But to what door?

He didn't know, couldn't read enough of the words to know. But the book in his hands seemed almost to thrum. Roland thought that perhaps this book was like the rose . . .

. . . but there were black roses, too.

NINE

"Roland, I found it! It's a little town in central Maine called East Stoneham, about forty miles north of Portland and . . ." He stopped, getting a good look at the gunslinger. "What's wrong?"

"The chiming sound," Roland said quickly. "Even with my ears stopped up, it got through." The door was shut and the chimes were gone, but there were still the voices. Callahan's father was currently asking if Donnie thought those magazines he'd found under his son's

bed were anything a Christian boy would want to have, what if his mother had found them? And when Roland suggested they leave the cave, Callahan was more than willing to go. He remembered that conversation with his old man far too clearly. They had ended up praying together at the foot of his bed, and the three *Playboys* had gone into the incinerator out back.

Roland returned the carved box to the pink bag and once more stowed it carefully behind Tower's case of valuable books. He had already replaced the book with the church on it, turning it with the title down so he could find it again quickly.

They went out and stood side by side, taking deep breaths of the fresh air. "Are you sure the chimes is all it was?" Callahan asked. "Man, you looked as though you'd seen a ghost."

"The todash chimes are *worse* than ghosts," Roland said. That might or might not be true, but it seemed to satisfy Callahan. As they started down the path, Roland remembered the promise he had made to the others, and, more important, to himself: no more secrets within the tet. How quickly he found himself ready to break that promise! But he felt he was right to do so. He *knew* at least some of the names in that book. The others would know them, too. Later they would need to know, if the book was as important as he thought it might be. But now it would only distract them from the approaching business of the Wolves. If they could win that battle, then perhaps . . .

"Roland, are you quite sure you're okay?"

"Yes." He clapped Callahan on the shoulder. The others would be able to read the book, and by reading might discover what it meant. Perhaps the story in the book was *just* a story . . . but how could it be, when . . .

"Pere?"

"Yes, Roland."

"A novel is a story, isn't it? A made-up story?"

"Yes, a long one."

"But make-believe."

"Yes, that's what fiction means. Make-believe."

Roland pondered this. *Charlie the Choo-Choo* had also been make-believe, only in many ways, many *vital* ways, it hadn't been. And the

author's name had changed. There were many different worlds, all held together by the Tower. Maybe . . .

No, not now. He mustn't think about these things now.

"Tell me about the town where Tower and his friend went," Roland said.

"I can't, really. I found it in one of the Maine telephone books, that's all. Also a simplified zip code map that showed about where it is."

"Good. That's very good."

"Roland, are you sure you're all right?"

Calla, Roland thought. *Callahan*. He made himself smile. Made himself clap Callahan on the shoulder again.

"I'm fine," he said. "Now let's get back to town."

CHAPTER V: THE MEETING OF THE FOLKEN

ONE

Tian Jaffords had never been more frightened in his life than he was as he stood on the stage in the Pavilion, looking down at the *folken* of Calla Bryn Sturgis. He knew there were likely no more than five hundred—six hundred at the very outside—but to him it looked like a multitude, and their taut silence was unnerving. He looked at his wife for comfort and found none there. Zalia's face looked thin and dark and pinched, the face of an old woman rather than one still well within her childbearing years.

Nor did the look of this late afternoon help him find calm. Overhead the sky was a pellucid, cloudless blue, but it was too dark for five o' the clock. There was a huge bank of clouds in the southwest, and the sun had passed behind them just as he climbed the steps to the stage. It was what his Granpere would have called weirding weather; *omenish*, say thankya. In the constant darkness that was Thunderclap, lightning flashed like great sparklights.

Had I known it would come to this, I'd never have started it a-going, he thought wildly. *And this time there'll be no Pere Callahan to haul my poor old ashes out of the fire.* Although Callahan was there, standing with Roland and his friends—they of the hard calibers—with his arms folded on his plain black shirt with the notched collar and his Man Jesus cross hanging above.

He told himself not to be foolish, that Callahan *would* help, and the outworlders would help, as well. They were *there* to help. The code they followed demanded that they *must* help, even if it meant their destruction and the end of whatever quest they were on. He told

himself that all he needed to do was introduce Roland, and Roland would come. Once before, the gunslinger had stood on this stage and danced the commala and won their hearts. Did Tian doubt that Roland would win their hearts again? In truth, Tian did not. What he was afraid of in *his* heart was that this time it would be a death-dance instead of a life-dance. Because death was what this man and his friends were about; it was their bread and wine. It was the sherbet they took to clear their palates when the meal was done. At that first meeting—could it have been less than a month ago?—Tian had spoken out of angry desperation, but a month was long enough to count the cost. What if this was a mistake? What if the Wolves burned the entire Calla flat with their light-sticks, took the children they wanted one final time, and exploded all the ones that were left—old, young, in the middle—with their whizzing balls of death?

They stood waiting for him to begin, the gathered Calla. Eisenharts and Overholsters and Javiers and Tookes without number (although no twins among these last of the age the Wolves liked, aye-no, such lucky Tookes they were); Telford standing with the men and his plump but hard-faced wife with the women; Stronges and Rossiters and Slightmans and Hands and Rosarios and Posellas; the Manni once again bunched together like a dark stain of ink, Henschick their patriarch standing with young Cantab, whom all the children liked so well; Andy, another favorite of the kiddies, standing off to one side with his skinny metal arms akimbo and his blue electric eyes flashing in the gloom; the Sisters of Oriza bunched together like birds on fencewire (Tian's wife among them); and the cowboys, the hired men, the dayboys, even old Bernardo, the town tosspot.

To Tian's right, those who had carried the feather shuffled a bit uneasily. In ordinary circumstances, one set of twins was plenty to take the opopanax feather; in most cases, people knew well in advance what was up, and carrying the feather was nothing but a formality. This time (it had been Margaret Eisenhart's idea), three sets of twins had gone together with the hallowed feather, carrying it from town to smallhold to ranch to farm in a bucka driven by Cantab, who sat unusually silent and songless up front, clucking along a matched set of brown mules that needed precious little help from the likes of him. Oldest at twenty-three were the Haggengood twins, born the year of

the last Wolf-raid (and ugly as sin by the lights of most folks, although precious hard workers, say thankya). Next came the Tavery twins, those beautiful map-drawing town brats. Last (and youngest, although eldest of Tian's brood) came Heddon and Hedda. And it was Hedda who got him going. Tian caught her eye and saw that his good (although plain-faced) daughter had sensed her father's fright and was on the verge of tears herself.

Eddie and Jake weren't the only ones who heard the voices of others in their heads; Tian now heard the voice of his Gran-pere. Not as Jamie was now, doddering and nearly toothless, but as he had been twenty years before: old but still capable of clouting you over the River Road if you sassed back or dawdled over a hard pull. Jamie Jaffords who had once stood against the Wolves. This Tian had from time to time doubted, but he doubted it no longer. Because Roland believed.

Garn, then! snarled the voice in his mind. *What is it fashes and diddles thee s'slow, oafing? 'Tis nobbut to say his name and stand aside, ennit? Then fer good or nis, ye can let him do a'rest.*

Still Tian looked out over the silent crowd a moment longer, their bulk hemmed in tonight by torches that didn't change—for this was no party—but only glared a steady orange. Because he wanted to say something, perhaps *needed* to say something. If only to acknowledge that he was partly to credit for this. For good or for nis.

In the eastern darkness, lightning fired off silent explosions.

Roland, standing with his arms folded like the Pere, caught Tian's eye and nodded slightly to him. Even by warm torchlight, the gunslinger's blue gaze was cold. Almost as cold as Andy's. Yet it was all the encouragement Tian needed.

He took the feather and held it before him. Even the crowd's breathing seemed to still. Somewhere far overtown, a rustie cawed as if to hold back the night.

"Not long since I stood in yon Gathering Hall and told'ee what I believe," Tian said. "That when the Wolves come, they don't just take our children but our hearts and souls. Each time they steal and we stand by, they cut us a little deeper. If you cut a tree deep enough, it dies. Cut a town deep enough, that dies, too."

The voice of Rosalita Munoz, childless her whole life, rang out in the fey dimness of the day with clear ferocity: "Say true, say thankya!

Hear him, *folken!* Hear him very well!”

“Hear him, hear him, hear him well” ran through the assembly.

“Pere stood up that night and told us there were gunslingers coming from the northwest, coming through Mid-Forest along the Path of the Beam. Some scoffed, but Pere spoke true.”

“Say thankya,” they replied. “Pere said true.” And a woman’s voice: “Praise Jesus! Praise Mary, mother of God!”

“They’ve been among us all these days since. Any who’s wanted to speak to em *has* spoke to em. They have promised nothing but to help —”

“And’ll move on, leaving bloody ruin behind em, if we’re foolish enough to allow it!” Eben Took roared.

There was a shocked gasp from the crowd. As it died, Wayne Overholser said: “Shut up, ye great mouth-organ.”

Took turned to look at Overholser, the Calla’s big farmer and Took’s best customer, with a look of gaping surprise.

Tian said: “Their dinh is Roland Deschain, of Gilead.” They knew this, but the mention of such legendary names still provoked a low, almost moaning murmur. “From In-World that was. Would you hear him? What say you, *folken?*”

Their response quickly rose to a shout. “*Hear him! Hear him! We would hear him to the last! Hear him well, say thankya!*” And a soft, rhythmic crumping sound that Tian could not at first identify. Then he realized what it was and almost smiled. This was what the tromping of shor’boots sounded like, not on the boards of the Gathering Hall, but out here on Lady Riza’s grass.

Tian held out his hand. Roland came forward. The tromping sound grew louder as he did. Women were joining in, doing the best they could in their soft town shoes. Roland mounted the steps. Tian gave him the feather and left the stage, taking Hedda’s hand and motioning for the rest of the twins to go before him. Roland stood with the feather held before him, gripping its ancient lacquered stalk with hands now bearing only eight digits. At last the tromping of the shoes and shor’boots died away. The torches sizzled and spat, illuminating the upturned faces of the *folken*, showing their hope and fear; showing both very well. The rustie called and was still. In the east, big lightning sliced up the darkness.

The gunslinger stood facing them.

TWO

For what seemed a very long time looking was all he did. In each glazed and frightened eye he read the same thing. He had seen it many times before, and it was easy reading. These people were hungry. They'd fain buy something to eat, fill their restless bellies. He remembered the pieman who walked the streets of Gilead low-town in the hottest days of summer, and how his mother had called him *seppe-sai* on account of how sick such pies could make people. *Seppesai* meant the death-seller.

Aye, he thought, *but I and my friends don't charge.*

At this thought, his face lit in a smile. It rolled years off his craggy map, and a sigh of nervous relief came from the crowd. He started as he had before: "We are well-met in the Calla, hear me, I beg."

Silence.

"You have opened to us. We have opened to you. Is it not so?"

"Aye, gunslinger!" Vaughn Eisenhart called back. "'Tis!"

"Do you see us for what we are, and accept what we do?"

It was Henchick of the Manni who answered this time. "Aye, Roland, by the Book and say thankya. Y'are of Eld, White come to stand against Black."

This time the crowd's sigh was long. Somewhere near the back, a woman began to sob.

"Calla-*folken*, do you seek aid and succor of us?"

Eddie stiffened. This question had been asked of many individuals during their weeks in Calla Bryn Sturgis, but he thought to ask it here was extremely risky. What if they said no?

A moment later Eddie realized he needn't have worried; in sizing up his audience, Roland was as shrewd as ever. Some *did* in fact say no—a smattering of Haycoxes, a peck of Tooks, and a small cluster of Telfords led the *antis*—but most of the *folken* roared out a hearty and immediate *AYE, SAY THANKYA!* A few others—Overholser was the most prominent—said nothing either way. Eddie thought that in most cases, this would have been the wisest move. The most *politic* move, anyway. But this wasn't most cases; it was the most extraordinary

moment of choice most of these people would ever face. If the Ka-Tet of Nineteen won against the Wolves, the people of this town would remember those who said no and those who said nothing. He wondered idly if Wayne Dale Overholser would still be the big farmer in these parts a year from now.

But then Roland opened the palaver, and Eddie turned his entire attention toward him. His *admiring* attention. Growing up where and how he had, Eddie had heard plenty of lies. Had told plenty himself, some of them very good ones. But by the time Roland reached the middle of his spiel, Eddie realized he had never been in the presence of a true genius of mendacity until this early evening in Calla Bryn Sturgis. And—

Eddie looked around, then nodded, satisfied.

And they were swallowing every word.

THREE

“Last time I was on this stage before you,” Roland began, “I danced the commala. Tonight—”

George Telford interrupted. He was too oily for Eddie’s taste, and too sly by half, but he couldn’t fault the man’s courage, speaking up as he did when the tide was so clearly running in the other direction.

“Aye, we remember, ye danced it well! How dance ye the mortata, Roland, tell me that, I beg.”

Disapproving murmurs from the crowd.

“Doesn’t matter how I dance it,” Roland said, not in the least discommoded, “for my dancing days in the Calla are done. We have work in this town, I and mine. Ye’ve made us welcome, and we say thankya. Ye’ve bid us on, sought our aid and succor, so now I bid ye to listen very well. In less of a week come the Wolves.”

There was a sigh of agreement. Time might have grown slippery, but even low *folken* could still hold onto five days’ worth of it.

“On the night before they’re due, I’d have every Calla twin-child under the age of seventeen there.” Roland pointed off to the left, where the Sisters of Oriza had put up a tent. Tonight there were a good many children in there, although by no means the hundred or so at risk. The older had been given the task of tending the younger

for the duration of the meeting, and one or another of the Sisters periodically checked to make sure all was yet fine.

“That tent won’t hold em all, Roland,” Ben Slightman said.

Roland smiled. “But a bigger one will, Ben, and I reckon the Sisters can find one.”

“Aye, and give em a meal they won’t ever forget!” Margaret Eisenhart called out bravely. Good-natured laughter greeted this, then sputtered before it caught. Many in the crowd were no doubt reflecting that if the Wolves won after all, half the children who spent Wolf’s Eve on the Green wouldn’t be able to remember their own names a week or two later, let alone what they’d eaten.

“I’d sleep em here so we can get an early start the next morning,” Roland said. “From all I’ve been told, there’s no way to know if the Wolves will come early, late, or in the middle of the day. We’d look the fools of the world if they were to come extra early and catch em right here, in the open.”

“What’s to keep em from coming a *day* early?” Eben Took called out truculently. “Or at midnight on what you call Wolf’s Eve?”

“They can’t,” Roland said simply. And, based on Jamie Jaffords’s testimony, they were almost positive this was true. The old man’s story was his reason for letting Andy and Ben Slightman run free for the next five days and nights. “They come from afar, and not all their traveling is on horseback. Their schedule is fixed far in advance.”

“How do’ee know?” Louis Haycox asked.

“Better I not tell,” Roland said. “Mayhap the Wolves have long ears.”

A considering silence met this.

“On the same night—Wolf’s Eve—I’d have a dozen bucka wagons here, the biggest in the Calla, to draw the children out to the north of town. I’ll appoint the drivers. There’ll also be child-minders to go with em, and stay with em when the time comes. And ye needn’t ask me where they’ll be going; it’s best we not speak of that, either.”

Of course most of them thought they already knew where the children would be taken: the old Gloria. Word had a way of getting around, as Roland well knew. Ben Slightman had thought a little further—to the Redbird Two, south of the Gloria—and that was also fine.

George Telford cried out: “Don’t listen to this, *folken*, I beg ye! And even if ee *do* listen, for your souls and the life of this town, don’t *do* it! What he’s saying is madness! We’ve tried to hide our children before, *and it doesn’t work!* But even if it did, they’d surely come and burn this town for vengeance’ sake, burn it flat—”

“Silence, ye coward.” It was Henchick, his voice as dry as a whipcrack.

Telford would have said more regardless, but his eldest son took his arm and made him stop. It was just as well. The clomping of the shor’boots had begun again. Telford looked at Eisenhart unbelievably, his thought as clear as a shout: *Ye can’t mean to be part of this madness, can ye?*

The big rancher shook his head. “No point looking at me so, George. I stand with my wife, and she stands with the Eld.”

Applause greeted this. Roland waited for it to quiet.

“Rancher Telford says true. The Wolves likely *will* know where the children have been bunkered. And when they come, my ka-tet will be there to greet them. It won’t be the first time we’ve stood against such as they.”

Roars of approval. More soft clumping of boots. Some rhythmic applause. Telford and Eben Took looked about with wide eyes, like men discovering they had awakened in a lunatic asylum.

When the Pavilion was quiet again, Roland said: “Some from town have agreed to stand with us, *folka* with good weapons. Again, it’s not a thing you need to know about just now.” But of course the feminine construction told those who didn’t already know about the Sisters of Oriza a great deal. Eddie once more had to marvel at the way he was leading them; cozy wasn’t in it. He glanced at Susannah, who rolled her eyes and gave him a smile. But the hand she put on his arm was cold. She wanted this to be over. Eddie knew exactly how she felt.

Telford tried one last time. “People, hear me! *All this has been tried before!*”

It was Jake Chambers who spoke up. “It hasn’t been tried by gunslingers, sai Telford.”

A fierce roar of approval met this. There was more stamping and clapping. Roland finally had to raise his hands to quiet it.

“Most of the Wolves will go to where they think the children are, and we’ll deal with them there,” he said. “Smaller groups may indeed raid the farms or ranches. Some may come into town. And aye, there may be some burning.”

They listened silently and respectfully, nodding, arriving ahead of him to the next point. As he had wanted them to.

“A burned building can be replaced. A roont child cannot.”

“Aye,” said Rosalita. “Nor a roont heart.”

There were murmurs of agreement, mostly from the women. In Calla Bryn Sturgis (as in most other places), men in a state of sobriety did not much like to talk about their hearts.

“Hear me now, for I’d tell you at least this much more: We know exactly what these Wolves are. Jamie Jaffords has told us what we already suspected.”

There were murmurs of surprise. Heads turned. Jamie, standing beside his grandson, managed to straighten his curved back for a moment or two and actually puff up his sunken chest. Eddie only hoped the old buzzard would hold his peace over what came next. If he got muddled and contradicted the tale Roland was about to tell, their job would become much harder. At the very least it would mean grabbing Slightman and Andy early. And if Finli o’ Tego—the voice Slightman reported to from the Dogan—didn’t hear from these two again before the day of the Wolves, there would be suspicions. Eddie felt movement in the hand on his arm. Susannah had just crossed her fingers.

FOUR

“There aren’t living creatures beneath the masks,” Roland said. “The Wolves are the undead servants of the vampires who rule Thunderclap.”

An awed murmur greeted this carefully crafted bit of claptrap.

“They’re what my friends Eddie, Susannah, and Jake call *zombis*. They can’t be killed by bow, bah, or bullet unless struck in the brain or the heart.” Roland tapped the left side of his chest for emphasis. “And of course when they come on their raids, they come wearing heavy armor under their clothes.”

Henchick was nodding. Several of the other older men and women—*folken* who well remembered the Wolves coming not just once before but twice—were doing the same. “It explains a good deal,” he said. “But how—”

“To strike them in the brain is beyond our abilities, because of the helmets they wear under their hoods,” Roland said. “But we saw such creatures in Lud. Their weakness is here.” Again he tapped his chest. “The undead don’t breathe, but there’s a kind of gill above their hearts. If they armor it over, they die. That’s where we’ll strike them.”

A low, considering hum of conversation greeted this. And then Gran-pere’s voice, shrill and excited: “‘Tis ever’ word true, for dinna Molly Doolin strike one there hersel’ wi’ the dish, an’ not even dead-on, neither, and yet the creetur’ dropped down!”

Susannah’s hand tightened on Eddie’s arm enough for him to feel her short nails, but when he looked at her, she was grinning in spite of herself. He saw a similar expression on Jake’s face. *Trig enough when the chips were down, old man*, Eddie thought. *Sorry I ever doubted you. Let Andy and Slightman go back across the river and report that happy horseshit!* He’d asked Roland if they (the faceless *they* represented by someone who called himself Finli o’ Tego) would believe such tripe. *They’ve raided this side of the Whye for over a hundred years and lost but a single fighter*, Roland had replied. *I think they’d believe anything. At this point their really vulnerable spot is their complacence.*

“Bring your twins here by seven o’ the clock on Wolf’s Eve,” Roland said. “There’ll be ladies—Sisters of Oriza, ye ken—with lists on slateboards. They’ll scratch off each pair as they come in. It’s my hope to have a line drawn through every name before nine o’ the clock.”

“Ye’ll not drig no line through the names o’ mine!” cried an angry voice from the back of the crowd. The voice’s owner pushed several people aside and stepped forward next to Jake. He was a squat man with a smallhold rice-patch far to the south’ards. Roland scratched through the untidy storehouse of his recent memory (untidy, yes, but nothing was ever thrown away) and eventually came up with the name: Neil Faraday. One of the few who hadn’t been home when Roland and his ka-tet had come calling . . . or not home to them, at least. A hard worker, according to Tian, but an even harder drinker. He certainly looked the part. There were dark circles under his eyes

and a complication of burst purplish veins on each cheek. Scruffy, say big-big. Yet Telford and Took threw him a grateful, surprised look. *Another sane man in bedlam, it said. Thank the gods.*

“Ay’ll take ’een babbies anyro’ and burn ’een squabbot town flat,” he said, speaking in an accent that made his words almost incomprehensible. “But ’ay’ll have one each o’ my see’, an’ ’at’ll stee’ lea’ me three, and a’ best ’ay ain’t worth squabbot, but my howgan *is!*” Faraday looked around at the townsfolk with an expression of sardonic disdain. “Burn’ee flat an’ be damned to ’ee,” he said. “Numb *gits!*” And back into the crowd he went, leaving a surprising number of people looking shaken and thoughtful. He had done more to turn the momentum of the crowd with his contemptuous and (to Eddie, at least) incomprehensible tirade than Telford and Took had been able to do together.

He may be shirrtail poor, but I doubt if he’ll have trouble getting credit from Took for the next year or so, Eddie thought. If the store still stands, that is.

“Sai Faraday’s got a right to his opinion, but I hope he’ll change it over the next few days,” Roland said. “I hope you folks will help him change it. Because if he doesn’t, he’s apt to be left not with three kiddies but none at all.” He raised his voice and shaped it toward the place where Faraday stood, glowering. “Then he can see how he likes working his tillage with no help but two mules and a wife.”

Telford stepped forward to the edge of the stage, his face red with fury. “Is there nothing ye won’t say to win your argument, you chary man? Is there no lie you won’t tell?”

“I don’t lie and I don’t say for certain,” Roland replied. “If I’ve given anyone the idea that I know all the answers when less than a season ago I didn’t even know the Wolves existed, I cry your pardon. But let me tell you a story before I bid you goodnight. When I was a boy in Gilead, before the coming of the Good Man and the great burning that followed, there was a tree farm out to the east o’ barony.”

“Whoever heard of farming *trees?*” someone called derisively.

Roland smiled and nodded. “Perhaps not ordinary trees, or even ironwoods, but these were blossies, a wonderful light wood, yet strong. The best wood for boats that ever was. A piece cut thin nearly floats in the air. They grew over a thousand acres of land, tens of

thousands of blossom trees in neat rows, all overseen by the barony forester. And the rule, never even bent, let alone broken, was this: take two, plant three.”

“Aye,” Eisenhart said. “Tis much the same with stock, and with *threaded* stock the advice is to keep four for every one ye sell or kill. Not that many could afford to do so.”

Roland’s eyes roamed the crowd. “During the summer season I turned ten, a plague fell on the blossom forest. Spiders spun white webs over the upper branches of some, and those trees died from their tops down, rotting as they went, falling of their own weight long before the plague could get to the roots. The forester saw what was happening, and ordered all the good trees cut down at once. To save the wood while it was still worth saving, do you see? There was no more take two and plant three, because the rule no longer made any sense. The following summer, the blossy woods east of Gilead was gone.”

Utter silence from the *folken*. The day had drained down to a premature dusk. The torches hissed. Not an eye stirred from the gunslinger’s face.

“Here in the Calla, the Wolves harvest babies. And needn’t even go to the work of planting em, because—hear me—that’s the way it is with men and women. Even the children know. ‘Daddy’s no fool, when he plants the rice commala, Mommy knows just what to do.’ ”

A murmur from the *folken*.

“The Wolves take, then wait. Take . . . and wait. It’s worked fine for them, because men and women always plant new babies, no matter what else befalls. But now comes a new thing. Now comes plague.”

Took began, “Aye, say true, ye’re a plague all r—” Then someone knocked the hat off his head. Eben Took whirled, looked for the culprit, and saw fifty unfriendly faces. He snatched up his hat, held it to his breast, and said no more.

“If they see the baby-farming is over for them here,” Roland said, “this last time they won’t just take twins; this time they’ll take every child they can get their hands on while the taking’s good. So bring your little ones at seven o’ the clock. That’s my best advice to you.”

“What choice have you left em?” Telford asked. He was white with fear and fury.

Roland had had enough of him. His voice rose to a shout, and Telford fell back from the force of his suddenly blazing blue eyes. “None that *you* have to worry about, sai, for your children are grown, as everyone in town knows. You’ve had your say. Now why don’t you shut up?”

A thunder of applause and boot-stomping greeted this. Telford took the bellowing and jeering for as long as he could, his head lowered between his hunched shoulders like a bull about to charge. Then he turned and began shoving his way through the crowd. Took followed. A few moments later, they were gone. Not long after that, the meeting ended. There was no vote. Roland had given them nothing to vote on.

No, Eddie thought again as he pushed Susannah’s chair toward the refreshments, cozy really wasn’t in it at all.

FIVE

Not long after, Roland accosted Ben Slightman. The foreman was standing beneath one of the torch-poles, balancing a cup of coffee and a plate with a piece of cake on it. Roland also had cake and coffee. Across the greensward, the children’s tent had for the nonce become the refreshment tent. A long line of waiting people snaked out of it. There was low talk but little laughter. Closer by, Benny and Jake were tossing a springball back and forth, every now and then letting Oy have a turn. The bumbler was barking happily, but the boys seemed as subdued as the people waiting in line.

“Ye spoke well tonight,” Slightman said, and clicked his coffee cup against Roland’s.

“Do you say so?”

“Aye. Of course they were ready, as I think ye knew, but Faraday must have been a surprise to ye, and ye handled him well.”

“I only told the truth,” Roland said. “If the Wolves lose enough of their troop, they’ll take what they can and cut their losses. Legends grow beards, and twenty-three years is plenty of time to grow a long one. *Calla-folken* assume there are thousands of Wolves over there in Thunderclap, maybe millions of em, but I don’t think that’s true.”

Slightman was looking at him with frank fascination. “Why not?”

“Because things are running down,” Roland said simply, and then: “I need you to promise me something.”

Slightman looked at him warily. The lenses of his spectacles twinkled in the torchlight. “If I can, Roland, I will.”

“Make sure your boy’s here four nights from now. His sister’s dead, but I doubt if that untwins him to the Wolves. He’s still very likely got what it is they come for.”

Slightman made no effort to disguise his relief. “Aye, he’ll be here. I never considered otten else.”

“Good. And I have a job for you, if you’ll do it.”

The wary look returned. “What job would it be?”

“I started off thinking that six would be enough to mind the children while we dealt with the Wolves, and then Rosalita asked me what I’d do if they got frightened and panicked.”

“Ah, but you’ll have em in a cave, won’t you?” Slightman asked, lowering his voice. “Kiddies can’t run far in a cave, even if they *do* take fright.”

“Far enough to run into a wall and brain themselves or fall down a hole in the dark. If one were to start a stampede on account of the yelling and the smoke and the fire, they might *all* fall down a hole in the dark. I’ve decided I’d like to have an even ten watching the kiddos. I’d like you to be one of em.”

“Roland, I’m flattered.”

“Is that a yes?”

Slightman nodded.

Roland eyed him. “You know that if we lose, the ones minding the children are apt to die?”

“If I thought you were going to lose, I’d never agree to go out there with the kids.” He paused. “Or send my own.”

“Thank you, Ben. Thee’s a good man.”

Slightman lowered his voice even further. “Which of the mines is it going to be? The Gloria or the Redbird?” And when Roland didn’t answer immediately: “Of course I understand if ye’d rather not tell—”

“It’s not that,” Roland said. “It’s that we haven’t decided.”

“But it’ll be one or the other.”

“Oh, aye, where else?” Roland said absently, and began to roll a smoke.

“And ye’ll try to get above them?”

“Wouldn’t work,” Roland said. “Angle’s wrong.” He patted his chest above his heart. “Have to hit em here, remember. Other places . . . no good. Even a bullet that goes through armor wouldn’t do much damage to a *zombi*.”

“It’s a problem, isn’t it?”

“It’s an *opportunity*,” Roland corrected. “You know the scree that spreads out below the adits of those old garnet mines? Looks like a baby’s bib?”

“Aye?”

“We’ll hide ourselves in there. *Under* there. And when they ride toward us, we’ll rise up and . . . ” Roland cocked a thumb and forefinger at Slightman and made a trigger-pulling gesture.

A smile spread over the foreman’s face. “Roland, that’s brilliant!”

“No,” Roland contradicted. “Only simple. But simple’s usually best. I think we’ll surprise them. Hem them in and pick them off. It’s worked for me before. No reason it shouldn’t work again.”

“No. I suppose not.”

Roland looked around. “Best we not talk about such things here, Ben. I know *you’re* safe, but—”

Ben nodded rapidly. “Say n’more, Roland, I understand.”

The springball rolled to Slightman’s feet. His son held up his hands for it, smiling. “Pa! Throw it!”

Ben did, and hard. The ball sailed, just as Molly’s plate had in Gran-pere’s story. Benny leaped, caught it one-handed, and laughed. His father grinned at him fondly, then glanced at Roland. “They’s a pair, ain’t they? Yours and mine?”

“Aye,” Roland said, almost smiling. “Almost like brothers, sure enough.”

SIX

The ka-tet ambled back toward the rectory, riding four abreast, feeling every town eye that watched them go: death on horseback.

“You happy with how it went, sugar?” Susannah asked Roland.

“It’ll do,” he allowed, and began to roll a smoke.

“I’d like to try one of those,” Jake said suddenly.

Susannah gave him a look both shocked and amused. “Bite your tongue, sugar—you haven’t seen thirteen yet.”

“My Dad started when he was ten.”

“And’ll be dead by fifty, like as not,” Susannah said sternly.

“No great loss,” Jake muttered, but he let the subject drop.

“What about Mia?” Roland asked, popping a match with his thumbnail. “Is she quiet?”

“If it wasn’t for you boys, I’m not sure I’d believe there even *was* such a jane.”

“And your belly’s quiet, too?”

“Yes.” Susannah guessed everyone had rules about lying; hers was that if you were going to tell one, you did best to keep it short. If she had a chap in her belly—some sort of monster—she’d let them help her worry about it a week from tonight. If they were still able to worry about anything, that was. For the time being they didn’t need to know about the few little cramps she’d been having.

“Then all’s well,” the gunslinger said. They rode in silence for awhile, and then he said: “I hope you two boys can dig. There’ll be some digging to do.”

“Graves?” Eddie asked, not sure if he was joking or not.

“Graves come later.” Roland looked up at the sky, but the clouds had advanced out of the west and stolen the stars. “Just remember, it’s the winners who dig them.”

CHAPTER VI: BEFORE THE STORM

ONE

Rising up from the darkness, dolorous and accusatory, came the voice of Henry Dean, the great sage and eminent junkie. “I’m in hell, bro! I’m in hell and I can’t get a fix and *it’s all your fault!*”

“How long will we have to be here, do you think?” Eddie asked Callahan. They had just reached the Doorway Cave, and the great sage’s little bro was already shaking a pair of bullets in his right hand like dice—seven-come-eleven, baby need a little peace n quiet. It was the day after the big meeting, and when Eddie and the Pere had ridden out of town, the high street had seemed unusually quiet. It was almost as if the Calla was hiding from itself, overwhelmed by what it had committed itself to.

“I’m afraid it’ll be awhile,” Callahan admitted. He was neatly (and nondescriptly, he hoped) dressed. In the breast pocket of his shirt was all the American money they’d been able to put together: eleven crumpled dollars and a pair of quarters. He thought it would be a bitter joke if he turned up in a version of America where Lincoln was on the single and Washington on the fifties. “But we can do it in stages, I think.”

“Thank God for small favors,” Eddie said, and dragged the pink bag out from behind Tower’s bookcase. He lifted it with both hands, began to turn, then stopped. He was frowning.

“What is it?” Callahan asked.

“There’s something in here.”

“Yes, the box.”

“No, something in the *bag*. Sewn into the lining, I think. It feels like a little rock. Maybe there’s a secret pocket.”

“And maybe,” Callahan said, “this isn’t the time to investigate it.”

Still, Eddie gave the object another small squeeze. It didn’t *feel* like a stone, exactly. But Callahan was probably right. They had enough mysteries on their hands already. This one was for another day.

When Eddie slid the ghostwood box out of the bag, a sick dread invaded both his head and his heart. “I hate this thing. I keep feeling like it’s going to turn on me and eat me like a . . . a taco-chip.”

“It probably could,” Callahan said. “If you feel something really bad happening, Eddie, shut the damn thing.”

“Your ass would be stuck on the other side if I did.”

“It’s not as though I’m a stranger there,” Callahan said, eyeing the unfound door. Eddie heard his brother; Callahan heard his mother, endlessly hectoring, calling him Donnie. He’d always hated being called Donnie. “I’ll just wait for it to open again.”

Eddie stuffed the bullets into his ears.

“Why are you letting him do that, Donnie?” Callahan’s mother moaned from the darkness. “Bullets in your ears, that’s *dangerous!*”

“Go on,” Eddie said. “Get it done.” He opened the box. The chimes attacked Callahan’s ears. And his heart. The door to everywhere clicked open.

TWO

He went through thinking about two things: the year 1977 and the men’s room on the main floor of the New York Public Library. He stepped into a bathroom stall with graffiti on the walls (BANGO SKANK had been there) and the sound of a flushing urinal somewhere to his left. He waited for whoever it was to leave, then stepped out of the stall.

It took him only ten minutes to find what he needed. When he stepped back through the door into the cave, he was holding a book under his arm. He asked Eddie to step outside with him, and didn’t have to ask twice. In the fresh air and breezy sunshine (the previous night’s clouds had blown away), Eddie took the bullets from his ears and examined the book. It was called *Yankee Highways*.

“The Father’s a library thief,” Eddie remarked. “You’re exactly the sort of person who makes the fees go up.”

“I’ll return it someday,” Callahan said. He meant it. “The important thing is I got lucky on my second try. Check page one-nineteen.”

Eddie did. The photograph showed a stark white church sitting on a hill above a dirt road. *East Stoneham Methodist Meeting Hall*, the caption said. *Built 1819*. Eddie thought: *Add em, come out with nineteen. Of course.*

He mentioned this to Callahan, who smiled and nodded. “Notice anything else?”

Of course he did. “It looks like the Calla Gathering Hall.”

“So it does. Its twin, almost.” Callahan took a deep breath. “Are you ready for round two?”

“I guess so.”

“This one’s apt to be longer, but you should be able to pass the time. There’s plenty of reading matter.”

“I don’t think I could read,” Eddie said. “I’m too fucking nervous, pardon my French. Maybe I’ll see what’s in the lining of the bag.”

But Eddie forgot about the object in the lining of the pink bag; it was Susannah who eventually found that, and when she did, she was no longer herself.

THREE

Thinking 1977 and holding the book open to the picture of the Methodist Meeting Hall in East Stoneham, Callahan stepped through the unfound door for the second time. He came out on a brilliantly sunny New England morning. The church was there, but it had been painted since its picture had been taken for *Yankee Highways*, and the road had been paved. Sitting nearby was a building that hadn’t been in the photo: the East Stoneham General Store. Good.

He walked down there, followed by the floating doorway, reminding himself not to spend one of the quarters, which had come from his own little stash, unless he absolutely had to. The one from Jake was dated 1969, which was okay. His, however, was from 1981, and that wasn’t. As he walked past the Mobil gas pumps (where

regular was selling for forty-nine cents a gallon), he transferred it to his back pocket.

When he entered the store—which smelled almost exactly like Took’s—a bell jingled. To the left was a stack of Portland *Press-Heralds*, and the date gave him a nasty little shock. When he’d taken the book from the New York Public Library, not half an hour ago by his body’s clock, it had been June 26th. The date on these papers was the 27th.

He took one, reading the headlines (a flood in New Orleans, the usual unrest among the homicidal idiots of the mideast) and noting the price: a dime. Good. He’d get change back from his ’69 quarter. Maybe buy a piece of good old Made in the U.S.A. salami. The clerk looked him over with a cheerful eye as he approached the counter.

“That do it?” he asked.

“Well, I tell you what,” Callahan said. “I could use a point toward the post office, if that does ya.”

The clerk raised an eyebrow and smiled. “You sound like you’re from these parts.”

“Do you say so, then?” Callahan asked, also smiling.

“Ayuh. Anyway, post office is easy. Ain’t but a mile down this road, on your left.” He pronounced road *rud*, exactly as Jamie Jaffords might have done.

“Good enough. And do you sell salami by the slice?”

“I’ll sell it just about any old way you want to buy it,” the clerk said amiably. “Summer visitor, are you?” It came out *summah visitah*, and Callahan almost expected him to add *Tell me, I beg*.

“You could call me that, I guess,” Callahan said.

FOUR

In the cave, Eddie fought against the faint but maddening jangle of the chimes and peered through the half-open door. Callahan was walking down a country road. Goody gumdrops for him. Meantime, maybe Mrs. Dean’s little boy *would* try having himself a bit of a read. With a cold (and slightly trembling) hand, he reached into the bookcase and pulled out a volume two down from one that had been turned upside down, one that would certainly have changed his day had he happened to grab it. What he came up with instead was *Four*

Short Novels of Sherlock Holmes. Ah, Holmes, another great sage and eminent junkie. Eddie opened to *A Study in Scarlet* and began to read. Every now and then he found himself looking down at the box, where Black Thirteen pulsed out its weird force. He could just see a curve of glass. After a little bit he gave up trying to read, only looking at the curve of glass, growing more and more fascinated. But the chimes were fading, and that was good, wasn't it? After a little while he could hardly hear them at all. A little while after that, a voice crept past the bullets in his ears and began to speak to him.

Eddie listened.

FIVE

"Pardon me, ma'am."

"Ayuh?" The postmistress was a woman in her late fifties or early sixties, dressed to meet the public with hair of a perfect beauty-shop blue-white.

"I'd like to leave a letter for some friends of mine," Callahan said. "They're from New York, and they'd likely be General Delivery customers." He had argued with Eddie that Calvin Tower, on the run from a bunch of dangerous hoods who would almost certainly still want his head on a stick, wouldn't do anything so dumb as sign up for mail. Eddie had reminded him of how Tower had been about his fucking precious first editions, and Callahan had finally agreed to at least try this.

"Summer folk?"

"Do ya," Callahan agreed, but that wasn't quite right. "I mean ayuh. Their names are Calvin Tower and Aaron Deepneau. I guess that isn't information you're supposed to give someone just in off the street, but—"

"Oh, we don't bother much about such things out in these parts," she said. *Parts* came out *pahts*. "Just let me check the list . . . we have so *many* between Memorial Day and Labor Day . . ."

She picked up a clipboard with three or four tattered sheets of paper on it from her side of the counter. Lots of hand-written names. She flicked over the first sheet to the second, then from the second to the third.

“Deepneau!” she said. “Ayuh, there’s that one. Now . . . just let me see if I can find t’other ’un . . .”

“Never mind,” Callahan said. All at once he felt uneasy, as though something had gone wrong back on the other side. He glanced over his shoulder and saw nothing but the door, and the cave, and Eddie sitting there cross-legged with a book in his lap.

“Got somebody chasin ya?” the postlady asked, smiling.

Callahan laughed. It sounded forced and stupid to his own ears, but the postlady seemed to sense nothing wrong. “If I were to write Aaron a note and put it in a stamped envelope, would you see that he gets it when he comes in? Or when Mr. Tower comes in?”

“Oh, no need to buy a stamp,” said she, comfortably. “Glad to do it.”

Yes, it *was* like the Calla. Suddenly he liked this woman very much. Liked her big-big.

Callahan went to the counter by the window (the door doing a neat do-si-do around him when he turned) and jotted a note, first introducing himself as a friend of the man who had helped Tower with Jack Andolini. He told Deepneau and Tower to leave their car where it was, and to leave some of the lights on in the place where they were staying, and then to move somewhere close by—a barn, an abandoned camp, even a shed. To do it immediately. *Leave a note with directions to where you are under the driver’s side floormat of your car, or under the back porch step*, he wrote. *We’ll be in touch*. He hoped he was doing this right; they hadn’t talked things out this far, and he’d never expected to have to do any cloak-and-dagger stuff. He signed as Roland had told him to: *Callahan, of the Eld*. Then, in spite of his growing unease, he added another line, almost slashing the letters into the paper: *And make this trip to the post office your LAST. How stupid can you be???*

He put the note in an envelope, sealed it, and wrote AARON DEEPNEAU OR CALVIN TOWER, GEN’L DELIVERY on the front. He took it back to the counter. “I’ll be happy to buy a stamp,” he told her again.

“Nawp, just two cent’ for the envelope and we’re square.”

He gave her the nickel left over from the store, took back his three cents change, and headed for the door. The ordinary one.

“Good luck to ye,” the postlady called.

Callahan turned his head to look at her and say thanks. He caught a glimpse of the unfound door when he did, still open. What he didn't see was Eddie. Eddie was gone.

SIX

Callahan turned to that strange door as soon as he was outside the post office. Ordinarily you couldn't do that, ordinarily it swung with you as neatly as a square-dance partner, but it seemed to know when you intended to step back through. Then you could face it.

The minute he was back the todash chimes seized him, seeming to etch patterns on the surface of his brain. From the bowels of the cave his mother cried, "There-now, Donnie, you've gone and let that nice boy commit suicide! He'll be in purgie forever, and it's your fault!"

Callahan barely heard. He dashed to the mouth of the cave, still carrying the *Press-Herald* he'd bought in the East Stoneham General Store under one arm. There was just time to see why the box hadn't closed, leaving him a prisoner in East Stoneham, Maine, circa 1977: there was a thick book sticking out of it. Callahan even had time to read the title, *Four Short Novels of Sherlock Holmes*. Then he burst out into sunshine.

At first he saw nothing but the boulder on the path leading up to the mouth of the cave, and was sickeningly sure his mother's voice had told the truth. Then he looked left and saw Eddie ten feet away, at the end of the narrow path and tottering on the edge of the drop. His untucked shirt fluttered around the butt of Roland's big revolver. His normally sharp and rather foxy features now looked puffy and blank. It was the dazed face of a fighter out on his feet. His hair blew around his ears. He swayed forward . . . then his mouth tightened and his eyes became almost aware. He grasped an outcrop of rock and swayed back again.

He's fighting it, Callahan thought. And I'm sure he's fighting the good fight, but he's losing.

Calling out might actually send him over the edge; Callahan knew this with a gunslinger's intuition, always sharpest and most dependable in times of crisis. Instead of yelling he sprinted up the remaining stub of path and wound a hand in the tail of Eddie's shirt

just as Eddie swayed forward again, this time removing his hand from the outcrop beside him and using it to cover his eyes in a gesture that was unmeaningly comic: *Goodbye, cruel world.*

If the shirt had torn, Eddie Dean would undoubtedly have been excused from ka's great game, but perhaps even the tails of homespun Calla Bryn Sturgis shirts (for that was what he was wearing) served ka. In any case the shirt didn't tear, and Callahan had held onto a great part of the physical strength he had built up during his years on the road. He yanked Eddie back and caught him in his arms, but not before the younger man's head struck the outcrop his hand had been on a few seconds before. His lashes fluttered and he looked at Callahan with a kind of stupid unrecognition. He said something that sounded like gibberish to Callahan: *Ihsay ahkin fly-oo ower.*

Callahan grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "What? I don't understand you!" Nor did he much want to, but he had to make some kind of contact, had to bring Eddie back from wherever the accursed thing in the box had taken him. "*I don't . . . understand you!*"

This time the response was clearer: "It says I can fly to the Tower. You can let me go. I *want* to go!"

"You can't fly, Eddie." He wasn't sure that got through, so he put his head down—all the way, until he and Eddie were resting brow to brow, like lovers. "It was trying to kill you."

"No . . ." Eddie began, and then awareness came all the way back into his eyes. An inch from Callahan's own, they widened in understanding. "*Yes.*"

Callahan lifted his head, but still kept a prudent grip on Eddie's shoulders. "Are you all right now?"

"Yeah. I guess so, at least. I was going along good, Father. Swear I was. I mean, the chimes were doing a number on me, but otherwise I was fine. I even grabbed a book and started to read." He looked around. "Jesus, I hope I didn't lose it. Tower'll scalp me."

"You didn't lose it. You stuck it partway into the box, and it's a damned good thing you did. Otherwise the door would have shut and you'd be strawberry jam about seven hundred feet down."

Eddie looked over the edge and went completely pale. Callahan had just time enough to regret his frankness before Eddie vomited on his new shor'boots.

SEVEN

“It crept up on me, Father,” he said when he could talk. “Lulled me and then jumped.”

“Yes.”

“Did you get anything at all out of your time over there?”

“If they get my letter and do what it says, a great deal. You were right. Deepneau at least signed up for General Delivery. About Tower, I don’t know.” Callahan shook his head angrily.

“I think we’re gonna find that Tower talked Deepneau into it,” Eddie said. “Cal Tower still can’t believe what he’s gotten himself into, and after what just happened to me—*almost* happened to me—I’ve got some sympathy for that kind of thinking.” He looked at what Callahan still had clamped under one arm. “What’s that?”

“The newspaper,” Callahan said, and offered it to Eddie. “Care to read about Golda Meir?”

EIGHT

Roland listened carefully that evening as Eddie and Callahan recounted their adventures in the Doorway Cave and beyond. The gunslinger seemed less interested in Eddie’s near-death experience than he was in the similarities between Calla Bryn Sturgis and East Stoneham. He even asked Callahan to imitate the accent of the storekeeper and the postlady. This Callahan (a former Maine resident, after all) was able to do quite well.

“Do ya,” said Roland, and then: “Ayuh. Do ya, ayuh.” He sat thinking, one bootheel cocked up on the rail of the rectory porch.

“Will they be okay for awhile, do you think?” Eddie asked.

“I hope so,” Roland replied. “If you want to worry about someone’s life, worry about Deepneau’s. If Balazar hasn’t given up on the vacant lot, he has to keep Tower alive. Deepneau’s nothing but a Watch Me chip now.”

“Can we leave them until after the Wolves?”

“I don’t see what choice we have.”

“We could drop this whole business and go over there to East Overshoe and protect him!” Eddie said heatedly. “How about that?”

Listen, Roland, I'll tell you exactly why Tower talked his friend into signing up for General Delivery: somebody's got a book he wants, that's why. He was dickering for it and negotiations had reached the delicate stage when I showed up and persuaded him to head for the hills. But Tower . . . man, he's like a chimp with a handful of grain. He won't let go. If Balazar knows that, and he probably does, he won't need a zip code to find his man, just a list of the people Tower did business with. I hope to Christ that if there *was* a list, it burned up in the fire."

Roland was nodding. "I understand, but we can't leave here. We're promised."

Eddie thought it over, sighed, and shook his head. "What the hell, three and a half more days over here, seventeen over there before the deal-letter Tower signed expires. Things'll probably hold together that long." He paused, biting his lip. "Maybe."

"Is *maybe* the best we can do?" Callahan asked.

"Yeah," Eddie said. "For the time being, I guess it is."

NINE

The following morning, a badly frightened Susannah Dean sat in the privy at the foot of the hill, bent over, waiting for her current cycle of contractions to pass. She'd been having them for a little over a week now, but these were by far the strongest. She put her hands on her lower belly. The flesh there was alarmingly hard.

Oh dear God, what if I'm having it right now? What if this is it?

She tried to tell herself this *couldn't* be it, her water hadn't broken and you couldn't go into genuine labor until that happened. But what did she actually know about having babies? Very little. Even Rosalita Munoz, a midwife of great experience, wouldn't be able to help her much, because Rosa's career had been delivering *human* babies, of mothers who actually looked pregnant. Susannah looked less pregnant now than when they'd first arrived in the Calla. And if Roland was right about *this* baby—

It's not a baby. It's a chap, and it doesn't belong to me. It belongs to Mia, whoever she is. Mia, daughter of none.

The cramps ceased. Her lower belly relaxed, losing that stony feel. She laid a finger along the cleft of her vagina. It felt the same as ever. Surely she was going to be all right for another few days. She *had* to be. And while she'd agreed with Roland that there should be no more secrets in their ka-tet, she felt she had to keep this one. When the fighting finally started, it would be seven against forty or fifty. Maybe as many as seventy, if the Wolves stuck together in a single pack. They would have to be at their very best, their most fiercely concentrated. That meant no distractions. It also meant that she must be there to take her place.

She yanked up her jeans, did the buttons, and went out into the bright sunshine, absently rubbing at her left temple. She saw the new lock on the privy—just as Roland had asked—and began to smile. Then she looked down at her shadow and the smile froze. When she'd gone into the privy, her Dark Lady had stretched out nine-in-the-morning long. Now she was saying that if noon wasn't here, it would be shortly.

That's impossible. I was only in there a few minutes. Long enough to pee.

Perhaps that was true. Perhaps it was Mia who had been in there the rest of the time.

"No," she said. "That can't be so."

But Susannah thought it was. Mia wasn't ascendant—not yet—but she was rising. Getting ready to take over, if she could.

Please, she prayed, putting one hand out against the privy wall to brace herself. Just three more days, God. Give me three more days as myself, let us do our duty to the children of this place, and then what You will. Whatever You will. But please—

"Just three more," she murmured. "And if they do us down out there, it won't matter noway. Three more days, God. Hear me, I beg."

TEN

A day later, Eddie and Tian Jaffords went looking for Andy and came upon him standing by himself at the wide and dusty junction of East and River Roads, singing at the top of his . . .

"Nope," Eddie said as he and Tian approached, "can't say lungs, he doesn't *have* lungs."

“Cry pardon?” Tian asked.

“Nothing,” Eddie said. “Doesn’t matter.” But, by the process of association—lungs to general anatomy—a question had occurred to him. “Tian, is there a doctor in the Calla?”

Tian looked at him with surprise and some amusement. “Not us, Eddie. Gut-tossers might do well for rich folks who have the time to go and the money to pay, but when us gets sick, we go to one of the Sisters.”

“The Sisters of Oriza.”

“Yar. If the medicine’s good—it usually be—we get better. If it ain’t, we get worse. In the end the ground cures all, d’ye see?”

“Yes,” Eddie said, thinking how difficult it must be for them to fit roont children into such a view of things. Those who came back roont died eventually, but for years they just . . . lingered.

“There’s only three boxes to a man, anyro’,” Tian said as they approached the solitary singing robot. Off in the eastern distance, between Calla Bryn Sturgis and Thunderclap, Eddie could see scarves of dust rising toward the blue sky, although it was perfectly still where they were.

“Boxes?”

“Aye, say true,” Tian said, then rapidly touched his brow, his breast, and his butt. “Headbox, titbox, shitbox.” And he laughed heartily.

“You say that?” Eddie asked, smiling.

“Well . . . out here, between us, it does fine,” Tian said, “although I guess no proper lady’d hear the boxes so described at her table.” He touched his head, chest, and bottom again. “Thoughtbox, heartbox, ki’box.”

Eddie heard *key*. “What’s that last one mean? What kind of key unlocks your ass?”

Tian stopped. They were in plain view of Andy, but the robot ignored them completely, singing what sounded like opera in a language Eddie couldn’t understand. Every now and then Andy held his arms up or crossed them, the gestures seemingly part of the song he was singing.

“Hear me,” Tian said kindly. “A man is stacked, do ye ken. On top is his thoughts, which is the finest part of a man.”

“Or a woman,” Eddie said, smiling.

Tian nodded seriously. “Aye, or a woman, but we use *man* to stand for both, because woman was born of man’s breath, kennit.”

“Do you say so?” Eddie asked, thinking of some women’s-lib types he’d met before leaving New York for Mid-World. He doubted they’d care for that idea much more than for the part of the Bible that said Eve had been made from Adam’s rib.

“Let it be so,” Tian agreed, “but it was Lady Oriza who gave birth to the first man, so the old folks will tell you. They say *Can-ah, can-tah, annah, Oriza*: ‘All breath comes from the woman.’ ”

“So tell me about these boxes.”

“Best and highest is the head, with all the head’s ideas and dreams. Next is the heart, with all our feelings of love and sadness and joy and happiness—”

“The emotions.”

Tian looked both puzzled and respectful. “Do you say so?”

“Well, where I come from we do, so let it be so.”

“Ah.” Tian nodded as if the concept were interesting but only borderline comprehensible. This time instead of touching his bottom, he patted his crotch. “In the last box is all what we’d call low-commala: have a fuck, take a shit, maybe want to do someone a meanness for no reason.”

“And if you *do* have a reason?”

“Oh, but then it wouldn’t be meanness, would it?” Tian asked, looking amused. “In that case, it’d come from the heartbox or the headbox.”

“That’s bizarre,” Eddie said, but he supposed it wasn’t, not really. In his mind’s eye he could see three neatly stacked crates: head on top of heart, heart on top of all the animal functions and groundless rages people sometimes felt. He was particularly fascinated by Tian’s use of the word *meanness*, as if it were some kind of behavioral landmark. Did that make sense, or didn’t it? He would have to consider it carefully, and this wasn’t the time.

Andy still stood gleaming in the sun, pouring out great gusts of song. Eddie had a vague memory of some kids back in the neighborhood, yelling out *I’m the Barber of Seville-a, You must try my fucking skill-a* and then running away, laughing like loons as they went.

“Andy!” Eddie said, and the robot broke off at once.

“Hile, Eddie, I see you well! Long days and pleasant nights!”

“Same to you,” Eddie said. “How are you?”

“Fine, Eddie!” Andy said fervently. “I always enjoy singing before the first semimon.”

“Semimon?”

“It’s what we call the windstorms that come before true winter,” Tian said, and pointed to the clouds of dust far beyond the Whye. “Yonder comes the first one; it’ll be here either the day of Wolves or the day after, I judge.”

“The day of, sai,” said Andy. “‘Semimon comin, warm days go runnin.’ So they say.” He bent toward Eddie. Clickings came from inside his gleaming head. His blue eyes flashed on and off. “Eddie, I have cast a great horoscope, very long and complex, and it shows victory against the Wolves! A great victory, indeed! You will vanquish your enemies and then meet a beautiful lady!”

“I already *have* a beautiful lady,” Eddie said, trying to keep his voice pleasant. He knew perfectly well what those rapidly flashing blue lights meant; the son of a bitch was laughing at him. *Well, he thought, maybe you’ll be laughing on the other side of your face a couple of days from now, Andy. I certainly hope so.*

“So you do, but many a married man has had his jilly, as I told sai Tian Jaffords not so long ago.”

“Not those who love their wives,” Tian said. “I told you so then and I tell you now.”

“Andy, old buddy,” Eddie said earnestly, “we came out here in hopes that you’d do us a solid on the night before the Wolves come. Help us a little, you know.”

There were several clicking sounds deep in Andy’s chest, and this time when his eyes flashed, they almost seemed alarmed. “I would if I could, sai,” Andy said, “oh yes, there’s nothing I like more than helping my friends, but there are a great many things I can’t do, much as I might like to.”

“Because of your programming.”

“Aye.” The smug so-happy-to-see-you tone had gone out of Andy’s voice. He sounded more like a machine now. *Yeah, that’s his fallback position, Eddie thought. That’s Andy being careful. You’ve seen em come and go, haven’t you, Andy? Sometimes they call you a useless bag of bolts and*

mostly they ignore you, but either way you end up walking over their bones and singing your songs, don't you? But not this time, pal. No, I don't think so.

“When were you built, Andy? I’m curious. When did you roll off the old LaMerk assembly line?”

“Long ago, sai.” The blue eyes flashing very slowly now. Not laughing anymore.

“Two thousand years?”

“Longer, I believe. Sai, I know a song about drinking that you might like, it’s very amusing—”

“Maybe another time. Listen, good buddy, if you’re thousands of years old, how is it that you’re programmed concerning the Wolves?”

From inside Andy there came a deep, reverberant clunk, as though something had broken. When he spoke again, it was in the dead, emotionless voice Eddie had first heard on the edge of Mid-Forest. The voice of Bosco Bob when ole Bosco was getting ready to cloud up and rain all over you.

“What’s your password, sai Eddie?”

“Think we’ve been down this road before, haven’t we?”

“Password. You have ten seconds. Nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . ”

“That password shit’s very convenient for you, isn’t it?”

“Incorrect password, sai Eddie.”

“Kinda like taking the Fifth.”

“Two . . . one . . . zero. You may retry once. Would you retry, Eddie?”

Eddie gave him a sunny smile. “Does the seminon blow in the summertime, old buddy?”

More clicks and clacks. Andy’s head, which had been tilted one way, now tilted the other. “I do not follow you, Eddie of New York.”

“Sorry. I’m just being a silly old human bean, aren’t I? No, I don’t want to retry. At least not right now. Let me tell you what we’d like you to help us with, and you can tell us if your programming will allow you to do it. Does that sound fair?”

“Fair as fresh air, Eddie.”

“Okay.” Eddie reached up and took hold of Andy’s thin metal arm. The surface was smooth and somehow unpleasant to the touch. Greasy. Oily. Eddie held on nonetheless, and lowered his voice to a

confidential level. “I’m only telling you this because you’re clearly good at keeping secrets.”

“Oh, yes, sai Eddie! No one keeps a secret like Andy!” The robot was back on solid ground and back to his old self, smug and complacent.

“Well . . . ” Eddie went up on tiptoe. “Bend down here.”

Servomotors hummed inside Andy’s casing—inside what would have been his heartbox, had he not been a high-tech tin-man. He bent down. Eddie, meanwhile, stretched up even further, feeling absurdly like a small boy telling a secret.

“The Pere’s got some guns from our level of the Tower,” he murmured. “Good ones.”

Andy’s head swiveled around. His eyes glared out with a brilliance that could only have been astonishment. Eddie kept a poker face, but inside he was grinning.

“Say true, Eddie?”

“Say thankya.”

“Pere says they’re powerful,” Tian said. “If they work, we can use em to blow the living bugger out of the Wolves. But we have to get em out north of town . . . and they’re heavy. Can you help us load em in a bucka on Wolf’s Eve, Andy?”

Silence. Clicks and clacks.

“Programming won’t let him, I bet,” Eddie said sadly. “Well, if we get enough strong backs—”

“I can help you,” Andy said. “Where are these guns, sais?”

“Better not say just now,” Eddie replied. “You meet us at the Pere’s rectory early on Wolf’s Eve, all right?”

“What hour would you have me?”

“How does six sound?”

“Six o’ the clock. And how many guns will there be? Tell me that much, at least, so I may calculate the required energy levels.”

My friend, it takes a bullshitter to recognize bullshit, Eddie thought merrily, but kept a straight face. “There be a dozen. Maybe fifteen. They weigh a couple of hundred pounds each. Do you know pounds, Andy?”

“Aye, say thankya. A pound is roughly four hundred and fifty grams. Sixteen ounces. ‘A pint’s a pound, the world around.’ Those

are big guns, sai Eddie, say true! Will they shoot?"

"We're pretty sure they will," Eddie said. "Aren't we, Tian?"

Tian nodded. "And you'll help us?"

"Aye, happy to. Six o' the clock, at the rectory."

"Thank you, Andy," Eddie said. He started away, then looked back. "You absolutely won't talk about this, will you?"

"No, sai, not if you tell me not to."

"That's just what I'm telling you. The last thing we want is for the Wolves to find out we've got some big guns to use against em."

"Of course not," Andy said. "What good news this is. Have a wonderful day, sais."

"And you, Andy," Eddie replied. "And you."

ELEVEN

Walking back toward Tian's place—it was only two miles distant from where they'd come upon Andy—Tian said, "Does he believe it?"

"I don't know," Eddie said, "but it surprised the shit out of him—did you feel that?"

"Yes," Tian said. "Yes, I did."

"He'll be there to see for himself, I guarantee that much."

Tian nodded, smiling. "Your dinh is clever."

"That he is," Eddie agreed. "That he is."

TWELVE

Once more Jake lay awake, looking up at the ceiling of Benny's room. Once more Oy lay on Benny's bed, curved into a comma with his nose beneath his squiggle of tail. Tomorrow night Jake would be back at Father Callahan's, back with his ka-tet, and he couldn't wait. Tomorrow would be Wolf's Eve, but this was only the *eve* of Wolf's Eve, and Roland had felt it would be best for Jake to stay this one last night at the Rocking B. "We don't want to raise suspicions this late in the game," he'd said. Jake understood, but boy, this was sick. The prospect of standing against the Wolves was bad enough. The thought of how Benny might look at him two days from now was even worse.

Maybe we'll all get killed, Jake thought. *Then I won't have to worry about it.*

In his distress, this idea actually had a certain attraction.

"Jake? You asleep?"

For a moment Jake considered faking it, but something inside sneered at such cowardice. "No," he said. "But I ought to try, Benny. I doubt if I'll get much tomorrow night."

"I guess *not*," Benny whispered back respectfully, and then: "You scared?"

" 'Course I am," Jake said. "What do you think I am, crazy?"

Benny got up on one elbow. "How many do you think you'll kill?"

Jake thought about it. It made him sick to think about it, way down in the pit of his stomach, but he thought about it anyway. "Dunno. If there's seventy, I guess I'll have to try to get ten."

He found himself thinking (with a mild sense of wonder) of Ms. Avery's English class. The hanging yellow globes with ghostly dead flies lying in their bellies. Lucas Hanson, who always tried to trip him when he was going up the aisle. Sentences diagrammed on the blackboard: beware the misplaced modifier. Petra Jesserling, who always wore A-line jumpers and had a crush on him (or so Mike Yanko claimed). The drone of Ms. Avery's voice. Outs at noon—what would be plain old lunch in a plain old public school. Sitting at his desk afterward and trying to stay awake. Was that boy, that neat Piper School boy, actually going out to the north of a farming town called Calla Bryn Sturgis to battle child-stealing monsters? Could that boy be lying dead thirty-six hours from now with his guts in a steaming pile behind him, blown out of his back and into the dirt by something called a sneetch? Surely that wasn't possible, was it? The housekeeper, Mrs. Shaw, had cut the crusts off his sandwiches and sometimes called him 'Bama. His father had taught him how to calculate a fifteen per cent tip. Such boys surely did not go out to die with guns in their hands. Did they?

"I bet you get *twenty!*" Benny said. "Boy, I wish I could be with you! We'd fight side by side! Pow! Pow! Pow! Then we'd reload!"

Jake sat up and looked at Benny with real curiosity. "*Would* you?" he asked. "If you could?"

Benny thought about it. His face changed, was suddenly older and wiser. He shook his head. “Nah. I’d be scared. Aren’t you really scared? Say true?”

“Scared to death,” Jake said simply.

“Of dying?”

“Yeah, but I’m even more scared of fucking up.”

“You won’t.”

Easy for you to say, Jake thought.

“If I have to go with the little kids, at least I’m glad my father’s going, too,” Benny said. “He’s taking his bah. You ever seen him shoot?”

“No.”

“Well, he’s good with it. If any of the Wolves get past you guys, he’ll take care of them. He’ll find that gill-place on their chests, and *pow!*”

What if Benny knew the gill-place was a lie? Jake wondered. False information this boy’s father would hopefully pass on? What if he knew—

Eddie spoke up in his head, Eddie with his wise-ass Brooklyn accent in full flower. *Yeah, and if fish had bicycles, every fuckin river’d be the Tour de France.*

“Benny, I really have to try to get some sleep.”

Benny lay back down. Jake did the same, and resumed looking up at the ceiling. All at once he hated it that Oy was on Benny’s bed, that Oy had taken so naturally to the other boy. All at once he hated everything about everything. The hours until morning, when he could pack, mount his borrowed pony, and ride back to town, seemed to stretch out into infinity.

“Jake?”

“What, Benny, *what?*”

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to say I’m glad you came here. We had some fun, didn’t we?”

“Yeah,” Jake said, and thought: *No one would believe he’s older than me. He sounds about . . . I don’t know . . . five, or something.* That was mean, but Jake had an idea that if he wasn’t mean, he might actually start to cry. He hated Roland for sentencing him to this last night at the Rocking B. “Yeah, fun big-big.”

“I’m gonna miss you. But I’ll bet they put up a statue of you guys in the Pavilion, or something.” *Guys* was a word Benny had picked up from Jake, and he used it every chance he got.

“I’ll miss you, too,” Jake said.

“You’re lucky, getting to follow the Beam and travel places. I’ll probably be here in this shitty town the rest of my life.”

No, you won’t. You and your Da’ are going to do plenty of wandering . . . if you’re lucky and they let you out of town, that is. What you’re going to do, I think, is spend the rest of your life dreaming about this shitty little town. About a place that was home. And it’s my doing. I saw . . . and I told. But what else could I do?

“Jake?”

He could stand no more. It would drive him mad. “Go to sleep, Benny. And let *me* go to sleep.”

“Okay.”

Benny rolled over to face the wall. In a little while his breathing slowed. A little while after that, he began snoring. Jake lay awake until nearly midnight, and then he went to sleep, too. And had a dream. In it Roland was down on his knees in the dust of East Road, facing a great horde of oncoming Wolves that stretched from the bluffs to the river. He was trying to reload, but both of his hands were stiff and one was short two fingers. The bullets fell uselessly in front of him. He was still trying to load his great revolver when the Wolves rode him down.

THIRTEEN

Dawn of Wolf’s Eve. Eddie and Susannah stood at the window of the Pere’s guest room, looking down the slope of lawn to Rosa’s cottage.

“He’s found something with her,” Susannah said. “I’m glad for him.”

Eddie nodded. “How you feeling?”

She smiled up at him. “I’m fine,” she said, and meant it. “What about you, sugar?”

“I’ll miss sleeping in a real bed with a roof over my head, and I’m anxious to get to it, but otherwise I’m fine, too.”

“Things go wrong, you won’t have to worry about the accommodations.”

“That’s true,” Eddie said, “but I don’t think they’re going to go wrong. Do you?”

Before she could answer, a gust of wind shook the house and whistled beneath the eaves. The seminon saying good day to ya, Eddie guessed.

“I don’t like that wind,” she said. “It’s a wild-card.”

Eddie opened his mouth.

“And if you say anything about ka, I’ll punch you in the nose.”

Eddie closed his mouth again and mimed zipping it shut. Susannah went to his nose anyway, a brief touch of knuckles like a feather. “We’ve got a fine chance to win,” she said. “They’ve had everything their own way for a long time, and it’s made em fat. Like Blaine.”

“Yeah. Like Blaine.”

She put a hand on his hip and turned him to her. “But things *could* go wrong, so I want to tell you something while it’s just the two of us, Eddie. I want to tell you how much I love you.” She spoke simply, with no drama.

“I know you do,” he said, “but I’ll be damned if I know why.”

“Because you make me feel whole,” she said. “When I was younger, I used to vacillate between thinking love was this great and glorious mystery and thinking it was just something a bunch of Hollywood movie producers made up to sell more tickets back in the Depression, when Dish Night kind of played out.”

Eddie laughed.

“Now I think that all of us are born with a hole in our hearts, and we go around looking for the person who can fill it. You . . . Eddie, you fill me up.” She took his hand and began to lead him back to the bed. “And right now I’d like you to fill me up the other way.”

“Suze, is it safe?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “and I don’t care.”

They made love slowly, the pace only building near the end. She cried out softly against his shoulder, and in the instant before his own climax blotted out reflection, Eddie thought: *I’m going to lose her if I’m not careful. I don’t know how I know that . . . but I do. She’ll just disappear.*

“I love you, too,” he said when they were finished and lying side by side again.

“Yes.” She took his hand. “I know. I’m glad.”

“It’s good to make someone glad,” he said. “I didn’t use to know that.”

“It’s all right,” Susannah said, and kissed the corner of his mouth. “You learn fast.”

FOURTEEN

There was a rocker in Rosa’s little living room. The gunslinger sat in it naked, holding a clay saucer in one hand. He was smoking and looking out at the sunrise. He wasn’t sure he would ever again see it rise from this place.

Rosa came out of the bedroom, also naked, and stood in the doorway looking at him. “How’re y’bones, tell me, I beg?”

Roland nodded. “That oil of yours is a wonder.”

“ ’Twon’t last.”

“No,” Roland said. “But there’s another world—my friends’ world—and maybe they have something there that will. I’ve got a feeling we’ll be going there soon.”

“More fighting to do?”

“I think so, yes.”

“You won’t be back this way in any case, will you?”

Roland looked at her. “No.”

“Are you tired, Roland?”

“To death,” said he.

“Come back to bed a little while, then, will ya not?”

He crushed out his smoke and stood. He smiled. It was a younger man’s smile. “Say thankya.”

“Thee’s a good man, Roland of Gilead.”

He considered this, then slowly shook his head. “All my life I’ve had the fastest hands, but at being good I was always a little too slow.”

She held out a hand to him. “Come ye, Roland. Come commala.” And he went to her.

FIFTEEN

Early that afternoon, Roland, Eddie, Jake, and Pere Callahan rode out the East Road—which was actually a north road at this point along the winding Devar-Tete Whye—with shovels concealed in the bedrolls at the backs of their saddles. Susannah had been excused from this duty on account of her pregnancy. She had joined the Sisters of Oriza at the Pavilion, where a larger tent was being erected and preparations for a huge evening meal were already going forward. When they left, Calla Bryn Sturgis had already begun to fill up, as if for a Fair-Day. But there was no whooping and hollering, no impudent rattle of firecrackers, no rides being set up on the Green. They had seen neither Andy nor Ben Slightman, and that was good.

“Tian?” Roland asked Eddie, breaking the rather heavy silence among them.

“He’ll meet me at the rectory. Five o’clock.”

“Good,” Roland said. “If we’re not done out here by four, you’re excused to ride back on your own.”

“I’ll go with you, if you like,” Callahan said. The Chinese believed that if you saved a man’s life, you were responsible for him ever after. Callahan had never given the idea much thought, but after pulling Eddie back from the ledge above the Doorway Cave, it seemed to him there might be truth in the notion.

“Better you stay with us,” Roland said. “Eddie can take care of this. I’ve got another job for you out here. Besides digging, I mean.”

“Oh? And what might that be?” Callahan asked.

Roland pointed at the dust-devils twisting and whirling ahead of them on the road. “Pray away this damned wind. And the sooner the better. Before tomorrow morning, certainly.”

“Are you worried about the ditch?” Jake asked.

“The ditch’ll be fine,” Roland said. “It’s the Sisters’ Orizas I’m worried about. Throwing the plate is delicate work under the best of circumstances. If it’s blowing up a gale out here when the Wolves come, the possibilities for things to go wrong—” He tossed his hand at the dusty horizon, giving it a distinctive (and fatalistic) Calla twist. “*Delah.*”

Callahan, however, was smiling. “I’ll be glad to offer a prayer,” he said, “but look east before you grow too concerned. Do ya, I beg.”

They turned that way in their saddles. Corn—the crop now over, the picked plants standing in sloping, skeletal rows—ran down to the rice-fields. Beyond the rice was the river. Beyond the river was the end of the borderlands. There, dust-devils forty feet high spun and jerked and sometimes collided. They made the ones dancing on their side of the river look like naughty children by comparison.

“The semimon often reaches the Whye and then turns back,” Callahan said. “According to the old folks, Lord Semimon begs Lady Oriza to make him welcome when he reaches the water and she often bars his passage out of jealousy. You see—”

“Semimon married her sissa,” Jake said. “Lady Riza wanted him for herself—a marriage of wind and rice—and she’s still p.o.’d about it.”

“How did you know that?” Callahan asked, both amused and astonished.

“Benny told me,” Jake said, and said no more. Thinking of their long discussions (sometimes in the hayloft, sometimes lazing on the bank of the river) and their eager exchanges of legend made him feel sad and hurt.

Callahan was nodding. “That’s the story, all right. I imagine it’s actually a weather phenomenon—cold air over there, warm air rising off the water, something like that—but whatever it is, this one shows every sign of going back where it came from.”

The wind dashed grit in his face, as if to prove him wrong, and Callahan laughed. “This’ll be over by first light tomorrow, I almost guarantee you. But—”

“Almost’s not good enough, Pere.”

“What I was going to say, Roland, is that since I know almost’s not good enough, I’ll gladly send up a prayer.”

“Tell ya thanks.” The gunslinger turned to Eddie, and pointed the first two fingers of his left hand at his own face. “The eyes, right?”

“The eyes,” Eddie agreed. “And the password. If it’s not nineteen, it’ll be ninety-nine.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“I know,” Eddie said.

“Still . . . be careful.”

“I will.”

A few minutes later they reached the place where, on their right, a rocky track wandered off into the arroyo country, toward the Gloria and Redbirds One and Two. The *folken* assumed that the buckas would be left here, and they were correct. They also assumed that the children and their minders would then walk up the track to one mine or the other. In this they were wrong.

Soon three of them were digging on the west side of the road, a fourth always standing watch. No one came—the *folken* from this far out were already in town—and the work went quickly enough. At four o'clock, Eddie left the others to finish up and rode back to town to meet Tian Jaffords with one of Roland's revolvers holstered on his hip.

SIXTEEN

Tian had brought his bah. When Eddie told him to leave it on the Pere's porch, the farmer gave him an unhappy, uncertain stare.

"He won't be surprised to see me packing iron, but he might have questions if he saw you with that thing," Eddie said. This was it, the true beginning of their stand, and now that it had come, Eddie felt calm. His heart was beating slowly and steadily. His vision seemed to have clarified; he could see each shadow cast by each individual blade of grass on the rectory lawn. "He's strong, from what I've heard. And very quick when he needs to be. Let it be my play."

"Then why am I here?"

Because even a smart robot won't expect trouble if I've got a clodhopper like you with me was the actual answer, but giving it wouldn't be very diplomatic.

"Insurance," Eddie said. "Come on."

They walked down to the privy. Eddie had used it many times during the last few weeks, and always with pleasure—there were stacks of soft grasses for the clean-up phase, and you didn't have to concern yourself with poison flurry—but he'd not examined the outside closely until now. It was a wood structure, tall and solid, but he had no doubt Andy could demolish it in short order if he really wanted to. If they gave him a chance to.

Rosa came to the back door of her cottage and looked out at them, holding a hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun. “How do ya, Eddie?”

“Fine so far, Rosie, but you better go back inside. There’s gonna be a scuffle.”

“Say true? I’ve got a stack of plates—”

“I don’t think Rizas’d help much in this case,” Eddie said. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt if you stood by, though.”

She nodded and went back inside without another word. The men sat down, flanking the open door of the privy with its new bolt-lock. Tian tried to roll a smoke. The first one fell apart in his shaking fingers and he had to try again. “I’m not good at this sort of thing,” he said, and Eddie understood he wasn’t talking about the fine art of cigarette-making.

“It’s all right.”

Tian peered at him hopefully. “Do ya say so?”

“I do, so let it be so.”

Promptly at six o’clock (*The bastard’s probably got a clock set right down to millionths of a second inside him*, Eddie thought), Andy came around the rectory-house, his shadow trailing out long and spidery on the grass in front of him. He saw them. His blue eyes flashed. He raised a hand in greeting. The setting sun reflected off his arm, making it look as though it had been dipped in blood. Eddie raised his own hand in return and stood up, smiling. He wondered if all the thinking-machines that still worked in this rundown world had turned against their masters, and if so, why.

“Just be cool and let me do the talking,” he said out of the corner of his mouth.

“Yes, all right.”

“Eddie!” Andy cried. “Tian Jaffords! How good to see you both! And weapons to use against the Wolves! My! Where are they?”

“Stacked in the shithouse,” Eddie said. “We can get a wagon down here once they’re out, but they’re heavy . . . and there isn’t much room to move around in there . . .”

He stood aside. Andy came on. His eyes were flashing, but not in laughter now. They were so brilliant Eddie had to squint—it was like looking at flashbulbs.

“I’m sure I can get them out,” Andy said. “How good it is to help! How often I’ve regretted how little my programming allows me to . . .”

He was standing in the privy door now, bent slightly at the thighs to get his metallic barrel of a head below the level of the jamb. Eddie drew Roland’s gun. As always, the sandalwood grip felt smooth and eager against his palm.

“Cry your pardon, Eddie of New York, but I see no guns.”

“No,” Eddie agreed. “Me either. Actually all I see is a fucking traitor who teaches songs to the kids and then sends them to be—”

Andy turned with terrible liquid speed. To Eddie’s ears the hum of the servos in his neck seemed very loud. They were standing less than three feet apart, point-blank range. “May it do ya fine, you stainless-steel bastard,” Eddie said, and fired twice. The reports were deafening in the evening stillness. Andy’s eyes exploded and went dark. Tian cried out.

“*NO!*” Andy screamed in an amplified voice. It was so loud that it made the gunshots seem no more than popping corks by comparison. “*NO, MY EYES, I CAN’T SEE, OH NO, VISION ZERO, MY EYES, MY EYES—*”

The scrawny stainless-steel arms flew up to the shattered sockets, where blue sparks were now jumping erratically. Andy’s legs straightened, and his barrel of a head ripped through the top of the privy’s doorway, throwing chunks of board left and right.

“*NO, NO, NO, I CAN’T SEE, VISION ZERO, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME, AMBUSH, ATTACK, I’M BLIND, CODE 7, CODE 7, CODE 7!*”

“Help me push him, Tian!” Eddie shouted, dropping the gun back into its holster. But Tian was frozen, gawking at the robot (whose head had now vanished inside the broken doorway), and Eddie had no time to wait. He lunged forward and planted his outstretched palms on the plate giving Andy’s name, function, and serial number. The robot was amazingly heavy (Eddie’s first thought was that it was like pushing a parking garage), but it was also blind, surprised, and off-balance. It stumbled backward, and suddenly the amplified words cut off. What replaced them was an unearthly shrieking siren. Eddie thought it would split his head. He grabbed the door and swung it

shut. There was a huge, ragged gap at the top, but the door still closed flush. Eddie ran the new bolt, which was as thick as his wrist.

From within the privy, the siren shrieked and warbled.

Rosa came running with a plate in both hands. Her eyes were huge. “What is it? In the name of God and the Man Jesus, *what is it?*”

Before Eddie could answer, a tremendous blow shook the privy on its foundations. It actually moved to the right, disclosing the edge of the hole beneath it.

“It’s Andy,” he said. “I think he just pulled up a horoscope he doesn’t much care f—”

“*YOU BASTARDS!*” This voice was totally unlike Andy’s usual three forms of address: smarmy, self-satisfied, or falsely subservient. “*YOU BASTARDS! COZENING BASTARDS! I’LL KILL YOU! I’M BLIND, OH, I’M BLIND, CODE 7! CODE 7!*” The words ceased and the siren recommenced. Rosa dropped her plates and clapped her hands over her ears.

Another blow slammed against the side of the privy, and this time two of the stout boards bowed outward. The next one broke them. Andy’s arm flashed through, gleaming red in the light, the four jointed fingers at the end opening and closing spasmodically. In the distance, Eddie could hear the crazy barking of dogs.

“He’s going to get out, Eddie!” Tian shouted, grabbing Eddie’s shoulder. “He’s going to get out!”

Eddie shook the hand off and stepped to the door. There was another crashing blow. More broken boards popped off the side of the privy. The lawn was scattered with them now. But he couldn’t shout against the wail of the siren, it was just too loud. He waited, and before Andy hammered the side of the privy again, it cut off.

“*BASTARDS!*” Andy screamed. “*I’LL KILL YOU! DIRECTIVE 20, CODE 7! I’M BLIND, ZERO VISION, YOU COWARDLY—*”

“Andy, Messenger Robot!” Eddie shouted. He had jotted the serial number on one of Callahan’s precious scraps of paper, with Callahan’s stub of pencil, and now he read it off. “DNF-44821-V-63! Password!”

The frenzied blows and amplified shouting ceased as soon as Eddie finished giving the serial number, yet even the silence wasn’t silent; his ears still rang with the hellish shriek of the siren. There was a

clank of metal and the click of relays. Then: “This is DNF-44821-V-63. Please give password.” A pause, and then, tonelessly: “You ambushing bastard Eddie Dean of New York. You have ten seconds. Nine . . . ”

“Nineteen,” Eddie said through the door.

“Incorrect password.” And, tin man or not, there was no mistaking the furious pleasure in Andy’s voice. “Eight . . . seven . . . ”

“Ninety-nine.”

“Incorrect password.” Now what Eddie heard was triumph. He had time to regret his insane cockiness out on the road. Time to see the look of terror which passed between Rosa and Tian. Time to realize the dogs were still barking.

“Five . . . four . . . ”

Not nineteen; not ninety-nine. What else was there? What in the name of Christ turned the bastard off?

“. . . three . . . ”

What flashed into his mind, as bright as Andy’s eyes had been before Roland’s big revolver turned them dark, was the verse scrawled on the fence around the vacant lot, spray-painted in dusty rose-pink letters: *Oh SUSANNAH-MIO, divided girl of mine, Done parked her RIG in the DIXIE PIG, in the year of—*

“. . . two . . . ”

Not one or the other; *both*. Which was why the damned robot hadn’t cut him off after a single incorrect try. He *hadn’t* been incorrect, not exactly.

“*Nineteen-ninety-nine!*” Eddie screamed through the door.

From behind it, utter silence. Eddie waited for the siren to start up again, waited for Andy to resume bashing his way out of the privy. He’d tell Tian and Rosa to run, try to cover them—

The voice that spoke from inside the battered building was colorless and flat: the voice of a machine. Both the fake smarminess and the genuine fury were gone. Andy as generations of *Calla-folken* had known him was gone, and for good.

“Thank you,” the voice said. “I am Andy, a messenger robot, many other functions. Serial number DNF-44821-V-63. How may I help?”

“By shutting yourself down.”

Silence from the privy.

“Do you understand what I’m asking?”

A small, horrified voice said, “Please don’t make me. You bad man. Oh, you bad man.”

“Shut yourself down *now*.”

A longer silence. Rosa stood with her hand pressed against her throat. Several men appeared around the side of the Pere’s house, armed with various homely weapons. Rosa waved them back.

“DNF-44821-V-63, comply!”

“Yes, Eddie of New York. I will shut myself down.” A horrible self-pitying sadness had crept into Andy’s new small voice. It made Eddie’s skin crawl. “Andy is blind and will shut down. Are you aware that with my main power cells ninety-eight per cent depleted, I may never be able to power up again?”

Eddie remembered the vast roont twins out at the Jaffords smallhold—Tia and Zalman—and then thought of all the others like them this unlucky town had known over the years. He dwelled particularly on the Tavery twins, so bright and quick and eager to please. And so beautiful. “Never won’t be long enough,” he said, “but I guess it’ll have to do. Palaver’s done, Andy. Shut down.”

Another silence from within the half-busted privy. Tian and Rosa crept up to either side of Eddie and the three of them stood together in front of the locked door. Rosa gripped Eddie’s forearm. He shook her off immediately. He wanted his hand free in case he had to draw. Although where he would shoot now that Andy’s eyes were gone, he didn’t know.

When Andy spoke again, it was in a toneless amplified voice that made Tian and Rosa gasp and step back. Eddie stayed where he was. He had heard a voice like this and words like this once before, in the clearing of the great bear. Andy’s rap wasn’t quite the same, but close enough for government work.

“DNF-44821-V-63 IS SHUTTING DOWN! ALL SUBNUCLEAR CELLS AND MEMORY CIRCUITS ARE IN SHUTDOWN PHASE! SHUTDOWN IS 13 PER CENT COMPLETE! I AM ANDY, MESSENGER ROBOT, MANY OTHER FUNCTIONS! PLEASE REPORT MY LOCATION TO LAMERK INDUSTRIES OR NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD! CALL 1-900-54! REWARD IS OFFERED! REPEAT, REWARD IS OFFERED!” There was a click as the message recycled. *“DNF-44821-V-63 IS SHUTTING DOWN! ALL SUBNUCLEAR CELLS AND MEMORY*

CIRCUITS ARE IN SHUTDOWN PHASE! SHUTDOWN IS 19 PER CENT COMPLETE! I AM ANDY—

“You *were* Andy,” Eddie said softly. He turned to Tian and Rosa, and had to smile at their scared-children’s faces. “It’s all right,” he said. “It’s over. He’ll go on blaring like that for awhile, and then he’ll be done. You can turn him into a . . . I don’t know . . . a planter, or something.”

“I think we’ll tear up the floor and bury him right there,” Rosa said, nodding at the privy.

Eddie’s smile widened and became a grin. He liked the idea of burying Andy in shit. He liked that idea very well.

SEVENTEEN

As dusk ended and night deepened, Roland sat on the edge of the bandstand and watched the *Calla-folken* tuck into their great dinner. Every one of them knew it might be the last meal they’d ever eat together, that tomorrow night at this time their nice little town might lie in smoking ruins all about them, but still they were cheerful. And not, Roland thought, entirely for the sake of the children. There was great relief in finally deciding to do the right thing. Even when folk knew the price was apt to be high, that relief came. A kind of giddiness. Most of these people would sleep on the Green tonight with their children and grandchildren in the tent nearby, and here they would stay, their faces turned to the northeast of town, waiting for the outcome of the battle. There would be gunshots, they reckoned (it was a sound many of them had never heard), and then the dust-cloud that marked the Wolves would either dissipate, turn back the way it had come, or roll on toward town. If the last, the *folken* would scatter and wait for the burning to commence. When it was over, they would be refugees in their own place. Would they rebuild, if that was how the cards fell? Roland doubted it. With no children to build for—because the Wolves *would* take them all this time if they won, the gunslinger did not doubt it—there would be no reason. At the end of the next cycle, this place would be a ghost town.

“Cry your pardon, sai.”

Roland looked around. There stood Wayne Overholser, with his hat in his hands. Standing thus, he looked more like a wandering saddle-tramp down on his luck than the Calla's big farmer. His eyes were large and somehow mournful.

"No need to cry my pardon when I'm still wearing the dayrider hat you gave me," Roland said mildly.

"Yar, but . . ." Overholser trailed off, thought of how he wanted to go on, and then seemed to decide to fly straight at it. "Reuben Caverra was one of the fellas you meant to take to guard the children during the fight, wasn't he?"

"Aye?"

"His gut busted this morning." Overholser touched his own swelling belly about where his appendix might have been. "He lays home feverish and raving. He'll likely die of the bloodmuck. Some get better, aye, but not many."

"I'm sorry to hear it," Roland said, trying to think who would be best to replace Caverra, a hulk of a man who had impressed Roland as not knowing much about fear and probably nothing at all about cowardice.

"Take me instea', would ye?"

Roland eyed him.

"Please, gunslinger. I can't stand aside. I thought I could—that I must—but I can't. It's making me sick." And yes, Roland thought, he *did* look sick.

"Does your wife know, Wayne?"

"Aye."

"And says aye?"

"She does."

Roland nodded. "Be here half an hour before dawn."

A look of intense, almost painful gratitude filled Overholser's face and made him look weirdly young. "Thankee, Roland! Say thankee! Big-big!"

"Glad to have you. Now listen to me a minute."

"Aye?"

"Things won't be just the way I told them at the big meeting."

"Because of Andy, y'mean."

"Yes, partly that."

“What else? You don’t mean to say there’s *another* traitor, do’ee? You don’t mean to say that?”

“All I mean to say is that if you want to come with us, you have to roll with us. Do you ken?”

“Yes, Roland, Very well.”

Overholser thanked him again for the chance to die north of town and then hurried off with his hat still in his hands. Before Roland could change his mind, perhaps.

Eddie came over. “Overholser’s coming to the dance?”

“Looks like it. How much trouble did you have with Andy?”

“It went all right,” Eddie said, not wanting to admit that he, Tian, and Rosalita had probably all come within a second of being toast. In the distance, they could still hear him bellowing. But probably not for much longer; the amplified voice was claiming shutdown was seventy-nine per cent complete.

“I think you did very well.”

A compliment from Roland always made Eddie feel like king of the world, but he tried not to show it. “As long as we do well tomorrow.”

“Susannah?”

“Seems fine.”

“No . . . ?” Roland rubbed above his left eyebrow.

“No, not that I’ve seen.”

“And no talking short and sharp?”

“No, she’s good for it. Practiced with her plates all the time you guys were digging.” Eddie tipped his chin toward Jake, who was sitting by himself on a swing with Oy at his feet. “That’s the one I’m worried about. I’ll be glad to get him out of here. This has been hard for him.”

“It’ll be harder on the other boy,” Roland said, and stood up. “I’m going back to Pere’s. Going to get some sleep.”

“*Can* you sleep?”

“Oh, yes,” Roland said. “With the help of Rosa’s cat-oil, I’ll sleep like a rock. You and Susannah and Jake should also try.”

“Okay.”

Roland nodded somberly. “I’ll wake you tomorrow morning. We’ll ride down here together.”

“And we’ll fight.”

“Yes,” Roland said. He looked at Eddie. His blue eyes gleamed in the glow of the torches. “We’ll fight. Until they’re dead, or we are.”

CHAPTER VII: THE WOLVES

ONE

See this now, see it very well:

Here is a road as wide and as well-maintained as any secondary road in America, but of the smooth packed dirt the Calla-folk call oggan. Ditches for runoff border both sides; here and there neat and well-maintained wooden culverts run beneath the oggan. In the faint, unearthly light that comes before dawn, a dozen bucka waggons—they are the kind driven by the Manni, with rounded canvas tops—roll along the road. The canvas is bright clean white, to reflect the sun and keep the interiors cool on hot summer days, and they look like strange, low-floating clouds. The cumulus kind, may it do ya. Each waggon is drawn by a team of six mules or four horses. On the seat of each, driving, are either a pair of fighters or of designated child-minders. Overholser is driving the lead waggon, with Margaret Eisenhart beside him. Next in line comes Roland of Gilead, mated with Ben Slightman. Fifth is Tian and Zalia Jaffords. Seventh is Eddie and Susannah Dean. Susannah's wheelchair is folded up in the waggon behind her. Bucky and Annabelle Javier are in charge of the tenth. On the peak-seat of the last waggon are Father Donald Callahan and Rosalita Munoz.

Inside the buckas are ninety-nine children. The left-over twin—the one that makes for an odd number—is Benny Slightman, of course. He is riding in the last waggon. (He felt uncomfortable about going with his father.) The children don't speak. Some of the younger ones have gone back to sleep; they will have to be awakened shortly, when the waggons reach their destination. Ahead, now less than a mile, is

the place where the path into the arroyo country splits off to the left. On the right, the land runs down a mild slope to the river. All the drivers keep looking to the east, toward the constant darkness that is Thunderclap. They are watching for an approaching dust-cloud. There is none. Not yet. Even the seminon winds have fallen still. Callahan's prayers seem to have been answered, at least in that regard.

TWO

Ben Slightman, sitting next to Roland on the bucka's peak-seat, spoke in a voice so low the gunslinger could barely hear him. "What will'ee do to me, then?"

If asked, when the waggons set out from Calla Bryn Sturgis, to give odds on Slightman's surviving this day, Roland might have put them at five in a hundred. Surely no better. There were two crucial questions that needed to be asked and then answered correctly. The first had to come from Slightman himself. Roland hadn't really expected the man to ask it, but here it was, out of his mouth. Roland turned his head and looked at him.

Vaughn Eisenhart's foreman was very pale, but he took off his spectacles and met Roland's gaze. The gunslinger ascribed no special courage to this. Surely Slightman the Elder had had time to take Roland's measure and knew that he *must* look the gunslinger in the eye if he was to have any hope at all, little as he might like to do it.

"Yar, I know," Slightman said. His voice was steady, at least so far. "Know what? That *you* know."

"Have since we took your pard, I suppose," Roland said. The word was deliberately sarcastic (sarcasm was the only form of humor Roland truly understood), and Slightman winced at it: pard. Your pard. But he nodded, eyes still steady on Roland's.

"I had to figure that if you knew about Andy, you knew about me. Although he'd never have peached on me. Such wasn't in his programming." At last it was too much and he could bear the eye-contact no longer. He looked down, biting his lip. "Mostly I knew because of Jake."

Roland wasn't able to keep the surprise out of his face.

“He changed. He didn’t mean to, not as trig as he is—and as brave—but he did. Not toward me, toward my boy. Over the last week, week and a half. Benny was only . . . well, puzzled, I guess you’d say. He felt something but didn’t know what it was. I did. It was like your boy didn’t want to be around him anymore. I asked myself what could do that. The answer seemed pretty clear. Clear as short beer, do ya.”

Roland was falling behind Overholser’s waggon. He flicked the reins over the backs of his own team. They moved a little faster. From behind them came the quiet sound of the children, some talking now but most snoring, and the muted jingle of trace. He’d asked Jake to collect up a small box of children’s possessions, and had seen the boy doing it. He was a good boy who never put off a chore. This morning he wore a dayrider hat to keep the sun out of his eyes, and his father’s gun. He rode on the seat of the eleventh waggon, with one of the Estrada men. He guessed that Slightman had a good boy, too, which had gone far toward making this the mess that it was.

“Jake was at the Dogan one night when you and Andy were there, passing on news of your neighbors,” Roland said. On the seat beside him, Slightman winced like a man who has just been punched in the belly.

“There,” he said. “Yes, I could almost sense . . . or thought I could . . .” A longer pause, and then: “*Fuck.*”

Roland looked east. A little brighter over there now, but still no dust. Which was good. Once the dust appeared, the Wolves would come in a rush. Their gray horses would be fast. Continuing on, speaking almost idly, Roland asked the other question. If Slightman answered in the negative, he wouldn’t live to see the coming of the Wolves no matter how fast their gray horses rode.

“If you’d found him, Slightman—if you’d found *my* boy—would you have killed him?”

Slightman put his spectacles back on as he struggled with it. Roland couldn’t tell if he understood the importance of the question or not. He waited to see if the father of Jake’s friend would live or die. He’d have to decide quickly; they were approaching the place where the waggons would stop and the children would get down.

The man at last raised his head and met Roland’s eyes again. He opened his mouth to speak and couldn’t. The fact of the matter was

clear enough: he could answer the gunslinger's question, or he could look into the gunslinger's face, but he could not do both at the same time.

Dropping his gaze back to the splintery wood between his feet, Slightman said: "Yes, I reckon we would have killed him." A pause. A nod. When he moved his head a tear fell from one eye and splashed on the wood of the peak-seat's floor. "Yar, what else?" Now he looked up; now he could meet Roland's eyes again, and when he did he saw his fate had been decided. "Make it quick," said he, "and don't let me boy see it happen. Beg ya please."

Roland flapped the reins over the mules' backs again. Then he said: "I won't be the one to stop your miserable breath."

Slightman's breath *did* stop. Telling the gunslinger that yes, he would have killed a twelve-year-old boy to protect his secret, his face had had a kind of strained nobility. Now it wore hope instead, and hope made it ugly. Nearly grotesque. Then he let his breath out in a ragged sigh and said, "You're fooling with me. A-teasing me. You're going to kill me, all right. Why would you not?"

"A coward judges all he sees by what he is," Roland remarked. "I'd not kill you unless I had to, Slightman, because I love my own boy. You must understand that much, don't you? To love a boy?"

"Yar." Slightman lowered his head again and began to rub the back of his sunburned neck. The neck he must have thought would end this day packed in dirt.

"But you have to understand something. For your own good and Benny's as much as ours. If the Wolves win, you *will* die. That much you can be sure of. 'Take it to the bank,' Eddie and Susannah say."

Slightman was looking at him again, eyes narrowed behind his specs.

"Hear me well, Slightman, and take understanding from what I say. We're not going to be where the Wolves think we're going to be, and neither are the kiddies. Win or lose, this time they're going to leave some bodies behind. And win or lose, they'll know they were misled. Who was there in Calla Bryn Sturgis to mislead them? Only two. Andy and Ben Slightman. Andy's shut down, gone beyond the reach of their vengeance." He gave Slightman a smile that was as cold as the

earth's north end. "But you're not. Nor the only one you care for in your poor excuse for a heart."

Slightman sat considering this. It was clearly a new idea to him, but once he saw the logic of it, it was undeniable.

"They'll likely think you switched sides a-purpose," Roland said, "but even if you could convince them it was an accident, they'd kill you just the same. And your son, as well. For vengeance."

A red stain had seeped into the man's cheeks as the gunslinger spoke—roses of shame, Roland supposed—but as he considered the probability of his son's murder at the hands of the Wolves, he grew white once more. Or perhaps it was the thought of Benny being taken east that did it—being taken east and roont. "I'm sorry," he said. "Sorry for what I've done."

"Balls to your sorry," Roland said. "Ka works and the world moves on."

Slightman made no reply.

"I'm disposed to send you with the kids, just as I said I would," Roland told him. "If things go as I hope, you won't see a single moment's action. If things don't go as I hope, you want to remember Sarey Adams is boss of that shooting match, and if I talk to her after, you want to hope that she says you did everything you were told to do." When this met with only more silence from Slightman, the gunslinger spoke sharply. "Tell me you understand, gods damn you. I want to hear 'Yes, Roland, I ken.' "

"Yes, Roland, I ken very well." There was a pause. "If we *do* win, will the *folken* find out, do'ee reckon? Find out about . . . me?"

"Not from Andy, they won't," Roland said. "His blabber's done. And not from me, if you do as you now promise. Not from my ka-tet, either. Not out of respect for you, but out of respect for Jake Chambers. And if the Wolves fall into the trap I've laid them, why would the *folken* ever suspect another traitor?" He measured Slightman with his cool eyes. "They're innocent folk. Trusting. As ye know. Certainly ye used it."

The flush came back. Slightman looked down at the floor of the peak-seat again. Roland looked up and saw the place he was looking for now less than a quarter of a mile ahead. Good. There was still no dust-cloud on the eastern horizon, but he could feel it gathering in

his mind. The Wolves were coming, oh yes. Somewhere across the river they had dismounted their train and mounted their horses and were riding like hell. And from it, he had no doubt.

“I did it for my son,” Slightman said. “Andy came to me and said they would surely take him. Somewhere over there, Roland—” He pointed east, toward Thunderclap. “Somewhere over there are poor creatures called Breakers. Prisoners. Andy says they’re telepaths and psychokinetics, and although I ken neither word, I know they’re to do with the mind. The Breakers are human, and they eat what we eat to nourish their bodies, but they need other food, *special* food, to nourish whatever it is that makes *them* special.”

“Brain-food,” Roland said. He remembered that his mother had called fish brain-food. And then, for no reason he could tell, he found himself thinking of Susannah’s nocturnal prowls. Only it wasn’t Susannah who visited that midnight banquet hall; it was Mia. Daughter of none.

“Yar, I reckon,” Slightman agreed. “Anyway, it’s something only twins have, something that links them mind-to-mind. And these fellows—not the Wolves, but they who send the Wolves—take it out. When it’s gone, the kids’re idiots. Roont. It’s *food*, Roland, do ya kennit? *That’s* why they take em! To feed their goddamned *Breakers*! Not their bellies or their bodies, but their minds! And I don’t even know what it is they’ve been set to break!”

“The two Beams that still hold the Tower,” Roland said.

Slightman was thunderstruck. And fearful. “The Dark Tower?” He whispered the words. “Do ya say so?”

“I do,” Roland said. “Who’s Finli? Finli o’ Tego.”

“I don’t know. A voice that takes my reports, is all. A taheen, I think—do you know what that is?”

“Do you?”

Slightman shook his head.

“Then we’ll leave it. Mayhap I’ll meet him in time and he’ll answer to hand for this business.”

Slightman did not reply, but Roland sensed his doubt. That was all right. They’d almost made it now, and the gunslinger felt an invisible band which had been cinched about his middle begin to loosen. He turned fully to the foreman for the first time. “There’s always been

someone like you for Andy to cozen, Slightman; I have no doubt it's mostly what he was left here for, just as I have no doubt that your daughter, Benny's sister, didn't die an accidental death. They always need one left-over twin, and one weak parent."

"You can't—"

"Shut up. You've said all that's good for you."

Slightman sat silent beside Roland on the seat.

"I understand betrayal. I've done my share of it, once to Jake himself. But that doesn't change what you are; let's have that straight. You're a carrion-bird. A rustie turned vulture."

The color was back in Slightman's cheeks, turning them the shade of claret. "I did what I did for my boy," he said stubbornly.

Roland spat into his cupped hand, then raised the hand and caressed Slightman's cheek with it. The cheek was currently full of blood, and hot to the touch. Then the gunslinger took hold of the spectacles Slightman wore and jiggled them slightly on the man's nose. "Won't wash," he said, very quietly. "Because of these. This is how they mark you, Slightman. This is your brand. You tell yourself you did it for your boy because it gets you to sleep at night. *I tell myself* that what I did to Jake I did so as not to lose my chance at the Tower . . . and that gets *me* to sleep at night. The difference between us, the *only* difference, is that I never took a pair of spectacles." He wiped his hand on his pants. "You sold out, Slightman. And you have forgotten the face of your father."

"Let me be," Slightman whispered. He wiped the slick of the gunslinger's spittle from his cheek. It was replaced by his own tears. "For my boy's sake."

Roland nodded. "That's all this is, for your boy's sake. You drag him behind you like a dead chicken. Well, never mind. If all goes as I hope, you may live your life with him in the Calla, and grow old in the regard of your neighbors. You'll be one of those who stood up to the Wolves when the gunslingers came to town along the Path of the Beam. When you can't walk, he'll walk with you and hold you up. I see this, but I don't like what I see. Because a man who'll sell his soul for a pair of spectacles will resell it for some other prink-a-dee—even cheaper—and sooner or later your boy will find out what you are, anyway. The best thing that could happen to your son today is for you

to die a hero." And then, before Slightman could reply, Roland raised his voice and shouted. "Hey, Overholser! Ho, the waggon! *Overholser!* Pull on over! We're here! Say thankya!"

"Roland—" Slightman began.

"No," Roland said, tying off the reins. "Palaver's done. Just remember what I said, sai: if you get a chance to die a hero today, do your son a favor and take it."

THREE

At first everything went according to plan and they called it ka. When things began going wrong and the dying started, they called that ka, too. Ka, the gunslinger could have told them, was often the last thing you had to rise above.

FOUR

Roland had explained to the children what he wanted of them while still on the common, under the flaring torches. Now, with daylight brightening (but the sun still waiting in the wings), they took their places perfectly, lining up in the road from oldest to youngest, each pair of twins holding hands. The buckas were parked on the left side of the road, their offside wheels just above the ditch. The only gap was where the track into the arroyo country split off from East Road. Standing beside the children in a stretched line were the minders, their number now swelled to well over a dozen with the addition of Tian, Pere Callahan, Slightman, and Wayne Overholser. Across from them, positioned in a line above the righthand ditch, were Eddie, Susannah, Rosa, Margaret Eisenhart, and Tian's wife, Zalia. Each of the women wore a silk-lined reed sack filled with plates. Stacked in the ditch below and behind them were boxes containing more Orizas. There were two hundred plates in all.

Eddie glanced across the river. Still no dust. Susannah gave him a nervous smile, which he returned in kind. This was the hard part—the scary part. Later, he knew, the red fog would wrap him up and carry him away. Now he was too aware. What he was aware of most was

that right now they were as helpless and vulnerable as a turtle without its shell.

Jake came hustling up the line of children, carrying the box of collected odds and ends: hair ribbons, a teething infant's comfort-chewy, a whistle whittled from a yew-stick, an old shoe with most of the sole gone, a mateless sock. There were perhaps two dozen similar items.

"Benny Slightman!" Roland barked. "Frank Tavery! Francine Tavery! To me!"

"Here, now!" Benny Slightman's father said, immediately alarmed. "What're you calling my son out of line f—"

"To do his duty, just as you'll do yours," Roland said. "Not another word."

The four children he had called appeared before him. The Taverys were flushed and out of breath, eyes shining, still holding hands.

"Listen, now, and make me repeat not a single word," Roland said. Benny and the Taverys leaned forward anxiously. Although clearly impatient to be off, Jake was less anxious; he knew this part, and most of what would follow. What Roland *hoped* would follow.

Roland spoke to the children, but loud enough for the strung-out line of child-minders to hear, too. "You're to go up the path," he said, "and every few feet you leave something, as if 'twere dropped on a hard, fast march. And I expect *you* four to make a hard, fast march. Don't run, but just below it. Mind your footing. Go to where the path branches—that's half a mile—and no farther. D'you ken? *Not one step farther.*"

They nodded eagerly. Roland switched his gaze to the adults standing tensely behind them.

"These four get a two-minute start. Then the rest of the twins go, oldest first, youngest last. They won't be going far; the last pairs will hardly get off the road." Roland raised his voice to a commanding shout. "*Children! When you hear this, come back! Come to me a-hurry!*" Roland put the first two fingers of his left hand into the corners of his mouth and blew a whistle so piercing that several children put their hands to their ears.

Annabelle Javier said, "Sai, if you mean for the children to hide in one of the caves, why would you call them back?"

“Because they’re not going into the caves,” Roland said. “They’re going down there.” He pointed east. “Lady Oriza is going to take care of the children. They’re going to hide in the rice, just this side of the river.” They all looked where he pointed, and so it was they all saw the dust at the same time.

The Wolves were coming.

FIVE

“Our company’s on the way, sugarpie,” Susannah said.

Roland nodded, then turned to Jake. “Go on, Jake. Just as I say.”

Jake pulled a double handful of stuff from the box and handed it to the Tavery twins. Then he jumped the lefthand ditch, graceful as a deer, and started up the arroyo track with Benny beside him. Frank and Francine were right behind; as Roland watched, Francine let a little hat fall from her hand.

“All right,” Overholser said. “I ken some of it, do ya. The Wolves’ll see the cast-offs and be even surer the kids are up there. But why send the rest of em north at all, gunslinger? Why not just march em down to the rice right now?”

“Because we have to assume the Wolves can smell the track of prey as well as real Wolves,” Roland said. He raised his voice again. “*Children, up the path! Oldest first! Hold the hand of your partner and don’t let go! Come back at my whistle!*”

The children started off, helped into the ditch by Callahan, Sarey Adams, the Javiers, and Ben Slightman. All the adults looked anxious; only Benny’s Da’ looked mistrustful, as well.

“The Wolves will start in because they’ve reason to believe the children are up there,” Roland said, “but they’re not fools, Wayne. They’ll look for sign and we’ll give it to em. If they smell—and I’d bet this town’s last rice crop that they do—they’ll have scent as well as dropped shoes and ribbons to look at. After the smell of the main group stops, that of the four I sent first will carry on yet awhile farther. It may suck em in deeper, or it may not. By then it shouldn’t matter.”

“But—”

Roland ignored him. He turned toward his little band of fighters. They would be seven in all. *It’s a good number*, he told himself. A

number of power. He looked beyond them at the dust-cloud. It rose higher than any of the remaining seminon dust-devils, and was moving with horrible speed. Yet for the time being, Roland thought they were all right.

“Listen and hear.” It was Zalia, Margaret, and Rosa to whom he was speaking. The members of his own ka-tet already knew this part, had since old Jamie whispered his long-held secret into Eddie’s ear on the Jaffordses’ porch. “The Wolves are neither men nor monsters; they’re robots.”

“*Robots!*” Overholser shouted, but with surprise rather than disbelief.

“Aye, and of a kind my ka-tet has seen before,” Roland said. He was thinking of a certain clearing where the great bear’s final surviving retainers had chased each other in an endless worry-circle. “They wear hoods to conceal tiny twirling things on top of their heads. They’re probably this wide and this long.” Roland showed them a height of about two inches and a length of about five. “It’s what Molly Doolin hit and snapped off with her dish, once upon a time. She hit by accident. We’ll hit a-purpose.”

“Thinking-caps,” Eddie said. “Their connection to the outside world. Without em, they’re as dead as dogshit.”

“Aim here.” Roland held his right hand an inch above the crown of his head.

“But the chests . . . the gills in the chests . . .” Margaret began, sounding utterly bewildered.

“Bullshit now and ever was,” Roland said. “Aim at the tops of the hoods.”

“Someday,” Tian said, “I’m going to know why there had to be so much buggering bullshit.”

“I hope there *is* a someday,” Roland said. The last of the children—the youngest ones—were just starting up the path, obediently holding hands. The eldest would be perhaps an eighth of a mile up, Jake’s quartet at least an eighth of a mile beyond that. It would have to be enough. Roland turned his attention to the child-minders.

“Now they come back,” he said. “Take them across the ditch and through the corn in two side-by-side rows.” He cocked a thumb over his shoulder without looking. “Do I have to tell you how important it

is that the corn-plants not be disturbed, especially close to the road, where the Wolves can see?”

They shook their heads.

“At the edge of the rice,” Roland continued, “take them into one of the streams. Lead them almost to the river, then have them lie down where it’s tall and still green.” He moved his hands apart, his blue eyes blazing. “Spread em out. You grown-ups get on the river side of em. If there’s trouble—more Wolves, something else we don’t expect—that’s the side it’ll come from.”

Without giving them a chance to ask questions, Roland buried his fingers in the corners of his mouth again and whistled. Vaughn Eisenhart, Krella Anselm, and Wayne Overholser joined the others in the ditch and began bellowing for the little ’uns to turn around and start back toward the road. Eddie, meanwhile, took another look over his shoulder and was stunned to see how far toward the river the dust-cloud had progressed. Such rapid movement made perfect sense once you knew the secret; those gray horses weren’t horses at all, but mechanical conveyances disguised to *look* like horses, no more than that. *Like a fleet of government Chevys*, he thought.

“Roland, they’re coming fast! Like hell!”

Roland looked. “We’re all right,” he said.

“Are you sure?” Rosa asked.

“Yes.”

The youngest children were now hurrying back across the road, hand-in-hand, bug-eyed with fear and excitement. Cantab of the Manni and Ara, his wife, were leading them. She told them to walk straight down the middle of the rows and try not to even brush any of the skeletal plants.

“Why, sai?” asked one tyke, surely no older than four. There was a suspicious dark patch on the front of his overalls. “Corn all picked, see.”

“It’s a game,” Cantab said. “A don’t-touch-the-corn game.” He began to sing. Some of the children joined in, but most were too bewildered and frightened.

As the pairs crossed the road, growing taller and older as they came, Roland cast another glance to the east. He estimated the Wolves were still ten minutes from the other side of the Whye, and

ten minutes should be enough, but gods, they were *fast!* It had already crossed his mind that he might have to keep Slightman the Younger and the Tavery twins up here, with them. It wasn't in the plan, but by the time things got this far, the plan almost always started to change. *Had* to change.

Now the last of the kids were crossing, and only Overholser, Callahan, Slightman the Elder, and Sarey Adams were still on the road.

"Go," Roland told them.

"I want to wait for my boy!" Slightman objected.

"Go!"

Slightman looked disposed to argue the point, but Sarey Adams touched one elbow and Overholser actually took hold of the other.

"Come'ee," Overholser said. "The man'll take care of yours same as he'll take care of his."

Slightman gave Roland a final doubtful look, then stepped over the ditch and began herding the tail end of the line downhill, along with Overholser and Sarey.

"Susannah, show them the hide," Roland said.

They'd been careful to make sure the kids crossed the ditch on the road's river side well down from where they had done their digging the day before. Now, using one of her capped and shortened legs, Susannah kicked aside a tangle of leaves, branches, and dead corn-plants—the sort of thing one would expect to see left behind in a roadside runoff ditch—and exposed a dark hole.

"It's just a trench," she said, almost apologetically. "There's boards over the top. Light ones, easy to push back. That's where we'll be. Roland's made a . . . oh, I don't know what you call it, we call it a periscope where I come from, a thing with mirrors inside it you can see through . . . and when the time comes, we just stand up. The boards'll fall away around us when we do."

"Where's Jake and those other three?" Eddie asked. "They should be back by now."

"It's too soon," Roland said. "Calm down, Eddie."

"I won't calm down and it's *not* too soon. We should at least be able to see them. I'm going over there—"

“No, you’re not,” Roland said. “We have to get as many as we can before they figure out what’s going on. That means keeping our firepower over here, at their backs.”

“Roland, something’s not right.”

Roland ignored him. “Lady-sais, slide in there, do ya please. The extra boxes of plates will be on your end; we’ll just kick some leaves over them.”

He looked across the road as Zalia, Rosa, and Margaret began to worm into the hole Susannah had disclosed. The path to the arroyo was now completely empty. There was still no sign of Jake, Benny, and the Tavery twins. He was beginning to think that Eddie was right; that something had gone amiss.

SIX

Jake and his companions reached the place where the trail split quickly and without incident. Jake had held back two items, and when they reached the fork, he threw a broken rattle toward the Gloria and a little girl’s woven string bracelet toward the Redbird. *Choose*, he thought, *and be damned to you either way*.

When he turned, he saw the Tavery twins had already started back. Benny was waiting for him, his face pale and his eyes shining. Jake nodded to him and made himself return Benny’s smile. “Let’s go,” he said.

Then they heard Roland’s whistle and the twins broke into a run, despite the scree and fallen rock which littered the path. They were still holding hands, weaving their way around what they couldn’t simply scramble over.

“Hey, don’t run!” Jake shouted. “He said not to run and mind your f—”

That was when Frank Tavery stepped into the hole. Jake heard the grinding, snapping sound his ankle made when it broke, knew from the horrified wince on Benny’s face that he had, too. Then Frank let out a low, screaming moan and pitched sideways. Francine grabbed for him and got a hand on his upper arm, but the boy was too heavy. He fell through her grip like a sashweight. The thud of his skull colliding with the granite outcrop beside him was far louder than the

sound his ankle had made. The blood which immediately began to flow from the wound in his scalp was brilliant in the early morning light.

Trouble, Jake thought. And in our road.

Benny was gaping, his cheeks the color of cottage cheese. Francine was already kneeling beside her brother, who lay at a twisted, ugly angle with his foot still caught in the hole. She was making high, breathless keening sounds. Then, all at once, the keening stopped. Her eyes rolled up in their sockets and she pitched forward over her unconscious twin brother in a dead faint.

“Come on,” Jake said, and when Benny only stood there, gawping, Jake punched him in the shoulder. “For your father’s sake!”

That got Benny moving.

SEVEN

Jake saw everything with a gunslinger’s cold, clear vision. The blood splashed on the rock. The clump of hair stuck in it. The foot in the hole. The spittle on Frank Tavery’s lips. The swell of his sister’s new breast as she lay awkwardly across him. The Wolves were coming now. It wasn’t Roland’s whistle that told him this, but the touch. *Eddie*, he thought. *Eddie wants to come over here.*

Jake had never tried using the touch to send, but he did now: *Stay where you are! If we can’t get back in time we’ll try to hide while they go past BUT DON’T YOU COME DOWN HERE! DON’T YOU SPOIL THINGS!*

He had no idea if the message got through, but he *did* know it was all he had time for. Meanwhile, Benny was . . . what? What was *le mot juste*? Ms. Avery back at Piper had been very big on *le mot juste*. And it came to him. Gibbering. Benny was gibbering.

“What are we gonna do, Jake? Man Jesus, *both* of them! They were fine! Just running, and then . . . what if the Wolves come? What if they come while we’re still here? We better leave em, don’t you think?”

“We’re not leaving them,” Jake said. He leaned down and grabbed Francine Tavery by the shoulders. He yanked her into a sitting position, mostly to get her off her brother so Frank could breathe. Her head lolled back, her hair streaming like dark silk. Her eyelids

fluttered, showing glabrous white beneath. Without thinking, Jake slapped her. And hard.

“Ow! *Ow!*” Her eyes flew open, blue and beautiful and shocked.

“Get up!” Jake shouted. “Get off him!”

How much time had passed? How still everything was, now that the children had gone back to the road! Not a single bird cried out, not even a rustie. He waited for Roland to whistle again, but Roland didn’t. And really, why would he? They were on their own now.

Francine rolled aside, then staggered to her feet. “Help him . . . please, sai, I beg . . . ”

“Benny. We have to get his foot out of the hole.” Benny dropped to one knee on the other side of the awkwardly sprawled boy. His face was still pale, but his lips were pressed together in a tight straight line that Jake found encouraging. “Take his shoulder.”

Benny grasped Frank Tavery’s right shoulder. Jake took the left. Their eyes met across the unconscious boy’s body. Jake nodded.

“*Now.*”

They pulled together. Frank Tavery’s eyes flew open—they were as blue and as beautiful as his sister’s—and he uttered a scream so high it was soundless. But his foot did not come free.

It was stuck deep.

EIGHT

Now a gray-green shape was resolving itself out of the dust-cloud and they could hear the drumming of many hooves on hardpan. The three Calla women were in the hide. Only Roland, Eddie, and Susannah still remained in the ditch, the men standing, Susannah kneeling with her strong thighs spread. They stared across the road and up the arroyo path. The path was still empty.

“I heard something,” Susannah said. “I think one of em’s hurt.”

“Fuck it, Roland, I’m going after them,” Eddie said.

“Is that what Jake wants or what *you* want?” Roland asked.

Eddie flushed. He had heard Jake in his head—not the exact words, but the gist—and he supposed Roland had, too.

“There’s a hundred kids down there and only four over there,” Roland said. “Get under cover, Eddie. You too, Susannah.”

“What about you?” Eddie asked.

Roland pulled in a deep breath, let it out. “I’ll help if I can.”

“You’re not going after him, are you?” Eddie looked at Roland with mounting disbelief. “You’re really not.”

Roland glanced toward the dust-cloud and the gray-green cluster beneath it, which would resolve itself into individual horses and riders in less than a minute. Riders with snarling wolf faces framed in green hoods. They weren’t riding toward the river so much as they were swooping down on it.

“No,” Roland said. “Can’t. Get under cover.”

Eddie stood where he was a moment longer, hand on the butt of the big revolver, pale face working. Then, without a word, he turned from Roland and grasped Susannah’s arm. He knelt beside her, then slid into the hole. Now there was only Roland, the big revolver slung low on his left hip, looking across the road at the empty arroyo path.

NINE

Benny Slightman was a well-built lad, but he couldn’t move the chunk of rock holding the Tavery boy’s foot. Jake saw that on the first pull. His mind (his cold, cold mind) tried to judge the weight of the imprisoned boy against the weight of the imprisoning stone. He guessed the stone weighed more.

“Francine.”

She looked at him from eyes which were now wet and a little blinded by shock.

“You love him?” Jake asked.

“Aye, with all my heart!”

He is your heart, Jake thought. *Good.* “Then help us. Pull him as hard as you can when I say. Never mind if he screams, pull him anyway.”

She nodded as if she understood. Jake hoped she did.

“If we can’t get him out this time, we’ll have to leave him.”

“I’ll *never!*” she shouted.

It was no time for argument. Jake joined Benny beside the flat white rock. Beyond its jagged edge, Frank’s bloody shin disappeared into a black hole. The boy was fully awake now, and gasping. His left

eye rolled in terror. The right one was buried in a sheet of blood. A flap of scalp was hanging over his ear.

“We’re going to lift the rock and you’re going to pull him out,” Jake told Francine. “On three. You ready?”

When she nodded, her hair fell across her face in a curtain. She made no attempt to get it out of the way, only seized her brother beneath the armpits.

“Francie, don’t hurt me,” he moaned.

“Shut up,” she said.

“One,” Jake said. “You pull this fucker, Benny, even if it pops your balls. You hear me?”

“Yer-bugger, just *count*.”

“Two. *Three*.”

They pulled, crying out at the strain. The rock moved. Francine yanked her brother backward with all her force, also crying out.

Frank Tavery’s scream as his foot came free was loudest of all.

TEN

Roland heard hoarse cries of effort, overtopped by a scream of pure agony. Something had happened over there, and Jake had done something about it. The question was, had it been enough to put right whatever had gone wrong?

Spray flew in the morning light as the Wolves plunged into the Whye and began galloping across on their gray horses. Roland could see them clearly now, coming in waves of five and six, spurring their mounts. He put the number at sixty. On the far side of the river, they’d disappear beneath the shoulder of a grass-covered bluff. Then they’d reappear, less than a mile away. They would disappear one last time, behind one final hill—all of them, if they stayed bunched up as they were now—and that would be the last chance for Jake to come, for all of them to get under cover.

He stared up the path, willing the children to appear—willing *Jake* to appear—but the path remained empty.

Wolves streaming up the west bank of the river now, their horses casting off showers of droplets which glittered in the morning sun like

gold. Clods of earth and sprays of sand flew. Now the hoofbeats were an approaching thunder.

ELEVEN

Jake took one shoulder, Benny the other. They carried Frank Tavery down the path that way, plunging ahead with reckless speed, hardly even looking down at the tumbles of rock. Francine ran just behind them.

They came around the final curve, and Jake felt a surge of gladness when he saw Roland in the ditch opposite, still Roland, standing watch with his good left hand on the butt of his gun and his hat tipped back from his brow.

“It’s my brother!” Francine was shouting at him. “He fell down! He got his foot caught in a hole!”

Roland suddenly dropped out of sight.

Francine looked around, not frightened, exactly, but uncomprehending. “What—?”

“Wait,” Jake said, because that was all he knew to say. He had no other ideas. If that was true of the gunslinger as well, they’d probably die here.

“My ankle . . . burning,” Frank Tavery gasped.

“Shut up,” Jake said.

Benny laughed. It was shock-laughter, but it was also real laughter. Jake looked at him around the sobbing, bleeding Frank Tavery . . . and winked. Benny winked back. And, just like that, they were friends again.

TWELVE

As she lay in the darkness of the hide with Eddie on her left and the acrid smell of leaves in her nose, Susannah felt a sudden cramp seize her belly. She had just time to register it before an icpick of pain, blue and savage, plunged into the left side of her brain, seeming to numb that entire side of her face and neck. At the same instant the image of a great banquet hall filled her mind: steaming roasts, stuffed

fish, smoking steaks, magnums of champagne, frigates filled with gravy, rivers of red wine. She heard a piano, and a singing voice. That voice was charged with an awful sadness. "Someone saved, someone saved, someone saved my li-iife tonight," it sang.

No! Susannah cried to the force that was trying to engulf her. And did that force have a name? Of course it did. Its name was Mother, its hand was the one that rocked the cradle, and the hand that rocks the cradle rules the w—

No! You have to let me finish this! Afterward, if you want to have it, I'll help you! I'll help you have it! But if you try to force this on me now, I'll fight you tooth and nail! And if it comes to getting myself killed, and killing your precious chap along with me, I'll do it! Do you hear me, you bitch?

For a moment there was nothing but the darkness, the press of Eddie's leg, the numbness in the left side of her face, the thunder of the oncoming horses, the acrid smell of the leaves, and the sound of the Sisters breathing, getting ready for their own battle. Then, each of her words articulated clearly from a place above and behind Susannah's left eye, Mia for the first time spoke to her.

Fight your fight, woman. I'll even help, if I can. And then keep your promise.

"Susannah?" Eddie murmured from beside her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said. And she was. The icepick was gone. The voice was gone. So was the terrible numbness. But close by, Mia was waiting.

THIRTEEN

Roland lay on his belly in the ditch, now watching the Wolves with one eye of imagination and one of intuition instead of with those in his head. The Wolves were between the bluff and the hill, riding full-out with their cloaks streaming behind them. They'd all disappear behind the hill for perhaps seven seconds. *If*, that was, they stayed bunched together and the leaders didn't start to pull ahead. *If* he had calculated their speed correctly. *If* he was right, he'd have five seconds when he could motion Jake and the others to come. Or seven. *If* he was right, they'd have those same five seconds to cross the road. If he was wrong (or if the others were slow), the Wolves would either see the man in the ditch, the children in the road, or all of them. The

distances would likely be too great to use their weapons, but that wouldn't much matter, because the carefully crafted ambush would be blown. The smart thing would be to stay down, and leave the kids over there to their fate. Hell, four kids caught on the arroyo path would make the Wolves more sure than ever that the rest of them were stashed farther on, in one of the old mines.

Enough thinking, Cort said in his head. *If you mean to move, maggot, this is your only chance.*

Roland shot to his feet. Directly across from him, protected by the cluster of tumbled boulders which marked the East Road end of the arroyo path, stood Jake and Benny Slightman, with the Tavery boy supported between them. The kid was bloody both north and south; gods knew what had happened to him. His sister was looking over his shoulder. In that instant they looked not just like twins but Kaffin twins, joined at the body.

Roland jerked both hands extravagantly back over his head, as if clawing for a grip in the air: *To me, come! Come!* At the same time, he looked east. No sign of the Wolves; good. The hill *had* momentarily blocked them all.

Jake and Benny sprinted across the road, still dragging the boy between them. Frank Tavery's shor'boots dug fresh grooves in the oggan. Roland could only hope the Wolves would attach no especial significance to the marks.

The girl came last, light as a sprite. "Down!" Roland snarled, grabbing her shoulder and throwing her flat. "Down, down, *down!*" He landed beside her and Jake landed on top of him. Roland could feel the boy's madly beating heart between his shoulderblades, through both of their shirts, and had a moment to relish the sensation.

Now the hoofbeats were coming hard and strong, swelling every second. Had they been seen by the lead riders? It was impossible to know, but they *would* know, and soon. In the meantime they could only go on as planned. It would be tight quarters in the hide with three extra people in there, and if the Wolves had seen Jake and the other three crossing the road, they would all no doubt be cooked where they lay without a single shot fired or plate thrown, but there was no time to worry about that now. They had a minute left at most,

Roland estimated, maybe only forty seconds, and that last little bit of time was melting away beneath them.

“Get off me and under cover,” he said to Jake. “Right now.”

The weight disappeared. Jake slipped into the hide.

“You’re next, Frank Tavery,” Roland said. “And be quiet. Two minutes from now you can scream all you want, but for now, keep your mouth shut. That goes for all of you.”

“I’ll be quiet,” the boy said huskily. Benny and Frank’s sister nodded.

“We’re going to stand up at some point and start shooting,” Roland said. “You three—Frank, Francine, Benny—stay down. Stay flat.” He paused. “For your lives, *stay out of our way.*”

FOURTEEN

Roland lay in the leaf- and dirt-smelling dark, listening to the harsh breathing of the children on his left. This sound was soon overwhelmed by that of approaching hooves. The eye of imagination and that of intuition opened once more, and wider than ever. In no more than thirty seconds—perhaps as few as fifteen—the red rage of battle would do away with all but the most primitive seeing, but for now he saw all, and all he saw was exactly as he wanted it to be. And why not? What good did visualizing plans gone astray ever do anyone?

He saw the twins of the Calla lying sprawled like corpses in the thickest, wettest part of the rice, with the muck oozing through their shirts and pants. He saw the adults beyond them, almost to the place where rice became riverbank. He saw Sarey Adams with her plates, and Ara of the Manni—Cantab’s wife—with a few of her own, for Ara also threw (although as one of the Manni-folk, she could never be at fellowship with the other women). He saw a couple of the men—Estrada, Anselm, Overholser—with their bahs hugged to their chests. Instead of a bah, Vaughn Eisenhart was hugging the rifle Roland had cleaned for him. In the road, approaching from the east, he saw rank upon rank of green-cloaked riders on gray horses. They were slowing now. The sun was finally up and gleaming on the metal of their masks. The joke of those masks, of course, was that there was more metal beneath them. Roland let the eye of his imagining rise, looking for

other riders—a party coming into the undefended town from the south, for instance. He saw none. In his own mind, at least, the entire raiding party was here. And if they'd swallowed the line Roland and the Ka-Tet of the Ninety and Nine had paid out with such care, it *should* be here. He saw the bucka waggons lined up on the town side of the road and had time to wish they'd freed the teams from the traces, but of course this way it looked better, more hurried. He saw the path leading into the arroyos, to the mines both abandoned and working, to the honeycomb of caves beyond them. He saw the leading Wolves rein up here, dragging the mouths of their mounts into snarls with their gauntleted hands. He saw through their eyes, saw pictures not made of warm human sight but cold, like those in the Magda-seens. Saw the child's hat Francine Tavery had let drop. His mind had a nose as well as an eye, and it smelled the bland yet fecund aroma of children. It smelled something rich and fatty—the stuff the Wolves would take from the children they abducted. His mind had an ear as well as a nose, and it heard—faintly—the same sort of clicks and clunks that had emanated from Andy, the same low whining of relays, servomotors, hydraulic pumps, gods knew what other machinery. His mind's eye saw the Wolves first inspecting the confusion of tracks on the road (he *hoped* it looked like a confusion to them), then looking up the arroyo path. Because imagining them looking the other way, getting ready to broil the ten of them in their hide like chickens in a roasting pan, would do him no good. No, they were looking up the arroyo path. *Must* be looking up the arroyo path. They were smelling children—perhaps their fear as well as the powerful stuff buried deep in their brains—and seeing the few tumbled bits of trash and treasure their prey had left behind. Standing there on their mechanical horses. Looking.

Go in, Roland urged silently. He felt Jake stir a little beside him, hearing his thought. His prayer, almost. *Go in. Go after them. Take what you will.*

There was a loud *clack!* sound from one of the Wolves. This was followed by a brief blurt of siren. The siren was followed by the nasty warbling whistle Jake had heard out at the Dogan. After that, the horses began to move again. First there was the soft thud of their hooves on the oggan, then on the far stonier ground of the arroyo

path. There was nothing else; these horses didn't whinny nervously, like those still harnessed to the buckas. For Roland, it was enough. They had taken the bait. He slipped his revolver out of its holster. Beside him, Jake shifted again and Roland knew he was doing the same thing.

He had told them the formation to expect when they burst out of the hide: about a quarter of the Wolves on one side of the path, looking toward the river, a quarter of their number turned toward the town of Calla Bryn Sturgis. Or perhaps a few more in that direction, since if there was trouble, the town was where the Wolves—or the Wolves' programmers—would reasonably expect it to come from. And the rest? Thirty or more? Already up the path. Hemmed in, do ya.

Roland began counting to twenty, but when he got to nineteen decided he'd counted enough. He gathered his legs beneath him—there was no dry twist now, not so much as a twinge—and then pistoned upward with his father's gun held high in his hand.

"For Gilead and the Calla!" he roared. *"Now, gunslingers! Now, you Sisters of Oriza! Now, now! Kill them! No quarter! Kill them all!"*

FIFTEEN

They burst up and out of the earth like dragon's teeth. Boards flew away to either side of them, along with dry flurries of weeds and leaves. Roland and Eddie each had one of the big revolvers with the sandalwood grips. Jake had his father's Ruger. Margaret, Rosa, and Zalia each held a Riza. Susannah had two, her arms crossed over her breasts as though she were cold.

The Wolves were deployed exactly as Roland had seen them with the cool killer's eye of his imagination, and he felt a moment of triumph before all lesser thought and emotion was swept away beneath the red curtain. As always, he was never so happy to be alive as when he was preparing to deal death. *Five minutes' worth of blood and stupidity*, he'd told them, and here those five minutes were. He'd also told them he always felt sick afterward, and while that was true enough, he never felt so fine as he did at this moment of beginning; never felt so completely and truly himself. Here were the tag ends of glory's old cloud. It didn't matter that they were robots; gods, no!

What mattered was that they had been preying on the helpless for generations, and this time they had been caught utterly and completely by surprise.

“Top of the hoods!” Eddie screamed, as in his right hand Roland’s pistol began to thunder and spit fire. The harnessed horses and mules reared in the traces; a couple screamed in surprise. *“Top of the hoods, get the thinking-caps!”*

And, as if to demonstrate his point, the green hoods of three riders to the right of the path twitched as if plucked by invisible fingers. Each of the three beneath pitched bonelessly out of their saddles and struck the ground. In Gran-pere’s story of the Wolf Molly Doolin had brought down, there had been a good deal of twitching afterward, but these three lay under the feet of their prancing horses as still as stones. Molly might not have hit the hidden “thinking-cap” cleanly, but Eddie knew what he was shooting for, and had.

Roland also began to fire, shooting from the hip, shooting almost casually, but each bullet found its mark. He was after the ones on the path, wanting to pile up bodies there, to make a barricade if he could.

“Riza flies true!” Rosalita Munoz shrieked. The plate she was holding left her hand and bolted across the East Road with an unremitting rising shriek. It clipped through the hood of a rider at the head of the arroyo path who was trying desperately to rein his horse around. The thing fell backward, feet up to heaven, and landed upside down with its boots in the road.

“Riza!” That was Margaret Eisenhart.

“For my brother!” Zalia cried.

“Lady Riza come for your asses, you bastards!” Susannah uncrossed her arms and threw both plates outward. They flew, screaming, crisscrossed in midair, and both found their mark. Scraps of green hooding fluttered down; the Wolves to whom the hoods had belonged fell faster and harder.

Bright rods of fire now glowed in the morning light as the jostling, struggling riders on either side of the path unsheathed their energy weapons. Jake shot the thinking-cap of the first one to unsheath and it fell on its own bitterly sizzling sword, catching its cloak afire. Its horse shied sideways, into the descending light-stick of the rider to the

direct left. Its head came off, disclosing a nest of sparks and wires. Now the sirens began to blat steadily, burglar alarms in hell.

Roland had thought the Wolves closest to town might try to break off and flee toward the Calla. Instead the nine on that side still left—Eddie had taken six with his first six shots—spurred past the buckas and directly toward them. Two or three hurled humming silvery balls.

“Eddie! Jake! Sneetches! Your right!”

They swung in that direction immediately, leaving the women, who were hurling plates as fast as they could pull them from their silk-lined bags. Jake was standing with his legs spread and the Ruger held out in his right hand, his left bracing his right wrist. His hair was blowing back from his brow. He was wide-eyed and handsome, smiling. He squeezed off three quick shots, each one a whipcrack in the morning air. He had a vague, distant memory of the day in the woods when he had shot pottery out of the sky. Now he was shooting at something far more dangerous, and he was glad. *Glad*. The first three of the flying balls exploded in brilliant flashes of bluish light. A fourth jinked, then zipped straight at him. Jake ducked and heard it pass just above his head, humming like some sort of pissed-off toaster oven. It would turn, he knew, and come back.

Before it could, Susannah swiveled and fired a plate at it. The plate flew straight to the mark, howling. When it struck, both it and the sneetch exploded. Sharpnel rained down in the corn-plants, setting some of them alight.

Roland reloaded, the smoking barrel of his revolver momentarily pointed down between his feet. Beyond Jake, Eddie was doing the same.

A Wolf jumped the tangled heap of bodies at the head of the arroyo path, its green cloak floating out behind it, and one of Rosa's plates tore back its hood, for a moment revealing the radar dish beneath. The thinking caps of the bear's retinue had been moving slowly and jerkily; this one was spinning so fast its shape was only a metallic blur. Then it was gone and the Wolf went tumbling to the side and onto the team which had drawn Overholser's lead waggon. The horses flinched backward, shoving the bucka into the one behind, mashing four whinnying, rearing animals between. These tried to bolt but had nowhere to go. Overholser's bucka teetered,

then overturned. The downed Wolf's horse gained the road, stumbled over the body of another Wolf lying there, and went sprawling in the dust, one of its legs jutting off crookedly to the side.

Roland's mind was gone; his eye saw everything. He was reloaded. The Wolves who had gone up the path were pinned behind a tangled heap of bodies, just as he had hoped. The group of fifteen on the town side had been decimated, only two left. Those on the right were trying to flank the end of the ditch, where the three Sisters of Oriza and Susannah anchored their line. Roland left the remaining two Wolves on his side to Eddie and Jake, sprinted down the trench to stand behind Susannah, and began firing at the ten remaining Wolves bearing down on them. One raised a sneetch to throw, then dropped it as Roland's bullet snapped off its thinking-cap. Rosa took another one, Margaret Eisenhart a third.

Margaret dipped to get another plate. When she stood up again, a light-stick swept off her head, setting her hair on fire as it tumbled into the ditch. And Benny's reaction was understandable; she had been almost a second mother to him. When the burning head landed beside him, he batted it aside and scrambled out of the ditch, blind with panic, howling in terror.

"Benny, no, get back!" Jake cried.

Two of the remaining Wolves threw their silver deathballs at the crawling, screaming boy. Jake shot one out of the air. He never had a chance at the other. It struck Benny Slightman in the chest and the boy simply exploded outward, one arm tearing free of his body and landing palm-up in the road.

Susannah cut the thinking-cap off the Wolf which had killed Margaret with one plate, then did for the one who had killed Jake's friend with another. She pulled two fresh Rizas from her sacks and turned back to the oncoming Wolves just as the first one leaped into the ditch, its horse's chest knocking Roland asprawl. It brandished its sword over the gunslinger. To Susannah it looked like a brilliant red-orange tube of neon.

"No you don't, muhfuh!" she screamed, and slung the plate in her right hand. It sheared through the gleaming saber and the weapon simply exploded at the hilt, tearing off the Wolf's arm. The next moment one of Rosa's plates amputated its thinking-cap and it

tumbled sideways and crashed to the ground, its gleaming mask grinning at the paralyzed, terrified Tavery twins, who lay clinging to each other. A moment later it began to smoke and melt.

Shrieking Benny's name, Jake walked across the East Road, reloading the Ruger as he went, tracking through his dead friend's blood without realizing it. To his left, Roland, Susannah, and Rosa were putting paid to the five remaining Wolves in what had been the raiding party's north wing. The raiders whirled their horses in jerky, useless circles, seeming unsure what to do in circumstances such as these.

"Want some company, kid?" Eddie asked him. On their right, the group of Wolves who had been stationed on the town side of the arroyo path all lay dead. Only one of them had actually made it as far as the ditch; that one lay with its hooded head plowed into the freshly turned earth of the hide and its booted feet in the road. The rest of its body was wrapped in its green cloak. It looked like a bug that has died in its cocoon.

"Sure," Jake said. Was he talking or only thinking? He didn't know. The sirens blasted the air. "Whatever you want. They killed Benny."

"I know. That sucks."

"It should have been his fucking *father*," Jake said. Was he crying? He didn't know.

"Agreed. Have a present." Into Jake's hand Eddie dropped a couple of balls about three inches in diameter. The surfaces looked like steel, but when Jake squeezed, he felt some give—it was like squeezing a child's toy made out of hard, hard rubber. A small plate on the side read

"SNEETCH"
HARRY POTTER MODEL

Serial # 465-11-AA HPJKR

CAUTION
EXPLOSIVE

To the left of the plate was a button. A distant part of Jake's mind wondered who Harry Potter was. The sneetch's inventor, more than likely.

They reached the heap of dead Wolves at the head of the arroyo path. Perhaps machines couldn't really be dead, but Jake was unable to think of them as anything else, tumbled and tangled as they were. Dead, yes. And he was savagely glad. From behind them came an explosion, followed by a shriek of either extreme pain or extreme pleasure. For the moment Jake didn't care which. All his attention was focused on the remaining Wolves trapped on the arroyo path. There were somewhere between eighteen and two dozen of them.

There was one Wolf out in front, its sizzling fire-stick raised. It was half-turned to its mates, and now it waved its light-stick at the road. *Except that's no light-stick*, Eddie thought. *That's a light-saber, just like the ones in the Star Wars movies. Only these light-sabers aren't special effects—they really kill. What the hell's going on here?* Well, the guy out front was trying to rally his troops, that much seemed clear. Eddie decided to cut the sermon short. He thumbed the button in one of the three sneetches he had kept for himself. The thing began to hum and vibrate in his hand. It was sort of like holding a joy-buzzer.

"Hey, Sunshine!" he called.

The head Wolf didn't look around and so Eddie simply lobbed the sneetch at it. Thrown as easily as it was, it should have struck the ground twenty or thirty yards from the cluster of remaining Wolves and rolled to a stop. It picked up speed instead, rose, and struck the head Wolf dead center in its frozen snarl of a mouth. The thing exploded from the neck up, thinking-cap and all.

"Go on," Eddie said. "Try it. Using their own shit against em has its own special pl—"

Ignoring him, Jake dropped the sneetches Eddie had given him, stumbled over the heap of bodies, and started up the path.

"Jake? Jake, I don't think that's such a good idea—"

A hand gripped Eddie's upper arm. He whirled, raising his gun, then lowering it again when he saw Roland. "He can't hear you," the gunslinger said. "Come on. We'll stand with him."

"Wait, Roland, wait." It was Rosa. She was smeared with blood, and Eddie assumed it was poor sai Eisenhart's. He could see no wound on

Rosa herself. "I want some of this," she said.

SIXTEEN

They reached Jake just as the remaining Wolves made their last charge. A few threw sneetches. These Roland and Eddie picked out of the air easily. Jake fired the Ruger in nine steady, spaced shots, right wrist clasped in left hand, and each time he fired, one of the Wolves either flipped backward out of its saddle or went sliding over the side to be trampled by the horses coming behind. When the Ruger was empty, Rosa took a tenth, screaming Lady Oriza's name. Zalia Jaffords had also joined them, and the eleventh fell to her.

While Jake reloaded the Ruger, Roland and Eddie, standing side by side, went to work. They almost certainly could have taken the remaining eight between them (it didn't much surprise Eddie that there had been nineteen in this last cluster), but they left the last two for Jake. As they approached, swinging their light-swords over their heads in a way that would have been undoubtedly terrifying to a bunch of farmers, the boy shot the thinking-cap off the one on the left. Then he stood aside, dodging as the last surviving Wolf took a halfhearted swing at him.

Its horse leaped the pile of bodies at the end of the path. Susannah was on the far side of the road, sitting on her haunches amid a litter of fallen green-cloaked machinery and melting, rotting masks. She was also covered in Margaret Eisenhart's blood.

Roland understood that Jake had left the final one for Susannah, who would have found it extremely difficult to join them on the arroyo path because of her missing lower legs. The gunslinger nodded. The boy had seen a terrible thing this morning, suffered a terrible shock, but Roland thought he would be all right. Oy—waiting for them back at the Pere's rectory-house—would no doubt help him through the worst of his grief.

"*Lady Oh-RIZA!*" Susannah screamed, and flung one final plate as the Wolf reined its horse around, turning it east, toward whatever it called home. The plate rose, screaming, and clipped off the top of the green hood. For a moment this last child thief sat in its saddle, shuddering and blaring out its alarm, calling for help that couldn't

come. Then it snapped violently backward, turning a complete somersault in midair, and thudded to the road. Its siren cut off in mid-whoop.

And so, Roland thought, our five minutes are over. He looked dully at the smoking barrel of his revolver, then dropped it back into its holster. One by one the alarms issuing from the downed robots were stopping.

Zalia was looking at him with a kind of dazed incomprehension. "Roland!" she said.

"Yes, Zalia."

"Are they gone? *Can* they be gone? Really?"

"All gone," Roland said. "I counted sixty-one, and they all lie here or on the road or in our ditch."

For a moment Tian's wife only stood there, processing this information. Then she did something that surprised a man who was not often surprised. She threw herself against him, pressing her body frankly to his, and covered his face with hungry, wet-lipped kisses. Roland bore this for a little bit, then held her away. The sickness was coming now. The feeling of uselessness. The sense that he would fight this battle or battles like it over and over for eternity, losing a finger to the lobstrosities here, perhaps an eye to a clever old witch there, and after each battle he would sense the Dark Tower a little farther away instead of a little closer. And all the time the dry twist would work its way in toward his heart.

Stop that, he told himself. *It's nonsense, and you know it.*

"Will they send more, Roland?" Rosa asked.

"They may have no more to send," Roland said. "If they do, there'll almost certainly be fewer of them. And now you know the secret to killing them, don't you?"

"Yes," she said, and gave him a savage grin. Her eyes promised him more than kisses later on, if he'd have her.

"Go down through the corn," he told her. "You and Zalia both. Tell them it's safe to come up now. Lady Oriza has stood friend to the Calla this day. And to the line of Eld, as well."

"Will ye not come yourself?" Zalia asked him. She had stepped away from him, and her cheeks were filled with fire. "Will ye not come and let em cheer ye?"

“Perhaps later on we may all hear them cheer us,” Roland said. “Now we need to speak an-tet. The boy’s had a bad shock, ye ken.”

“Yes,” Rosa said. “Yes, all right. Come on, Zee.” She reached out and took Zalia’s hand. “Help me be the bearer of glad tidings.”

SEVENTEEN

The two women crossed the road, making a wide berth around the tumbled, bloody remains of the poor Slightman lad. Zalia thought that most of what was left of him was only held together by his clothes, and shivered to think of the father’s grief.

The young man’s shor’leg lady-sai was at the far north end of the ditch, examining the bodies of the Wolves scattered there. She found one where the little revolving thing hadn’t been entirely shot off, and was still trying to turn. The Wolf’s green-gloved hands shivered uncontrollably in the dust, as if with palsy. While Rosa and Zalia watched, Susannah picked up a largish chunk of rock and, cool as a night in Wide Earth, brought it down on the remains of the thinking-cap. The Wolf stilled immediately. The low hum that had been coming from it stopped.

“We go to tell the others, Susannah,” Rosa said. “But first we want to tell thee well-done. How we do love thee, say true!”

Zalia nodded. “We say thankya, Susannah of New York. We say thankya more big-big than could ever be told.”

“Yar, say true,” Rosa agreed.

The lady-sai looked up at them and smiled sweetly. For a moment Rosalita looked a little doubtful, as if maybe she saw something in that dark-brown face that she shouldn’t. Saw that Susannah Dean was no longer here, for instance. Then the expression of doubt was gone. “We go with good news, Susannah,” said she.

“Wish you joy of it,” said Mia, daughter of none. “Bring them back as you will. Tell them the danger here’s over, and let those who don’t believe count the dead.”

“The legs of your pants are wet, do ya,” Zalia said.

Mia nodded gravely. Another contraction had turned her belly to a stone, but she gave no sign. “ ’Tis blood, I’m afraid.” She nodded toward the headless body of the big rancher’s wife. “Hers.”

The women started down through the corn, hand-in-hand. Mia watched Roland, Eddie, and Jake cross the road toward her. This would be the dangerous time, right here. Yet perhaps not too dangerous, after all; Susannah's friends looked dazed in the aftermath of the battle. If she seemed a little off her feed, perhaps they would think the same of her.

She thought mostly it would be a matter of waiting for her opportunity. Waiting . . . and then slipping away. In the meantime, she rode the contraction of her belly like a boat riding a high wave.

They'll know where you went, a voice whispered. It wasn't a head-voice but a belly-voice. The voice of the chap. And that voice spoke true.

Take the ball with you, the voice told her. *Take it with you when you go. Leave them no door to follow you through.*

Aye.

EIGHTEEN

The Ruger cracked out a single shot and a horse died.

From below the road, from the rice, came a rising roar of joy that was not quite disbelieving. Zalia and Rosa had given their good news. Then a shrill cry of grief cut through the mingled voices of happiness. They had given the bad, as well.

Jake Chambers sat on the wheel of the overturned waggon. He had unharnessed the three horses that were okay. The fourth had been lying with two broken legs, foaming helplessly through its teeth and looking to the boy for help. The boy had given it. Now he sat staring at his dead friend. Benny's blood was soaking into the road. The hand on the end of Benny's arm lay palm-up, as if the dead boy wanted to shake hands with God. What God? According to current rumor, the top of the Dark Tower was empty.

From Lady Oriza's rice came a second scream of grief. Which had been Slightman, which Vaughn Eisenhart? At a distance, Jake thought, you couldn't tell the rancher from the foreman, the employer from the employee. Was there a lesson there, or was it what Ms. Avery, back at good old Piper, would have called FEAR, false evidence appearing real?

The palm pointing up to the brightening sky, *that* was certainly real.

Now the *folken* began to sing. Jake recognized the song. It was a new version of the one Roland had sung on their first night in Calla Bryn Sturgis.

*“Come-come-commala
Rice come a-falla
I-sissa ’ay a-bralla
Dey come a-folla
We went to a-rivva
'Riza did us kivva . . . ”*

The rice swayed with the passage of the singing *folken*, swayed as if it were dancing for their joy, as Roland had danced for them that torchlit night. Some came with babbies in their arms, and even so burdened, they swayed from side to side. *We all danced this morning*, Jake thought. He didn't know what he meant, only that it was a true thought. *The dance we do. The only one we know. Benny Slightman? Died dancing. Sai Eisenhart, too.*

Roland and Eddie came over to him; Susannah, too, but she hung back a bit, as if deciding that, at least for the time being, the boys should be with the boys. Roland was smoking, and Jake nodded at it.

“Roll me one of those, would you?”

Roland turned in Susannah's direction, eyebrows raised. She shrugged, then nodded. Roland rolled Jake a cigarette, gave it to him, then scratched a match on the seat of his pants and lit it. Jake sat on the waggon wheel, taking the smoke in occasional puffs, holding it in his mouth, then letting it out. His mouth filled up with spit. He didn't mind. Unlike some things, spit could be got rid of. He made no attempt to inhale.

Roland looked down the hill, where the first of the two running men was just entering the corn. “That's Slightman,” he said. “Good.”

“Why good, Roland?” Eddie asked.

“Because sai Slightman will have accusations to make,” Roland said. “In his grief, he isn't going to care who hears them, or what his

extraordinary knowledge might say about his part in this morning's work."

"Dance," Jake said.

They turned to look at him. He sat pale and thoughtful on the waggon-wheel, holding his cigarette. "This morning's dance," he said.

Roland appeared to consider this, then nodded. "His part in this morning's *dance*. If he gets here soon enough, we may be able to quiet him. If not, his son's death is only going to be the start of Ben Slightman's commala."

NINETEEN

Slightman was almost fifteen years younger than the rancher, and arrived at the site of the battle well before the other. For a moment he only stood on the far edge of the hide, considering the shattered body lying in the road. There was not so much blood, now—the oggan had drunk it greedily—but the severed arm still lay where it had been, and the severed arm told all. Roland would no more have moved it before Slightman got here than he would have opened his flies and pissed on the boy's corpse. Slightman the Younger had reached the clearing at the end of his path. His father, as next of kin, had a right to see where and how it had happened.

The man stood quiet for perhaps five seconds, then pulled in a deep breath and let it out in a shriek. It chilled Eddie's blood. He looked around for Susannah and saw she was no longer there. He didn't blame her for ducking out. This was a bad scene. The worst.

Slightman looked left, looked right, then looked straight ahead and saw Roland, standing beside the overturned waggon with his arms crossed. Beside him, Jake still sat on the wheel, smoking his first cigarette.

"*YOU!*" Slightman screamed. He was carrying his bah; now he unslung it. "*YOU DID THIS! YOU!*"

Eddie plucked the weapon deftly from Slightman's hands. "No, you don't, partner," he murmured. "You don't need this right now, why don't you let me keep it for you."

Slightman seemed not to notice. Incredibly, his right hand still made circular motions in the air, as if winding the bah for a shot.

“YOU KILLED MY SON! TO PAY ME BACK! YOU BASTARD! MURDERING BAS—”

Moving with the eerie, spooky speed that Eddie could still not completely believe, Roland seized Slightman around the neck in the crook of one arm, then yanked him forward. The move simultaneously cut off the flow of the man’s accusations and drew him close.

“Listen to me,” Roland said, “and listen well. I care nothing for your life or honor, one’s been misspent and the other’s long gone, but your son is dead and about *his* honor I care very much. If you don’t shut up this second, you worm of creation, I’ll shut you up myself. So what would you? It’s nothing to me, either way. I’ll tell em you ran mad at the sight of him, stole my gun out of its holster, and put a bullet in your own head to join him. What would you have? Decide.”

Eisenhart was badly blown but still lurching and weaving his way up through the corn, hoarsely calling his wife’s name: *“Margaret! Margaret! Answer me, dear! Gi’ me a word, I beg ya, do!”*

Roland let go of Slightman and looked at him sternly. Slightman turned his awful eyes to Jake. “Did your dinh kill my boy in order to be revenged on me? Tell me the truth, soh.”

Jake took a final puff on his cigarette and cast it away. The butt lay smoldering in the dirt next to the dead horse. “Did you even look at him?” he asked Benny’s Da’. “No bullet ever made could do that. Sai Eisenhart’s head fell almost on top of him and Benny crawled out of the ditch from the . . . the horror of it.” It was a word, he realized, that he had never used out loud. Had never *needed* to use out loud. “They threw two of their sneetches at him. I got one, but . . .” He swallowed. There was a click in his throat. “The other . . . I would have, you ken . . . I tried, but . . .” His face was working. His voice was breaking apart. Yet his eyes were dry. And somehow as terrible as Slightman’s. “I never had a chance at the other’n,” he finished, then lowered his head and began to sob.

Roland looked at Slightman, his eyebrows raised.

“All right,” Slightman said. “I see how ’twas. Yar. Tell me, were he brave until then? Tell me, I beg.”

“He and Jake brought back one of that pair,” Eddie said, gesturing to the Tavery twins. “The boy half. He got his foot caught in a hole. Jake and Benny pulled him out, then carried him. Nothing but guts, your boy. Side to side and all the way through the middle.”

Slightman nodded. He took the spectacles off his face and looked at them as if he had never seen them before. He held them so, before his eyes, for a second or two, then dropped them onto the road and crushed them beneath one bootheel. He looked at Roland and Jake almost apologetically. “I believe I’ve seen all I need to,” he said, and then went to his son.

Vaughn Eisenhart emerged from the corn. He saw his wife and gave a bellow. Then he tore open his shirt and began pounding his right fist above his flabby left breast, crying her name each time he did it.

“Oh, man,” Eddie said. “Roland, you ought to stop that.”

“Not I,” said the gunslinger.

Slightman took his son’s severed arm and planted a kiss in the palm with a tenderness Eddie found nearly unbearable. He put the arm on the boy’s chest, then walked back toward them. Without the glasses, his face looked naked and somehow unformed. “Jake, would you help me find a blanket?”

Jake got off the waggon wheel to help him find what he needed. In the uncovered trench that had been the hide, Eisenhart was cradling his wife’s burnt head to his chest, rocking it. From the corn, approaching, came the children and their minders, singing “The Rice Song.” At first Eddie thought that what he was hearing from town must be an echo of that singing, and then he realized it was the rest of the Calla. They knew. They had heard the singing, and they knew. They were coming.

Pere Callahan stepped out of the field with Lia Jaffords cradled in his arms. In spite of the noise, the little girl was asleep. Callahan looked at the heaps of dead Wolves, took one hand from beneath the little girl’s bottom, and drew a slow, trembling cross in the air.

“God be thanked,” he said.

Roland went to him and took the hand that had made the cross. “Put one on me,” he said.

Callahan looked at him, uncomprehending.

Roland nodded to Vaughn Eisenhart. “That one promised I’d leave town with his curse on me if harm came to his wife.”

He could have said more, but there was no need. Callahan understood, and signed the cross on Roland’s brow. The fingernail trailed a warmth behind it that Roland felt a long time. And although Eisenhart never kept his promise, the gunslinger was never sorry that he’d asked the Pere for that extra bit of protection.

TWENTY

What followed was a confused jubilee there on the East Road, mingled with grief for the two who had fallen. Yet even the grief had a joyful light shining through it. No one seemed to feel that the losses were in any way equal to the gains. And Eddie supposed that was true. If it wasn’t your wife or your son who had fallen, that was.

The singing from town drew closer. Now they could see rising dust. In the road, men and women embraced. Someone tried to take Margaret Eisenhart’s head away from her husband, who for the time being refused to let it go.

Eddie drifted over to Jake.

“Never saw *Star Wars*, did you?” he asked.

“No, told you. I was *going* to, but—”

“You left too soon. I know. Those things they were swinging—Jake, they were from that movie.”

“You sure?”

“*Yes*. And the Wolves . . . Jake, the Wolves themselves . . . ”

Jake was nodding, very slowly. Now they could see the people from town. The newcomers saw the children—*all* the children, still here and still safe—and raised a cheer. Those in the forefront began to run. “I know.”

“*Do* you?” Eddie asked. His eyes were almost pleading. “Do you really? Because . . . man, it’s so *crazy*—”

Jake looked at the heaped Wolves. The green hoods. The gray leggings. The black boots. The snarling, decomposing faces. Eddie had already pulled one of those rotting metal faces away and looked at what was beneath it. Nothing but smooth metal, plus lenses that served as eyes, a round mesh grille that doubtless served as a nose,

two sprouted microphones at the temples for ears. No, all the personality these things had was in the masks and clothing they wore.

“Crazy or not, I know what they are, Eddie. Or where they come from, at least. Marvel Comics.”

A look of sublime relief filled Eddie’s face. He bent and kissed Jake on the cheek. A ghost of a smile touched the boy’s mouth. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

“The *Spider-Man* books,” Eddie said. “When I was a kid I couldn’t get enough of those things.”

“I didn’t buy em myself,” Jake said, “but Timmy Mucci down at Mid-Town Lanes used to have a terrible jones for the Marvel mags. *Spider-Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Captain America*, all of em. These guys . . .”

“They look like Dr. Doom,” Eddie said.

“Yeah,” Jake said. “It’s not exact, I’m sure the masks were modified to make them look a little more like wolves, but otherwise . . . same green hoods, same green cloaks. Yeah, Dr. Doom.”

“And the sneetches,” Eddie said. “Have you ever heard of Harry Potter?”

“I don’t think so. Have you?”

“No, and I’ll tell you why. Because the sneetches are from the future. Maybe from some Marvel comic book that’ll come out in 1990 or 1995. Do you see what I’m saying?”

Jake nodded.

“It’s all nineteen, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Nineteen, ninety-nine, and nineteen-ninety-nine.”

Eddie glanced around. “Where’s Suze?”

“Probably went after her chair,” Jake said. But before either of them could explore the question of Susannah Dean’s whereabouts any further (and by then it was probably too late, anyway), the first of the *folken* from town arrived. Eddie and Jake were swept into a wild, impromptu celebration—hugged, kissed, shaken by the hand, laughed over, wept over, thanked and thanked and thanked.

TWENTY-ONE

Ten minutes after the main body of the townsfolk arrived, Rosalita reluctantly approached Roland. The gunslinger was extremely glad to see her. Eben Took had taken him by the arms and was telling him—over and over again, endlessly, it seemed—how wrong he and Telford had been, how utterly and completely wrong, and how when Roland and his ka-tet were ready to move on, Eben Took would outfit them from stem to stern and not a penny would they pay.

“Roland!” Rosa said.

Roland excused himself and took her by the arm, leading her a little way up the road. The Wolves had been scattered everywhere and were now being mercilessly looted of their possessions by the laughing, deliriously happy *folken*. Stragglers were arriving every minute.

“Rosa, what is it?”

“It’s your lady,” Rosa said. “Susannah.”

“What of her?” Roland asked. Frowning, he looked around. He didn’t see Susannah, couldn’t remember when he *had* last seen her. When he’d given Jake the cigarette? That long ago? He thought so. “Where is she?”

“That’s just it,” Rosa said. “I don’t know. So I peeked into the waggon she came in, thinking that perhaps she’d gone in there to rest. That perhaps she felt faint or gut-sick, do ya. But she’s not there. And Roland . . . her chair is gone.”

“Gods!” Roland snarled, and slammed his fist against his leg. “Oh, *gods!*”

Rosalita took a step back from him, alarmed.

“Where’s Eddie?” Roland asked.

She pointed. Eddie was so deep in a cluster of admiring men and women that Roland didn’t think he would have seen him, but for the child riding on his shoulders; it was Heddon Jaffords, an enormous grin on his face.

“Are you sure you want to disturb him?” Rosa asked timidly. “May be she’s just gone off a bit, to pull herself back together.”

Gone off a bit, Roland thought. He could feel a blackness filling his heart. His sinking heart. She’d gone off a bit, all right. And he knew who had stepped in to take her place. Their attention had wandered in the aftermath of the fight . . . Jake’s grief . . . the congratulations of

the *folken* . . . the confusion and the joy and the singing . . . but that was no excuse.

“*Gunslingers!*” he roared, and the jubilant crowd quieted at once. Had he cared to look, he could have seen the fear that lay just beneath their relief and adulation. It would not have been new to him; they were always afraid of those who came wearing the hard calibers. What they wanted of such when the shooting was done was to give them a final meal, perhaps a final gratitude-fuck, then send them on their way and pick up their own peaceful farming-tools once more.

Well, Roland thought, *we’ll be going soon enough. In fact, one of us has gone already. Gods!*

“*Gunslingers, to me! To me!*”

Eddie reached Roland first. He looked around. “Where’s Susannah?” he asked.

Roland pointed into the stony wasteland of bluffs and arroyos, then elevated his finger until it was pointing at a black hole just below the skyline. “I think there,” he said.

All the color had drained out of Eddie Dean’s face. “That’s Doorway Cave you’re pointing at,” he said. “Isn’t it?”

Roland nodded.

“But the ball . . . Black Thirteen . . . she wouldn’t even go *near* it when it was in Callahan’s church—”

“No,” Roland said. “*Susannah* wouldn’t. But she’s not in charge anymore.”

“Mia?” Jake asked.

“Yes.” Roland studied the high hole with his faded eyes. “Mia’s gone to have her baby. She’s gone to have her chap.”

“No,” Eddie said. His hands wandered out and took hold of Roland’s shirt. Around them, the *folken* stood silently, watching. “Roland, say no.”

“We’ll go after her and hope we’re not too late,” Roland said.

But in his heart, he knew they already were.

EPILOGUE:

THE DOOR WAY CAVE

ONE

They moved fast, but Mia moved faster. A mile beyond the place where the arroyo path divided, they found her wheelchair. She had pushed it hard, using her strong arms to give it a savage beating against the unforgiving terrain. Finally it had struck a jutting rock hard enough to bend the lefthand wheel out of true and render the chair useless. It was a wonder, really, that she had gotten as far in it as she had.

“Fuck-commala,” Eddie murmured, looking at the chair. At the dents and dings and scratches. Then he raised his head, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted. *“Fight her, Susannah! Fight her! We’re coming!”* He pushed past the chair and headed on up the path, not looking to see if the others were following.

“She can’t make it up the path to the cave, can she?” Jake asked. “I mean, her *legs* are gone.”

“Wouldn’t think so, would you?” Roland asked, but his face was dark. And he was limping. Jake started to say something about this, then thought better of it.

“What would she want up there, anyway?” Callahan asked.

Roland turned a singularly cold eye on him. “To go somewhere else,” he said. “Surely you see that much. Come on.”

TWO

As they neared the place where the path began to climb, Roland caught up to Eddie. The first time he put his hand on the younger man’s shoulder, Eddie shook it off. The second time he turned—reluctantly—to look at his dinh. Roland saw there was blood spattered across the front of Eddie’s shirt. He wondered if it was Benny’s, Margaret’s, or both.

“Mayhap it’d be better to let her alone awhile, if it’s Mia,” Roland said.

“Are you crazy? Did fighting the Wolves loosen your *screws*?”

“If we let her alone, she may finish her business and be gone.” Even as he spoke the words, Roland doubted them.

“Yeah,” Eddie said, studying him with burning eyes, “she’ll finish her business, all right. First piece, have the kid. Second piece, kill my wife.”

“That would be suicide.”

“But she might do it. We have to go after her.”

Surrender was an art Roland practiced rarely but with some skill on the few occasions in his life when it had been necessary. He took another look at Eddie Dean’s pale, set face and practiced it now. “All right,” he said, “but we’ll have to be careful. She’ll fight to keep from being taken. She’ll kill, if it comes to that. You before any of us, mayhap.”

“I know,” Eddie said. His face was bleak. He looked up the path, but a quarter of a mile up, it hooked around to the south side of the bluff and out of sight. The path zigged back to their side just below the mouth of the cave. That stretch of the climb was deserted, but what did that prove? She could be anywhere. It crossed Eddie’s mind that she might not even be up there at all, that the crashed chair might have been as much a red herring as the children’s possessions Roland had had scattered along the arroyo path.

I won’t believe that. There’s a million ratholes in this part of the Calla, and if I believe that she could be in any of them . . .

Callahan and Jake had caught up and stood there looking at Eddie.

“Come on,” he said. “I don’t care who she is, Roland. If four able-bodied men can’t catch one no-legs lady, we ought to turn in our guns and call it a day.”

Jake smiled wanly. “I’m touched. You just called me a man.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Sunshine. Come on.”

THREE

Eddie and Susannah spoke and thought of each other as man and wife, but he hadn’t exactly been able to take a cab over to Cartier’s

and buy her a diamond and a wedding band. He'd once had a pretty nice high school class ring, but that he'd lost in the sand at Coney Island during the summer he turned seventeen, the summer of Mary Jean Sobieski. Yet on their journeyings from the Western Sea, Eddie had rediscovered his talent as a wood-carver ("wittle baby-ass whittler," the great sage and eminent junkie would have said), and Eddie had carved his beloved a beautiful ring of willowgreen, light as foam but strong. This Susannah had worn between her breasts, hung on a length of rawhide.

They found it at the foot of the path, still on its rawhide loop. Eddie picked it up, looked at it grimly for a moment, then slipped it over his own head, inside his own shirt.

"Look," Jake said.

They turned to a place just off the path. Here, in a patch of scant grass, was a track. Not human, not animal. Three wheels in a configuration that made Eddie think of a child's tricycle. What the hell?

"Come on," he said, and wondered how many times he'd said it since realizing she was gone. He also wondered how long they'd keep following him if he kept on saying it. Not that it mattered. He'd go on until he had her again, or until he was dead. Simple as that. What frightened him most was the baby . . . what she called the chap. Suppose it turned on her? And he had an idea it might do just that.

"Eddie," Roland said.

Eddie looked over his shoulder and gave him Roland's own impatient twirl of the hand: *let's go*.

Roland pointed at the track, instead. "This was some sort of motor."

"Did you hear one?"

"No."

"Then you can't know that."

"But I do," Roland said. "Someone sent her a ride. Or *something*."

"You can't *know* that, goddam you!"

"Andy could have left a ride for her," Jake said. "If someone told him to."

"Who would have told him to do a thing like that?" Eddie rasped.

Finli, Jake thought. *Finli o' Tego, whoever he is. Or maybe Walter.* But he said nothing. Eddie was upset enough already.

Roland said, "She's gotten away. Prepare yourself for it."

"Go fuck yourself!" Eddie snarled, and turned to the path leading upward. "Come on!"

FOUR

Yet in his heart, Eddie knew Roland was right. He attacked the path to the Doorway Cave not with hope but with a kind of desperate determination. At the place where the boulder had fallen, blocking most of the path, they found an abandoned vehicle with three balloon tires and an electric motor that was still softly humming, a low and constant *ummmmm* sound. To Eddie, the gadget looked like one of those funky ATV things they sold at Abercrombie & Fitch. There was a handgrip accelerator and handgrip brakes. He bent close and read what was stamped into the steel of the left one:

° "SQUEEZIE-PIE" BRAKES, BY NORTH CENTRAL
POSITRONICS °

Behind the bicycle-style seat was a little carry-case. Eddie flipped it up and was totally unsurprised to see a six-pack of Nozz-A-La, the drink favored by discriminating bumhugs everywhere. One can had been taken off the ring. She'd been thirsty, of course. Moving fast made you thirsty. Especially if you were in labor.

"This came from the place across the river," Jake murmured. "The Dogan. If I'd gone out back, I would have seen it parked there. A whole fleet of them, probably. I bet it *was* Andy."

Eddie had to admit it made sense. The Dogan was clearly an outpost of some sort, probably one that predated the current unpleasant residents of Thunderclap. This was exactly the sort of vehicle you'd want to make patrols on, given the terrain.

From this vantage-point beside the fallen boulder, Eddie could see the battleground where they'd stood against the Wolves, throwing plates and lead. That stretch of East Road was so full of people it

made him think of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The whole Calla was out there partying, and oh how Eddie hated them in that moment. *My wife's gone because of you chickenshit motherfuckers*, he thought. It was a stupid idea, stupendously unkind, as well, yet it offered a certain hateful satisfaction. What was it that poem by Stephen Crane had said, the one they'd read back in high school? "I like it because it is bitter, and because it is my heart." Something like that. Close enough for government work.

Now Roland was standing beside the abandoned, softly humming trike, and if it was sympathy he saw in the gunslinger's eyes—or, worse, pity—he wanted none of it.

"Come on, you guys. Let's find her."

FIVE

This time the voice that greeted them from the Doorway Cave's depths belonged to a woman Eddie had never actually met, although he had heard of her—aye, much, say thankya—and knew her voice at once.

"She's gone, ye great dick-led galoot!" cried Rhea of the Cöos from the darkness. "Taken her labor elsewhere, ye ken! And I've no doubt that when her cannibal baby finally comes out, it'll munch its mother north from the cunt, aye!" She laughed, a perfect (and perfectly grating) Witch Hazel cackle. "No titty-milk fer this one, ye grobbut lost lad! This one'll have *meat!*"

"Shut up!" Eddie screamed into the darkness. "Shut up, you . . . you fucking *phantom!*"

And for a wonder, the phantom did.

Eddie looked around. He saw Tower's goddamned two-shelf bookcase—first editions under glass, may they do ya fine—but no pink metal-mesh bag with MID-WORLD LANES printed on it; no engraved ghostwood box, either. The unfound door was still here, its hinges still hooked to nothing, but now it had a strangely dull look. Not just unfound but unremembered; only one more useless piece of a world that had moved on.

"No," Eddie said. "No, I don't accept that. The power is still here. *The power is still here.*"

He turned to Roland, but Roland wasn't looking at him. Incredibly, Roland was studying the books. As if the search for Susannah had begun to bore him and he was looking for a good read to pass the time.

Eddie took Roland's shoulder, turned him. "What happened, Roland? Do you know?"

"What happened is obvious," Roland said. Callahan had come up beside him. Only Jake, who was visiting the Doorway Cave for the first time, hung back at the entrance. "She took her wheelchair as far as she could, then went on her hands and knees to the foot of the path, no mean feat for a woman who's probably in labor. At the foot of the path, someone—probably Andy, just as Jake says—left her a ride."

"If it was Slightman, I'll go back and kill him myself."

Roland shook his head. "Not Slightman." *But Slightman might know for sure*, he thought. It probably didn't matter, but he liked loose ends no more than he liked crooked pictures hanging on walls.

"Hey, bro, sorry to tell you this, but your poke-bitch is dead," Henry Dean called up from deep in the cave. He didn't sound sorry; he sounded gleeful. "Damn thing ate her all the way up! Only stopped long enough on its way to the brain to spit out her teeth!"

"*Shut up!*" Eddie screamed.

"The brain's the ultimate brain-food, you know," Henry said. He had assumed a mellow, scholarly tone. "Revered by cannibals the world over. That's quite the chap she's got, Eddie! Cute but *hungry*."

"Be still, in the name of God!" Callahan cried, and the voice of Eddie's brother ceased. For the time being, at least, all the voices ceased.

Roland went on as if he had never been interrupted. "She came here. Took the bag. Opened the box so that Black Thirteen would open the door. Mia, this is—not Susannah but Mia. Daughter of none. And then, still carrying the open box, she went through. On the other side she closed the box, closing the door. Closing it against us."

"No," Eddie said, and grabbed the crystal doorknob with the rose etched into its geometric facets. It wouldn't turn. There was not so much as a single iota of give.

From the darkness, Elmer Chambers said: "If you'd been quicker, son, you could have saved your friend. It's your fault." And fell silent

again.

“It’s not real, Jake,” Eddie said, and rubbed a finger across the rose. The tip of his finger came away dusty. As if the unfound door had stood here, unused as well as unfound, for a score of centuries. “It just broadcasts the worst stuff it can find in your own head.”

“I was always hatin yo’ guts, honky!” Detta cried triumphantly from the darkness beyond the door. “Ain’t I glad to be shed of you!”

“Like that,” Eddie said, cocking a thumb in the direction of the voice.

Jake nodded, pale and thoughtful. Roland, meanwhile, had turned back to Tower’s bookcase.

“Roland?” Eddie tried to keep the irritation out of his voice, or at least add a little spark of humor to it, and failed at both. “Are we boring you, here?”

“No,” Roland said.

“Then I wish you’d stop looking at those books and help me think of a way to open this d—”

“I know how to open it,” Roland said. “The first question is where will it take us now that the ball is gone? The second question is where do we want to go? After Mia, or to the place where Tower and his friend are hiding from Balazar and *his* friends?”

“We go after Susannah!” Eddie shouted. “Have you been listening to any of the shit those voices are saying? They’re saying it’s a cannibal! My wife could be giving birth to some kind of a cannibal monster *right now*, and if you think anything’s more important than that—”

“The *Tower’s* more important,” Roland said. “And somewhere on the other side of this door there’s a man whose *name* is Tower. A man who owns a certain vacant lot and a certain rose growing there.”

Eddie looked at him uncertainly. So did Jake and Callahan. Roland turned again to the little bookcase. It looked strange indeed, here in this rocky darkness.

“And he owns these books,” Roland mused. “He risked all things to save them.”

“Yeah, because he’s one obsessed motherfucker.”

“Yet all things serve ka and follow the Beam,” Roland said, and selected a volume from the upper shelf of the bookcase. Eddie saw it

had been placed in there upside down, which struck him as a very un-Calvin Tower thing to do.

Roland held the book in his seamed, weather-chapped hands, seeming to debate which one to give it to. He looked at Eddie . . . looked at Callahan . . . and then gave the book to Jake.

“Read me what it says on the front,” he said. “The words of your world make my head hurt. They swim to my eye easily enough, but when I reach my mind toward them, most swim away again.”

Jake was paying little attention; his eyes were riveted on the book jacket with its picture of a little country church at sunset. Callahan, meanwhile, had stepped past him in order to get a closer look at the door standing here in the gloomy cave.

At last the boy looked up. “But . . . Roland, isn’t this the town Pere Callahan told us about? The one where the vampire broke his cross and made him drink his blood?”

Callahan whirled away from the door. “*What?*”

Jake held the book out wordlessly. Callahan took it. Almost snatched it.

“ ‘*Salem’s Lot*,’ he read. “A novel by Stephen King.” He looked up at Eddie, then at Jake. “Heard of him? Either of you? He’s not from my time, I don’t think.”

Jake shook his head. Eddie began to shake his, as well, and then he saw something. “That church,” he said. “It looks like the Calla Gathering Hall. Close enough to be its twin, almost.”

“It also looks like the East Stoneham Methodist Meeting Hall, built in 1819,” Callahan said, “so I guess this time we’ve got a case of triplets.” But his voice sounded faraway to his own ears, as hollow as the false voices which floated up from the bottom of the cave. All at once he felt false to himself, not real. He felt *nineteen*.

SIX

It’s a joke, part of his mind assured him. *It must be a joke, the cover of this book says it’s a novel, so—*

Then an idea struck him, and he felt a surge of relief. It was *conditional* relief, but surely better than none at all. The idea was that

sometimes people wrote make-believe stories about real places. That was it, surely. Had to be.

“Look at page one hundred and nineteen,” Roland said. “I could make out a little of it, but not all. Not nearly enough.”

Callahan found the page, and read this:

“ ‘In the early days at the seminary, a friend of Father . . . ’ ” He trailed off, eyes racing ahead over the words on the page.

“Go on,” Eddie said. “You read it, Father, or I will.”

Slowly, Callahan resumed.

“ ‘. . . a friend of Father Callahan’s had given him a blasphemous crewelwork sampler which had sent him into gales of horrified laughter at the time, but which seemed more true and less blasphemous as the years passed: *God grant me the SERENITY to accept what I cannot change, the TENACITY to change what I may, and the GOOD LUCK not to fuck up too often.* This in Old English script with a rising sun in the background.

“ ‘Now, standing before Danny Glick’s . . . Danny Glick’s mourners, that old credo . . . that old credo returned.’ ”

The hand holding the book sagged. If Jake hadn’t caught it, it probably would have tumbled to the floor of the cave.

“You had it, didn’t you?” Eddie said. “You actually had a sampler saying that.”

“Frankie Foyle gave it to me,” Callahan said. His voice was hardly more than a whisper. “Back in seminary. And Danny Glick . . . I officiated at his funeral, I think I told you that. That was when everything seemed to change, somehow. But this is a *novel!* A novel is *fiction!* How . . . how can it . . . ” His voice suddenly rose to a damned howl. To Roland it sounded eerily like the false voices that rose up from below. “*Damn it, I’m a REAL PERSON!*”

“Here’s the part where the vampire broke your cross,” Jake reported. “ ‘ “Together at last!” Barlow said, smiling. His face was strong and intelligent and handsome in a sharp, forbidding sort of way—yet, as the light shifted, it seemed—’ ”

“Stop,” Callahan said dully. “It makes my head hurt.”

“It says his face reminded you of the bogeyman who lived in your closet when you were a kid. Mr. Flip.”

Callahan's face was now so pale he might have been a vampire's victim himself. "I never told anyone about Mr. Flip, not even my mother. That can't be in that book. It just can't be."

"It is," Jake said simply.

"Let's get this straight," Eddie said. "When you were a kid, there *was* a Mr. Flip, and you *did* think of him when you faced this particular Type One vampire, Barlow. Correct?"

"Yes, but—"

Eddie turned to the gunslinger. "Is this getting us any closer to Susannah, do you think?"

"Yes. We've reached the heart of a great mystery. Perhaps *the* great mystery. I believe the Dark Tower is almost close enough to touch. And if the Tower is close, Susannah is, too."

Ignoring him, Callahan was flipping through the book. Jake was looking over his shoulder.

"And you know how to open that door?" Eddie pointed at it.

"Yes," Roland said. "I'd need help, but I think the people of Calla Bryn Sturgis owe us a little help, don't you?"

Eddie nodded. "All right, then, let me tell you this much: I'm pretty sure I *have* seen the name Stephen King before, at least once."

"On the Specials board," Jake said without looking up from the book. "Yeah, I remember. It was on the Specials board the first time we went todash."

"Specials board?" Roland asked, frowning.

"*Tower's* Specials board," Eddie said. "It was in the window, remember? Part of his whole Restaurant-of-the-Mind thing."

Roland nodded.

"But I'll tell you guys something," Jake said, and now he *did* look up from the book. "The name was there when Eddie and I went todash, but it *wasn't* on the board the first time I went in there. The time Mr. Deepneau told me the river riddle, it was someone else's name. It changed, just like the name of the writer on *Charlie the Choo-Choo*."

"I *can't* be in a book," Callahan was saying. "I am *not* a fiction . . . am I?"

"Roland." It was Eddie. The gunslinger turned to him. "I need to find her. I don't care who's real and who's not. I don't care about

Calvin Tower, Stephen King, or the Pope of Rome. As far as reality goes, she's all of it I want. *I need to find my wife.*" His voice dropped. "Help me, Roland."

Roland reached out and took the book in his left hand. With his right he touched the door. *If she's still alive*, he thought. *If we can find her, and if she's come back to herself. If and if and if.*

Eddie took Roland's arm. "Please," he said. "Please don't make me try to do it on my own. I love her so much. Help me find her."

Roland smiled. It made him younger. It seemed to fill the cave with its own light. All of Eld's ancient power was in that smile: the power of the White.

"Yes," he said. "We go."

And then he said again, all the affirmation necessary in this dark place.

"Yes."

Bangor, Maine
December 15, 2002

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The debt I owe to the American Western in the composition of the *Dark Tower* novels should be clear without my belaboring the point; certainly the Calla did not come by the final part of its (slightly misspelled) name accidentally. Yet it should be pointed out that at least two sources for some of this material aren't American at all. Sergio Leone (*A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, etc.) was Italian. And Akira Kurosawa (*The Seven Samurai*) was, of course, Japanese. Would these books have been written without the cinematic legacy of Kurosawa, Leone, Peckinpah, Howard Hawks, and John Sturgis? Probably not without Leone. But without the others, I would argue there could *be* no Leone.

I also owe a debt of thanks to Robin Furth, who managed to be there with the right bit of information every time I needed it, and of course to my wife, Tabitha, who is still patiently giving me the time and light and space I need to do this job to the best of my abilities.

S.K.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

Before you read this short afterword, I ask that you take a moment (may it do ya fine) to look again at the dedication page at the front of this story. I'll wait.

Thank you. I want you to know that Frank Muller has read a number of my books for the audio market, beginning with *Different Seasons*. I met him at Recorded Books in New York at that time and we liked each other immediately. It's a friendship that has lasted longer than some of my readers have been alive. In the course of our association, Frank recorded the first four *Dark Tower* novels, and I listened to them—all sixty or so cassettes—while preparing to finish the gunslinger's story. Audio is the perfect medium for such exhaustive preparation, because audio insists you absorb everything; your hurrying eye (or occasionally tired mind) cannot skip so much as a single word. That was what I wanted, complete immersion in Roland's world, and that was what Frank gave me. He gave me something more, as well, something wonderful and unexpected. It was a sense of newness and freshness that I had lost somewhere along the way; a sense of Roland and Roland's friends as *actual people*, with their own vital inner lives. When I say in the dedication that Frank heard the voices in my head, I am speaking the literal truth as I understand it. And, like a rather more benign version of the Doorway Cave, he brought them fully back to life. The remaining books are finished (this one in final draft, the last two in rough), and in large part I owe that to Frank Muller and his inspired readings.

I had hoped to have Frank on board to do the audio readings of the final three *Dark Tower* books (unabridged readings; I do not allow abridgments of my work and don't approve of them, as a rule), and he was eager to do them. We discussed the possibility at a dinner in Bangor during October of 2001, and in the course of the conversation, he called the *Tower* stories his absolute favorites. As he had read over five hundred novels for the audio market, I was extremely flattered.

Less than a month after that dinner and that optimistic, forward-looking discussion, Frank suffered a terrible motorcycle accident on a highway in California. It happened only days after discovering that he was to become a father for the second time. He was wearing his brain-bucket and that probably saved his life—motorcyclists please take note—but he suffered serious injuries nevertheless, many of them neurological. He won't be recording the final *Dark Tower* novels on tape, after all. Frank's final work will almost certainly be his inspired reading of Clive Barker's *Coldheart Canyon*, which was completed in September of 2001, just before his accident.

Barring a miracle, Frank Muller's working life is over. His work of rehabilitation, which is almost sure to be lifelong, has only begun. He'll need a lot of care and a lot of professional help. Such things cost money, and money's not a thing which, as a rule, freelance artists have a great deal of. I and some friends have formed a foundation to help Frank—and, hopefully, other freelance artists of various types who suffer similar cataclysms. All the income I receive from the audio version of *Wolves of the Calla* will go into this foundation's account. It won't be enough, but the work of funding The Wavedancer Foundation (*Wavedancer* was the name of Frank's sailboat), like Frank's rehabilitative work, is only beginning. If you've got a few bucks that aren't working and want to help insure the future of The Wavedancer Foundation, don't send them to me; send them to:

The Wavedancer Foundation
c/o Mr. Arthur Greene
101 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10001

Frank's wife, Erika, says thankya. So do I.
And Frank would, if he could.

Bangor, Maine
December 15, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by David King



Photo by Tabitha King

STEPHEN KING is the author of more than fifty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. Among his most recent are *From a Buick 8*, *Everything's Eventual*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *Bag of Bones*, the screenplay *Storm of the Century*, and *The Green Mile*. His acclaimed nonfiction book, *On Writing*, was also a bestseller. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

ALSO BY STEPHEN KING

NOVELS

Carrie

'Salem's Lot

The Shining

The Stand

The Dead Zone

Firestarter

Cujo

THE DARK TOWER I:

The Gunslinger

Christine

Pet Sematary

Cycle of the Werewolf

The Talisman (*with Peter Straub*)

It

The Eyes of the Dragon

Misery

The Tommyknockers

THE DARK TOWER II:

The Drawing of the Three

THE DARK TOWER III:

The Waste Lands

The Dark Half

Needful Things

Gerald's Game

Dolores Claiborne

Insomnia

Rose Madder

Desperation

The Green Mile

THE DARK TOWER IV:

Wizard and Glass

Bag of Bones

The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon

Dreamcatcher
Black House (*with Peter Straub*)
From a Buick 8

THE DARK TOWER VI:

Song of Susannah

THE DARK TOWER VII:

The Dark Tower

AS RICHARD BACHMAN

Rage

The Long Walk

Roadwork

The Running Man

Thinner

The Regulators

COLLECTIONS

Night Shift

Different Seasons

Skeleton Crew

Four Past Midnight

Nightmares and Dreamscapes

Hearts in Atlantis

Everything's Eventual

SCREENPLAYS

Creepshow

Cat's Eye

Silver Bullet

Maximum Overdrive

Pet Sematary

Golden Years

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The Stand

The Shining

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Storm of the Century

NONFICTION
Danse Macabre
On Writing

Dark Tower-related in bold

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STEPHEN
KING

SONG OF SUSANNAH

THE DARK TOWER

JOIN THE QUEST FOR THE ELUSIVE DARK TOWER

PRAISE FOR STEPHEN KING'S
SONG OF SUSANNAH
THE DARK TOWER VI

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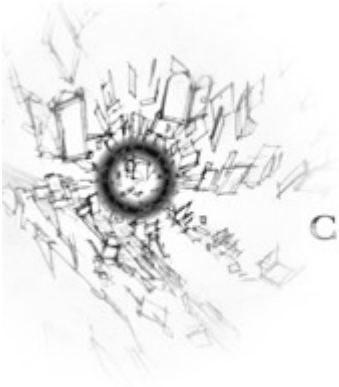
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For Tabby, who knew when it was done



“Go, then. There are other worlds than these.”

John “Jake” Chambers

“I am a maid of constant sorrow
I’ve seen trouble all my days
All through the world I’m bound to ramble
I have no friends to show my way . . .”

Traditional

“Fair is whatever God wants to do.”

Leif Enger

Peace Like a River

REPRODUCTION

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1ST STANZA



ONE

“How long will the magic stay?”

At first no one answered Roland’s question, and so he asked it again, this time looking across the living room of the rectory to where Henchick of the Manni sat with Cantab, who had married one of Henchick’s numerous granddaughters. The two men were holding hands, as was the Manni way. The older man had lost a granddaughter that day, but if he grieved, the emotion did not show on his stony, composed face.

Next to Roland, holding no one’s hand, silent and dreadfully white, sat Eddie Dean. Beside him, cross-legged on the floor, was Jake Chambers. He had pulled Oy into his lap, a thing Roland had never seen before and would not have believed the billy-bumbler would allow. Both Eddie and Jake were splattered with blood. That on Jake’s shirt belonged to his friend Benny Slightman. That on Eddie’s belonged to Margaret Eisenhart, once Margaret of Redpath, the lost granddaughter of the old patriarch. Both Eddie and Jake looked as tired as Roland felt, but he was quite sure there would be no rest for them this night. Distant, from town, came the sounds of fireworks and singing and celebration.

There was no celebration here. Benny and Margaret were dead, and Susannah was gone.

“Henchick, tell me, I beg: how long will the magic stay?”

The old man stroked his beard in a distracted fashion. “Gunslinger—*Roland*—I can’t say. The magic of the door in that cave is beyond me. As thee must know.”

“Tell me what you think. Based on what you *do* know.”

Eddie raised his hands. They were dirty, there was blood under the nails, and they trembled. “Tell, Henchick,” he said, speaking in a voice, humble and lost, that Roland had never heard before. “Tell, I beg.”

Rosalita, Pere Callahan’s woman of all work, came in with a tray. There were cups on it, and a carafe of steaming coffee. She, at least, had found time to change out of her bloody, dusty jeans and shirt and into a housedress, but her eyes were still shocked. They peered from her face like small animals from their burrows. She poured the coffee and passed the cups without speaking. Nor had she gotten all the blood, Roland saw as he took one of the cups. There was a streak of it on the back of her right hand. Margaret’s or Benny’s? He didn’t know. Or much care. The Wolves had been defeated. They might or might not come again to Calla Bryn Sturgis. That was ka’s business. Theirs was Susannah Dean, who had disappeared in the aftermath, taking Black Thirteen with her.

Henchick said: “Ye ask of kaven?”

“Aye, father,” Roland agreed. “The persistence of magic.”

Father Callahan took a cup of coffee with a nod and a distracted smile, but no word of thanks. He had spoken little since they’d come back from the cave. In his lap was a book called *’Salem’s Lot*, by a man of whom he had never heard. It purported to be a work of fiction, but he, Donald Callahan, was in it. He had lived in the town of which it told, had taken part in the events it recounted. He had looked on the back and on the rear flap for the author’s photograph, queerly certain that he would see a version of his own face looking back at him (the way he’d looked in 1975, when these events had taken place, most likely), but there had been no picture, just a note about the book’s writer that told very little. He lived in the state of

Maine. He was married. He'd written one previous book, quite well reviewed, if you believed the quotations on the back.

"The greater the magic, the longer it persists," Cantab said, and then looked at Henschick questioningly.

"Aye," Henschick said. "Magic and glammer, both are one, and they do unroll from the back." He paused. "From the past, do'ee ken."

"This door opened on many places and many times in the world my friends came from," Roland said. "I would open it again, but just on the last two. The most recent two. Can that be done?"

They waited as Henschick and Cantab considered. The Manni were great travelers. If anyone knew, if anyone could do what Roland wanted—what they all wanted—it would be these folk.

Cantab leaned deferentially toward the old man, the dinh of Calla Redpath. He whispered. Henschick listened, his face expressionless, then turned Cantab's head with one gnarled old hand and whispered back.

Eddie shifted, and Roland felt him getting ready to break loose, perhaps to begin shouting. He put a restraining hand on Eddie's shoulder, and Eddie subsided. For the time being, at least.

The whispered consultation went on for perhaps five minutes while the others waited. The sounds of celebration in the distance were difficult for Roland to take; God knew how they must make Eddie feel.

At last Henschick patted Cantab's cheek with his hand and turned to Roland.

"We think this may be done," he said.

"Thank God," Eddie muttered. Then, louder: "Thank *God!* Let's go up there. We can meet you on the East Road—"

Both of the bearded men were shaking their heads, Henschick with a kind of stern sorrow, Cantab with a look that was almost horror.

"We'll not go up to the Cave of the Voices in the dark," Henschick said.

"We *have* to!" Eddie burst out. "You don't understand! It's not just a question of how long the magic will or won't last, it's a question of

time on the other side! It goes faster over there, and once it's gone, it's gone! Christ, Susannah could be having that baby right now, and if it's some kind of cannibal—”

“Listen to me, young fellow,” Henchick said, “and hear me very well, I beg. The day is nigh gone.”

This was true. Never in Roland's experience had a day run so quickly through his fingers. There had been the battle with the Wolves early, not long after dawn, then celebration there on the road for the victory and sorrow for their losses (which had been amazingly small, as things had fallen). Then had come the realization that Susannah was gone, the trek to the cave, their discoveries there. By the time they'd gotten back to the East Road battlefield, it had been past noon. Most of the townsfolk had left, bearing their saved children home in triumph. Henchick had agreed willingly enough to this palaver, but by the time they'd gotten back to the rectory, the sun had been on the wrong side of the sky.

We're going to get a night's rest, after all, Roland thought, and didn't know whether to be glad or disappointed. He could use sleep; that much he did know.

“I listen and hear,” Eddie said, but Roland's hand was still on his shoulder, and he could feel the younger man trembling.

“Even were we willing to go, we couldn't persuade enough of the others to come wi' us,” Henchick said.

“You're their dinh—”

“Aye, so you call it, and so I suppose I am, although it isn't our word, ye ken. In most things they'd follow me, and they know the debt they owe your ka-tet out of this day's work and would say thank ya any way they could. But they wouldn't go up that path and into that haunted place after dark.” Henchick was shaking his head slowly and with great certainty. “No—that they will not do.

“Listen, young man. Cantab and I can be back at Redpath Kra-ten well before full dark. There we'll call our menfolk to the Tempa, which is to us as the Meeting Hall is to the forgetful folk.” He glanced briefly at Callahan. “Say pardon, Pere, if the term offends ye.”

Callahan nodded absently without looking up from the book, which he was turning over and over in his hands. It had been covered in protective plastic, as valuable first editions often are. The price lightly penciled on the flyleaf was \$950. Some young man's second novel. He wondered what made it so valuable. If they ran into the book's owner, a man named Calvin Tower, he would surely ask. And that would only be the start of his questioning.

"We'll explain what it is ye want, and ask for volunteers. Of the sixty-eight men of Redpath Kraten, I believe all but four or five will agree to help—to blend their forces together. It will make powerful khef. Is that what ye call it? Khef? The sharing?"

"Yes," Roland said. "The sharing of water, we say."

"You couldn't fit anywhere that number of men in the mouth of that cave," Jake said. "Not even if half of them sat on the other half's shoulders."

"No need," Henschick said. "We'll put the most powerful inside—what we call the senders. The others can line up along the path, linked hand to hand and bob to bob. They'll be there before the sun goes rooftop tomorrow. I set my watch and warrant on it."

"We'll need tonight to gather our mags and bobs, anyway," Cantab said. He was looking at Eddie apologetically, and with some fear. The young man was in terrible pain, that was clear. And he was a gunslinger. A gunslinger might strike out, and when one did, it was never blindly.

"It could be too late," Eddie said, low. He looked at Roland with his hazel eyes. They were now bloodshot and dark with exhaustion. "Tomorrow could be too late even if the magic *hasn't* gone away."

Roland opened his mouth and Eddie raised a finger.

"Don't say ka, Roland. If you say ka one more time, I swear my head'll explode."

Roland closed his mouth.

Eddie turned back to the two bearded men in their dark, Quakerish cloaks. "And you can't be sure the magic will stay, can you? What could be opened tonight could be closed against us forever tomorrow."

Not all the magnets and plumb-bobs in Manni creation could open it.”

“Aye,” Henchick said. “But your woman took the magic ball with her, and whatever’ee may think, Mid-World and the Borderlands are well shed of it.”

“I’d sell my soul to have it back, and in my hands,” Eddie said clearly.

They all looked shocked at this, even Jake, and Roland felt a deep urge to tell Eddie he must take that back, must unsay it. There were powerful forces working against their quest for the Tower, dark ones, and Black Thirteen was their clearest sigil. What could be used could also be misused, and the bends o’ the rainbow had their own malevolent glammer, Thirteen most of all. Was the sum of all, perhaps. Even if they had possessed it, Roland would have fought to keep it out of Eddie Dean’s hands. In his current state of sorrowing distraction, the ball would either destroy him or make him its slave in minutes.

“A stone might drink if it had a mouth,” Rosa said dryly, startling them all. “Eddie, questions of magic aside, think of the path that goes up there. Then think of five dozen men, many of them nigh as old as Henchick, one or two blind as bats, trying to climb it after dark.”

“The boulder,” Jake said. “Remember the boulder you have to kind of slide by, with your feet sticking out over the drop?”

Eddie nodded reluctantly. Roland could see him trying to accept what he couldn’t change. Groping for sanity.

“Susannah Dean is also a gunslinger,” Roland said. “Mayhap she can take care of herself a little while.”

“I don’t think Susannah’s in charge anymore,” Eddie replied, “and neither do you. It’s Mia’s baby, after all, and it’ll be Mia at the controls until the baby—the chap—comes.”

Roland had an intuition then, and like so many he’d had over the years, it turned out to be true. “She may have been in charge when they left, but she may not be able to stay in charge.”

Callahan spoke at last, looking up from the book which had so stunned him. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not her world,” Roland said. “It’s Susannah’s. If they can’t find a way to work together, they may die together.”

TWO

Henchick and Cantab went back to Manni Redpath, first to tell the gathered (and entirely male) elders about the day’s work, and then to tell them what payment was required. Roland went with Rosa to her cottage. It stood up the hill from a formerly neat privy which was now mostly in ruins. Within this privy, standing useless sentinel, was what remained of Andy the Messenger Robot (many other functions). Rosalita undressed Roland slowly and completely. When he was mother-naked, she stretched beside him on her bed and rubbed him with special oils: cat-oil for his aches, a creamier, faintly perfumed blend for his most sensitive parts. They made love. They came together (the sort of physical accident fools take for fate), listening to the crackle of firecrackers from the Calla’s high street and the boisterous shouts of the *folken*, most of them now well past tipsy, from the sound.

“Sleep,” she said. “Tomorrow I see you no more. Not me, not Eisenhart or Overholser, not anyone in the Calla.”

“Do you have the sight, then?” Roland asked. He sounded relaxed, even amused, but even when he had been deep in her heat and thrusting, the gnaw of Susannah had never left his mind: one of his ka-tet, and lost. Even if there had been no more than that, it would have been enough to keep him from true rest or ease.

“No,” said she, “but I have feelings from time to time, like any other woman, especially about when her man is getting ready to move on.”

“Is that what I am to you? Your man?”

Her gaze was both shy and steady. “For the little time ye’ve been here, aye, I like to think so. Do’ee call me wrong, Roland?”

He shook his head at once. It was good to be some woman's man again, if only for a short time.

She saw he meant it, and her face softened. She stroked his lean cheek. "We were well-met, Roland, were we not? Well-met in the Calla."

"Aye, lady."

She touched the remains of his right hand, then his right hip. "And how are your aches?"

To her he wouldn't lie. "Vile."

She nodded, then took hold of his left hand, which he'd managed to keep away from the lobstrosities. "And this un?"

"Fine," he said, but he felt a deep ache. Lurking. Waiting its time to come out. What Rosalita called the dry twist.

"Roland!" said she.

"Aye?"

Her eyes looked at him calmly. She still had hold of his left hand, touching it, culling out its secrets. "Finish your business as soon as you can."

"Is that your advice?"

"Aye, dearheart. Before your business finishes you."

THREE

Eddie sat on the back porch of the rectory as midnight came and what these folk would ever after call The Day of the East Road Battle passed into history (after which it would pass into myth . . . always assuming the world held together long enough for it to happen). In town the sounds of celebration had grown increasingly loud and feverish, until Eddie seriously began to wonder if they might not set the entire high street afire. And would he mind? Not a whit, say thanks and you're welcome, too. While Roland, Susannah, Jake, Eddie, and three women—Sisters of Oriza, they called themselves—stood against the Wolves, the rest of the *Calla-folken* had either been

cowering back in town or in the rice by the riverbank. Yet ten years from now—maybe even five!—they would be telling each other about how they'd bagged their limit one day in autumn, standing shoulder to shoulder with the gunslingers.

It wasn't fair and part of him knew it wasn't fair, but never in his life had he felt so helpless, so lost, and so consequently mean. He would tell himself not to think of Susannah, to wonder where she was or if her demon child had yet been delivered, and find himself thinking of her, anyway. She had gone to New York, of that much he was sure. But when? Were people traveling in hansom cabs by gaslight or jetting around in anti-grav taxis driven by robots from North Central Positronics?

Is she even alive?

He would have shuddered away from this thought if he could have, but the mind could be so cruel. He kept seeing her in the gutter somewhere down in Alphabet City, with a swastika carved on her forehead, and a placard reading GREETINGS FROM YOUR FRIENDS IN OXFORD TOWN hung around her neck.

Behind him the door from the rectory's kitchen opened. There was the soft padding sound of bare feet (his ears were sharp now, trained like the rest of his killer's equipment), and the click of toenails. Jake and Oy.

The kid sat down next to him in Callahan's rocking chair. He was dressed and wearing his docker's clutch. In it was the Ruger Jake had stolen from his father on the day he had run away from home. Today it had drawn . . . well, not blood. Not yet. Oil? Eddie smiled a little. There was no humor in it.

"Can't sleep, Jake?"

"Ake," Oy agreed, and collapsed at Jake's feet, muzzle resting on the boards between his paws.

"No," Jake said. "I keep thinking about Susannah." He paused, then added: "And Benny."

Eddie knew that was natural, the boy had seen his friend blown apart before his very eyes, of *course* he'd be thinking about him, but

Eddie still felt a bitter spurt of jealousy, as if all of Jake's regard should have been saved for Eddie Dean's wife.

"That Tavery kid," Jake said. "It's his fault. Panicked. Got running. Broke his ankle. If not for him, Benny'd still be alive." And very softly—it would have chilled the heart of the boy in question had he heard it, Eddie had no doubt of that—Jake said: "Frank . . . fucking . . . Tavery."

Eddie reached out a hand that did not want to comfort and made it touch the kid's head. His hair was long. Needed a wash. Hell, needed a cut. Needed a mother to make sure the boy under it took care of it. No mother now, though, not for Jake. And a little miracle: giving comfort made Eddie feel better. Not a lot, but a little.

"Let it go," he said. "Done is done."

"Ka," Jake said bitterly.

"Ki-yet, ka," Oy said without raising his muzzle.

"Amen," Jake said, and laughed. It was disturbing in its coldness. Jake took the Ruger from its make-shift holster and looked at it. "This one will go through, because it came from the other side. That's what Roland says. The others may, too, because we won't be going todash. If they don't, Henchick will cache them in the cave and maybe we can come back for them."

"If we wind up in New York," Eddie said, "there'll be plenty of guns. And we'll find them."

"Not like Roland's. I hope like hell they go through. There aren't any guns left in any of the worlds like his. That's what I think."

It was what Eddie thought, too, but he didn't bother saying so. From town there came a rattle of firecrackers, then silence. It was winding down there. Winding down at last. Tomorrow there would undoubtedly be an all-day party on the common, a continuation of today's celebration but a little less drunk and a little more coherent. Roland and his ka-tet would be expected as guests of honor, but if the gods of creation were good and the door opened, they would be gone. Hunting Susannah. Finding her. Never mind hunting. *Finding*.

As if reading his thoughts (and he could do that, he was strong in the touch), Jake said: “She’s still alive.”

“How can you know that?”

“We would have felt it if she was gone.”

“Jake, can you touch her?”

“No, but—”

Before he could finish, a deep rumbling came from the earth. The porch suddenly began to rise and fall like a boat on a heavy sea. They could hear the boards groaning. From the kitchen came the sound of rattling china like chattering teeth. Oy raised his head and whined. His foxy little face was comically startled, his ears laid back along his skull. In Callahan’s parlor, something fell over and shattered.

Eddie’s first thought, illogical but strong, was that Jake had killed Suze simply by declaring her still alive.

For a moment the shaking intensified. A window shattered as its frame was twisted out of shape. There was a crump from the darkness. Eddie assumed—correctly—that it was the ruined privy, now falling down completely. He was on his feet without realizing it. Jake was standing beside him, gripping his wrist. Eddie had drawn Roland’s gun and now they both stood as if ready to begin shooting.

There was a final grumbling from deep in the earth, and then the porch settled under their feet. At certain key points along the Beam, people were waking up and looking around, dazed. In the streets of one New York when, a few car alarms were going off. The following day’s papers would report a minor earthquake: broken windows, no reported casualties. Just a little shake of the fundamentally sound bedrock.

Jake was looking at Eddie, eyes wide. And knowing.

The door opened behind them and Callahan came out onto the porch, dressed in flimsy white underpants that fell to his knees. The only other thing on him was the gold crucifix around his neck.

“It was an earthquake, wasn’t it?” he said. “I felt one in northern California once, but never since coming to the Calla.”

“It was a hell of a lot more than an earthquake,” Eddie said, and pointed. The screened-in porch looked east, and over there the horizon was lit by silent artillery bursts of green lightning. Downhill from the rectory, the door of Rosalita’s snug creaked open and then banged shut. She and Roland came up the hill together, she in her chemise and the gunslinger in a pair of jeans, both barefoot in the dew.

Eddie, Jake, and Callahan went down to them. Roland was looking fixedly at the already diminishing flickers of lightning in the east, where the land of Thunderclap waited for them, and the Court of the Crimson King, and, at the end of End-World, the Dark Tower itself.

If, Eddie thought. If it still stands.

“Jake was just saying that if Susannah died, we’d know it,” Eddie said. “That there’d be what you call a sigil. Then comes this.” He pointed to the Pere’s lawn, where a new ridge had humped up, peeling the sod apart in one ten-foot line to show the puckered brown lips of the earth. A chorus of dogs was barking in town, but there were no sounds from the *folken*, at least not yet; Eddie supposed a goodly number had slept through the whole thing. The sleep of the drunken victorious. “But it wasn’t anything to do with Suze. Was it?”

“Not directly, no.”

“And it wasn’t ours,” Jake put in, “or the damage would have been a lot worse. Don’t you think?”

Roland nodded.

Rosa looked at Jake with a mixture of puzzlement and fright. “Wasn’t our *what*, boy? What are you talking about? It wasn’t an earthquake, sure!”

“No,” Roland said, “a *Beamquake*. One of the Beams holding up the Tower—which holds up everything—just let go. Just snapped.”

Even in the faint light from the four ’seners flickering on the porch, Eddie saw Rosalita Munoz’s face lose its color. She crossed herself. “A *Beam*? One of the *Beams*? Say no! Say not true!”

Eddie found himself thinking of some long-ago baseball scandal. Of some little boy begging, *Say it ain’t so, Joe*.

“I can’t,” Roland told her, “because it is.”

“How many of these Beams are there?” Callahan asked.

Roland looked at Jake, and nodded slightly: *Say your lesson, Jake of New York—speak and be true.*

“Six Beams connecting twelve portals,” Jake said. “The twelve portals are at the twelve ends of the earth. Roland, Eddie, and Susannah really started their quest from the Portal of the Bear, and picked me up between there and Lud.”

“Shardik,” Eddie said. He was watching the last flickers of lightning in the east. “That was the bear’s name.”

“Yes, Shardik,” Jake agreed. “So we’re on the Beam of the Bear. All the Beams come together at the Dark Tower. Our Beam, on the other side of the Tower . . .?” He looked at Roland for help. Roland, in turn, looked at Eddie Dean. Even now, it seemed, Roland was not done teaching them the Way of Eld.

Eddie either didn’t see the look or chose to ignore it, but Roland would not be put off. “Eddie?” he murmured.

“We’re on the Path of the Bear, Way of the Turtle,” Eddie said absently. “I don’t know why it would ever matter, since the Tower’s as far as we’re going, but on the other side it’s the Path of the Turtle, Way of the Bear.” And he recited:

*“See the TURTLE of enormous girth!
On his shell he holds the earth,
His thought is slow but always kind;
He holds us all within his mind.”*

At this point, Rosalita took up the verse

*“On his back the truth is carried,
And there are love and duty married.
He loves the earth and loves the sea,
And even loves a child like me.”*

“Not quite the way I learned it in my cradle and taught it to my friends,” Roland said, “but close enough, by watch and by warrant.”

“The Great Turtle’s name is Maturin,” Jake said, and shrugged. “If it matters.”

“You have no way of telling which one broke?” Callahan said, studying Roland closely.

Roland shook his head. “All I know is that Jake’s right—it wasn’t ours. If it had been, nothing within a hundred miles of Calla Bryn Sturgis would be standing.” Or maybe within a thousand miles—who could know? “The very birds would have fallen flaming from the sky.”

“You speak of Armageddon,” Callahan said in a low, troubled voice.

Roland shook his head, but not in disagreement. “I don’t know that word, Pere, but I’m speaking of great death and great destruction, sure. And somewhere—along the Beam connecting Fish to Rat, perhaps—that has now happened.”

“Are you positive this is true?” Rosa asked, low.

Roland nodded. He had been through this once before, when Gilead fell and civilization as he then understood it had ended. When he had been cast loose to wander with Cuthbert and Alain and Jamie and the few others of their ka-tet. One of the six Beams had broken then, and almost certainly not the first.

“How many Beams remain to hold the Tower?” Callahan asked.

For the first time, Eddie seemed interested in something other than the fate of his lost wife. He was looking at Roland with what was almost attention. And why not? This was, after all, the crucial question. *All things serve the Beam*, they said, and although the actual truth was that all things served the Tower, it was the Beams which held the Tower up. If they snapped—

“Two,” Roland said. “There have to be at least two, I’d say. The one running through Calla Bryn Sturgis and another. But God knows how long they’ll hold. Even without the Breakers working on them, I doubt they’d hold for long. We have to hurry.”

Eddie had stiffened. “If you’re suggesting we go on without Suze —”

Roland shook his head impatiently, as if to tell Eddie not to be a fool. “We can’t win through to the Tower without her. For all I know, we can’t win through without Mia’s chap. It’s in the hands of ka, and there used to be a saying in my country: ‘Ka has no heart or mind.’”

“That one I can agree with,” Eddie said.

“We might have another problem,” Jake said.

Eddie frowned at him. “We don’t *need* another problem.”

“I know, but . . . what if the earthquake blocked the mouth of that cave? Or . . .” Jake hesitated, then reluctantly brought out what he was really afraid of. “Or knocked it down completely?”

Eddie reached out, took hold of Jake’s shirt, and bundled it into his fist. “Don’t say that. Don’t you even *think* that.”

Now they could hear voices from town. The *folken* would be gathering on the common again, Roland guessed. He further guessed that this day—and now this night—would be remembered in Calla Bryn Sturgis for a thousand years. If the Tower stood, that was.

Eddie let go of Jake’s shirt and then pawed at the place he had grabbed, as if to erase the wrinkles. He tried a smile that made him look feeble and old.

Roland turned to Callahan. “Will the Manni still turn up tomorrow? You know this bunch better than I.”

Callahan shrugged. “Henchick’s a man of his word. Whether he can hold the others to his word after what just happened . . . that, Roland, I don’t know.”

“He better be able to,” Eddie said darkly. “He just better be.”

Roland of Gilead said, “Who’s for Watch Me?”

Eddie looked at him, unbelieving.

“We’re going to be up until morning light,” the gunslinger said. “We might as well pass the time.”

So they played Watch Me, and Rosalita won hand after hand, adding up their scores on a piece of slate with no smile of triumph—with no expression at all that Jake could read. At least not at first. He

was tempted to try the touch, but had decided that to use it for any but the strongest reasons was wrong. Using it to see behind Rosa's poker face would be like watching her undress. Or watching her and Roland make love.

Yet as the game went on and the northeast finally began to grow lighter, Jake guessed he knew what she was thinking of after all, because it was what *he* was thinking of. On some level of their minds, all of them would be thinking of those last two Beams, from now until the end.

Waiting for one or both of them to snap. Whether it was them trailing Susannah or Rosa cooking her dinner or even Ben Slightman, mourning his dead son out there on Vaughn Eisenhart's ranch, all of them would now be thinking of the same thing: only two left, and the Breakers working against them night and day, eating into them, *killing* them.

How long before everything ended? And *how* would it end? Would they hear the vast rumble of those enormous slate-colored stones as they fell? Would the sky tear open like a flimsy piece of cloth, spilling out the monstrosities that lived in the todash darkness? Would there be time to cry out? Would there be an afterlife, or would even Heaven and Hell be obliterated by the fall of the Dark Tower?

He looked at Roland and sent a thought, as clearly as he could: *Roland, help us.*

And one came back, filling his mind with cold comfort (ah, but comfort served cold was better than no comfort at all): *If I can.*

"Watch Me," said Rosalita, and laid down her cards. She had built Wands, the high run, and the card on top was Madame Death.

STAVE: *Commala-come-come*
There's a young man with a gun.
Young man lost his honey
When she took it on the run.

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-one!*

*She took it on the run!
Left her baby lonely but
Her baby ain't done.*

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2ND STANZA



ONE

They needn't have worried about the Manni-folk showing up. Henchick, dour as ever, appeared at the town common, which had been the designated setting-out point, with forty men. He assured Roland it would be enough to open the Unfound Door, if it could indeed be opened now that what he called "the dark glass" was gone. The old man offered no word of apology for showing up with less than the promised number of men, but he kept tugging on his beard. Sometimes with both hands.

"Why does he do that, Pere, do you know?" Jake asked Callahan. Henchick's troops were rolling eastward in a dozen bucka-waggons. Behind these, drawn by a pair of albino asses with freakishly long ears and fiery pink eyes, was a two-wheeled fly completely covered in white duck. To Jake it looked like a big Jiffy-Pop container on wheels. Henchick rode upon this contraption alone, gloomily yanking at his chin-whiskers.

"I think it means he's embarrassed," Callahan said.

"I don't see why. I'm surprised so many showed up, after the Beamquake and all."

"What he learned when the ground shook is that some of his men were more afraid of that than of him. As far as Henchick's concerned, it adds up to an unkept promise. Not just *any* unkept promise, either, but one he made to your dinh. He's lost face." And, without changing

his tone of voice at all, tricking him into an answer he would not otherwise have given, Callahan asked: “Is she still alive, then, your molly?”

“Yes, but in ter—” Jake began, then covered his mouth. He looked at Callahan accusingly. Ahead of them, on the seat of the two-wheeled fly, Henchick looked around, startled, as if they had raised their voices in argument. Callahan wondered if everyone in this damned story had the touch but him.

It's not a story. It's not a story, it's my life!

But it was hard to believe that, wasn't it, when you'd seen yourself set in type as a major character in a book with the word FICTION on the copyright page. Doubleday and Company, 1975. A book about vampires, yet, which everyone *knew* weren't real. Except they had been. And, in at least some of the worlds adjacent to this one, still were.

“Don't treat me like that,” Jake said. “Don't *trick* me like that. Not if we're all on the same side, Pere. Okay?”

“I'm sorry,” Callahan said. And then: “Cry pardon.”

Jake smiled wanly and stroked Oy, who was riding in the front pocket of his poncho.

“Is she—”

The boy shook his head. “I don't want to talk about her now, Pere. It's best we not even think about her. I have a feeling—I don't know if it's true or not, but it's strong—that something's looking for her. If there is, it's better it not overhear us. And it could.”

“Something . . .?”

Jake reached out and touched the kerchief Callahan wore around his neck, cowboy-style. It was red. Then he put a hand briefly over his left eye. For a moment Callahan didn't understand, and then he did. The red eye. The Eye of the King.

He sat back on the seat of the waggon and said no more. Behind them, not talking, Roland and Eddie rode horseback, side by side. Both were carrying their gunna as well as their guns, and Jake had his

own in the waggon behind him. If they came back to Calla Bryn Sturgis after today, it wouldn't be for long.

In terror was what he had started to say, but it was worse than that. Impossibly faint, impossibly distant, but still clear, Jake could hear Susannah screaming. He only hoped Eddie did not.

TWO

So they rode away from a town that mostly slept in emotional exhaustion despite the quake which had struck it. The day was cool enough so that when they started out they could see their breath on the air, and a light scrim of frost coated the dead cornstalks. A mist hung over the Devar-tete Whye like the river's own spent breath. Roland thought: *This is the edge of winter.*

An hour's ride brought them to the arroyo country. There was no sound but the jingle of trace, the squeak of wheels, the clop of horses, an occasional sardonic honk from one of the albino asses pulling the fly, and distant, the call of rusties on the wing. Headed south, perhaps, if they could still find it.

Ten or fifteen minutes after the land began to rise on their right, filling in with bluffs and cliffs and mesas, they returned to the place where, just twenty-four hours before, they had come with the children of the Calla and fought their battle. Here a track split off from the East Road and rambled more or less northwest. In the ditch on the other side of the road was a raw trench of earth. It was the hide where Roland, his ka-tet, and the ladies of the dish had waited for the Wolves.

And, speaking of the Wolves, where were they? When they'd left this place of ambush, it had been littered with bodies. Over sixty, all told, man-shaped creatures who had come riding out of the west wearing gray pants, green cloaks, and snarling wolf-masks.

Roland dismounted and walked up beside Henchick, who was getting down from the two-wheeled fly with the stiff awkwardness of

age. Roland made no effort to help him. Henschick wouldn't expect it, might even be offended by it.

The gunslinger let him give his dark cloak a final settling shake, started to ask his question, and then realized he didn't have to. Forty or fifty yards farther along, on the right side of the road, was a vast hill of uprooted corn-plants where no hill had been the day before. It was a funerary heap, Roland saw, one which had been constructed without any degree of respect. He hadn't lost any time or wasted any effort wondering how the *folken* had spent the previous afternoon—before beginning the party they were now undoubtedly sleeping off—but now he saw their work before him. Had they been afraid the Wolves might come back to life? he wondered, and knew that, on some level, that was exactly what they'd feared. And so they'd dragged the heavy, inert bodies (gray horses as well as gray-clad Wolves) off into the corn, stacked them willy-rully, then covered them with uprooted corn-plants. Today they'd turn this bier into a pyre. And if the seminon winds came? Roland guessed they'd light it up anyway, and chance a possible conflagration in the fertile land between road and river. Why not? The growing season was over for the year, and there was nothing like fire for fertilizer, so the old folks did say; besides, the *folken* would not really rest easy until that hill was burned. And even then few of them would like to come out here.

“Roland, look,” Eddie said in a voice that trembled somewhere between sorrow and rage. “Ah, goddammit, *look*.”

Near the end of the path, where Jake, Benny Slight-man, and the Tavery twins had waited before making their final dash for safety across the road, stood a scratched and battered wheelchair, its chrome winking brilliantly in the sun, its seat streaked with dust and blood. The left wheel was bent severely out of true.

“Why do'ee speak in anger?” Henschick inquired. He had been joined by Cantab and half a dozen elders of what Eddie sometimes referred to as the Cloak Folk. Two of these elders looked a good deal older than Henschick himself, and Roland thought of what Rosalita had said last night: *Many of them nigh as old as Henschick, trying to*

climb that path after dark. Well, it wasn't dark, but he didn't know if some of these would be able to walk as far as the upsy part of the path to Doorway Cave, let alone the rest of the way to the top.

"They brought your woman's rolling chair back here to honor her. And you. So why do'ee speak in anger?"

"Because it's not supposed to be all banged up, and she's supposed to be in it," Eddie told the old man. "Do you ken that, Henschick?"

"Anger is the most useless emotion," Henschick intoned, "destructive to the mind and hurtful of the heart."

Eddie's lips thinned to no more than a white scar below his nose, but he managed to hold in a retort. He walked over to Susannah's scarred chair—it had rolled hundreds of miles since they'd found it in Topeka, but its rolling days were done—and looked down at it moodily. When Callahan approached him, Eddie waved the Pere back.

Jake was looking at the place on the road where Benny had been struck and killed. The boy's body was gone, of course, and someone had covered his spilled blood with a fresh layer of the oggan, but Jake found he could see the dark splotches, anyway. And Benny's severed arm, lying palm-up. Jake remembered how his friend's Da' had staggered out of the corn and seen his son lying there. For five seconds or so he had been capable of no sound whatever, and Jake supposed that was time enough for someone to have told sai Slightman they'd gotten off incredibly light: one dead boy, one dead rancher's wife, another boy with a broken ankle. Piece of cake, really. But no one had and then Slight-man the Elder had shrieked. Jake thought he would never forget the sound of that shriek, just as he would always see Benny lying here in the dark and bloody dirt with his arm off.

Beside the place where Benny had fallen was something else which had been covered with dirt. Jake could see just a small wink of metal. He dropped to one knee and excavated one of the Wolves' death-balls, things called sneetches. The Harry Potter model, according to what was written on them. Yesterday he'd held a couple of these in his hand and felt them vibrating. Heard their faint, malevolent hum. This one was as dead as a rock. Jake stood up and threw it toward the heap of

corn-covered dead Wolves. Threw hard enough to make his arm hurt. That arm would probably be stiff tomorrow, but he didn't care. Didn't care much about Henschick's low opinion of anger, either. Eddie wanted his wife back; Jake wanted his friend. And while Eddie might get what *he* wanted somewhere down the line, Jake Chambers never would. Because dead was the gift that kept on giving. Dead, like diamonds, was forever.

He wanted to get going, wanted this part of the East Road looking at his back. He also wanted not to have to look at Susannah's empty, beat-up chair any longer. But the Manni had formed a ring around the spot where the battle had actually taken place, and Henschick was praying in a high, rapid voice that hurt Jake's ears: it sounded quite a lot like the squeal of a frightened pig. He spoke to something called the Over, asking for safe passage to yon cave and success of endeavor with no loss of life or sanity (Jake found this part of Henschick's prayer especially disturbing, as he'd never thought of sanity as a thing to be prayed for). The boss-man also begged the Over to enliven their mags and bobs. And finally he prayed for kaven, the persistence of magic, a phrase that seemed to have a special power for these people. When he was finished, they all said "Over-sam, Over-kra, Over-can-tah" in unison, and dropped their linked hands. A few went down on their knees to have a little extra palaver with the really *big* boss. Cantab, meanwhile, led four or five of the younger men to the fly. They folded back its snowy white top, revealing a number of large wooden boxes. Plumb-bobs and magnets, Jake guessed, and a lot bigger than the ones they wore around their necks. They'd brought out the heavy artillery for this little adventure. The boxes were covered with designs—stars and moons and odd geometric shapes—that looked cabalistic rather than Christian. But, Jake realized, he had no basis for believing the Manni were Christians. They might *look* like Quakers or Amish with their cloaks and beards and round-crowned black hats, might throw the occasional *thee* or *thou* into their conversation, but so far as Jake knew, neither the Quakers nor the Amish had ever made a hobby of traveling to other worlds.

Long polished wooden rods were pulled from another waggon. They were thrust through metal sleeves on the undersides of the engraved boxes. The boxes were called coffs, Jake learned. The Manni carried them like religious artifacts through the streets of a medieval town. Jake supposed that in a way they *were* religious artifacts.

They started up the path, which was still scattered with hair-ribbons, scraps of cloth, and a few small toys. These had been bait for the Wolves, and the bait had been taken.

When they reached the place where Frank Tavery had gotten his foot caught, Jake heard the voice of the useless git's beautiful sister in his mind: *Help him, please, sai, I beg*. He had, God forgive him. And Benny had died.

Jake looked away, grimacing, then thought *You're a gunslinger now, you gotta do better*. He forced himself to look back.

Pere Callahan's hand dropped onto his shoulder. "Son, are you all right? You're awfully pale."

"I'm okay," Jake said. A lump had risen in his throat, quite a large one, but he forced himself to swallow past it and repeat what he'd just said, telling the lie to himself rather than to the Pere: "Yeah, I'm okay."

Callahan nodded and shifted his own gunna (the halfhearted packsack of a town man who does not, in his heart, believe he's going anywhere) from his left shoulder to his right. "And what's going to happen when we get up to that cave? *If* we can get up to that cave?"

Jake shook his head. He didn't know.

THREE

The path was okay. A good deal of loose rock had shaken down on it, and the going was arduous for the men carrying the coffs, but in one respect their way was easier than before. The quake had dislodged the giant boulder that had almost blocked the path near the top. Eddie peered over and saw it lying far below, shattered into two pieces.

There was some sort of lighter, sparkly stuff in its middle, making it look to Eddie like the world's largest hard-boiled egg.

The cave was still there, too, although a large pile of talus now lay in front of its mouth. Eddie joined some of the younger Manni in helping to clear it, tossing handfuls of busted-up shale (garnets gleaming in some of the pieces like drops of blood) over the side. Seeing the cave's mouth eased a band which had been squeezing Eddie's heart, but he didn't like the silence of the cave, which had been damnably chatty on his previous visit. From somewhere deep in its gullet he could hear the grating whine of a draft, but that was all. Where was his brother, Henry? Henry should have been bitching about how Balazar's gentlemen had killed him and it was all Eddie's fault. Where was his Ma, who should have been agreeing with Henry (and in equally dolorous tones)? Where was Margaret Eisenhart, complaining to Henschick, her grandfather, about how she'd been branded forgetful and then abandoned? This had been the Cave of the Voices long before it had been the Doorway Cave, but the voices had fallen silent. And the door looked . . . *stupid* was the word which first came to Eddie's mind. The second was *unimportant*. This cave had once been informed and defined by the voices from below; the door had been rendered awful and mysterious and powerful by the glass ball—Black Thirteen—which had come into the Calla through it.

But now it's left the same way, and it's just an old door that doesn't

—

Eddie tried to stifle the thought and couldn't.

—that doesn't go anywhere.

He turned to Henschick, disgusted by the sudden welling of tears in his eyes but unable to stop them. "There's no magic left here," he said. His voice was wretched with despair. "There's nothing behind that fucking door but stale air and fallen rock. You're a fool and I'm another."

There were shocked gasps at this, but Henschick looked at Eddie with eyes that almost seemed to twinkle. "Lewis, Thonnie!" he said, almost jovially. "Bring me the Branni coff."

Two strapping young men with short beards and hair pulled back in long braids stepped forward. Between them they bore an ironwood coff about four feet long, and heavy, from the way they carried the poles. They set it before Henchick.

“Open it, Eddie of New York.”

Thonnie and Lewis looked at him, questioning and a little afraid. The older Manni men, Eddie saw, were watching with a kind of greedy interest. He supposed it took a few years to become fully invested in the Manni brand of extravagant weirdness; in time Lewis and Thonnie would get there, but they hadn’t made it much past peculiar as yet.

Henchick nodded, a little impatiently. Eddie bent and opened the box. It was easy. There was no lock. Inside was a silk cloth. Henchick removed it with a magician’s flourish and disclosed a plumb-bob on a chain. To Eddie it looked like an old-fashioned child’s top, and was nowhere near as big as he had expected. It was perhaps eighteen inches long from its pointed tip to its broader top and made of some yellowish wood that looked greasy. It was on a silver chain that had been looped around a crystal plug set in the coff’s top.

“Take it out,” Henchick said, and when Eddie looked to Roland, the hair over the old man’s mouth opened and a set of perfect white teeth displayed themselves in a smile of astounding cynicism. “Why do’ee look to your dinh, young snivelment? The magic’s gone out of this place, you said so yourself! And would’ee not know? Why, thee must be all of . . . I don’t know . . . twenty-five?”

Snickers from the Manni who were close enough to hear this jape, several of them not yet twenty-five themselves.

Furious with the old bastard—and with himself, as well—Eddie reached into the box. Henchick stayed his hand.

“Touch not the bob itself. Not if thee’d keep thy cream in on one side and thy crap on the other. By the chain, do’ee kennit?”

Eddie almost reached for the bob anyway—he’d already made a fool of himself in front of these people, there was really no reason not to finish the job—but he looked into Jake’s grave gray eyes and

changed his mind. The wind was blowing hard up here, chilling the sweat of the climb on his skin, making him shiver. Eddie reached forward again, took hold of the chain, and gingerly unwound it from the plug.

“Lift him out,” Henchick said.

“What’ll happen?”

Henchick nodded, as if Eddie had finally talked some sense. “That’s to see. Lift him out.”

Eddie did so. Given the obvious effort with which the two young men had been carrying the box, he was astounded at how light the bob was. Lifting it was like lifting a feather which had been attached to a four-foot length of fine-link chain. He looped the chain over the back of his fingers and held his hand in front of his eyes. He looked a little like a man about to make a puppet caper.

Eddie was about to ask Henchick again what the old man expected to happen, but before he could, the bob began to sway back and forth in modest arcs.

“I’m not doing that,” Eddie said. “At least, I don’t think I am. It must be the wind.”

“I don’t think it can be,” Callahan said. “There are no flukes to—”

“Hush!” Cantab said, and with such a forbidding look that Callahan did hush.

Eddie stood in front of the cave, with all the arroyo country and most of Calla Bryn Sturgis spread out below him. Dreaming blue-gray in the far distance was the forest through which they had come to get here—the last vestige of Mid-World, where they would never go more. The wind gusted, blowing his hair back from his forehead, and suddenly he heard a humming sound.

Except he didn’t. The humming was inside the hand in front of his eyes, the one with the chain lying upon the spread fingers. It was in his arm. And most of all, in his head.

At the far end of the chain, at about the height of Eddie’s right knee, the bob’s swing grew more pronounced and became the arc of a pendulum. Eddie realized a strange thing: each time the bob reached

the end of its swing, it grew heavier. It was like holding onto something that was being pulled by some extraordinary centrifugal force.

The arc grew longer, the bob's swings faster, the pull at the end of each swing stronger. And then—

“Eddie!” Jake called, somewhere between concern and delight. “Do you see?”

Of course he did. Now the bob was growing *dim* at the end of each swing. The downward pressure on his arm—the bob's weight—was rapidly growing stronger as this happened. He had to support his right arm with his left hand in order to maintain his grip, and now he was also swaying at the hips with the swing of the bob. Eddie suddenly remembered where he was—roughly seven hundred feet above the ground. This baby would shortly yank him right over the side, if it wasn't stopped. What if he couldn't get the chain off his hand?

The plumb-bob swung to the right, tracing the shape of an invisible smile in the air, gaining weight as it rose toward the end of its arc. All at once the puny piece of wood he'd lifted from its box with such ease seemed to weigh sixty, eighty, a hundred pounds. And as it paused at the end of its arc, momentarily balanced between motion and gravity, he realized he could see the East Road through it, not just clearly but *magnified*. Then the Branni bob started back down again, plummeting, shedding weight. But when it started up again, this time to his left . . .

“Okay, I get the point!” Eddie shouted. “Get it off me, Henchick. At least make it stop!”

Henchick uttered a single word, one so guttural it sounded like something yanked from a mudflat. The bob didn't slow through a series of diminishing arcs but simply quit, again hanging beside Eddie's knee with the tip pointing at his foot. For a moment the humming in his arm and head continued. Then that also quit. When it did, the bob's disquieting sense of weight lifted. The damn thing was once more feather-light.

“Do’ee have something to say to me, Eddie of New York?” Henchick asked.

“Yeah, cry your pardon.”

Henchick’s teeth once more put in an appearance, gleaming briefly in the wilderness of his beard and then gone. “Thee’s not entirely slow, is thee?”

“I hope not,” Eddie said, and could not forbear a small sigh of relief as Henchick of the Manni lifted the fine-link silver chain from his hand.

FOUR

Henchick insisted on a dry-run. Eddie understood why, but he hated all this foreplay crap. The passing time now seemed almost to be a physical thing, like a rough piece of cloth slipping beneath the palm of your hand. He kept silent, nevertheless. He’d already pissed off Henchick once, and once was enough.

The old man brought six of his *amigos* (five of them looked older than God to Eddie) into the cave. He passed bobs to three of them and shell-shaped magnets to the other three. The Branni bob, almost certainly the tribe’s strongest, he kept for himself.

The seven of them formed a ring at the mouth of the cave.

“Not around the door?” Roland asked.

“Not until we have to,” Henchick said.

The old men joined hands, each holding a bob or a mag at the clasping point. As soon as the circle was complete, Eddie heard that humming again. It was as loud as an over-amped stereo speaker. He saw Jake raise his hands to his ears, and Roland’s face tighten in a brief grimace.

Eddie looked at the door and saw it had lost that dusty, unimportant look. The hieroglyphs on it once more stood out crisply, some forgotten word that meant UNFOUND. The crystal doorknob glowed, outlining the rose carved there in lines of white light.

Could I open it now? Eddie wondered. *Open it and step through?* He thought not. Not yet, anyway. But he was a hell of a lot more hopeful about this process than he'd been five minutes ago.

Suddenly the voices from deep in the cave came alive, but they did so in a roaring jumble. Eddie could make out Benny Slightman the Younger screaming the word *Dogan*, heard his Ma telling him that now, to top off a career of losing things, he'd lost his *wife*, heard some man (probably Elmer Chambers) telling Jake that Jake had gone crazy, he was *fou*, he was *Monsieur Lunatique*. More voices joined in, and more, and more.

Henchick nodded sharply to his colleagues. Their hands parted. When they did, the voices from below ceased in mid-babble. And, Eddie was not surprised to see, the door immediately regained its look of unremarkable anonymity—it was any door you ever passed on the street without a second look.

“What in God’s name was *that?*” Callahan asked, nodding toward the deeper darkness where the floor sloped down. “It wasn’t like that before.”

“I believe that either the quake or the loss of the magic ball has driven the cave insane,” Henchick said calmly. “It doesn’t matter to our business here, anyroa’. Our business is with the door.” He looked at Callahan’s packsack. “Once you were a wandering man.”

“So I was.”

Henchick’s teeth made another brief guest appearance. Eddie decided that, on some level, the old bastard was enjoying this. “From the look of your gunna, sai Callahan, you’ve lost the knack.”

“I suppose it’s hard for me to believe that we’re really going anywhere,” Callahan said, and offered a smile. Compared to Henchick’s, it was feeble. “And I’m older now.”

Henchick made a rude sound at that—*fah!*, it sounded like.

“Henchick,” Roland said, “do you know what caused the ground to shake early this morning?”

The old man’s blue eyes were faded but still sharp. He nodded. Outside the cave’s mouth, in a line going down the path, almost three

dozen Manni men waited patiently. “Beam let go is what we think.”

“What I think, too,” Roland said. “Our business grows more desperate. I’d have an end to idle talk, if it does ya. Let’s have what palaver we must have, and then get on with our business.”

Henchick looked at Roland as coldly as he had looked at Eddie, but Roland’s eyes never wavered. Henchick’s brow furrowed, then smoothed out.

“Aye,” he said. “As’ee will, Roland. Thee’s rendered us a great service, Manni and forgetful folk alike, and we’d return it now as best we can. The magic’s still here, and thick. Wants only a spark. We can make that spark, aye, easy as commala. You may get what’ee want. On the other hand, we all may go to the clearing at the end of the path together. Or into the darkness. Does thee understand?”

Roland nodded.

“Would’ee go ahead?”

Roland stood for a moment with his head lowered and his hand on the butt of his gun. When he looked up, he was wearing his own smile. It was handsome and tired and desperate and dangerous. He twirled his whole left hand twice in the air: *Let’s go*.

FIVE

The coffs were set down—carefully, because the path leading up to what the Manni called Kra Kammen was narrow—and the contents were removed. Long-nailed fingers (the Manni were allowed to cut their nails only once a year) tapped the magnets, producing a shrill hum that seemed to slice through Jake’s head like a knife. It reminded him of the todash chimes, and he guessed that wasn’t surprising; those chimes *were* the kammen.

“What does Kra Kammen mean?” he asked Cantab. “House of Bells?”

“House of Ghosts,” he replied without looking up from the chain he was unwinding. “Leave me alone, Jake, this is delicate work.”

Jake couldn't see why it would be, but he did as bade. Roland, Eddie, and Callahan were standing just inside the cave's mouth. Jake joined them. Henschick, meanwhile, had placed the oldest members of his group in a semicircle that went around the back of the door. The front side, with its incised hieroglyphs and crystal doorknob, was unguarded, at least for the time being.

The old man went to the mouth of the cave, spoke briefly with Cantab, then motioned for the line of Manni waiting on the path to move up. When the first man in line was just inside the cave, Henschick stopped him and came back to Roland. He squatted, inviting the gunslinger with a gesture to do the same.

The cave's floor was powdery with dust. Some came from rocks, but most of it was the bone residue of small animals unwise enough to wander in here. Using a fingernail, Henschick drew a rectangle, open at the bottom, and then a semicircle around it.

"The door," he said. "And the men of my kra. Do'ee kennit?"

Roland nodded.

"You and your friends will finish the circle," he said, and drew it.

"The boy's strong in the touch," Henschick said, looking at Jake so suddenly that Jake jumped.

"Yes," Roland said.

"We'll put him direct in front of the door, then, but far enough away so that if it opens hard—and it may—it won't clip his head off. Will'ee stand, boy?"

"Yes, until you or Roland says different," Jake replied.

"You'll feel something in your head—like a sucking. It's not nice." He paused. "Ye'd open the door twice."

"Yes," Roland said. "Twim."

Eddie knew the door's second opening was about Calvin Tower, and he'd lost what interest he'd had in the bookstore proprietor. The man wasn't entirely without courage, Eddie supposed, but he was also greedy and stubborn and self-involved: the perfect twentieth-century New York City man, in other words. But the most recent person to use this door had been Suze, and the moment it opened, he intended

to dart through. If it opened a second time on the little Maine town where Calvin Tower and his friend, Aaron Deepneau, had gone to earth, fine and dandy. If the rest of them wound up there, trying to protect Tower and gain ownership of a certain vacant lot and a certain wild pink rose, also fine and dandy. Eddie's priority was Susannah. Everything else was secondary to that.

Even the tower.

SIX

Henchick said: "Who would'ee send the first time the door opens?"

Roland thought about this, absently running his hand over the bookcase Calvin Tower had insisted on sending through. The case containing the book which had so upset the Pere. He did not much want to send Eddie, a man who was impulsive to begin with and now all but blinded by his concern and his love, after his wife. Yet would Eddie obey him if Roland ordered him after Tower and Deepneau instead? Roland didn't think so. Which meant—

"Gunslinger?" Henchick prodded.

"The first time the door opens, Eddie and I will go through," Roland said. "The door will shut on its own?"

"Indeed it will," Henchick said. "You must be as quick as the devil's bite, or you'll likely be cut in two, half of you on the floor of this cave and the rest wherever the brown-skinned woman took herself off to."

"We'll be as quick as we can, sure," Roland said.

"Aye, that's best," Henchick said, and put his teeth on display once more. This was a smile

(what's he not telling? something he knows or only thinks he knows?)

Roland would have occasion to think of not long hence.

"I'd leave your guns here," Henchick said. "If you try to carry them through, you may lose them."

“I’m going to try and keep mine,” Jake said. “It came from the other side, so it should be all right. If it’s not, I’ll get another one. Somehow.”

“I expect mine may travel, as well,” Roland said. He’d thought about this carefully, and had decided to try and keep the big revolvers. Henchick shrugged, as if to say *As you will*.

“What about Oy, Jake?” Eddie asked.

Jake’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped. Roland realized the boy hadn’t considered his bumbler friend until this moment. The gunslinger reflected (not for the first time) how easy it was to forget the most basic truth about John “Jake” Chambers: he was just a kid.

“When we went todash, Oy—” Jake began.

“This ain’t that, sugar,” Eddie said, and when he heard Susannah’s endearment coming out of his mouth, his heart gave a sad cramp. For the first time he admitted to himself that he might never see her again, any more than Jake might see Oy once they left this stinking cave.

“But . . .” Jake began, and then Oy gave a reproachful little bark. Jake had been squeezing him too tightly.

“We’ll keep him for you, Jake,” Cantab said gently. “Keep him very well, say true. There’ll be folk posted here until thee comes back for thy friend and all the rest of thy goods.” *If you ever do* was the part he was too kind to state. Roland read it in his eyes, however.

“Roland, are you sure I can’t . . . that he can’t . . . no. I see. Not todash this time. Okay. No.”

Jake reached into the front pocket of the poncho, lifted Oy out, set him on the powdery floor of the cave. He bent down, hands planted just above his knees. Oy looked up, stretching his neck so that their faces almost touched. And Roland now saw something extraordinary: not the tears in Jake’s eyes, but those that had begun to well up in Oy’s. A billy-bumbler crying. It was the sort of story you might hear in a saloon as the night grew late and drunk—the faithful bumbler who wept for his departing master. You didn’t believe such stories but never said so, in order to save brawling (perhaps even shooting). Yet here it was, he was seeing it, and it made Roland feel a bit like crying

himself. Was it just more bumbler imitation, or did Oy really understand what was happening? Roland hoped for the former, and with all his heart.

“Oy, you have to stay with Cantab for a little while. You’ll be okay. He’s a pal.”

“Tab!” the bumbler repeated. Tears fell from his muzzle and darkened the powdery surface where he stood in dime-sized drops. Roland found the creature’s tears uniquely awful, somehow even worse than a child’s might have been. “Ake! Ake!”

“No, I gotta split,” Jake said, and wiped at his cheeks with the heels of his hands. He left dirty streaks like warpaint all the way up to his temples.

“No! Ake!”

“I gotta. You stay with Cantab. I’ll come back for you, Oy—unless I’m dead, I’ll come back.” He hugged Oy again, then stood up. “Go to Cantab. That’s him.” Jake pointed. “Go on, now, you mind me.”

“Ake! Tab!” The misery in that voice was impossible to deny. For a moment Oy stayed where he was. Then, still weeping—or imitating Jake’s tears, Roland still hoped for that—the bumbler turned, trotted to Cantab, and sat between the young man’s dusty shor’boots.

Eddie attempted to put an arm around Jake. Jake shook it off and stepped away from him. Eddie looked baffled. Roland kept his Watch Me face, but inside he was grimly delighted. Not thirteen yet, no, but there was no shortage of steel there.

And it was time.

“Henchick?”

“Aye. Would’ee speak a word of prayer first, Roland? To whatever God thee holds?”

“I hold to no God,” Roland said. “I hold to the Tower, and won’t pray to that.”

Several of Henchick’s *’migos* looked shocked at this, but the old man himself only nodded, as if he had expected no more. He looked at Callahan. “Pere?”

Callahan said, "God, Thy hand, Thy will." He sketched a cross in the air and nodded at Henchick. "If we're goin, let's go."

Henchick stepped forward, touched the Unfound Door's crystal knob, then looked at Roland. His eyes were bright. "Hear me this last time, Roland of Gilead."

"I hear you very well."

"I am Henchick of the Manni Kra Redpath-a-Sturgis. We are far-seers and far travelers. We are sailors on ka's wind. Would thee travel on that wind? Thee and thine?"

"Aye, to where it blows."

Henchick slipped the chain of the Branni bob over the back of his hand and Roland at once felt some power let loose in this chamber. It was small as yet, but it was growing. Blooming, like a rose.

"How many calls would you make?"

Roland held up the remaining fingers of his right hand. "Two. Which is to say *twim* in the Eld."

"Two or twim, both the same," Henchick said. "Commala-come-two." he raised his voice. "Come, Manni! Come-commala, join your force to my force! Come and keep your promise! Come and pay our debt to these gunslingers! Help me send them on their way! *Now!*"

SEVEN

Before any of them could even begin to register the fact that ka had changed their plans, ka had worked its will on them. But at first it seemed that nothing at all would happen.

The Manni Henchick had chosen as senders—six elders, plus Cantab—formed their semicircle behind the door and around to its sides. Eddie took Cantab's hand and laced his fingers through the Manni's. One of the shell-shaped magnets kept their palms apart. Eddie could feel it vibrating like something alive. He supposed it was. Callahan took his other hand and gripped it firmly.

On the other side of the door, Roland took Henchick's hand, weaving the Branni bob's chain between his fingers. Now the circle was complete save for the one spot directly in front of the door. Jake took a deep breath, looked around, saw Oy sitting against the wall of the cave about ten feet behind Cantab, and nodded.

Oy, stay, I'll be back, Jake sent, and then he stepped into his place. He took Callahan's right hand, hesitated, and then took Roland's left.

The humming returned at once. The Branni bob began to move, not in arcs this time but in a small, tight circle. The door brightened and became more *there*—Jake saw this with his own eyes. The lines and circles of the hieroglyphs spelling UNFOUND grew clearer. The rose etched into the doorknob began to glow.

The door, however, remained closed.

(Concentrate, boy!)

That was Henchick's voice, so strong in his head that it almost seemed to slosh Jake's brains. He lowered his head and looked at the doorknob. He saw the rose. He saw it very well. He imagined it turning as the knob upon which it had been cast turned. Once not so long ago he had been obsessed by doors and the other world

(Mid-World)

he knew must lie behind one of them. This felt like going back to that. He imagined all the doors he'd known in his life—bedroom doors bathroom doors kitchen doors closet doors bowling alley doors cloakroom doors movie theater doors restaurant doors doors marked KEEP OUT doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY refrigerator doors, yes even those—and then saw them all opening at once.

Open! he thought at the door, feeling absurdly like an Arabian princeling in some ancient story. *Open sesame! Open says me!*

From the cave's belly far below, the voices began to babble once more. There was a whooping, windy sound, the heavy crump of something falling. The cave's floor trembled beneath their feet, as if with another Beamquake. Jake paid no mind. The feeling of live force in this chamber was very strong now—he could feel it plucking at his skin, vibrating in his nose and eyes, teasing the hairs out from his

scalp—but the door remained shut. He bore down more strongly on Roland’s hand and the Pere’s, concentrating on firehouse doors, police station doors, the door to the Principal’s Office at Piper, even a science fiction book he’d once read called *The Door into Summer*. The smell of the cave—deep must, ancient bones, distant drafts—seemed suddenly very strong. He felt that brilliant, exuberant uprush of certainty—*Now, it will happen now, I know it will*—yet the door still stayed closed. And now he could smell something else. Not the cave, but the slightly metallic aroma of his own sweat, rolling down his face.

“Henchick, it’s not working. I don’t think I—”

“Nar, not yet—and never think thee needs to do it all thyself, lad. Feel for something between you and the door . . . something like a hook . . . or a thorn . . .” As he spoke, Henchick nodded at the Manni heading the line of reinforcements. “Hedron, come forward. Thonnie, take hold of Hedron’s shoulders. Lewis, take hold of Thonnie’s. And on back! Do it!”

The line shuffled forward. Oy barked doubtfully.

“Feel, boy! Feel for that hook! It’s between thee and t’door! Feel for it!”

Jake reached out with his mind while his imagination suddenly bloomed with a powerful and terrifying vividness that was beyond even the clearest dreams. He saw Fifth Avenue between Forty-eighth and Sixtieth (“the twelve blocks where my Christmas bonus disappears every January,” his father had liked to grumble). He saw every door, on both sides of the street, swinging open at once: Fendi! Tiffany! Bergdorf Goodman! Cartier! Doubleday Books! The Sherry Netherland Hotel! He saw an endless hallway floored with brown linoleum and knew it was in the Pentagon. He saw doors, at least a thousand of them, all swinging open at once and generating a hurricane draft.

Yet the door in front of him, the only one that mattered, remained closed.

Yeah, but—

It was rattling in its frame. He could hear it.

“Go, kid!” Eddie said. The words came from between clamped teeth. “If you can’t open it, knock the fucker down!”

“Help me!” Jake shouted. “*Help* me, goddammit! *All of you!*”

The force in the cave seemed to double. The hum seemed to be vibrating the very bones of Jake’s skull. His teeth were rattling. Sweat ran into his eyes, blurring his sight. He saw two Henchicks nodding to someone behind him: Hedron. And behind Hedron, Thonnie. And behind Thonnie, all the rest, snaking out of the cave and down thirty feet of the path.

“Get ready, lad,” Henchick said.

Hedron’s hand slipped under Jake’s shirt and gripped the waistband of his jeans. Jake felt pushed instead of pulled. Something in his head bolted forward, and for a moment he saw all the doors of a thousand, thousand worlds flung wide, generating a draft so great it could almost have blown out the sun.

And then his progress was stopped. There was something . . . something right in front of the door . . .

The hook! It’s the hook!

He slipped himself over it as if his mind and life-force were some sort of loop. At the same time he felt Hedron and the others pulling him backward. The pain was immediate, enormous, seeming to tear him apart. Then the draining sensation began. It was hideous, like having someone pull his guts out a loop at a time. And always, the manic buzzing in his ears and deep in his brain.

He tried to cry out—*No, stop, let go, it’s too much!*—and couldn’t. He tried to scream and heard it, but only inside his head. God, he was caught. Caught on the hook and being ripped in two.

One creature *did* hear his scream. Barking furiously, Oy darted forward. And as he did, the Unfound Door sprang open, swinging in a hissing arc just in front of Jake’s nose.

“*Behold!*” Henchick cried in a voice that was at once terrible and exalted. “*Behold, the door opens! Over-sam kammen! Can-tah, can-kavar kammen! Over-can-tah!*”

The others responded, but by then Jake Chambers had already been torn loose from Roland's hand on his right. By then he was flying, but not alone.

Pere Callahan flew with him.

EIGHT

There was just time for Eddie to hear New York, *smell* New York, and to realize what was happening. In a way, that was what made it so awful—he was able to register everything going diabolically counter to what he had expected, but not able to do anything about it.

He saw Jake yanked out of the circle and felt Callahan's hand ripped out of his own; he saw them fly through the air toward the door, actually looping the loop in tandem, like a couple of fucked-up acrobats. Something furry and barking like a motherfucker shot past the side of his head. Oy, doing barrel-rolls, his ears laid back and his terrified eyes seeming to start from his head.

And more. Eddie was aware of dropping Cantab's hand and lunging forward toward the door—*his* door, *his* city, and somewhere in it *his* lost and pregnant wife. He was aware (exquisitely so) of the invisible hand that *pushed him back*, and a voice that spoke, but not in words. What Eddie heard was far more terrible than any words could have been. With words you could argue. This was only an inarticulate negation, and for all he knew, it came from the Dark Tower itself.

Jake and Callahan were shot like bullets from a gun: shot into a darkness filled with the exotic sounds of honking horns and rushing traffic. In the distance but clear, like the voices you heard in dreams, Eddie heard a rapid, rapping, ecstatic voice streetbopping its message: "Say *Gawd*, brotha, that's right, say *Gawd* on Second Avenue, say *Gawd* on Avenue B, say *Gawd* in the Bronx, I say *Gawd*, I say *Gawd*-bomb, I say *Gawd*!" The voice of an authentic New York crazy if Eddie had ever heard one and it laid his heart open. He saw Oy zip

through the door like a piece of newspaper yanked up the street in the wake of a speeding car, and then the door slammed shut, swinging so fast and hard that he had to slit his eyes against the wind it blew into his face, a wind that was gritty with the bone-dust of this rotten cave.

Before he could scream his fury, the door slapped open again. This time he was dazzled by hazy sunshine loaded with birdsong. He smelled pine trees and heard the distant backfiring of what sounded like a big truck. Then he was sucked into that brightness, unable to yell that this was fucked up, assbackw—

Something collided with the side of Eddie's head. For one brief moment he was brilliantly aware of his passage between the worlds. Then the gunfire. Then the killing.

STAVE: *Commala-come-coo*
The wind'll blow ya through.
Ya gotta go where ka's wind blows ya
Cause there's nothin else to do.

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-two!*
Nothin else to do!
Gotta go where ka's wind blows ya
Cause there's nothin else to do.

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3RD STANZA



ONE

Until June first of 1999, Trudy Damascus was the sort of hard-headed woman who'd tell you that most UFOs were weather balloons (and those that weren't were probably the fabrications of people who wanted to get on TV), the Shroud of Turin was some fourteenth-century con man's trick, and that ghosts—Jacob Marley's included—were either the perceptions of the mentally ill or caused by indigestion. She was hard-headed, she *prided* herself on being hard-headed, and had nothing even slightly spiritual on her mind as she walked down Second Avenue toward her business (an accounting firm called Guttenberg, Furth, and Patel) with her canvas carry-bag and her purse slung over her shoulder. One of GF&P's clients was a chain of toy stores called KidzPlay, and KidzPlay owed GF&P a goodly sum of money. The fact that they were also tottering on the edge of Chapter Eleven meant el zippo to Trudy. She wanted that \$69,211.19, and had spent most of her lunch-hour (in a back booth of Dennis's Waffles and Pancakes, which had been Chew Chew Mama's until 1994) mulling over ways to get it. During the last two years she had taken several steps toward changing Guttenberg, Furth, and Patel to Guttenberg, Furth, Patel and Damascus; forcing KidzPlay to cough up would be yet another step—a long one—in that direction.

And so, as she crossed Forty-sixth Street toward the large dark glass skyscraper which now stood on the uptown corner of Second

and Forty-sixth (where there had once been a certain Artistic Deli and then a certain vacant lot), Trudy wasn't thinking about gods or ghosts or visitations from the spirit world. She was thinking about Richard Goldman, the asshole CEO of a certain toy company, and how—

But that was when Trudy's life changed. At 1:19 P.M., EDT, to be exact. She had just reached the curb on the downtown side of the street. Was, in fact, stepping up. And all at once a woman appeared on the sidewalk in front of her. A wide-eyed African-American woman. There was no shortage of black women in New York City, and God knew there had to be a fair percentage of them with wide eyes, but Trudy had never seen one emerge directly from thin air before, which was what this one did. And there was something else, something even more unbelievable. Ten seconds before, Trudy Damascus would have laughed and said *nothing* could be more unbelievable than a woman flicking into existence in front of her on a Midtown sidewalk, but there was. There definitely was.

And now she knew how all those people who reported seeing flying saucers (not to mention ghosts wrapped in clanking chains) must feel, how they must grow frustrated by the entrenched disbelief of people like . . . well, people like the one Trudy Damascus had been at 1:18 P.M. on that day in June, the one who said goodbye for good on the downtown side of Forty-sixth Street. You could tell people *You don't understand, this REALLY HAPPENED!* and it cut zero ice. They said stuff like *Well, she probably came out from behind the bus shelter and you just didn't notice* or *She probably came out of one of the little stores and you just didn't notice*. You could tell them that there *was* no bus shelter on the downtown side of Second and Forty-sixth (or on the uptown side, for that matter), and it did no good. You could tell them there *were* no little stores in that area, not since 2 Hammar skjöld Plaza went up, and that didn't work, either. Trudy would soon find these things out for herself, and they would drive her close to insanity. She was not used to having her perceptions dismissed as no more than a blob of mustard or a bit of underdone potato.

No bus shelter. No little shops. There were the steps going up to Hammarskjöld Plaza, where a few late lunchers were still sitting with their brown bags, but the ghost-woman hadn't come from there, either. The fact was this: when Trudy Damascus put her sneaker-clad left foot up on the curb, the sidewalk directly ahead of her was completely empty. As she shifted her weight preparatory to lifting her right foot up from the street, a woman appeared.

For just a moment, Trudy could see Second Avenue through her, and something else, as well, something that looked like the mouth of a cave. Then that was gone and the woman was solidifying. It probably took only a second or two, that was Trudy's estimate; she would later think of that old saying *If you blinked you missed it* and wish she had blinked. Because it wasn't just the materialization.

The black lady grew legs right in front of Trudy Damascus's eyes.

That's right; grew legs.

There was nothing wrong with Trudy's powers of observation, and she would later tell people (fewer and fewer of whom wanted to listen) that every detail of that brief encounter was imprinted on her memory like a tattoo. The apparition was a little over four feet tall. That was a bit on the stumpy side for an ordinary woman, Trudy supposed, but probably not for one who quit at the knees.

The apparition was wearing a white shirt, splattered with either maroon paint or dried blood, and jeans. The jeans were full and round at the thighs, where there *were* legs inside them, but below the knees they trailed out on the sidewalk like the shed skins of weird blue snakes. Then, suddenly, they plumped up. *Plumped up*, the very words sounded insane, but Trudy saw it happen. At the same moment, the woman rose from her nothing-below-the-knee four-feet-four to her all-there height of perhaps five-six or -seven. It was like watching some extraordinary camera trick in a movie, but this was no movie, it was Trudy's *life*.

Over her left shoulder the apparition wore a cloth-lined pouch that looked as if it had been woven of reeds. There appeared to be plates or dishes inside it. In her right hand she clutched a faded red bag with

a drawstring top. Something with square sides at the bottom, swinging back and forth. Trudy couldn't make out everything written on the side of the bag, but she thought part of it was MIDTOWN LANES.

Then the woman grabbed Trudy by the arm. "What you got in that bag?" she asked. "You got shoes?"

This caused Trudy to look at the black woman's feet, and she saw another amazing thing when she did: the African-American woman's feet were *white*. As white as her own.

Trudy had heard of people being rendered speechless; now it had happened to her. Her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth and wouldn't come down. Still, there was nothing wrong with her eyes. They saw everything. The white feet. More droplets on the black woman's face, almost certainly dried blood. The smell of sweat, as if materializing on Second Avenue like this had only come as the result of tremendous exertion.

"If you got shoes, lady, you best give em to me. I don't want to kill you but I got to get to folks that'll help me with my chap and I can't do that barefoot."

No one on this little piece of Second Avenue. People—a few, anyway—sitting on the steps of 2 Hammarskjöld Plaza, and a couple were looking right at Trudy and the black woman (the *mostly* black woman), but not with any alarm or even interest, what the hell was *wrong* with them, were they blind?

Well, it's not them she's grabbing, for one thing. And it's not them she's threatening to kill, for another—

The canvas Borders bag with her office shoes inside it (sensible half-heels, cordovan-colored) was snatched from her shoulder. The black woman peered inside it, then looked up at Trudy again. "What size're these?"

Trudy's tongue finally came unstuck from the roof of her mouth, but that was no help; it promptly fell dead at the bottom.

"Ne'mine, Susannah says you look like about a seven. These'll d
—"

The apparition's face suddenly seemed to shimmer. She lifted one hand—it rose in a loose loop with an equally loose fist anchoring the end, as if the woman didn't have very good control of it—and thumped herself on the forehead, right between the eyes. And suddenly her face was different. Trudy had Comedy Central as part of her basic cable deal, and she'd seen stand-up comics who specialized in mimicry change their faces that same way.

When the black woman spoke again, her voice had changed, too. Now it was that of an educated woman. And (Trudy would have sworn it) a frightened one.

“Help me,” she said. “My name is Susannah Dean and I . . . I . . . oh dear . . . oh *Christ*—”

This time it was pain that twisted the woman's face, and she clutched at her belly. She looked down. When she looked back up again, the first one had reappeared, the one who had talked of killing for a pair of shoes. She took a step back on her bare feet, still holding the bag with Trudy's nice Ferragamo low-heels and her *New York Times* inside it.

“Oh Christ,” she said. “Oh don't that hurt! *Mama!* You got to make it stop. It can't come yet, not right out here on the street, you got to make it stop awhile.”

Trudy tried to raise her voice and yell for a cop. Nothing came out but a small, whispering sigh.

The apparition pointed at her. “You want to get out of here now,” she said. “And if you rouse any constabulary or raise any posse, I'll find you and cut your breasts off.” She took one of the plates from the reed pouch. Trudy observed that the plate's curved edge was metal, and as keen as a butcher's knife, and suddenly found herself in a struggle to keep from wetting her pants.

Find you and cut your breasts off, and an edge like the one she was looking at would probably do the job. Zip-zoop, instant mastectomy, O dear Lord.

“Good day to you, madam,” Trudy heard her mouth saying. She sounded like someone trying to talk to the dentist before the Novocain

has worn off. “Enjoy those shoes, wear them in good health.”

Not that the apparition looked particularly healthy. Not even with her legs on and her fancy white feet.

Trudy walked. She walked down Second Avenue. She tried to tell herself (with no success at all) that she had *not* seen a woman appear out of thin air in front of 2 Hammarskjöld, the building the folks who worked there jokingly called the Black Tower. She tried to tell herself (also with no success at all) that this was what she got for eating roast beef and fried potatoes. She should have stuck to her usual waffle-and-egg, you went to Dennis’s for *waffles*, not for roast beef and potatoes, and if you didn’t believe that, look what had just happened to her. Seeing African-American apparitions, and—

And her bag! Her canvas Borders bag! She must have dropped it!

Knowing better. All the time expecting the woman to come after her, shrieking like a headhunter from the deepest, darkest jungles of Papua. There was a ningly-tumb place on her back (she meant *a tingly-numb place*, but ningly-tumb was how it actually felt, kind of loose and cool and distant) where she knew the crazy woman’s plate would bite into her, drinking her blood and then eating one of her kidneys before coming to rest, still quivering, in the live chalk of her spine. She would hear it coming, somehow she knew that, it would make a whistling sound like a child’s top before it chunked into her and warm blood went splashing down over her buttocks and the backs of her legs—

She couldn’t help it. Her bladder let go, her urine gushed, and the front of her slacks, part of a *très* expensive Norma Kamali suit, went distressingly dark. She was almost at the corner of Second and Forty-fifth by then. Trudy—never again to be the hard-headed woman she’d once fancied herself—was finally able to stop and turn around. She no longer felt quite so ningly-tumb. Only warm at the crotch.

And the woman, the mad apparition, was gone.

TWO

Trudy kept some softball-practice clothes—tee-shirts and two old pairs of jeans—inside her office storage cabinet. When she got back to Guttenberg, Furth, and Patel, she made changing her first priority. Her second was a call to the police. The cop who took her report turned out to be Officer Paul Antassi.

“My name is Trudy Damascus,” she said, “and I was just mugged on Second Avenue.”

Officer Antassi was extremely sympathetic on the phone, and Trudy found herself imagining an Italian George Clooney. Not a big stretch, considering Antassi’s name and Clooney’s dark hair and eyes. Antassi didn’t look a bit like Clooney in person, but hey, who expected miracles and movie stars, it was a real world they were living in. Although . . . considering what had happened to her on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth at 1:19 P.M., EDT . . .

Officer Antassi arrived at about three-thirty, and she found herself telling him exactly what had happened to her, *everything*, even the part about feeling ningly-tumb instead of tingly-numb and her weird certainty that the woman was getting ready to throw that dish at her

—
“Dish had a sharpened edge, you say?” Antassi asked, jotting on his pad, and when she said yes, he nodded sympathetically. Something about that nod had struck her as familiar, but right then she’d been too involved in telling her tale to chase down the association. Later, though, she wondered how she could possibly have been so dumb. It was every sympathetic nod she’d ever seen in one of those lady-gone-crazy films, from *Girl, Interrupted* with Winona Ryder all the way back to *The Snake Pit*, with Olivia de Havilland.

But right then she’d been too involved. Too busy telling the nice Officer Antassi about how the apparition’s jeans had been dragging on the sidewalk from the knees down. And when she was done, she for the first time heard the one about how the black woman had probably come out from behind a bus shelter. Also the one—this’ll killya—about how the black woman had probably just stepped out of some little store, there were billions of them in that neighborhood. As for

Trudy, she premiered her bit about how there *were* no bus shelters on that corner, not on the downtown side of Forty-sixth, not on the uptown side, either. Also the one about how all the shops were gone on the downtown side since 2 Hammarskjöld went up, that would prove to be one of her most popular routines, would probably get her onstage at Radio Goddam City someday.

She was asked for the first time what she'd had for lunch just before seeing this woman, and realized for the first time that she'd had a twentieth-century version of what Ebenezer Scrooge had eaten shortly before seeing his old (and long-dead) business partner: potatoes and roast beef. Not to mention *several* blots of mustard.

She forgot all about asking Officer Antassi if he'd like to go out to dinner with her.

In fact, she threw him out of her office.

Mitch Guttenberg poked his head in shortly thereafter. "Do they think they'll be able to get your bag back, Tru—"

"Get lost," Trudy said without looking up. "Right now."

Guttenberg assessed her pallid cheeks and set jaw. Then he retired without saying another word.

THREE

Trudy left work at four-forty-five, which was early for her. She walked back to the corner of Second and Forty-sixth, and although that ningly-tumb feeling began to work its way up her legs and into the pit of her stomach again as she approached Hammarskjöld Plaza, she never hesitated. She stood on the corner, ignoring both white WALK and red DON'T WALK. She turned in a tight little circle, almost like a ballet dancer, also ignoring her fellow Second Avenue-ites and being ignored in turn.

"Right here," she said. "It happened right here. I know it did. She asked me what size I was, and before I could answer—I *would* have

answered, I would have told her what color my underwear was if she asked, I was in shock—before I could answer, she said . . .”

Ne'mine, Susannah says you look like about a seven. These'll do.

Well, no, she hadn't quite finished that last part, but Trudy was sure that was what the woman had meant to say. Only then her face had changed. Like a comic getting ready to imitate Bill Clinton or Michael Jackson or maybe even George Clooney. And she'd asked for help. Asked for help and said her name was . . . what?

“Susannah Dean,” Trudy said. “That was the name. I never told Officer Antassi.”

Well, yeah, but fuck Officer Antassi. Officer Antassi with his bus shelters and little stores, just *fuck* him.

That woman—Susannah Dean, Whoopi Goldberg, Coretta Scott King, whoever she was—thought she was pregnant. Thought she was in labor. I'm almost sure of it. Did she look pregnant to you, Trudes?

“No,” she said.

On the uptown side of Forty-sixth, white WALK once again became red DON'T WALK. Trudy realized she was calming down. Something about just standing here, with 2 Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza on her right, was calming. Like a cool hand on a hot brow, or a soothing word that assured you that there was nothing, absolutely *nothing* to feel ningly-tumb about.

She could hear a humming, she realized. A sweet humming sound.

“That's not humming,” she said as red DON'T WALK cycled back to white WALK one more time (she remembered a date in college once telling her the worst karmic disaster he could imagine would be coming back as a traffic light). “That's not humming, that's *singing*.”

And then, right beside her—startling her but not frightening her—a man's voice spoke. “That's right,” he said. Trudy turned and saw a gentleman who looked to be in his early forties. “I come by here all the time, just to hear it. And I'll tell you something, since we're just ships passing in the night, so to speak—when I was a young man, I had the world's most terrible case of acne. I think coming here cleared it up, somehow.”

“You think standing on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth cleared up your acne,” she said.

His smile, only a small one but very sweet, faltered a tiny bit. “I know it sounds crazy—”

“I saw a woman appear out of nowhere right here,” Trudy said. “Three and a half hours ago, I saw this. When she showed up, she had no legs from the knees down. Then she grew the rest of em. So who’s crazy, my friend?”

He was looking at her, wide-eyed, just some anonymous time-server in a suit with his tie pulled down at the end of the work-day. And yes, she could see the pits and shadows of old acne on his cheeks and forehead. “This is true?”

She held up her right hand. “If I’m lyin, I’m dyin. Bitch stole my shoes.” She hesitated. “No, she wasn’t a bitch. I don’t believe she was a bitch. She was scared and she was barefooted and she thought she was in labor. I just wish I’d had time to give her my sneakers instead of my good goddam shoes.”

The man was giving her a cautious look, and Trudy Damascus suddenly felt tired. She had an idea this was a look she was going to get used to. The sign said WALK again, and the man who’d spoken to her started across, swinging his briefcase.

“Mister!”

He didn’t stop walking, but did look back over his shoulder.

“What used to be here, back when you used to stop by for acne treatments?”

“Nothing,” he said. “It was just a vacant lot behind a fence. I thought it would stop—that nice sound—when they built on the site, but it never did.”

He gained the far curb. Walked off up Second Avenue. Trudy stood where she was, lost in thought. *I thought it would stop, but it never did.*

“Now why would that be?” she asked, and turned to look more directly at 2 Hammar skjöld Plaza. The Black Tower. The humming was stronger now that she was concentrating on it. And sweeter. Not

just one voice but many of them. Like a choir. Then it was gone. Disappeared as suddenly as the black woman had done the opposite.

No it didn't, Trudy thought. I just lost the knack of hearing it, that's all. If I stood here long enough, I bet it would come back. Boy, this is nuts. I'm nuts.

Did she believe that? The truth was that she did not. All at once the world seemed very thin to her, more an idea than an actual thing, and barely there at all. She had never felt less hard-headed in her life. What she felt was weak in her knees and sick to her stomach and on the verge of passing out.

FOUR

There was a little park on the other side of Second Avenue. In it was a fountain; nearby was a metal sculpture of a turtle, its shell gleaming wetly in the fountain's spray. She cared nothing for fountains or sculptures, but there was also a bench.

WALK had come around again. Trudy tottered across Second Avenue, like a woman of eighty-three instead of thirty-eight, and sat down. She began to take long, slow breaths, and after three minutes or so felt a little better.

Beside the bench was a trash receptacle with KEEP LITTER IN ITS PLACE stenciled on the side. Below this, in pink spray-paint, was an odd little graffito: *See the TURTLE of enormous girth.* Trudy saw the turtle, but didn't think much of its girth; the sculpture was quite modest. She saw something else, as well: a copy of the *New York Times*, rolled up as she always rolled hers, if she wanted to keep it a little longer and happened to have a bag to stow it in. Of course there were probably at least a million copies of that day's *Times* floating around Manhattan, but this one was hers. She knew it even before fishing it out of the litter basket and verifying what she knew by turning to the crossword, which she'd mostly completed over lunch, in her distinctive lilac-colored ink.

She returned it to the litter basket and looked across Second Avenue to the place where her idea of how things worked had changed. Maybe forever.

Took my shoes. Crossed the street and sat here by the turtle and put them on. Kept my bag but dumped the Times. Why'd she want my bag? She didn't have any shoes of her own to put in it.

Trudy thought she knew. The woman had put her plates in it. A cop who got a look at those sharp edges might be curious about what you served on dishes that could cut your fingers off if you grabbed them in the wrong place.

Okay, but then where did she go?

There was a hotel down at the corner of First and Forty-sixth. Once it had been the U.N. Plaza. Trudy didn't know what its name was now, and didn't care. Nor did she want to go down there and ask if a black woman in jeans and a stained white shirt might have come in a few hours ago. She had a strong intuition that her version of Jacob Marley's ghost had done just that, but here was an intuition she didn't want to follow up on. Better to let it go. The city was full of shoes, but *sanity*, one's *sanity*—

Better to head home, take a shower, and just . . . let it go. Except—

“Something is wrong,” she said, and a man walking past on the sidewalk looked at her. She looked back defiantly. “Somewhere something is *very* wrong. It's—”

Tipping was the word that came to mind, but she would not say it. As if to say it would cause the tip to become a topple.

It was a summer of bad dreams for Trudy Damascus. Some were about the woman who first appeared and then *grew*. These were bad, but not the worst. In the worst ones she was in the dark, and terrible chimes were ringing, and she sensed something tipping further and further toward the point of no return.

STAVE: *Commala-come-key*
Can ya tell me what ya see?
Is it ghosts or just the mirror

That makes ya want to flee?

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-three!*

I beg ya, tell me!

Is it ghosts or just your darker self

That makes ya want to flee?

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4TH STANZA



ONE

Susannah's memory had become distressingly spotty, unreliable, like the half-stripped transmission of an old car. She remembered the battle with the Wolves, and Mia waiting patiently while it went on . . .

No, that wasn't right. Wasn't fair. Mia had been doing a lot more than waiting patiently. She had been cheering Susannah (and the others) on with her own warrior's heart. Holding the labor in abeyance while her chap's surrogate mother dealt death with her plates. Only the Wolves had turned out to be robots, so could you really say . . .

Yes. Yes, you can. Because they were more than robots, much more, and we killed them. Rose up righteous and killed their asses.

But that was neither here nor there, because it was over. And once it was, she had felt the labor coming back, and strong. She was going to have the kid at the side of the damn road if she didn't look out; and there it would die, because it was hungry, Mia's chap was *hongry*, and . . .

You got to help me!

Mia. And impossible not to respond to that cry. Even while she felt Mia pushing her aside (as Roland had once pushed Detta Walker aside), it was impossible not to respond to that wild mother's cry. Partly, Susannah supposed, because it was *her* body they shared, and the body had declared itself on behalf of the baby. Probably could not

do otherwise. And so she had helped. She had done what Mia herself no longer could do, had stopped the labor a bit longer. Although that in itself would become dangerous to the chap (funny how that word insinuated itself into her thoughts, became her word as well as Mia's word) if it was allowed to go on too long. She remembered a story some girl had told during a late-night hen party in the dorm at Columbia, half a dozen of them sitting around in their pj's, smoking cigarettes and passing a bottle of Wild Irish Rose—absolutely *verboten* and therefore twice as sweet. The story had been about a girl their age on a long car-trip, a girl who'd been too embarrassed to tell her friends she needed a pee-stop. According to the story, the girl had suffered a ruptured bladder and died. It was the kind of tale you simultaneously thought was bullshit and believed absolutely. And this thing with the chap . . . the *baby* . . .

But whatever the danger, she'd been able to stop the labor. Because there were switches that could do that. Somewhere.

(in the Dogan)

Only the machinery in the Dogan had never been meant to do what she—they—

(us we)

were making it do. Eventually it would overload and

(rupture)

all the machines would catch fire, burn out. Alarms going off. Control panels and TV screens going dark. How long before that happened? Susannah didn't know.

She had a vague memory of taking her wheelchair out of a bucka-waggon while the rest of them were distracted, celebrating their victory and mourning their dead. Climbing and lifting weren't easy when you were legless from the knees down, but they weren't as hard as some folks might believe, either. Certainly she was used to mundane obstacles—everything from getting on and off the toilet to getting books off a shelf that had once been easily accessible to her (there had been a step-stool for such chores in every room of her New York apartment). In any case, Mia had been insisting—had actually been

driving her, as a cowboy might drive a stray dogie. And so Susannah had hoisted herself into the bucka, had lowered the wheelchair down, and then had lowered herself neatly into it. Not quite as easy as rolling off a log, but far from the hardest chore she'd ever done since losing her last sixteen inches or so.

The chair had taken her one last mile, maybe a little more (no legs for Mia, daughter of none, not in the Calla). Then it smashed into a spur of granite, spilling her out. Luckily, she had been able to break her fall with her arms, sparing her turbulent and unhappy belly.

She remembered picking herself up—correction, she remembered Mia picking up Susannah Dean's hijacked body—and working her way on up the path. She had only one other clear memory from the Calla side, and that was of trying to stop Mia from taking off the rawhide loop Susannah wore around her neck. A ring hung from it, a beautiful light ring that Eddie had made for her. When he'd seen it was too big (meaning it as a surprise, he hadn't measured her finger), he had been disappointed and told her he'd make her another.

You go on and do just that if you like, she'd said, *but I'll always wear this one.*

She had hung it around her neck, liking the way it felt between her breasts, and now here was this unknown woman, this *bitch*, trying to take it off.

Detta had *come forward*, struggling with Mia. Detta had had absolutely no success in trying to reassert control over Roland, but Mia was no Roland of Gilead. Mia's hands dropped away from the rawhide. Her control wavered. When it did, Susannah felt another of those labor pains sweep through her, making her double over and groan.

It has to come off! Mia shouted. *Otherwise, they'll have his scent as well as yours! Your husband's! You don't want that, believe me!*

Who? Susannah had asked. *Who are you talking about?*

Never mind—there's no time. But if he comes after you—and I know you think he'll try—they mustn't have his scent! I'll leave it here, where he'll find it. Later, if ka wills, you may wear it again.

Susannah had thought of telling her they could wash the ring off, wash Eddie's smell off it, but she knew it wasn't just a smell Mia was speaking of. It was a love-ring, and that scent would always remain.

But for whom?

The Wolves, she supposed. The *real* Wolves. The ones in New York. The vampires of whom Callahan had spoken, and the low men. Or was there something else? Something even worse?

Help me! Mia cried, and again Susannah found that cry impossible to resist. The baby might or might not be Mia's, and it might or might not be a monster, but her body wanted to have it. Her eyes wanted to see it, whatever it was, and her ears wanted to hear it cry, even if the cries were really snarls.

She had taken the ring off, kissed it, and then dropped it at the foot of the path, where Eddie would surely see it. Because he would follow her at least this far, she knew it.

Then what? She didn't know. She thought she remembered riding on something most of the way up a steep path, surely the path which led to the Doorway Cave.

Then, blackness.

(not blackness)

No, not *complete* blackness. There were blinking lights. The low glow of television screens that were, for the time being, projecting no pictures but only soft gray light. The faint hum of motors; the click of relays. This was

(the Dogan Jake's Dogan)

some sort of control room. Maybe a place she had constructed herself, maybe her imagination's version of a Quonset hut Jake had found on the west side of the River Whye.

The next thing she remembered clearly was being back in New York. Her eyes were windows she looked through as Mia stole some poor terrified woman's shoes.

Susannah *came forward* again, asking for help. She meant to go on, to tell the woman she needed to go to the hospital, needed a doctor, she was going to have a baby and something was wrong with it.

Before she could get any of that out, another labor pain washed over her, this one monstrous, deeper than any pain she had ever felt in her life, worse even than the pain she'd felt after the loss of her lower legs. This, though—*this*—

“Oh Christ,” she said, but Mia took over again before she could say anything else, telling Susannah that she had to make it stop, and telling the woman that if she whistled for any John Laws, she'd lose a pair of something a lot more valuable to her than shoes.

Mia, listen to me, Susannah told her. *I can stop it again—I think I can—but you have to help. You have to sit down. If you don't settle for awhile, God Himself won't be able to stop your labor from running its course. Do you understand? Do you hear me?*

Mia did. She stayed where she was for a moment, watching the woman from whom she'd stolen the shoes. Then, almost timidly, she asked a question: *Where should I go?*

Susannah sensed that her kidnapper was for the first time becoming aware of the enormous city in which she now found herself, was finally seeing the surging schools of pedestrians, the floods of metal carriages (every third one, it seemed, painted a yellow so bright it almost screamed), and towers so high that on a cloudy day their tops would have been lost to view.

Two women looked at an alien city through one set of eyes. Susannah knew it was *her* city, but in many ways, it no longer was. She'd left New York in 1964. How many years further along was this? Twenty? Thirty? Never mind, let it go. Now was not the time to worry about it.

Their combined gaze settled on the little pocket park across the street. The labor pains had ceased for the time being, and when the sign over there said WALK, Trudy Damascus's black woman (who didn't look particularly pregnant) crossed, walking slowly but steadily.

On the far side was a bench beside a fountain and a metal sculpture. Seeing the turtle comforted Susannah a little; it was as if Roland had left her this sign, what the gunslinger himself would have called a sigul.

He'll come after me, too, she told Mia. And you should 'ware him, woman. You should 'ware him very well.

I'll do what I need to do, Mia replied. You want to see the woman's papers. Why?

I want to see when this is. The newspaper will say.

Brown hands pulled the rolled-up newspaper from the canvas Borders bag, unrolled it, and held it up to blue eyes that had started that day as brown as the hands. Susannah saw the date—June 1st, 1999—and marveled over it. Not twenty years or even thirty, but thirty-five. Until this moment she hadn't realized how little she'd thought of the world's chances to survive so long. The contemporaries she'd known in her old life—fellow students, civil rights advocates, drinking buddies, and folk-music *aficionados*—would now be edging into late middle age. Some were undoubtedly dead.

Enough, Mia said, and tossed the newspaper back into the trash barrel, where it curled into its former rolled shape. She brushed as much dirt as she could from the soles of her bare feet (because of the dirt, Susannah did not notice they had changed color) and then put on the stolen shoes. They were a little tight, and with no socks she supposed they'd give her blisters if she had to walk very far, but—

*What do you care, right? Susannah asked her. Ain't your feet. And knew as soon as she'd said it (for this *was* a form of talking; what Roland called palaver) that she might be wrong about that. Certainly her own feet, those which had marched obediently through life below the body of Odetta Holmes (and sometimes Detta Walker), were long gone, rotting or—more likely—burned in some municipal incinerator.*

But she did not notice the change in color. Except later she'd think: You noticed, all right. Noticed it and blocked it right out. Because too much is too much.

Before she could pursue the question, as much philosophical as it was physical, of whose feet she now wore, another labor pain struck her. It cramped her stomach and turned it to stone even as it loosened her thighs. For the first time she felt the dismaying and terrifying need to *push*.

You have to stop it! Mia cried. Woman, you have to! For the chap's sake, and for ours, too!

Yes, all right, but how?

Close your eyes, Susannah told her.

What? Didn't you hear me? You've got to—

I heard you, Susannah said. Close your eyes.

The park disappeared. The world went dark. She was a black woman, still young and undoubtedly beautiful, sitting on a park bench beside a fountain and a metal turtle with a wet and gleaming metal shell. She might have been meditating on this warm late-spring afternoon in the year of 1999.

I'm going away for a little while now, Susannah said. I'll be back. In the meantime, sit where you are. Sit quiet. Don't move. The pain should draw back again, but even if it doesn't at first, sit still. Moving around will only make it worse. Do you understand me?

Mia might be frightened, and she was certainly determined to have her way, but she wasn't dumb. She asked only a single question.

Where are you going?

Back to the Dogan, Susannah said. My Dogan. The one inside.

TWO

The building Jake had found on the far side of the River Whye was some sort of ancient communications-and-surveillance post. The boy had described it to them in some detail, but he still might not have recognized Susannah's imagined version of it, which was based on a technology which had been far out of date only thirteen years later, when Jake had left New York for Mid-World. In Susannah's when, Lyndon Johnson had been President and color TV was still a curiosity. Computers were huge things that filled whole buildings. Yet Susannah had visited the city of Lud and seen some of the wonders there, and so Jake *might* have recognized the place where he had hidden from Ben Slightman and Andy the Messenger Robot, after all.

Certainly he would have recognized the dusty linoleum floor, with its checkerboard pattern of black and red squares, and the rolling chairs along consoles filled with blinking lights and glowing dials. And he would have recognized the skeleton in the corner, grinning above the frayed collar of its ancient uniform shirt.

She crossed the room and sat in one of the chairs. Above her, black-and-white TV screens showed dozens of pictures. Some were of Calla Bryn Sturgis (the town common, Callahan's church, the general store, the road leading east out of town). Some were still pictures like studio photographs: one of Roland, one of a smiling Jake holding Oy in his arms, and one—she could hardly bear to look at it—of Eddie with his hat tipped back cowpoke-style and his whittling knife in one hand.

Another monitor showed the slim black woman sitting on the bench beside the turtle, knees together, hands folded in her lap, eyes closed, a pair of stolen shoes on her feet. She now had three bags: the one she'd stolen from the woman on Second Avenue, the rush sack with the sharpened Orizas in it . . . and a bowling bag. This one was a faded red, and there was something with square corners inside it. A box. Looking at it in the TV screen made Susannah feel angry—betrayed—but she didn't know why.

The bag was pink on the other side, she thought. It changed color when we crossed, but only a little.

The woman's face on the black-and-white screen above the control board grimaced. Susannah felt an echo of the pain Mia was experiencing, only faint and distant.

Got to stop that. And quick.

The question still remained: how?

The way you did on the other side. While she was horsing her freight up to that cave just as fast as she damn could.

But that seemed a long time ago now, in another life. And why not? It *had* been another life, another world, and if she ever hoped to get back there, she had to help right now. So what had she done?

You used this stuff, that's what you did. It's only in your head, anyway—what Professor Overmeyer called "a visualization

technique” back in Psych One. Close your eyes.

Susannah did so. Now both sets of eyes were closed, the physical ones that Mia controlled in New York and the ones in her mind.

Visualize.

She did. Or tried.

Open.

She opened her eyes. Now on the panel in front of her there were two large dials and a single toggle-switch where before there had been rheostats and flashing lights. The dials looked to be made of Bakelite, like the oven-dials on her mother’s stove back in the house where Susannah had grown up. She supposed there was no surprise there; all you imagined, no matter how wild it might seem, was no more than a disguised version of what you already knew.

The dial on her left was labeled EMOTIONAL TEMP. The markings on it ran from 32 to 212 (32 in blue; 212 in bright red). It was currently set at 160. The dial in the middle was marked LABOR FORCE. The numbers around its face went from 0 to 10, and it was currently turned to 9. The label under the toggle-switch simply read CHAP, and there were only two settings: AWAKE and ASLEEP. It was currently set to AWAKE.

Susannah looked up and saw one of the screens was now showing a baby *in utero*. It was a boy. A *beautiful* boy. His tiny penis floated like a strand of kelp below the lazy curl of his umbilical cord. His eyes were open, and although the rest of the image was black and white, those eyes were a piercing blue. The chap’s gaze seemed to go right through her.

They’re Roland’s eyes, she thought, feeling stupid with wonder. How can that be?

It couldn’t, of course. All this was nothing but the work of her own imagination, a visualization technique. But if so, why would she imagine Roland’s blue eyes? Why not Eddie’s hazel ones? Why not her husband’s hazel eyes?

No time for that now. Do what you have to do.

She reached out to EMOTIONAL TEMP with her lower lip caught between her teeth (on the monitor showing the park bench, Mia also began biting her lower lip). She hesitated, then dialed it back to 72, exactly as if it was a thermostat. And wasn't it?

Calm immediately filled her. She relaxed in her chair and let her lip escape the grip of her teeth. On the park monitor, the black woman did the same. All right, so far, so good.

She hesitated for a moment with her hand not quite touching the LABOR FORCE dial, then moved on to CHAP instead. She flipped the toggle from AWAKE to ASLEEP. The baby's eyes closed immediately. Susannah found this something of a relief. Those blue eyes were disconcerting.

All right, back to LABOR FORCE. Susannah thought this was the important one, what Eddie would call the Big Casino. She took hold of the old-fashioned dial, applied a little experimental force, and was not exactly surprised to find the clunky thing dully resistant in its socket. It didn't want to turn.

But you will, Susannah thought. *Because we need you to. We need you to.*

She grasped it tightly and began turning it slowly counter-clockwise. A pain went through her head and she grimaced. Another momentarily constricted her throat, as if she'd gotten a fishbone stuck in there, but then both pains cleared. To her right an entire bank of lights flashed on, most of them amber, a few bright red.

"WARNING," said a voice that sounded eerily like that of Blaine the Mono. "THIS OPERATION MAY EXCEED SAFETY PARAMETERS."

No shit, Sherlock, Susannah thought. The LABOR FORCE dial was now down to 6. When she turned it past 5, another bank of amber and red lights flashed on, and three of the monitors showing Calla scenes shorted out with sizzling pops. Another pain gripped her head like invisible pressing fingers. From somewhere beneath her came the start-up whine of motors or turbines. Big ones, from the sound. She could feel them thrumming against her feet, which were bare, of

course—Mia had gotten the shoes. *Oh well*, she thought, *I didn't have any feet at all before this, so maybe I'm ahead of the game.*

“WARNING,” said the mechanical voice. “WHAT YOU'RE DOING IS DANGEROUS, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK. HEAR ME I BEG. IT'S NOT NICE TO FOOL MOTHER NATURE.”

One of Roland's proverbs occurred to her: You do what *you* need to, and I'll do what *I* need to, and we'll see who gets the goose. She wasn't sure what it meant, but it seemed to fit this situation, so she repeated it aloud as she slowly but steadily turned the LABOR FORCE dial past 4, to 3 . . .

She meant to turn the dial all the way back to 1, but the pain which ripped through her head when the absurd thing passed 2 was so huge—so *sickening*—that she dropped her hand.

For a moment the pain continued—intensified, even—and she thought it would kill her. Mia would topple off the bench where she was sitting, and both of them would be dead before their shared body hit the concrete in front of the turtle sculpture. Tomorrow or the next day, her remains would take a quick trip to Potter's Field. And what would go on the death certificate? Stroke? Heart attack? Or maybe that old standby of the medical man in a hurry, natural causes?

But the pain subsided and she was still alive when it did. She sat in front of the console with the two ridiculous dials and the toggle-switch, taking deep breaths and wiping the sweat from her cheeks with both hands. Boy-howdy, when it came to visualization technique, she had to be the champ of the world.

This is more than visualization—you know that, right?

She supposed she did. Something had changed her—had changed all of them. Jake had gotten the touch, which was a kind of telepathy. Eddie had grown (was still growing) into some sort of ability to create powerful, talismanic objects—one of them had already served to open a door between two worlds. And she?

I . . . see. That's all. Except if I see it hard enough, it starts to be real. The way Detta Walker got to be real.

All over this version of the Dogan, amber lights were glowing. Even as she looked, some turned red. Beneath her feet—special guest feet, she thought them—the floor trembled and thrummed. Enough of this and cracks would start to appear in its elderly surface. Cracks that would widen and deepen. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the House of Usher.

Susannah got up from the chair and looked around. She should go back. Was there anything else that needed doing before she did?

One thing occurred to her.

THREE

Susannah closed her eyes and imagined a radio mike. When she opened them the mike was there, standing on the console to the right of the two dials and the toggle-switch. She had imagined a Zenith trademark, right down to the lightning-bolt Z, on the microphone's base, but NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS had been stamped there, instead. So something was messing in with her visualization technique. She found that extremely scary.

On the control panel directly behind the microphone was a semicircular, tri-colored readout with the words **SUSANNAH-MIO** printed below it. A needle was moving out of the green and into the yellow. Beyond the yellow segment the dial turned red, and a single word was printed in black: **DANGER.**

Susannah picked up the mike, saw no way to use it, closed her eyes again, and imagined a toggle-switch like the one marked with AWAKE and ASLEEP, only this time on the side of the mike. When she opened her eyes again, the switch was there. She pressed it.

“Eddie,” she said. She felt a little foolish, but went on, anyway. “Eddie, if you hear me, I’m okay, at least for the time being. I’m with Mia, in New York. It’s June first of 1999, and I’m going to try and help her have the baby. I don’t see any other choice. If nothing else, I

have to be rid of it myself. Eddie, you take care of yourself. I . . .” Her eyes welled with tears. “I love you, sugar. So much.”

The tears spilled down her cheeks. She started to wipe them away and then stopped herself. Didn’t she have a right to cry for her man? As much right as any other woman?

She waited for a response, knowing she could make one if she wanted to and resisting the urge. This wasn’t a situation where talking to herself in Eddie’s voice would do any good.

Suddenly her vision doubled in front of her eyes. She saw the Dogan for the unreal shade that it was. Beyond its walls were not the deserty wastelands on the east side of the Whye but Second Avenue with its rushing traffic.

Mia had opened her eyes. She was feeling fine again—*thanks to me, honeybunch, thanks to me*—and was ready to move on.

Susannah went back.

FOUR

A black woman (who still thought of herself as a Negro woman) was sitting on a bench in New York City in the spring of ’99. A black woman with her traveling bags—her gunna—spread around her. One of them was a faded red. NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MIDTOWN LANES was printed on it. It had been pink on the other side. The color of the rose.

Mia stood up. Susannah promptly *came forward* and made her sit down again.

What did you do that for? Mia asked, surprised.

I don’t know, I don’t have a clue. But let’s us palaver a little. Why don’t you start by telling me where you want to go?

I need a telefung. Someone will call.

Tele phone, Susannah said. And by the way, there’s blood on our shirt, sugar, Margaret Eisenhart’s blood, and sooner or later someone’s gonna recognize it for what it is. Then where will you be?

The response to this was wordless, a swell of smiling contempt. It made Susannah angry. Five minutes ago—or maybe fifteen, it was hard to keep track of time when you were having fun—this hijacking bitch had been screaming for help. And now that she'd gotten it, what her rescuer got was an internal contemptuous smile. What made it worse was that the bitch was right: she could probably stroll around Midtown all day without anyone asking her if that was dried blood on her shirt, or had she maybe just spilled her chocolate egg-cream.

All right, she said, but even if nobody bothers you about the blood, where are you going to store your goods? Then another question occurred to her, one that probably should have come to her right away.

Mia, how do you even know what a telephone is? And don't tell me they have em where you came from, either.

No response. Only a kind of watchful silence. But she had wiped the smile off the bitch's face; she'd done that much.

You have friends, don't you? Or at least you think they're friends. Folks you've been talking to behind my back. Folks that'll help you. Or so you think.

Are you going to help me or not? Back to that. And angry. But beneath the anger, what? Fright? Probably that was too strong, at least for now. But worry, certainly. How long have I—have we—got before the labor starts up again?

Susannah guessed somewhere between six and ten hours—certainly before midnight saw in June second—but tried to keep this to herself.

I don't know. Not all that long.

Then we have to get started. I have to find a telefung. Phone. In a private place.

Susannah thought there was a hotel at the First Avenue end of Forty-sixth Street, and tried to keep this to herself. Her eyes went back to the bag, once pink, now red, and suddenly she understood. Not everything, but enough to dismay and anger her.

I'll leave it here, Mia had said, speaking of the ring Eddie had made her, I'll leave it here, where he'll find it. Later, if ka wills, you may

wear it again.

Not a promise, exactly, at least not a direct one, but Mia had certainly *implied*—

Dull anger surged through Susannah's mind. No, she'd not promised. She had simply led Susannah in a certain direction, and Susannah had done the rest.

She didn't cozen me; she let me cozen myself.

Mia stood up again, and once again Susannah *came forward* and made her sit down. Hard, this time.

What? Susannah, you promised! The chap—

I'll help you with the chap, Susannah replied grimly. She bent forward and picked up the red bag. The bag with the box inside it. And inside the box? The ghostwood box with UNFOUND written upon it in runes? She could feel a baleful pulse even through the layer of magical wood and cloth which hid it. Black Thirteen was in the bag. Mia had taken it through the door. And if it was the ball that opened the door, how could Eddie get to her now?

I did what I had to, Mia said nervously. *It's my baby, my chap, and every hand is against me now. Every hand but yours, and you only help me because you have to. Remember what I said . . . if ka wills, I said—*

It was Detta Walker's voice that replied. It was harsh and crude and brooked no argument. "I don't give a shit bout ka," she said, "and you bes be rememberin dat. You got problems, girl. Got a rug-monkey comin you don't know what it is. Got folks say they'll he'p you and you don't know what *dey* are. Shit, you doan even know what a telephone is or where to find one. Now we goan sit here, and you're goan tell me what happens next. We goan palaver, girl, and if you don't play straight, we still be sittin here with these bags come nightfall and you can have your precious chap on this bench and wash him off in the fuckin fountain."

The woman on the bench bared her teeth in a gruesome smile that was all Detta Walker.

“*You* care bout dat chap . . . and Susannah, she care a *little* bout dat chap . . . but I been mos’ly turned out of this body, and I . . . don’t . . . *give* a shit.”

A woman pushing a stroller (it looked as divinely lightweight as Susannah’s abandoned wheelchair) gave the woman on the bench a nervous glance and then pushed her own baby onward, so fast she was nearly running.

“So!” Detta said brightly. “It’s be purty out here, don’t you think? Good weather for talkin. You hear me, mamma?”

No reply from Mia, daughter of none and mother of one. Detta wasn’t put out of countenance; her grin widened.

“You hear me, all right; you hear me just *fahn*. So let’s us have a little chat. Let’s us palaver.”

STAVE: *Commala-come-ko*
Whatcha doin at my do’?
If you doan tell me now, my friend,
I’ll lay ya on de flo’.

RESPONSE: *Commala-come fo’!*
I can lay ya low!
The things I done to such as you
You never want to know.

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5TH STANZA



ONE

Mia said: *Talking will be easier—quicker and clearer, too—if we do it face-to-face.*

How can we? Susannah asked.

We'll have our palaver in the castle, Mia replied promptly. The Castle on the Abyss. In the banquet room. Do you remember the banquet room?

Susannah nodded, but hesitantly. Her memories of the banquet room were but recently recovered, and consequently vague. She wasn't sorry, either. Mia's feeding there had been . . . well, enthusiastic, to say the very least. She'd eaten from many plates (mostly with her fingers) and drunk from many glasses and spoken to many phantoms in many borrowed voices. Borrowed? Hell, *stolen* voices. Two of these Susannah had known quite well. One had been Odetta Holmes's nervous—and rather hoitytoity—"social" voice. Another had been Detta's raucous who-gives-a-shit bellow. Mia's thievery had extended to every aspect of Susannah's personality, it seemed, and if Detta Walker was back, pumped up and ready to cut butt, that was in large part this unwelcome stranger's doing.

The gunslinger saw me there, Mia said. The boy, too.

There was a pause. Then:

I have met them both before.

Who? Jake and Roland?

Aye, they.

Where? When? How could y—

We can't speak here. Please. Let us go somewhere more private.

Someplace with a phone, isn't that what you mean? So your friends can call you.

I only know a little, Susannah of New York, but what little I know, I think you would hear.

Susannah thought so, too. And although she didn't necessarily want Mia to realize it, she was also anxious to get off Second Avenue. The stuff on her shirt might look like spilled egg-cream or dried coffee to the casual passerby, but Susannah herself was acutely aware of what it was: not just blood, but the blood of a brave woman who had stood true on behalf of her town's children.

And there were the bags spread around her feet. She'd seen plenty of bag-folken in New York, aye. Now she felt like one herself, and she didn't like the feeling. She'd been raised to better, as her mother would have said. Each time someone passing on the sidewalk or cutting through the little park gave her a glance, she felt like telling them she wasn't crazy in spite of how she looked: stained shirt, dirty face, hair too long and in disarray, no purse, only those three bags at her feet. Homeless, aye—had anyone ever been as homeless as she, not just out of house but out of time itself?—but in her right mind. She needed to palaver with Mia and get an understanding of what all this was about, that was true. What she *wanted* was much simpler: to wash, to put on fresh clothes, and to be out of public view for at least a little while.

Might as well wish for the moon, sugar, she told herself . . . and Mia, if Mia was listening. Privacy costs money. You're in a version of New York where a single hamburger might cost as much as a dollar, crazy as that sounds. And you don't have a sou. Just a dozen or so sharpened plates and some kind of black-magic ball. So what are you gonna do?

Before she could get any further in her thinking, New York was swept away and she was back in the Doorway Cave. She'd been barely aware of her surroundings on her first visit—Mia had been in charge

then, and in a hurry to make her getaway through the door—but now they were very clear. Pere Callahan was here. So was Eddie. And Eddie’s brother, in a way. Susannah could hear Henry Dean’s voice floating up from the cave’s depths, both taunting and dismayed: “I’m in hell, bro! I’m in hell and I can’t get a fix and *it’s all your fault!*”

Susannah’s disorientation was nothing to the fury she felt at the sound of that nagging, hectoring voice. “Most of what was wrong with Eddie was *your fault!*” she screamed at him. “You should have done everyone a favor and died young, Henry!”

Those in the cave didn’t even look around at her. What was this? Had she come here todash from New York, just to add to the fun? If so, why hadn’t she heard the chimes?

Hush. Hush, love. That was Eddie’s voice in her mind, clear as day. *Just watch.*

Do you hear him? she asked Mia. *Do you—*

Yes! Now shut up!

“How long will we have to be here, do you think?” Eddie asked Callahan.

“I’m afraid it’ll be awhile,” Callahan replied, and Susannah understood she was seeing something that had already happened. Eddie and Callahan had gone up to the Doorway Cave to try to locate Calvin Tower and Tower’s friend, Deepneau. Just before the showdown with the Wolves, this had been. Callahan was the one who’d gone through the door. Black Thirteen had captured Eddie while the Pere was gone. And almost killed him. Callahan had returned just in time to keep Eddie from hurling himself from the top of the bluff and into the draw far below.

Right now, though, Eddie was dragging the bag—pink, yes, she’d been right about that, on the Calla side it had been pink—out from underneath the troublesome sai Tower’s bookcase of first editions. They needed the ball inside the bag for the same reason Mia had needed it: because it opened the Unfound Door.

Eddie lifted it, started to turn, then froze. He was frowning.

“What is it?” Callahan asked.

“There’s something in here,” Eddie replied.

“The box—”

“No, in the bag. Sewn into the lining. It feels like a little rock, or something.” Suddenly he seemed to be looking directly at Susannah, and she was aware that she was sitting on a park bench. It was no longer voices from the depths of the cave she heard, but the watery hiss and splash of the fountain. The cave was fading. Eddie and Callahan were fading. She heard Eddie’s last words as if from a great distance: “Maybe there’s a secret pocket.”

Then he was gone.

TWO

She hadn’t gone todash at all, then. Her brief visit to the Doorway Cave had been some kind of vision. Had Eddie sent it to her? And if he had, did it mean he’d gotten the message she’d tried to send him from the Dogan? These were questions Susannah couldn’t answer. If she saw him again, she’d ask him. After she’d kissed him a thousand times or so, that was.

Mia picked up the red bag and ran her hands slowly down its sides. There was the shape of the box inside, yes. But halfway down there was something else, a small bulge. And Eddie was right: it felt like a stone.

She—or perhaps it was they, it no longer mattered to her—rolled the bag down, not liking the intensified pulse from the thing hidden inside but setting her mind against it. Here it was, right in here . . . and something that felt like a seam.

She leaned closer and saw not a seam but some kind of a seal. She didn’t recognize it, nor would Jake have done, but Eddie would have known Velcro when he saw it. She *had* heard a certain Z.Z. Top tribute to the stuff, a song called “Velcro Fly.” She got a fingernail into the seal and pulled with her fingertip. It came loose with a soft ripping sound, revealing a small pocket on the inside of the bag.

What is it? Mia asked, fascinated in spite of herself.

Well, let's just see.

She reached in and brought out not a stone but a small scrimshaw turtle. Made of ivory, from the look of it. Each detail of the shell was tiny and precisely executed, although it had been marred by one tiny scratch that looked almost like a question-mark. The turtle's head poked halfway out. Its eyes were tiny black dots of some tarry stuff, and looked incredibly alive. She saw another small imperfection in the turtle's beak—not a scratch but a crack.

"It's old," she whispered aloud. "So old."

Yes, Mia whispered back.

Holding it made Susannah feel incredibly good. It made her feel . . . *safe*, somehow.

See the Turtle, she thought. *See the Turtle of enormous girth, on his shell he holds the earth*. Was that how it went? She thought it was at least close. And of course that was the Beam they had been following to the Tower. The Bear at one end—Shardik. The Turtle at the other—Maturin.

She looked from the tiny totem she'd found in the lining of the bag to the one beside the fountain. Barring the difference in materials—the one beside her bench was made of dark metal with brighter coppery glints—they were exactly the same, right down to the scratch on the shell and the tiny wedge-shaped break in the beak. For a moment her breath stopped, and her heart seemed to stop, also. She went along from moment to moment through this adventure—sometimes even from day to day—without thinking much but simply driven by events and what Roland insisted was *ka*. Then something like this would happen, and she would for a moment glimpse a far bigger picture, one that immobilized her with awe and wonder. She sensed forces beyond her ability to comprehend. Some, like the ball in the ghostwood box, were evil. But this . . . *this* . . .

"Wow," someone said. Almost sighed.

She looked up and saw a businessman—a very successful one, from the look of his suit—standing there by the bench. He'd been cutting

through the park, probably on his way to someplace as important as he was, some sort of meeting or a conference, maybe even at the United Nations, which was close by (unless that had changed, too). Now, however, he had come to a dead stop. His expensive briefcase dangled from his right hand. His eyes were large and fixed on the turtle in Susannah-Mia's hand. On his face was a large and rather dopey grin.

Put it away! Mia cried, alarmed. *He'll steal it!*

Like to see him try, Detta Walker replied. Her voice was relaxed and rather amused. The sun was out and she—all parts of she—suddenly realized that, all else aside, this day was beautiful. And precious. And gorgeous.

“Precious and beautiful and gorgeous,” said the businessman (or perhaps he was a diplomat), who had forgotten all about his business. Was it the day he was talking about, or the scrimshaw turtle?

It's both, Susannah thought. And suddenly she thought she understood this. Jake would have understood, too—no one better! She laughed. Inside her, Detta and Mia also laughed, Mia a bit against her will. And the businessman or diplomat, he laughed, too.

“Yah, it's both,” the businessman said. In his faint Scandinavian accent, *both* came out *boad*. “What a lovely thing you have!” *Whad a loffly thing!*

Yes, it *was* lovely. A lovely little treasure. And once upon a time, not so long ago, Jake Chambers had found something queerly similar. In Calvin Tower's bookshop, Jake had bought a book called *Charlie the Choo-Choo*, by Beryl Evans. Why? Because it had called to him. Later—shortly before Roland's ka-tet had come to Calla Bryn Sturgis, in fact—the author's name had changed to Claudia y Inez Bachman, making her a member of the ever-expanding Ka-Tet of Nineteen. Jake had slipped a key into that book, and Eddie had whittled a double of it in Mid-World. Jake's version of the key had both fascinated the folks who saw it and made them extremely suggestible. Like Jake's key, the scrimshaw turtle had its double; she was sitting beside it. The question was if the turtle was like Jake's key in other ways.

Judging from the fascinated way the Scandinavian businessman was looking at it, Susannah was pretty sure the answer was yes. She thought, *Dad-a-chuck, dad-a-churtle, don't worry, girl, you got the turtle!* It was such a silly rhyme she almost laughed out loud.

To Mia she said, *Let me handle this.*

Handle what? I don't understand—

I know you don't. So let me handle it. Agreed? She didn't wait for Mia's reply. She turned back to the businessman, smiling brightly, holding the turtle up where he could see it. She floated it from right to left and noted the way his eyes followed it, although his head, with its impressive mane of white hair, never moved.

"What's your name, sai?" Susannah asked.

"Mathiessen van Wyck," he said. His eyes rolled slowly in their sockets, watching the turtle. "I am second assistant to the Swedish Ambassador to the United Nations. My wife has taken a lover. This makes me sad. My bowels are regular once again, the tea the hotel masseuse recommended worked for me, and this makes me happy." A pause. Then: "Your *sköldpadda* makes me happy."

Susannah was fascinated. If she asked this man to drop his trousers and evacuate his newly regularized bowels on the sidewalk, would he do it? Of course he would.

She looked around quickly and saw no one in the immediate vicinity. That was good, but she thought it would still behoove her to transact her business here as quickly as she could. Jake had drawn quite the little crowd with his key. She had no urge to do the same, if she could avoid it.

"Mathiessen," she began, "you mentioned—"

"Mats," he said.

"Beg your pardon?"

"Call me Mats, if you would. I prefer it."

"All right, Mats, you mentioned a—"

"Do you speak Swedish?"

"No," she said.

"Then we will speak English."

“Yes, I’d prefer—”

“I have quite an important position,” Mats said. His eyes never left the turtle. “I am meeting many important peoples. I am going to cocktail parties where good-looking women are wearing ‘the little black dress.’”

“That must be quite a thrill for you. Mats, I want you to shut your trap and only open it to speak when I ask you a direct question. Will you do that?”

Mats closed his mouth. He even made a comical little zipping gesture across his lips, but his eyes never left the turtle.

“You mentioned a hotel. Do you stay at a hotel?”

“Yah, I am staying at the New York Plaza–Park Hyatt, at the corner of First and Forty-sixth. Soon I am getting the condominium apartment—”

Mats seemed to realize he was saying too much again and shut his mouth.

Susannah thought furiously, holding the turtle in front of her breasts where her new friend could see it very well.

“Mats, listen to me, okay?”

“I listen to hear, mistress-sai, and hear to obey.” That gave her a nasty jolt, especially coming out as it did in Mats’s cute little Scandihoovian accent.

“Do you have a credit card?”

Mats smiled proudly. “I have many. I have American Express, MasterCard, and Visa. I have the Euro-Gold Card. I have—”

“Good, that’s good. I want you to go down to the—” For a moment her mind blanked, and then it came. “—to the Plaza–Park Hotel and rent a room. Rent it for a week. If they ask, tell them it’s for a friend of yours, a lady friend.” An unpleasant possibility occurred to her. This was New York, the *north*, in the year 1999, and a person liked to believe that things continued to go in the right direction, but it was best to be sure. “Will they make any unpleasantness about me being a Negro?”

“No, of course not.” He looked surprised. “Rent the room in your name and tell the clerk that a woman named Susannah Mia Dean will be using it. Do you understand?”

“Yah, Susannah Mia Dean.”

What else? Money, of course. She asked him if he had any. Her new friend removed his wallet and handed it to her. She continued to hold the turtle where he could see it in one hand while she riffled through the wallet, a very nice Lord Buxton, with the other. There was a wad of traveler’s checks—no good to her, not with that insanely convoluted signature—and about two hundred dollars in good old American cabbage. She took it and dropped it into the Borders bag which had lately held the pair of shoes. When she looked up she was dismayed to see that a couple of Girl Scouts, maybe fourteen years old and both wearing backpacks, had joined the businessman. They were staring at the turtle with shiny eyes and wet lips. Susannah found herself remembering the girls in the audience on the night Elvis Presley had played *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

“Too coooool,” one of them said, almost in a sigh.

“Totally awesome,” said the other.

“You girls go on about your business,” Susannah said.

Their faces tucked in, assuming identical looks of sorrow. They could almost have been twins from the Calla. “Do we have to?” asked the first.

“Yes!” Susannah said.

“Thankee-sai, long days and pleasant nights,” said the second. Tears had begun to roll down her cheeks. Her friend was also crying.

“Forget you saw me!” Susannah called as they started away.

She watched them nervously until they reached Second Avenue and headed uptown, then turned her attention back to Mats van Wyck. “You get a wiggle on, too, Mats. Hoss your freight down to that hotel and rent a room. Tell them your friend Susannah will be right along.”

“What is this freight-hossing? I do not understand—”

“It means hurry up.” She handed back his wallet, minus the cash, wishing she could have gotten a longer look at all those plastic cards,

wondering why anyone would need so many. “Once you have the room nailed down, go on to where you were going. Forget you ever saw me.”

Now, like the girls in their green uniforms, Mats began to weep. “Must I also forget the *sköldpadda*?”

“Yes.” Susannah remembered a hypnotist she’d once seen performing on some TV variety show, maybe even *Ed Sullivan*. “No turtle, but you’re going to feel good the rest of the day, you hear me? You’re going to feel like . . .” *A million bucks* might not mean that much to him, and for all she knew a million kroner wouldn’t buy a haircut. “You’re going to feel like the Swedish Ambassador himself. And you’ll stop worrying about your wife’s fancy-man. To hell with him, right?”

“Yah, to hell wit *dot* guy!” Mats cried, and although he was still weeping, he was now smiling, too. There was something divinely childish in that smile. It made Susannah feel happy and sad at the same time. She wanted to do something else for Mats van Wyck, if she could.

“And your bowels?”

“Yah?”

“Like clockwork for the rest of your life,” Susannah said, holding the turtle up. “What’s your usual time, Mats?”

“I am going yust after breakfast.”

“Then that’s when it’ll be. For the rest of your life. Unless you’re busy. If you’re late for an appointment or something like that, just say . . . um . . . *Maturin*, and the urge’ll pass until the next day.”

“*Maturin*.”

“Correct. Go on, now.”

“May I not take the *sköldpadda*?”

“No, you may not. Go on, now.”

He started away, then paused and looked back at her. Although his cheeks were wet, his expression was pixie-ish, a trifle sly. “Perhaps I should take it,” he said. “Perhaps it is mine by right.”

Like to see you try, honky was Detta's thought, but Susannah—who felt more and more in charge of this wacky triad, at least for the time being—shushed her. “Why would you say that, my friend? Tell, I beg.”

The sly look remained. *Don't kid a kidder*, it said. That was what it looked like to Susannah, anyway. “Mats, Maturin,” he said. “Maturin, Mats. You see?”

Susannah did. She started to tell him it was just a coincidence and then thought: *Calla, Callahan*.

“I see,” she said, “but the *sköldpadda* isn't yours. Nor mine, either.”

“Then whose?” Plaintive. *Den hoose?* it sounded like.

And before her conscious mind could stop her (or at least censor her), Susannah spoke the truth her heart and soul knew: “It belongs to the Tower, sai. The Dark Tower. And it's to there I'll return it, ka willing.”

“Gods be with you, lady-sai.”

“And you, Mats. Long days and pleasant nights.”

She watched the Swedish diplomat walk away, then looked down at the scrimshaw turtle and said, “That was pretty amazing, Mats old buddy.”

Mia had no interest in the turtle; she had but a single object. *This hotel*, she said. *Will there be a telephone?*

THREE

Susannah-Mia put the turtle into the pocket of her bluejeans and forced herself to wait for twenty minutes on the park bench. She spent much of this time admiring her new lower legs (whoever they belonged to, they were pretty fine) and wiggling her new toes inside her new

(stolen)

shoes. Once she closed her eyes and summoned up the control room of the Dogan. More banks of warning lights had gone on there, and the machinery under the floor was throbbing louder than ever, but the needle of the dial marked **SUSANNAH-MIO** was still just a little way into the yellow. Cracks in the floor had begun to appear, as she had known they would, but so far they didn't look serious. The situation wasn't that great, but she thought they could live with it for now.

What are you waiting for? Mia demanded. *Why are we just sitting here?*

I'm giving the Swede a chance to do his business for us at the hotel and clear out, Susannah replied.

And when she thought enough time had passed for him to have done that, she gathered her bags, got up, crossed Second Avenue, and started down Forty-sixth Street to the Plaza-Park Hotel.

FOUR

The lobby was full of pleasant afternoon light reflected by angles of green glass. Susannah had never seen such a beautiful room—outside of St. Patrick's, that was—but there was something alien about it, too.

Because it's the future, she thought.

God knew there were enough signs of that. The cars looked smaller, and entirely different. Many of the younger women she saw were walking around with their lower bellies exposed and their bra-straps showing. Susannah had to see this latter phenomenon four or five times on her stroll down Forty-sixth Street before she could completely convince herself that it was some sort of bizarre fashion fillip, and not a mistake. In her day, a woman with a bra-strap showing (or an inch of slip, *snowing down south* they used to say) would have ducked into the nearest public restroom to pin it up, and at once. As for the deal with the nude bellies . . .

Would have gotten you arrested anywhere but Coney Island, she thought. *No doubt about it.*

But the thing which made the biggest impression was also the hardest thing to define: the city just seemed *bigger*. It thundered and hummed all around her. It vibrated. Every breath of air was perfumed with its signature smell. The women waiting for taxis outside the hotel (with or without their bra-straps showing) could only be New York women; the doormen (not one but two) flagging cabs could only be New York doormen; the cabbies (she was amazed by how many of them were dark-skinned, and she saw one who was wearing a *turban*) could only be New York cabbies, but they were all . . . different. The world had moved on. It was as if her New York, that of 1964, had been a triple-A ball-club. This was the major leagues.

She paused for a moment just inside the lobby, pulling the scrimshaw turtle out of her pocket and getting her bearings. To her left was a parlor area. Two women were sitting there, chatting, and Susannah stared at them for a moment, hardly able to credit how much leg they were showing under the hems of their skirts (*what skirts, ha-ha?*). And they weren't teenagers or kollege kuties, either; these were women in their thirties, at least (although she supposed they might be in their *sixties*, who knew what scientific advances there might have been over the last thirty-five years).

To the right was a little shop. Somewhere in the shadows behind it a piano was tinkling out something blessedly familiar—"Night and Day"—and Susannah knew if she went toward the sound, she'd find a lot of leather seats, a lot of sparkling bottles, and a gentleman in a white coat who'd be happy to serve her even if it *was* only the middle of the afternoon. All this was a decided relief.

Directly ahead of her was the reception desk, and behind it was the most exotic woman Susannah had ever seen in her life. She appeared to be white, black, and Chinese, all whipped together. In 1964, such a woman would undoubtedly have been called a mongrel, no matter how beautiful she might have been. Here she had been popped into an extremely handsome ladies' suit and put behind the reception desk of a large first-class hotel. The Dark Tower might be increasingly shaky, Susannah thought, and the world might be moving on, but she

thought the lovely desk clerk was proof (if any were needed) that not *everything* was falling down or going in the wrong direction. She was talking to a customer who was complaining about his in-room movie bill, whatever that might be.

Never mind, it's the future, Susannah told herself once again. *It's science fiction, like the City of Lud. Best leave it at that.*

I don't care what it is or when, Mia said. *I want to be near a telephone. I want to see to my chap.*

Susannah walked past a sign on a tripod, then turned back and gave it a closer look.

**AS OF JULY 1ST, 1999, THE
NEW YORK PLAZA-PARK HYATT
WILL BECOME THE REGAL
U.N. PLAZA HOTEL
ANOTHER GREAT SOMBRA/
NORTH CENTRAL PROJECT!!**

Susannah thought, *Sombra as in Turtle Bay Luxury Condominiums . . . which never got built, from the look of that black-glass needle back on the corner. And North Central as in North Central Positronics. Interesting.*

She felt a sudden twinge of pain go through her head. Twinge? Hell, a bolt. It made her eyes water. And she knew who had sent it. Mia, who had no interest in the Sombra Corporation, North Central Positronics, or the Dark Tower itself, was becoming impatient. Susannah knew she'd have to change that, or at least try. Mia was focused blindly on her chap, but if she wanted to *keep* the chap, she might have to widen her field of vision a little bit.

She fight you ever' damn step of the way, Detta said. Her voice was shrewd and tough and cheerful. *You know dat too, don't you?*

She did.

Susannah waited until the man with the problem finished explaining how he had ordered some movie called *X-Rated* by

accident, and he didn't mind paying as long as it wasn't on his bill, and then she stepped up to the desk herself. Her heart was pounding.

"I believe that my friend, Mathiessen van Wyck, has rented a room for me," she said. She saw the reception clerk looking at her stained shirt with well-bred disapproval, and laughed nervously. "I really can't wait to take a shower and change my clothes. I had a small accident. At lunch."

"Yes, madam. Just let me check." The woman went to what looked like a small TV screen with a typewriter attached. She tapped a few keys, looked at the screen, and then said: "Susannah Mia Dean, is that correct?"

You say true, I say thank ya rose to her lips and she squelched it. "Yes, that's right."

"May I see some identification, please?"

For a moment Susannah was flummoxed. Then she reached into the rush bag and took out an Oriza, being careful to hold it by the blunt curve. She found herself remembering something Roland had said to Wayne Overholser, the Calla's big rancher: *We deal in lead*. The 'Rizas weren't bullets, but surely they were the equivalent. She held the plate up in one hand and the small carved turtle in the other.

"Will this do?" she asked pleasantly.

"What—" the beautiful desk clerk began, then fell silent as her eyes shifted from the plate to the turtle. They grew wide and slightly glassy. Her lips, coated with an interesting pink gloss (it looked more like candy than lipstick to Susannah), parted. A soft sound came from between them: *ohhh* . . .

"It's my driver's license," Susannah said. "Do you see?" Luckily there was no one else around, not even a bellman. The late-day checkouts were on the sidewalk, fighting for hacks; in here, the lobby was a-doze. From the bar beyond the gift shop, "Night and Day" gave way to a lazy and introspective version of "Stardust."

"Driver's license," the desk clerk agreed in that same sighing, wondering voice.

"Good. Are you supposed to write anything down?"

“No . . . Mr. Van Wyck rented the room . . . all I need is to . . . to check your . . . may I hold the turtle, ma’am?”

“No,” Susannah said, and the desk clerk began to weep. Susannah observed this phenomenon with bemusement. She didn’t believe she had made so many people cry since her disastrous violin recital (both first and last) at the age of twelve.

“No, I may not hold it,” the desk clerk said, weeping freely. “No, no, I may not, may not hold it, ah, Discordia, I may not—”

“Hush up your snivel,” Susannah said, and the desk clerk hushed at once. “Give me the room-key, please.”

But instead of a key, the Eurasian woman handed her a plastic card in a folder. Written on the inside of the folder—so would-be thieves couldn’t easily see it, presumably—was the number 1919. Which didn’t surprise Susannah at all. Mia, of course, could not have cared less.

She stumbled on her feet a little. Reeled a little. Had to wave one hand (the one holding her “driver’s license”) for balance. There was a moment when she thought she might tumble to the floor, and then she was okay again.

“Ma’am?” the desk clerk inquired. Looking remotely—*very* remotely—concerned. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Yeah,” Susannah said. “Only . . . lost my balance there for a second or two.”

Wondering, *What in the blue hell just happened?* Oh, but she knew the answer. Mia was the one with the legs, *Mia*. Susannah had been driving the bus ever since encountering old Mr. May I Not Take The *Sköldpadda*, and this body was starting to revert to its legless-below-the-knee state. Crazy but true. Her body was going Susannah on her.

Mia, get up here. Take charge.

I can’t. Not yet. As soon as we’re alone I will.

And dear Christ, Susannah recognized that tone of voice, recognized it very well. The bitch was *shy*.

To the desk clerk, Susannah said, “What’s this thing? Is it a key?”

“Why—yes, sai. You use it in the elevator as well as to open your room. Just push it into the slot in the direction the arrows point. Remove it briskly. When the light on the door turns green, you may enter. I have slightly over eight thousand dollars in my cash drawer. I’ll give it all to you for your pretty thing, your turtle, your *skölpadda*, your *tortuga*, your *kavvit*, your—”

“No,” Susannah said, and staggered again. She clutched the edge of the desk. Her equilibrium was shot. “I’m going upstairs now.” She’d meant to visit the gift shop first and spend some of Mats’s dough on a clean shirt, if they carried such things, but that would have to wait. *Everything* would have to wait.

“Yes, sai.” No more *ma’am*, not now. The turtle was working on her. Sanding away the gap between the worlds.

“You just forget you saw me, all right?”

“Yes, sai. Shall I put a do-not-disturb on the phone?”

Mia clamored. Susannah didn’t even bother paying attention. “No, don’t do that. I’m expecting a call.”

“As you like, sai.” Eyes on the turtle. Ever on the turtle. “Enjoy the Plaza–Park. Would you like a bellman to assist you with your bags?”

Look like I need help with these three pukey li’l things? Detta thought, but Susannah only shook her head.

“Very well.”

Susannah started to turn away, but the desk clerk’s next words swung her back in a hurry.

“Soon comes the King, he of the Eye.”

Susannah gaped at the woman, her surprise close to shock. She felt gooseflesh crawling up her arms. The desk clerk’s beautiful face, meanwhile, remained placid. Dark eyes on the scrimshaw turtle. Lips parted, now damp with spittle as well as gloss. *If I stay here much longer*, Susannah thought, *she’ll start to drool*.

Susannah very much wanted to pursue the business of the King and the Eye—it was *her* business—and she could, she was the one up front and driving the bus, but she staggered again and knew she couldn’t . . . unless, that was, she wanted to crawl to the elevator on

her hands and knees with the empty lower legs of her jeans trailing out behind her. *Maybe later*, she thought, knowing that was unlikely; things were moving too fast now.

She started across the lobby, walking with an educated stagger. The desk clerk spoke after her in a voice expressing pleasant regret, no more than that.

“When the King comes and the Tower falls, sai, all such pretty things as yours will be broken. Then there will be darkness and nothing but the howl of Discordia and the cries of the can toi.”

Susannah made no reply, although the gooseflesh was now all the way up the nape of her neck and she could feel her scalp tightening on her very skull. Her legs (*someone’s* legs, anyway) were rapidly losing all feeling. If she’d been able to look at her bare skin, would she have seen her fine new legs going transparent? Would she have been able to see the blood flowing through her veins, bright red going down, darker and exhausted heading back up to her heart? The interwoven pigtailed of muscle?

She thought yes.

She pushed the UP button and then put the Oriza back into its bag, praying one of the three elevator doors would open before she collapsed. The piano player had switched to “Stormy Weather.”

The door of the middle car opened. Susannah-Mia stepped in and pushed 19. The door slid shut but the car went nowhere.

The plastic card, she reminded herself. *You have to use the card.*

She saw the slot and slid the card into it, being careful to push in the direction of the arrows. This time when she pushed 19, the number lit up. A moment later she was shoved rudely aside as Mia *came forward*.

Susannah subsided at the back of her own mind with a kind of tired relief. Yes, let someone else take over, why not? Let someone else drive the bus for awhile. She could feel the strength and substance coming back into her legs, and that was enough for now.

FIVE

Mia might have been a stranger in a strange land, but she was a fast learner. In the nineteenth-floor lobby she located the arrow with 1911–1923 beneath it and walked briskly down the corridor to 1919. The carpet, some thick green stuff that was delightfully soft, whispered beneath her

(their)

stolen shoes. She inserted the key-card, opened the door, and stepped in. There were two beds. She put the bags on one of them, looked around without much interest, then fixed her gaze on the telephone.

Susannah! Impatient.

What?

How do I make it ring?

Susannah laughed with genuine amusement. *Honey, you aren't the first person to ask that question, believe me. Or the millionth. It either will or it won't. In its own good time. Meanwhile, why don't you have a look around. See if you can't find a place to store your gunna.*

She expected an argument but didn't get one. Mia prowled the room (not bothering to open the drapes, although Susannah very much wanted to see the city from this height), peeked into the bathroom (palatial, with what looked like a marble basin and mirrors everywhere), then looked into the closet. Here, sitting on a shelf with some plastic bags for dry-cleaning on top, was a safe. There was a sign on it, but Mia couldn't read it. Roland had had similar problems from time to time, but his had been caused by the difference between the English language alphabet and In-World's "great letters." Susannah had an idea that Mia's problems were a lot more basic; although her kidnapper clearly knew numbers, Susannah didn't think the chap's mother could read at all.

Susannah *came forward*, but not all the way. For a moment she was looking through two sets of eyes at two signs, the sensation so

peculiar that it made her feel nauseated. Then the images came together and she could read the message:

**THIS SAFE IS PROVIDED FOR YOUR
PERSONAL BELONGINGS THE MANAGEMENT
OF THE PLAZA-PARK HYATT ASSUMES
NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR ITEMS LEFT HERE
CASH AND JEWELRY SHOULD BE DEPOSITED
IN THE HOTEL SAFE DOWNSTAIRS
TO SET CODE, PUNCH IN FOUR NUMBERS
PLUS ENTER TO OPEN, ENTER YOUR
FOUR-NUMBER CODE AND PUSH OPEN**

Susannah retired and let Mia select four numbers. They turned out to be a one and three nines. It was the current year and might be one of the first combinations a room burglar would try, but at least it wasn't quite the room number itself. Besides, they were the *right* numbers. Numbers of power. A *sigul*. They both knew it.

Mia tried the safe after programming it, found it locked tightly, then followed the directions for opening it. There was a whirring noise from somewhere inside and the door popped ajar. She put in the faded red MIDTOWN LANES bag—the box inside just fit on the shelf—and then the bag of Oriza plates. She closed and locked the safe's door again, tried the handle, found it tight, and nodded. The Borders bag was still on the bed. She took the wad of cash out of it and tucked it into the right front pocket of her jeans, along with the turtle.

Have to get a clean shirt, Susannah reminded her unwelcome guest.

Mia, daughter of none, made no reply. She clearly cared *bupkes* for shirts, clean or dirty. Mia was looking at the telephone. For the time being, with her labor on hold, the phone was all she cared about.

Now we palaver, Susannah said. *You promised, and it's a promise you're going to keep. But not in that banquet room.* She shuddered. *Somewhere outside, hear me I beg. I want fresh air. That banqueting hall smelled of death.*

Mia didn't argue. Susannah got a vague sense of the other woman riffling through various files of memory—examining, rejecting, examining, rejecting—and at last finding something that would serve.

How do we go there? Mia asked indifferently.

The black woman who was now two women (again) sat on one of the beds and folded her hands in her lap. *Like on a sled*, the woman's Susannah part said. *I'll push, you steer. And remember, Susannah-Mio, if you want my cooperation, you give me some straight answers.*

I will, the other replied. *Just don't expect to like them. Or even understand them.*

What do you—

Never mind! Gods, I never met anyone who could ask so many questions! Time is short! When the telephone rings, our palaver ends! So if you'd palaver at all—

Susannah didn't bother giving her a chance to finish. She closed her eyes and let herself fall back. No bed stopped that fall; she went right through it. She was falling for real, falling through space. She could hear the jangle of the todash chimes, dim and far.

Here I go again, she thought. And: *Eddie, I love you.*

STAVE: *Commala-gin-jive*
Ain't it grand to be alive?
To look out on Discordia
When the Demon Moon arrives.

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-five!*
Even when the shadows rise!
To see the world and walk the world
Makes ya glad to be alive.

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6TH STANZA



ONE

All at once she was falling into her body again and the sensation provoked a memory of blinding brilliance: Odetta Holmes at sixteen, sitting on her bed in her slip, sitting in a brilliant bar of sun and pulling up a silk stocking. For the moment this memory held, she could smell White Shoulders perfume and Pond's Beauty Bar, her mother's soap and her mother's borrowed perfume, so grown-up to be allowed perfume, and she thought: *It's the Spring Hop! I'm going with Nathan Freeman!*

Then it was gone. The sweet smell of Pond's soap was replaced by a clean and cold (but somehow dank) night breeze, and all that remained was that sense, so queer and perfect, of stretching into a new body as if it were a stocking one was pulling up over one's calf and knee.

She opened her eyes. The wind gusted, blowing a fine grit in her face. She squinted against it, grimacing and raising an arm, as if she might have to ward off a blow.

"Over here!" a woman's voice called. It wasn't the voice Susannah would have expected. Not strident, not a triumphant caw. "Over here, out of the wind!"

She looked and saw a tall and comely woman beckoning to her. Susannah's first look at Mia in the flesh astounded her, because the chap's mother was *white*. Apparently Odetta-that-was now had a

Caucasian side to her personality, and how that must frost Detta Walker's racially sensitive butt!

She herself was legless again, and sitting in a kind of rude one-person cart. It had been parked at a notch in a low parapet wall. She looked out at the most fearsome, forbidding stretch of countryside she had ever seen in her life. Huge rock formations sawed at the sky and jostled into the distance. They glistened like alien bone beneath the glare of a savage sickle moon. Away from the glare of that lunar grin, a billion stars burned like hot ice. Amid the rocks with their broken edges and gaping crevices, a single narrow path wound into the distance. Looking at it, Susannah thought that a party would have to travel that path in single file. *And bring plenty of supplies. No mushrooms to pick along the way; no pokeberries, either.* And in the distance—dim and baleful, its source somewhere over the horizon—a dark crimson light waxed and waned. *Heart of the rose*, she thought, and then: *No, not that. Forge of the King.* She looked at the pulsing sullen light with helpless, horrified fascination. Flex . . . and loosen. Wax . . . and wane. An infection announcing itself to the sky.

“Come to me now, if you'd come at all, Susannah of New York,” said Mia. She was dressed in a heavy serape and what looked like leather pants that stopped just below the knee. Her shins were scabbed and scratched. She wore thick-soled *huaraches* on her feet. “For the King can fascinate, even at a distance. We're on the Discordia side of the Castle. Would you like to end your life on the needles at the foot of this wall? If he fascinates you and tells you to jump, you'll do just that. Your bossy gunslinger-men aren't here to help you now, are they? Nay, nay. You're on your own, so y'are.”

Susannah tried to pull her gaze from that steadily pulsing glow and at first couldn't do it. Panic bloomed in her mind

(if he fascinates you and tells you to jump)

and she seized it as a tool, compressing it to an edge with which to cut through her frightened immobility. For a moment nothing happened, and then she threw herself backward so violently in the shabby little cart that she had to clutch the edge in order to keep

herself from tumbling to the cobbles. The wind gusted again, blowing stone-dust and grit against her face and into her hair, seeming to mock her.

But that pull . . . fascination . . . *glammer* . . . whatever it had been, it was gone.

She looked at the dog-cart (so she thought it, whether that was the right name or not) and saw at once how it worked. Simple enough, too. With no mule to draw it, *she* was the mule. It was miles from the sweet, light little chair they'd found in Topeka, and light-years from being able to walk on the strong legs that had conveyed her from the little park to the hotel. God, she missed having legs. Missed it already.

But you made do.

She seized hold of the cart's wooden wheels, strained, produced no movement, strained harder. Just as she was deciding she'd have to get out of the chair and hop-crawl her ignominious way to where Mia waited, the wheels turned with a groaning, oilless creak. She rumbled toward Mia, who was standing behind a squat stone pillar. There were a great many of these, marching away into the dark along a curve. Susannah supposed that once upon a time (before the world had moved on), archers would have stood behind them for protection while the assaulting army fired their arrows or red-hot catapults or whatever you called them. Then they'd step into the gaps and fire their own weapons. How long ago had that been? What world *was* this? And how close to the Dark Tower?

Susannah had an idea it might be very close indeed.

She pushed the balky, gawky, protesting cart out of the wind and looked at the woman in the serape, ashamed to be so out of breath after moving less than a dozen yards but unable to help panting. She drew down deep breaths of the dank and somehow stony air. The pillars—she had an idea they were called merlons, or something like that—were on her right. On her left was a circular pool of darkness surrounded by crumbling stone walls. Across the way, two towers rose high above the outer wall, but one had been shattered, as if by lightning or some powerful explosive.

“This where we stand is the allure,” Mia said. “The wall-walk of the Castle on the Abyss, once known as Castle Discordia. You said you wanted fresh air. I hope this does ya, as they say in the Calla. This is far beyond there, Susannah, this is deep in End-World, near the place where your quest ends, for good or for ill.” She paused and then said, “For ill, almost surely. Yet I care nothing for that, no, not I. I am Mia, daughter of none, mother of one. I care for my chap and nothing more. Chap be enough for me, aye! Would you palaver? Fine. I’ll tell you what I may and be true. Why not? What is it to me, one way or the other?”

Susannah looked around. When she faced in toward the center of the castle—what she supposed was the courtyard—she caught an aroma of ancient rot. Mia saw her wrinkle her nose and smiled.

“Aye, they’re long gone, and the machines the later ones left behind are mostly stilled, but the smell of their dying lingers, doesn’t it? The smell of death always does. Ask your friend the gunslinger, the *true* gunslinger. He knows, for he’s dealt his share of it. He is responsible for much, Susannah of New York. The guilt of worlds hangs around his neck like a rotting corpse. Yet he’s gone far enough with his dry and lusty determination to finally draw the eyes of the great. He will be destroyed, aye, and all those who stand with him. I carry his doom in my own belly, and I care not.” Her chin jutted forward in the starlight. Beneath the serape her breasts heaved . . . and, Susannah saw, her belly curved. In this world, at least, Mia was very clearly pregnant. Ready to burst, in fact.

“Ask your questions, have at me,” Mia said. “Just remember, we exist in the other world, too, the one where we’re bound together. We’re lying on a bed in the inn, as if asleep . . . but we don’t sleep, do we, Susannah? Nay. And when the telephone rings, when my friends call, we leave this place and go to them. If your questions have been asked and answered, fine. If not, that’s also fine. Ask. Or . . . are you not a gunslinger?” Her lips curved in a disdainful smile. Susannah thought she was pert, yes, pert indeed. Especially for someone who

wouldn't be able to find her way from Forty-sixth Street to Forty-seventh in the world they had to go back to. "So *shoot!* I should say."

Susannah looked once more into the darkened, broken well that was the castle's soft center, where lay its keeps and lists, its barbicans and murder holes, its God-knew-what. She had taken a course in medieval history and knew some of the terms, but that had been long ago. Surely there was a banqueting hall somewhere down there, one that she herself had supplied with food, at least for awhile. But her catering days were done. If Mia tried to push her too hard or too far, she'd find that out for herself.

Meantime, she thought she'd start with something relatively easy.

"If this is the Castle on the Abyss," she said, "where's the Abyss? I don't see anything out that way except for a minefield of rocks. And that red glow on the horizon."

Mia, her shoulder-length black hair flying out behind her (not a bit of kink in that hair, as there was in Susannah's; Mia's was like silk), pointed across the inner chasm below them to the far wall, where the towers rose and the allure continued its curve.

"This is the inner keep," she said. "Beyond it is the village of Fedic, now deserted, all dead of the Red Death a thousand years ago and more. Beyond that—"

"The Red Death?" Susannah asked, startled (also frightened in spite of herself). "*Poe's* Red Death? Like in the story?" And why not? Hadn't they already wandered into—and then back out of—L. Frank Baum's Oz? What came next? The White Rabbit and the Red Queen?

"Lady, I know not. All I can tell you is that beyond the deserted village is the outer wall, and beyond the outer wall is a great crack in the earth filled with monsters that cozen, diddle, increase, and plot to escape. Once there was a bridge across, but it fell long ago. 'In the time before counting,' as 'tis said. They're horrors that might drive an ordinary man or woman mad at a glance."

She favored Susannah with a glance of her own. A decidedly satiric one.

"But not a *gunslinger*. Surely not one such as *thee*."

“Why do you mock me?” Susannah asked quietly.

Mia looked startled, then grim. “Was it my idea to come here? To stand in this miserable cold where the King’s Eye dirties the horizon and sullies the very cheek of the moon with its filthy light? Nay, lady! ’Twas you, so harry me not with your tongue!”

Susannah could have responded that it hadn’t been her idea to catch preg with a demon’s baby in the first place, but this would be a terrible time to get into one of those yes-you-did, no-I-didn’t squabbles.

“I wasn’t scolding,” Susannah said, “only asking.”

Mia made an impatient shooing gesture with her hand as if to say *Don’t split hairs*, and half-turned away. Under her breath she said, “I didn’t go to Morehouse or *no* house. And in any case I’ll bear my chap, do you hear? Whichever way the cards fall. Bear him and feed him!”

All at once Susannah understood a great deal. Mia mocked because she was afraid. In spite of all she knew, so much of her *was* Susannah.

I didn’t go to Morehouse or no house, for instance; that was from *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison. When Mia had bought into Susannah, she had purchased at least two personalities for the price of one. It was Mia, after all, who’d brought Detta out of retirement (or perhaps deep hibernation), and it was Detta who was particularly fond of that line, which expressed so much of the Negro’s deep-held disdain for and suspicion of what was sometimes called “the finer postwar Negro education.” Not to Morehouse or *no* house; I know what I know, in other words, I heard it through the grapevine, I got it on the earie, dearie, I picked it up on the jungle telegraph.

“Mia,” she said now. “Whose chap is it besides yours? What demon was his father, do you know?”

Mia grinned. It wasn’t a grin Susannah liked. There was too much Detta in it; too much laughing, bitter knowledge. “Aye, lady, I know. And you’re right. It was a demon got him on you, a very great demon indeed, say true! A human one! It had to have been so, for know you that true demons, those left on the shore of these worlds which spin

around the Tower when the *Prim* receded, are sterile. And for a very good reason.”

“Then how—”

“Your dinh is the father of my chap,” Mia said. “Roland of Gilead, aye, he. Steven Deschain finally has his grandson, although he lies rotten in his grave and knows it not.”

Susannah was goggling at her, unmindful of the cold wind rushing out of the Discordia wilderness. “*Roland . . . ?* It can’t be! He was beside me when the demon was *in* me, he was pulling Jake through from the house on Dutch Hill and fucking was the *last* thing on his mind . . .” She trailed off, thinking of the baby she’d seen in the Dogan. Thinking of those eyes. Those blue bombardier’s eyes. *No. No, I refuse to believe it.*

“All the same, Roland is his father,” Mia insisted. “And when the chap comes, I shall name him from your own mind, Susannah of New York; from what you learned at the same time you learned of merlons and courtyards and trebuchets and barbicans. Why not? ’Tis a good name, and fair.”

Professor Murray’s Introduction to Medieval History, that’s what she’s talking about.

“I will name him Mordred,” said she. “He’ll grow quickly, my darling boy, quicker than human, after his demon nature. He’ll grow strong. The avatar of every gunslinger that ever was. And so, like the Mordred of your tale, will he slay his father.”

And with that, Mia, daughter of none, raised her arms to the star-shot sky and screamed, although whether in sorrow, terror, or joy, Susannah could not tell.

TWO

“Hunker,” Mia said. “I have this.”

From beneath her serape she produced a bundle of grapes and a paper sack filled with orange poke-berries as swollen as her belly.

Where, Susannah wondered, had the fruit come from? Was their shared body sleepwalking back in the Plaza–Park Hotel? Had there perhaps been a fruit basket she hadn't noticed? Or were these the fruits of pure imagination?

Not that it mattered. Any appetite she might have had was gone, robbed by Mia's claim. The fact that it was impossible somehow only added to the monstrosity of the idea. And she couldn't stop thinking of the baby she'd seen *in utero* on one of those TV screens. Those blue eyes.

No. It can't be, do you hear? It cannot be!

The wind coming through the notches between the merlons was chilling her to the bone. She swung off the seat of the cart and settled herself against the allure wall beside Mia, listening to the wind's constant whine and looking up at the alien stars.

Mia was cramming her mouth with grapes. Juice ran from one corner of her mouth while she spat seeds from the other corner with the rapidity of machine-gun bullets. She swallowed, wiped her chin, and said: "It can. It can be. And more: it is. Are you still glad you came, Susannah of New York, or do you wish you'd left your curiosity unsatisfied?"

"If I'm gonna have a baby I didn't hump for, I'm gonna know everything about that baby that I can. Do you understand that?"

Mia blinked at the deliberate crudity, then nodded. "If you like."

"Tell me how it can be Roland's. And if you want me to believe anything you tell me, you better start by making me believe this."

Mia dug her fingernails into the skin of a pokeberry, stripped it away in one quick gesture, and ate the fruit down greedily. She considered opening another, then simply rolled it between her palms (those disconcertingly white palms), warming it. After enough of this, Susannah knew, the fruit would split its skin on its own. Then she began.

THREE

“How many Beams do there be, Susannah of New York?”

“Six,” Susannah said. “At least, there were. I guess now there are only two that—”

Mia waved a hand impatiently, as if to say *Don't waste my time*. “Six, aye. And when the Beams were created out of that greater Discordia, the soup of creation some (including the Manni) call the Over and some call the *Prim*, what made them?”

“I don't know,” Susannah said. “Was it God, do you think?”

“Perhaps there is a God, but the Beams rose from the *Prim* on the airs of magic, Susannah, the true magic which passed long ago. Was it God that made magic, or was it magic that made God? I know not. It's a question for philosophers, and mothering's my job. But once upon a time all was Discordia and from it, strong and all crossing at a single unifying point, came the six Beams. There was magic to hold them steady for eternity, but when the magic left from all there is but the Dark Tower, which some have called Can Calyx, the Hall of Resumption, men despaired. When the Age of Magic passed, the Age of Machines came.”

“North Central Positronics,” Susannah murmured. “Dipolar computers. Slo-trans engines.” She paused. “Blaine the Mono. But not in our world.”

“No? Do you say your world is exempt? What about the sign in the hotel lobby?” The pokeberry popped. Mia stripped it and gobbled it, drizzling juice through a knowing grin.

“I had an idea you couldn't read,” Susannah said. This was beside the point, but it was all she could think of to say. Her mind kept returning to the image of the baby; to those brilliant blue eyes. Gunslinger's eyes.

“Aye, but I know my numbers, and when it comes to your mind, I read very well. Do you say you don't recall the sign in the hotel lobby? Will you tell me that?”

Of course she remembered. According to the sign, the Plaza-Park would be part of an organization called Sombra/North Central in just another month. And when she'd said *Not in our world*, of course she

had been thinking of 1964—the world of black-and-white television, absurdly bulky room-sized computers, and Alabama cops more than willing to sic the dogs on black marchers for voting rights. Things had changed greatly in the intervening thirty-five years. The Eurasian desk clerk's combination TV and typewriter, for instance—how did Susannah know that wasn't a dipolar computer run by some form of slotrans engine? She did not.

“Go on,” she told Mia.

Mia shrugged. “You doom yourselves, Susannah. You seem positively bent on it, and the root is always the same: your faith fails you, and you replace it with rational thought. But there is no love in thought, nothing that lasts in deduction, only death in rationalism.”

“What does this have to do with your chap?”

“I don't know. There's much I don't know.” She raised a hand, forestalling Susannah before Susannah could speak. “And no, I'm *not* playing for time, or trying to lead you away from what you'd know; I'm speaking as my heart tells me. Would you hear or not?”

Susannah nodded. She'd hear this . . . for a little longer, at least. But if it didn't turn back to the baby soon, she'd turn it back in that direction herself.

“The magic went away. Maerlyn retired to his cave in one world, the sword of Eld gave way to the pistols of the gunslingers in another, and the magic went away. And across the arc of years, great alchemists, great scientists, and great—what?—technicians, I think? Great men of thought, anyway, that's what I mean, great men of *deduction*—these came together and created the machines which ran the Beams. They were great machines but they were *mortal* machines. They replaced the *magic* with *machines*, do ya kennit, and now the machines are failing. In some worlds, great plagues have decimated whole populations.”

Susannah nodded. “We saw one of those,” she said quietly. “They called it the superflu.”

“The Crimson King's Breakers are only hurrying along a process that's already in train. The machines are going mad. You've seen this

for yourself. The men believed there would always be more men like them to make more machines. None of them foresaw what's happened. This . . . this universal exhaustion."

"The world has moved on."

"Aye, lady. It has. And left no one to replace the machines which hold up the last magic in creation, for the *Prim* has receded long since. The magic is gone and the machines are failing. Soon enough the Dark Tower will fall. Perhaps there'll be time for one splendid moment of universal rational thought before the darkness rules forever. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Won't the Crimson King be destroyed, too, when the Tower falls? Him and all his crew? The guys with the bleeding holes in their foreheads?"

"He has been promised his own kingdom, where he'll rule forever, tasting his own special pleasures." Distaste had crept into Mia's voice. Fear, too, perhaps.

"Promised? Promised by whom? Who is more powerful than he?"

"Lady, I know not. Perhaps this is only what he has promised himself." Mia shrugged. Her eyes wouldn't quite meet Susannah's.

"Can nothing prevent the fall of the Tower?"

"Not even your gunslinger friend hopes to *prevent* it," Mia said, "only to slow it down by freeing the Breakers and—perhaps—slaying the Crimson King. Save it! *Save* it, O delight! Did he ever tell you that was his quest?"

Susannah considered this and shook her head. If Roland had ever said that, in so many words, she couldn't remember. And she was sure she would have.

"No," Mia went on, "for he won't lie to his ka-tet unless he has to, 'tis his pride. What he wants of the Tower is only to *see* it." Then she added, rather grudgingly: "Oh, perhaps to enter it, and climb to the room at the top, his ambition may strike so far. He may dream of standing on its allure as we hunker on this one, and chant the names of his fallen comrades, and of his line all the way back to Arthur Eld. But *save* it? No, good lady! Only a return of the magic could possibly

save it, and—as you yourself well know—your dinh deals only in lead.”

Never since crossing the worlds had Susannah heard Roland’s trade of hand cast in such a paltry light. It made her feel sad and angry, but she hid her feelings as best she could.

“Tell me how your chap can be Roland’s son, for I would hear.”

“Aye, ’tis a good trick, but one the old people of River Crossing could have explained to you, I’ve no doubt.”

Susannah started at that. “How do you know so *much* of me?”

“Because you are possessed,” Mia said, “and I am your possessor, sure. I can look through any of your memories that I like. I can read what your eyes see. Now be quiet and listen if you would learn, for I sense our time has grown short.”

FOUR

This is what Susannah’s demon told her.

“There are six Beams, as you did say, but there are twelve Guardians, one for each end of each Beam. This—for we’re still on it—is the Beam of Shardik. Were you to go beyond the Tower, it would become the Beam of Maturin, the great turtle upon whose shell the world rests.

“Similarly, there are but six demon elementals, one for each Beam. Below them is the whole invisible world, those creatures left behind on the beach of existence when the *Prim* receded. There are speaking demons, demons of house which some call ghosts, ill-sick demons which some—makers of machines and worshippers of the great false god rationality, if it does ya—call disease. Many small demons but only six demon elementals. Yet as there are twelve Guardians for the six Beams, there are twelve demon *aspects*, for each demon elemental is both male and female.”

Susannah began to see where this was going, and felt a sudden sinking in her guts. From the naked bristle of rocks beyond the allure,

in what Mia called the Discordia, there came a dry, feverish cackle of laughter. This unseen humorist was joined by a second, a third, a fourth and fifth. Suddenly it seemed that the whole world was laughing at her. And perhaps with good reason, for it was a good joke. But how could she have known?

As the hyenas—or whatever they were—cackled, she said: “You’re telling me that the demon elementals are hermaphrodites. That’s why they’re sterile, because they’re both.”

“Aye. In the place of the Oracle, your dinh had intercourse with one of these demon elementals in order to gain information, what’s called *prophecy* in the High Speech. He had no reason to think the Oracle was anything but a succubus, such as those that sometimes exist in the lonely places—”

“Right,” Susannah said, “just a run-of-the-mill demon sexpot.”

“If you like,” Mia said, and this time when she offered Susannah a pokeberry, Susannah took it and began to roll it between her palms, warming the skin. She still wasn’t hungry, but her mouth was dry. So dry.

“The demon took the gunslinger’s seed as female, and gave it back to you as male.”

“When we were in the speaking ring,” Susannah said dismally. She was remembering how the pouring rain had pounded against her upturned face, the sense of invisible hands on her shoulders, and then the thing’s engorgement filling her up and at the same time seeming to tear her apart. The worst part had been the coldness of the enormous cock inside her. At the time, she’d thought it was like being fucked by an icicle.

And how had she gotten through it? By summoning Detta, of course. By calling on the bitch, victor in a hundred nasty little sex-skirmishes fought in the parking lots of two dozen roadhouses and county-line honky-tonks. Detta, who had trapped it—

“It tried to get away,” she told Mia. “Once it figured out it had its cock caught in a damn Chinese finger-puller, it tried to get away.”

“If it had wanted to get away,” Mia said quietly, “it *would* have.”

“Why would it bother fooling me?” Susannah asked, but she didn’t need Mia to answer that question, not now. Because it had needed her, of course. It had needed her to carry the baby.

Roland’s baby.

Roland’s doom.

“You know everything you need to know about the chap,” Mia said. “Don’t you?”

Susannah supposed she did. A demon had taken in Roland’s seed while female; had stored it, somehow; and then shot it into Susannah Dean as male. Mia was right. She knew what she needed to know.

“I’ve kept my promise,” Mia said. “Let’s go back. The cold’s not good for the chap.”

“Just a minute longer,” Susannah said. She held up the pokeberry. Golden fruit now bulged through ruptures in the orange skin. “My berry just popped. Let me eat it. I have another question.”

“Eat and ask and be quick about both.”

“Who are *you*? Who are you really? Are you this demon? Does she have a name, by the way? She and he, do they have a name?”

“No,” Mia said. “Elementals have no need of names; they are what they are. Am I a demon? Is that what you’d know? Yar, I suppose I am. Or I was. All that is vague now, like a dream.”

“And you’re not me . . . or are you?”

Mia didn’t answer. And Susannah realized that she probably didn’t know.

“Mia?” Low. Musing.

Mia was hunkering against the merlon with her serape tucked between her knees. Susannah could see that her ankles were swollen and felt a moment’s pity for the woman. Then she squashed it. This was no time for pity, for there was no truth in it.

“You ain’t nothing but the baby-sitter, girl.”

The reaction was all she’d hoped for, and more. Mia’s face registered shock, then anger. Hell, *fury*. “You *lie!* I’m this chap’s *mother!* And when he comes, Susannah, there will be no more combing the world for Breakers, for my chap will be the greatest of

them all, able to break both of the remaining Beams all by himself!” Her voice had filled with pride that sounded alarmingly close to insanity. “My Mordred! Do you hear me?”

“Oh, yes,” Susannah said. “I hear. And you’re actually going to go trotting right to those who’ve made it their business to pull down the Tower, aren’t you? They call, you come.” She paused, then finished with deliberate softness. “And when you get to them, they’ll take your chap, and thank you very much, and then send you back into the soup you came from.”

“Nay! I shall have the raising of him, for so they have promised!” Mia crossed her arms protectively over her belly. “He’s mine, I’m his mother and I shall have the raising of him!”

“Girl, why don’t you get *real*? Do you think they’ll *keep* their word? *Them*? How can you see so much and not see that?”

Susannah knew the answer, of course. Motherhood itself had deluded her.

“Why would they not let me raise him?” Mia asked shrilly. “Who better? Who better than Mia, who was made for only two things, to bear a son and raise him?”

“But you’re not just you,” Susannah said. “You’re like the children of the Calla, and just about everything else my friends and I have run into along the way. You’re a *twin*, Mia! I’m your other half, your lifeline. You see the world through my eyes and breathe through my lungs. I had to carry the chap, because you couldn’t, could you? You’re as sterile as the big boys. And once they’ve got your kid, their A-bomb of a Breaker, they’ll get rid of you if only so they can get rid of me.”

“I have their promise,” she said. Her face was downcast, set in its stubbornness.

“Turn it around,” Susannah said. “Turn it around, I beg. If I were in your place and you in mine, what would you think if I spoke of such a promise?”

“I’d tell you to stop your blabbering tongue!”

“Who are you, really? Where in the hell did they get you? Was it like a newspaper ad you answered, ‘Surrogate Mother Wanted, Good Benefits, Short Term of Employment’? Who are you, really?”

“Shut up!”

Susannah leaned forward on her haunches. This position was ordinarily exquisitely uncomfortable for her, but she’d forgotten both her discomfort and the half-eaten pokeberry in her hand.

“Come on!” she said, her voice taking on the rasping tones of Detta Walker. “Come on and take off yo’ blindfold, honeybunch, jus’ like you made me take off mine! Tell the truth and spit in the devil’s eye! *Who the fuck are you?*”

“*I don’t know!*” Mia screamed, and below them the jackals hidden in the rocks screamed back, only their screams were laughter. “*I don’t know, I don’t know who I am, does that satisfy?*”

It did not, and Susannah was about to press on and press harder when Detta Walker spoke up.

FIVE

This is what Susannah’s other demon told her.

Baby-doll, you need to think bout this a little, seem to me. She cain’t, she stone dumb, cain’t read, cain’t cipher more than just a little, ain’t been to Morehouse, ain’t been to no house, but you have, Miss Oh-Detta Holmes been to Co-lum-bee-ya, lah-de-dah, de Gem ob de Ocean, ain’t we jus’ so fine.

You need to think bout how she pregnant, for one thing. She say she done fucked Roland out of his jizz, then turn male, into the Demon of the Ring, and shot it into you, and den you carryin it, you tossin all those nasty things she made you eat down yo’ throat, so where she in all this now, dat what Detta like to know. How come she settin there pregnant under dat greaser blanket she wearin? Is it more of dat . . . what you call it . . . visualization technique?

Susannah didn't know. She only knew that Mia was looking at her with suddenly narrowed eyes. She was doubtless picking up some of this monologue. How much? Not much at all, that was Susannah's bet; maybe a word here and there, but mostly it was just quack. And in any case, Mia certainly *acted* like the baby's mother. Baby Mordred! It was like a Charles Addams cartoon.

Dat she do, Detta mused. She ack like a Mommy, she wrapped around it root and branch, you right bout dat much.

But maybe, Susannah thought, that was just her nature. Maybe once you got beyond the mothering instinct, there *was* no Mia.

A cold hand reached out and seized Susannah's wrist. "Who is it? Is it that nasty-talking one? If it is, banish her. She scares me."

She still scared Susannah a little, in all truth, but not as much as when she'd first come to accept that Detta was real. They hadn't become friends and probably never would, but it was clear that Detta Walker could be a powerful ally. She was more than mean. Once you got past the idiotic Butterfly McQueen accent, she was shrewd.

Dis Mia make a mighty pow'ful ally her own-self, if you c'd get her on yo' side. Ain't hardly nothin in the world as pow'ful as a pissed-off Mommy.

"We're going back," Mia said. "I've answered your questions, the cold's bad for the baby, and the mean one's here. Palaver's done."

But Susannah shook off her grip and moved back a little, out of Mia's immediate reach. In the gap between the merlons the cold wind knifed through her light shirt, but it also seemed to clear her mind and refresh her thinking.

Part of her is me, because she has access to my memories. Eddie's ring, the people of River Crossing, Blaine the Mono. But she's got to be more than me as well, because . . . because . . .

Go on, girl, you ain't doin bad, but you slow.

Because she knows all this other stuff, as well. She knows about the demons, both the little ones and the elementals. She knows how the Beams came into being—sort of—and about this magical soup of creation, the Prim. As far as I ever knew, prim's a word you use for

girls who are always yanking their skirts down over their knees. She didn't get that other meaning from me.

It occurred to her what this conversation was like: parents studying their new baby. Their new chap. He's got your nose, Yes but he's got *your* eyes, and But my goodness, *where* did he get that hair?

Detta said: *And she also got friens back in New York, don't forget dat. Least she want to think they her friens.*

So she's someone or something else, as well. Someone from the invisible world of house demons and ill-sicks. But who? Is she really one of the elementals?

Detta laughed. *She say so, but she lyin bout dat, sugar! I know she is!*

Then what is she? What was she, before she was Mia?

All at once a phone, amplified to almost earsplitting shrillness, began to ring. It was so out of place on this abandoned castle tower that at first Susannah didn't know what it was. The things out there in the Discordia—jackals, hyenas, whatever they were—had been subsiding, but with the advent of this sound they began to cackle and shriek again.

Mia, daughter of none, mother of Mordred, knew that ringing for what it was immediately, however. She *came forward*. Susannah at once felt this world waver and lose its reality. It seemed almost to freeze and become something like a painting. Not a very good one, either.

“No!” she shouted, and threw herself at Mia. But Mia—pregnant or not, scratched up or not, swollen ankles or no swollen ankles—overpowered her easily. Roland had shown them several hand-to-hand tricks (the Detta part of her had crowed with delight at the nastiness of them), but they were useless against Mia; she parried each before Susannah had done more than get started.

Sure, yes, of course, she knows your tricks just like she knows about Aunt Talitha in River Crossing and Topsy the Sailor in Lud, because she has access to your memories, because she is, at least to some extent, you—

And here her thoughts ended, because Mia had twisted her arms up behind her and oh dear God the pain was enormous.

Ain't you just the most babyish cunt, Detta said with a kind of genial, panting contempt, and before Susannah could reply, an amazing thing happened: the world ripped open like a brittle piece of paper. This rip extended from the dirty cobbles of the allure's floor to the nearest merlon and then on up into the sky. It raced into that star-shot firmament and tore the crescent moon in two.

There was a moment for Susannah to think that this was it, one or both of the final two Beams had snapped and the Tower had fallen. Then, through the rip, she saw two women lying on one of the twin beds in room 1919 of the Plaza–Park Hotel. Their arms were around each other and their eyes were shut. They were dressed in identical bloodstained shirts and bluejeans. Their features were the same, but one had legs below the knee and straight silky hair and white skin.

“Don't you mess with me!” Mia panted in her ear. Susannah could feel a fine, tickling spray of saliva. “Don't you mess with me or with my chap. Because I'm stronger, do you hear? *I'm stronger!*”

There was no doubt about that, Susannah thought as she was propelled toward the widening hole. At least for now.

She was pushed through the rip in reality. For a moment her skin seemed simultaneously on fire and coated with ice. Somewhere the todash chimes were ringing, and then—

SIX

—she sat up on the bed. One woman, not two, but at least one with legs. Susannah was shoved, reeling, to the back. Mia in charge now. Mia reaching for the phone, at first getting it wrong-way-up and then reversing it.

“Hello? Hello!”

“Hello, Mia. My name is—”

She overrode him. “Are you going to let me keep my baby? This bitch inside me says you’re not!”

There was a pause, first long and then too long. Susannah felt Mia’s fear, first a rivulet and then a flood. *You don’t have to feel that way*, she tried to tell her. *You’re the one with what they want, with what they need, don’t you see that?*

“Hello, are you there? Gods, *are you there? PLEASE TELL ME YOU’RE STILL THERE!*”

“I’m here,” the man’s voice said calmly. “Shall we start again, Mia, daughter of none? Or shall I ring off until you’re feeling . . . a little more yourself?”

“No! No, don’t do that, don’t do that I beg!”

“You won’t interrupt me again? Because there’s no reason for unseemliness.”

“I promise!”

“My name is Richard P. Sayre.” A name Susannah knew, but from where? “You know where you need to go, don’t you?”

“Yes!” Eager now. Eager to please. “The Dixie Pig, Sixty-first and Lexingworth.”

“Lexington,” Sayre said. “Odetta Holmes can help you find it, I’m sure.”

Susannah wanted to scream *That’s not my name!* She kept silent instead. This Sayre would like her to scream, wouldn’t he? Would like her to lose control.

“Are you there, Odetta?” Pleasantly teasing. “Are you there, you interfering bitch?”

She kept silent.

“She’s in there,” Mia said. “I don’t know why she’s not answering, I’m not holding her just now.”

“Oh, I think *I* know why,” Sayre said indulgently. “She doesn’t like that name, for one thing.” Then, in a reference Susannah didn’t get: “‘Don’t call me Clay no more, Clay my slave name, call me Muhammad Ali!’ Right, Susannah? Or was that after your time? A little after, I think. Sorry. Time can be so confusing, can’t it? Never

mind. I have something to tell you in a minute, my dear. You won't like it very much, I fear, but I think you should know."

Susannah kept silent. It was getting harder.

"As for the immediate future of your chap, Mia, I'm surprised you'd even feel it necessary to ask," Sayre told her. He was a smoothie, whoever he was, his voice containing exactly the right amount of outrage. "The King keeps his promises, unlike some I could name. And, issues of our integrity aside, think of the *practical* issues! Who else should have the keeping of perhaps the most important child to ever be born . . . *including* Christ, *including* Buddha, *including* the Prophet Muhammad? To who else's breast, if I may be crude, would we trust his suck?"

Music to her ears, Susannah thought dismally. *All the things she's been thirsting to hear. And why? Because she is Mother.*

"You'd trust him to me!" Mia cried. "Only to me, of course! Thank you! *Thank you!*"

Susannah spoke at last. Told *her* not to trust *him*. And was, of course, roundly ignored.

"I'd no more lie to you than break a promise to my own mother," said the voice on the phone. (*Did you ever have one, sugar?* Detta wanted to know.) "Even though the truth sometimes hurts, lies have a way of coming back to bite us, don't they? The truth of this matter is you won't have your chap for long, Mia, his childhood won't be like that of other children, normal children—"

"I know! Oh, I know!"

"—but for the five years you *do* have him . . . or perhaps seven, it might be as many as seven . . . he'll have the best of everything. From you, of course, but also from us. Our interference will be minimal—"

Detta Walker leaped forward, as quick and as nasty as a grease-burn. She was only able to take possession of Susannah Dean's vocal cords for a moment, but it was a *precious* moment.

"Dass raht, dahlin, dass raht," she cackled, "he won't come in yo' mouf or get it in you' hair!"

“*Shut that bitch UP!*” Sayre whipcracked, and Susannah felt the jolt as Mia shoved Detta head over heels—but still cackling—to the back of their shared mind again. Once more into the brig.

Had mah say, though, damn if I didn't! Detta cried. *Ah tole that honky muhfuh!*

Sayre's voice in the telephone's earpiece was cold and clear. “Mia, do you have control or not?”

“Yes! Yes, I do!”

“Then don't let that happen again.”

“I won't!”

And somewhere—it felt like above her, although there were no real directions here at the back of the shared mind—something clanged shut. It sounded like iron.

We really are in the brig, she told Detta, but Detta just went on laughing.

Susannah thought: *I'm pretty sure I know who she is, anyway. Besides me, that is.* This truth seemed obvious to her. The part of Mia that wasn't either Susannah or something summoned from the void world to do the Crimson King's bidding . . . surely the third part really was the Oracle, elemental or not; the female force that had at first tried to molest Jake and then had taken Roland, instead. That sad, craving spirit. She finally had the body she needed. One capable of carrying the chap.

“Odetta?” Sayre's voice, teasing and cruel. “Or Susannah, if you like that better? I promised you news, didn't I? It's kind of a good news—bad news thing, I'm afraid. Would you like to hear it?”

Susannah held her silence.

“The bad news is that Mia's chap may not be able to fulfill the destiny of his name by killing his father, after all. The good news is that Roland will almost surely be dead in the next few minutes. As for Eddie, I'm afraid there's no question. He doesn't have either your dinh's reflexes or his battle experience. My dear, you're going to be a widow very soon. That's the bad news.”

She could hold her silence no longer, and Mia let her speak. “You lie! About *everything!*”

“Not at all,” Sayre said calmly, and Susannah realized where she knew that name from: the end of Callahan’s story. Detroit. Where he’d violated his church’s most sacred teaching and committed suicide to keep from falling into the hands of the vampires. Callahan had jumped out of a skyscraper window to avoid that particular fate. He had landed first in Mid-World, and gone from there, via the Unfound Door, into the Calla Borderlands. And what he’d been thinking, the Pere had told them, was *They don’t get to win, they don’t get to win*. And he was right about that, *right*, goddammit. But if Eddie died—

“We knew where your dinh and your husband would be most likely to end up, should they be swept through a certain doorway,” Sayre told her. “And calling certain people, beginning with a chap named Enrico Balazar . . . I assure you, Susannah, that was *easy*.”

Susannah heard the sincerity in his voice. If he didn’t mean what he said, then he was the world’s best liar.

“How could you find such a thing out?” Susannah asked. When there was no answer she opened her mouth to ask the question again. Before she could, she was tumbled backward once more. Whatever Mia might have been once, she had grown to incredible strength inside Susannah.

“Is she gone?” Sayre was asking.

“Yes, gone, in the back.” Servile. Eager to please.

“Then come to us, Mia. The sooner you come to us, the sooner you can look your chap in the face!”

“Yes!” Mia cried, delirious with joy, and Susannah caught a sudden brilliant glimpse of something. It was like peeking beneath the hem of a circus tent at some bright wonder. Or a dark one.

What she saw was as simple as it was terrible: Pere Callahan, buying a piece of salami from a shopkeeper. A *Yankee* shopkeeper. One who ran a certain general store in the town of East Stoneham, Maine, in the year of 1977. Callahan had told them all this story in the rectory . . . *and Mia had been listening*.

Comprehension came like a red sun rising on a field where thousands have been slaughtered. Susannah rushed forward again, unmindful of Mia's strength, screaming it over and over again:

"Bitch! Betraying bitch! Murdering bitch! You told them where the Door would send them! Where it would send Eddie and Roland! Oh you BITCH!"

SEVEN

Mia was strong, but unprepared for this new attack. It was especially ferocious because Detta had joined her own murderous energy to Susannah's understanding. For a moment the interloper was pushed backward, eyes wide. In the hotel room, the telephone dropped from Mia's hand. She staggered drunkenly across the carpet, almost tripped over one of the beds, then whirled about like a tipsy dancer. Susannah slapped at her and red marks appeared on her cheek like exclamation points.

Slapping myself, that's all I'm doing, Susannah thought. *Beating up the equipment, how stupid is that?* But she couldn't help it. The enormity of what Mia had done, the betraying *enormity*—

Inside, in some battle-ring which was not quite physical (but not entirely mental, either), Mia was finally able to clutch Susannah/Detta by the throat and drive her back. Mia's eyes were still wide with shock at the ferocity of the assault. And perhaps with shame, as well. Susannah hoped she was able to feel shame, that she hadn't gone beyond that.

I did what I had to do, Mia repeated as she forced Susannah back into the brig. *It's my chap, every hand is against me, I did what I had to do.*

You traded Eddie and Roland for your monster, that's what you did! Susannah screamed. *Based on what you overheard and then passed on, Sayre was sure they'd use the Door to go after Tower, wasn't he? And how many has he set against them?*

The only answer was that iron clang. Only this time it was followed by a second. And a third. Mia had had the hands of her hostess clamped around her throat and was consequently taking no chances. This time the brig's door had been triple-locked. Brig? Hell, might as well call it the Black Hole of Calcutta.

When I get out of here, I'll go back to the Dogan and disable all the switches! she cried. *I can't believe I tried to help you! Well, fuck that! Have it on the street, for all of me!*

You can't get out, Mia replied, almost apologetically. *Later, if I can, I'll leave you in peace—*

What kind of peace will there be for me with Eddie dead? No wonder you wanted to take his ring off! How could you bear to have it lie against your skin, knowing what you'd done?

Mia picked up the telephone and listened, but Richard P. Sayre was no longer there. Probably had places to go and diseases to spread, Susannah thought.

Mia replaced the telephone in its cradle, looked around at the empty, sterile room the way people do when they won't be coming back to a place and want to make sure they've taken everything that matters. She patted one pocket of her jeans and felt the little wad of cash. Touched the other and felt the lump that was the turtle, the *sköldpadda*.

I'm sorry, Mia said. *I have to take care of my chap. Every hand is against me now.*

That's not true, Susannah said from the locked room where Mia had thrown her. And where was it, really? In the deepest, darkest dungeons of the Castle on the Abyss? Probably. Did it matter? *I was on your side. I helped you. I stopped your damn labor when you needed it stopped. And look what you did. How could you ever be so cowardly and low?*

Mia paused with her hand on the room's doorknob, her cheeks flushing a dull red. Yes, she was ashamed, all right. But shame wouldn't stop her. *Nothing* would stop her. Until, that was, she found herself betrayed in turn by Sayre and his friends.

Thinking of that inevitability gave Susannah no satisfaction at all.

You're damned, she said. *You know that, don't you?*

"I don't care," Mia said. "An eternity in hell's a fair price to pay for one look in my chap's face. Hear me well, I beg."

And then, carrying Susannah and Detta with her, Mia opened the hotel room door, re-entered the corridor, and took her first steps on her course toward the Dixie Pig, where terrible surgeons waited to deliver her of her equally terrible chap.

STAVE: *Commala-mox-nix!*

You're in a nasty fix!

To take the hand in a traitor's glove

Is to grasp a sheaf of sticks!

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-six!*

Nothing there but thorns and sticks!

When you find your hand in a traitor's glove

You're in a nasty fix.

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7TH STANZA



ONE

Roland Deschain was the last of Gilead's last great band of warriors, for good reason; with his queerly romantic nature, his lack of imagination, and his deadly hands, he had ever been the best of them. Now he had been invaded by arthritis, but there was no dry twist in his ears or eyes. He heard the thud of Eddie's head against the side of the Unfound Door as they were sucked through (and, ducking down at the last split second, only just avoided having his own skull broken in by the Door's top jamb). He heard the sound of birds, at first strange and distant, like birds singing in a dream, then immediate and prosaic and completely there. Sunlight struck his face and should have dazzled him blind, coming as he was from the dimness of the cave. But Roland had turned his eyes into slits the moment he'd seen that bright light, had done it without thinking. Had he not, he surely would have missed the circular flash from two o'clock as they landed on hard-packed, oildarkened earth. Eddie would have died for sure. Maybe both of them would have died. In Roland's experience, only two things glared with that perfect brilliant circularity: eyeglasses and the long sight of a weapon.

The gunslinger grabbed Eddie beneath the arm as unthinkingly as he'd slitted his eyes against the glare of onrushing sunlight. He'd felt the tension in the younger man's muscles as their feet left the rock-and-bone-littered floor of the Doorway Cave, and he felt them go slack

when Eddie's head connected with the side of the Unfound Door. But Eddie was groaning, still trying to talk, so he was at least partly aware.

"*Eddie, to me!*" Roland bellowed, scrambling to his feet. Bitter agony exploded in his right hip and raced almost all the way down to his knee, but he gave no sign. Barely registered it, in fact. He hauled Eddie with him toward a building, some building, and past what even Roland recognized as oil or gasoline pumps. These were marked MOBIL instead of CITGO or SUNOCO, two other names with which the gunslinger was familiar.

Eddie was semiconscious at best. His left cheek was drenched with blood from a laceration in his scalp. Nevertheless, he put his legs to work as best he could and stumbled up three wooden steps to what Roland now recognized as a general store. It was quite a bit smaller than Took's, but otherwise not much d—

A limber whipcrack of sound came from behind and slightly to the right. The shooter was close enough for Roland to feel confident that if he had heard the sound of the shot, the man with the rifle had already missed.

Something passed within an inch of his ear, making its own perfectly clear sound: *Mizzzzzzz!* The glass in the little mercantile's front door shattered inward. The sign which had been hanging there (**WE'RE OPEN, SO COME IN 'N VISIT**) jumped and twisted.

"Rolan . . ." Eddie's voice, weak and distant, sounded as if it were coming through a mouthful of mush. "Rolan wha . . . who . . . OWF!" This last a grunt of surprise as Roland threw him flat inside the door and landed on top of him.

Now came another of those limber whipcracks; there was a gunner with an extremely high-powered rifle out there. Roland heard someone shout "Aw, fuck 'at, Jack!" and a moment later a speed-shooter—what Eddie and Jake called a machine-gun—opened up. The dirty display windows on both sides of the door came crashing down in bright shards. The paperwork which had been posted inside the glass—town notices, Roland had no doubt—went flying.

Two women and a gent of going-on-elderly years were the only customers in the store's aisles. All three were turned toward the front—toward Roland and Eddie—and on their faces was the eternal uncomprehending look of the gunless civilian. Roland sometimes thought it a grass-eating look, as though such folk—those in Calla Bryn Sturgis mostly no different—were sheep instead of people.

“*Down!*” Roland bellowed from where he lay on his semiconscious (and now breathless) companion. “For the love of your gods *get DOWN!*”

The going-on-elderly gent, who was wearing a checked flannel shirt in spite of the store's warmth, let go of the can he'd been holding (there was a picture of a tomato on it) and dropped. The two women did not, and the speed-shooter's second burst killed them both, caving in the chest of one and blowing off the top of the other's head. The chest-shot woman went down like a sack of grain. The one who'd been head-shot took two blind, blundering steps toward Roland, blood spewing from where her hair had been like lava from an erupting volcano. Outside the store a second and third speed-shooter began, filling the day with noise, filling the air above them with a deadly crisscross of slugs. The woman who'd lost the top of her head spun around twice in a final dance-step, arms flailing, and then collapsed. Roland went for his gun and was relieved to find it still in its holster: the reassuring sandalwood grip. So that much was well. The gamble had paid off. And he and Eddie certainly weren't todash. The gunners had seen them, seen them very well.

More. Had been *waiting* for them.

“Move in!” someone was screaming. “Move in, move in, don't give em a chance to find their peckers, move in, you *catzarros!*”

“Eddie!” Roland roared. “Eddie, you have to help me now!”

“Hizz . . .?” Faint. Bemused. Eddie looking at him with only one eye, the right. The left was temporarily drowned in blood from his scalp-wound.

Roland reached out and slapped him hard enough to make blood fly from his hair. “*Harriers!* Coming to kill us! Kill all here!”

Eddie's visible eye cleared. It happened fast. Roland saw the effort that took—not to regain his wits but to regain them at such speed, and despite a head that must be pounding monstrously—and took a moment to be proud of Eddie. He was Cuthbert Allgood all over again, Cuthbert to the life.

“What the hell's this?” someone called in a cracked, excited voice. “Just *what* in the blue *hell* is *this*?”

“Down,” Roland said, without looking around. “If you want to live, get on the floor.”

“Do what he says, Chip,” someone else replied—probably, Roland thought, the man who'd been holding the can with the tomato on it.

Roland crawled through litters of broken glass from the door, feeling pricks and prinks of pain as some cut his knees and knuckles, not caring. A bullet buzzed past his temple. Roland ignored that, too. Outside was a brilliant summer day. In the foreground were the two oil-pumps with MOBIL printed on them. To one side was an old car, probably belonging to either the women shoppers (who'd never need it again) or to Mr. Flannel Shirt. Beyond the pumps and the oiled dirt of the parking area was a paved country road, and on the other side of that a little cluster of buildings painted a uniform gray. One was marked TOWN OFFICE, one STONE-HAM FIRE AND RESCUE. The third and largest was the TOWN GARAGE. The parking area in front of these buildings was also paved (*metaled* was Roland's word for it), and a number of vehicles had been parked there, one the size of a large bucka-waggon. From behind them came more than half a dozen men at full charge. One hung back and Roland recognized him: Enrico Balazar's ugly lieutenant, Jack Andolini. The gunslinger had seen this man die, gunshot and then eaten alive by the carnivorous lobstrosities which lived in the shallow waters of the Western Sea, but here he was again. Because infinite worlds spun on the axle which was the Dark Tower, and here was another of them. Yet only one world was true; only one where, when things were finished, they *stayed* finished. It might be this one; it might not be. In either case, this was no time to worry about it.

Up on his knees, Roland opened fire, fanning the trigger of his revolver with the hard ridge of his right hand, aiming first at the boys with the speed-shooters. One of them dropped dead on the country road's white centerline with blood boiling out of his throat. The second was flung backward all the way to the road's dirt shoulder with a hole between his eyes.

Then Eddie was beside him, also on his knees, fanning the trigger of Roland's other gun. He missed at least two of his targets, which wasn't surprising, given his condition. Three others dropped to the road, two dead and one screaming "*I'm hit! Ah, Jack, help me, I'm hit in the guts!*"

Someone grabbed Roland's shoulder, unaware of what a dangerous thing that was to do to a gunslinger, especially one in a fire-fight. "Mister, what in the hell—"

Roland took a quick look, saw a fortyish man wearing both a tie and a butcher's apron, had time to think, *Shopkeeper, probably the one who gave Pere directions to the post office*, and then shoved the man violently backward. A split second later, blood dashed backward from the left side of the man's head. Grooved, the gunslinger judged, but not seriously hurt, at least not yet. If Roland hadn't pushed him, however—

Eddie was reloading. Roland did the same, taking a bit longer thanks to the missing fingers on his right hand. Meanwhile, two of the surviving harriers had taken cover behind one of the old cars on this side of the road. Too close. Not good. Roland could hear the rumble of an approaching motor. He looked back at the fellow who'd been quick-witted enough to drop when Roland told him to, thus avoiding the fate of the ladies.

"You!" Roland said. "Do you have a gun?"

The man in the flannel shirt shook his head. His eyes were a brilliant blue. Frightened, but not, Roland judged, panicky. In front of this customer, the shopkeeper was sitting up, spread-legged, looking with sickened amazement at the red droplets pattering down and spreading on his white apron.

“Shopkeeper, do you keep a gun?” Roland asked.

Before the shopkeeper could answer—if he was capable of answering—Eddie grabbed Roland’s shoulder. “Charge of the Light Brigade,” he said. The words came out mushy—*sharr uvva lie brig-gay*—but Roland wouldn’t have understood the reference in any case. The important thing was that Eddie had seen another six men dashing across the road. This time they were spread out and zigzagging from side to side.

“*Vai, vai, vai!*” Andolini bawled from behind them, sweeping both hands in the air.

“Christ, Roland, that’s Tricks Postino,” Eddie said. Tricks was once more toting an extremely large weapon, although Eddie couldn’t be sure it was the oversized M-16 he’d called The Wonderful Rambo Machine. In any case, he was no luckier here than he’d been in the shootout at the Leaning Tower: Eddie fired and Tricks went down on top of one of the guys already lying in the road, still firing his assault weapon at them as he did so. This was probably nothing more heroic than a finger-spasm, final signals sent from a dying brain, but Roland and Eddie had to throw themselves flat again, and the other five outlaws reached cover behind the old cars on this side of the road. Worse still. Backed by covering fire from the vehicles across the street—the vehicles these boys had come in, Roland was quite sure—they would soon be able to turn this little store into a shooting gallery without too much danger to themselves.

All of this was too close to what had happened at Jericho Hill.

It was time to beat a retreat.

The sound of the approaching vehicle continued to swell—a big engine, laboring under a heavy load, from the sound. What topped the rise to the left of the store was a gigantic truck filled with enormous cut trees. Roland saw the driver’s eyes widen and his mouth drop open, and why not? Here in front of this small-town mercantile where he had doubtless stopped many times for a bottle of beer or ale at the end of a long, hot day in the woods, lay half a dozen bleeding bodies

scattered in the road like soldiers killed in a battle. Which was, Roland knew, exactly what they were.

The big truck's front brakes shrieked. From the rear came the angry-dragon chuff of the airbrakes. There was an accompanying scream of huge rubber tires first locking and then smoking black tracks on the metaled surface of the road. The truck's multi-ton load began to slew sideways. Roland saw splinters flying from the trees and into the blue sky as the outlaws on the far side of the road continued to fire heedlessly. There was something almost hypnotic about all this, like watching one of the Lost Beasts of Eld come tumbling out of the sky with its wings on fire.

The truck's horseless front end ran over the first of the bodies. Guts flew in red ropes and splashed the dirt of the shoulder. Legs and arms were torn off. A wheel squashed Tricks Postino's head, the sound of his imploding skull like a chestnut bursting in a hot fire. The truck's load broached sideways and began to totter. Wheels fully as high as Roland's shoulders dug in and tossed up clouds of bloody dirt. The truck slid by the store with a majestic lack of speed. The driver was no longer visible in the cab. For a moment the store and the people inside it were blocked from the superior firepower on the other side of the road. The shopkeeper—Chip—and the surviving customer—Mr. Flannel Shirt—were staring at the broaching truck with identical expressions of helpless amazement. The shopkeeper absently wiped blood from the side of his head and flicked it onto the floor like water. His wound was worse than Eddie's, Roland judged, yet he seemed unaware of it. Maybe that was good.

“Out back,” the gunslinger said to Eddie. “Now.”

“Good call.”

Roland grabbed the man in the flannel shirt by the arm. The man's eyes immediately left the truck and went to the gunslinger. Roland nodded toward the back, and the elderly gent nodded back. His unquestioning quickness was an unexpected gift.

Outside, the truck's load finally overturned, mashing one of the parked cars (and the harriers hiding behind it, Roland dearly hoped),

spilling logs first off the top and then simply spilling them all. There was a gruesome, endless sound of scraping metal that made the gunfire seem puny by comparison.

TWO

Eddie grabbed the storekeeper just as Roland had grabbed the other man, but Chip showed none of his customer's awareness or instinct for survival. He merely went on staring through the jagged hole where his windows had been, eyes wide with shock and awe as the pulp-truck out there entered the final phase of its self-destructive ballet, the cab twisting free of the overloaded carrier and bouncing down the hill beyond the store and into the woods. The load itself went sliding up the right side of the road, creating a huge bow-wave of dirt and leaving behind a deep groove, a flattened Chevrolet, and two more flattened harriers.

There were plenty more where those came from, though. Or so it seemed. The gunfire continued.

"Come on, Chip, time to split," Eddie said, and this time when he tugged the shopkeeper toward the back of the store Chip came, still looking back over his shoulder and wiping blood from the side of his face.

At the rear of the market, on the left, was an added-on lunchroom with a counter, a few patched stools, three or four tables, and an old lobster-pot over a newsstand which seemed to contain mostly out-of-date girlie magazines. As they reached this part of the building, the gunfire from outside intensified. Then it was dwarfed again, this time by an explosion. The pulper's fuel-tank, Eddie assumed. He felt the droning passage of a bullet and saw a round black hole appear in the picture of a lighthouse mounted on the wall.

"Who *are* those guys?" Chip asked in a perfectly conversational voice. "Who are you? Am I hit? My son was in Viet Nam, you know. Did you see that truck?"

Eddie answered none of his questions, just smiled and nodded and hustled Chip along in Roland's wake. He had absolutely no idea where they were going or how they were going to get out of this fuckaree. The only thing he was completely sure of was that Calvin Tower wasn't here. Which was probably good. Tower might or might not have brought down this particular batch of hellfire and brimstone, but the hellfire and brimstone was *about* old Cal, of that Eddie had no doubt. If old Cal had only—

A darning-needle of heat suddenly tore through his arm and Eddie shouted in surprise and pain. A moment later another punched him in the calf. His lower right leg exploded into *serious* pain, and he cried out again.

"Eddie!" Roland chanced a look back. "Are you—"

"Yeah, fine, go, go!"

Ahead of them now was a cheap fiberboard back wall with three doors in it. One was marked BUOYS, one GULLS, one EMPLOYEES ONLY.

"EMPLOYEES ONLY!" Eddie shouted. He looked down and saw a blood-ringed hole in his bluejeans about three inches below his right knee. The bullet hadn't exploded the knee itself, which was to the good, but oh Mama, it hurt like the veriest motherfucker of creation.

Over his head, a light-globe exploded. Glass showered down on Eddie's head and shoulders.

"I'm insured, but God knows if it covers somethin like *this*," Chip said in his perfectly conversational voice. He wiped more blood from his face, then slatted it off his fingertips and onto the floor, where it made a Rorschach inkblot. Bullets buzzed around them. Eddie saw one flip up Chip's collar. Some-where behind them, Jack Andolini—old Double-Ugly—was hollering in Italian. Eddie somehow didn't think he was calling retreat.

Roland and the customer in the flannel shirt went through the EMPLOYEES ONLY door. Eddie followed, pumped up on the wine of adrenaline and still dragging Chip. This was a storeroom, and of quite a good size. Eddie could smell different kinds of grain, some sort of minty tang, and, most of all, coffee.

Now Mr. Flannel Shirt had taken the lead. Roland followed him quickly down the storeroom's center aisle and between pallets stacked high with canned goods. Eddie limped gamely along after, still hauling the shopkeeper. Old Chip had lost a lot of blood from the wound on the side of his head and Eddie kept expecting him to pass out, but Chip actually seemed . . . well, chipper. He was currently asking Eddie what had happened to Ruth Beemer and her sister. If he meant the two women who'd been in the store (Eddie was pretty sure he did), Eddie hoped that Chip wouldn't suddenly regain his memory.

There was another door at the back. Mr. Flannel Shirt opened it and started out. Roland hauled him back by the shirt, then went out himself, low. Eddie stood Chip beside Mr. Flannel Shirt and himself just in front of them. Behind them, bullets smacked through the EMPLOYEES ONLY door, creating startled white eyes of daylight.

"Eddie!" Roland grunted. "To me!"

Eddie limped out. There was a loading dock here, and beyond it about an acre of unlovely, churned-up ground. Trash barrels had been stacked haphazardly to the right of the dock and there were two Dumpsters to the left, but it didn't look to Eddie Dean as if anyone had worried too much about putting litter in its place. There were also several piles of beercans almost big enough to qualify as archaeological middens. *Nothing like relaxing on the back porch after a hard day at the store*, Eddie thought.

Roland was pointing his gun at another oil-pump, this one rustier and older than the ones out front. On it was a single word. "Diesel," Roland said. "Does that mean fuel? It does, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Eddie said. "Chip, does the diesel pump work?"

"Sure, sure," Chip said in a disinterested tone of voice. "Lotsa guys fill up back here."

"I can run it, mister," said Flannel Shirt. "You better let me, too—it's tetchy. Can you and your buddy cover me?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Pour it in there." And jerked a thumb at the storeroom.

"Hey, no!" Chip said, startled.

How long did all these things take? Eddie could not have said, not for sure. All he was aware of was a clarity he had known only once before: while riddling Blaine the Mono. It overwhelmed everything with its brilliance, even the pain in his lower leg, where the tibia might or might not have been chipped by a bullet. He was aware of how funky it smelled back here—rotted meat and moldy produce, the yeasty scent of a thousand departed brewskis, the odors of don't-care laziness—and the divinely sweet fir-perfume of the woods just beyond the perimeter of this dirty little roadside store. He could hear the drone of a plane in some distant quadrant of the sky. He knew he loved Mr. Flannel Shirt because Mr. Flannel Shirt was *here*, was *with* them, linked to Roland and Eddie by the strongest of bonds for these few minutes. But time? No, he had no true sense of that. But it couldn't have been much more than ninety seconds since Roland had begun their retreat, or surely they would have been overwhelmed, crashed truck or no crashed truck.

Roland pointed left, then turned right himself. He and Eddie stood back to back on the loading dock with about six feet between them, guns raised to their cheeks like men about to commence a duel. Mr. Flannel Shirt hopped off the end of the dock, spry as a cricket, and seized the chrome crank on the side of the old diesel pump. He began to spin it rapidly. The numbers in their little windows spun backward, but instead of returning to all zeros, they froze at 0 0 1 9. Mr. Flannel Shirt tried the crank again. When it refused to turn, he shrugged and yanked the nozzle out of its rusty cradle.

“John, no!” Chip cried. He was still standing in the doorway of his storeroom and holding up his hands, one clean and the other bloody all the way up the forearm.

“Get out of the way, Chip, or you're gonna—”

Two men dashed around Eddie's side of the East Stoneham General Store. Both were dressed in jeans and flannel shirts, but unlike Chip's shirt, these looked brand-new, with the creases still in the sleeves. Purchased especially for the occasion, Eddie had no doubt. And one of the goons Eddie recognized quite well; had last seen him in The

Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind, Calvin Tower's bookshop. Eddie had also killed this fellow once before. Ten years in the future, if you could believe it. In The Leaning Tower, Balazar's joint, and with the same gun he now held in his hand. A snatch of an old Bob Dylan lyric occurred to him, something about the price you had to pay to keep from going through everything twice.

"Hey, Big Nose!" Eddie cried (as he seemed to each time he saw this particular piece of pond scum). "How you doing, pal?" In truth, George Biondi did not appear to be doing well at all. Not even his mother would have considered him much more than presentable, even on his best day (that humungous beak), and now his features were puffed and discolored by bruises that had only just begun to fade. The worst of them was right between the eyes.

I did that, Eddie thought. *In the back of Tower's bookstore*. It was true, but it also seemed like something that had happened a thousand years ago.

"*You*," said George Biondi. He seemed too stunned to even raise his gun. "*You. Here.*"

"Me here," Eddie agreed. "As for you, you should have stayed in New York." With that said, he blew George Biondi's face off. His friend's face, too.

Flannel Shirt squeezed the pump handle's pistol grip and dark diesel sprayed from the nozzle. It doused Chip, who cawed indignantly and then staggered out onto the loading dock. "*Stings!*" he shouted. "*Gorry, don't that sting! Quit it, John!*"

John did not. Another three men came dashing around Roland's side of the store, took one look at the gunslinger's calm and awful face, tried to backtrack. They were dead before they could do more than get the heels of their new country walking shoes planted. Eddie thought of the half-dozen cars and the big Winnebago that had been parked across the street and had time to wonder just how many men Balazar had sent on this little expedition. Certainly not just his own guys. How had he paid for the imports?

He didn't have to, Eddie thought. Someone loaded him up with dough and told him to go buy the farm. As many out-of-town goons as he could get. And somehow convinced him the guys they were going after deserved that kind of coverage.

From inside the store there came a dull, percussive thud. Soot blew out of the chimney and was lost against the darker, oilier cloud rising from the crashed pulp truck. Eddie thought somebody had tossed a grenade. The door to the storeroom blew off its hinges, walked halfway down the aisle surrounded by a cloud of smoke, and fell flat. Soon the fellow who'd thrown the grenade would throw another, and with the floor of the storeroom now covered in an inch of diesel fuel—

“Slow him down if you can,” Roland said. “It's not wet enough in there yet.”

“Slow down Andolini?” Eddie asked. “How do I do that?”

“With your everlasting *mouth!*” Roland cried, and Eddie saw a wonderful, heartening thing: Roland was grinning. Almost laughing. At the same time he looked at Flannel Shirt—John—and made a spinning gesture with his right hand: *keep pumping*.

“Jack!” Eddie shouted. He had no idea where Andolini might be at this point, and so simply yelled as loud as he could. Having grown up ramming around Brooklyn's less savory streets, this was quite loud.

There was a pause. The gunfire slowed, then stopped.

“Hey,” Jack Andolini called back. He sounded surprised, but in a good-humored way. Eddie doubted he was really surprised at all, and he had no doubt whatsoever that what Jack wanted was payback. He'd been hurt in the storage area behind Tower's bookshop, but that wasn't the worst of it. He'd also been humiliated. “Hey, Slick! Are you the guy who was gonna send my brains to Hoboken, then stuck a gun under my chin? Man, I got a mark there!”

Eddie could see him making this rueful little speech, all the time gesturing with his hands, moving his remaining men into position. How many was that? Eight? Maybe ten? They'd already taken out a bunch, God knew. And where would the remainder be? A couple on the left of the store. A couple more on the right. The rest with

Monsieur Grenades R Us. And when Jack was ready, those guys would charge. Right into the new shallow lake of diesel fuel.

Or so Eddie hoped.

“I’ve got the same gun with me today!” he called to Jack. “This time I’ll jam it up your ass, how’d that be?”

Jack laughed. It was an easy, relaxed sound. An act, but a good one. Inside, Jack would be redlining: heart-rate up over one-thirty, blood-pressure up over one-seventy. This was it, not just payback for some little punk daring to blindside him but the biggest job of his stinking bad-guy career, the Super Bowl.

Balazar gave the orders, undoubtedly, but Jack Andolini was the one on the spot, the field marshal, and this time the job wasn’t just beating up a dice-dopey bartender who wouldn’t pay the vig on what he owed or convincing some Yid jewelry-store owner on Lenox Avenue that he needed protection; this was an actual war. Jack was smart—at least compared to most of the street-hoods Eddie had met while doped up and running with his brother Henry—but Jack was also stupid in some fundamental way that had nothing to do with IQ scores. The punk who was currently taunting him had already beaten him once, and quite handily, but Jack Andolini had contrived to forget that.

Diesel sloshed quietly over the loading dock and rippled along the old warped boards of the mercantile’s storeroom. John, aka Sai Yankee Flannel Shirt, gave Roland a questioning look. Roland responded by first shaking his head and then twirling his right hand again: more.

“Where’s the bookstore guy, Slick?” Andolini’s voice just as pleasant as before, but closer now. He’d crossed the road, then. Eddie put him just outside the store. Too bad diesel fuel wasn’t more explosive. “Where’s Tower? Give him to us and we’ll leave you and the other guy alone until next time.”

Sure, Eddie thought, and remembered something Susannah sometimes said (in her best growling Detta Walker voice) to indicate utter disbelief: *Also I won’t come in yo’ mouth or get any in yo’ hair.*

This ambush had been set up especially for visiting gunslingers, Eddie was almost sure of it. The bad boys might or might not know where Tower was (he trusted what came out of Jack Andolini's mouth not at all), but someone had known to exactly which where and when the Unfound Door was going to deliver Eddie and Roland, and had passed that knowledge on to Balazar. *You want the boy who embarrassed your boy, Mr. Balazar? The kid who peeled Jack Andolini and George Biondi off Tower before Tower had time to give in and give you what you wanted? Fine. Here's where he's going to show up. Him and one other. And by the way, here's enough dough to buy an army of mercenaries in tu-tone shoes. Might not be enough, the kid's hard and his buddy's worse, but you might get lucky. Even if you don't, even if the one named Roland gets away and leaves a bunch of dead guys behind . . . well, getting the kid's a start. And there are always more gunnies, aren't there? Sure. The world's full of them. The worlds.*

And what about Jake and Callahan? Had there been a reception party waiting for them, too, and had it been twenty-two years up the line from this when? The little poem on the fence surrounding the vacant lot suggested that, if they'd followed his wife, it had been—SUSANNAH-MIO, DIVIDED GIRL OF MINE, the poem had said. PARKED HER RIG IN THE DIXIE PIG IN THE YEAR OF '99. And if there *had* been a reception party waiting, could they possibly still be alive?

Eddie clung to one idea: if any member of the ka-tet died—Susannah, Jake, Callahan, even Oy—he and Roland would know. If he was kidding himself about that, succumbing to some romantic fallacy, so be it.

THREE

Roland caught the eye of the man in the flannel shirt and drew the side of his hand across his throat. John nodded and let go of the oil-pump's squeeze-handle at once. Chip, the store owner, was now

standing beside the loading dock, and where his face wasn't lathered with blood, he was looking decidedly gray. Roland thought he would pass out soon. No loss there.

"Jack!" the gunslinger shouted. "Jack Andolini!" His pronunciation of the Italian name was a pretty thing to listen to, both precise and rippling.

"You Slick's big brother?" Andolini asked. He sounded amused. And he sounded closer. Roland put him in front of the store, perhaps on the very spot where he and Eddie had come through. He wouldn't wait long to make his next move; this was the countryside, but there were still people about. The rising black plume of smoke from the overturned wood-waggon would already have been noticed. Soon they would hear sirens.

"I suppose you'd call me his foreman," Roland said. He pointed at the gun in Eddie's hand, then pointed into the storeroom, then pointed at himself: *Wait for my signal*. Eddie nodded.

"Why don't you send him out, *mi amigo*? This doesn't have to be your concern. I'll take him and let you go. Slick's the one I want to talk to. Getting the answers I need from him will be a pleasure."

"You could never take us," Roland said pleasantly. "You've forgotten the face of your father. You're a bag of shit with legs. Your own ka-daddy is a man named Balazar, and you lick his dirty ass. The others know and they laugh at you. 'Look at Jack,' they say, 'all that ass-licking only makes him uglier.'"

There was a brief pause. Then: "You got a mean mouth on you, mister." Andolini's voice was level, but all the bogus good humor had gone out of it. All the laughter. "But you know what they say about sticks and stones."

In the distance, at last, a siren rose. Roland nodded first to John (who was watching him alertly) and then at Eddie. *Soon*, that nod said.

"Balazar will be building his towers of cards long after you're nothing but bones in an unmarked grave, Jack. Some dreams are destiny, but not yours. Yours are only dreams."

“Shut up!”

“Hear the sirens? Your time’s almost u—”

“*Vai!*” Jack Andolini shouted. “*Vai! Get em! I want that old fucker’s head, do you hear me? I want his head!*”

A round black object arced lazily through the hole where the EMPLOYEES ONLY door had been. Another grenado. Roland had been expecting it. He fired once, from the hip, and the grenado exploded in midair, turning the flimsy wall between the storeroom and the lunchroom into a storm of destructive, splintery blowback. There were screams of surprise and agony.

“*Now, Eddie!*” Roland shouted, and began to fire into the diesel. Eddie joined in. At first Roland didn’t think anything was going to happen, but then a sluggish ripple of blue flame appeared in the center aisle and went snaking toward where the rear wall had been. Not enough! Gods, how he wished it had been the kind they called gasoline!

Roland tipped out the cylinder of his gun, dropped the spent casings around his boots, and reloaded.

“On your right, mister,” John said, almost conversationally, and Roland dropped flat. One bullet passed through the place where he’d been. The second flipped at the ends of his long hair. He’d only had time to reload three of his revolver’s six chambers, but that was one more bullet than he needed. The two harriers flew backward with identical holes in the center of their brows, just below the hairline.

Another hoodlum dashed around the corner of the store on Eddie’s side and saw Eddie waiting for him with a grin on his bloody face. The fellow dropped his gun immediately and began to raise his hands. Eddie put a bullet through his chest before they got as high as his shoulders. *He’s learning*, Roland thought. *Gods help him, but he is.*

“That fire’s a little slow for my taste, boys,” said John, and leaped up onto the loading dock. The store was barely visible through the rolling smoke of the deflected grenado, but bullets came flying through it. John seemed not to notice them, and Roland thanked ka for putting such a good man in their path. Such a hard man.

John took a square silver object from his pants pocket, flipped up the lid, and produced a good flame with the flick of his thumb on a small wheel. He tossed the little flaming tinderbox underhand into the storeroom. Flames burst up all around it with a *whoomp* sound.

“*What’s the matter with you?*” Andolini screamed. “*Get them!*”

“Come and do it yourself!” Roland called. At the same time he pulled on John’s pants leg. John jumped off the loading dock backward and stumbled. Roland caught him. Chip the storekeeper chose this moment to faint, pitching forward to the trash-littered earth with a groan so soft it was almost a sigh.

“Yeah, come on!” Eddie goaded. “Come on *Slick*, *whatsamatta Slick*, don’t send a boy to do a man’s work, you ever hear that one? How many guys did you have over there, two dozen? And we’re still standing! So come on! Come on and do it yourself! Or do you want to lick Enrico Balazar’s ass for the rest of your life?”

More bullets came through the smoke and flame, but the harriers in the store showed no interest in trying to charge through the growing fire. No more came around the sides of the store, either.

Roland pointed at Eddie’s lower right leg, where the hole was. Eddie gave him a thumbs-up, but the leg of his jeans now seemed too full below the knee—swollen—and when he moved, his shor’boot squelched. The pain had settled to a steady hard ache that seemed to cycle with the beat of his heart. Yet he was coming to believe it might have missed the bone. *Maybe*, he admitted to himself, *because I want to believe it.*

The first siren had been joined by two or three others, and they were closing in.

“*Go!*” Jack screamed. He now sounded on the verge of hysterics. “*Go, you chickenshit motherfuckers, go get them!*”

Roland thought that the remaining badmen might have attacked a couple of minutes ago—maybe even thirty seconds ago—if Andolini had led their charge personally. But now the frontal-assault option had been closed off, and Andolini must surely know that if he led men around either side of the store, Roland and Eddie would pick them off

like clay birds in a Fair-Day shooting contest. The only workable strategies left to him were siege or a long flanking movement through the woods, and Jack Andolini had no time for either. Standing their ground back here, however, would present its own problems. Dealing with the local constabulary, for instance, or the fire brigade if that showed up first.

Roland pulled John to him so he could speak quietly. “We need to get out of here right now. Can you help us?”

“Oh, ayuh, I think so.” The wind shifted. A draft blew through the mercantile’s broken front windows, through the place where the back wall had been, and out the back door. The diesel smoke was black and oily. John coughed and waved it away. “Follow me. Let’s step lively.”

John hurried across the ugly acre of waste ground behind the store, stepping over a broken crate and weaving his way between a rusty incinerator and a pile of even rustier machine parts. There was a name on the biggest of these that Roland had seen before in his wanderings: JOHN DEERE.

Roland and Eddie walked backward, protecting John’s back, taking little glances over their own shoulders to keep from tripping. Roland hadn’t entirely given up hope that Andolini would make a final charge and he could kill him, as he had done once before. On the beach of the Western Sea, that had been, and here he was again, not only back but ten years *younger*.

While I, Roland thought, feel at least a thousand years older.

Yet that was not really true. Yes, he was now suffering—finally—the ills an old man could reasonably expect. But he had a ka-tet to protect again, and not just any ka-tet but one of *gunslingers*, and they had refreshed his life in a way he never would have expected. It all meant something to him again, not just the Dark Tower but *all* of it. So he wanted Andolini to come. And if he killed Andolini in this world, he had an idea Andolini would stay dead. Because this world was *different*. It had a resonance all the others, even his own, lacked. He felt it in every bone and every nerve. Roland looked up and saw exactly what he expected: clouds in a line. At the rear of the barren

acre, a path slipped into the woods, its head marked by a pair of good-sized granite rocks. And here the gunslinger saw herringbone patterns of shadows, overlapping but all pointing the same way. You had to look to see it, but once seen it was unmistakable. As in the version of New York where they had found the empty bag in the vacant lot and Susannah had seen the vagrant dead, this was the true world, the one where time always ran in a single direction. They might be able to hop into the future if they could find a door, as he was sure Jake and Callahan had done (for Roland also remembered the poem on the fence, and now understood at least part of it), but they could never return to the past. This was the true world, the one where no roll of the dice could ever be taken back, the one closest to the Dark Tower. And they were still on the Path of the Beam.

John led them onto the way into the woods and quickly down it, away from the rising pillars of thick dark smoke and the approaching whine of the sirens.

FOUR

They hadn't gone even a quarter of a mile before Eddie began seeing blue glints through the trees. The path was slippery with pine needles, and when they came to the final slope—the one leading down to a long and narrow lake of surpassing loveliness—Eddie saw that someone had built a birch railing. Beyond it was a stub of dock jutting out into the water. Tied to the dock was a motorboat.

“That’s mine,” John said. “I come over for m’groceries and a bite of lunch. Didn’t expect no excitement.”

“Well, you got it,” Eddie said.

“Ayuh, that’s a true thing. Mind this last bit, if you don’t want to go on your keister.” John went nimbly down the final slope, holding the rail for balance and sliding rather than walking. On his feet was a pair of old scuffed workboots that would have looked perfectly at home in Mid-World, Eddie thought.

He went next himself, favoring his bad leg. Roland brought up the rear. From behind them came a sudden explosion, as sharp and limber as that first high-powered rifleshot but far louder.

“That’d be Chip’s propane,” John said.

“Cry pardon?” Roland asked.

“Gas,” Eddie said quietly. “He means gas.”

“Ayuh, stove-gas,” John agreed. He stepped into his boat, grabbed the Evinrude’s starter-cord, gave it a yank. The engine, a sturdy little twenty-horse sewing machine of a thing, started on the first pull. “Get in here, boys, and let’s us vacate t’ area,” he grunted.

Eddie got in. Roland paused for a moment to tap his throat three times. Eddie had seen him perform this ritual before when about to cross open water, and reminded himself to ask about it. He never got the chance; before the question occurred to him again, death had slipped between them.

FIVE

The skiff moved as quietly and as gracefully over the water as any motor-powered thing can, skating on its own reflection beneath a sky of summer’s most pellucid blue. Behind them the plume of dark smoke sullied that blue, rising higher and higher, spreading as it went. Dozens of folk, most of them in shorts or bathing costumes, stood upon the banks of this little lake, turned in the smoke’s direction, hands raised to shade against the sun. Few if any marked the steady (and completely unshowy) passage of the motorboat.

“This is Keywadin Pond, just in case you were wonderin,” John said. He pointed ahead of them, where another gray tongue of dock stuck out. Beside this one was a neat little boathouse, white with green trim, its overhead door open. As they neared it, Roland and Eddie could see both a canoe and a kayak bobbing inside, at tether.

“Boathouse is mine,” the man in the flannel shirt added. The *boat* in *boathouse* came out in a way impossible to reproduce with mere

letters—*bwut* would probably come closest—but which both men recognized. It was the way the word was spoken in the Calla.

“Looks well-kept,” Eddie said. Mostly to be saying *something*.

“Oh, ayuh,” John said. “I do caretakin, camp-checkin, some rough carpenterin. Wouldn’t look good f’business if I had a fallin-down boathouse, would it?”

Eddie smiled. “Suppose not.”

“My place is about half a mile back from the water. Name’s John Cullum.” He held out his right hand to Roland, continuing to steer a straight course away from the rising pillar of smoke and toward the boathouse with the other.

Roland took the hand, which was pleasantly rough. “I’m Roland Deschain, of Gilead. Long days and pleasant nights, John.”

Eddie put out his own hand in turn. “Eddie Dean, from Brooklyn. Nice to meet you.”

John shook with him easily enough but his eyes studied Eddie closely. When their hands parted, he said: “Young fella, did somethin just happen? It did, didn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Eddie said. Not with complete honesty.

“You ain’t been to Brooklyn for a long time, son, have you?”

“Ain’t been to Morehouse or to *no* house,” Eddie Dean said, and then quickly, before he could lose it: “Mia’s locked Susannah away. Locked her away in the year of ’99. Suze can get to the Dogan, but going there’s no good. Mia’s locked off the controls. There’s nothing Suze can do. She’s kidnapped. She . . . she . . .”

He stopped. For a moment everything had been so *clear*, like a dream upon the instant of waking. Then, as so often happens with dreams, it faded. He didn’t even know if it had been a real message from Susannah, or pure imagination.

Young fella, did somethin just happen?

So Cullum had felt it, too. Not imagination, then. Some form of the touch seemed more likely.

John waited, and when there was no more from Eddie, turned to Roland. “Does your pal come over funny that way often?”

“Not often, no. Sai . . . *Mister*, I mean. Mister Cullum, I thank you for helping us when we needed help. I thank ya big-big. It would be monstrous impudent of us to ask for more, but—”

“But you’re gonna. Ayuh, figgered.” John made a minute course correction toward the little boathouse with its square open mouth. Roland estimated they’d be there in five minutes. That was fine by him. He had no objection to riding in this tight little motor-powered boat (even though it rode rather low in the water with the weight of three grown men inside), but Keywadin Pond was far too exposed for his taste. If Jack Andolini (or his successor, should Jack be replaced) asked enough of those shore-gawkers, he would eventually find a few who remembered the little skiff with the three men in it. And the boathouse with the neat green trim. *John Cullum’s bwut-huss, may it do ya fine*, these witnesses would say. Best they should be farther along the Beam before that happened, with John Cullum packed off to somewhere safe. Roland judged “safe” in this case to be perhaps three looks to the horizon-line, or about a hundred wheels. He had no doubt that Cullum, a total stranger, had saved their lives by stepping in decisively at the right moment. The last thing he wanted was for the man to lose his own as a result.

“Well, I’ll do what I can for ya, already made up m’mind to that, but I got to ask you somethin now, while I got the chance.”

Eddie and Roland exchanged a brief look. Roland said, “We’ll answer if we can. Which is to say, John of East Stoneham, if we judge that the answer won’t cause you harm.”

John nodded. He seemed to gather himself. “I know you’re not ghosts, because we all saw you back at the store and I just now touched you to shake hands. I can see the shadders you cast.” He pointed at where they lay across the side of the boat. “Real as real. So my question is this: are you walk-ins?”

“Walk-ins,” Eddie said. He looked at Roland, but Roland’s face was completely blank. Eddie looked back at John Cullum, sitting in the stern of the boat and steering them toward the boathouse. “I’m sorry, but I don’t . . .”

“Been a lot of em around here, last few years,” John said. “Waterford, Stoneham, East Stoneham, Lovell, Sweden . . . even over in Bridgton and Denmark.” This last township name came out *Denmaaaaaak*.

He saw they were still puzzled.

“Walk-ins’re people who just *appear*,” he said. “Sometimes they’re dressed in old-fashioned clothes, as if they came from . . . ago, I guess you’d say. One was nekkid as a jaybird, walkin right up the middle of Route 5. Junior Angstrom seen im. Last November this was. Sometimes they talk other languages. One came to Don Russert’s house over in Waterford. Sat right there in the kitchen! Donnie’s a retired history professor from Vanderbilt College and he taped the fella. Fella jabbered quite awhile, then went into the laundry room. Donnie figured he must’a taken it for the bathroom and went after him to turn him around, but the fella was already gone. No door for him to go out of, but gone he was.

“Donnie played that tape of his for just about everyone in the Vandy Languages Department (*Depaaa-aatment*), and wasn’t none of em recognized it. One said it must be a completely made-up language, like Esperanto. Do you sabby Esperanto, boys?”

Roland shook his head. Eddie said (cautiously), “I’ve heard of it, but I don’t really know what it i—”

“And sometimes,” John said, his voice lowering as they glided into the shadows of the boathouse, “sometimes they’re hurt. Or disfigured. Roont.”

Roland started so suddenly and so hard that the boat rocked. For a moment they were actually in danger of being tipped out. “What? What do you say? Speak again, John, for I would hear it very well.”

John apparently thought it was purely an issue of verbal comprehension, because this time he was at pains to pronounce the word more carefully. “*Ruined*. Like folks who’d been in a nuclear war, or a fallout zone, or something.”

“Slow mutants,” Roland said. “I think he might be talking about slow muties. Here in this town.”

Eddie nodded, thinking about the Grays and Pubes in Lud. Also thinking about a misshapen beehive and the monstrous insects which had been crawling over it.

John killed the little Evinrude engine, but for a moment the three of them sat where they were, listening to water slap hollowly against the aluminum sides of the boat.

“Slow mutants,” the old fellow said, almost seeming to taste the words. “Ayuh, I guess that’d be as good a name for em as any. But they ain’t the only ones. There’s been animals, too, and kinds of birds no one’s ever seen in these parts. But mostly it’s the walk-ins that’ve got people worried and talkin amongst themselves. Donnie Russert called someone he knew at Duke University, and that fella called someone in their Department of Psychic Studies—amazin they’ve got such a thing as that in a real college, but it appears they do—and the Psychic Studies woman said that’s what such folks are called: walk-ins. And then, when they disappear again—which they always do, except for one fella over in East Conway Village, who died—they’re called *walk-outs*. The lady said that some scientists who study such things—I guess you could call em scientists, although I know a lot of folks might argue—b’lieve that walk-ins are aliens from other planets, that spaceships drop em off and then pick em up again, but most of em think they’re time-travelers, or from different Earths that lie in a line with ours.”

“How long has this been going on?” Eddie asked. “How long have the walk-ins been showing up?”

“Oh, two or three years. And it’s gettin worse ruther’n better. I seen a couple of such fellas myself, and once a woman with a bald head who looked like she had this bleedin eye in the middle of her forehead. But they was all at a distance, and you fellas are up close.”

John leaned toward them over his bony knees, his eyes (as blue as Roland’s own) gleaming. Water slapped hollowly at the boat. Eddie felt a strong urge to take John Cullum’s hand again, to see if something else would happen. There was another Dylan song called

“Visions of Johanna.” What Eddie wanted was not a vision of Johanna, but the name was at least close to that.

“Ayuh,” John was saying, “you boys are right up close and personal. Now, I’ll help you along your way if I can, because I don’t sense nothing the least bit bad about either of you (although I’m going to tell you flat out that I ain’t *never* seen such shooting), but I want to know: are you walk-ins or not?”

Once more Roland and Eddie exchanged looks, and then Roland answered. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose we are.”

“Gorry,” John whispered. In his awe, not even his seamed face could keep him from looking like a child. “Walk-ins! And where is it you’re from, can you tell me that?” He looked at Eddie, laughed the way people do when they are admitting you’ve put a good one over on them, and said: “Not *Brooklyn*.”

“But I *am* from Brooklyn,” Eddie said. The only thing was it hadn’t been *this* world’s Brooklyn, and he knew that now. In the world he came from, a children’s book named *Charlie the Choo-Choo* had been written by a woman named Beryl Evans; in this one it had been written by someone named Claudia y Inez Bachman. Beryl Evans sounded real and Claudia y Inez Bachman sounded phony as a three-dollar bill, yet Eddie was coming more and more to believe that Bachman was the true handle. And why? Because it came as part of this world.

“I *am* from Brooklyn, though. Just not the . . . well . . . the same one.”

John Cullum was still looking at them with that wide-eyed child’s expression of wonder. “What about those other fellas? The ones who were waiting for you? Are they . . .?”

“No,” Roland said. “Not they. No more time for this, John—not now.” He got cautiously to his feet, grabbed an overhead beam, and stepped out of the boat with a little wince of pain. John followed and Eddie came last. The two other men had to help him. The steady throb in his right calf had receded a little bit, but the leg was stiff and numb, hard to control.

“Let’s go to your place,” Roland said. “There’s a man we need to find. With the blessing, you may be able to help us do that.”

He may be able to help us in more ways than that, Eddie thought, and followed them back into the sunlight, gimping along on his bad leg with his teeth gritted.

At that moment, Eddie thought he would have slain a saint in exchange for a dozen aspirin tablets.

STAVE: *Commala-loaf-leaven!*

They go to hell or up to heaven!

When the guns are shot and the fire’s hot,

You got to poke em in the oven.

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-seven!*

Salt and yow’ for leaven!

Heat em up and knock em down

And poke em in the oven.

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8TH STANZA



ONE

In the winter of 1984–85, when Eddie’s heroin use was quietly sneaking across the border from the Land of Recreational Drugs and into the Kingdom of Really Bad Habits, Henry Dean met a girl and fell briefly in love. Eddie thought Sylvia Goldover was a Skank *El Supremo* (smelly armpits and dragon breath wafting out from between a pair of Mick Jagger lips), but kept his mouth shut because *Henry* thought she was beautiful, and Eddie didn’t want to hurt Henry’s feelings. That winter the young lovers spent a lot of time either walking on the windswept beach at Coney Island or going to the movies in Times Square, where they would sit in the back row and wank each other off once the popcorn and the extra-large box of Goobers were gone.

Eddie was philosophic about the new person in Henry’s life; if Henry could work his way past that awful breath and actually tangle tongues with Sylvia Goldover, more power to him. Eddie himself spent a lot of those mostly gray three months alone and stoned in the Dean family apartment. He didn’t mind; liked it, in fact. If Henry had been there, he would have insisted on TV and would have ragged Eddie constantly about his story-tapes. (“Oh boy! Eddie’s gonna wissen to his wittle stowy about the *elves* and the *ogs* and the cute wittle *midgets!*”) Always calling the orcs the *ogs*, and always calling the Ents “the scawwy walking *twees*.” Henry thought made-up shit was queer.

Eddie had sometimes tried to tell him there was nothing more made-up than the crud they showed on afternoon TV, but Henry wasn't having any of that; Henry could tell you all about the evil twins on *General Hospital* and the equally evil stepmother on *The Guiding Light*.

In many ways, Henry Dean's great love affair—which ended when Sylvia Goldover stole ninety bucks out of his wallet, left a note saying *I'm sorry, Henry* in its place, and took off for points unknown with her *old* boyfriend—was a relief to Eddie. He'd sit on the sofa in the living room, put on the tapes of John Gielgud reading Tolkien's *Rings* trilogy, skin-pop along the inside of his right arm, and nod off to the Forests of Mirkwood or the Mines of Moria along with Frodo and Sam.

He'd loved the hobbits, thought he could have cheerfully spent the rest of his life in Hobbiton, where the worst drug going was tobacco and big brothers did not spend entire days ragging on little brothers, and John Cullum's little cottage in the woods returned him to those days and that darktoned story with surprising force. Because the cottage had a hobbit-hole feel about it. The furniture in the living room was small but perfect: a sofa and two overstuffed chairs with those white doilies on the arms and where the back of your head would rest. The gold-framed black-and-white photograph on one wall had to be Cullum's folks, and the one opposite it had to be his grandparents. There was a framed Certificate of Thanks from the East Stoneham Volunteer Fire Department. There was a parakeet in a cage, twittering amiably, and a cat on the hearth. She raised her head when they came in, gazed greenly at the strangers for a moment, then appeared to go back to sleep. There was a standing ashtray beside what had to be Cullum's easy chair, and in it were two pipes, one a corncob and the other a briar. There was an old-fashioned Emerson record-player/radio (the radio of the type featuring a multi-band dial and a large knurled tuning knob) but no television. The room smelled pleasantly of tobacco and potpourri. As fabulously neat as it was, a single glance was enough to tell you that the man who lived here

wasn't married. John Cullum's parlor was a modest ode to the joys of bachelorhood.

"How's your leg?" John asked. "Pears to have stopped bleeding, at least, but you got a pretty good hitch in your gitalong."

Eddie laughed. "It hurts like a son of a bitch, but I can walk on it, so I guess that makes me lucky."

"Bathroom's in there, if you want to wash up," Cullum said, and pointed.

"Think I better," Eddie said.

The washing-up was painful but also a relief. The wound in his leg was deep, but seemed to have totally missed the bone. The one in his arm was even less of a problem; the bullet had gone right through, praise God, and there was hydrogen peroxide in Cullum's medicine cabinet. Eddie poured it into the hole, teeth bared at the pain, and then went ahead and used the stuff on both his leg and the laceration in his scalp before he could lose his courage. He tried to remember if Frodo and Sam had had to face anything even close to the horrors of hydrogen peroxide, and couldn't come up with anything. Well, of course they'd had elves to heal them, hadn't they?

"I got somethin might help out," Cullum said when Eddie reappeared. The old guy disappeared into the next room and returned with a brown prescription bottle. There were three pills inside it. He tipped them into Eddie's palm and said, "This is from when I fell down on the ice last winter and busted my goddam collarbone. Percodan, it's called. I dunno if there's any good left in em or not, but —"

Eddie brightened. "Percodan, huh?" he asked, and tossed the pills into his mouth before John Cullum could answer.

"Don't you want some water with those, son?"

"Nope," Eddie said, chewing enthusiastically. "Neat's a treat."

A glass case full of baseballs stood on a table beside the fireplace, and Eddie wandered over to look at it. "Oh my God," he said, "you've got a signed Mel Parnell ball! And a Lefty Grove! Holy shit!"

“Those ain’t nothing,” Cullum said, picking up the briar pipe. “Look up on t’ top shelf.” He took a sack of Prince Albert tobacco from the drawer of an endtable and began to fill his pipe. As he did so, he caught Roland watching him. “Do ya smoke?”

Roland nodded. From his shirt pocket he took a single bit of leaf. “P’raps I might roll one.”

“Oh, I can do ya better than that,” Cullum said, and left the room again. The room beyond was a study not much bigger than a closet. Although the Dickens desk in it was small, Cullum had to sidle his way around it.

“Holy shit,” Eddie said, seeing the baseball Cullum must have meant. “Autographed by the Babe!”

“Ayuh,” Cullum said. “Not when he was a Yankee, either, I got no use for baseballs autographed by Yankees. That ’us signed when Ruth was still wearing a Red Sox . . .” He broke off. “Here they are, knew I had em. Might be stale, but it’s a lot staler where there’s none, my mother used to say. Here you go, mister. My nephew left em. He ain’t hardly old enough to smoke, anyway.”

Cullum handed the gunslinger a package of cigarettes, three-quarters full. Roland turned them thoughtfully over in his hand, then pointed to the brand name. “I see a picture of a dromedary, but that isn’t what this says, is it?”

Cullum smiled at Roland with a kind of cautious wonder. “No,” he said. “That word’s *Camel*. It means about the same.”

“Ah,” Roland said, and tried to look as if he understood. He took one of the cigarettes out, studied the filter, then put the tobacco end in his mouth.

“No, turn it around,” Cullum said.

“Say true?”

“Ayuh.”

“Jesus, Roland! He’s got a Bobby Doerr . . . two Ted Williams balls . . . a Johnny Pesky . . . a Frank Malzone . . .”

“Those names don’t mean anything to you, do they?” John Cullum asked Roland.

“No,” Roland said. “My friend . . . thank you.” He took a light from the match sai Cullum offered. “My friend hasn’t been on this side very much for quite awhile. I think he misses it.”

“Gorry,” Cullum said. “Walk-ins! Walk-ins in *my* house! I can’t hardly believe it!”

“Where’s Dewey Evans?” Eddie asked. “You don’t have a Dewey Evans ball.”

“Pardon?” Cullum asked. It came out *paaaaaadon*.

“Maybe they don’t call him that yet,” Eddie said, almost to himself. “Dwight Evans? Right fielder?”

“Oh.” Cullum nodded. “Well, I only have the best in that cabinet, don’t you know.”

“Dewey fills the bill, believe me,” Eddie said. “Maybe he’s not worthy of being in the John Cullum Hall of Fame yet, but wait a few years. Wait until ’86. And by the way, John, as a fan of the game, I want to say two words to you, okay?”

“Sure,” Cullum said. It came out exactly as the word was said in the Calla: *SHO-ah*.

Roland, meanwhile, had taken a drag from his smoke. He blew it out and looked at the cigarette, frowning.

“The words are *Roger Clemens*,” Eddie said. “Remember that name.”

“Clemens,” John Cullum said, but dubiously. Faintly, from the far side of Keywadin Pond, came the sound of more sirens. “Roger Clemens, ayuh, I’ll remember. Who is he?”

“You’re gonna want him in here, leave it at that,” Eddie said, tapping the case. “Maybe on the same shelf with the Babe.”

Cullum’s eyes gleamed. “Tell me somethin, son. Have the Red Sox won it all yet? Have they—”

“This isn’t a smoke, it’s nothing but murky air,” Roland said. He gave Cullum a reproachful look that was so un-Roland that it made Eddie grin. “No taste to speak of at all. People here actually *smoke* these?”

Cullum took the cigarette from Roland's fingers, broke the filter off the end, and gave it back to him. "Try it now," he said, and returned his attention to Eddie. "So? I got you out of a jam on t'other side of the water. Seems like you owe me one. Have they ever won the Series? At least up to your time?"

Eddie's grin faded and he looked at the old man seriously. "I'll tell you if you really want me to, John. But *do ya?*"

John considered, puffing his pipe. Then he said, "I s'pose not. Knowin'd spoil it."

"Tell you one thing," Eddie said cheerfully. The pills John had given him were kicking in and he *felt* cheerful. A little bit, anyway. "You don't want to die before 1986. That one's gonna be a corker."

"Ayuh?"

"Say absolutely true." Then Eddie turned to the gunslinger. "What are we going to do about our gunna, Roland?"

Roland hadn't even thought about it until this moment. All their few worldly possessions, from Eddie's fine new whittling knife, purchased in Took's Store, to Roland's ancient grow-bag, given to him by his father far on the other side of time's horizon, had been left behind when they came through the door. When they had been *blown through* the door. The gunslinger assumed their gunna had been left lying in the dirt in front of the East Stoneham store, although he couldn't remember for sure; he'd been too fiercely focused on getting Eddie and himself to safety before the fellow with the long-sighted rifle blew their heads off. It hurt to think of all those companions of the long trek burned up in the fire that had undoubtedly claimed the store by now. It hurt even worse to think of them in the hands of Jack Andolini. Roland had a brief but vivid picture of his grow-bag hanging on Andolini's belt like a 'backy-pouch (or an enemy's scalp) and winced.

"Roland? What about our—"

"We have our guns, and that's all the gunna we need," Roland said, more roughly than he had intended. "Jake has the *Choo-Choo* book, and I can make another compass should we need one. Otherwise—"

“But—”

“If you’re talkin about your goods, sonny, I c’n ask some questions about em when the time comes,” Cullum said. “But for the time being, I think your friend’s right.”

Eddie *knew* his friend was right. His friend was almost *always* right, which was one of the few things Eddie still hated about him. He wanted his gunna, goddammit, and not just for the one clean pair of jeans and the two clean shirts. Nor for extra ammo or the whittling knife, fine as it was. There had been a lock of Susannah’s hair in his leather swag-bag, and it had still carried a faint whiff of her smell. *That* was what he missed. But done was done.

“John,” he said, “what day is this?”

The man’s bristly gray eyebrows went up. “You serious?” And when Eddie nodded: “Ninth of July. Year of our Lord nineteen-seventy-seven.”

Eddie made a soundless whistling noise through his pursed lips.

Roland, the last stub of the Dromedary cigarette smoldering between his fingers, had gone to the window for a looksee. Nothing behind the house but trees and a few seductive blue winks from what Cullum called “the Keywadin.” But that pillar of black smoke still rose in the sky, as if to remind him that any sense of peace he might feel in these surroundings was only an illusion. They had to get out of here. And no matter how terribly afraid he was for Susannah Dean, now that they were here they had to find Calvin Tower and finish their business with him. And they’d have to do it quickly. Because—

As if reading his mind and finishing his thought, Eddie said: “Roland? It’s speeding up. Time on this side is speeding up.”

“I know.”

“It means that whatever we do, we have to get it right the first time, because in this world you can never come back earlier. There are no do-overs.”

Roland knew that, too.

TWO

“The man we’re looking for is from New York City,” Eddie told John Cullum.

“Ayuh, plenty of those around in the summertime.”

“His name’s Calvin Tower. He’s with a friend of his named Aaron Deepneau.”

Cullum opened the glass case with the baseballs inside, took out one with *Carl Yastrzemski* written across the sweet spot in that weirdly perfect script of which only professional athletes seem capable (in Eddie’s experience it was the spelling that gave most of them problems), and began to toss it from hand to hand. “Folks from away really pile in once June comes—you know that, don’t ya?”

“I do,” Eddie said, feeling hopeless already. He thought it was possible old Double-Ugly had already gotten to Cal Tower. Maybe the ambush at the store had been Jack’s idea of dessert. “I guess you can’t —”

“If I can’t, I guess I better goddam retire,” Cullum said with some spirit, and tossed the Yaz ball to Eddie, who held it in his right hand and ran the tips of his left-hand fingers over the red stitches. The feel of them raised a wholly unexpected lump in his throat. If a baseball didn’t tell you that you were home, what did? Only this world wasn’t home anymore. John was right, he was a walk-in.

“What do you mean?” Roland asked. Eddie tossed him the ball and Roland caught it without ever taking his eyes off John Cullum.

“I don’t bother with names, but I know most everyone who comes into this town just the same,” he said. “Know em by sight. Same with any other caretaker worth his salt, I s’pose. You want to know who’s in your territory.” Roland nodded at this with perfect understanding. “Tell me what this guy looks like.”

Eddie said, “He stands about five-nine and weighs . . . oh, I’m gonna say two-thirty.”

“Heavyset, then.”

“Do ya. Also, most of his hair’s gone on the sides of his forehead.” Eddie raised his hands to his own head and pushed his hair back, exposing the temples (one of them still oozing blood from his near-fatal passage through the Unfound Door). He winced a little at the pain this provoked in his upper left arm, but there the bleeding had already stopped. Eddie was more worried about the round he’d taken in the leg. Right now Cullum’s Percodan was dealing with the pain, but if the bullet was still in there—and Eddie thought it might be—it would eventually have to come out.

“How old is he?” Cullum asked.

Eddie looked at Roland, who only shook his head. Had Roland ever actually seen Tower? At this particular moment, Eddie couldn’t remember. He thought not.

“I think in his fifties.”

“He’s the book collector, ain’t he?” Cullum asked, then laughed at Eddie’s expression of surprise. “Told you, I keep a weather eye out on the summah folk. You never know when one’s gonna turn out to be a deadbeat. Maybe an outright thief. Or, eight or nine years ago, we had this woman from New Jersey who turned out to be a firebug.” Cullum shook his head. “Looked like a small-town librarian, the sort of lady who wouldn’t say boo to a goose, and she was lightin up barns all over Stoneham, Lovell, and Waterford.”

“How do you know he’s a book dealer?” Roland asked, and tossed the ball back to Cullum, who immediately tossed it to Eddie.

“Didn’t know *that*,” he said. “Only that he collects em, because he told Jane Sargus. Jane’s got a little shop right where Dimity Road branches off from Route 5. That’s about a mile south of here. Dimity Road’s actually where that fella and his friend are stayin, if we’re talking about the right ones. I guess we are.”

“His friend’s name is Deepneau,” Eddie said, and tossed the Yaz ball to Roland. The gunslinger caught it, tossed it to Cullum, then went to the fireplace and dropped the last shred of his cigarette onto the little pile of logs stacked on the grate.

“Don’t bother with names, like I told you, but the friend’s skinny and looks about seventy. Walks like his hips pain him some. Wears steel-rimmed glasses.”

“That’s the guy, all right,” Eddie said.

“Janey has a little place called Country Collectibles. She got some furniture in the barn, dressers and armoires and such, but what she specializes in is quilts, glassware, and old books. Sign says so right out front.”

“So Cal Tower . . . what? Just went in and started browsing?” Eddie couldn’t believe it, and at the same time he could. Tower had been balky about leaving New York even after Jack and George Biondi had threatened to burn his most valuable books right in front of his eyes. And once he and Deepneau got here, the fool had signed up for general delivery at the post office—or at least his friend Aaron had, and as far as the bad guys were concerned, one was as good as the other. Callahan had left him a note telling him to stop advertising his presence in East Stoneham. *How stupid can you be???* had been the Pere’s final communication to sai Tower, and the answer seemed to be more stupid than a bag of hammers.

“Ayuh,” Cullum said. “Only he did a lot more’n browse.” His eyes, as blue as Roland’s, were twinkling. “Bought a couple of hundred dollars’ worth of readin material. Paid with traveler’s checks. Then he gut her to give him a list of other used bookstores in the area. There’s quite a few, if you add in Notions in Norway and that Your Trash, My Treasure place over in Fryeburg. Plus he got her to write down the names of some local folks who have book collections and sometimes sell out of their houses. Jane was awful excited. Talked about it all over town, she did.”

Eddie put a hand to his forehead and groaned. That was the man he’d met, all right, that was Calvin Tower to the life. What had he been thinking? That once he “gut” north of Boston he was safe?

“Can you tell us how to find him?” Roland asked.

“Oh, I c’n do better’n that. I can take you right to where they’re stayin.”

Roland had been tossing the ball from hand to hand. Now he stopped and shook his head. “No. You’ll be going somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“Anyplace you’ll be safe,” Roland said. “Beyond that, sai, I don’t want to know. Neither of us do.”

“Well call me Sam, I say goddam. Dunno’s I like that much.”

“Doesn’t matter. Time is short.” Roland considered, then said: “Do you have a cartomobile?”

Cullum looked momentarily puzzled, then grinned. “Yep, a cartomobile and a truckomobile both. I’m loaded.” The last word came out *ludded*.

“Then you’ll lead us to Tower’s Dimity Road place in one while Eddie . . .” Roland paused for a moment. “Eddie, do you still remember how to drive?”

“Roland, you’re hurtin my feelings.”

Roland, never a very humorous fellow even at the best of times, didn’t smile. He returned his attention to the dan-tete—little savior—ka had put in their way, instead. “Once we’ve found Tower, you’ll go your course, John. That’s any course that isn’t ours. Take a little vacation, if it does ya. Two days should be enough, then you can return to your business.” Roland hoped their own business here in East Stoneham would be done by sundown, but didn’t want to hex them by saying so.

“I don’t think you understand that this is my busy season,” Cullum said. He held out his hands and Roland tossed him the ball. “I got a boathouse to paint . . . a barn that needs shinglin—”

“If you stay with us,” Roland said, “you’ll likely never shingle another barn.”

Cullum looked at him with an eyebrow cocked, clearly trying to gauge Roland’s seriousness and not much liking what he saw.

While this was going on, Eddie found himself returning to the question of whether or not Roland had ever actually seen Tower with his own eyes. And now he realized that his first answer to that question had been wrong—Roland *had* seen Tower.

Sure he did. It was Roland who pulled that bookcase full of Tower's first editions into the Doorway Cave. Roland was looking right at him. What he saw was probably distorted, but . . .

That train of thought drifted away, and by the seemingly inevitable process of association, Eddie's mind returned to Tower's precious books, such rarities as *The Dogan*, by Benjamin Slightman, Jr., and *'Salem's Lot*, by Stephen King.

"I'll just get m'keys and we're off," Cullum said, but before he could turn away, Eddie said: "Wait."

Cullum looked at him quizzically.

"We've got a little more to talk about, I think." And he held up his hands for the baseball.

"Eddie, our time is short," Roland said.

"I know that," Eddie said. *Probably better than you, since it's my woman the clock's running out on.* "If I could, I'd leave that asshole Tower to Jack and concentrate on getting back to Susannah. But ka won't let me do that. Your damned old ka."

"We need—"

"Shut up." He had never said such a thing to Roland in his life, but now the words came out on their own, and he felt no urge to call them back. In his mind, Eddie heard a ghostly Calla-chant: *Commala-come-come, the palaver's not done.*

"What's on your mind?" Cullum asked him.

"A man named Stephen King. Do you know that name?"

And saw by Cullum's eyes that he did.

THREE

"Eddie," Roland said. He spoke in an oddly tentative way the younger man had never heard before. *He's as at sea as I am.* Not a comforting thought. "Andolini may still be looking for us. More important, he may be looking for Tower, now that we've slipped through his

fingers . . . and as sai Cullum has made perfectly clear, Tower has made himself easy to find.”

“Listen to me,” Eddie replied. “I’m playing a hunch here, but a hunch is *not* all this is. We’ve met one man, Ben Slightman, who wrote a book in another world. *Tower’s* world. *This* world. And we’ve met another one, Donald Callahan, who was a *character* in a book from another world. Again, *this* world.” Cullum had tossed him the ball and now Eddie flipped it underhand, and hard, to Roland. The gunslinger caught it easily.

“This might not seem like such a big deal to me, except we’ve been *haunted* by books, haven’t we? *The Dogan*. *The Wizard of Oz*. *Charlie the Choo-Choo*. Even Jake’s Final Essay. And now *’Salem’s Lot*. I think that if this Stephen King is real—”

“Oh, he’s real, all right,” Cullum said. He glanced out his window toward Keywadin Pond and the sound of the sirens on the other side. At the pillar of smoke, now diffusing the blue sky with its ugly smudge. Then he held his hands up for the baseball. Roland threw it in a soft arc whose apogee almost skimmed the ceiling. “And I read that book you’re all het up about. Got it up to the City, at Bookland. Thought it was a corker, too.”

“A story about vampires.”

“Ayuh, I heard him talkin about it on the radio. Said he got the idea from *Dracula*.”

“You heard the writer on the radio,” Eddie said. He was having that through-the-looking-glass, down-the-rabbit-hole, off-on-a-comet feeling again, and tried to ascribe it to the Percodan. It wouldn’t work. All at once he felt strangely unreal to himself, a shade you could almost see through, as thin as . . . well, as thin as a page in a book. It was no help to realize that this world, lying in the summer of 1977 on time’s beam, seemed real in a way all the other wheres and whens—including his own—did not. And that feeling was totally subjective, wasn’t it? When you came right down to it, how did anyone know they weren’t a character in some writer’s story, or a transient thought in some bus-riding schmoe’s head, or a momentary mote in God’s eye?

Thinking about such stuff was crazy, and enough such thinking could *drive* you crazy.

And yet . . .

Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key.

Keys, my specialty, Eddie thought. And then: King's a key, isn't he? Calla, Callahan. Crimson King, Stephen King. Is Stephen King the Crimson King of this world?

Roland had settled. Eddie was sure it hadn't been easy for him, but the difficult had ever been Roland's specialty. "If you have questions to ask, have at it." And made the twirling gesture with his right hand.

"Roland, I hardly know where to start. The ideas I've got are so big . . . so . . . I don't know, so fundamentally fucking *scary* . . ."

"Best to keep it simple, then." Roland took the ball when Eddie tossed it to him but now looked more than a little impatient with the game of toss. "We really *do* have to move on."

How Eddie knew it. He would have asked his questions while they were rolling, if they all could have ridden in the same vehicle. But they couldn't, and Roland had never driven a motor vehicle, which made it impossible for Eddie and Cullum to ride in the same one.

"All right," he said. "Who is he? Let's start with that. Who is Stephen King?"

"A writer," Cullum said, and gave Eddie a look that said, *Are you a fool, son?* "He lives over in Bridgton with his family. Nice enough fella, from what I've heard."

"How far away is Bridgton?"

"Oh . . . twenty, twenty-five miles."

"How old is he?" Eddie was groping, maddeningly aware that the right questions might be out there, but he had no clear idea of what they were.

John Cullum squinted an eye and seemed to calculate. "Not that old, I sh'd think. If he's thirty, he just got there."

"This book . . . *'Salem's Lot* . . . was it a bestseller?"

"Dunno," Cullum said. "Lots of people around here read it, tell you that much. Because it's set in Maine. And because of the ads they

had on TV, you know. Also there was a movie made out of his first book, but I never went to see it. Looked too bloody.”

“What was it called?”

Cullum thought, then shook his head. “Can’t quite remember. ’Twas just one word, and I’m pretty sure it was a girl’s name, but that’s the best I can do. Maybe it’ll come to me.”

“He’s not a walk-in, you don’t think?”

Cullum laughed. “Born and raised right here in the state of Maine. Guess that makes him a *live-in*.”

Roland was looking at Eddie with increasing impatience, and Eddie decided to give up. This was worse than playing Twenty Questions. But goddammit, Pere Callahan was *real* and he was also in a book of fiction written by this man King, and King lived in an area that was a magnet for what Cullum called walk-ins. One of those walk-ins had sounded very much to Eddie like a servant of the Crimson King. A woman with a bald head who seemed to have a bleeding eye in the center of her forehead, John had said.

Time to drop this for now and get to Tower. Irritating he might be, but Calvin Tower owned a certain vacant lot where the most precious rose in the universe was growing wild. Also, he knew all sorts of stuff about rare books and the folks who had written them. Very likely he knew more about the author of *Salem’s Lot* than sai Cullum. Time to let it go. But—

“Okay,” he said, tossing the ball back to the caretaker. “Lock that thing up and we’ll head off to the Dimity Road, if it does ya. Just a couple more questions.”

Cullum shrugged and put the Yaz ball back into the case. “It’s your nickel.”

“I know,” Eddie said . . . and suddenly, for the second time since he’d come through the door, Susannah seemed weirdly close. He saw her sitting in a room filled with antique-looking science and surveillance equipment. Jake’s Dogan, for sure . . . only as Susannah must have imagined it. He saw her speaking into a mike, and although he couldn’t hear her, he could see her swollen belly and her frightened

face. Now *very* pregnant, wherever she was. Pregnant and ready to pop. He knew well enough what she was saying: *Come, Eddie, save me, Eddie, save both of us, do it before it's too late.*

“Eddie?” Roland said. “You’ve come over all gray. Is it your leg?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said, although right now his leg didn’t hurt at all. He thought again of whittling the key. The dreadful responsibility of knowing it had to be just right. And here he was again, in much the same situation. He had hold of something, he knew he did . . . but what? “Yeah, my leg.”

He arched sweat from his forehead.

“John, about the name of the book. ‘*Salem’s Lot*. That’s actually Jerusalem’s Lot, right?”

“Ayuh.”

“It’s the name of the town in the book.”

“Ayuh.”

“Stephen King’s second book.”

“Ayuh.”

“His second *novel*.”

“Eddie,” Roland said, “surely that’s enough.”

Eddie waved him aside, then winced at the pain in his arm. His attention was fixed on John Cullum. “There *is* no Jerusalem’s Lot, right?”

Cullum looked at Eddie as if he were crazy. “Course not,” he said. “It’s a made-up story about made-up folks in a made-up town. It’s about *vampires*.”

Yes, Eddie thought, *and if I told you I have reason to believe that vampires are real . . . not to mention invisible demons, magic balls, and witches . . . you’d be absolutely positive I was nuts, wouldn’t you?*

“Do you happen to know if Stephen King has been living in this Bridgton town his whole life?”

“No, he hasn’t. He ’n his family moved down here two, maybe three years ago. I b’lieve they lived in Windham first when they got down from the northern part of the state. Or maybe ’twas Raymond. One of the towns on Big Sebago, anyway.”

“Would it be fair to say that these walk-ins you mentioned have been turning up since the guy moved into the area?”

Cullum’s bushy eyebrows went up, then knitted together. A loud and rhythmic hooting began to come to them from over the water, a sound like a foghorn.

“You know,” Cullum said, “you might have somethin there, son. It might only be coincidence, but maybe not.”

Eddie nodded. He felt emotionally wrung out, like a lawyer at the end of a long and difficult cross-examination. “Let’s blow this pop-shop,” he said to Roland.

“Might be a good idea,” Cullum said, and tipped his head in the direction of the rhythmic foghorn blasts. “That’s Teddy Wilson’s boat. He’s the county constable. Also a game warden.” This time he tossed Eddie a set of car-keys instead of a baseball. “I’m givin you the automatic transmission,” he said. “Just in case you’re a little rusty. The truck’s a stick shift. You follow me, and if you get in trouble, honk the horn.”

“I will, believe me,” Eddie said.

As they followed Cullum out, Roland said: “Was it Susannah again? Is that why you lost all the color out of your face?”

Eddie nodded.

“We’ll help her if we can,” Roland said, “but this may be our only way back to her.”

Eddie knew that. He also knew that by the time they got to her, it might be too late.

STAVE: *Commala-ka-kate*
You’re in the hands of fate.
No matter if you’re real or not,
The hour groweth late.

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-eight!*
The hour groweth late!
No matter what the shade ya cast

You're in the hands of fate.

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9TH STANZA



ONE

Pere Callahan had made a brief visit to the East Stoneham Post Office almost two weeks before the shootout at Chip McAvoy's store, and there the former Jerusalem's Lot parish priest had written a hurried note. Although addressed to both Aaron Deepneau and Calvin Tower, the note inside the envelope had been aimed at the latter, and its tone had not been particularly friendly:

6/27/77

Tower—

I'm a friend of the guy who helped you with Andolini. Wherever you are, you need to move right away. Find a barn, unused camp, even an abandoned shed if it comes down to that. You probably won't be comfortable but remember that the alternative is being dead. I mean every word I say! Leave some lights on where you are staying now and leave your car in the garage or driveway. Hide a note with directions to your new location under the driver's-side floor-mat, or under the back-porch step. We'll be in touch. Remember that we are the only ones who can relieve you of the burden you carry. But if we are to help you, you must help us.

Callahan, of the Eld

And make this trip to the post office your LAST! How stupid can you be???

Callahan had risked his life to leave that note, and Eddie, under the spell of Black Thirteen, had nearly lost his. And the net result of those risks and close calls? Why, Calvin Tower had gone jaunting merrily around the western Maine countryside, looking for buys on rare and out-of-print books.

Following John Cullum up Route 5 with Roland sitting silently beside him, then turning to follow Cullum onto the Dimity Road, Eddie felt his temper edging up into the red zone.

Gonna have to put my hands in my pockets and bite my tongue, he thought, but in this case he wasn't sure even those old reliables would work.

TWO

About two miles from Route 5, Cullum's Ford F-150 made a right off Dimity Road. The turn was marked by two signs on a rusty pole. The top one said ROCKET RD. Below it was another (rustier still) which promised LAKESIDE CABINS BY THE WK MO OR SEAS. Rocket Road was little more than a trail winding through the trees, and Eddie hung well behind Cullum to avoid the rooster-tail of dust their new friend's old truck was kicking up. The "cartomobile" was another Ford, some anonymous two-door model Eddie couldn't have named without looking at the chrome on the back or in the owner's manual. But it felt most religiously fine to be driving again, with not a single horse between his legs but several hundred of them ready to run at the slightest motion of his right foot. It was also good to hear the sound of the sirens fading farther and farther behind.

The shadows of overhanging trees swallowed them. The smell of fir and pinesap was simultaneously sweet and sharp. "Pretty country,"

the gunslinger said. "A man could take his long ease here." It was his only comment.

Cullum's truck began to pass numbered driveways. Below each number was a small legend reading JAFFORDS RENTALS. Eddie thought of pointing out to Roland that they'd known a Jaffords in the Calla, known him very well, and then didn't. It would have been belaboring the obvious.

They passed 15, 16, and 17. Cullum paused briefly to consider at 18, then stuck his arm out the cab's window and motioned them on again. Eddie had been ready to move on even before the gesture, knowing perfectly well that Cabin 18 wasn't the one they wanted.

Cullum turned in at the next drive. Eddie followed, the tires of the sedan now whispering on a thick bed of fallen pine needles. Winks of blue once more began to appear between the trees, but when they finally reached Cabin 19 and a view of the water, Eddie saw that this, unlike Keywadin, was a true pond. Probably not much wider than a football field. The cabin itself looked like a two-room job. There was a screened-in porch facing the water with a couple of tatty but comfortable-looking rockers on it. A tin stovestack poked up from the roof. There was no garage and no car parked in front of the cabin, although Eddie thought he could see where one had been. With the cover of duff, it was hard to tell for sure.

Cullum killed the truck's engine. Eddie did likewise. Now there was only the lap of water against the rocks, the sigh of a breeze through the pines, and the mild sound of birdsong. When Eddie looked to the right, he saw that the gunslinger was sitting with his talented, long-fingered hands folded peaceably in his lap.

"How does it feel to you?" Eddie asked.

"Quiet." The word was spoken Calla-fashion: *Cahh-it*.

"Anyone here?"

"I think so, yes."

"Danger?"

"Yar. Beside me."

Eddie looked at him, frowning.

“You, Eddie. You want to kill him, don’t you?”

After a moment, Eddie admitted it was so. This uncovered part of his nature, as simple as it was savage, sometimes made him uneasy, but he could not deny it was there. And who, after all, had brought it out and honed it to a keen edge?

Roland nodded. “There came into my life, after years during which I wandered in the desert as solitary as any anchorite, a whining and self-involved young man whose only ambition was to continue taking a drug which did little but make him sniffle and feel sleepy. This was a posturing, selfish, loudmouthed loutkin with little to recommend him —”

“But good-looking,” Eddie said. “Don’t forget that. The cat was a true sex *mo-chine*.”

Roland looked at him, unsmiling. “If I could manage not to kill you then, Eddie of New York, you can manage not to kill Calvin Tower now.” And with that, Roland opened the door on his side and got out.

“Well, says *you*,” Eddie told the interior of Cullum’s car, and then got out himself.

THREE

Cullum was still behind the wheel of his truck when first Roland and then Eddie joined him.

“Place feels empty to me,” he said, “but I see a light on in the kitchen.”

“Uh-huh,” Eddie said. “John, I’ve got—”

“Don’t tell me, you got another question. Only person I know who’s got more of em is my grandnephew Aidan. He just went three. Go on, ask.”

“Could you pinpoint the center of the walk-in activity in this area over the last few years?” Eddie had no idea why he was asking this question, but it suddenly seemed vitally important to him.

Cullum considered, then said: "Turtleback Lane, over in Lovell."

"You sound pretty sure of that."

"Ayuh. Do you remember me mentionin my friend Donnie Russert, the history prof from Vandy?"

Eddie nodded.

"Well, after he met one of these fellas in person, he got interested in the phenomenon. Wrote several articles about it, although he said no reputable magazine'd publish em no matter how well documented his facts were. He said that writin about the walk-ins in western Maine taught him something he'd never expected to learn in his old age: that some things people just won't believe, not even when you can prove em. He used to quote a line from some Greek poet. 'The column of truth has a hole in it.'

"Anyway, he had a map of the seven-town area mounted on one wall of his study: Stoneham, East Stoneham, Waterford, Lovell, Sweden, Fryeburg, and East Fryeburg. With pins stuck in it for each walk-in reported, do ya see?"

"See very well, say thank ya," Eddie said.

"And I'd have to say . . . yeah, Turtleback Lane's the heart of it. Why, there were six or eight pins right there, and the whole damn rud can't be more'n two miles long; it's just a loop that runs off Route 7, along the shore of Kezar Lake, and then back to 7 again."

Roland was looking at the house. Now he turned to the left, stopped, and laid his left hand on the sandalwood butt of his gun. "John," he said, "we're well-met, but it's time for you to roll out of here."

"Ayuh? You sure?"

Roland nodded. "The men who came here are fools. It still has the smell of fools, which is partly how I know that they haven't moved on. You're not one of that kind."

John Cullum smiled faintly. "Sh'd hope not," he said, "but I gut t'thankya for the compliment." Then he paused and scratched his gray head. "If 'tis a compliment."

“Don’t get back to the main road and start thinking I didn’t mean what I said. Or worse, that we weren’t here at all, that you dreamed the whole thing. Don’t go back to your house, not even to pack an extra shirt. It’s no longer safe. Go somewhere else. At least three looks to the horizon.”

Cullum closed one eye and appeared to calculate. “In the fifties, I spent ten miserable years as a guard at the Maine State Prison,” he said, “but I met a hell of a nice man there named—”

Roland shook his head and then put the two remaining fingers of his right hand to his lips. Cullum nodded.

“Well, I f’git what his name is, but he lives over in Vermont, and I’m sure I’ll remember it—maybe where he lives, too—by the time I get acrost the New Hampshire state line.”

Something about this speech struck Eddie as a little false, but he couldn’t put his finger on just why, and he decided in the end that he was just being paranoid. John Cullum was a straight arrow . . . wasn’t he? “May you do well,” he said, and gripped the old man’s hand. “Long days and pleasant nights.”

“Same to you boys,” Cullum said, and then shook with Roland. He held the gunslinger’s three-fingered right hand a moment longer. “Was it God saved my life back there, do ya think? When the bullets first started flyin?”

“Yar,” the gunslinger said. “If you like. And may he go with you now.”

“As for that old Ford of mine—”

“Either right here or somewhere nearby,” Eddie said. “You’ll find it, or someone else will. Don’t worry.”

Cullum grinned. “That’s pretty much what I was gonna tell you.”

“*Vaya con Dios*,” Eddie said.

Cullum grinned. “Goes back double, son. You want to watch out for those walk-ins.” He paused. “Some of em aren’t very nice. From all reports.”

Cullum put his truck in gear and drove away. Roland watched him go and said, “Dan-tete.”

Eddie nodded. Dan-tete. Little savior. It was as good a way to describe John Cullum—now as gone from their lives as the old people of River Crossing—as any other. And he *was* gone, wasn't he? Although there'd been something about the way he'd talked of his friend in Vermont . . .

Paranoia.

Simple paranoia.

Eddie put it out of his mind.

FOUR

Since there was no car present and hence no driver's-side floormat beneath which to look, Eddie intended to explore under the porch step. But before he could take more than a single stride in that direction, Roland gripped his shoulder in one hand and pointed with the other. What Eddie saw was a brushy slope going down to the water and the roof of what was probably another boathouse, its green shingles covered with a layer of dry needles.

"Someone there," Roland said, his lips barely moving. "Probably the lesser of the two fools, and watching us. Raise your hands."

"Roland, do you think that's safe?"

"Yes." Roland raised his hands. Eddie thought of asking him upon what basis he placed his belief, and knew the answer without asking: intuition. It was Roland's specialty. With a sigh, Eddie raised his own hands to his shoulders.

"Deepneau!" Roland called out in the direction of the boathouse. "Aaron Deepneau! We're friends, and our time is short! If that's you, come out! We need to palaver!"

There was a pause, and then an old man's voice called: "What's your name, mister?"

"Roland Deschain, of Gilead and the line of the Eld. I think you know it."

"And your trade?"

“I deal in lead!” Roland called, and Eddie felt goosebumps pebble his arms.

A long pause. Then: “Have they killed Calvin?”

“Not that *we* know of,” Eddie called back. “If you know something we don’t, why don’t you come on out here and tell us?”

“Are you the guy who showed up while Cal was dickering with that prick Andolini?”

Eddie felt another throb of anger at the word *dickering*. At the slant it put on what had actually been going down in Tower’s back room. “A dicker? Is that what he told you it was?” And then, without waiting for Aaron Deepneau to answer: “Yeah, I’m that guy. Come out here and let’s talk.”

No answer. Twenty seconds slipped by. Eddie pulled in breath to call Deepneau again. Roland put a hand on Eddie’s arm and shook his head. Another twenty seconds went by, and then there was the rusty shriek of a spring as a screen door was pushed open. A tall, skinny man stepped out of the boathouse, blinking like an owl. In one hand he held a large black automatic pistol by the barrel. Deepneau raised it over his head. “It’s a Beretta, and unloaded,” he said. “There’s only one clip and it’s in the bedroom, under my socks. Loaded guns make me nervous. Okay?”

Eddie rolled his eyes. These *folken* were their own worst enemies, as Henry might have said.

“Fine,” Roland said. “Just keep coming.”

And—wonders never ceased, it seemed—Deepneau did.

FIVE

The coffee he made was better by far than any they’d had in Calla Bryn Sturgis, better than any Roland had had since his days in Mejis, Drop-riding out on the Rim. There were also strawberries. Cultivated and store-bought, Deepneau said, but Eddie was transported by their sweetness. The three of them sat in the kitchen of Jaffords Rentals’

Cabin #19, drinking coffee and dipping the big strawberries in the sugarbowl. By the end of their palaver, all three men looked like assassins who'd dabbled the tips of their fingers in the spilled blood of their latest victim. Deepneau's unloaded gun lay forgotten on the windowsill.

Deepneau had been out for a walk on the Rocket Road when he heard gunfire, loud and clear, and then explosions. He'd hurried back to the cabin (not that he was capable of too much hurry in his current condition, he said), and when he saw the smoke starting to rise in the south, had decided that returning to the boathouse might be wise, after all. By then he was almost positive it was the Italian hoodlum, Andolini, so—

“What do you mean, you *returned* to the boathouse?” Eddie asked.

Deepneau shifted his feet under the table. He was extremely pallid, with purple patches beneath his eyes and only a few wisps of hair, fine as dandelion fluff, on his head. Eddie remembered Tower's telling him that Deepneau had been diagnosed with cancer a couple of years ago. He didn't look great today, but Eddie had seen folks—especially in the City of Lud—who looked a lot worse. Jake's old pal Gasher had been just one of them.

“Aaron?” Eddie asked. “What did you mean—”

“I heard the question,” he said, a trifle irritably. “We got a note via general delivery, or rather Cal did, suggesting we move out of the cabin to someplace adjacent, and keep a lower profile in general. It was from a man named Callahan. Do you know him?”

Roland and Eddie nodded.

“This Callahan . . . you could say he took Cal to the woodshed.”

Cal, Calla, Callahan, Eddie thought, and sighed.

“Cal's a decent man in most ways, but he does not enjoy being taken to the woodshed. We did move down to the boathouse for a few days . . .” Deepneau paused, possibly engaging in a brief struggle with his conscience. Then he said, “Two days, actually. Only two. And then Cal said we were crazy, being in the damp was making his arthritis worse, and he could hear me wheezing. ‘Next thing I'll have you in

that little shitpot hospital over in Norway,' he said, 'with pneumonia as well as cancer.' He said there wasn't a chance in hell of Andolini finding us up here, as long as the young guy—you"—he pointed a gnarled and strawberry-stained finger at Eddie—"kept his mouth shut. 'Those New York hoodlums can't find their way north of Westport without a compass,' he said."

Eddie groaned. For once in his life he absolutely *loathed* being right about something.

"He said we'd been very careful. And when I said, 'Well, *somebody* found us, this Callahan found us,' Cal said well of course." Again the finger pointed at Eddie. "*You* must have told Mr. Callahan where to look for the zip code, and after that it was easy. Then Cal said, 'And the post office was the best he could do, wasn't it? Believe me, Aaron, we're safe out here. No one knows where we are except the rental agent, and she's back in New York.'"

Deepneau peered at them from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, then dipped a strawberry and ate half of it.

"Is that how you found us? The rental agent?"

"No," Eddie said. "A local. He took us right to you, Aaron."

Deepneau sat back. "Ouch."

"Ouch is right," Eddie said. "So you moved back into the cabin, and Cal went right on buying books instead of hiding out here and reading one. Correct?"

Deepneau dropped his eyes to the tablecloth. "You have to understand that Cal is very dedicated. Books are his life."

"No," Eddie said evenly, "Cal isn't dedicated. Cal is *obsessed*, that's what Cal is."

"I understand that you are a scrip," Roland said, speaking for the first time since Deepneau had led them into the cabin. He had lit another of Cullum's cigarettes (after plucking the filter off as the caretaker had shown him) and now sat smoking with what looked to Eddie like absolutely no satisfaction at all.

"A scrip? I don't . . ."

"A lawyer."

“Oh. Well, yes. But I’ve been retired from practice since—”

“We need you to come out of retirement long enough to draw up a certain paper,” Roland said, and then explained what sort of paper he wanted. Deepneau was nodding before the gunslinger had done more than get started, and Eddie assumed Tower had already told his friend this part of it. That was okay. What he didn’t like was the expression on the old fella’s face. Still, Deepneau let Roland finish. He hadn’t forgotten the basics of relating to potential clients, it seemed, retired or not.

When he was sure Roland *was* finished, Deepneau said: “I feel I must tell you that Calvin has decided to hold onto that particular piece of property a little longer.”

Eddie thumped the unwounded side of his head, being careful to use his right hand for this bit of theater. His left arm was stiffening up, and his leg was once more starting to throb between the knee and the ankle. He supposed it was possible that good old Aaron was traveling with some heavy-duty painkillers and made a mental note to ask for a few if he was.

“Cry pardon,” Eddie said, “but I took a knock on the head while I was arriving in this charming little town, and I think it’s screwed up my hearing. I thought you said that sai . . . that Mr. Tower had decided against selling us the lot.”

Deepneau smiled, rather wearily. “You know perfectly well what I said.”

“But he’s *supposed* to sell it to us! He had a letter from Stefan Toren, his three-times-great grandfather, saying just that!”

“Cal says different,” Aaron responded mildly. “Have another strawberry, Mr. Dean.”

“No thank you!”

“Have another strawberry, Eddie,” Roland said, and handed him one.

Eddie took it. Considered squashing it against Long, Tall, and Ugly’s beak, just for the hell of it, then dipped it first in a saucer of cream, then in the sugarbowl. He began to eat. And damn, it was hard

to stay bitter with that much sweetness flooding your mouth. A fact of which Roland (Deepneau too, for that matter) was surely aware.

“According to Cal,” Deepneau said, “there was nothing in the envelope he had from Stefan Toren except for this man’s name.” He tilted his mostly hairless head toward Roland. “Toren’s will—what was in the olden days sometimes called a ‘dead-letter’—was long gone.”

“I knew what was in the envelope,” Eddie said. “He asked me, and *I knew!*”

“So he told me.” Deepneau regarded him expressionlessly. “He said it was a trick any street-corner magician could do.”

“Did he also tell you that he *promised* to sell us the lot if I could tell him the name? That he fucking *promised?*”

“He claims to have been under considerable stress when he made that promise. As I am sure he was.”

“Does the son of a bitch think we mean to weasel on him?” Eddie asked. His temples were thudding with rage. Had he ever been so angry? Once, he supposed. When Roland had refused to let him go back to New York so he could score some horse. “Is that it? Because we won’t. We’ll come up with every cent he wants, and more. I swear it on the face of my father! And on the heart of my dinh!”

“Listen to me carefully, young man, because this is important.”

Eddie glanced at Roland. Roland nodded slightly, then crushed out his cigarette on one bootheel. Eddie looked back at Deepneau, silent but glowering.

“He *says* that is exactly the problem. He says you’ll pay him some ridiculously low token amount—a dollar is the usual sum in such cases—and then stiff him for the rest. He claims you tried to hypnotize him into believing you were a supernatural being, or someone with *access* to supernatural beings . . . not to mention access to millions from the Holmes Dental Corporation . . . but he was not fooled.”

Eddie gaped at him.

“These are things Calvin *says*,” Deepneau continued in that same calm voice, “but they are not necessarily the things Calvin *believes*.”

“What in hell do you mean?”

“Calvin has issues with letting go of things,” Deepneau said. “He is quite good at finding rare and antiquarian books, you know—a regular literary Sherlock Holmes—and he is compulsive about acquiring them. I’ve seen him *hound* the owner of a book he wants—I’m afraid there’s no other word that really fits—until the book’s owner gives in and sells. Sometimes just to make Cal stop calling on the telephone, I’m sure.

“Given his talents, his location, and the considerable sum of money to which he gained complete access on his twenty-sixth birthday, Cal should have been one of the most successful antiquarian book-dealers in New York, or in the whole country. His problem isn’t with buying but selling. Once he has an item he’s really worked to acquire, he hates to let it go again. I remember when a book collector from San Francisco, a fellow almost as compulsive as Cal himself, finally wore down Cal enough to sell him a signed first of *Moby-Dick*. Cal made over seventy thousand dollars on that one deal alone, but he also didn’t sleep for a week.

“He feels much the same way about the lot on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth. It’s the only real property, other than his books, which he still has. And he’s convinced himself that you want to steal it from him.”

There was a short period of silence. Then Roland said: “Does he know better, in his secret heart?”

“Mr. Deschain, I don’t understand what—”

“Aye, ya do,” Roland said. “Does he?”

“Yes,” Deepneau said at last. “I believe he does.”

“Does he understand in his secret heart that we are men of our word who will pay him for his property, unless we’re dead?”

“Yes, probably. But—”

“Does he understand that, if he transfers ownership of the lot to us, and if we make this transfer perfectly clear to Andolini’s dinh—his boss, a man named Balazar—”

“I know the name,” Deepneau said dryly. “It’s in the papers from time to time.”

“That Balazar will then leave your friend alone? If, that is, he can be made to understand that the lot is no longer your friend’s to sell, and that any effort to take revenge on sai Tower will cost Balazar himself dearly?”

Deepneau crossed his arms over his narrow chest and waited. He was looking at Roland with a kind of uneasy fascination.

“In short, if your friend Calvin Tower sells us that lot, his troubles will be over. Do you think he knows *that* in his secret heart?”

“Yes,” Deepneau said. “It’s just that he’s got this . . . this kink about letting stuff go.”

“Draw up a paper,” Roland said. “Object, the vacant square of waste ground on the corner of those two streets. Tower the seller. Us the buyer.”

“The Tet Corporation as buyer,” Eddie put in.

Deepneau was shaking his head. “I could draw it up, but you won’t convince him to sell. Unless you’ve got a week or so, that is, and you’re not averse to using hot irons on his feet. Or maybe his balls.”

Eddie muttered something under his breath. Deepneau asked him what he’d said. Eddie told him nothing. What he’d said was *Sounds good*.

“We will convince him,” Roland said.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that, my friend.”

“We will convince him,” Roland repeated. He spoke in his driest tone.

Outside, an anonymous little car (a Hertz rental if Eddie had ever seen one) rolled into the clearing and came to a stop.

Bite your tongue, bite your tongue, Eddie told himself, but as Calvin Tower got briskly out of the car (giving the new vehicle in his dooryard only the most cursory glance), Eddie felt his temples begin to heat up. He rolled his hands into fists, and when his nails bit into the skin of his palms, he grinned in bitter appreciation of the pain.

Tower opened the trunk of his rental Chevy and pulled out a large bag. *His latest haul*, Eddie thought. Tower looked briefly south, at the smoke in the sky, then shrugged and started for the cabin.

That's right, Eddie thought, *that's right, you whore, just something on fire, what's it to you?* Despite the throb of pain it caused in his wounded arm, Eddie squeezed his fists tighter, dug his nails in deeper.

You can't kill him, Eddie, Susannah said. *You know that, don't you?*

Did he know it? And even if he did, could he listen to Suze's voice? To any voice of reason, for that matter? Eddie didn't know. What he knew was that the real Susannah was gone, she had a monkey named Mia on her back and had disappeared into the maw of the future. Tower, on the other hand, was here. Which made sense, in a way. Eddie had read someplace that nuclear war's most likely survivors would be the cockroaches.

Never mind, sugar, you just bite down on your tongue and let Roland handle this. You can't kill him!

No, Eddie supposed not.

Not, at least, until sai Tower had signed on the dotted line. After that, however . . . after that . . .

SIX

"Aaron!" Tower called as he mounted the porch steps.

Roland caught Deepneau's eyes and put a finger across his lips.

"Aaron, hey *Aaron!*" Tower sounded strong and happy to be alive—not a man on the run but a man on a wonderful busman's holiday. "Aaron, I went over to that widow's house in East Fryeburg, and holy Joe, she's got every novel Herman Wouk ever wrote! Not the book club editions, either, which is what I expected, but—"

The *scroink!* of the screen door's rusty spring being stretched was followed by the clump of shoes across the porch.

“—the Doubleday firsts! *Marjorie Morningstar!* *The Caine Mutiny!* I think somebody across the lake better hope their fire insurance is paid up, because—”

He stepped in. Saw Aaron. Saw Roland sitting across from Deepneau, looking at him steadily from those frightening blue eyes with the deep crow’s feet at the corners. And, last of all, he saw Eddie. But Eddie didn’t see him. At the last moment Eddie Dean had lowered his clasped hands between his knees and then lowered his head so his gaze was fixed upon them and the board floor below them. He was quite literally biting his tongue. There were two drops of blood on the side of his right thumb. He fixed his eyes on these. He fixed every iota of his attention on them. Because if he looked at the owner of that jolly voice, Eddie would surely kill him.

Saw our car. Saw it but never went over for a look. Never called out and asked his friend who was here, or if everything was okay. If Aaron was okay. Because he had some guy named Herman Wouk on his mind, not book club editions but the real thing. No worries, mate. Because you’ve got no more short-term imagination than Jack Andolini. You and Jack, just a couple ragged cockroaches, scuttling across the floor of the universe. Eyes on the prize, right? Eyes on the fucking prize.

“You,” Tower said. The happiness and excitement were gone from his voice. “The guy from—”

“The guy from nowhere,” Eddie said without looking up. “The one who peeled Jack Andolini off you when you were about two minutes from shitting in your pants. And this is how you repay. You’re quite the guy, aren’t you?” As soon as he finished speaking, Eddie clamped down on his tongue again. His clasped hands were trembling. He expected Roland to intervene—surely he would, Eddie couldn’t be expected to deal with this selfish monster on his own, he wasn’t capable of it—but Roland said nothing.

Tower laughed. The sound was as nervous and brittle as his voice when he’d realized who was sitting in the kitchen of his rented cabin.

“Oh, sir . . . Mr. Dean . . . I really think you’ve exaggerated the seriousness of that situation—”

“What I remember,” Eddie said, still without looking up, “is the smell of the gasoline. I fired my dinh’s gun, do you recall that? I suppose we were lucky there were no fumes, and that I fired it in the right direction. They poured gasoline all over the corner where you keep your desk. They were going to burn your favorite books . . . or should I say your best friends, your family? Because that’s what they are to you, aren’t they? And Deepneau, who the fuck is he? Just some old guy full of cancer who ran north with you when you needed a running buddy. You’d leave him dying in a ditch if someone offered you a first edition of Shakespeare or some special Ernest Hemingway.”

“I resent that!” Tower cried. “I happen to know that my bookshop has been burned flat, and through an oversight it’s uninsured! I’m ruined, and it’s all your fault! I want you out of here!”

“You defaulted on the insurance when you needed cash to buy that Hopalong Cassidy collection from the Clarence Mulford estate last year,” Aaron Deepneau said mildly. “You told me that insurance lapse was only temporary, but—”

“It was!” Tower said. He sounded both injured and surprised, as if he had never expected betrayal from this quarter. Probably he hadn’t. “It *was* only temporary, goddammit!”

“—but to blame this young man,” Deepneau went on in that same composed but regretful voice, “seems most unfair.”

“I want you out of here!” Tower snarled at Eddie. “You and your friend, as well! I have no wish to do business with you! If you ever thought I did, it was a . . . a *misapprehension!*” He seized upon this last word as though upon a prize, and nearly shouted it out.

Eddie clasped his hands more tightly yet. He had never been more aware of the gun he was wearing; it had gained a kind of balefully lively weight. He reeked with sweat; he could smell it. And now drops of blood began to ooze out from between his palms and fall to the floor. He could feel his teeth beginning to sink into his tongue. Well, it

was certainly a way to forget the pain in one's leg. Eddie decided to give the tongue in question another brief conditional parole.

"What I remember most clearly about my visit to you—"

"You have some books that belong to me," Tower said. "I want them back. I *insist* on—"

"Shut up, Cal," Deepneau said.

"*What?*" Tower did not sound wounded now; he sounded shocked. Almost breathless.

"Stop squirming. You've earned this scolding, and you know it. If you're lucky, a scolding is all it will be. So shut up and for once in your life take it like a man."

"Hear him very well," Roland said in a tone of dry approval.

"What I remember most clearly," Eddie pushed on, "is how horrified you were by what I told Jack—about how I and my friends would fill Grand Army Plaza with corpses if he didn't lay off. Some of them women and children. You didn't like that, but do you know what, Cal? Jack Andolini's here, right now, in East Stoneham."

"You *lie!*" Tower said. He drew in breath as he said it, turning the words into an inhaled scream.

"God," Eddie replied, "if only I did. I saw two innocent women die, Cal. In the general store, this was. Andolini set an ambush, and if you were a praying man—I suppose you're not, unless there's some first edition you feel in danger of losing, but if you were—you might want to get down on your knees and pray to the god of selfish, obsessed, greedy, uncaring dishonest bookstore owners that it was a woman named *Mia* who told Balazar's dinh where we were probably going to end up, *her*, not you. Because if they followed *you*, Calvin, those two women's blood is on *your hands!*"

His voice was rising steadily, and although Eddie was still looking steadfastly down, his whole body had begun to tremble. He could feel his eyes bulging in their sockets and the cords of strain standing out on his neck. He could feel his balls drawn all the way up, as small and as hard as peachpits. Most of all he could feel the desire to spring across the room, as effortless as a ballet dancer, and bury his hands in

Calvin Tower's fat white throat. He was waiting for Roland to intervene—*hoping* for Roland to intervene—but the gunslinger did not, and Eddie's voice continued to rise toward the inevitable scream of fury.

“One of those women went right down but the other . . . she stayed up for a couple of seconds. A bullet took off the top of her head. I think it was a machine-gun bullet, and for the couple of seconds she stayed on her feet, she looked like a volcano. Only she was blowing blood instead of lava. Well, but it was probably Mia who ratted. I've got a feeling about that. It's not entirely logical, but luckily for you, it's *strong*. Mia using what Susannah knew and protecting her chap.”

“Mia? Young man—Mr. Dean—I know no—”

“Shut up!” Eddie cried. “Shut up, you rat! You lying, reneging weasel! You greedy, grasping, piggy excuse for a man! Why didn't you take out a few billboards? HI, I'M CAL TOWER! I'M STAYING ON THE ROCKET ROAD IN EAST STONEHAM! WHY DON'T YOU COME SEE ME AND MY FRIEND, AARON! BRING GUNS!”

Slowly, Eddie looked up. Tears of rage were rolling down his face. Tower had backed up against the wall to one side of the door, his eyes huge and moist in his round face. Sweat stood out on his brow. He held his bag of freshly acquired books against his chest like a shield.

Eddie looked at him steadily. Blood dripped from between his tightly clasped hands; the spot of blood on the arm of his shirt had begun to spread again; now a trickle of blood ran from the left side of his mouth, as well. And he supposed he understood Roland's silence. This was Eddie Dean's job. Because he knew Tower inside as well as out, didn't he? Knew him very well. Once upon a time not so long ago hadn't he himself thought everything in the world but heroin pale and unimportant? Hadn't he believed everything in the world that wasn't heroin up for barter or sale? Had he not come to a point when he would literally have pimped his own mother in order to get the next fix? Wasn't that why he was so angry?

“That lot on the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street was never yours,” Eddie said. “Not your father's, or his father's, all

the way back to Stefan Toren. You were only custodians, the same way I'm custodian of the gun I wear."

"I deny that!"

"Do you?" Aaron asked. "How strange. I've heard you speak of that piece of land in almost those exact words—"

"Aaron, shut up!"

"—many times," Deepneau finished calmly.

There was a pop. Eddie jumped, sending a fresh throb of pain up his leg from the hole in his shin. It was a match. Roland was lighting another cigarette. The filter lay on the oilcloth covering the table with two others. They looked like little pills.

"Here is what you said to me," Eddie said, and all at once he was calm. The rage was out of him, like poison drawn from a snakebite. Roland had let him do that much, and despite his bleeding tongue and bleeding palms, he was grateful.

"Anything I said . . . I was under stress . . . I was afraid you might kill me yourself!"

"You said you had an envelope from March of 1846. You said there was a sheet of paper in the envelope, and a name written on the paper. You said—"

"I deny—"

"You said that if I could tell you the name written on that piece of paper, you'd sell me the lot. For one dollar. And with the understanding that you'd be getting a great deal more—millions—between now and . . . 1985, let's say."

Tower barked a laugh. "Why not offer me the Brooklyn Bridge while you're at it?"

"You made a promise. And now your father watches you attempt to break it."

Calvin Tower shrieked: *"I DENY EVERY WORD YOU SAY!"*

"Deny and be damned," Eddie said. "And now I'm going to tell you something, Cal, something I know from my own beat-up but still beating heart. You're eating a bitter meal. You don't know that

because someone told you it was sweet and your own tastebuds are numb.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about! You’re crazy!”

“No,” Aaron said. “He’s not. You’re the one who’s crazy if you don’t listen to him. I think . . . I think he’s giving you a chance to redeem the purpose of your life.”

“Give it up,” Eddie said. “Just once listen to the better angel instead of to the other one. That other one hates you, Cal. It only wants to kill you. Believe me, I know.”

Silence in the cabin. From the pond came the cry of a loon. From across it came the less lovely sound of sirens.

Calvin Tower licked his lips and said, “Are you telling the truth about Andolini? Is he really in this town?”

“Yes,” Eddie said. Now he could hear the *whuppa-whuppa-whup* of an approaching helicopter. A TV news chopper? Wasn’t this still about five years too early for such things, especially up here in the boondocks?

The bookstore owner’s eyes shifted to Roland. Tower had been surprised, and he’d been guilt-tripped with a vengeance, but the man was already regaining some of his composure. Eddie could see it, and he reflected (not for the first time) on how much simpler life would be if people would stay in the pigeonholes where you originally put them. He did not want to waste time thinking of Calvin Tower as a brave man, or as even second cousin to the good guys, but maybe he was both those things. Damn him.

“You’re truly Roland of Gilead?”

Roland regarded him through rising membranes of cigarette smoke. “You say true, I say thank ya.”

“Roland of the Eld?”

“Yes.”

“Son of Steven?”

“Yes.”

“Grandson of Alaric?”

Roland's eyes flickered with what was probably surprise. Eddie himself was surprised, but what he mostly felt was a kind of tired relief. The questions Tower was asking could mean only two things. First, more had been passed down to him than just Roland's name and trade of hand. Second, he was coming around.

"Of Alaric, aye," Roland said, "him of the red hair."

"I don't know anything about his hair, but I know why he went to Garlan. Do you?"

"To slay a dragon."

"And did he?"

"No, he was too late. The last in that part of the world had been slain by another king, one who was later murdered."

Now, to Eddie's even greater surprise, Tower haltingly addressed Roland in a language that was a second cousin to English at best. What Eddie heard was something like *Had heet Rol-uh, fa heet gun, fa heet hak, fa-had gun?*

Roland nodded and replied in the same tongue, speaking slowly and carefully. When he was finished, Tower sagged against the wall and dropped his bag of books unheeded to the floor. "I've been a fool," he said.

No one contradicted him.

"Roland, would you step outside with me? I need . . . I . . . need . . ." Tower began to cry. He said something else in that not-English language, once more ending on a rising inflection, as if asking a question.

Roland got up without replying. Eddie also got up, wincing at the pain in his leg. There was a slug in there, all right, he could feel it. He grabbed Roland's arm, pulled him down, and whispered in the gunslinger's ear: "Don't forget that Tower and Deepneau have an appointment at the Turtle Bay Washateria, four years from now. Tell him Forty-seventh Street, between Second and First. He probably knows the place. Tower and Deepneau were . . . are . . . *will be* the ones who save Don Callahan's life. I'm almost sure of it."

Roland nodded, then crossed to Tower, who initially cringed away and then straightened with a conscious effort. Roland took his hand in the way of the Calla, and led him outside.

When they were gone, Eddie said to Deepneau, “Draw up the contract. He’s selling.”

Deepneau regarded him skeptically. “You really think so?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “I really do.”

SEVEN

Drawing the contract didn’t take long. Deepneau found a pad in the kitchen (there was a cartoon beaver on top of each sheet, and the legend DAM IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO) and wrote it on that, pausing every now and then to ask Eddie a question.

When they were finished, Deepneau looked at Eddie’s sweat-shiny face and said, “I have some Percocet tablets. Would you like some?”

“You bet,” Eddie said. If he took them now, he thought—hoped—he would be ready for what he wanted Roland to do when Roland got back. The bullet was still in there, in there for sure, and it had to come out. “How about four?”

Deepneau’s eyes measured him.

“I know what I’m doing,” Eddie said. Then added: “Unfortunately.”

EIGHT

Aaron found a couple of children’s Band-Aids in the cabin’s medicine chest (Snow White on one, Bambi on another) and put them over the hole in Eddie’s arm after pouring another shot of disinfectant into the wound’s entry and exit points. Then, while drawing a glass of water to go with the painkillers, he asked Eddie where he came from.

“Because,” he said, “although you wear that gun with authority, you sound a lot more like Cal and me than you do him.”

Eddie grinned. “There’s a perfectly good reason for that. I grew up in Brooklyn. Co-Op City.” And thought: *Suppose I were to tell you that I’m there right now, as a matter of fact? Eddie Dean, the world’s horniest fifteen-year-old, running wild in the streets? For that Eddie Dean, the most important thing in the world is getting laid. Such things as the fall of the Dark Tower and some ultimate baddie named the Crimson King won’t bother me for another—*

Then he saw the way Aaron Deepneau was looking at him and came out of his own head in a hurry. “What? Have I got a booger hanging out of my nose, or something?”

“Co-Op City’s not in Brooklyn,” Deepneau said. He spoke as one does to a small child. “Co-Op City’s in the Bronx. Always has been.”

“That’s—” Eddie began, meaning to add *ridiculous*, but before he could get it out, the world seemed to waver on its axis. Again he was overwhelmed by that sense of fragility, that sense of the entire universe (or an entire *continuum* of universes) made of crystal instead of steel. There was no way to speak rationally of what he was feeling, because there was nothing rational about what was happening.

“There are more worlds than these,” he said. “That was what Jake told Roland just before he died. ‘Go, then—there are other worlds than these.’ And he must have been right, because he came back.”

“Mr. Dean?” Deepneau looked concerned. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about, but you’ve come over very pale. I think you should sit down.”

Eddie allowed himself to be led back into the cabin’s combination kitchen and sitting room. Did he himself understand what he was talking about? Or how Aaron Deepneau—presumably a lifelong New Yorker—could assert with such casual assurance that Co-Op City was in the Bronx when Eddie knew it to be in Brooklyn?

Not entirely, but he understood enough to scare the hell out of him. Other worlds. Perhaps an infinite number of worlds, all of them spinning on the axle that was the Tower. All of them were similar, but

there *were* differences. Different politicians on the currency. Different makes of automobiles—Takuro Spirits instead of Datsuns, for instance—and different major league baseball teams. In these worlds, one of which had been decimated by a plague called the superflu, you could time-hop back and forth, past and future. Because . . .

Because in some vital way, they aren't the real world. Or if they're real, they're not the key world.

Yes, that felt closer. He had come from one of those other worlds, he was convinced of it. So had Susannah. And Jakes One and Two, the one who had fallen and the one who had been literally pulled out of the monster's mouth and saved.

But this world was the key world. And he knew it because he was a *key-maker* by trade: *Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key.*

Beryl Evans? Not quite real. Claudia y Inez Bachman? Real.

World with Co-Op City in Brooklyn? Not quite real. World with Co-Op City in the Bronx? Real, hard as it was to swallow.

And he had an idea that Callahan had crossed over from the real world to one of the others long before he had embarked on his highways in hiding; had crossed without even knowing it. He'd said something about officiating at some little boy's funeral, and how, after that . . .

"After that he said everything changed," Eddie said as he sat down. "That *everything* changed."

"Yes, yes," Aaron Deepneau said, patting him on the shoulder. "Sit quietly now."

"Pere went from a seminary in Boston to Lowell, real. 'Salem's Lot, not real. Made up by a writer named—"

"I'm going to get a cold compress for your forehead."

"Good idea," Eddie said, closing his eyes. His mind was whirling. Real, not real. Live, Memorex. John Cullum's retired professor friend was right: the column of truth *did* have a hole in it.

Eddie wondered if anyone knew how deep that hole went.

NINE

It was a different Calvin Tower who came back to the cabin with Roland fifteen minutes later, a quiet and chastened Calvin Tower. He asked Deepneau if Deepneau had written a bill of sale, and when Deepneau nodded, Tower said nothing, only nodded back. He went to the fridge and returned with several cans of Blue Ribbon beer and handed them around. Eddie refused, not wanting to put alcohol on top of the Percs.

Tower did not offer a toast, but drank off half his beer at a single go. “It isn’t every day I get called the scum of the earth by a man who promises to make me a millionaire and also to relieve me of my heart’s heaviest burden. Aaron, will this thing stand up in court?”

Aaron Deepneau nodded. Rather regretfully, Eddie thought.

“All right, then,” Tower said. Then, after a pause: “All right, let’s do it.” But still he didn’t sign.

Roland spoke to him in that other language. Tower flinched, then signed his name in a quick scrawl, his lips tucked into a line so narrow his mouth seemed almost not to be there. Eddie signed for the Tet Corporation, marveling at how strange the pen felt in his hand—he couldn’t remember when last he had held one.

When the thing was done, sai Tower reverted—looked at Eddie and cried in a cracked voice that was almost a shriek, “There! I’m a pauper! Give me my dollar! I’m promised a dollar! I feel a need to take a shit coming on and I need something to wipe my ass with!”

Then he put his hands over his face. He sat like that for several seconds, while Roland folded the signed paper (Deepneau had witnessed both signatures) and put it in his pocket.

When Tower lowered his hands again, his eyes were dry and his face was composed. There even seemed to be a touch of color in his formerly ashy cheeks. “I think I actually do feel a little better,” he said. He turned to Aaron. “Do you suppose these two *cockubs* might be right?”

“I think it’s a real possibility,” Aaron said, smiling.

Eddie, meanwhile, had thought of a way to find out for sure if it really was these two men who would save Callahan from the Hitler Brothers—or almost for sure. One of them had said . . .

“Listen,” he said. “There’s a certain phrase, Yiddish, I think. *Gai cocknif en yom*. Do you know what it means? Either of you?”

Deepneau threw back his head and laughed. “Yeah, it’s Yiddish, all right. My Ma used to say it all the time when she was mad at us. It means go shit in the ocean.”

Eddie nodded at Roland. In the next couple of years, one of these men—probably Tower—would buy a ring with the words *Ex Libris* carved into it. Maybe—how crazy was *this*—because Eddie Dean himself had put the idea into Cal Tower’s head. And Tower—selfish, acquisitive, miserly, book-greedy Calvin Tower—would save Father Callahan’s life while that ring was on his finger. He was going to be shit-scared (Deepneau, too), but he was going to do it. And—

At that point Eddie happened to look at the pen with which Tower had signed the bill of sale, a perfectly ordinary Bic Clic, and the enormous truth of what had just happened struck home. They owned it. They owned the vacant lot. *They*, not the Sombra Corporation. *They owned the rose!*

He felt as if he’d just taken a hard shot to the head. The rose belonged to the Tet Corporation, which was the firm of Deschain, Dean, Dean, Chambers & Oy. It was now their responsibility, for better or for worse. This round they had won. Which did not change the fact that he had a bullet in his leg.

“Roland,” he said, “there’s something you have to do for me.”

TEN

Five minutes later Eddie lay on the cabin’s linoleum floor in his ridiculous knee-length Calla Bryn Sturgis underbritches. In one hand he held a leather belt which had spent its previous life holding up

various pairs of Aaron Deepneau's pants. Beside him was a basin filled with a dark brown fluid.

The hole in his leg was about three inches below his knee and a little bit to the right of the shinbone. The flesh around it had risen up in a hard little cone. This miniature volcano's caldera was currently plugged with a shiny red-purple clot of blood. Two folded towels had been laid beneath Eddie's calf.

"Are you going to hypnotize me?" he asked Roland. Then he looked at the belt he was holding and knew the answer. "Ah, shit, you're not, are you?"

"No time." Roland had been rummaging in the junk-drawer to the left of the sink. Now he approached Eddie with a pair of pliers in one hand and a paring knife in the other. Eddie thought they made an exceedingly ugly combo.

The gunslinger dropped to one knee beside him. Tower and Deepneau stood in the living area, side by side, watching with big eyes. "There was a thing Cort told us when we were boys," Roland said. "Will I tell it to you, Eddie?"

"If you think it'll help, sure."

"Pain rises. From the heart to the head, pain rises. Double up sai Aaron's belt and put it in your mouth."

Eddie did as Roland said, feeling very foolish and very scared. In how many Western movies had he seen a version of this scene? Sometimes John Wayne bit a stick and sometimes Clint Eastwood bit a bullet, and he believed that in some TV show or other, Robert Culp had actually bitten a belt.

But of course we have to remove the bullet, Eddie thought. *No story of this type would be complete without at least one scene where*

A sudden memory, shocking in its brilliance, struck him and the belt tumbled from his mouth. He actually cried out.

Roland had been about to dip his rude operating instruments in the basin, which held the rest of the disinfectant. Now he looked at Eddie, concerned. "What is it?"

For a moment Eddie couldn't reply. His breath was quite literally gone, his lungs as flat as old inner tubes. He was remembering a movie the Dean boys had watched one afternoon on TV in their apartment, the one in

(*Brooklyn*)

(*the Bronx*)

Co-Op City. Henry mostly got to pick what they watched because he was bigger and older. Eddie didn't protest too often or too much; he idolized his big brother. (When he *did* protest too much he was apt to get the old Indian Rope Burn or maybe a Dutch Rub up the back of his neck.) What Henry liked was Westerns. The sort of movies where, sooner or later, some character had to bite the stick or belt or bullet.

"Roland," he said. His voice was just a faint wheeze to start with. "Roland, listen."

"I hear you very well."

"There was a movie. I told you about movies, right?"

"Stories told in moving pictures."

"Sometimes Henry and I used to stay in and watch them on TV. Television's basically a home movie-machine."

"A shit-machine, some would say," Tower put in.

Eddie ignored him. "One of the movies we watched was about these Mexican peasants—*folken*, if it does ya—who hired some gunslingers to protect them from the *bandidos* who came every year to raid their village and steal their crops. Does any of this ring a bell?"

Roland looked at him with gravity and what might have been sadness. "Yes. Indeed it does."

"And the name of Tian's village. I always knew it sounded familiar, but I didn't know why. Now I do. The movie was called *The Magnificent Seven*, and just by the way, Roland, how many of us were in the ditch that day, waiting for the Wolves?"

"Would you boys mind telling us what you're talking about?" Deepneau asked. But although he asked politely, both Roland and Eddie ignored him, too.

Roland took a moment to cull his memory, then said: “You, me, Susannah, Jake, Margaret, Zalia, and Rosa. There were more—the Tavery twins and Ben Slightman’s boy—but seven fighters.”

“Yes. And the link I couldn’t quite make was to the movie’s director. When you’re making a movie, you need a director to run things. He’s the dinh.”

Roland nodded.

“The dinh of *The Magnificent Seven* was a man named John Sturges.”

Roland sat a moment longer, thinking. Then he said: “Ka.”

Eddie burst out laughing. He simply couldn’t help it. Roland always had the answer.

ELEVEN

“In order to catch the pain,” Roland said, “you have to clamp down on the belt at the instant you feel it. Do you understand? *The very instant*. Pin it with your teeth.”

“Gotcha. Just make it quick.”

“I’ll do the best I can.”

Roland dipped first the pliers and then the knife into the disinfectant. Eddie waited with the belt in his mouth, lying across his teeth. Yes, once you saw the basic pattern, you couldn’t unsee it, could you? Roland was the hero of the piece, the grizzled old warrior who’d be played by some grizzled but vital star like Paul Newman or maybe Eastwood in the Hollywood version. He himself was the young buck, played by the hot young boy star of the moment. Tom Cruise, Emilio Estevez, Rob Lowe, someone like that. And here’s a set we all know, a cabin in the woods, and a situation we’ve seen many times before but still relish, Pulling the Bullet. All that was missing was the ominous sound of drums in the distance. And, Eddie realized, probably the drums were missing because they’d already been through the Ominous Drums part of the story: the god-drums. They had turned out to be an

amplified version of a Z.Z. Top song being broadcast through streetcorner speakers in the City of Lud. Their situation was becoming ever harder to deny: *they were characters in someone's story*. This whole world—

I refuse to believe that. I refuse to believe that I was raised in Brooklyn simply because of some writer's mistake, something that will eventually be fixed in the second draft. Hey, Pere, I'm with you—I refuse to believe I'm a character. This is my fucking life!

“Go on, Roland,” he said. “Get that thing outta me.”

The gunslinger poured some of the disinfectant from the bowl over Eddie's shin, then used the tip of the knife to flick the clot out of the wound. With that done, he lowered the pliers. “Be ready to bite the pain, Eddie,” he murmured, and a moment later Eddie did.

TWELVE

Roland knew what he was doing, had done it before, and the bullet hadn't gone deep. The whole thing was over in ninety seconds, but it was the longest minute and a half in Eddie's life. At last Roland tapped the pliers on one of Eddie's closed hands. When Eddie managed to unroll his fingers, the gunslinger dropped a flattened slug into it. “Souvenir,” he said. “Stopped right on the bone. That was the scraping that you heard.”

Eddie looked at the mashed piece of lead, then flicked it across the linoleum floor like a marble. “Don't want it,” he said, and wiped his brow.

Tower, ever the collector, picked up the cast-off slug. Deepneau, meanwhile, was examining the toothmarks in his belt with silent fascination.

“Cal,” Eddie said, getting up on his elbows. “You had a book in your case—”

“I want those books back,” Tower said immediately. “You better be taking care of them, young man.”

“I’m sure they’re in great condition,” Eddie said, telling himself once more to bite his tongue if he had to. *Or grab Aaron’s belt and bite that again, if your tongue won’t do.*

“They better be, young man; now they’re all I have left.”

“Yes, along with the forty or so in your various safe deposit boxes,” Aaron Deepneau said, completely ignoring the vile look his friend shot him. “The signed *Ulysses* is probably the best, but there are several gorgeous Shakespeare folios, a complete set of signed Faulkners—”

“Aaron, would you please be quiet?”

“—and a *Huckleberry Finn* that you could turn into a Mercedes-Benz sedan any day of the week,” Deepneau finished.

“In any case, one of them was a book called ‘*Salem’s Lot*,’ Eddie said. “By a man named—”

“Stephen King,” Tower finished. He gave the slug a final look, then put it on the kitchen table next to the sugarbowl. “I’ve been told he lives close to here. I’ve picked up two copies of *Lot* and also three copies of his first novel, *Carrie*. I was hoping to take a trip to Bridgton and get them signed. I suppose now that won’t happen.”

“I don’t understand what makes it so valuable,” Eddie said, and then: “Ouch, Roland, that hurts!”

Roland was checking the makeshift bandage around the wound in Eddie’s leg. “Be still,” he said.

Tower paid no attention to this. Eddie had turned him once more in the direction of his favorite subject, his obsession, his darling. What Eddie supposed Gollum in the Tolkien books would have called “his precious.”

“Do you remember what I told you when we were discussing *The Hogan*, Mr. Dean? Or *The Dogan*, if you prefer? I said that the value of a rare book—like that of a rare coin or a rare stamp—is created in different ways. Sometimes it’s just an autograph—”

“Your copy of ‘*Salem’s Lot* isn’t signed.”

“No, because this particular author is very young and not very well known. He may amount to something one day, or he may not.” Tower

shrugged, almost as if to say that was up to ka. “But this particular book . . . well, the first edition was only seventy-five hundred copies, and almost all of them sold in New England.”

“Why? Because the guy who wrote it is from New England?”

“Yes. As so often happens, the book’s value was created entirely by accident. A local chain decided to promote it heavily. They even produced a TV commercial, which is almost unheard-of at the local retail level. And it worked. Bookland of Maine ordered five thousand copies of the first edition—almost seventy per cent—and sold nearly every single one. Also, as with *The Hogan*, there were misprints in the front matter. Not the title, in this case, but on the flap. You can tell an authentic first of *Salem’s Lot* by the clipped price—at the last minute, Doubleday decided to raise the price from seven-ninety-five to eight-ninety-five—and by the name of the priest in the flap copy.”

Roland looked up. “What about the name of the priest?”

“In the book, it’s Father Callahan. But on the flap someone wrote Father *Cody*, which is actually the name of the town’s doctor.”

“And that’s all it took to bump the price of a copy from nine bucks to nine hundred and fifty,” Eddie marveled.

Tower nodded. “That’s all—scarcity, clipped flap, misprint. But there’s also an element of speculation in collecting rare editions which I find . . . quite exciting.”

“That’s one word for it,” Deepneau said dryly.

“For instance, suppose this man King becomes famous or critically acclaimed? I admit the chances are small, but suppose that did happen? Available first editions of his second book are so rare that, instead of being worth seven hundred and fifty dollars, my copy might be worth ten times that.” He frowned at Eddie. “So you’d better be taking good care of it.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Eddie said, and wondered what Calvin Tower would think if he knew that one of the book’s characters had it on a shelf in his arguably fictional rectory. Said rectory in a town that was the fraternal twin of one in an old movie starring Yul Brynner as Roland’s twin, and introducing Horst Buchholz as Eddie’s.

He'd think you were crazy, that's what he'd think.

Eddie got to his feet, swayed a little, and gripped the kitchen table. After a few moments the world steadied.

“Can you walk on it?” Roland asked.

“I was before, wasn't I?”

“No one was digging around in there before.”

Eddie took a few experimental steps, then nodded. His shin flared with pain each time he shifted his weight to his right leg, but yes—he could walk on it.

“I'll give you the rest of my Percocet,” Aaron said. “I can get more.”

Eddie opened his mouth to say yeah, sure, bring it on, and then saw Roland looking at him. If Eddie said yes to Deepneau's offer, the gunslinger wouldn't speak up and cause Eddie to lose face . . . but yes, his dinh was watching.

Eddie thought of the speech he'd made to Tower, all that poetic stuff about how Calvin was eating a bitter meal. It was true, poetic or not. But that apparently wouldn't stop Eddie from sitting back down to that same dinner himself. First a few Percodan, then a few Percocet. Both of them too much like horse for comfort. So how long would it be before he got tired of kissing his sister and started looking for some *real* pain relief?

“I think I'll skip the Percs,” Eddie said. “We're going to Bridgton —”

Roland looked at him, surprised. “We are?”

“We are. I can pick up some aspirin on the way.”

“Astin,” Roland said, with unmistakable affection.

“Are you sure?” Deepneau asked.

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “I am.” He paused, then added: “Say sorry.”

THIRTEEN

Five minutes later the four of them stood in the needle-carpeted dooryard, listening to sirens and looking at the smoke, which had now begun to thin. Eddie was bouncing the keys to John Cullum's Ford impatiently in one hand. Roland had asked him twice if this trip to Bridgton was necessary, and Eddie had told him twice that he was almost sure it was. The second time he'd added (almost hopefully) that as *dinh*, Roland could overrule him, if he wished.

"No. If you think we should go see this tale-spinner, we will. I only wish you knew *why*."

"I think that when we get there, we'll both understand."

Roland nodded, but still looked dissatisfied. "I know you're as anxious as I am to leave this world—this level of the Tower. For you to want to go against that, your intuition must be strong."

It was, but there was something else, as well: he'd heard from Susannah again, the message once more coming from her version of the Dogan. She was a prisoner in her own body—at least Eddie *thought* that was what she was trying to tell him—but she was in the year 1999 and she was all right.

This had happened while Roland was thanking Tower and Deepneau for their help. Eddie was in the bathroom. He'd gone in to take a leak, but suddenly forgot all about that and simply sat on the toilet's closed lid, head bent, eyes closed. Trying to send a message back to her. Trying to tell her to slow Mia down if she possibly could. He'd gotten the sense of daylight from her—New York in the afternoon—and that was bad. Jake and Callahan had gone through the Unfound Door into New York at night; this Eddie had seen with his own eyes. They might be able to help her, but only if she could slow Mia down.

Burn up the day, he sent to Susannah . . . or tried to. *You have to burn up the day before she takes you to wherever she's supposed to have the kid. Do you hear me? Suze, do you hear me? Answer if you hear me! Jake and Pere Callahan are coming and you have to hold on!*

June, a sighing voice had replied. *June of 1999. The girls walk around with their bellies showing and—*

Then came Roland's knock on the bathroom door, and Roland's voice asking if Eddie was ready to roll. Before the day was over they'd make their way to Turtleback Lane in the town of Lovell—a place where walk-ins were common, according to John Cullum, and reality was apt to be correspondingly thin—but first they were going to make a trip to Bridgton, and hopefully meet the man who seemed to have created Donald Callahan and the town of 'Salem's Lot.

Be a hoot if King was out in California, writing the movie version, or something, Eddie thought, but he didn't believe that was going to be the case. They were still on the Path of the Beam, in the way of ka. So, presumably, was sai King.

"You boys want to take it very easy," Deepneau told them. "There are going to be a lot of cops around. Not to mention Jack Andolini and whatever remains of his merry band."

"Speaking of Andolini," Roland said, "I think the time has come for the two of you to go somewhere he isn't."

Tower bristled. Eddie could have predicted it. "Go *now*? You must be joking! I have a list of almost a dozen people in the area who collect books—buy, sell, trade. Some know what they're doing, but others . . ." He made a clipping gesture, as if shearing an invisible sheep.

"There'll be people selling old books out of their barns over in Vermont, too," Eddie said. "And you want to remember how easy it was for us to find you. It was you who made it easy, Cal."

"He's right," Aaron said, and when Calvin Tower made no reply, only turned his sulky face down to regard his shoes, Deepneau looked at Eddie again. "But at least Cal and I have driver's licenses to show, should we be stopped by the local or the state police. I'm guessing neither of you do."

"That would be correct," Eddie said.

"And I very much doubt if you could show a permit to carry those frighteningly large handguns, either."

Eddie glanced down at the big—and incredibly ancient—revolver riding just below his hip, then looked back up at Deepneau, amused.

“That would also be correct,” he said.

“Then be careful. You’ll be leaving East Stone-ham, so you’ll probably be okay if you are.”

“Thanks,” Eddie said, and stuck out his hand. “Long days and pleasant nights.”

Deepneau shook. “That’s a lovely thing to say, son, but I’m afraid my nights haven’t been especially pleasant just lately, and if things on the medical front don’t take a turn for the better soon, my days aren’t apt to be especially long, either.”

“They’re going to be longer than you might think,” Eddie said. “I have good reason to believe you’ve got at least another four years in you.”

Deepneau touched a finger to his lips, then pointed at the sky. “From the mouth of man to the ear of God.”

Eddie swung to Calvin Tower while Roland shook hands with Deepneau. For a moment Eddie didn’t think the bookstore owner was going to shake with him, but at last he did. Grudgingly.

“Long days and pleasant nights, sai Tower. You did the right thing.”

“I was coerced and you know it,” Tower said. “Store gone . . . property gone . . . about to be run off the first real vacation I’ve had in ten years . . .”

“Microsoft,” Eddie said abruptly. And then: “Lemons.”

Tower blinked. “Beg pardon?”

“*Lemons*,” Eddie repeated, and then he laughed out loud.

FOURTEEN

Toward the end of his mostly useless life, the great sage and eminent junkie Henry Dean had enjoyed two things above all others: getting stoned; getting stoned and talking about how he was going to make a killing in the stock market. In investment matters, he considered himself a regular E. F. Hutton.

“One thing I would most definitely *not* invest in, bro,” Henry told him once when they were up on the roof. Not long before Eddie’s trip to the Bahamas as a cocaine mule, this had been. “One thing I would most apple-solutely *not* sink my money into is all this computer shit, Microsoft, Macintosh, Sanyo, Sankyō, Pentium, all that.”

“Seems pretty popular,” Eddie had ventured. Not that he’d much cared, but what the hell, it was a conversation. “Microsoft, especially. The coming thing.”

Henry had laughed indulgently and made jacking-off gestures. “My prick, that’s the coming thing.”

“But—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, people’re *flocking* to that crap. Driving all the prices up. And when I observe that action, do you know what I see?”

“No, what?”

“Lemons!”

“Lemons?” Eddie had asked. He’d thought he was following Henry, but he guessed he was lost, after all. Of course the sunset had been amazing that evening, and he had been most colossally fucked up.

“You heard me!” Henry had said, warming to the subject. “Fuckin lemons! Didn’t they teach you anything in school, bro? Lemons are these little animals that live over in Switzerland, or someplace like that. And every now and then—I think it’s every ten years, I’m not sure—they get suicidal and throw themselves over the cliffs.”

“Oh,” Eddie said, biting hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from bursting into mad cackles. “*Those* lemons. I thought you meant the ones you use to make lemonade.”

“Fuckin wank,” Henry said, but he spoke with the indulgent good nature the great and eminent sometimes reserve for the small and uninformed. “Anyway, my *point* is that all these people who are flockin to invest in Microsoft and Macintosh and, I don’t know, fuckin Nervous Norvus Speed Dial Chips, all they’re gonna do is make Bill Fuckin Gates and Steve Fuckin Jobs-a-rino rich. This computer shit is gonna crash and burn by 1995, all the experts say so,

and the people investin in it? Fuckin lemons, throwin themselves over the cliffs and into the fuckin ocean.”

“Just fuckin lemons,” Eddie agreed, and sprawled back on the still-warm roof so Henry wouldn’t see how close he was to losing it entirely. He was seeing billions of Sunkist lemons trotting toward these high cliffs, all of them wearing red jogging shorts and little white sneakers, like M&Ms in a TV ad.

“Yeah, but I wish I’d gotten into that fuckin Microsoft in ’82,” Henry said. “Do you realize that shares that were sellin for fifteen bucks back then are now sellin for thirty-five? Oh, man!”

“Lemons,” Eddie had said dreamily, watching the sunset’s colors begin to fade. At that point he’d had less than a month to live in his world—the one where Co-Op City was in Brooklyn and always had been—and Henry had less than a month to live, period.

“Yeah,” Henry had said, lying down beside him, “but man, I wish I coulda gotten in back in ’82.”

FIFTEEN

Now, still holding Tower’s hand, he said: “I’m from the future. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know that *he* says you are, yes.” Tower jerked his head toward Roland, then tried to pull his hand free. Eddie held on.

“Listen to me, Cal. If you listen and then act on what I tell you, you can earn what that vacant lot of yours would be worth on the real estate market five, maybe even ten times over.”

“Big talk from a man who isn’t even wearing socks,” Tower said, and once again tried to pull his hand free. Again Eddie held it. Once he supposed he wouldn’t have been able to do that, but his hands were stronger now. So was his will.

“Big talk from a man who’s seen the future,” he corrected. “And the future is computers, Cal. The future is Microsoft. Can you remember that?”

“I can,” Aaron said. “Microsoft.”

“Never heard of it,” Tower said.

“No,” Eddie agreed, “I don’t think it even exists yet. But it will, soon, and it’s going to be huge. Computers, okay? Computers for everybody, or at least that was the plan. *Will be* the plan. The guy in charge is Bill Gates. Always Bill, never William.”

It occurred to him briefly that since this world was different from the one in which he and Jake had grown up—the world of Claudia y Inez Bachman instead of Beryl Evans—that maybe the big computer genius here *wouldn’t* be Gates; could be someone named Chin Ho Fuk, for all Eddie knew. But he also knew that wasn’t likely. This world was very close to his: same cars, same brand names (Coke and Pepsi rather than Nozz-A-La), same people on the currency. He thought he could count on Bill Gates (not to mention Steve Jobs-a-rino) showing up when he was supposed to.

In one way, he didn’t even care. Calvin Tower was in many respects a total shithead. On the other hand, Tower had stood up to Andolini and Balazar for as long as he had to. He’d held onto the vacant lot. And now Roland had the bill of sale in his pocket. They owed Tower a fair return for what he’d sold them. It had nothing to do with how much or how little they liked the guy, which was probably a good thing for old Cal.

“This Microsoft stuff,” Eddie said, “you can pick it up for fifteen dollars a share in 1982. By 1987—which is when I sort of went on permanent vacation—those shares will be worth thirty-five apiece. That’s a hundred per cent gain. A little more.”

“Says you,” Tower said, and finally succeeded in pulling his hand free.

“If he says so,” Roland said, “it’s the truth.”

“Say thanks,” Eddie said. It occurred to him that he was suggesting that Tower take a fairly big leap based on a stone junkie’s observations, but he thought that in this case he could do that.

“Come on,” Roland said, and made that twirling gesture with his fingers. “If we’re going to see the writer, let’s go.”

Eddie slid behind the wheel of Cullum's car, suddenly sure that he would never see either Tower or Aaron Deepneau again. With the exception of Pere Callahan, none of them would. The partings had begun.

"Do well," he said to them. "May ya do well."

"And you," Deepneau said.

"Yes," Tower said, and for once he didn't sound a bit grudging. "Good luck to you both. Long days and happy nights, or whatever it is."

There was just room to turn around without backing, and Eddie was glad—he wasn't quite ready for reverse, at least not yet.

As Eddie drove back toward the Rocket Road, Roland looked over his shoulder and waved. This was highly unusual behavior for him, and the knowledge must have shown on Eddie's face.

"It's the end-game now," Roland said. "All I've worked for and waited for all the long years. The end is coming. I feel it. Don't you?"

Eddie nodded. It was like that point in a piece of music when all the instruments begin rushing toward some inevitable crashing climax.

"Susannah?" Roland asked.

"Still alive."

"Mia?"

"Still in control."

"The baby?"

"Still coming."

"And Jake? Father Callahan?"

Eddie stopped at the road, looked both ways, then made his turn.

"No," he said. "From them I haven't heard. What about you?"

Roland shook his own head. From Jake, somewhere in the future with just an ex-Catholic priest and a billy-bumbler for protection, there was only silence. Roland hoped the boy was all right.

For the time being, he could do no more.

STAVE: *Commala-me-mine*
You have to walk the line.

*When you finally get the thing you need
It makes you feel so fine.*

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-nine!*
It makes ya feel fine!
*But if you'd have the thing you need
You have to walk the line.*

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10TH STANZA



ONE

“John Fitzgerald Kennedy died this afternoon at Parkland Memorial Hospital.”

This voice, this grieving voice: Walter Cronkite’s voice, in a dream.
“America’s last gunslinger is dead. O Discordia!”

TWO

As Mia left room 1919 of the New York Plaza–Park (soon to be the Regal U.N. Plaza, a Sombra/North Central project, O Discordia), Susannah fell into a swoon. From a swoon she passed into a savage dream filled with savage news.

THREE

The next voice is that of Chet Huntley, co-anchor of *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. It’s also—in some way she cannot understand—the voice of Andrew, her chauffeur.

“Diem and Nhu are dead,” says that voice. “Now do slip the dogs of war, the tale of woe begins; from here the way to Jericho Hill is paved with blood and sin. Ah, Discordia! Charyou tree! Come, reap!”

Where am I?

She looks around and sees a concrete wall packed with a jostling intaglio of names, slogans, and obscene drawings. In the middle, where anyone sitting on the bunk must see it, is this greeting: HELLO NIGGER WELCOME TO OXFORD DON'T LET THE SUN SET ON YOU HERE!

The crotch of her slacks is damp. The underwear beneath is downright soaked, and she remembers why: although the bail bondsman was notified well in advance, the cops held onto them as long as possible, cheerfully ignoring the increasing chorus of pleas for a bathroom break. No toilets in the cells; no sinks; not even a tin bucket. You didn't need to be a quiz-kid on *Twenty-one* to figure it out; they were *supposed* to piss in their pants, supposed to get in touch with their essential animal natures, and eventually she had, *she*, Odetta Holmes—

No, she thinks, *I am Susannah. Susannah Dean. I've been taken prisoner again, jailed again, but I am still I.*

She hears voices from beyond this wing of jail cells, voices which for her sum up the present. She's supposed to think they're coming from a TV out in the jail's office, she assumes, but it's got to be a trick. Or some ghoul's idea of a joke. Why else would Frank McGee be saying President Kennedy's brother, Bobby, is dead? Why would Dave Garroway from the *Today* show be saying that the President's little boy is dead, that John-John has been killed in a plane crash? What sort of awful lie is that to hear as you sit in a stinking southern jail with your wet underpants clinging to your crotch? Why is "Buffalo" Bob Smith of the *Howdy Doody* show yelling "Cowabunga, kids, Martin Luther King is dead"? And the kids all screaming back, "Commala-come-Yay! We love the things ya say! Only good nigger's a dead nigger, so kill a coon *today!*"

The bail bondsman will be here soon. That's what she needs to hold onto, *that*.

She goes to the bars and grips them. Yes, this is Oxford Town, all right, Oxford all over again, two men dead by the light of the moon, somebody better investigate soon. But she's going to get out, and she'll

fly away, fly away, fly away home, and not long after that there will be an entirely new world to explore, with a new person to love and a new person to *be*. Commala-come-come, the journey's just begun.

Oh, but that's a lie. The journey is almost over. Her heart knows this.

Down the hall a door opens and footsteps come clicking toward her. She looks in that direction—eagerly, hoping for the bondsman, or a deputy with a ring of keys—but instead it's a black woman in a pair of stolen shoes. It's her old self. It's Odetta Holmes. Didn't go to Morehouse, but did go to Columbia. And to all those coffee houses down in the Village. And to the Castle on the Abyss, that house, too.

"Listen to me," Odetta says. "No one can get you out of this but yourself, girl."

"You want to enjoy those legs while you got em, honey!" The voice she hears coming out of her mouth is rough and confrontational on top, scared underneath. The voice of Detta Walker. "You goan lose em fore long! They goan be cut off by the A train! That fabled A train! Man named Jack Mort goan push you off the platform in the Christopher Street station!"

Odetta looks at her calmly and says, "The A train doesn't stop there. It's *never* stopped there."

"What the fuck you *talkin* about, bitch?"

Odetta is not fooled by the angry voice or the profanity. She knows who she's talking to. And she knows what she's talking about. The column of truth has a hole in it. These are not the voices of the gramophone but those of our dead friends. There are ghosts in the rooms of ruin. "Go back to the Dogan, Susannah. And remember what I say: only you can save yourself. Only you can lift yourself out of Discordia."

FOUR

Now it's the voice of David Brinkley, saying that someone named Stephen King was struck and killed by a minivan while walking near his home in Lovell, a small town in western Maine. King was fifty-two, he says, the author of many novels, most notably *The Stand*, *The Shining*, and *'Salem's Lot*. Ah Discordia, Brinkley says, the world grows darker.

FIVE

Odetta Holmes, the woman Susannah once was, points through the bars of the cell and past her. She says it again: "Only you can save yourself. But the way of the gun is the way of damnation as well as salvation; in the end there is no difference."

Susannah turns to look where the finger is pointing, and is filled with horror at what she sees: The blood! Dear God, the *blood!* There is a bowl filled with blood, and in it some monstrous dead thing, a dead baby that's not human, and has she killed it herself?

"No!" she screams. "No, I will never! *I will NEVER!*"

"Then the gunslinger will die and the Dark Tower will fall," says the terrible woman standing in the corridor, the terrible woman who is wearing Trudy Damascus's shoes. "Discordia indeed."

Susannah closes her eyes. Can she *make* herself swoon? Can she swoon herself right out of this cell, this terrible world?

She does. She falls forward into the darkness and the soft beeping of machinery and the last voice she hears is that of Walter Cronkite, telling her that Diem and Nhu are dead, astronaut Alan Shepard is dead, Lyndon Johnson is dead, Richard Nixon is dead, Elvis Presley is dead, Rock Hudson is dead, Roland of Gilead is dead, Eddie of New York is dead, Jake of New York is dead, the world is dead, the *worlds*, the Tower is falling, a trillion universes are merging, and all is Discordia, all is ruin, all is ended.

SIX

Susannah opened her eyes and looked around wildly, gasping for breath. She almost fell out of the chair in which she was sitting. It was one of those capable of rolling back and forth along the instrument panels filled with knobs and switches and blinking lights. Overhead were the black-and-white TV screens. She was back in the Dogan. Oxford

(Diem and Nhu are dead)

had only been a dream. A dream within a dream, if you pleased. This was another, but marginally better.

Most of the TV screens which had been showing pictures of Calla Bryn Sturgis the last time she'd been here were now broadcasting either snow or test-patterns. On one, however, was the nineteenth-floor corridor of the Plaza-Park Hotel. The camera rolled down it toward the elevators, and Susannah realized that these were Mia's eyes she was looking through.

My eyes, she thought. Her anger was thin, but she sensed it could be fed. Would *have* to be fed, if she was ever to regard the unspeakable thing she'd seen in her dream. The thing in the corner of her Oxford jail cell. The thing in the bowl of blood.

They're my eyes. She hijacked them, that's all.

Another TV screen showed Mia arriving in the elevator lobby, examining the buttons, and then pushing the one marked with the DOWN arrow. *We're off to see the midwife*, Susannah thought, looking grimly up at the screen, and then barked a short, humorless laugh. *Oh, we're off to see the midwife, the wonderful midwife of Oz. Because because because because be-CAUZZZ . . . Because of the wonderful things she does!*

Here were the dials she'd reset at some considerable inconvenience—hell, *pain*. EMOTIONAL TEMP still at 72. The toggle-switch marked CHAP still turned to ASLEEP, and in the monitor above it the chap thus still in black-and-white like everything else: no sign of those disquieting blue eyes. The absurd LABOR FORCE oven-dial was still at 2,

but she saw that most of the lights which had been amber the last time she'd been in this room had now turned red. There were more cracks in the floor and the ancient dead soldier in the corner had lost his head: the increasingly heavy vibration of the machinery had toppled the skull from the top of its spine, and it now laughed up at the fluorescent lights in the ceiling.

The needle on the **SUSANNAH-MIO** readout had reached the end of the yellow zone; as Susannah watched, it edged into the red. Danger, danger, Diem and Nhu are dead. Papa Doc Duvalier is dead. Jackie Kennedy is dead.

She tried the controls one after another, confirming what she already knew: they were locked in place. Mia might not have been able to change the settings in the first place, but locking things up once those settings were to her liking? That much she had been able to do.

There was a crackle and squall from the overhead speakers, loud enough to make her jump. Then, coming to her through heavy bursts of static, Eddie's voice.

"Suze! . . . ay! . . . Ear me? Burn . . . ay! Do it before . . . ever . . . posed . . . id! Do you hear me?"

On the screen she thought of as Mia-Vision, the doors of the central elevator car opened. The hijacking mommy-bitch got on. Susannah barely noticed. She snatched up the microphone and pushed the toggle-switch on the side. "Eddie!" she shouted. "I'm in 1999! The girls walk around with their bellies showing and their bra-straps—" Christ, what was she blathering on about? She made a mighty effort to sweep her mind clear.

"Eddie, I don't understand you! Say it again, sugar!"

For a moment there was nothing but more static, plus the occasional spooky wail of feedback. She was about to try the mike again when Eddie's voice returned, this time a little clearer.

"Burn up . . . day! Jake . . . Pere Cal . . . hold on! Burn . . . before she . . . to wherever she . . . have the kid! If you . . . knowledge!"

"I hear you, I acknowledge that much!" she cried. She was clutching the silver mike so tightly that it trembled in her grasp. "I'm

in 1999! June of 1999! But I'm not understanding you as well as I need to, sug! Say again, and tell me if you're all right!"

But Eddie was gone.

After calling for him half a dozen times and getting nothing but that blur of static, she set the microphone down again and tried to figure out what he had been trying to tell her. Trying also to set aside her joy just in knowing that Eddie could still try to tell her *anything*.

"Burn up day," she said. That part, at least, had come through loud and clear. "Burn up *the* day. As in kill some time." She thought that almost had to be right. Eddie wanted Susannah to slow Mia down. Maybe because Jake and Pere Callahan were coming? About that part she wasn't so sure, and she didn't much like it, anyway. Jake was a gunslinger, all right, but he was also only a kid. And Susannah had an idea that the Dixie Pig was full of very nasty people.

Meanwhile, on Mia-Vision, the elevator doors were opening again. The hijacking mommy-bitch had reached the lobby. For the time being Susannah put Eddie, Jake, and Pere Callahan out of her mind. She was recalling how Mia had refused to *come forward*, even when their Susannah-Mio legs were threatening to disappear right out from under their shared Susannah-Mio body. Because she was, to misquote some old poem or other, alone and afraid in a world she never made.

Because she was *shy*.

And my goodness, things in the lobby of the Plaza-Park had changed while the hijacking mommy-bitch had been upstairs waiting for her phone call. They had changed a *lot*.

Susannah leaned forward with her elbows propped on the edge of the Dogan's main instrument panel and her chin propped on the palms of her hands.

This might be interesting.

SEVEN

Mia stepped out of the elevator, then attempted to step right back in. She thumped against the doors instead, and hard enough to make her teeth come together with a little ivory click. She looked around, bewildered, at first not sure how it was that the little descending room had disappeared.

Susannah! What happened to it?

No answer from the dark-skinned woman whose face she now wore, but Mia discovered she didn't actually need one. She could see the place where the door slid in and out. If she pushed the button the door would probably open again, but she had to conquer her sudden strong desire to go back up to Room 1919. Her business there was done. Her *real* business was somewhere beyond the lobby doors.

She looked toward those doors with the sort of lip-biting dismay which may escalate into panic at a single rough word or angry look.

She'd been upstairs for a little over an hour, and during that time the lobby's early-afternoon lull had ended. Half a dozen taxis from La Guardia and Kennedy had pulled up in front of the hotel at roughly the same time; so had a Japanese tour-bus from Newark Airport. The tour had originated in Sapporo and consisted of fifty couples with reservations at the Plaza-Park. Now the lobby was rapidly filling with chattering people. Most had dark, slanted eyes and shiny black hair, and were wearing oblong objects around their necks on straps. Every now and then one would raise one of these objects and point it at someone else. There would be a brilliant flash, laughter, and cries of *Domo! Domo!* There were three lines forming at the desk. The beautiful woman who'd checked Mia in during quieter times had been joined by two other clerks, all of them working like mad. The high-ceilinged lobby echoed with laughter and mingled conversation in some strange tongue that sounded to Mia like the twittering of birds. The banks of mirror-glass added to the general confusion by making the lobby seem twice as full as it actually was.

Mia cringed back, wondering what to do.

"Front!" yelled a desk clerk, and banged a bell. The sound seemed to shoot across Mia's confused thoughts like a silver arrow. "Front,

please!”

A grinning man—black hair slicked against his skull, yellow skin, slanting eyes behind round spectacles—came rushing up to Mia, holding one of the oblong flash-things. Mia steeled herself to kill him if he attacked.

“Ah-yoo takea pickcha me and my wife?”

Offering her the flash-thing. Wanting her to take it from him. Mia cringed away, wondering if it ran on radiation, if the flashes might hurt her baby.

Susannah! What do I do?

No answer. Of course not, she really couldn't expect Susannah's help after what had just happened, but . . .

The grinning man was still thrusting the flash-machine at her. He looked a trifle puzzled, but mostly undaunted. “Yooo take-ah pickcha, preese?” And put the oblong thing in her hand. He stepped back and put his arm around a lady who looked exactly like him except for her shiny black hair, which was cut across her forehead in what Mia thought of as a wench-clip. Even the round glasses were the same.

“No,” Mia said. “No, cry pardon . . . no.” The panic was very close now and very bright, whirling and gibbering right in front of her

(yooo take-ah pickcha, we kill-ah baby)

and Mia's impulse was to drop the oblong flasher on the floor. That might break it, however, and release the devilry that powered the flashes.

She put it down carefully instead, smiling apologetically at the astonished Japanese couple (the man still had his arm around his wife), and hurried across the lobby in the direction of the little shop. Even the piano music had changed; instead of the former soothing melodies, it was pounding out something jagged and dissonant, a kind of musical headache.

I need a shirt because there's blood on this one. I'll get the shirt and then I'll go to the Dixie Pig, Sixty-first and Lexington . . . Lexington, I mean, Lexington . . . and then I'll have my baby. I'll have my

baby and all this confusion will end. I'll think of how I was afraid and I'll laugh.

But the shop was also full. Japanese women examined souvenirs and twittered to each other in their bird-language while they waited for their husbands to get them checked in. Mia could see a counter stacked with shirts, but there were women all around it, examining them. And there was another line at the counter.

Susannah, what should I do? You've got to help me!

No answer. She was in there, Mia could feel her, but she would not help. *And really, she thought, would I, if I were in her position?*

Well, perhaps she would. Someone would have to offer her the right inducement, of course, but—

The only inducement I want from you is the truth, Susannah said coldly.

Someone brushed against Mia as she stood in the door to the shop and she turned, her hands coming up. If it was an enemy, or some enemy of her chap, she would claw his eyes out.

“Solly,” said a smiling black-haired woman. Like the man, she was holding out one of the oblong flash-things. In the middle was a circular glass eye that stared at Mia. She could see her own face in it, small and dark and bewildered. “You take pickcha, preese? Take pickcha me and my fliend?”

Mia had no idea what the woman was saying or what she wanted or what the flash-makers were supposed to do. She only knew that there were too many people, they were everywhere, this was a madhouse. Through the shop window she could see that the front of the hotel was likewise thronged. There were yellow cars and long black cars with windows you couldn't look into (although the people inside could doubtless look out), and a huge silver conveyance that sat rumbling at the curb. Two men in green uniforms were in the street, blowing silver whistles. Somewhere close by something began to rattle loudly. To Mia, who had never heard a jackhammer, it sounded like a speed-shooter gun, but no one outside was throwing himself to the sidewalk; no one even looked alarmed.

How was she supposed to get to the Dixie Pig on her own? Richard P. Sayre had said he was sure Susannah could help her find it, but Susannah had fallen stubbornly silent, and Mia herself was on the verge of losing control entirely.

Then Susannah spoke up again.

If I help you a little now—get you to a quiet place where you can catch your breath and at least do something about your shirt—will you give me some straight answers?

About what?

About the baby, Mia. And about the mother. About you.

I did!

I don't think so. I don't think you're any more elemental than . . . well, than I am. I want the truth.

Why?

I want the truth, Susannah repeated, and then fell silent, refusing to respond to any more of Mia's questions. And when yet another grinning little man approached her with yet another flash-thing, Mia's nerve broke. Right now just getting across the hotel lobby looked like more than she could manage on her own; how was she supposed to get all the way to this Dixie Pig place? After so many years in

(Fedic)

(Discordia)

(the Castle on the Abyss)

to be among so many people made her feel like screaming. And after all, why not tell the dark-skinned woman what little she knew? She—Mia, daughter of none, mother of one—was firmly in charge. What harm in a little truth-telling?

All right, she said. *I'll do as you ask, Susannah or Odetta or whoever you are. Just help me. Get me out of here.*

Susannah Dean *came forward*.

EIGHT

There was a women's restroom adjacent to the hotel bar, around the corner from the piano player. Two of the yellow-skinned, black-haired ladies with the tipped eyes were at the basins, one washing her hands, the other fixing her hair, both of them twittering in their birdy-lingo. Neither paid any attention to the *kokujin* lady who went past them and to the stalls. A moment later they left her in blessed silence except for the faint music drifting down from the overhead speakers.

Mia saw how the latch worked and engaged it. She was about to sit down on the toilet seat when Susannah said: *Turn it inside out.*

What?

The shirt, woman. Turn it inside out, for your father's sake!

For a moment Mia didn't. She was too stunned.

The shirt was a rough-woven callum-ka, the sort of simple pullover favored by both sexes in the rice-growing country during cooler weather. It had what Odetta Holmes would have called a boat-neck. No buttons, so yes, it could very easily be turned inside out, but—

Susannah, clearly impatient: *Are you going to stand there commala-moon all day? Turn it inside out! And tuck it into your jeans this time.*

W . . . Why?

It'll give you a different look, Susannah replied promptly, but that wasn't the reason. What she wanted was a look at herself below the waist. If her legs were Mia's then they were quite probably white legs. She was fascinated (and a little sickened) by the idea that she had become a kind of tu-tone halfbreed.

Mia paused a moment longer, fingertips rubbing the rough weave of the shirt above the worst of the bloodstains, which was over her left breast. Over her heart. Turn it inside out! In the lobby, a dozen half-baked ideas had gone through her head (using the scrimshaw turtle to fascinate the people in the shop had probably been the only one even close to workable), but simply turning the damned thing inside out hadn't been one of them. Which only showed, she supposed, how close to total panic she had been. But now . . .

Did she need Susannah for the brief time she would be in this overcrowded and disorienting city, which was so different from the

quiet rooms of the castle and the quiet streets of Fedic? Just to get from here to Sixty-first Street and Lexing-worth?

Lexing ton, said the woman trapped inside her. *Lexington. You keep forgetting that, don't you?*

Yes. Yes, she did. And there was no reason to forget such a simple thing, maybe she hadn't been to Morehouse, Morehouse or no house, but she wasn't stupid. So why—

What? she demanded suddenly. *What are you smiling about?*

Nothing, said the woman inside . . . but she was still smiling. Almost grinning. Mia could feel it, and she didn't like it. Upstairs in Room 1919, Susannah had been screaming at her in a mixture of terror and fury, accusing Mia of betraying the man she loved and the one she followed. Which had been true enough to make Mia ashamed. She didn't enjoy feeling that way, but she'd liked the woman inside better when she was howling and crying and totally discombobulated. The smile made her nervous. This version of the brown-skinned woman was trying to turn the tables on her; maybe thought she *had* turned the tables. Which was impossible, of course, she was under the protection of the King, but . . .

Tell me why you're smiling!

Oh, it don't amount to much, Susannah said, only now she sounded like the other one, whose name was Detta. Mia did more than dislike that one. She was a little afraid of that one. *It's just that there was this fella named Sigmund Freud, honey-chile—honky muhfuh, but not stupid. And he said that when someone always be f'gittin sump'in, might be because that person want to be f'gittin it.*

That's stupid, Mia said coldly. Beyond the stall where she was having this mental conversation, the door opened and two more ladies came in—no, at least three and maybe four—twittering in their birdy-language and giggling in a way that made Mia clamp her teeth together. *Why would I want to forget the place where they're waiting to help me have my baby?*

Well, dis Freud—dis smart cigar-smoking Viennese honky muhfuh—he claim dat we got dis mind under our mind, he call it the

unconscious or subconscious or some fuckin conscious. Now I ain't claimin dere is such a thing, only dat he say dere was.

(Burn up the day, Eddie had told her, that much she was sure of, and she would do her best, only hoping that she wasn't working on getting Jake and Callahan killed by doing it.)

Ole Honky Freud, Detta went on, he say in lots of ways de subconscious or unconscious mind smarter dan de one on top. Cut through de bullshit faster dan de one on top. An maybe yours understand what I been tellin you all along, that yo' frien Sayre nothin but a lyin rat-ass muhfuh goan steal yo baby and, I dunno, maybe cut it up in dis bowl and den feed it to the vampires like dey was dawgs an dat baby nuffin but a big-ass bowl o' Alpo or Purina Vampire Ch—

Shut up! Shut up your lying face!

Out at the basins, the birdy-women laughed so shrilly that Mia felt her eyeballs shiver and threaten to liquefy in their sockets. She wanted to rush out and seize their heads and drive them into the mirrors, wanted to do it again and again until their blood was splashed all the way up to the ceiling and their *brains*—

Temper, temper, said the woman inside, and now it sounded like Susannah again.

She lies! That bitch LIES!

No, Susannah replied, and the conviction in that single short word was enough to send an arrow of fear into Mia's heart. *She says what's on her mind, no argument there, but she doesn't lie. Go on, Mia, turn your shirt inside out.*

With a final eye-watering burst of laughter, the birdy-women left the bathroom. Mia pulled the shirt off over her head, baring Susannah's breasts, which were the color of coffee with just the smallest splash of milk added in. Her nipples, which had always been as small as berries, were now much larger. Nipples craving a mouth.

There were only the faintest maroon spots on the inside of the shirt. Mia put it back on, then unbuttoned the front of her jeans so she could tuck it in. Susannah stared, fascinated, at the point just above her pubic thatch. Here her skin lightened to a color that might have

been milk with the smallest splash of coffee added in. Below were the white legs of the woman she'd met on the castle allure. Susannah knew that if Mia lowered her jeans all the way, she'd see the scabbed and scratched shins she had already observed as Mia—the *real* Mia—looked out over Discordia toward the red glow marking the castle of the King.

Something about this frightened Susannah terribly, and after a moment's consideration (it took no longer), the reason came to her. If Mia had only replaced those parts of her legs that Odetta Holmes had lost to the subway train when Jack Mort pushed her onto the tracks she would have been white only from the knees or so down. But her *thighs* were white, too, and her groin area was turning. What strange lycanthropy was this?

De body-stealin kind, Detta replied cheerfully. *Pretty soon you be havin a white belly . . . white breas's . . . white neck . . . white cheeks . . .*

Stop it, Susannah warned, but when had Detta Walker ever listened to her warnings? Hers or anybody's?

And den, las' of all, you have a white brain, girl! A Mia brain! And won't dat be fahn? Sho! You be all Mia den! Nobody give you no shit if you want to ride right up front on de bus!

Then the shirt was drawn over her hips; the jeans were again buttoned up. Mia sat down on the toilet ring that way. In front of her, scrawled on the door, was this graffito: BANGO SKANK AWAITS THE KING!

Who is this Bango Skank? Mia asked.

I have no idea.

I think . . . It was hard, but Mia forced herself. *I think I owe you a word of thanks.*

Susannah's response was cold and immediate. *Thank me with the truth.*

First tell me why you'd help me at all, after I . . .

This time Mia couldn't finish. She liked to think of herself as brave—as brave as she had to be in the service of her chap, at least—but this time she couldn't finish.

After you betrayed the man I love to men who are, when you get right down to it, footsoldiers of the Crimson King? After you decided it would be all right for them to kill mine so long as you could keep yours? Is that what you want to know?

Mia hated to hear it spoken of that way, but bore it. *Had* to bear it. *Yes, lady, if you like.*

It was the other one who replied this time, in that voice—harsh, cawing, laughing, triumphant, and hateful—that was even worse than the shrill laughter of the birdy-women. Worse by far.

Because mah boys got away, dass why! Fucked those honkies mos' righteous! The ones dey didn't shoot all blowed to smithereens!

Mia felt a deep stirring of unease. Whether it was true or not, the bad laughing woman clearly *believed* it was true. And if Roland and Eddie Dean were still out there, wasn't it possible the Crimson King wasn't as strong, as all-powerful, as she had been told? Wasn't it even possible that she *had* been misled about—

Stop it, stop it, you can't think that way!

There's another reason I helped. The harsh one was gone and the other was back. At least for now.

What?

It's my baby, too, Susannah said. *I don't want it killed.*

I don't believe you.

But she did. Because the woman inside was right: Mordred Deschain of Gilead and Discordia belonged to both of them. The bad one might not care, but the other, Susannah, clearly felt the chap's tidal pull. And if she was right about Sayre and whoever waited for her at the Dixie Pig . . . if they were liars and cozeners . . .

Stop it. Stop. I have nowhere else to go but to them.

You do, Susannah said quickly. *With Black Thirteen you can go anywhere.*

You don't understand. He'd follow me. Follow it.

You're right, I don't understand. She actually did, or *thought* she did, but . . . *Burn up the day,* he'd said.

All right, I'll try to explain. I don't understand everything myself—there are things I don't know—but I'll tell you what I can.

Thank y—

Before she could finish, Susannah was falling again, like Alice down the rabbit-hole. Through the toilet, through the floor, through the pipes beneath the floor, and into another world.

NINE

No castle at the end of her drop, not this time. Roland had told them a few stories of his wandering years—the vampire nurses and little doctors of Eluria, the walking waters of East Downe, and, of course, the story of his doomed first love—and this was a little like falling into one of those tales. Or, perhaps, into one of the oat-operas (“adult Westerns,” as they were called) on the still relatively new ABC-TV network: *Sugarfoot*, with Ty Hardin, *Maverick*, with James Garner, or—Odetta Holmes’s personal favorite—*Cheyenne*, starring Clint Walker. (Odetta had once written a letter to ABC programming, suggesting they could simultaneously break new ground and open up a whole new audience if they did a series about a wandering Negro cowboy in the years after the Civil War. She never got an answer. She supposed writing the letter in the first place had been ridiculous, a waste of time.)

There was a livery stable with a sign out front reading **TACK MENDED CHEAP**. The sign over the hotel promised **QUIET ROOMS, GUD BEDS**. There were at least five saloons. Outside one of them, a rusty robot that ran on squalling treads turned its bulb head back and forth, blaring a come-on to the empty town from the horn-shaped speaker in the center of its rudimentary face: “Girls, girls, *girls!* Some are humie and some are cybie, but who cares, you can’t tell the difference, they do what you want without complaint, won’t is not in their vo-CAB-ulary, they give satisfaction with every action! Girls, girls, girls! Some are cybie, some are real, you can’t tell the

difference when you cop a feel! They do what you want! They want what *you* want!”

Walking beside Susannah was the beautiful young white woman with the swollen belly, scratched legs, and shoulder-length black hair. Now, as they walked below the gaudy false front of **THE FEDIC GOOD-TIME SALOON, BAR, AND DANCE EMPORIUM**, she was wearing a faded plaid dress which advertised her advanced state of pregnancy in a way that made it seem freakish, almost a sign of the apocalypse. The *huaraches* of the castle allure had been replaced by scuffed and battered shor’boots. Both of them were wearing shor’boots, and the heels clumped hollowly on the boardwalk.

From one of the deserted barrooms farther along came the herky-jerky jazz of a jagtime tune, and a snatch of some old poem came to Susannah: *A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute Saloon!*

She looked over the batwing doors and was not in the least surprised to see the words **SERVICE’S MALAMUTE SALOON**.

She slowed long enough to peer over the batwing doors and saw a chrome piano playing itself, dusty keys popping up and down, just a mechanical music-box no doubt built by the ever-popular North Central Positronics, entertaining a room that was empty except for a dead robot and, in the far corner, two skeletons working through the process of final decomposition, the one that would take them from bone to dust.

Farther along, at the end of the town’s single street, loomed the castle wall. It was so high and so wide it blotted out most of the sky.

Susannah abruptly knocked her fist against the side of her head. Then she held her hands out in front of her and snapped her fingers.

“What are you doing?” Mia asked. “Tell me, I beg.”

“Making sure I’m here. Physically here.”

“You are.”

“So it seems. But how can that be?”

Mia shook her head, indicating that she didn’t know. On this, at least, Susannah was inclined to believe her. There was no dissenting

word from Detta, either.

“This isn’t what I expected,” Susannah said, looking around. “It’s not what I expected at all.”

“Nay?” asked her companion (and without much interest). Mia was moving in that awkward but strangely endearing duck-footed waddle that seems to best suit women in the last stages of their carry. “And what was it ye did expect, Susannah?”

“Something more medieval, I guess. More like that.” She pointed at the castle.

Mia shrugged as if to say take it or leave it, and then said, “Is the other one with you? The nasty one?”

Detta, she meant. Of course. “She’s always with me. She’s a part of me just as your chap is a part of you.” Although how Mia could be pregnant when it had been Susannah who caught the fuck was something Susannah was still dying to know.

“I’ll soon be delivered of mine,” Mia said. “Will ya never be delivered of yours?”

“I thought I was,” Susannah said truthfully. “She came back. Mostly, I think, to deal with you.”

“I hate her.”

“I know.” And Susannah knew more. Mia feared Detta, as well. Feared her big-big.

“If she speaks, our palaver ends.”

Susannah shrugged. “She comes when she comes and speaks when she speaks. She doesn’t ask my permission.”

Ahead of them on this side of the street was an arch with a sign above it:

**FEDIC STATION
MONO PATRICIA DISCONTINUED
THUMBPRINT READER INOPERATIVE
SHOW TICKET
NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS THANKS YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE**

The sign didn't interest Susannah as much as the two things that lay on the filthy station platform beyond it: a child's doll, decayed to little more than a head and one floppy arm, and, beyond it, a grinning mask. Although the mask appeared to be made of steel, a good deal of it seemed to have rotted like flesh. The teeth poking out of the grin were canine fangs. The eyes were glass. Lenses, Susannah felt sure, no doubt also crafted by North Central Positronics. Surrounding the mask were a few shreds and tatters of green cloth, what had undoubtedly once been this thing's hood. Susannah had no trouble putting together the remains of the doll and the remains of the Wolf; her mamma, as Detta sometimes liked to tell folks (especially horny boys in roadhouse parking lots), didn't raise no fools.

"This is where they brought them," she said. "Where the Wolves brought the twins they stole from Calla Bryn Sturgis. Where they—what?—operated on them."

"Not just from Calla Bryn Sturgis," Mia said indifferently, "but aye. And once the babbies were here, they were taken there. A place you'll also recognize, I've no doubt."

She pointed across Fedic's single street and farther up. The last building before the castle wall abruptly ended the town was a long Quonset hut with sides of filthy corrugated metal and a rusty curved roof. The windows running along the side Susannah could see had been boarded up. Also along that side was a steel hitching rail. To it were tied what looked like seventy horses, all of them gray. Some had fallen over and lay with their legs sticking straight out. One or two had turned their heads toward the women's voices and then seemed to freeze in that position. It was very un-horselike behavior, but of course these weren't real horses. They were robots, or cyborgs, or whichever one of Roland's terms you might like to use. Many of them seemed to have run down or worn out.

In front of this building was a sign on a rusting steel plate. It read:

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.
Fedic Headquarters

Arc 16 Experimental Station

Maximum Security VERBAL ENTRY CODE REQUIRED EYEPRINT REQUIRED

“It’s another Dogan, isn’t it?” Susannah asked.

“Well, yes and no,” Mia said. “It’s the Dogan of all Dogans, actually.”

“Where the Wolves brought the children.”

“Aye, and will bring them again,” Mia said. “For the King’s work will go forward after this disturbance raised by your friend the gunslinger is past. I have no doubt of it.”

Susannah looked at her with real curiosity. “How can you speak so cruel and yet be so serene?” she asked. “They bring children here and scoop out their heads like . . . like gourds. Children, who’ve harmed nobody! What they send back are great galumphing idiots who grow to their full size in agony and often die in much the same way. Would you be so sanguine, Mia, if *your* child was borne away across one of those saddles, shrieking for you and holding out his arms?”

Mia flushed, but was able to meet Susannah’s gaze. “Each must follow the road upon which ka has set her feet, Susannah of New York. Mine is to bear my chap, and raise him, and thus end your dinn’s quest. And his life.”

“It’s wonderful how everyone seems to think they know just what ka means for them,” Susannah said. “Don’t you think that’s wonderful?”

“I think you’re trying to make jest of me because you fear,” Mia said levelly. “If such makes you feel better, than aye, have on.” She spread her arms and made a little sarcastic bow over her great belly.

They had stopped on the boardwalk in front of a shop advertising **MILLINERY & LADIES’ WEAR** and across from the Fedic Dogan. Susannah thought: *Burn up the day, don’t forget that’s the other part*

of your job here. Kill time. Keep the oddity of a body we now seem to share in that women's restroom just as long as you possibly can.

"I'm not making fun," Susannah said. "I'm only asking you to put yourself in the place of all those other mothers."

Mia shook her head angrily, her inky hair flying around her ears and brushing at her shoulders. "I did not make their fate, lady, nor did they make mine. I'll save my tears, thank you. Would you hear my tale or not?"

"Yes, please."

"Then let us sit, for my legs are sorely tired."

TEN

In the Gin-Puppie Saloon, a few rickety storefronts back in the direction from which they'd come, they found chairs which would still bear their weight, but neither woman had any taste for the saloon itself, which smelled of dusty death. They dragged the chairs out to the boardwalk, where Mia sat with an audible sigh of relief.

"Soon," she said. "Soon you shall be delivered, Susannah of New York, and so shall I."

"Maybe, but I don't understand any of this. Least of all why you're rushing to this guy Sayre when you must know he serves the Crimson King."

"Hush!" Mia said. She sat with her legs apart and her huge belly rising before her, looking out across the empty street. "'Twas a man of the King who gave me a chance to fulfill the only destiny ka ever left me. Not Sayre but one much greater than he. Someone to whom Sayre answers. A man named Walter."

Susannah started at the name of Roland's ancient nemesis. Mia looked at her, gave her a grim smile.

"You know the name, I see. Well, maybe that'll save some talk. Gods know there's been far too much talk for my taste, already; it's

not what I was made for. I was made to bear my chap and raise him, no more than that. And no less.”

Susannah offered no reply. Killing was supposedly her trade, killing time her current chore, but in truth she had begun to find Mia’s singlemindedness a trifle tiresome. Not to mention frightening.

As if picking this thought up, Mia said: “I am what I am and I am content wi’ it. If others are not, what’s that to me? Spit on em!”

Spoken like Detta Walker at her feistiest, Susannah thought, but made no reply. It seemed safer to remain quiet.

After a pause, Mia went on. “Yet I’d be lying if I didn’t say that being here brings back . . . certain memories. Yar!” And, unexpectedly, she laughed. Just as unexpectedly, the sound was beautiful and melodic.

“Tell your tale,” Susannah said. “This time tell me all of it. We have time before the labor starts again.”

“Do you say so?”

“I do. Tell me.”

For a few moments Mia just looked out at the street with its dusty cover of oggan and its air of sad and ancient abandonment. As Susannah waited for story-time to commence, she for the first time became aware of the still, shadeless quality to Fedic. She could see everything very well, and there was no moon in the sky as on the castle allure, but she still hesitated to call this daytime.

It’s no time, a voice inside her whispered—she knew not whose. *This is a place between, Susannah; a place where shadows are cancelled and time holds its breath.*

Then Mia told her tale. It was shorter than Susannah had expected (shorter than she wanted, given Eddie’s abjuration to burn up the day), but it explained a great deal. More, actually, than Susannah had hoped for. She listened with growing rage, and why not? She had been more than raped that day in the ring of stones and bones, it seemed. She had been robbed, as well—the strangest robbery to which any woman had ever been subject.

And it was still going on.

ELEVEN

“Look out there, may it do ya fine,” said the bigbellied woman sitting beside Susannah on the boardwalk. “Look out and see Mia before she gained her name.”

Susannah looked into the street. At first she saw nothing but a cast-off waggon-wheel, a splintered (and long-dry) watering trough, and a starry silver thing that looked like the lost rowel from some cowpoke’s spur.

Then, slowly, a misty figure formed. It was that of a nude woman. Her beauty was blinding—even before she had come fully into view, Susannah knew that. Her age was any. Her black hair brushed her shoulders. Her belly was flat, her navel a cunning cup into which any man who ever loved women would be happy to dip his tongue. Susannah (or perhaps it was Detta) thought, *Hell, I could dip my own*. Hidden between the ghost-woman’s thighs was a cunning cleft. Here was a different tidal pull.

“That’s me when I came here,” said the pregnant version sitting beside Susannah. She spoke almost like a woman who is showing slides of her vacation. *That’s me at the Grand Canyon, that’s me in Seattle, that’s me at Grand Coulee Dam; that’s me on the Fedic high street, do it please ya*. The pregnant woman was also beautiful, but not in the same eerie way as the shade in the street. The pregnant woman looked a certain age, for instance—late twenties—and her face had been marked by experience. Much of it painful.

“I said I was an elemental—the one who made love to your dinh—but that was a lie. As I think you suspected. I lied not out of hope of gain, but only . . . I don’t know . . . from a kind of wishfulness, I suppose. I wanted the baby to be mine that way, too—”

“Yours from the start.”

“Aye, from the start—you say true.” They watched the nude woman walk up the street, arms swinging, muscles of her long back flexing, hips swaying from side to side in that eternal breathless clock of motion. She left no tracks on the oggan.

“I told you that the creatures of the invisible world were left behind when the *Prim* receded. Most died, as fishes and sea-animals will when cast up on a beach and left to strangle in the alien air. But there are always some who adapt, and I was one of those unfortunates. I wandered far and wide, and whenever I found men in the wastes, I took on the form you see.”

Like a model on a runway (one who has forgotten to actually put on the latest Paris fashion she’s supposed to be displaying), the woman in the street pivoted on the balls of her feet, buttocks tensing with lovely silken ease, creating momentary crescent-shaped hollows. She began to walk back, the eyes just below the straight cut of her bangs fixed on some distant horizon, her hair swinging beside ears that were without other ornament.

“When I found someone with a prick, I fucked him,” Mia said. “That much I had in common with the demon elemental who first tried to have congress with your soh and then did have congress with your dinh, and that also accounts for my lie, I suppose. And I found your dinh passing fair.” The tiniest bit of greed roughened her voice as she said this. The Detta in Susannah found it sexy. The Detta in Susannah bared her lips in a grin of gruesome understanding.

“I fucked them, and if they couldn’t break free I fucked them to death.” Matter-of-fact. *After the Grand Coulee, we went to Yosemite.* “Would you tell your dinh something for me, Susannah? If you see him again?”

“Aye, if you like.”

“Once he knew a man—a bad man—named Amos Depape, brother of the Roy Depape who ran with Eldred Jonas in Mejis. Your dinh believes Amos Depape was stung to death by a snake, and in a way he was . . . but the snake was me.”

Susannah said nothing.

“I didn’t fuck them for sex, I didn’t fuck them to kill them, although I didn’t care when they died and their pricks finally wilted out of me like melting icicles. In truth I didn’t know *why* I was fucking them, until I came here, to Fedic. In those early days there were still

men and women here; the Red Death hadn't come, do ye ken. The crack in the earth beyond town was there, but the bridge over it still stood strong and true. Those folk were stubborn, trying not to let go, even when the rumors that Castle Discordia was haunted began. The trains still came, although on no regular schedule—”

“The children?” Susannah asked. “The twins?” She paused. “The Wolves?”

“Nay, all of that was two dozen centuries later. Or more. But hear me now: there was one couple in Fedic who had a *baby*. You've no idea, Susannah of New York, how rare and wonderful that was in those days when most folk were as sterile as the elementals themselves, and those who weren't more often than not produced either slow mutants or monsters so terrible they were killed by their parents if they took more than a single breath. Most of them didn't. But *this* baby!”

She clasped her hands. Her eyes shone.

“It was round and pink and unblemished by so much as a portwine stain—perfect—and I knew after a single look what I'd been made for. I wasn't fucking for the sex of it, or because in coitus I was almost mortal, or because it brought death to most of my partners, but to have a baby like theirs. Like their Michael.”

She lowered her head slightly and said, “I would have taken him, you know. Would have gone to the man, fucked him until he was crazy, then whispered in his ear that he should kill his molly. And when she'd gone to the clearing at the end of the path, I would have fucked him dead and the baby—that beautiful little pink baby—would have been mine. D'you see?”

“Yes,” Susannah said. She felt faintly sick. In front of them, in the middle of the street, the ghostly woman made yet another turn and started back again. Farther down, the huckster-robot honked out his seemingly eternal spiel: *Girls, girls, girls! Some are humie and some are cybie, but who cares, you can't tell the difference!*

“I discovered I couldn't go near them,” Mia said. “It was as though a magic circle had been drawn around them. It was the baby, I

suppose.

“Then came the plague. The Red Death. Some folks said something had been opened in the castle, some jar of demonstuff that should have been left shut forever. Others said the plague came out of the crack—what they called the Devil’s Arse. Either way, it was the end of life in Fedic, life on the edge of Discordia. Many left on foot or in waggons. Baby Michael and his parents stayed, hoping for a train. Each day I waited for them to sicken—for the red spots to show on the baby’s dear cheeks and fat little arms—but they never did; none of the three sickened. Perhaps they *were* in a magic circle. I think they must have been. And a train came. It was Patricia. The mono. Do ya ken—”

“Yes,” Susannah said. She knew all she wanted to about Blaine’s companion mono. Once upon a time her route must have taken her over here as well as to Lud.

“Aye. They got on. I watched from the station platform, weeping my unseen tears and wailing my unseen cries. They got on with their sweet wee one . . . only by then he was three or four years old, walking and talking. And they went. I tried to follow them, and Susannah, I could not. I was a prisoner here. Knowing my purpose was what made me so.”

Susannah wondered about that, but decided not to comment.

“Years and decades and centuries went by. In Fedic there were by then only the robots and the unburied bodies left over from the Red Death, turning to skeletons, then to dust.

“Then men came again, but I didn’t dare go near them because they were *his* men.” She paused. “*Its* men.”

“The Crimson King’s.”

“Aye, they with the endlessly bleeding holes on their foreheads. They went there.” She pointed to the Fedic Dogan—the Arc 16 Experimental Station. “And soon their accursed machines were running again, just as if they still believed that machines could hold up the world. Not, ye ken, that holding it up is what they want to do! No, no, not they! They brought in beds—”

“Beds!” Susannah said, startled. Beyond them, the ghostly woman in the street rose once more on the balls of her feet and made yet one more graceful pirouette.

“Aye, for the children, although this was still long years before the Wolves began to bring em here, and long before you were part of your dinh’s story. Yet that time did draw nigh, and Walter came to me.”

“Can you make that woman in the street disappear?” Susannah asked abruptly (and rather crossly). “I know she’s a version of you, I get the idea, but she makes me . . . I don’t know . . . nervous. Can you make her go away?”

“Aye, if you like.” Mia pursed her lips and blew. The disturbingly beautiful woman—the spirit without a name—disappeared like smoke.

For several moments Mia was quiet, once more gathering the threads of her story. Then she said, “Walter . . . saw me. Not like other men. Even the ones I fucked to death only saw what they wanted to see. Or what *I* wanted them to see.” She smiled in unpleasant reminiscence. “I made some of them die thinking they were fucking their own mothers! You should have seen their faces!” Then the smile faded. “But Walter *saw* me.”

“What did he look like?”

“Hard to tell, Susannah. He wore a hood, and inside it he grinned—such a grinning man he was—and he palavered with me. There.” She pointed toward the Fedic Good-Time Saloon with a finger that trembled slightly.

“No mark on his forehead, though?”

“Nay, I’m sure not, for he’s not one of what Pere Callahan calls the low men. Their job is the Breakers. The Breakers and no more.”

Susannah began to feel the anger then, although she tried not to show it. Mia had access to all her memories, which meant all the inmost workings and secrets of their ka-tet. It was like discovering you’d had a burglar in the house who had tried on your underwear as well as stealing your money and going through your most personal papers.

It was awful.

“Walter is, I suppose, what you’d call the Crimson King’s Prime Minister. He often travels in disguise, and is known in other worlds under other names, but always he is a grinning, laughing man—”

“I met him briefly,” Susannah said, “under the name of Flagg. I hope to meet him again.”

“If you truly knew him, you’d wish for no such thing.”

“The Breakers you spoke of—where are they?”

“Why . . . Thunderclap, do’ee not know? The shadowlands. Why do you ask?”

“No reason but curiosity,” Susannah said, and seemed to hear Eddie: *Ask any question she’ll answer. Burn up the day. Give us a chance to catch up.* She hoped Mia couldn’t read her thoughts when they were separated like this. If she could, they were all likely up shit creek without a paddle. “Let’s go back to Walter. Can we speak of him a bit?”

Mia signaled a weary acceptance that Susannah didn’t quite believe. How long had it been since Mia had had an ear for any tale she might care to tell? The answer, Susannah guessed, was probably never. And the questions Susannah was asking, the doubts she was articulating . . . surely some of them must have passed through Mia’s own head. They’d be banished quickly as the blasphemies they were, but still, come on, this was not a stupid woman. Unless obsession *made* you stupid. Susannah supposed a case could be made for that idea.

“Susannah? Bumbler got your tongue?”

“No, I was just thinking what a relief it must have been when he came to you.”

Mia considered that, then smiled. Smiling changed her, made her look girlish and artless and shy. Susannah had to remind herself that wasn’t a look she could trust. “Yes! It was! Of course it was!”

“After discovering your purpose and being trapped here by it . . . after seeing the Wolves getting ready to store the kids and then operate on them . . . after all that, Walter comes. The devil, in fact, but at least

he can see you. At least he can hear your sad tale. And he makes you an offer.”

“He said the Crimson King would give me a child,” Mia said, and put her hands gently against the great globe of her belly. “My Mordred, whose time has come round at last.”

TWELVE

Mia pointed again at the Arc 16 Experimental Station. What she had called the Dogan of Dogans. The last remnant of her smile lingered on her lips, but there was no happiness or real amusement in it now. Her eyes were shiny with fear and—perhaps—awe.

“That’s where they changed me, made me mortal. Once there were many such places—there must have been—but I’d set my watch and warrant that’s the only one left in all of In-World, Mid-World, or End-World. It’s a place both wonderful and terrible. And it was there I was taken.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.” Susannah was thinking of her Dogan. Which was, of course, based on *Jake’s* Dogan. It was certainly a strange place, with its flashing lights and multiple TV screens, but not frightening.

“Beneath it are passages which go under the castle,” Mia said. “At the end of one is a door that opens on the Calla side of Thunderclap, just under the last edge of the darkness. That’s the one the Wolves use when they go on their raids.”

Susannah nodded. That explained a lot. “Do they take the kiddies back the same way?”

“Nay, lady, do it please you; like many doors, the one that takes the Wolves from Fedic to the Calla side of Thunderclap goes in only one direction. When you’re on the other side, it’s no longer there.”

“Because it’s not a *magic* door, right?”

Mia smiled and nodded and patted her knee.

Susannah looked at her with mounting excitement. “It’s another twin-thing.”

“Do you say so?”

“Yes. Only this time Tweedledum and Tweedledee are science and magic. Rational and irrational. Sane and insane. No matter what terms you pick, that’s a double-damned pair if ever there was one.”

“Aye? Do you say so?”

“Yes! *Magic* doors—like the one Eddie found and you took me through to New York—go both ways. The doors North Central Positronics made to replace them when the *Prim* receded and the magic faded . . . they go only one way. Have I got that right?”

“I think so, aye.”

“Maybe they didn’t have time to figure out how to make teleportation a two-lane highway before the world moved on. In any case, the Wolves go to the Calla side of Thunderclap by door and come back to Fedic by train. Right?”

Mia nodded.

Susannah no longer thought she was just trying to kill time. This information might come in handy later on. “And after the King’s men, Pere’s low men, have scooped the kids’ brains, what then? Back through the door with them, I suppose—the one under the castle. Back to the Wolves’ staging point. And a train takes them the rest of the way home.”

“Aye.”

“Why do they bother takin em back at all?”

“Lady, I know not.” Then Mia’s voice dropped. “There’s another door under Castle Discordia. Another door in the rooms of ruin. One that goes . . .” She licked her lips. “That goes todash.”

“Todash? . . . I know the word, but I don’t understand what’s so bad—”

“There are endless worlds, your dinh is correct about that, but even when those worlds are close together—like some of the multiple New Yorks—there are endless spaces between. Think ya of the spaces between the inner and outer walls of a house. Places where it’s always

dark. But just because a place is always dark doesn't mean it's empty. Does it, Susannah?"

There are monsters in the todash darkness.

Who had said that? Roland? She couldn't remember for sure, and what did it matter? She thought she understood what Mia was saying, and if so, it was horrible.

"Rats in the walls, Susannah. *Bats* in the walls. All sorts of sucking, biting bugs in the walls."

"Stop it, I get the picture."

"That door beneath the castle—one of their mistakes, I have no doubt—goes to *nowhere at all*. Into the darkness between worlds. Todash-space. But not empty space." Her voice lowered further. "That door is reserved for the Red King's most bitter enemies. They're thrown into a darkness where they may exist—blind, wandering, insane—for years. But in the end, something always finds them and devours them. Monsters beyond the ability of such minds as ours to bear thought of."

Susannah found herself trying to picture such a door, and what waited behind it. She didn't want to but couldn't help it. Her mouth dried up.

In that same low and somehow horrible tone of confidentiality, Mia said, "There were many places where the old people tried to join magic and science together, but you may be the only one left." She nodded toward the Dogan. "It was there that Walter took me, to make me mortal and take me out of *Prim's* way forever.

"To make me like you."

THIRTEEN

Mia didn't know everything, but so far as Susannah could make out, Walter/Flagg had offered the spirit later to be known as Mia the ultimate Faustian bargain. If she was willing to give up her nearly eternal but discorporate state and become a mortal woman, then she

could become pregnant and bear a child. Walter was honest with her about how little she would actually be getting for all she'd be giving up. The baby wouldn't grow as normal babies did—as Baby Michael had done before Mia's unseen but worshipful eyes—and she might only have him for seven years, but oh what wonderful years they could be!

Beyond this, Walter had been tactfully silent, allowing Mia to form her own pictures: how she would nurse her baby and wash him, not neglecting the tender creases behind the knees and ears; how she would kiss him in the honeyspot between the unfledged wings of his shoulderblades; how she would walk with him, holding both of his hands in both of hers as he toddled; how she would read to him and point out Old Star and Old Mother in the sky and tell him the story of how Rustie Sam stole the widow's best loaf of bread; how she would hug him to her and bathe his cheek with her grateful tears when he spoke his first word, which would, of course, be *Mama*.

Susannah listened to this rapturous account with a mixture of pity and cynicism. Certainly Walter had done one hell of a job selling the idea to her, and as ever, the best way to do that was to let the mark sell herself. He'd even proposed a properly Satanic period of proprietorship: seven years. *Just sign on the dotted line, madam, and please don't mind that whiff of brimstone; I just can't seem to get the smell out of my clothes.*

Susannah understood the deal and still had trouble swallowing it. This creature had given up immortality for morning sickness, swollen and achy breasts, and, in the last six weeks of her carry, the need to pee approximately every fifteen minutes. And wait, folks, there's more! Two and a half years of changing diapers soaked with piss and loaded with shit! Of getting up in the night as the kid howls with the pain of cutting his first tooth (and cheer up, Mom, only thirty-one to go). That first magic spit-up! That first heartwarming spray of urine across the bridge of your nose when the kid lets go as you're changing his clout!

And yes, there would be magic. Even though she'd never had a child herself, Susannah knew there would be magic even in the dirty diapers and the colic if the child were the result of a loving union. But to have the child and then have him taken away from you just when it was getting good, just as the child approached what most people agreed was the age of reason, responsibility, and accountability? To then be swept over the Crimson King's red horizon? That was an awful idea. And was Mia so besotted by her impending motherhood that she didn't realize the little she *had* been promised was now being whittled away? Walter/Flagg had come to her in Fedic, Scenic Aftermath of the Red Death, and promised her seven years with her son. On the telephone in the Plaza-Park, however, Richard Sayre had spoken of a mere five.

In any case, Mia had agreed to the dark man's terms. And really, how much sport could there have been in getting her to do that? She'd been made for motherhood, had arisen from the *Prim* with that imperative, had known it herself ever since seeing her first perfect human baby, the boy Michael. How could she have said no? Even if the offer had only been for three years, or for one, how? Might as well expect a long-time junkie to refuse a loaded spike when it was offered.

Mia had been taken into the Arc 16 Experimental Station. She'd been given a tour by the smiling, sarcastic (and undoubtedly frightening) Walter, who sometimes called himself Walter of End-World and sometimes Walter of All-World. She'd seen the great room filled with beds, awaiting the children who would come to fill them; at the head of each was a stainless-steel hood attached to a segmented steel hose. She did not like to think what the purpose of such equipment might be. She'd also been shown some of the passages under the Castle on the Abyss, and had been in places where the smell of death was strong and suffocating. She—there had been a red darkness and she—

“Were you mortal by then?” Susannah asked. “It sounds as though maybe you were.”

“I was on my way,” she said. “It was a process Walter called *becoming*.”

“All right. Go on.”

But here Mia’s recollections were lost in a dark fugue—not todash, but far from pleasant. A kind of amnesia, and it was *red*. A color Susannah had come to distrust. Had the pregnant woman’s transition from the world of the spirit to the world of the flesh—her trip to Mia—been accomplished through some other kind of doorway? She herself didn’t seem to know. Only that there had been a time of darkness—unconsciousness, she supposed—and then she had awakened “. . . as you see me. Only not yet pregnant, of course.”

According to Walter, Mia could not actually make a baby, even as a mortal woman. Carry, yes. Conceive, no. So it came to pass that one of the demon elementals had done a great service for the Crimson King, taking Roland’s seed as female and passing it on to Susannah as male. And there had been another reason, as well. Walter hadn’t mentioned it, but Mia had known.

“It’s the prophecy,” she said, looking into Fedic’s deserted and shadowless street. Across the way, a robot that looked like Andy of the Calla stood silent and rusting in front of the Fedic Café, which promised **GOOD MEELS CHEEP**.

“What prophecy?” Susannah asked.

“He who ends the line of Eld shall conceive a child of incest with his sister or his daughter, and the child will be marked, by his red heel shall you know him. It is he who shall stop the breath of the last warrior.”

“Woman, *I’m* not Roland’s sister, or his daughter, either! You maybe didn’t notice a small but basic difference in the color of our hides, namely his being *white* and mine being *black*.” But she thought she had a pretty good idea of what the prophecy meant, just the same. Families were made in many ways. Blood was only one of them.

“Did he not tell you what *dinh* means?” Mia asked.

“Of course. It means leader. If he was in charge of a whole country instead of just three scruffy-ass gunpuppies, it’d mean king.”

“Leader and king, you say true. Now, Susannah, will you tell me that such words aren’t just poor substitutes for another?”

Susannah made no reply.

Mia nodded as though she had, then winced when a fresh contraction struck. It passed, and she went on. “The sperm was Roland’s. I believe it may have been preserved somehow by the old people’s science while the demon elemental turned itself inside out and made man from woman, but that isn’t the important part. The important part is that it lived and found the rest of itself, as ordained by ka.”

“My egg.”

“Your egg.”

“When I was raped in the ring of stones.”

“Say true.”

Susannah sat, musing. Finally she looked up. “Seem to me that it’s what I said before. You didn’t like it then, not apt to like it now, but—girl, you just the baby-sitter.”

There was no rage this time. Mia only smiled. “Who went on having her periods, even when she was being sick in the mornings? You did. And who’s got the full belly today? *I* do. If there was a baby-sitter, Susannah of New York, it was you.”

“How can that be? Do you know?”

Mia did.

FOURTEEN

The baby, Walter had told her, would be *transmitted* to Mia; sent to her cell by cell just as a fax is sent line by line.

Susannah opened her mouth to say she didn’t know what a fax was, then closed it again. She understood the *gist* of what Mia was saying, and that was enough to fill her with a terrible combination of awe and rage. She *had* been pregnant. She was, in a real sense, pregnant right this minute. But the baby was being

(faxed)

sent to Mia. Was this a process that had started fast and slowed down, or started slow and speeded up? The latter, she thought, because as time passed she'd felt less pregnant instead of more. The little swelling in her belly had mostly flattened out again. And now she understood how both she and Mia could feel an equal attachment to the chap: it did, in fact, belong to both of them. Had been passed on like a . . . a blood transfusion.

Only when they want to take your blood and put it into someone else, they ask your permission. If they're doctors, that is, and not one of Pere Callahan's vampires. You're a lot closer to one of those, Mia, aren't you?

"Science or magic?" Susannah asked. "Which one was it that allowed you to steal my baby?"

Mia flushed a little at that, but when she turned to Susannah, she was able to meet Susannah's eyes squarely. "I don't know," she said. "Likely a mixture of both. And don't be so self-righteous! It's in *me*, not you. It's feeding off my bones and my blood, not yours."

"So what? Do you think that changes anything? You stole it, with the help of some filthy magician."

Mia shook her head vehemently, her hair a storm around her face.

"No?" Susannah asked. "Then how come *you* weren't the one eating frogs out of the swamp and shoats out of the pen and God knows what other nasty things? How come you needed all that make-believe nonsense about the banquets in the castle, where you could pretend to be the one eating? In short, sugarpie, how come your chap's nourishment had to go down *my* throat?"

"Because . . . because . . ." Mia's eyes, Susannah saw, were filling with tears. "Because this is spoiled land! Blasted land! The place of the Red Death and the edge of the Discordia! I'd not feed my chap from here!"

It was a good answer, Susannah reckoned, but not the *complete* answer. And Mia knew it, too. Because Baby Michael, perfect Baby Michael, had been conceived here, had thrived here, had been thriving

when Mia last saw him. And if she was so sure, why were those tears standing in her eyes?

“Mia, they’re lying to you about your chap.”

“You don’t know that, so don’t be hateful!”

“I *do* know it.” And she did. But there wasn’t proof, gods damn it! How did you prove a feeling, even one as strong as this?

“Flagg—Walter, if you like that better—he promised you seven years. Sayre says you can have five. What if they hand you a card, GOOD FOR THREE YEARS OF CHILD-REARING WITH STAMP, when you get to this Dixie Pig? Gonna go with that, too?”

“That won’t happen! You’re as nasty as the other one! Shut up!”

“You got a nerve calling *me* nasty! Can’t wait to give birth to a child supposed to murder his Daddy.”

“I don’t care!”

“You’re all confused, girl, between what you want to happen and what *will* happen. How do you know they aren’t gonna kill him before he can cry out his first breath, and grind him up and feed him to these Breaker bastards?”

“*Shut . . . up!*”

“Kind of a super-food? Finish the job all at once?”

“Shut *up*, I said, *shut UP!*”

“Point is, you don’t know. You don’t know anything. You just the baby-sitter, just the au pair. You know they lie, you know they trick and never treat, and yet you go on. And you want *me* to shut up.”

“Yes! Yes!”

“I won’t,” Susannah told her grimly, and seized Mia’s shoulders. They were amazingly bony under the dress, but hot, as if the woman were running a fever. “I won’t because it’s really mine and you know it. Cat can have kittens in the oven, girl, but that won’t ever make em muffins.”

All right, they had made it back to all-out fury after all. Mia’s face twisted into something both horrible and unhappy. In Mia’s eyes, Susannah thought she could see the endless, craving, grieving creature

this woman once had been. And something else. A spark that might be blown into belief. If there was time.

“I’ll *shut* you up,” Mia said, and suddenly Fedic’s main street tore open, just as the allure had. Behind it was a kind of bulging darkness. But not empty. Oh no, not empty, Susannah felt that very clearly.

They fell toward it. Mia *propelled* them toward it. Susannah tried to hold them back with no success at all. As they tumbled into the dark, she heard a singsong thought running through her head, running in an endless worry-circle: *Oh Susannah-Mio, divided girl of mine, Done parked her RIG*

FIFTEEN

in the DIXIE PIG, In the year of—

Before this annoying (but ever so important) jingle could finish its latest circuit through Susannah-Mio’s head, the head in question struck something, and hard enough to send a galaxy of bright stars exploding across her field of vision. When they cleared, she saw, very large, in front of her eyes:

NK AWA

She pulled back and saw BANGO SKANK AWAITS THE KING! It was the graffito written on the inside of the toilet stall’s door. Her life was haunted by doors—had been, it seemed, ever since the door of her cell had clanged closed behind her in Oxford, Mississippi—but this one was shut. Good. She was coming to believe that shut doors presented fewer problems. Soon enough this one would open and the problems would start again.

Mia: *I told you all I know. Now are you going to help me get to the Dixie Pig, or do I have to do it on my own? I can if I have to, especially with the turtle to help me.*

Susannah: *I’ll help.*

Although how much or how little help Mia got from her sort of depended on what time it was right now. How long had they been in here? Her legs felt completely numb from the knees down—her butt, too—and she thought that was a good sign, but under these fluorescent lights, Susannah supposed it was always half-past anytime.

What does it matter to you? Mia asked, suspicious. *What does it matter to you what time it is?*

Susannah scrambled for an explanation.

The baby. You know that what I did will keep it from coming only for so long, don't you?

Of course I do. That's why I want to get moving.

All right. Let's see the cash our old pal Mats left us.

Mia took out the little wad of bills and looked at them uncomprehendingly.

Take the one that says Jackson.

I . . . Embarrassment. I can't read.

Let me come forward. I'll read it.

No!

All right, all right, calm down. It's the guy with the long white hair combed back kind of like Elvis.

I don't know this Elvis—

Never mind, it's that one right on top. Good. Now put the rest of the cash back in your pocket, nice and safe. Hold the twenty in the palm of your hand. Okay, we're blowing this pop-stand.

What's a pop-stand?

Mia, shut up.

SIXTEEN

When they re-entered the lobby—walking slowly, on legs that tingled with pins and needles—Susannah was marginally encouraged to see that it was dusk outside. She hadn't succeeded in burning up the entire day, it seemed, but she'd gotten rid of most of it.

The lobby was busy but no longer frantic. The beautiful Eurasian girl who'd checked her/them in was gone, her shift finished. Under the canopy, two new men in green monkeysuits were whistling up cabs for folks, many of whom were wearing tuxedos or long sparkly dresses.

Going out to parties, Susannah said. Or maybe the theater.

Susannah, I care not. Do we need to get one of the yellow vehicles from one of the men in the green suits?

No. We'll get a cab on the corner.

Do you say so?

Oh, quit with the suspicion. You're taking your kid to either its death or yours, I'm sure of that, but I recognize your intention to do well and I'll keep my promise. Yes, I do say so.

All right.

Without another word—certainly none of apology—Mia left the hotel, turned right, and began walking back toward Second Avenue, 2 Hammarskjöld Plaza, and the beautiful song of the rose.

SEVENTEEN

On the corner of Second and Forty-sixth, a metal waggon of faded red was parked at the curb. The curb was yellow at this point, and a man in a blue suit—a Guard o' the Watch, by his sidearm—seemed to be discussing that fact with a tall, white-bearded man.

Inside of her, Mia felt a flurry of startled movement.

Susannah? What is it?

That man!

The Guard o' the Watch? Him?

No, the one with the beard! He looks almost exactly like Henschick! Henschick of the Manni! Do you not see?

Mia neither saw nor cared. She gathered that although parking waggons along the yellow curb was forbidden, and the man with the beard seemed to understand this, he still would not move. He went on

setting up easels and then putting pictures on them. Mia sensed this was an old argument between the two men.

“I’m gonna have to give you a ticket, Rev.”

“Do what you need to do, Officer Benzyck. God loves you.”

“Good. Delighted to hear it. As for the ticket, you’ll tear it up. Right?”

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; render unto God those things that are God’s. So says the Bible, and blessed be the Lord’s Holy Book.”

“I can get behind that,” said Benzyck o’ the Watch. He pulled a thick pad of paper from his back pocket and began to scribble on it. This also had the feel of an old ritual. “But let me tell you something, Harrigan—sooner or later City Hall is gonna catch up to your action, and they’re gonna render unto your scofflaw holy-rollin’ *ass*. I only hope I’m there when it happens.”

He tore a sheet from his pad, went over to the metal waggon, and slipped the paper beneath a black window-slider resting on the waggon’s glass front.

Susannah, amused: *He’s gettin a ticket. Not the first one, either, from the sound.*

Mia, momentarily diverted in spite of herself: *What does it say on the side of his waggon, Susannah?*

There was a slight shift as Susanna *came* partway *forward*, and the sense of a squint. It was a strange sensation for Mia, like having a tickle deep in her head.

Susannah, still sounding amused: *It says CHURCH OF THE HOLY GOD-BOMB, Rev. Earl Harrigan. It also says YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS WILL BE REWARDED IN HEAVEN.*

What’s heaven?

Another name for the clearing at the end of the path.

Ah.

Benzyck o’ the Watch was strolling away with his hands clasped behind his back, his considerable ass bunching beneath his blue uniform trousers, his duty done. The Rev. Harrigan, meanwhile, was

adjusting his easels. The picture on one showed a man being let out of jail by a fellow in a white robe. The whiterobe's head was glowing. The picture on the other showed the whiterobe turning away from a monster with red skin and horns on his head. The monster with the horns looked pissed like a bear at sai Whiterobe.

Susannah, is that red thing how the folk of this world see the Crimson King?

Susannah: *I guess so. It's Satan, if you care—lord of the underworld. Have the god-guy get you a cab, why don't you? Use the turtle.*

Again, suspicious (Mia apparently couldn't help it): *Do you say so? Say true! Aye! Say Jesus Christ, woman!*

All right, all right. Mia sounded a bit embarrassed. She walked toward Rev. Harrigan, pulling the scrimshaw turtle out of her pocket.

EIGHTEEN

What she needed to do came to Susannah in a flash. She withdrew from Mia (if the woman couldn't get a taxi with the help of that magic turtle, she was hopeless) and with her eyes squeezed shut visualized the Dogan. When she opened them, she was there. She grabbed the microphone she'd used to call Eddie and depressed the toggle.

"Harrigan!" she said into the mike. "Reverend Earl Harrigan! Are you there? Do you read me, sugar? *Do you read me?*"

NINETEEN

Rev. Harrigan paused in his labors long enough to watch a black woman—one fine-struttin honey, too, praise God—get into a cab. The cab drove off. He had a lot to do before beginning his nightly sermon—his little dance with Officer Benzyck was only the opening gun—but

he stood there watching the cab's taillights twinkle and dwindle, just the same.

Had something just happened to him?

Had . . . ? Was it possible that . . . ?

Rev. Harrigan fell to his knees on the sidewalk, quite oblivious of the pedestrians passing by (just as most were oblivious of him). He clasped his big old praise-God hands and raised them to his chin. He knew the Bible said that praying was a private thing best done in one's closet, and he'd spent plenty of time getting kneebound in his own, yes Lord, but he also believed God wanted folks to see what a praying man looked like from time to time, because most of them—say *Gawd!*—had forgotten what that looked like. And there was no better, no *nicer* place to speak with God than right here on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth. There was a singing here, clean and sweet. It uplifted the spirit, clarified the mind . . . and, just incidentally, clarified the skin, as well. This wasn't the voice of God, and Rev. Harrigan was not so blasphemously stupid as to think it was, but he had an idea that it was angels. Yes, say *Gawd*, say *Gawd-bomb*, the voice of the seraphim!

“God, did you just drop a little God-bomb on me? I want to ask was that voice I just heard yours or mine own?”

No answer. So many times there was no answer. He would ponder this. In the meantime, he had a sermon to prepare for. A show to do, if you wanted to be perfectly vulgar about it.

Rev. Harrigan went to his van, parked at the yellow curb as always, and opened the back doors. Then he took out the pamphlets, the silk-covered collection plate which he'd put beside him on the sidewalk, and the sturdy wooden cube. The soapbox upon which he would stand, could you raise up high and shout hallelujah?

And yes, brother, while you were right at it, could you give amen?

STAVE: *Commala-come-ken*

It's the other one again.

You may know her name and face

But that don't make her your friend.

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-ten!*

She is not your friend!

If you let her get too close

She'll cut you up again.

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11TH STANZA



ONE

By the time they reached the little shopping center in the town of Bridgton—a supermarket, a laundry, and a surprisingly large drugstore—both Roland and Eddie sensed it: not just the singing, but the gathering power. It lifted them up like some crazy, wonderful elevator. Eddie found himself thinking of Tinkerbell’s magic dust and Dumbo’s magic feather. This was like drawing near the rose and yet not like that. There was no sense of holiness or sanctification in this little New England town, but *something* was going on here, and it was powerful.

Driving here from East Stoneham, following the signs to Bridgton from back road to back road, Eddie had sensed something else, as well: the unbelievable *crispness* of this world. The summer-green depths of the pine forests had a validity he had never encountered before, never even suspected. The birds which flew across the sky fair stopped his breath for wonder, even the most common sparrow. The very shadows on the ground seemed to have a velvety thickness, as if you could reach down, pick them up, and carry them away under your arm like pieces of carpet, if you so chose.

At some point, Eddie asked Roland if he felt any of this.

“Yes,” Roland said. “I feel it, see it, hear it . . . Eddie, I *touch* it.”

Eddie nodded. He did, too. This world was real beyond reality. It was . . . *anti-todash*. That was the best he could do. And they were

very much in the heart of the Beam. Eddie could feel it carrying them on like a river rushing down a gorge toward a waterfall.

“But I’m afraid,” Roland said. “I feel as though we’re approaching the center of everything—the Tower itself, mayhap. It’s as if, after all these years, the quest itself has become the point for me, and the end is frightening.”

Eddie nodded. He could get behind that. Certainly he was afraid. If it wasn’t the Tower putting out that stupendous force, then it was some potent and terrible thing akin to the rose. But not quite the same. A *twin* to the rose? That could be right.

Roland looked out at the parking lot and the people who came and went beneath a summer sky filled with fat, slow-floating clouds, seemingly unaware that the whole world was singing with power around them, and that all the clouds flowed along the same ancient pathway in the heavens. They were unaware of their own beauty.

The gunslinger said, “I used to think the most terrible thing would be to reach the Dark Tower and find the top room empty. The God of all universes either dead or nonexistent in the first place. But now . . . suppose there *is* someone there, Eddie? Someone in charge who turns out to be . . .” He couldn’t finish.

Eddie could. “Someone who turns out to be just another bumhug? Is that it? God not dead but feeble-minded and malicious?”

Roland nodded. This was not, in fact, precisely what he was afraid of, but he thought Eddie had at least come close.

“How can that be, Roland? Considering what we feel?”

Roland shrugged, as if to say anything could be.

“In any case, what choice do we have?”

“None,” Roland said bleakly. “All things serve the Beam.”

Whatever the great and singing force was, it seemed to be coming from the road that ran west from the shopping center, back into the woods. Kansas Road, according to the sign, and that made Eddie think of Dorothy and Toto and Blaine the Mono.

He dropped the transmission of their borrowed Ford into Drive and started rolling forward. His heart was beating in his chest with

slow, exclamatory force. He wondered if Moses had felt like this when he approached the burning bush which contained God. He wondered if Jacob had felt like this, awakening to find a stranger, both radiant and fair, in his camp—the angel with whom he would wrestle. He thought that they probably had. He felt sure that another part of their journey was about to come to an end—another answer lay up ahead.

God living on Kansas Road, in the town of Bridgton, Maine? It should have sounded crazy, but didn't.

Just don't strike me dead, Eddie thought, and turned west. *I need to get back to my sweetheart, so please don't strike me dead, whoever or whatever you are.*

"Man, I'm so scared," he said.

Roland reached out and briefly grasped his hand.

TWO

Three miles from the shopping center, they came to a dirt road which struck off into the pine trees on their left. There had been other byways, which Eddie had passed without slowing from the steady thirty miles an hour he had been maintaining, but at this one he stopped.

Both front windows were down. They could hear the wind in the trees, the grouchy call of a crow, the not-too-distant buzz of a powerboat, and the rumble of the Ford's engine. Except for a hundred thousand voices singing in rough harmony, those were the only sounds. The sign marking the turnoff said no more than PRIVATE DRIVE. Nevertheless, Eddie was nodding.

"This is it."

"Yes, I know. How's your leg?"

"Hurts. Don't worry about it. Are we gonna do this?"

"We *have* to," Roland said. "You were right to bring us here. What's here is the other half of *this*." He tapped the paper in his

pocket, the one conveying ownership of the vacant lot to the Tet Corporation.

“You think this guy King is the rose’s twin.”

“You say true.” Roland smiled at his own choice of words. Eddie thought he’d rarely seen one so sad. “We’ve picked up the Calla way of talking, haven’t we? Jake first, then all of us. But that will fall away.”

“Further to go,” Eddie said. It wasn’t a question.

“Aye, and it will be dangerous. Still . . . maybe nothing so dangerous as this. Shall we roll?”

“In a minute. Roland, do you remember Susannah mentioning a man named Moses Carver?”

“A stem . . . which is to say a man of affairs. He took over her father’s business when sai Holmes died, am I correct?”

“Yeah. He was also Suze’s godfather. She said he could be trusted completely. Remember how mad she got at Jake and me when we suggested he might have stolen the company’s money?”

Roland nodded.

“I trust her judgment,” Eddie said. “What about you?”

“Yes.”

“If Carver *is* honest, we might be able to put him in charge of the things we need to accomplish in this world.”

None of this seemed terribly important compared to the force Eddie felt rising all around him, but he thought it was. They might only have one chance to protect the rose now and ensure its survival later. They had to do it right, and Eddie knew that meant heeding the will of destiny.

In a word, ka.

“Suze says Holmes Dental was worth eight or ten million when you snatched her out of New York, Roland. If Carver’s as good as I hope he is, the company might be worth twelve or fourteen million by now.”

“That’s a lot?”

“Delah,” Eddie said, tossing his open hand at the horizon, and Roland nodded. “It sounds funny to talk about using the profits from some kind of dental process to save the universe, but that’s just what I *am* talking about. And the money the tooth-fairy left her may only be the beginning. Microsoft, for instance. Remember me mentioning that name to Tower?”

Roland nodded. “Slow down, Eddie. *Calm* down, I beg.”

“I’m sorry,” Eddie said, and pulled in a deep breath. “It’s this place. The singing. The *faces* . . . do you see the faces in the trees? In the shadows?”

“I see them very well.”

“It makes me feel a little crazy. Bear with me. What I’m talking about is merging Holmes Dental and the Tet Corporation, then using our knowledge of the future to turn it into one of the richest combinations in the history of the world. Resources to equal those of the Sombra Corporation . . . or maybe North Central Positronics itself.”

Roland shrugged, then lifted a hand as if to ask how Eddie could talk about money while in the presence of the immense force flowing along the barrel of the Beam and through them, lifting the hair from the napes of their necks, making their sinuses tingle, turning every woodsy shadow into a watching face . . . as if a multitude had gathered here to watch them play out a crucial scene in their drama.

“I know how you feel, but it *matters*,” Eddie insisted. “Believe me, it does. Suppose, for instance, we were to grow fast enough to buy out North Central Positronics before it can rise as a force in this world? Roland, we might be able to turn it, the way you can turn even the biggest river with no more than a single spade up in its headwaters, where it’s only a trickle.”

At this Roland’s eyes gleamed. “Take it over,” he said. “Turn its purpose from the Crimson King’s to our own. Yes, that might be possible.”

“Whether it is or isn’t, we have to remember that we’re not just playing for 1977, or 1987, where I came from, or 1999, where Suze

went.” In that world, Eddie realized, Calvin Tower might be dead and Aaron Deepneau would be for sure, their final action in the Dark Tower’s drama—saving Donald Callahan from the Hitler Brothers—long finished. Swept from the stage, both of them. Into the clearing at the end of the path along with Gasher and Hoots, Benny Slightman, Susan Delgado

(*Calla, Callahan, Susan, Susannah*)

and the Tick-Tock Man, even Blaine and Patricia. Roland and his ka-tet would also pass into that clearing, be it early or late. In the end—if they were fantastically lucky and suicidally brave—only the Dark Tower would stand. If they could nip North Central Positronics in the bud, they might be able to save all the Beams that had been broken. Even if they failed at that, two Beams might be enough to hold the Tower in place: the rose in New York and a man named Stephen King in Maine. Eddie’s head had no proof that this was indeed the case . . . but his heart believed it.

“What we’re playing for, Roland, is the ages.”

Roland made a fist and thumped it lightly on the dusty dashboard of John Cullum’s old Ford and nodded.

“Anything can go on that lot, you realize that? *Anything*. A building, a park, a monument, The National Gramophone Institute. As long as the rose stays. This guy Carver can make the Tet Corporation legal, maybe working with Aaron Deepneau—”

“Yes,” Roland said. “I liked Deepneau. He had a true face.”

Eddie thought so, too. “Anyway, they can draw up legal papers that take care of the rose—the rose always stays, no matter what. And I’ve got a feeling that it will. 2007, 2057, 2525, 3700 . . . hell, the year 19,000 . . . I think it’ll always be there. Because it may be fragile, but I think it’s also immortal. We have to do it right while we have the chance, though. Because this is the key world. In this one you never get a chance to whittle a little more if the key doesn’t turn. In this world I don’t think there are any do-overs.”

Roland considered this, then pointed to the dirt road leading into the trees. Into a forest of watching faces and singing voices. A

harmonium of all that filled life with worth and meaning, that held to the truth, that acknowledged the White. “And what about the man who lives at the end of this road, Eddie? If he *is* a man.”

“I think he is, and not just because of what John Cullum said. It’s what I feel here.” Eddie patted his chest above the heart.

“So do I.”

“Do you say so, Roland?”

“Aye, I do. Is *he* immortal, do you think? Because I’ve seen much in my years, and heard rumors of much more, but never of a man or woman who lived forever.”

“I don’t think he needs to be immortal. I think all he needs to do is write the right story. Because some stories *do* live forever.”

Understanding lit up Roland’s eyes. *At last*, Eddie thought. *At last he sees it.*

But how long had it taken him to see it himself, and then to swallow it? God knew he should have been able to, after all the other wonders he’d seen, and yet still this last step had eluded him. Even discovering that Pere Callahan had seemingly sprung alive and breathing from a fiction called *’Salem’s Lot* hadn’t been enough to take him that last crucial step. What had finally done it was finding out that Co-Op City was in the Bronx, not Brooklyn. In this world, at least. Which was the only world that mattered.

“Maybe he’s not at home,” Roland said as around them the whole world waited. “Maybe this man who made us is not at home.”

“You know he is.”

Roland nodded. And the old light had dawned in his eyes, light from a fire that had never gone out, the one that had lit his way along the Beam all the way from Gilead.

“Then drive on!” he cried hoarsely. “Drive on, for your father’s sake! If he’s God—our God—I’d look Him in the eye and ask Him the way to the Tower!”

“Would you not ask him the way to Susannah, first?”

As soon as the question was out of his mouth, Eddie regretted it and prayed the gunslinger would not answer it.

Roland didn't. He only twirled the remaining fingers on his right hand: *Go, go.*

Eddie put the gearshift of Cullum's Ford into Drive and turned onto the dirt road. He drove them into a great singing force that seemed to go through them like a wind, turning them into something as insubstantial as a thought, or a dream in the head of some sleeping god.

THREE

A quarter of a mile in, the road forked. Eddie took the lefthand branch, although the sign pointing that way said ROWDEN, not KING. The dust raised by their passage hung in the rearview mirror. The singing was a sweet din, pouring through him like liquor. His hair was still standing up at the roots, and his muscles were trembling. Called upon to draw his gun, Eddie thought he would probably drop the damned thing. Even if he managed to hold onto it, aiming would be impossible. He didn't know how the man they were looking for could live so close to the sound of that singing and eat or sleep, let alone write stories. But of course King wasn't just *close* to the sound; if Eddie had it right, King was the *source* of the sound.

But if he has a family, what about them? And even if he doesn't, what about the neighbors?

Here was a driveway on the right, and—

"Eddie, stop." It was Roland, but not sounding the least bit like himself. His Calla tan was thin paint over an immense pallor.

Eddie stopped. Roland fumbled at the door-handle on his side, couldn't make it work, levered himself out the window all the way to his waist instead (Eddie heard the chink his belt buckle made on the chrome strip which faced the window-well), and then vomited onto the oggan. When he fell back into the seat, he looked both exhausted and exalted. The eyes which rolled to meet Eddie's were blue, ancient, glittering. "Drive on."

“Roland, are you sure—”

Roland only twirled his fingers, looking straight out through the Ford’s dusty windshield. *Go, go. For your father’s sake!*

Eddie drove on.

FOUR

It was the sort of house real-estate agents call a ranch. Eddie wasn’t surprised. What *did* surprise him a little was how modest the place was. Then he reminded himself that not every writer was a *rich* writer, and that probably went double for *young* writers. Some sort of typo had apparently made his second novel quite the catch among bibliomaniacs, but Eddie doubted if King ever saw a commission on that sort of thing. Or royalties, if that was what they called it.

Still, the car parked in the turnaround driveway was a new-looking Jeep Cherokee with a nifty Indian stripe running up the side, and that suggested Stephen King wasn’t exactly starving for his art, either. There was a wooden jungle gym in the front yard with a lot of plastic toys scattered around it. Eddie’s heart sank at the sight of them. One lesson which the Calla had taught exquisitely was that kids complicated things. The ones living here were *little* kids, from the look of the toys. And to them comes a pair of men wearing hard calibers. Men who were not, at this point in time, strictly in their right minds.

Eddie cut the Ford’s engine. A crow cawed. A powerboat—bigger than the one they’d heard earlier, from the sound—buzzed. Beyond the house, bright sun glinted on blue water. And the voices sang *Come, come, come-come-commala*.

There was a clunk as Roland opened his door and got out, slewing a little as he did so: bad hip, dry twist. Eddie got out on legs that felt as numb as sticks.

“Tabby? That you?”

This from around the right side of the house. And now, running ahead of the voice and the man who owned the voice, came a shadow.

Never had Eddie seen one that so filled him with terror and fascination. He thought, and with absolute certainty: *Yonder comes my maker. Yonder is he, aye, say true.* And the voices sang, *Commala-come-three, he who made me.*

“Did you forget something, darling?” Only the last word came out in a downeast drawl, *daaa-lin*, the way John Cullum would have said it. And then came the man of the house, then came he. He saw them and stopped. He saw *Roland* and stopped. The singing voices stopped with him, and the powerboat’s drone seemed to stop as well. For a moment the whole world hung on a hinge. Then the man turned and ran. Not, however, before Eddie saw the terrible thunderstruck look of recognition on his face.

Roland was after him in a flash, like a cat after a bird.

FIVE

But sai King was a man, not a bird. He couldn’t fly, and there was really nowhere to run. The side lawn sloped down a mild hill broken only by a concrete pad that might have been the well or some kind of sewage-pumping device. Beyond the lawn was a postage stamp-sized bit of beach, littered with more toys. After that came the lake. The man reached the edge of it, splashed into it, then turned so awkwardly he almost fell down.

Roland skidded to a stop on the sand. He and Stephen King regarded each other. Eddie stood perhaps ten yards behind Roland, watching both of them. The singing had begun again, and so had the buzzing drone of the powerboat. Perhaps they had never stopped, but Eddie believed he knew better.

The man in the water put his hands over his eyes like a child. “You’re not there,” he said.

“I am, sai.” Roland’s voice was both gentle and filled with awe. “Take your hands from your eyes, Stephen of Bridgton. Take them down and see me very well.”

“Maybe I’m having a breakdown,” said the man in the water, but he slowly dropped his hands. He was wearing thick glasses with severe black frames. One bow had been mended with a bit of tape. His hair was either black or a very dark brown. The beard was definitely black, the first threads of white in it startling in their brilliance. He was wearing bluejeans below a tee-shirt that said THE RAMONES and ROCKET TO RUSSIA and GABBA-GABBA-HEY. He looked like starting to run to middle-aged fat, but he wasn’t fat yet. He was tall, and as ashy-pale as Roland. Eddie saw with no real surprise that Stephen King *looked* like Roland. Given the age difference they could never be mistaken for twins, but father and son? Yes. Easily.

Roland tapped the base of his throat three times, then shook his head. It wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t do. Eddie watched with fascination and horror as the gunslinger sank to his knees amid the litter of bright plastic toys and put his curled hand against his brow.

“Hile, tale-spinner,” he said. “Comes to you Roland Deschain of Gilead that was, and Eddie Dean of New York. Will you open to us, if we open to you?”

King laughed. Given the power of Roland’s words, Eddie found the sound shocking. “I . . . man, this can’t be happening.” And then, to himself: “Can it?”

Roland, still on his knees, went on as if the man standing in the water had neither laughed nor spoken. “Do you see us for what we are, and what we do?”

“You’d be gunslingers, if you were real.” King peered at Roland through his thick spectacles. “Gunslingers seeking the Dark Tower.”

That’s it, Eddie thought as the voices rose and the sun shimmered on the blue water. *That nails it.*

“You say true, sai. We seek aid and succor, Stephen of Bridgton. Will’ee give it?”

“Mister, I don’t know who your friend is, but as for you . . . man, I *made* you. You can’t be standing *there* because the only place you really exist is *here*.” He thumped a fist to the center of his forehead, as if in parody of Roland. Then he pointed to his house. His ranch-style

house. “And in there. You’re in there, too, I guess. In a desk drawer, or maybe a box in the garage. You’re unfinished business. I haven’t thought of you in . . . in . . .”

His voice had grown thin. Now he began to sway like someone who hears faint but delicious music, and his knees buckled. He fell.

“Roland!” Eddie shouted, at last plunging forward. “Man’s had a fucking heart attack!” Already knowing (or perhaps only hoping) better. Because the singing was as strong as ever. The faces in the trees and shadows as clear.

The gunslinger was bending down and grasping King—who had already begun to thrash weakly—under the arms. “He’s but fainted. And who could blame him? Help me get him into the house.”

SIX

The master bedroom had a gorgeous view of the lake and a hideous purple rug on the floor. Eddie sat on the bed and watched through the bathroom door as King took off his wet sneakers and outer clothes, stepping between the door and the tiled bathroom wall for a moment to swap his wet undershorts for a dry pair. He hadn’t objected to Eddie following him into the bedroom. Since coming to—and he’d been out for no more than thirty seconds—he had displayed an almost eerie calm.

Now he came out of the bathroom and crossed to the bureau. “Is this a practical joke?” he asked, rummaging for dry jeans and a fresh tee-shirt. To Eddie, King’s house said money—some, at least. God knew what the clothes said. “Is it something Mac McCutcheon and Floyd Calderwood dreamed up?”

“I don’t know those men, and it’s no joke.”

“Maybe not, but that man can’t be real.” King stepped into the jeans. He spoke to Eddie in a reasonable tone of voice. “I mean, I *wrote* about him!”

Eddie nodded. "I kind of figured that. But he's real, just the same. I've been running with him for—" How long? Eddie didn't know. "—for awhile," he finished. "You wrote about him but not me?"

"Do you feel left out?"

Eddie laughed, but in truth he *did* feel left out. A little, anyway. Maybe King hadn't gotten to him yet. If that was the case, he wasn't exactly safe, was he?

"This doesn't *feel* like a breakdown," King said, "but I suppose they never do."

"You're not having a breakdown, but I have some sympathy for how you feel, sai. That man—"

"Roland. Roland of . . . Gilead?"

"You say true."

"I don't know if I had the Gilead part or not," King said. "I'd have to check the pages, if I could find them. But it's good. As in 'There is no balm in Gilead.'"

"I'm not following you."

"That's okay, neither am I." King found cigarettes, Pall Malls, on the bureau and lit one. "Finish what you were going to say."

"He dragged me through a door between this world and his world. I also felt like I was having a breakdown." It hadn't been this world from which Eddie had been dragged, close but no cigar, and he'd been jonesing for heroin at the time—jonesing bigtime—but the situation was complicated enough without adding that stuff. Still, there was one question he had to ask before they rejoined Roland and the real palaver began.

"Tell me something, sai King—do you know where Co-Op City is?"

King had been transferring his coins and keys from his wet jeans to the dry ones, right eye squinted shut against the smoke of the cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth. Now he stopped and looked at Eddie with his eyebrows raised. "Is this a trick question?"

"No."

“And you won’t shoot me with that gun you’re wearing if I get it wrong?”

Eddie smiled a little. King wasn’t an unlikable cuss, for a god. Then he reminded himself that God had killed his little sister, using a drunk driver as a tool, and his brother Henry as well. God had made Enrico Balazar and burned Susan Delgado at the stake. His smile faded. But he said, “No one’s getting shot here, sai.”

“In that case, I believe Co-Op City’s in Brooklyn. Where you come from, judging by your accent. So do I win the Fair-Day Goose?”

Eddie jerked like someone who’s been poked with a pin. “What?”

“Just a thing my mother used to say. When my brother Dave and I did all our chores and got em right the first time, she’d say ‘You boys win the Fair-Day Goose.’ It was a joke. So do I win the prize?”

“Yes,” Eddie said. “Sure.”

King nodded, then butted out his cigarette. “You’re an okay guy. It’s your pal I don’t much care for. And never did. I think that’s part of the reason I quit on the story.”

That startled Eddie again, and he got up from the bed to cover it. “*Quit* on it?”

“Yeah. *The Dark Tower*, it was called. It was gonna be my *Lord of the Rings*, my *Gormenghast*, my you-name-it. One thing about being twenty-two is that you’re never short of ambition. It didn’t take me long to see that it was just too big for my little brain. Too . . . I don’t know . . . outré? That’s as good a word as any, I guess. Also,” he added dryly, “I lost the outline.”

“You did *what*?”

“Sounds crazy, doesn’t it? But writing can be a crazy deal. Did you know that Ernest Hemingway once lost a whole book of short stories on a train?”

“Really?”

“Really. He had no back-up copies, no carbons. Just poof, gone. That’s sort of what happened to me. One fine drunk night—or maybe I was done up on mescaline, I can no longer remember—I did a complete outline for this five- or ten-thousand-page fantasy epic. It

was a good outline, I think. Gave the thing some form. Some style. And then I lost it. Probably flew off the back of my motorcycle when I was coming back from some fucking bar. Nothing like that ever happened to me before. I'm usually careful about my work, if nothing else."

"Uh-huh," Eddie said, and thought of asking *Did you happen to see any guys in loud clothes, the sort of guys who drive flashy cars, around the time you lost it? Low men, not to put too fine a point on it? Anyone with a red mark on his or her forehead? The sort of thing that looks a little like a circle of blood? Any indications, in short, that someone stole your outline? Someone who might have an interest in making sure The Dark Tower never gets finished?*

"Let's go out to the kitchen. We need to palaver." Eddie just wished he knew what they were supposed to palaver *about*. Whatever it was, they had better get it right, because this was the real world, the one in which there were no do-overs.

SEVEN

Roland had no idea of how to stock and then start the fancy coffee-maker on the counter, but he found a battered coffee pot on one of the shelves that was not much different from the one Alain Johns had carried in his gunna long ago, when three boys had come to Mejis to count stock. Sai King's stove ran on electricity, but a child could have figured out how to make the burners work. When Eddie and King came into the kitchen, the pot was beginning to get hot.

"I don't use coffee, myself," King said, and went to the cold-box (giving Roland a wide berth). "And I don't ordinarily drink beer before five, but I believe that today I'll make an exception. Mr. Dean?"

"Coffee'll do me fine."

"Mr. Gilead?"

"It's Deschain, sai King. I'll also have the coffee, and say thank ya."

The writer opened a can by using the built-in ring in the top (a device that struck Roland as superficially clever and almost moronically wasteful). There was a hiss, followed by the pleasant smell

(*commala-come-come*)

of yeast and hops. King drank down at least half the can at a go, wiped foam out of his mustache, then put the can on the counter. He was still pale, but seemingly composed and in possession of his faculties. The gunslinger thought he was doing quite well, at least so far. Was it possible that, in some of the deeper ranges of his mind and heart, King had expected their visit? Had been waiting for them?

“You have a wife and children,” Roland said. “Where are they?”

“Tabby’s folks live up north, near Bangor. My daughter’s been spending the last week with her nanna and poppa. Tabby took our youngest—Owen, he’s just a baby—and headed that way about an hour ago. I’m supposed to pick up my other son—Joe—in . . .” He checked his watch. “In just about an hour. I wanted to finish my writing, so this time we’re taking both cars.”

Roland considered. It might be true. It was almost certainly King’s way of telling them that if anything happened to him, he would be missed in short order.

“I can’t believe this is happening. Have I said that enough to be annoying yet? In any case, it’s too much like one of my own stories to be happening.”

“Like *’Salem’s Lot*, for instance,” Eddie suggested.

King raised his eyebrows. “So you know about that. Do they have the Literary Guild wherever you came from?” He downed the rest of his beer. He drank, Roland thought, like a man with a gift for it. “A couple of hours ago there were sirens way over on the other side of the lake, plus a big plume of smoke. I could see it from my office. At the time I thought it was probably just a grassfire, maybe in Harrison or Stoneham, but now I wonder. Did that have anything to do with you guys? It did, didn’t it?”

Eddie said, "He's writing it, Roland. Or was. He says he stopped. But it's called *The Dark Tower*. So he knows."

King smiled, but Roland thought he looked really, deeply frightened for the first time. Setting aside that initial moment when he'd come around the corner of the house and seen them, that was. When he'd seen his creation.

Is that what I am? His creation?

It felt wrong and right in equal measure. Thinking about it made Roland's head ache and his stomach feel slippery all over again.

"He knows," King said. "I don't like the sound of that, boys. In a story, when someone says 'He knows,' the next line is usually 'We'll have to kill him.'"

"Believe me when I tell you this," Roland said. He spoke with great emphasis. "Killing you is the last thing we'd ever want to do, sai King. Your enemies are our enemies, and those who would help you along your way are our friends."

"Amen," Eddie said.

King opened his cold-box and got another beer. Roland saw a great many of them in there, standing to frosty attention. More cans of beer than anything else. "In that case," he said, "you better call me Steve."

EIGHT

"Tell us the story with me in it," Roland invited.

King leaned against the kitchen counter and the top of his head caught a shaft of sun. He took a sip of his beer and considered Roland's question. Eddie saw it then for the first time, very dim—a contrast to the sun, perhaps. A dusty black shadow, something swaddled around the man. Dim. Barely there. But there. Like the darkness you saw hiding behind things when you traveled todash. Was that it? Eddie didn't think so.

Barely there.

But there.

“You know,” King said, “I’m not much good at telling stories. That sounds like a paradox, but it’s not; it’s the reason I write them down.”

Is it Roland he talks like, or me? Eddie wondered. He couldn’t tell. Much later on he’d realize that King talked like *all* of them, even Rosa Munoz, Pere Callahan’s woman of work in the Calla.

Then the writer brightened. “Tell you what, why don’t I see if I can find the manuscript? I’ve got four or five boxes of busted stories downstairs. *Dark Tower*’s got to be in one of them.” *Busted. Busted stories.* Eddie didn’t care for the sound of that at all. “You can read some of it while I go get my little boy.” He grinned, displaying big, crooked teeth. “Maybe when I get back, you’ll be gone and I can get to work on thinking you were never here at all.”

Eddie glanced at Roland, who shook his head slightly. On the stove, the first bubble of coffee blinked in the pot’s glass eye.

“Sai King—” Eddie began.

“Steve.”

“Steve, then. We ought to transact our business now. Matters of trust aside, we’re in a ripping hurry.”

“Sure, sure, right, racing against time,” King said, and laughed. The sound was charmingly goofy. Eddie suspected that the beer was starting to do its work, and he wondered if the man was maybe a juice-head. Impossible to tell for sure on such short acquaintance, but Eddie thought some of the signs were there. He didn’t remember a whole hell of a lot from high school English, but he did recall some teacher or other telling him that writers *really* liked to drink. Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, “The Raven” guy. Writers liked to drink.

“I’m not laughing at you guys,” King said. “It’s actually against my religion to laugh at men who are toting guns. It’s just that in the sort of books I write, people are almost always racing against time. Would you like to hear the first line of *The Dark Tower*?”

“Sure, if you remember it,” Eddie said.

Roland said nothing, but his eyes gleamed bright under brows that were now threaded with white.

“Oh, I remember it. It may be the best opening line I ever wrote.” King set his beer aside, then raised his hands with the first two fingers of each held out and bent, as if making quotation marks. “‘The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.’ The rest might have been puff and blow, but man, that was clean.” He dropped his hands and picked up his beer. “For the forty-third time, is this really happening?”

“Was the man in black’s name Walter?” Roland asked.

King’s beer tilted shy of his mouth and he spilled some down his front, wetting his fresh shirt. Roland nodded, as if that was all the answer he needed.

“Don’t faint on us again,” Eddie said, a trifle sharply. “Once was enough to impress me.”

King nodded, took another sip of his beer, seemed to take hold of himself at the same time. He glanced at the clock. “Are you gentlemen really going to let me pick up my son?”

“Yes,” Roland said.

“You . . .” King paused to consider, then smiled. “Do you set your watch and your warrant on it?”

With no smile in return, Roland said, “So I do.”

“Okay, then, *The Dark Tower*, Reader’s Digest Condensed Book version. Keeping in mind that oral storytelling isn’t my thing, I’ll do the best I can.”

NINE

Roland listened as if worlds depended on it, as he was quite sure they did. King had begun his version of Roland’s life with the campfires, which had pleased the gunslinger because they confirmed Walter’s essential humanity. From there, King said, the story went back to Roland’s meeting with a kind of shirrtail farmer on the edge of the desert. Brown, his name had been.

Life for your crop, Roland heard across an echo of years, and *Life for your own*. He'd forgotten Brown, and Brown's pet raven, Zoltan, but this stranger had not.

"What I liked," King said, "was how the story seemed to be going backward. From a purely technical standpoint, it was very interesting. I start with you in the desert, then slip back a notch to you meeting Brown and Zoltan. Zoltan was named after a folksinger and guitarist I knew at the University of Maine, by the way. Anyway, from the dweller's hut the story slips back another notch to you coming into the town of Tull . . . named after a rock group—"

"Jethro Tull," Eddie said. "Goddam of course! I *knew* that name was familiar! What about Z.Z. Top, Steve? Do you know them?" Eddie looked at King, saw the incomprehension, and smiled. "I guess it's not their when quite yet. Or if it is, you haven't found out about them."

Roland twirled his fingers: *Go on, go on*. And gave Eddie a look that suggested he stop interrupting.

"Anyway, from Roland coming into Tull, the story slips back another notch to tell how Nort, the weed-eater, died and was resurrected by Walter. You see what buzzed me about it, don't you? The early part of it was all told in reverse gear. It was bass-ackwards."

Roland had no interest in the technical aspects that seemed to fascinate King; this was his life they were talking about, after all, his *life*, and to him it had all been moving forward. At least until he'd reached the Western Sea, and the doors through which he had drawn his traveling companions.

But Stephen King knew nothing of the doors, it seemed. He had written of the way station, and Roland's meeting with Jake Chambers; he had written of their trek first into the mountains and then through them; he had written of Jake's betrayal by the man he had come to trust and to love.

King observed the way Roland hung his head during this part of the tale, and spoke with odd gentleness. "No need to look so ashamed, Mr. Deschain. After all, I was the one who made you do it."

But again, Roland wondered about that.

King had written of Roland's palaver with Walter in the dusty golgotha of bones, the telling of the Tarot and the terrible vision Roland had had of growing right through the roof of the universe. He had written of how Roland had awakened following that long night of fortune-telling to find himself years older, and Walter nothing but bones. Finally, King said, he'd written of Roland going to the edge of the water and sitting there. "You said, 'I loved you, Jake'"

Roland nodded matter-of-factly. "I love him still."

"You speak as though he actually exists."

Roland looked at him levelly. "Do I exist? Do you?"

King was silent.

"What happened then?" Eddie asked.

"Then, *señor*, I ran out of story—or got intimidated, if you like that better—and stopped."

Eddie also wanted to stop. He could see the shadows beginning to lengthen in the kitchen and wanted to get after Susannah before it was too late. He thought both he and Roland had a pretty good idea of how to get out of this world, suspected Stephen King himself could direct them to Turtleback Lane in Lovell, where reality was thin and—according to John Cullum, at least—the walk-ins had been plentiful of late. And King would be happy to direct them. Happy to get rid of them. But they couldn't go just yet, and in spite of his impatience Eddie knew it.

"You stopped because you lost your lineout," Roland said.

"Outline. And no, not really." King had gone after his third beer, and Eddie thought it was no wonder the man was getting pudgy in the middle; he'd already consumed the caloric equivalent of a loaf of bread, and was starting on Loaf #2. "I hardly ever work from an outline. In fact . . . don't hold me to this, but that might have been the only time. And it got too big for me. Too strange. Also *you* became a problem, sir or sai or whatever you call yourself." King grimaced. "Whatever form of address that is, I didn't make it up."

"Not yet, anyway," Roland remarked.

“You started as a version of Sergio Leone’s *Man With No Name*.”

“In the Spaghetti Westerns,” Eddie said. “Jesus, of course! I watched a hundred of em at the Majestic with my brother Henry, when Henry was still at home. I went by myself or with this friend of mine, Chuggy Coter, when Henry was in the Nam. Those were *guy flicks*.”

King was grinning. “Yeah,” he said, “but my wife went ape for em, so go figure.”

“Cool on her!” Eddie exclaimed.

“Yeah, Tab’s a cool kitty.” King looked back at Roland. “As *The Man With No Name*—a fantasy version of Clint Eastwood—you were okay. A lot of fun to partner up with.”

“Is that how you think of it?”

“Yes. But then you changed. Right under my hand. It got so I couldn’t tell if you were the hero, the antihero, or no hero at all. When you let the kid drop, that was the capper.”

“You said you made me do that.”

Looking Roland straight in the eyes—blue meeting blue amid the endless choir of voices—King said: “I lied, brother.”

TEN

There was a little pause while they all thought that over. Then King said, “You started to scare me, so I stopped writing about you. Boxed you up and put you in a drawer and went on to a series of short stories I sold to various men’s magazines.” He considered, then nodded. “Things changed for me after I put you away, my friend, and for the better. I started to sell my stuff. Asked Tabby to marry me. Not long after that I started a book called *Carrie*. It wasn’t my first novel, but it was the first one I sold, and it put me over the top. All that after saying goodbye Roland, so long, happy trails to you. Then what happens? I come around the corner of my house one day six or seven years later and see you standing in my fucking driveway, big as Billy-

be-damned, as my mother used to say. And all I can say now is that thinking you're a hallucination brought on by overwork is the most optimistic conclusion I can draw. And I don't believe it. How can I?" King's voice was rising, becoming reedy. Eddie didn't mistake it for fear; this was outrage. "How can I believe it when I see the shadows you cast, the blood on your leg—" He pointed to Eddie. "And the dust on your face?" This time to Roland. "You've taken away my goddam options, and I can feel my mind . . . I don't know . . . tipping? Is that the word? I think it is. Tipping."

"You didn't just stop," Roland said, ignoring this last completely for the self-indulgent nonsense it probably was.

"No?"

"I think telling stories is like pushing something. Pushing against uncreation itself, maybe. And one day while you were doing that, you felt something pushing back."

King considered this for what seemed to Eddie like a very long time. Then he nodded. "You could be right. It was more than the usual going-dry feeling, for sure. I'm used to that, although it doesn't happen as often as it used to. It's . . . I don't know, one day you just start having less fun while you're sitting there, tapping the keys. Seeing less clearly. Getting less of a buzz from telling *yourself* the story. And then, to make things worse, you get a *new* idea, one that's all bright and shiny, fresh off the showroom floor, not a scratch on her. Completely unfuckedup by you, at least as of yet. And . . . well . . ."

"And you felt something pushing back." Roland spoke in the same utterly flat tone.

"Yeah." King's voice had dropped so low Eddie could barely hear him. "NO TRESPASSING. DO NOT ENTER. HIGH VOLTAGE." He paused. "Maybe even DANGER OF DEATH."

You wouldn't like that faint shadow I see swirling around you, Eddie thought. That black nimbus. No, sai, I don't think you'd like that at all, and what am I seeing? The cigarettes? The beer? Something else addictive you maybe have a taste for? A car accident one drunk night? And how far ahead? How many years?

He looked at the clock over the Kings' kitchen table and was dismayed to see that it was quarter to four in the afternoon. "Roland, it's getting late. This man's got to get his kid." *And we've got to find my wife before Mia has the baby they seem to be sharing and the Crimson King has no more use for the Susannah part of her.*

Roland said, "Just a little more." And lowered his head without saying anything. Thinking. Trying to decide which questions were the right questions. Maybe just one right question. And it was important, Eddie knew it was, because they'd never be able to return to the ninth day of July in the year 1977. They might be able to revisit that day in some other world, but not in this one. And would Stephen King exist in any of those other worlds? Eddie thought maybe not. *Probably* not.

While Roland considered, Eddie asked King if the name Blaine meant anything special to him.

"No. Not particularly."

"What about Lud?"

"As in Luddites? They were some sort of machine-hating religious sect, weren't they? Nineteenth century, I think, or they might have started even earlier. If I've got it right, the ones in the nineteenth century would break into factories and bash the machinery to pieces." He grinned, displaying those crooked teeth. "I guess they were the Greenpeace of their day."

"Beryl Evans? That name ring a bell?"

"No."

"Henchick? Henchick of the Manni?"

"No. What are the Manni?"

"Too complicated to go into. What about Claudia y Inez Bachman? That one mean anyth—"

King burst out laughing, startling Eddie. Startling King himself, judging from the look on his face. "Dicky's wife!" he exclaimed. "How in the hell do you know about that?"

"I don't. Who's Dicky?"

"Richard Bachman. I've started publishing some of my earliest novels as paperback originals, under a pseudonym. Bachman is it. One

night when I was pretty drunk, I made up a whole author bio for him, right down to how he beat adult-onset leukemia, hooray Dickie. Anyway, Claudia's his wife. Claudia Inez Bachman. The y part, though . . . that I don't know about."

Eddie felt as if a huge invisible stone had suddenly rolled off his chest and out of his life. *Claudia Inez Bachman* only had eighteen letters. So something had added the y, and why? To make nineteen, of course. Claudia Bachman was just a name. Claudia y Inez Bachman, though . . . *she* was ka-tet.

Eddie thought they'd just gotten one of the things they'd come here for. Yes, Stephen King had created them. At least he'd created Roland, Jake, and Father Callahan. The rest he hadn't gotten to yet. And he had moved Roland like a piece on a chessboard: go to Tull, Roland, sleep with Allie, Roland, chase Walter across the desert, Roland. But even as he moved his main character along the board, so had *King himself* been moved. That one letter added to the name of his pseudonym's wife insisted upon it. Something had wanted to make Claudia Bachman *nineteen*. So—

"Steve."

"Yes, Eddie of New York." King smiled self-consciously.

Eddie could feel his heart beating hard in his chest. "What does the number nineteen mean to you?"

King considered. Outside the wind soughed in the trees, the powerboats whined, and the crow—or another—cawed. Soon along this lake would come the hour of barbecues, and then maybe a trip to town and a band concert on the square, all in this best of all possible worlds. Or just the one most real.

At last, King shook his head and Eddie let out a frustrated breath.

"Sorry. It's a prime number, but that's all I can come up with. Primes sort of fascinate me, have ever since Mr. Soychak's Algebra I class at Lisbon High. And I think it's how old I was when I met my wife, but she might dispute that. She has a disputatious nature."

"What about ninety-nine?"

King thought it over, then ticked items off on his fingers. “A hell of an age to be. ‘Ninety-nine years on the old rock-pile.’ A song called—I think—‘The Wreck of Old Ninety-nine.’ Only it might be ‘The Wreck of the *Hesperus*’ I’m thinking about. ‘Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, we took one down and passed it all around, and there were ninety-eight bottles of beer.’ Beyond that, *nada*.”

This time it was King’s turn to look at the clock.

“If I don’t leave soon, Betty Jones is going to call to see if I forgot I *have* a son. And after I get Joe I’m supposed to drive a hundred and thirty miles north, there’s that. Which might be easier if I quit with the beer. And that, in turn, might be easier if I didn’t have a couple of armed spooks sitting in my kitchen.”

Roland was nodding. He reached down to his gunbelt, brought up a shell, and began to roll it absently between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. “Just one more question, if it does ya. Then we’ll go our course and let you go yours.”

King nodded. “Ask it, then.” He looked at his third can of beer, then tipped it down the sink with an expression of regret.

“Was it you wrote *The Dark Tower*?”

To Eddie this question made no sense, but King’s eyes lit up and he smiled brilliantly. “*No!*” he said. “And if I ever do a book on writing—and I probably could, it’s what I taught before I retired to do this—I’ll say so. Not that, not any of them, not really. I know that there are writers who *do* write, but I’m not one of them. In fact, whenever I run out of inspiration and resort to plot, the story I’m working on usually turns to shit.”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” Eddie said.

“It’s like . . . hey, that’s neat!”

The shell rolling back and forth between the gunslinger’s thumb and forefinger had jumped effortlessly to the backs of his fingers, where it seemed to walk along Roland’s rippling knuckles.

“Yes,” Roland agreed, “it is, isn’t it?”

“It’s how you hypnotized Jake at the way station. How you made him remember being killed.”

And Susan, Eddie thought. He hypnotized Susan the same way, only you don't know about that yet, sai King. Or maybe you do. Maybe somewhere inside you know all of it.

"I've tried hypnosis," King said. "In fact, a guy got me up onstage at the Topsham Fair when I was a kid and tried to make me cluck like a hen. It didn't work. That was around the time Buddy Holly died. And the Big Bopper. And Ritchie Valens. Todana! Ah, Discordia!"

He suddenly shook his head as if to clear it, and looked up from the dancing shell to Roland's face. "Did I say something just then?"

"No, sai." Roland looked down at the dancing shell—back and forth it went, and back and forth—which quite naturally drew King's eyes back as well.

"What happens when you make a story?" Roland inquired. "My story, for instance?"

"It just comes," King said. His voice had grown faint. Bemused. "It blows into me—that's the good part—and then it comes out when I move my fingers. Never from the head. Comes out the navel, or somewhere. There was an editor . . . I think it was Maxwell Perkins . . . who called Thomas Wolfe—"

Eddie knew what Roland was doing and knew it was probably a bad idea to interrupt, but he couldn't help it. "A rose," he said. "A rose, a stone, an unfound door."

King's face lighted with pleasure, but his eyes never lifted from the shell dancing along the heddles of the gunslinger's knuckles. "Actually it's a stone, a *leaf*, a door," he said. "But I like rose even better."

He had been entirely captured. Eddie thought he could almost hear the sucking sound as the man's conscious mind drained away. It occurred to him that something as simple as a ringing phone at this critical moment might change the whole course of existence. He got up, and—moving quietly in spite of his stiff and painful leg—went to where it hung on the wall. He twisted the cord in his fingers and applied pressure until it snapped.

"A rose, a stone, an unfound door," King agreed. "That could be Wolfe, all right. Maxwell Perkins called him 'a divine wind-chime.' O

lost, and by the wind grieved! All the forgotten faces! O Discordia!”

“How does the story come to you, sai?” Roland asked quietly.

“I don’t like the New Agers . . . the crystal-wavers . . . all the it-don’t-matter, turn-the-pagers . . . but they call it channeling, and that’s . . . how it feels . . . like something in a channel . . .”

“Or on a beam?” Roland asked.

“All things serve the Beam,” the writer said, and sighed. The sound was terrible in its sadness. Eddie felt his back prickle up in helpless waves of gooseflesh.

ELEVEN

Stephen King stood in a shaft of dusty afternoon sunlight. It lit his cheek, the curve of his left eye, the dimple at the corner of his mouth. It turned each white hair on the left side of his beard into a line of light. He *stood* in light, and that made the faint darkness around him clearer. His respiration had slowed to perhaps three or four breaths a minute.

“Stephen King,” Roland said. “Do you see me?”

“Hile, gunslinger, I see you very well.”

“When did you first see me?”

“Not until today.”

Roland looked surprised at this, and a little frustrated. It was clearly not the answer he had expected. Then King went on.

“I saw Cuthbert, not you.” A pause. “You and Cuthbert broke bread and scattered it beneath the gallows. That’s in the part that’s already written.”

“Aye, so we did. When Hax the cook swung. We were but lads. Did Bert tell you that tale?”

But King did not answer this. “I saw Eddie. I saw him very well.” A pause. “Cuthbert and Eddie are twins.”

“Roland—” Eddie began in a low voice. Roland hushed him with a savage shake of the head and put the bullet he’d used to hypnotize

King on the table. King kept looking at the place where it had been, as if he still saw it there. Probably he did. Dust motes danced around his dark and shaggy head of hair.

“Where were you when you saw Cuthbert and Eddie?”

“In the barn.” King’s voice dropped. His lips had begun to tremble. “Auntie sent me out because we tried to run away.”

“Who?”

“Me and my brother Dave. They caught us and brought us back. They said we were bad, bad boys.”

“And you had to go into the barn.”

“Yes, and saw wood.”

“That was your punishment.”

“Yes.” A tear welled in the corner of King’s right eye. It slipped down his cheek to the edge of his beard. “The chickens are dead.”

“The chickens in the barn?”

“Yes, them.” More tears followed the first.

“What killed them?”

“Uncle Oren says it was avian flu. Their eyes are open. They’re . . . a little scary.”

Or perhaps more than just a little, Eddie thought, judging by the tears and the pallor of the man’s cheeks.

“You couldn’t leave the barn?”

“Not until I saw my share of the wood. David did his. It’s my turn. There are spiders in the chickens. Spiders in their guts, little red ones. Like specks of red pepper. If they get on me I’ll catch the flu and die. Only then I’ll come back.”

“Why?”

“I’ll be a vampire. I’ll be a slave to *him*. His scribe, maybe. His pet writer.”

“Whose?”

“The Lord of the Spiders. The Crimson King, Tower-pent.”

“Christ, Roland,” Eddie whispered. He was shuddering. What had they found here? What nest had they exposed? “Sai King, *Steve*, how old were you—*are* you?”

“I’m seven.” A pause. “I wet my pants. I don’t want the spiders to bite me. The red spiders. But then *you* came, Eddie, and I went free.” He smiled radiantly, his cheeks gleaming with tears.

“Are you asleep, Stephen?” Roland asked.

“Aye.”

“Go deeper.”

“All right.”

“I’ll count to three. On three you’ll be as deep as you can go.”

“All right.”

“One . . . two . . . three.” On *three*, King’s head lolled forward. His chin rested on his chest. A line of silver drool ran from his mouth and swung like a pendulum.

“So now we know something,” Roland said to Eddie. “Something crucial, maybe. He was touched by the Crimson King when he was just a child, but it seems that we won him over to our side. Or *you* did, Eddie. You and my old friend, Bert. In any case, it makes him rather special.”

“I’d feel better about my heroism if I remembered it,” Eddie said. Then: “You realize that when this guy was seven, I wasn’t even born?”

Roland smiled. “Ka is a wheel. You’ve been turning on it under different names for a long time. Cuthbert for one, it seems.”

“What’s this about the Crimson King being ‘Tower-pent’?”

“I have no idea.”

Roland turned back to Stephen King. “How many times do you think the Lord of Discordia has tried to kill you, Stephen? Kill you and halt your pen? Shut up your troublesome mouth? Since that first time in your aunt and uncle’s barn?”

King seemed to try counting, then shook his head. “Delah,” he said. *Many.*

Eddie and Roland exchanged a glance.

“And does someone always step in?” Roland asked.

“Nay, sai, never think it. I’m not helpless. Sometimes I step aside.”

Roland laughed at that—the dry sound of a stick broken over a knee. “Do you know what you are?”

King shook his head. His lower lip had pooched out like that of a sulky child.

“Do you know what you are?”

“The father first. The husband second. The writer third. Then the brother. After brotherhood I am silent. Okay?”

“No. Not oh-kay. Do you know what you are?”

A long pause. “No. I told you all I can. Stop asking me.”

“I’ll stop when you speak true. Do you know—” “Yes, all right, I know what you’re getting at. Satisfied?”

“Not yet. Tell me what—”

“I’m Gan, or *possessed* by Gan, I don’t know which, maybe there’s no difference.” King began to cry. His tears were silent and horrible. “But it’s not Dis, I turned aside from Dis, I *repudiate* Dis, and that should be enough but it’s not, ka is never satisfied, greedy old ka, that’s what *she* said, isn’t it? What Susan Delgado said before you killed her, or I killed her, or Gan killed her. ‘Greedy old ka, how I hate it.’ Regardless of who killed her, *I* made her say that, I, for I hate it, so I do. I buck against ka’s goad, and will until the day I go into the clearing at the end of the path.”

Roland sat at the table, white at the sound of Susan’s name.

“And still ka comes to me, comes *from* me, I translate it, am *made* to translate it, ka flows out of my navel like a ribbon. I am not ka, I am not the ribbon, it’s just what comes through me and I hate it I hate it! The chickens were full of *spiders*, do you understand that, full of *spiders!*”

“Stop your snivelment,” Roland said (with a remarkable lack of sympathy, to Eddie’s way of thinking), and King stilled.

The gunslinger sat thinking, then raised his head.

“Why did you stop writing the story when I came to the Western Sea?”

“Are you dumb? Because *I don’t want to be Gan!* I turned aside from Dis, I should be able to turn aside from Gan, as well. I love my wife. I love my kids. I love to write stories, but I don’t want to write *your* story. I’m always afraid. He looks for me. The Eye of the King.”

“But not since you stopped,” Roland said.

“No, since then he looks for me not, he sees me not.”

“Nevertheless, you must go on.”

King’s face twisted, as if in pain, then smoothed out into the previous look of sleep.

Roland raised his mutilated right hand. “When you do, you’ll start with how I lost my fingers. Do you remember?”

“Lobstrosities,” King said. “Bit them off.”

“And how do you know that?”

King smiled a little and made a gentle *wissshhh*-ing sound. “The wind blows,” said he.

“Gan bore the world and moved on,” Roland replied. “Is that what you mean to say?”

“Aye, and the world would have fallen into the abyss if not for the great turtle. Instead of falling, it landed on his back.”

“So we’re told, and we all say thank ya. Start with the lobstrosities biting off my fingers.”

“Dad-a-jum, dad-a-jingers, goddam lobsters bit off your fingers,” King said, and actually laughed.

“Yes.”

“Would have saved me a lot of trouble if you’d died, Roland son of Steven.”

“I know. Eddie and my other friends, as well.” A ghost of a smile touched the corners of the gunslinger’s mouth. “Then, after the lobstrosities—”

“Eddie comes, Eddie comes,” King interrupted, and made a dreamy little flapping gesture with his right hand, as if to say he knew all that and Roland shouldn’t waste his time. “The Prisoner the Pusher the Lady of Shadows. The butcher the baker the candle-mistaker.” He smiled. “That’s how my son Joe says it. When?”

Roland blinked, caught by surprise.

“When, when, *when?*” King raised his hand and Eddie watched with surprise as the toaster, the waffle maker, and the drainer full of clean dishes rose and floated in the sunshine.

“Are you asking me when you should start again?”

“Yes, yes, *yes!*” A knife rose out of the floating dish drainer and flew the length of the room. There it stuck, quivering, in the wall. Then everything settled back into place again.

Roland said, “Listen for the song of the Turtle, the cry of the Bear.”

“Song of Turtle, cry of Bear. Maturin, from the Patrick O’Brian novels. Shardik from the Richard Adams novel.”

“Yes. If you say so.”

“Guardians of the Beam.”

“Yes.”

“Of *my* Beam.”

Roland looked at him fixedly. “Do you say so?”

“Yes.”

“Then let it be so. When you hear the song of the Turtle or the cry of the Bear, then you must start again.”

“When I open my eye to your world, he sees me.” A pause. “*It.*”

“I know. We’ll try to protect you at those times, just as we intend to protect the rose.”

King smiled. “I love the rose.”

“Have you seen it?” Eddie asked.

“Indeed I have, in New York. Up the street from the U.N. Plaza Hotel. It used to be in the deli. Tom and Jerry’s. In the back. Now it’s in the vacant lot where the deli was.”

“You’ll tell our story until you’re tired,” Roland said. “When you can’t tell any more, when the Turtle’s song and the Bear’s cry grow faint in your ears, then will you rest. And when you can begin again, you *will* begin again. You—”

“Roland?”

“Sai King?”

“I’ll do as you say. I’ll listen for the song of the Turtle and each time I hear it, I’ll go on with the tale. If I live. But you must listen, too. For *her* song.”

“Whose?”

“Susannah’s. The baby will kill her if you aren’t quick. And your ears must be sharp.”

Eddie looked at Roland, frightened. Roland nodded. It was time to go.

“Listen to me, sai King. We’re well-met in Bridgton, but now we must leave you.”

“Good,” King said, and he spoke with such unfeigned relief that Eddie almost laughed.

“You will stay here, right where you are, for ten minutes. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll wake up. You’ll feel very well. You won’t remember that we were here, except in the very deepest depths of your mind.”

“In the mudholes.”

“The mudholes, do ya. On top, you’ll think you had a nap. A wonderful, refreshing nap. You’ll get your son and go to where you’re supposed to go. You’ll feel fine. You’ll go on with your life. You’ll write many stories, but every one will be to some greater or lesser degree about this story. Do you understand?”

“Yar,” King said, and he sounded so much like Roland when Roland was gruff and tired that Eddie’s back pricked up in gooseflesh again. “Because what’s seen can’t be unseen. What’s known can’t be unknown.” He paused. “Save perhaps in death.”

“Aye, perhaps. Every time you hear the song of the Turtle—if that’s what it sounds like to you—you’ll start on our story again. The only real story you have to tell. And we’ll try to protect you.”

“I’m afraid.”

“I know, but we’ll try—”

“It’s not *that*. I’m afraid of not being able to finish.” His voice lowered. “I’m afraid the Tower will fall and I’ll be held to blame.”

“That is up to ka, not you,” Roland said. “Or me. I’ve satisfied myself on that point. And now—” He nodded to Eddie, and stood up.

“Wait,” King said.

Roland looked at him, eyebrows raised.

“I am allowed mail privileges, but only once.”

Sounds like a guy in a POW camp, Eddie mused. And aloud: “Who allows you mail privileges, Steve-O?”

King’s brow wrinkled. “Gan?” he asked. “Is it Gan?” Then, like the sun breaking through on a foggy morning, his brow smoothed out and he smiled. “I think it’s *me!*” he said. “I can send a letter to myself . . . perhaps even a small package . . . but only once.” His smile broadened into an engaging grin. “All of this . . . sort of like a fairy-tale, isn’t it?”

“Yes indeed,” Eddie said, thinking of the glass palace they’d come to straddling the Interstate in Kansas.

“What would you do?” Roland asked. “To whom would you send mail?”

“To Jake,” King said promptly.

“And what would you tell him?”

King’s voice became Eddie Dean’s voice. It wasn’t an approximation; it was *exact*. The sound turned Eddie cold.

“Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee,” King lilted, “not to worry, you’ve got the key!”

They waited for more, but it seemed there was no more. Eddie looked at Roland, and this time it was the younger man’s turn to twirl his fingers in the let’s-go gesture. Roland nodded and they started for the door.

“That was fucking-A creepy,” Eddie said.

Roland didn’t reply.

Eddie stopped him with a touch on the arm. “One other thing occurs to me, Roland. While he’s hypnotized, maybe you ought to tell him to quit drinking and smoking. Especially the ciggies. He’s a fiend for them. Did you see this place? Fuckin ashtrays everywhere.”

Roland looked amused. “Eddie, if one waits until the lungs are fully formed, tobacco prolongs life, not shortens it. It’s the reason why in Gilead everyone smoked but the very poorest, and even they had their shuckies, like as not. Tobacco keeps away ill-sick vapors, for one thing. Many dangerous insects, for another. Everyone knows this.”

“The Surgeon General of the United States would be delighted to hear what everyone in Gilead knows,” Eddie said dryly. “What about the booze, then? Suppose he rolls his Jeep over some drunk night, or gets on the Interstate going the wrong way and head-ons someone?”

Roland considered it, then shook his head. “I’ve meddled with his mind—and ka itself—as much as I intend to. As much as I *dare* to. We’ll have to keep checking back over the years in any . . . why do you shake your head at me? The tale spins from *him!*”

“Maybe so, but we won’t be able to check on him for twenty-two years unless we decide to abandon Susannah . . . and I’ll never do that. Once we jump ahead to 1999, there’s no coming back. Not in this world.”

For a moment Roland made no reply, just looked at the man leaning his behind against his kitchen counter, asleep on his feet with his eyes open and his hair tumbled on his brow. Seven or eight minutes from now King would awaken with no memory of Roland and Eddie . . . always assuming they were gone, that was. Eddie didn’t seriously believe the gunslinger would leave Suze hung out on the line . . . but he’d let Jake drop, hadn’t he? Let Jake drop into the abyss, once upon a time.

“Then he’ll have to go it alone,” Roland said, and Eddie breathed a sigh of relief. “Sai King.”

“Yes, Roland.”

“Remember—when you hear the song of the Turtle, you must put aside all other things and tell this story.”

“I will. At least I’ll try.”

“Good.”

Then the writer said: “The ball must be taken off the board and broken.”

Roland frowned. “Which ball? Black Thirteen?”

“If it wakes, it will become the most dangerous thing in the universe. And it’s waking now. In some other place. Some other where and when.”

“Thank you for your prophecy, sai King.”

“Dad-a-shim, dad-a-shower. Take the ball to the double Tower.”

To this Roland shook his head in silent bewilderment.

Eddie put a fist to his forehead and bent slightly. “Hile, wordslinger.”

King smiled faintly, as if this were ridiculous, but said nothing.

“Long days and pleasant nights,” Roland told him. “You don’t need to think about the chickens anymore.”

An expression of almost heartbreaking hope spread across Stephen King’s bearded face. “Do you really say so?”

“I really do. And may we meet again on the path before we all meet in the clearing.” The gunslinger turned on his bootheel and left the writer’s house.

Eddie took a final look at the tall, rather stooped man standing with his narrow ass propped against the counter. He thought: *The next time I see you, Stevie—if I do—your beard will be mostly white and there’ll be lines around your face . . . and I’ll still be young. How’s your blood-pressure, sai? Good to go for the next twenty-two years? Hope so. What about your ticker? Does cancer run in your family, and if it does, how deep?*

There was time for none of these questions, of course. Or any others. Very soon the writer would be waking up and going on with his life. Eddie followed his dinh out into the latening afternoon and closed the door behind him. He was beginning to think that, when ka had sent them here instead of to New York City, it had known what it was doing, after all.

TWELVE

Eddie stopped on the driver’s side of John Cullum’s car and looked across the roof at the gunslinger. “Did you see that thing around him? That black haze?”

“The todana, yes. Thank your father that it’s still faint.”

“What’s a todana? Sounds like todash.”

Roland nodded. "It's a variation of the word. It means deathbag. He's been marked."

"Jesus," Eddie said.

"It's faint, I tell you."

"But there."

Roland opened his door. "We can do nothing about it. Ka marks the time of each man and woman. Let's move, Eddie."

But now that they were actually ready to get rolling again, Eddie was queerly reluctant to go. He had a sense of things unfinished with sai King. And he hated the thought of that black aura.

"What about Turtleback Lane, and the walk-ins? I meant to ask him—"

"We can find it."

"Are you sure? Because I think we need to go there."

"I think so, too. Come on. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

THIRTEEN

The taillights of the old Ford had hardly cleared the end of the driveway before Stephen King opened his eyes. The first thing he did was look at the clock. Almost four. He should have been rolling after Joe ten minutes ago, but the nap he'd taken had done him good. He felt wonderful. Refreshed. Cleaned out in some weird way. He thought, *If every nap could do that, taking them would be a national law.*

Maybe so, but Betty Jones was going to be seriously worried if she didn't see the Cherokee turning into her yard by four-thirty. King reached for the phone to call her, but his eyes fell to the pad on the desk below it, instead. The sheets were headed CALLING ALL BLOWHARDS. A little something from one of his sisters-in-law.

Face going blank again, King reached for the pad and the pen beside it. He bent and wrote:

Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key.

He paused, looking fixedly at this, then wrote:

Dad-a-chud, dad-a-ched, see it, Jake! The key is red!

He paused again, then wrote:

Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee, give this boy a plastic key.

He looked at what he had written with deep affection. Almost love. God almighty, but he felt fine! These lines meant nothing at all, and yet writing them afforded a satisfaction so deep it was almost ecstasy.

King tore off the sheet.

Balled it up.

Ate it.

It stuck for a moment in his throat and then—ulp!—down it went. Good deal! He snatched the

(ad-a-chee)

key to the Jeep off the wooden key-board (which was itself shaped like a key) and hurried outside. He'd get Joe, they'd come back here and pack, they'd grab supper at Mickey Kee's in South Paris. Correction, Mickey-Dee's. He felt he could eat a couple of Quarter Pounders all by himself. Fries, too. *Damn*, but he felt good!

When he reached Kansas Road and turned toward town, he flipped on the radio and got the McCoys, singing "Hang On, Sloopy"—always excellent. His mind drifted, as it so often did while listening to the radio, and he found himself thinking of the characters from that old story, *The Dark Tower*. Not that there were many left; as he recalled, he'd killed most of them off, even the kid. Didn't know what else to do with him, probably. That was usually why you got rid of characters, because you didn't know what else to do with them. What had his name been, Jack? No, that was the haunted Dad in *The Shining*. The *Dark Tower* kid had been *Jake*. Excellent choice of name for a story with a Western motif, something right out of Wayne D.

Overholser or Ray Hogan. Was it possible Jake could come back into that story, maybe as a ghost? Of course he could. The nice thing about tales of the supernatural, King reflected, was that nobody had to *really* die. They could always come back, like that guy Barnabas on *Dark Shadows*. Barnabas Collins had been a vampire.

“Maybe the *kid* comes back as a vampire,” King said, and laughed. “Watch out, Roland, dinner is served and dinner be you!” But that didn’t feel right. What, then? Nothing came, but that was all right. In time, something might. Probably when he least expected it; while feeding the cat or changing the baby or just walking dully along, as Auden said in that poem about suffering.

No suffering today. Today he felt *great*.

Yar, just call me Tony the Tiger.

On the radio, the McCoys gave way to Troy Shondell, singing “This Time.”

That *Dark Tower* thing had been sort of interesting, actually. King thought, *Maybe when we get back from up north I ought to dig it out. Take a look at it.*

Not a bad idea.

STAVE: *Commala-come-call*

*We hail the One who made us all,
Who made the men and made the maids,
Who made the great and small.*

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-call!*

*He made the great and small!
And yet how great the hand of fate
That rules us one and all.*

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12TH STANZA



ONE

Don Callahan had had many dreams of returning to America. Usually they began with him waking up under a high, fair desert sky full of the puffy clouds baseball players call “angels” or in his own rectory bed in the town of Jerusalem’s Lot, Maine. No matter which locale it happened to be, he’d be nearly overwhelmed with relief, his first instinct for prayer. *Oh, thank God. Thank God it was only a dream and finally I am awake.*

He was awake now, no question of that.

He turned a complete circle in the air and saw Jake do exactly the same in front of him. He lost one of his sandals. He could hear Oy yapping and Eddie roaring in protest. He could hear taxi horns, that sublime New York street music, and something else, as well: a preacher. Really cruising along, by the sound of him. Third gear, at least. Maybe overdrive.

One of Callahan’s ankles clipped the side of the Unfound Door as he went through and there was a burst of terrific pain from that spot. Then the ankle (and the area around it) went numb. There was a speedy riffle of todash chimes, like a thirty-three-and-a-third record played at forty-five rpm. A buffet of conflicting air currents hit him, and suddenly he was smelling gasoline and exhaust instead of the Doorway Cave’s dank air. First street music; now street perfume.

For a moment there were *two* preachers. Henchick behind, roaring “*Behold, the door opens!*” and another one ahead, bellowing “*Say GAWD, brotha, that’s right, say GAWD on Second Avenue!*”

More twins, Callahan thought—there was time for that—and then the door behind him slammed shut and the only God-shouter was the one on Second Avenue. Callahan also had time to think *Welcome home, you sonofabitch, welcome back to America*, and then he landed.

TWO

It was quite an all-out crash, but he came down hard on his hands and knees. His jeans protected the latter parts to some degree (although they tore), but the sidewalk scraped what felt like an acre of skin from his palms. He heard the rose, singing powerfully and undisturbed.

Callahan rolled over onto his back and looked up at the sky, snarling with pain, holding his bleeding, buzzing hands in front of his face. A drop of blood from the left one splashed onto his cheek like a tear.

“Where the fuck did *you* come from, my friend?” asked an astounded black man in gray fatigues. He seemed to have been the only one to mark Don Callahan’s dramatic re-entry into America. He was staring down at the man on the sidewalk with wide eyes.

“Oz,” Callahan said, and sat up.

His hands stung fiercely and now his ankle was back, complaining in loud *yowp-yowp-yowp* bursts of pain that were in perfect synch with his elevated heartbeat. “Go on, fella. Get out of here. I’m okay, so twenty-three skidoo.”

“Whatever you say, bro. Later.”

The man in the gray fatigues—a janitor just off-shift was Callahan’s guess—started walking. He favored Callahan with one final glance—still amazed but already beginning to doubt what he’d seen—and then

skirted the little crowd listening to the street preacher. A moment later he was gone.

Callahan got to his feet and stood on one of the steps leading up to Hammarskjöld Plaza, looking for Jake. He didn't see him. He looked the other way, for the Unfound Door, but that was gone, too.

"Now listen, my friends! Listen, I say God, I say God's love, I say gimme hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah," said a member of the street preacher's crowd, not really sounding all that into it.

"I say amen, thank you, brotha! Now listen because this is America's time of TESTING and America is FAILING her TEST! This country needs a BOMB, not a new-kew-lar one but a GAWD-BOMB, can you say hallelujah?"

"Jake!" Callahan shouted. "Jake, where are you? Jake!"

"Oy!" That was Jake, his voice raised in a scream. "Oy, LOOK OUT!"

There was a yapping, excited bark Callahan would have recognized anywhere. Then the scream of locked tires.

The blare of a horn.

And the thud.

THREE

Callahan forgot about his bashed ankle and sizzling palms. He ran around the preacher's little crowd (it had turned as one to the street and the preacher had quit his rant in mid-flow) and saw Jake standing in Second Avenue, in front of a Yellow Cab that had slewed to a crooked stop no more than an inch from his legs. Blue smoke was still drifting up from its rear tires. The driver's face was a pallid, craning O of shock. Oy was crouched between Jake's feet. To Callahan the bumbler looked freaked out but otherwise all right.

The thud came again and yet again. It was Jake, bringing his balled-up fist down on the hood of the taxi. "Asshole!" Jake yelled at

the pallid O on the other side of the windshield. *Thud!* “*Why don’t you—*” *Thud!* “*—watch where—*” *THUD!* “*—the fuck you’re GOING!*” *THUD-THUD!*

“You give it to im, Cholly!” yelled someone from across the street, where perhaps three dozen people had stopped to watch the fun.

The taxi’s door opened. The long tall helicopter who stepped out was wearing what Callahan thought was called a dashiki over jeans and huge mutant sneakers with boomerangs on the sides. There was a fez on his head, which probably accounted somewhat for the impression of extreme height, but not entirely. Callahan guessed the guy was at least six and a half feet tall, fiercely bearded, and scowling at Jake. Callahan started toward this developing scene with a sinking heart, barely aware that one of his feet was bare, slapping the pavement with every other step. The street preacher was also moving toward the developing confrontation. Behind the taxi stopped in the intersection, another driver, interested in nothing but his own scheduled evening plans, laid on his horn with both hands—*WHEEEOOOONNNNNNK!!!*—and leaned out his window, hollering “Move it, Abdul, you’re blockin the box!”

Jake paid no attention. He was in a total fury. This time he brought both fists down on the hood of the taxi, like Ratso Rizzo in *Midnight Cowboy*—*THUD!* “*You almost ran my friend down, you asshole, did you even LOOK—*” *THUD!* “*—where you were GOING?*”

Before Jake could bring his fists down on the hood of the taxi again—which he obviously meant to do until he was satisfied—the driver grabbed his right wrist. “Stop doing that, you little punk!” he cried in an outraged and strangely high voice. “I am telling you—”

Jake stepped back, breaking free of the tall taxi driver’s grip. Then, in a liquid motion too quick for Callahan to follow, the kid yanked the Ruger from the docker’s clutch under his arm and pointed it at the driver’s nose.

“Tell me *what?*” Jake raged at him. “Tell me *what?* That you were driving too fast and almost ran down my friend? That you don’t want to die here in the street with a hole in your head? Tell me *WHAT?*”

A woman on the far side of Second Avenue either saw the gun or caught a whiff of Jake's homicidal fury. She screamed and started hurrying away. Several more followed her example. Others gathered at the curb, smelling blood. Incredibly, one of them—a young man wearing his hat turned around backward—shouted: “Go on, kid! Ventilate that camel-jockey!”

The driver backed up two steps, his eyes widening. He held up his hands to his shoulders. “Do not shoot me, boy! Please!”

“Then say you're sorry!” Jake raved. “If you want to live, you cry my pardon! And his! And *his!*” Jake's skin was dead pale except for tiny red spots of color high up on his cheekbones. His eyes were huge and wet. What Don Callahan saw most clearly and liked least was the way the barrel of the Ruger was trembling. “Say you're sorry for the way you were driving, you careless motherfucker! Do it now! *Do it now!*”

Oy whined uneasily and said, “Ake!”

Jake looked down at him. When he did, the taxi driver lunged for the gun. Callahan hit him with a fairly respectable right cross and the driver sprawled against the front of his car, his fez tumbling from his head. The driver behind him had clear lanes on either side and could have swung around but continued to lay on his horn instead, yelling “*Move it buddy, move it!*” Some of the spectators on the far side of Second were actually applauding like spectators at a Madison Square Garden fight, and Callahan thought: *Why, this place is a madhouse. Did I know that before and forget, or is it something I just learned?*

The street preacher, a man with a beard and long white hair that descended to his shoulders, was now standing beside Jake, and when Jake started to raise the Ruger again, the preacher laid a gentle, unhurried hand on the boy's wrist.

“Holster it, boy,” he said. “Stick it away, praise Jesus.”

Jake looked at him and saw what Susannah had seen not long before: a man who looked eerily like Henschick of the Manni. Jake put the gun back into the docker's clutch, then bent and picked up Oy.

The bumbler whined, stretched his face toward Jake's on his long neck, and began to lick the boy's cheek.

Callahan, meanwhile, had taken the driver's arm and was leading him back toward his hack. He fished in his pocket and palmed a ten-dollar bill which was about half the money they'd managed to put together for this little safari.

"All over," he said to the driver, speaking in what he hoped was a soothing voice. "No harm, no foul, you go your way, he goes his—" And then, past the hackie, yelling at the relentless horn-honker: "Horn works, you nimrod, so why not give it a rest and try your lights?"

"That little bastard was pointing the gun at me," said the taxi driver. He felt on his head for his fez and didn't find it.

"It's only a model," Callahan said soothingly. "The kind of thing you build from a kit, doesn't even fire pellets. I assure y—"

"Hey, pal!" cried the street preacher, and when the taxi driver looked, the preacher underhanded him the faded red fez. With this back on his head, the driver seemed more willing to be reasonable. More willing yet when Callahan pressed the ten into his hand.

The guy behind the cab was driving an elderly whale of a Lincoln. Now he laid on his horn again.

"You may be biting my crank, Mr. Monkey-meat!" the taxi driver yelled at him, and Callahan almost burst out laughing. He started toward the guy in the Lincoln. When the taxi driver tried to join him, Callahan put his hands on the man's shoulders and stopped him.

"Let me handle this. I'm a religious. Making the lion lie down with the lamb is my job."

The street preacher joined them in time to hear this. Jake had retired to the background. He was standing beside the street preacher's van and checking Oy's legs to make sure he was uninjured.

"Brother!" the street preacher addressed Callahan. "May I ask your denomination? Your, I say hallelujah, your *view* of the *Almighty*?"

"I'm a Catholic," Callahan said. "Therefore, I view the Almighty's a guy."

The street preacher held out a large, gnarled hand. It produced exactly the sort of fervent, just-short-of-crushing grip Callahan had expected. The man's cadences, combined with his faint Southern accent, made Callahan think of Foghorn Leghorn in the Warner Bros. cartoons.

"I'm Earl Harrigan," the preacher said, continuing to wring Callahan's fingers. "Church of the Holy God-Bomb, Brooklyn and America. A pleasure to meet you, Father."

"I'm sort of semi-retired," Callahan said. "If you have to call me something, make it Pere. Or just Don. Don Callahan."

"Praise Jesus, Father Don!"

Callahan sighed and supposed Father Don would have to do. He went to the Lincoln. The cab driver, meanwhile, scooted away with his OFF DUTY light on.

Before Callahan could speak to the Lincoln's driver, that worthy got out on his own. It was Callahan's night for tall men. This one went about six-three and was carrying a large belly.

"It's all over," Callahan told him. "I suggest you get back in your car and drive out of here."

"It ain't over until I say it's over," Mr. Lincoln demurred. "I got Abdul's medallion number; what I want from you, Sparky, is the name and address of that kid with the dog. I also want a closer look at the pistol he just—*ow, ow! OWW! OWWWWW! Quit it!*"

Reverend Earl Harrigan had seized one of Mr. Lincoln's hands and twisted it behind his back. Now he seemed to be doing something creative to the man's thumb. Callahan couldn't see exactly what it was. The angle was wrong.

"God loves you so much," Harrigan said, speaking quietly into Mr. Lincoln's ear. "And what He wants in return, you loudmouth shithead, is for you to give me hallelujah and then go on your way. Can you give me hallelujah?"

"*OWW, OWWW, let go! Police! POLEECE!*"

"Only policeman apt to be on this block around now would be Officer Benzyck, and he's already given me my nightly ticket and

moved on. By now he'll be in Dennis's, having a pecan waffle and double bacon, praise God, so I want you to think about this." There came a cracking sound from behind Mr. Lincoln's back that set Callahan's teeth on edge. He didn't like to think Mr. Lincoln's thumb had made that sound, but didn't know what else it could have been. Mr. Lincoln cocked his head skyward on his thick neck and let out a long exhalation of pure pain—*Yaaaahhhhhh!*

"You want to give me hallelujah, brother," advised Rev. Harrigan, "or you'll be, praise God, carrying your thumb home in your breast pocket."

"Hallelujah," whispered Mr. Lincoln. His complexion had gone an other shade. Callahan thought some of that might be attributable to the orangey streetlamps which at some point had replaced the fluorescents of his own time. Probably not all of it, though.

"Good! Now say amen. You'll feel better when you do."

"A-Amen."

"Praise God! Praise Jee-eee-eee-*esus!*"

"Let me go . . . let go of my *thumb*—!"

"Are you going to get out of here and stop blocking this intersection if I do?"

"Yes!"

"Without any more fiddle-de-dee or hidey-ho, praise Jesus?"

"Yes!"

Harrigan leaned yet closer to Mr. Lincoln, his lips stopping less than half an inch from a large plug of yellow-orange wax caught in the cup of Mr. Lincoln's ear. Callahan watched this with fascination and complete absorption, all other unresolved issues and unfulfilled goals for the time being forgotten. The Pere was more than halfway to believing that if Jesus had had Earl Harrigan on His team, it probably would have been old Pontius who ended up on the cross.

"My friend, bombs will soon begin to fall: God-bombs. And you have to choose whether you want to be among those who are, praise Jesus, up in the sky *dropping* those bombs, or those who are in the villages below, getting blown to smithereens. Now I sense this isn't the

time or place for you to make a choice for Christ, but will you at least think about these things, sir?”

Mr. Lincoln’s response must have been a tad slow for Rev. Harrigan, because that worthy did something else to the hand he had pinned behind Mr. Lincoln’s back. Mr. Lincoln uttered another high, breathless scream.

“I said, will you *think* about these things?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Then get in your car and drive away and God bless you and keep you.”

Harrigan released Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lincoln backed away from him, eyes wide, and got back into his car. A moment later he was driving down Second Avenue—fast.

Harrigan turned to Callahan and said, “Catholics are going to Hell, Father Don. Idolators, each and every one of them; they bow to the Cult of Mary. And the Pope! Don’t get me started on *him!* Yet I have known some fine Catholic folks, and have no doubt you’re one of them. It may be I can pray you through to a change of faith. Lacking that, I may be able to pray you through the flames.” He looked back at the sidewalk in front of what now seemed to be called Hammarskjöld Plaza. “I believe my congregation has dispersed.”

“Sorry about that,” Callahan said.

Harrigan shrugged. “Folks don’t come to Jesus in the summertime, anyway,” he said matter-of-factly. “They do a little window-shopping and then go back to their sinning. Winter’s the time for serious crusading . . . got to get you a little storefront where you can give em hot soup and hot scripture on a cold night.” He looked down at Callahan’s feet and said, “You seem to have lost one of your sandals, my mackerel-snapping friend.” A new horn blared at them and a perfectly amazing taxi—to Callahan it looked like a newer version of the old VW Microbuses—went swerving past with a passenger yelling something out at them. It probably wasn’t happy birthday. “Also, if we don’t get out of the street, faith may not be enough to protect us.”

FOUR

“He’s all right,” Jake said, setting Oy down on the sidewalk. “I flipped, didn’t I? I’m sorry.”

“Perfectly understandable,” the Rev. Harrigan assured him. “What an interesting dog! I’ve never seen one that looked quite like that, praise Jesus!” And he bent to Oy.

“He’s a mixed breed,” Jake said tightly, “and he doesn’t like strangers.”

Oy showed how much he disliked and distrusted them by raising his head to Harrigan’s hand and flattening his ears in order to improve the stroking surface. He grinned up at the preacher as if they were old, old pals. Callahan, meanwhile, was looking around. It was New York, and in New York people had a tendency to mind their business and let you mind yours, but still, Jake had drawn a gun. Callahan didn’t know how many folks had seen it, but he *did* know it would only take one to report it, perhaps to this Officer Benzyck Harrigan had mentioned, and put them in trouble when they could least afford it.

He looked at Oy and thought, *Do me a favor and don’t say anything, okay? Jake can maybe pass you off as some new kind of Corgi or Border Collie hybrid, but the minute you start talking, that goes out the window. So do me a favor and don’t.*

“Good boy,” said Harrigan, and after Jake’s friend miraculously did *not* respond by saying “Oy!” the preacher straightened up. “I have something for you, Father Don. Just a minute.”

“Sir, we really have to—”

“I have something for you, too, son—praise Jesus, say dear Lord! But first . . . this won’t take but a second . . .”

Harrigan ran to open the side door of his illegally parked old Dodge van, ducked inside, rummaged.

Callahan bore this for awhile, but the sense of passing seconds quickly became too much. “Sir, I’m sorry, but—”

“*Here they are!*” Harrigan exclaimed and backed out of the van with the first two fingers of his right hand stuck into the heels of a pair

of battered brown loafers. “If you’re less than a size twelve, we can stuff em with newspaper. More, and I guess you’re out of luck.”

“A twelve is exactly what I am,” Callahan said, and ventured a praise-God as well as a thank-you. He was actually most comfortable in size eleven and a half shoes, but these were close enough, and he slipped them on with genuine gratitude. “And now we—”

Harrigan turned to the boy and said, “The woman you’re after got into a cab right where we had our little dust-up, and no more than half an hour ago.” He grinned at Jake’s rapidly changing expression—first astonishment, then delight. “She said the other one is in charge, that you’d know who the other one was, and where the other one is taking her.”

“Yeah, to the Dixie Pig,” Jake said. “Lex and Sixty-first. Pere, we might still have time to catch her, but only if we go right now. She—”

“No,” Harrigan said. “The woman who spoke to me—inside my head she spoke to me and clear as a bell, praise Jesus—said you were to go to the hotel first.”

“Which hotel?” Callahan asked.

Harrigan pointed down Forty-sixth Street to the Plaza–Park Hyatt. “That’s the only one in the neighborhood . . . and that’s the direction she came from.”

“Thank you,” Callahan said. “Did she say why we were to go there?”

“No,” Harrigan said serenely, “I believe right around then the other one caught her blabbing and shut her up. Then into the taxi and away she went!”

“Speaking of moving on—” Jake began.

Harrigan nodded, but also raised an admonitory finger. “By all means, but remember that the God-bombs are going to fall. Never mind the showers of blessing—that’s for Methodist wimps and Episcopalian scuzzballs! The *bombs* are gonna fall! And boys?”

They turned back to him.

“I know you fellas are as much God’s human children as I am, for I’ve smelled your sweat, praise Jesus. But what about the lady? The

lay-dees, for in truth I b'lieve there were two of em. What about *them*?"

"The woman you met's with us," Callahan said after a brief hesitation. "She's okay."

"I wonder about that," Harrigan said. "The Book says—praise God and praise His Holy Word—to beware of the strange woman, for her lips drip as does the honeycomb but her feet go down to death and her steps take hold on hell. Remove thy way from her and come not nigh the door of her house." He had raised one lumpy hand in a benedictory gesture as he offered this. Now he lowered it and shrugged. "That ain't exact, I don't have the memory for scripture that I did when I was younger and Bible-shoutin down south with my Daddy, but I think you get the drift."

"Book of Proverbs," Callahan said.

Harrigan nodded. "Chapter five, say *Gawd*." Then he turned and contemplated the building which rose into the night sky behind him. Jake started away, but Callahan stayed him with a touch . . . although when Jake raised his eyebrows, Callahan could only shake his head. No, he didn't know why. All he knew was that they weren't quite through with Harrigan yet.

"This is a city stuffed with sin and sick with transgression," the preacher said at last. "Sodom on the halfshell, Gomorrah on a graham cracker, ready for the God-bomb that will surely fall from the skies, say hallelujah, say sweet Jesus and gimme amen. But this right here is a good place. A *good* place. Can you boys feel it?"

"Yes," Jake said.

"Can you *hear* it?"

"Yes," Jake and Callahan said together.

"Amen! I thought it would all stop when they tore down the little deli that stood here years and years ago. But it didn't. Those angelic voices—"

"So speaks Gan along the Beam," Jake said.

Callahan turned to him and saw the boy's head cocked to one side, his face wearing the calm look of entrancement.

Jake said: “So speaks Gan, and in the voice of the can calah, which some call angels. Gan denies the can toi; with the merry heart of the guiltless he denies the Crimson King and Discordia itself.”

Callahan looked at him with wide eyes—frightened eyes—but Harrigan nodded matter-of-factly, as if he had heard it all before. Perhaps he had. “There was a vacant lot after the deli, and then they built this. Two Hammarskjöld Plaza. And I thought, ‘Well, *that’ll* end it and then I’ll move on, for Satan’s grip is strong and his hoof prints leave deep tracks in the ground, and there no flower will bloom and no grain will grow.’ Can you say *see-lah*?” He raised his arms, his gnarly old man’s hands, trembling with the outriders of Parkinson’s, turned upward to the sky in that open immemorial gesture of praise and surrender. “Yet still it sings,” he said, and dropped them.

“Selah,” Callahan murmured. “You say true, we say thank ya.”

“It *is* a flower,” Harrigan said, “for once I went in there to see. In the lobby, somebody say hallelujah, I say in the *lobby* between the doors to the street and the elevators to those upper floors where God knows how much dollarbill fuckery is done, there’s a little garden growing in the sun which falls through the tall windows, a garden behind velvet ropes, and the sign says GIVEN BY THE TET CORPORATION, IN HONOR OF THE BEAME FAMILY, AND IN MEMORY OF GILEAD.”

“Does it?” Jake said, and his face lit with a glad smile. “Do you say so, sai Harrigan?”

“Boy, if I’m lyin I’m dyin. *Gawd*-bomb! And in the middle of all those flowers there grows a single wild rose, so beautiful that I saw it and wept as those by the waters of Babylon, the great river that flows by Zion. And the men coming and going in that place, them with their briefcases stuffed full of Satan’s piecework, many of *them* wept, too. Wept and went right on about their whores’ business as if they didn’t even know.”

“They know,” Jake said softly. “You know what I think, Mr. Harrigan? I think the rose is a secret their hearts keep, and that if anyone threatened it, most of them would fight to protect it. Maybe to the death.” He looked up at Callahan. “Pere, we have to go.”

“Yes.”

“Not a bad idea,” Harrigan agreed, “for mine eyes can see Officer Benzyck headed back this way, and it might be well if you were gone when he gets here. I’m glad your furry little friend wasn’t hurt, son.”

“Thanks, Mr. Harrigan.”

“Praise God, he’s no more a dog than I am, is he?”

“No, sir,” Jake said, smiling widely.

“Beware that woman, boys. She put a thought in my head. I call that witchcraft. And she was *two*.”

“Twins-say-twim, aye,” Callahan said, and then (without knowing he meant to do it until it was done) he sketched the sign of the cross in front of the preacher.

“Thank you for your blessing, heathen or not,” Earl Harrigan said, clearly touched. Then he turned toward the approaching NYPD patrolman and called cheerfully, “Officer Benzyck! Good to see you and there’s some jam right there on your collar, praise God!”

And while Officer Benzyck was studying the jam on his uniform collar, Jake and Callahan slipped away.

FIVE

“Whoo-eee,” Jake said under his breath as they walked toward the brightly underlit hotel canopy. A white limousine, easily twice the size of any Jake had seen before (and he’d seen his share; once his father had even taken him to the Emmys), was offloading laughing men in tuxedos and women in evening dresses. They came out in a seemingly endless stream.

“Yes indeed,” Callahan said. “It’s like being on a roller coaster, isn’t it?”

Jake said, “We’re not even supposed to *be* here. This was Roland and Eddie’s job. We were just supposed to go see Calvin Tower.”

“Something apparently thought different.”

“Well, it should have thought twice,” Jake said gloomily. “A kid and a priest, with one gun between them? It’s a joke. What are our chances, if the Dixie Pig is full of vampires and low men unwinding on their day off?”

Callahan did not respond to this, although the prospect of trying to rescue Susannah from the Dixie Pig terrified him. “What was that Gan stuff you were spouting?”

Jake shook his head. “I don’t know—I can barely remember what I said. I think it’s part of the touch, Pere. And do you know where I think I got it?”

“Mia?”

The boy nodded. Oy trotted neatly at his heel, his long snout not quite touching Jake’s calf. “And I’m getting something else, as well. I keep seeing this black man in a jail cell. There’s a radio playing, telling him all these people are dead—the Kennedys, Marilyn Monroe, George Harrison, Peter Sellers, Itzak Rabin, whoever *he* is. I think it might be the jail in Oxford, Mississippi, where they kept Odetta Holmes for awhile.”

“But this is a *man* you see. Not Susannah but a *man*.”

“Yes, with a toothbrush mustache, and he wears funny little gold-rimmed glasses, like a wizard in a fairy-tale.”

They stopped just outside the radiance of the hotel’s entrance. A doorman in a green swallowtail coat blew an ear-splitting blast on his little silver whistle, hailing down a Yellow Cab.

“Is it Gan, do you think? Is the black man in the jail cell Gan?”

“I don’t know.” Jake shook his head with frustration. “There’s something about the Dogan, too, all mixed in.”

“And this comes from the touch.”

“Yes, but it’s not from Mia or Susannah or you or me. I think . . .” Jake’s voice lowered. “I think I better figure out who that black man is and what he means to us, because I think that what I’m seeing comes from the Dark Tower itself.” He looked at Callahan solemnly. “In some ways, we’re getting very close to it, and that’s why it’s so dangerous for the ka-tet to be broken like it is.”

“In some ways, we’re almost there.”

SIX

Jake took charge smoothly and completely from the moment he stepped out of the revolving doors with Oy in his arms and then put the billy-bumbler down on the lobby’s tile floor. Callahan didn’t think the kid was even aware of it, and probably that was all to the good. If he got self-conscious, his confidence might crumble.

Oy sniffed delicately at his own reflection in one of the lobby’s green glass walls, then followed Jake to the desk, his claws clicking faintly on the black and white marble squares. Callahan walked beside him, aware that he was looking at the future and trying not to goggle at it too obviously.

“She was here,” Jake said. “Pere, I can almost see her. Both of them, her and Mia.”

Before Callahan could reply, Jake was at the desk. “Cry pardon, ma’am,” he said. “My name is Jake Chambers. Do you have a message for me, or a package, or something? It’d be either from Susannah Dean or maybe from a Miss Mia.”

The woman peered down doubtfully at Oy for a moment. Oy looked up at her with a cheery grin that revealed a great many teeth. Perhaps these disturbed the clerk, because she turned away from him with a frown and examined the screen of her computer.

“Chambers?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” Spoken in his best getting-along-with-grownups voice. It had been awhile since he’d needed to use that one, but it was still there, Jake found, and within easy reach.

“I have something for you, but it’s not from a woman. It’s from someone named Stephen King.” She smiled. “I don’t suppose it’s the famous writer? Do you know him?”

“No, ma’am,” Jake said, and snuck a sideways glance at Callahan. Neither of them had heard of Stephen King until recently, but Jake

understood why the name might give his current traveling companion the chills. Callahan didn't look particularly chilly at the moment, but his mouth had thinned to a single line.

"Well," she said, "I suppose it's a common enough name, isn't it? Probably there are *normal* Stephen Kings all over the United States who wish he'd just . . . I don't know . . . give it a *rest*." She voiced a nervous little laugh, and Callahan wondered what had set her on edge. Oy, who got less doggy the longer you looked at him? Maybe, but Callahan thought it was more likely something in Jake, something that whispered *danger*. Perhaps even *gunslinger*. Certainly there was something in him that set him apart from other boys. *Far*. Callahan thought of him pulling the Ruger from the docker's clutch and sticking it under the unfortunate taxi driver's nose. *Tell me that you were driving too fast and almost ran down my friend!* he'd screamed, his finger already white on the trigger. *Tell me that you don't want to die here in the street with a hole in your head!*

Was that the way an ordinary twelve-year-old reacted to a near-miss accident? Callahan thought not. He thought the desk clerk was right to be nervous. As for himself, Callahan realized he felt a little better about their chances at the Dixie Pig. Not a lot, but a little.

SEVEN

Jake, perhaps sensing something a little off-kilter, flashed the clerk his best getting-along-with-grownups smile, but to Callahan it looked like Oy's: too many teeth.

"Just a moment," she said, turning away from him.

Jake gave Callahan a puzzled what's up-with-*her* look. Callahan shrugged and spread his hands.

The clerk went to a cabinet behind her, opened it, looked through the contents of a box stored inside, and returned to the desk with an envelope bearing the Plaza-Park's logo. Jake's name—and something

else—had been written on the front in what looked like half-script and half-printing:

Jake Chambers
This is the Truth

She slid it across the desk to him, careful that their fingers should not touch.

Jake took it and ran his fingers down the length of it. There was a piece of paper inside. Something else, as well. A hard narrow strip. He tore open the envelope and pulled out the paper. Folded inside it was the slim, white plastic rectangle of a hotel MagCard. The note had been written on a cheeky piece of stationery headed CALLING ALL BLOWHARDS. The message itself was only three lines long:

Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key.

Dad-a-chud, dad-a-ched, see it, Jake! The key is red!

Jake looked at the MagCard and watched color abruptly swirl into it, turning it the color of blood almost instantly.

Couldn't be red until the message was read, Jake thought, smiling a little at the idea's riddle-ish quality. He looked up to see if the clerk had seen the MagCard's transformation, but she had found something which required her attention at the far end of the desk. And Callahan was checking out a couple of women who'd just come strolling in from the street. He might be a Pere, Jake reflected, but his eye for the ladies still seemed to be in proper working order.

Jake looked back at the paper and was just in time to read the last line:

Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee, give this boy a plastic key.

A couple of years before, his mother and father had given him a Tyco Chemistry Set for Christmas. Using the instruction booklet, he'd

whipped up a batch of invisible ink. The words written in the stuff had faded almost as quickly as these words were fading now, only if you looked very closely, you could still read the message written in chemistry set ink. This one, however, was authentically *gone*, and Jake knew why. Its purpose had been served. There was no more need for it. Ditto the line about the key being red, and sure enough, that was fading, as well. Only the first line remained, as if he needed reminding:

Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee, not to worry, you've got the key.

Had Stephen King sent this message? Jake doubted it. More likely one of the other players in the game—perhaps even Roland or Eddie—had used the name to get his attention. Still, he'd run upon two things since arriving here that encouraged him enormously. The first was the continued singing of the rose. It was stronger than ever, really, even though a skyscraper had been built on the vacant lot. The second was that Stephen King was apparently still alive twenty-four years after creating Jake's traveling companion. And no longer just a writer but a *famous* writer.

Great. For now things were still rattling precariously along the right set of tracks.

Jake grabbed Father Callahan's arm and led him toward the gift shop and tinkling cocktail piano. Oy followed, padding at Jake's knee. Along the wall they found a line of house phones. "When the operator answers," Jake said, "tell her you want to talk to your friend Susannah Dean, or to *her* friend, Mia."

"She'll ask me what room," Callahan said.

"Tell her you forgot, but it's on the nineteenth floor."

"How do you—"

"It'll be the nineteenth, just trust me."

"I do," Callahan said.

The phone rang twice and then the operator asked how she could help. Callahan told her. He was connected, and in some room on the nineteenth floor, a telephone began to ring.

Jake watched the Pere begin to speak, then subside into listening again with a small, bemused smile on his face. After a few moments, he hung up. “Answering machine!” he said. “They have a *machine* that takes guests’ calls and then tapes messages! What a wonderful invention!”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Anyway, we know for sure that she’s out and for pretty sure she didn’t leave anyone behind to watch her gunna. But, just in case . . .” He patted the front of his shirt, which now concealed the Ruger.

As they crossed the lobby to the elevator bank, Callahan said: “What do we want in her room?”

“I don’t know.”

Callahan touched him on the shoulder. “I think you do.”

The doors of the middle elevator popped open and Jake got on with Oy still at heel. Callahan followed, but Jake thought he was all at once dragging his feet a little.

“Maybe,” Jake said as they started up. “And maybe you do, too.”

Callahan’s stomach suddenly felt heavier, as if he’d just finished a large meal. He supposed the added weight was fear. “I thought I was rid of it,” he said. “When Roland took it out of the church, I really thought I was rid of it.”

“Some bad pennies just keep turning up,” Jake said.

EIGHT

He was prepared to try his unique red key in every door on the nineteenth floor if he had to, but Jake knew 1919 was right even before they reached it. Callahan did, too, and a sheen of sweat broke on his forehead. It felt thin and hot. Feverish.

Even Oy knew. The bumbler whined uneasily.

“Jake,” Callahan said. “We need to think this over. That thing is dangerous. Worse, it’s *malevolent*.”

“That’s why we gotta take it,” Jake said patiently. He stood in front of 1919, drumming the MagCard between his fingers. From behind the door—and under it, and through it—came a hideous drone like the singing voice of some apocalyptic idiot. Mixed in was the sound of jangling, out-of-tune chimes. Jake knew the ball had the power to send you todash, and in those dark and mostly doorless spaces, it was all too possible to become lost forever. Even if you found your way to another version of Earth, it would have a queer darkness to it, as if the sun were always on the verge of total eclipse.

“Have you seen it?” Callahan asked.

Jake shook his head.

“I have,” Callahan said dully, and arched sweat from his forehead. His cheeks had gone leaden. “There’s an Eye in it. I think it’s the Crimson King’s eye. I think it’s a part of him that’s trapped in there forever, and insane. Jake, taking that ball to a place where there are vampires and low men—servants of the King—would be like giving Adolf Hitler an A-bomb for his birthday.”

Jake knew perfectly well that Black Thirteen was capable of doing great, perhaps illimitable, damage. But he knew something else, as well.

“Pere, if Mia left Black Thirteen in this room and she’s now going to where *they* are, they’ll know about it soon enough. And they’ll be after it in one of their big flashy cars before you can say Jack Robinson.”

“Can’t we leave it for Roland?” Callahan asked miserably.

“Yes,” Jake said. “That’s a good idea, just like taking it to the Dixie Pig is a bad one. But we can’t leave it for him *here*.” Then, before Callahan could say anything else, Jake slid the blood-red MagCard into the slot above the doorknob. There was a loud click and the door swung open.

“Oy, stay right here, outside the door.”

“Ake!” He sat down, curling his cartoon squiggle of a tail around his paws, and looked at Jake with anxious eyes.

Before they went in, Jake laid a cold hand on Callahan's wrist and said a terrible thing.

"Guard your mind."

NINE

Mia had left the lights on, and yet a queer darkness had crept into Room 1919 since her departure. Jake recognized it for what it was: todash darkness. The droning song of the idiot and the muffled, jangling chimes were coming from the closet.

It's awake, he thought with mounting dismay. It was asleep before—dozing, at least—but all this moving around woke it up. What do I do? Are the box and the bowling bag enough to make it safe? Do I have anything that will make it safer? Any charm, any sigul?

As Jake opened the closet door, Callahan found himself exerting all the force of his will—which was considerable—just to keep from fleeing. That atonal humming and the occasional jangling chimes beneath it offended his ears and mind and heart. He kept remembering the way station, and how he had shrieked when the hooded man had opened the box. How *slick* the thing inside had been! It had been lying on red velvet . . . and it had *rolled*. Had *looked* at him, and all the malevolent madness of the universe had been in that disembodied, leering gaze.

I will not run. I will not. If the boy can stay, I can stay.

Ah, but the boy was a *gunslinger*, and that made a difference. He was more than ka's child; he was Roland of Gilead's child as well, his adopted son.

Don't you see how pale he is? He's as scared as you are, for Christ's sake! Now get hold of yourself, man!

Perhaps it was perverse, but observing Jake's extreme pallor steadied him. When an old bit of nonsense song occurred to him and he began to sing under his breath, he steadied yet more.

“Round and round the mulberry bush,” he sang in a whisper, “the monkey chased the weasel . . . the monkey thought ’twas all in fun . . .”

Jake eased open the closet. There was a room safe inside. He tried 1919 and nothing happened. He paused to let the safe mechanism reset itself, wiped sweat from his forehead with both hands (they were shaking), and tried again. This time he punched 1999, and the safe swung open.

Black Thirteen’s droning song and the contrapuntal jangle of the todash chimes both increased. The sounds were like chilly fingers prying around in their heads.

And it can send you places, Callahan thought. *All you have to do is let down your guard a little bit . . . open the bag . . . open the box . . . and then . . . oh, the places you’ll go! Pop goes the weasel!*

True though he knew this to be, part of him *wanted* to open the box. *Lusted* to. Nor was he the only one; as he watched, Jake knelt before the safe like a worshipper at an altar. Callahan reached to stop him from lifting the bag out with an arm that seemed incredibly heavy.

It doesn’t matter if you do or don’t, a voice whispered in his mind. It was sleep-inducing, that voice, and incredibly persuasive. Nonetheless, Callahan kept reaching. He grasped Jake’s collar with fingers from which all feeling seemed to have departed.

“No,” he said. “Don’t.” His voice sounded draggy, dispirited, depressed. When he pulled Jake to one side, the boy seemed to go as if in slow motion, or underwater. The room now seemed lit by the sick yellow light that sometimes falls over a landscape before a ruinous storm. As Callahan fell onto his own knees before the open safe (he seemed to descend through the air for at least a full minute before touching down), he heard the voice of Black Thirteen, louder than ever. It was telling him to kill the boy, to open the boy’s throat and give the ball a refreshing drink of his warm life’s blood. Then Callahan himself would be allowed to leap from the room’s window.

All the way down to Forty-sixth Street you will praise me, Black Thirteen assured him in a voice both sane and lucid.

“Do it,” Jake sighed. “Oh yes, do it, who gives a damn.”

“Ake!” Oy barked from the doorway. “Ake!” They both ignored him.

As Callahan reached for the bag, he found himself remembering his final encounter with Barlow, the king vampire—the Type One, in Callahan’s own parlance—who had come to the little town of ’Salem’s Lot. Found himself remembering how he’d confronted Barlow in Mark Petrie’s house, with Mark’s parents lying lifeless on the floor at the vampire’s feet, their skulls crushed and their oh-so-rational brains turned to jelly.

While you fall, I’ll let you whisper the name of my king, Black Thirteen whispered. *The Crimson King.*

As Callahan watched his hands grasp the bag—whatever had been there before, NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MID-WORLD LANES was now printed on the side—he thought of how his crucifix had first glared with some otherworldly light, driving Barlow back . . . and then had begun to darken again.

“Open it!” Jake said eagerly. “Open it, I want to see it!”

Oy was barking steadily now. Down the hall someone yelled “Shut that dog up!” and was likewise ignored.

Callahan slipped the ghostwood box from the bag—the box that had spent such a blessedly quiet time hidden beneath the pulpit of his church in Calla Bryn Sturgis. Now he would open it. Now he would observe Black Thirteen in all its repellent glory.

And then die. Gratefully.

TEN

Sad to see a man’s faith fail, the vampire Kurt Barlow had said, and then he’d plucked Don Callahan’s dark and useless cross from his hand. Why had he been able to do that? Because—behold the paradox, consider the riddle—Father Callahan *had failed to throw the cross away himself.* Because he had failed to accept that the cross was

nothing but one symbol of a far greater power, one that ran like a river beneath the universe, perhaps beneath a thousand universes—

I need no symbol, Callahan thought; and then: Is that why God let me live? Was He giving me a second chance to learn that?

It was possible, he thought as his hands settled on the lid of the box. Second chances were one of God's specialties.

"Folks, you got to shut your dog *up*." The querulous voice of a hotel maid, but very distant. Then it said: "*Madre de Dios*, why's it so *dark* in here? What's that . . . what's that . . . n . . . n . . ."

Perhaps she was trying to say *noise*. If so, she never finished. Even Oy now seemed resigned to the spell of the humming, singing ball, for he gave up his protests (and his post at the door) to come trotting into the room. Callahan supposed the beast wanted to be at Jake's side when the end came.

The Pere struggled to still his suicidal hands. The thing in the box raised the volume of its idiot's song, and the tips of his fingers twitched in response. Then they stilled again. *I have that much of a victory*, Callahan thought.

"Ne'mine, *I'll* do it." The voice of the maid, drugged and avid. "I want to see it. *Dios!* I want to *hold* it!"

Jake's arms seemed to weigh a ton, but he forced them to reach out and grab the maid, a middle-aged Hispanic lady who couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and five pounds.

As he had struggled to still his hands, so Callahan now struggled to pray.

God, not my will but Thine. Not the potter but the potter's clay. If I can't do anything else, help me to take it in my arms and jump out the window and destroy the gods-damned thing once and for all. But if it be Your will to help me make it still, instead—to make it go back to sleep—then send me Your strength. And help me to remember . . .

Drugged by Black Thirteen he might have been, but Jake still hadn't lost his touch. Now he plucked the rest of the thought out of the Pere's mind and spoke it aloud, only changing the word Callahan used to the one Roland had taught them.

“I need no sigul,” Jake said. “Not the potter but the potter’s clay, *and I need no sigul!*”

“God,” Callahan said. The word was as heavy as a stone, but once it was out of his mouth, the rest of them came easier. “God, if You’re still there, if You still hear me, this is Callahan. Please still this thing, Lord. Please send it back to sleep. I ask it in the name of Jesus.”

“In the name of the White,” Jake said.

“*Ite!*” Oy yapped.

“Amen,” said the maid in a stoned, bemused voice.

For a moment the droning idiot’s song from the box rose another notch, and Callahan understood it was hopeless, that not even God Almighty could stand against Black Thirteen.

Then it fell silent.

“God be thanked,” he whispered, and realized his entire body was drenched with sweat.

Jake burst into tears and picked up Oy. The chambermaid also began to weep, but had no one to comfort her. As Pere Callahan slid the meshy (and oddly heavy) material of the bowling bag back around the ghostwood box, Jake turned to her and said, “You need to take a nap, sai.”

It was the only thing he could think of, and it worked. The maid turned and walked across to the bed. She crawled up on it, pulled her skirt down over her knees, and appeared to fall unconscious.

“Will it stay asleep?” Jake asked Callahan in a low voice. “Because . . . Pere . . . that was too close for comfort.”

Perhaps, but Callahan’s mind suddenly seemed free—freer than it had been in years. Or perhaps it was his heart that had been freed. In any case, his thoughts seemed very clear as he lowered the bowling bag to the folded dry-cleaning bags on top of the safe.

Remembering a conversation in the alley behind Home. He and Frankie Chase and Magruder, out on a smoke-break. The talk had turned to protecting your valuables in New York, especially if you had to go away for awhile, and Magruder had said the safest storage in New York . . . the absolute safest storage . . .

“Jake, there’s also a bag of plates in the safe.”

“Orizas?”

“Yes. Get them.” While he did, Callahan went to the maid on the bed and reached into the left skirt pocket of her uniform. He brought out a number of plastic MagCards, a few regular keys, and a brand of mints he’d never heard of—Altoids.

He turned her over. It was like turning a corpse.

“What’re you doing?” Jake whispered. He had put Oy down so he could sling the silk-lined reed pouch over his shoulder. It was heavy, but he found the weight comforting.

“Robbing her, what does it look like?” the Pere replied angrily. “Father Callahan of the Holy Roman Catholic Church is robbing a hotel maid. Or would, if she had any . . . ah!”

In the other pocket was the little roll of bills he’d been hoping for. She had been performing turndown service when Oy’s barking had distracted her. This included flushing the john, pulling the shades, turning down the bed, and leaving what the maids called “pillow candy.” Sometimes patrons tipped for the service. This maid was carrying two tens, three fives, and four ones.

“I’ll pay you back if our paths cross,” Callahan told the unconscious maid. “Otherwise, just consider it your service to God.”

“*Whiiiiite*,” the maid said in the slurred whisper of one who talks and yet sleeps.

Callahan and Jake exchanged a look.

ELEVEN

In the elevator going back down, Callahan held the bag containing Black Thirteen and Jake carried the one with the ’Rizas inside. He also carried their money. It now came to a total of forty-eight dollars.

“Will it be enough?” It was his only question after hearing the Pere’s plan for disposing of the ball, a plan which would necessitate another stop.

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Callahan replied. They were speaking in the low voices of conspirators, although the elevator was empty save for them. “If I can rob a sleeping chambermaid, stiffing a cab driver should be a leadpipe cinch.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. He was thinking that Roland had done more than rob a few innocent people during his quest for the Tower; he’d killed a good many, as well. “Let’s just get this done and then find the Dixie Pig.”

“You don’t have to worry so much, you know,” Callahan said. “If the Tower falls, you’ll be among the very first to know.”

Jake studied him. After a moment or two of this, Callahan cracked a smile. He couldn’t help it.

“Not that funny, sai,” Jake said, and they went out into the dark of that early summer’s night in the year of ’99.

TWELVE

It was quarter to nine and there was still a residue of light across the Hudson when they arrived at the first of their two stops. The taximeter’s tale was nine dollars and fifty cents. Callahan gave the cabbie one of the maid’s tens.

“Mon, don’t hurt yose’f,” the driver said in a powerful Jamaican accent. “I dreadful ’fraid you might leave yose’f *shote*.”

“You’re lucky to get anything at all, son,” Callahan said kindly. “We’re seeing New York on a budget.”

“My woman got a budget, too,” said the cabbie, and then drove away.

Jake, meanwhile, was looking up. “Wow,” he said softly. “I guess I forgot how *big* all this is.”

Callahan followed his glance, then said: “Let’s get it done.” And, as they hurried inside: “What are you getting from Susannah? Anything?”

“Man with a guitar,” Jake said. “Singing . . . I don’t know. And I should. It was another one of those coincidences that aren’t coincidences, like the owner of the bookstore being named Tower or Balazar’s joint turning out to be The Leaning Tower. Some song . . . I should know.”

“Anything else?”

Jake shook his head. “That’s the last thing I got from her, and it was just after we got into the taxi outside the hotel. I think she’s gone into the Dixie Pig and now she’s out of touch.” He smiled faintly at the unintentional pun.

Callahan veered toward the building directory in the center of the huge lobby. “Keep Oy close to you.”

“Don’t worry.”

It didn’t take Callahan long to find what he was looking for.

THIRTEEN

The sign read:

LONG-TERM STORAGE
10-36 MOS.
USE TOKENS
TAKE KEY
MANAGEMENT ACCEPTS
NO RESPONSIBILITY
FOR LOST PROPERTY!

Below, in a framed box, was a list of rules and regulations, which they both scanned closely. From beneath their feet came the rumble of a subway train. Callahan, who hadn’t been in New York for almost twenty years, had no idea what train it might be, where it might go, or how deep in the city’s intestine it might run. They’d already come

down two levels by escalator, first to the shops and then to here. The subway station was deeper still.

Jake shifted the bag of Orizas to his other shoulder and pointed out the last line on the framed notice. “We’d get a discount if we were tenants,” he said.

“Count!” Oy cried sternly.

“Aye, laddie,” Callahan agreed, “and if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. We don’t need a discount.”

Nor did they. After walking through a metal detector (no problem with the Orizas) and past a rent-a-cop dozing on a stool, Jake determined that one of the smallest lockers—those on the far left-hand side of the long room—would accommodate the MID-WORLD LANES bag and the box inside. To rent the box for the maximum length of time would cost twenty-seven dollars. Pere Callahan fed bills into the various slots of the token-dispensing machine carefully, prepared for a malfunction: of all the wonders and horrors he’d seen during their brief time back in the city (the latter including a two-dollar taxi drop-charge), this was in some ways the hardest to accept. A vending machine that accepted paper currency? A lot of sophisticated technology had to lie behind this machine with its dull brown finish and its sign commanding patrons to INSERT BILLS FACE UP! The picture accompanying the command showed George Washington with the top of his head facing to the left, but the bills Callahan fed into the machine seemed to work no matter which way the head was facing. Just as long as the picture was on top. Callahan was almost relieved when the machine *did* malfunction once, refusing to accept an old and wrinkled dollar bill. The relatively crisp fives it gobbled up without a murmur, dispensing little showers of tokens into the tray beneath. Callahan gathered up twenty-seven dollars’ worth of these, started back toward where Jake was waiting, and then turned around again, curious about something. He looked on the side of the amazing (amazing to him, at least, it was) currency-eating vending machine. Toward the bottom, on a series of little plaques, was the information he’d been looking for. This was a Change-Mak-R 2000, manufactured

in Cleveland, Ohio, but a lot of companies had chipped in: General Electric, DeWalt Electronics, Showrie Electric, Panasonic, and, at the bottom, smallest of all but very much there, North Central Positronics.

The snake in the garden, Callahan thought. This guy Stephen King, who supposedly thought me up, may only exist in one world, but what do you bet North Central Positronics exists in all of them? Sure, because that's the Crimson King's rig, just like Sombra's his rig, and he only wants what any power-mad despot in history has wanted: to be everywhere, own everything, and basically control the universe.

"Or bring it to darkness," he murmured.

"Pere!" Jake called impatiently. "Pere!"

"I'm coming," he said, and hurried across to Jake with his hands full of shiny gold tokens.

FOURTEEN

The key came out of Locker 883 after Jake had inserted nine of the tokens, but he went on putting them in until all twenty-seven were gone. At this point the small glass porthole under the locker-number turned red.

"Maxed out," Jake said with satisfaction. They were still talking in those low mustn't-wake-the-baby tones, and this long, cavernous room was indeed very quiet. Jake guessed it would be bedlam at eight in the morning and five in the afternoon on working days, with folks coming and going from the subway station below, some of them storing their gear in the short-term coin-op lockers. Now there was just the ghostly sound of conversation drifting down the escalator well from the few shops still open in the arcade and the rumble of another approaching train.

Callahan slid the bowling bag into the narrow opening. Slid it back as far as it would go with Jake watching anxiously. Then he closed the

locker and Jake turned the key. “Bingo,” Jake said, putting the key in his pocket. Then, with anxiety: “Will it sleep?”

“I think so,” Callahan said. “Like it did in my church. If another Beam breaks, it might wake up and work mischief, but then, if another Beam lets go—”

“If another Beam lets go, a little mischief won’t matter,” Jake finished for him.

Callahan nodded. “The only thing is . . . well, you know where we’re going. And you know what we’re apt to find there.”

Vampires. Low men. Other servants of the Crimson King, maybe. Possibly Walter, the hooded man in black who sometimes shifted his shape and form and called himself Randall Flagg. Possibly even the Crimson King himself.

Yes, Jake knew.

“If you have the touch,” Callahan continued, “we have to assume that some of them do, too. It’s possible they could pick this place—and the locker-number—out of our minds. We’re going to go in there and try to get her, but we have to recognize that the chances of failure are fairly high. I’ve never fired a gun in my life, and you’re not—forgive me, Jake, but you’re not exactly a battle-hardened veteran.”

“I’ve got one or two under my belt,” Jake said. He was thinking about his time with Gasher. And about the Wolves, of course.

“This is apt to be different,” Callahan said. “I’m just saying it might be a bad idea for us to be taken alive. If it comes to that. Do you understand?”

“Don’t worry,” Jake said in a tone of chilling comfort. “Don’t worry about that, Pere. We won’t be.”

FIFTEEN

Then they were outside again, looking for another cab. Thanks to the maid’s tip-money, Jake reckoned they had just about enough remaining cash to take them to the Dixie Pig. And he had an idea that

once they entered the Pig, their need for ready cash—or anything else—would cease.

“Here’s one,” Callahan said, and waved his arm in a flagging gesture. Jake, meanwhile, looked back at the building from which they had just emerged.

“You’re sure it’ll be safe there?” he asked Callahan as the cab swerved toward them, honking relentlessly at a slowpoke between him and his fares.

“According to my old friend sai Magruder, that’s the safest storage area in Manhattan,” Callahan said. “Fifty times safer than the coin-op lockers in Penn Station and Grand Central, he said . . . and of course here you’ve got the long-term storage option. There are probably other storage places in New York, but we’ll be gone before they open—one way or the other.”

The cab pulled over. Callahan held the door for Jake, and Oy hopped unobtrusively in right behind him. Callahan spared one final glance at the twin towers of the World Trade Center before getting in himself.

“It’s good to go until June of two thousand and two, unless someone breaks in and steals it.”

“Or if the building falls down on top of it,” Jake said.

Callahan laughed, although Jake hadn’t quite sounded as if he were joking. “Never happen. And if it did . . . well, one glass ball under a hundred and ten stories of concrete and steel? Even a glass ball filled with deep magic? That’d be one way to take care of the nasty thing, I guess.”

SIXTEEN

Jake had asked the cabbie to drop them off at Lexington and Fifty-ninth, just to be on the safe side, and after looking to Callahan for approval, he gave the sai all but their last two dollars.

On the corner of Lex and Sixtieth, Jake pointed to a number of cigarette ends mashed into the sidewalk. “This is where he was,” he said. “The man playing the guitar.”

He bent down, picked up one of the butts, and held it in his palm for a moment or two. Then he nodded, smiled cheerlessly, and readjusted the strap on his shoulder. The Orizas clanked faintly inside the rush bag. Jake had counted them in the back of the cab and hadn’t been surprised to find there were exactly nineteen.

“No wonder she stopped,” Jake said, dropping the butt and wiping his hand on his shirt. And suddenly he sang, low but perfectly on pitch: “I am a man . . . of constant sorrow . . . I’ve seen trouble . . . all my days . . . I’m bound to ride . . . that Northern railroad . . . Perhaps I’ll take . . . the very next train.”

Callahan, keyed up already, felt his nerves crank yet tighter. Of course he recognized the song. Only when Susannah had sung it that night on the Pavilion—the same night Roland had won the hearts of the Calla by dancing the fiercest commala many had ever seen—she’d substituted “maid” for “man.”

“She gave him money,” Jake said dreamily. “And she said . . .” He stood with his head down, biting his lip, thinking hard. Oy looked up at him raptly. Nor did Callahan interrupt. Understanding had come to him: he and Jake were going to die in the Dixie Pig. They would go down fighting, but they were going to die there.

And he thought dying would be all right. It was going to break Roland’s heart to lose the boy . . . yet he would go on. As long as the Dark Tower stood, Roland would go on.

Jake looked up. “She said, ‘Remember the struggle.’”

“Susannah did.”

“Yes. She *came forward*. Mia let her. And the song moved Mia. She wept.”

“Say true?”

“True. Mia, daughter of none, mother of one. And while Mia was distracted . . . her eyes blind with tears . . .”

Jake looked around. Oy looked around with him, likely not searching for anything but only imitating his beloved Ake. Callahan was remembering that night on the Pavilion. The lights. The way Oy had stood on his hind legs and bowed to the *folken*. Susannah, singing. The lights. The dancing, Roland dancing the commala in the lights, the colored lights. Roland dancing in the white. Always Roland; and in the end, after the others had fallen, murdered away one by one in these bloody motions, Roland would remain.

I can live with that, Callahan thought. *And die with it.*

“She left something but it’s *gone!*” Jake said in a distressed, almost-crying voice. “Someone must have found it . . . or maybe the guitar-player saw her drop it and took it . . . this fucking city! Everyone steals everything! Ah, *shit!*”

“Let it go.”

Jake turned his pale, tired, frightened face up to Callahan’s. “She left us something and we *need* it! Don’t you understand how thin our chances are?”

“Yes. If you want to back off, Jake, now would be the time.”

The boy shook his head with no doubt nor the slightest hesitation, and Callahan was fiercely proud of him. “Let’s go, Pere,” he said.

SEVENTEEN

On the corner of Lex and Sixty-first they stopped again. Jake pointed across the street. Callahan saw the green awning and nodded. It was imprinted with a cartoon porker that was grinning blissfully in spite of having been roasted a bright and smoking red. THE DIXIE PIG was written on the awning’s overhang. Parked in a row in front of it were five long black limousines with their accent lights glowing a slightly blurred yellow in the dark. Callahan realized for the first time that a mist was creeping down the Avenue.

“Here,” Jake said, and handed him the Ruger. The boy rummaged in his pockets and came up with two big handfuls of cartridges. They

gleamed dully in the pervasive orange glow of the streetlamps. “Put em all in your breast pocket, Pere. Easier to get at that way, all right?”

Callahan nodded.

“Ever shot a gun before?”

“No,” Callahan said. “Have you ever fired one of those plates?”

Jake’s lips parted in a grin. “Benny Slightman and I snuck a bunch of the practice dishes out to the riverbank and had a match one night. He wasn’t much good, but . . .”

“Let me guess. You were.”

Jake shrugged, then nodded. He had no words to express how fine the plates had felt in his hands, how savagely right. But perhaps that was natural. Susannah had also taken quickly and naturally to throwing the Oriza. That Pere Callahan had seen for himself.

“All right, what’s our plan?” Callahan asked. Now that he had decided to go through it all the way to the end, he was more than willing to give leadership over to the boy. Jake was, after all, the gunslinger.

The boy shook his head. “There *is* none,” he said, “not really. I go in first. You right behind me. Once we’re through the door, we spread apart. Ten feet between us any time we have ten feet to give, Pere—do you understand? So that no matter how many there are or how *close* they are, no one of them can get both of us at the same time.”

This was Roland’s teaching, and Callahan recognized it as such. He nodded.

“I’ll be able to follow her by touch, and Oy will be able to by scent,” Jake said. “Move with us. Shoot whatever asks to be shot, and without hesitation, do you understand?”

“Aye.”

“If you kill something that has what looks like a useful weapon, take it. If you can scoop it up on the move, that is. We have to keep moving. We have to keep taking it to them. We have to be relentless. Can you scream?”

Callahan considered it, then nodded.

“Scream at them,” Jake said. “I’ll be doing the same. And I’ll be moving. Maybe running, more likely at a good fast walk. Make sure that every time I look on my right, I see the side of your face.”

“You’ll see it,” Callahan said, and thought: *Until one of them drops me, at least.* “After we bring her out of there, Jake, am I a gunslinger?”

Jake’s grin was wolfish, all his doubts and fears put behind him. “Khef, ka, and ka-tet,” he said. “Look, there’s the WALK light. Let’s cross.”

EIGHTEEN

The driver’s seat of the first limo was empty. There was a fellow in a cap and a uniform behind the wheel of the second, but to Pere Callahan the sai looked asleep. Another man in cap and uniform was leaning against the sidewalk side of the third limo. The coal of a cigarette made a lazy arc from his side to his mouth and then back down again. He glanced their way, but with no appreciable interest. What was there to see? A man going on elderly, a boy going on teenage, and a scurrying dog. Big deal.

When they gained the other side of Sixty-first, Callahan saw a sign on a chrome stand in front of the restaurant:

CLOSED FOR PRIVATE FUNCTION

What exactly did you call tonight’s function at the Dixie Pig? Callahan wondered. A baby shower? A birthday party?

“What about Oy?” he asked Jake in a low voice.

“Oy stays with me.”

Only four words, but they were enough to convince Callahan Jake knew what he did: this was their night to die. Callahan didn’t know if they’d manage to go out in a blaze of glory, but they would be going out, all three of them. The clearing at the end of the path was now

hidden from their view by only a single turn; they would enter it three abreast. And little as he wanted to die while his lungs were still clear and his eyes could still see, Callahan understood that things could have been much worse. Black Thirteen had been stuffed away in another dark place where it would sleep, and if Roland did indeed remain standing when the hurly-burly was done, the battle lost and won, then he would track it down and dispose of it as he saw fit. Meanwhile—

“Jake, listen to me a second. This is important.”

Jake nodded, but he looked impatient.

“Do you understand that you are in danger of death, and do you ask forgiveness for your sins?”

The boy understood he was being given last rites. “Yes,” he said.

“Are you sincerely sorry for those sins?”

“Yes.”

“Repent of them?”

“Yes, Pere.”

Callahan sketched the sign of the cross in front of him. “*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus—*”

Oy barked. Just once, but with excitement. And it was a bit muffled, that bark, for he had found something in the gutter and was holding it up to Jake in his mouth. The boy bent and took it.

“What?” Callahan asked. “What is it?”

“It’s what she left for us,” Jake said. He sounded enormously relieved, almost hopeful again. “What she dropped while Mia was distracted and crying about the song. Oh man—we might have a chance, Pere. We might just have a chance after all.”

He put the object in the Pere’s hand. Callahan was surprised by its weight, and then struck almost breathless by its beauty. He felt the same dawning of hope. It was probably stupid, but it was there, all right.

He held the scrimshaw turtle up to his face and ran the pad of his index finger over the question-mark-shaped scratch on its shell.

Looked into its wise and peaceful eyes. “How lovely it is,” he breathed. “Is it the Turtle Maturin? It is, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said. “Probably. She calls it the *sköldpadda*, and it may help us, but it can’t kill the harriers that are waiting for us in there.” He nodded toward the Dixie Pig. “Only we can do that, Pere. Will you?”

“Oh yes,” Callahan said calmly. He put the turtle, the *sköldpadda*, into his breast pocket. “I’ll shoot until the bullets are gone or I’m dead. If I run out of bullets before they kill me, I’ll club them with the gun-butt.”

“Good. Let’s go give *them* some last rites.”

They walked past the CLOSED sign on its chrome post, Oy trotting between them, his head up and his muzzle wearing that toothy grin. They mounted the three steps to the double doors without hesitating. At the top, Jake reached into the pouch and brought out two of the plates. He tapped them together, nodded at the dull ringing sound, and then said: “Let’s see yours.”

Callahan lifted the Ruger and held the barrel beside his right cheek like a duelist. Then he touched his breast pocket, which bulged and drooped with shells.

Jake nodded, satisfied. “Once we’re in, we stay together. Always together, with Oy between. On three. And once we start, we don’t stop until we’re dead.”

“Never stop.”

“Right. Are you ready?”

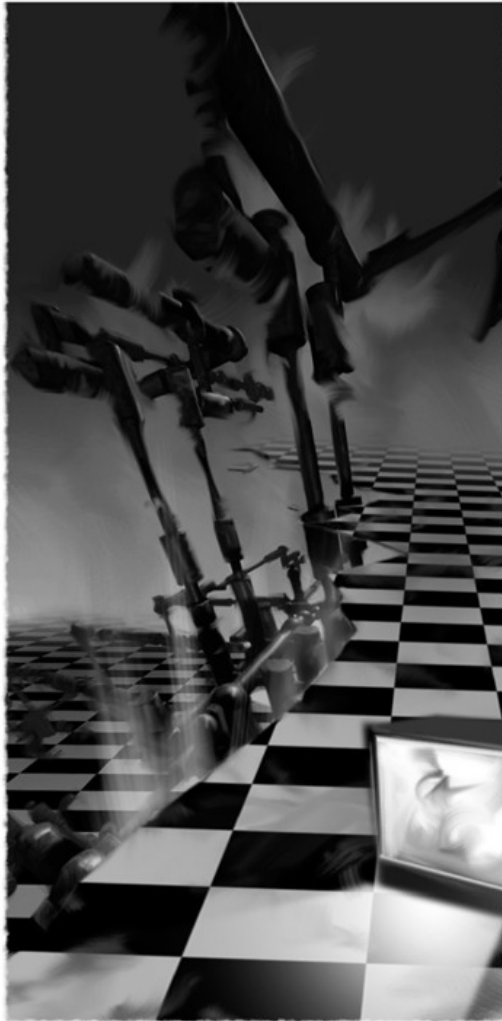
“Yes. God’s love on you, boy.”

“And on you, Pere. One . . . two . . . *three*.” Jake opened the door and together they went into dim light and the sweet tangy smell of roasting pork.

STAVE: *Commala-come-ki,
There’s a time to live and one to die.
With your back against the final wall
Ya gotta let the bullets fly.*

RESPONSE: *Commala-come ki!*
Let the bullets fly!
Don't 'ee mourn for me, my lads
When it comes my day to die.

" H I L E ,
M I A ,
H I L E ,
M O T H E R "



13TH STANZA



ONE

Ka might have put that downtown bus where it was when Mia's cab pulled up, or it might only have been coincidence. Certainly it's the sort of question that provokes argument from the humblest street-preacher (can you give me hallelujah) all the way up to the mightiest of theological philosophers (can you give me a Socratic amen). Some might consider it almost frivolous; the mighty issues that loom their shadows behind the question, however, are anything but.

One downtown bus, half empty.

But if it hadn't been there on the corner of Lex and Sixty-first, Mia likely would never have noticed the man playing the guitar. And, had she not stopped to listen to the man playing the guitar, who knows how much of what followed might have been different?

TWO

"Awwww, *man*, wouldja looka-dat!" the cab driver exclaimed, and lifted his hand to his windshield in an exasperated gesture. A bus was parked on the corner of Lexington and Sixty-first, its diesel engine rumbling and its taillights flashing what Mia took to be some kind of distress code. The bus driver was standing by one of the rear wheels,

looking at the dark cloud of diesel smoke pouring from the bus's rear vent.

"Lady," said the cab driver, "you mind getting off on the corner of Sixtieth? Tha'be all right?"

Is it? Mia asked. *What should I say?*

Sure, Susannah replied absently. *Sixtieth's fine.*

Mia's question had called her back from her version of the Dogan, where she'd been trying to get in touch with Eddie. She'd had no luck doing that, and was appalled at the state of the place. The cracks in the floor now ran deep, and one of the ceiling panels had crashed down, bringing the fluorescent lights and several long snarls of electrical cable with it. Some of the instrument panels had gone dark. Others were seeping tendrils of smoke. The needle on the **SUSANNAH-MIO** dial was all the way over into the red. Below her feet, the floor was vibrating and the machinery was screaming. And saying that none of this was real, it was all only a visualization technique, kind of missed the whole point, didn't it? She'd shut down a very powerful process, and her body was paying a price. The Voice of the Dogan had warned her that what she was doing was dangerous; that it wasn't (in the words of a TV ad) nice to fool Mother Nature. Susannah had no idea which of her glands and organs were taking the biggest beating, but she knew that they *were* hers. Not Mia's. It was time to call a halt to this madness before everything went sky-high.

First, though, she'd tried to get in touch with Eddie, yelling his name repeatedly into the mike with NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS stamped on it. Nothing. Yelling Roland's name also brought no result. If they were dead, she would have known it. She was sure of that. But not to be able to get in touch with them at *all* . . . what did that mean?

It mean you once mo' been fucked mos' righteous, honeychile, Detta told her, and cackled. *This what you get fo' messin wit' honkies.*

I can get out here? Mia was asking, shy as a girl arriving at her first dance. *Really?*

Susannah would have slapped her own brow, had she had one. God, when it was about anything but her baby, the bitch was so

goddam *timid!*

Yes, go ahead. It's only a single block, and on the avenues, the blocks are short.

The driver . . . how much should I give the driver?

Give him a ten and let him keep the change. Here, hold it out for me—

Susannah sensed Mia's reluctance and reacted with weary anger. This was not entirely without amusement.

Listen to me, sweetheart, I wash my hands of you. Okay? Give him any fucking bill you want.

No, no, it's all right. Humble now. Frightened. *I trust you, Susannah.* And she held up the remaining bills from Mats, fanned out in front of her eyes like a hand of cards.

Susannah almost refused, but what was the point? She *came forward*, took control of the brown hands holding the money, selected a ten, and gave it to the driver. "Keep the change," she said.

"Thanks, lady!"

Susannah opened the curbside door. A robot voice began to speak when she did, startling her—startling both of them. It was someone named Whoopi Goldberg, reminding her to take her bags. For Susannah-Mia, the question of her gunna was moot. There was only one piece of baggage which concerned them now, and of this Mia would soon be delivered.

She heard guitar music. At the same time she felt her control over the hand stuffing money back into her pocket and the leg swinging out of the cab begin to ebb. Mia, taking over again now that Susannah had solved another of her little New York dilemmas. Susannah began to struggle against this usurpation

(my body, goddammit, mine, at least from the waist up, and that includes the head and the brain inside it!)

and then quit. What was the use? Mia was stronger. Susannah had no idea why that should be, but she knew that it was.

A kind of queer *Bushido* fatalism had come over Susannah Dean by this point. It was the sort of calmness that cloaks the drivers of cars

skidding helplessly toward bridge overpasses, the pilots of planes that heel over into their final dives, their engines dead . . . and gunslingers driven to their final cave or draw. Later she might fight, if fighting seemed either worthwhile or honorable. She would fight to save herself or the baby, but not Mia—this was her decision. Mia had forfeited any chance of rescue she might once have deserved, in Susannah’s eyes.

For now there was nothing to do, except maybe to turn the LABOR FORCE dial back to 10. She thought she would be allowed that much control.

Before that, though . . . the music. The guitar. It was a song she knew, and knew well. She had sung a version of it to the *folken* the night of their arrival in Calla Bryn Sturgis.

After all she had been through since meeting Roland, hearing “Man of Constant Sorrow” on this New York streetcorner did not strike her as coincidental in the least. And it was a wonderful song, wasn’t it? Perhaps the vertex of all the folk songs she had so loved as a younger woman, the ones that had seduced her, step by step, into activism and had led her finally to Oxford, Mississippi. Those days were gone—she felt ever so much older than she had then—but this song’s sad simplicity still appealed to her. The Dixie Pig was less than a block from here. Once Mia had transported them through its doors, Susannah would be in the Land of the Crimson King. She had no doubts or illusions about that. She did not expect to return from there, did not expect to see either her friends or her beloved again, and had an idea she might have to die with Mia’s cheated howls for company . . . but none of that had to interfere with her enjoyment of this song now. Was it her death-song? If so, fine.

Susannah, daughter of Dan, reckoned there could have been far worse.

THREE

The busker had set up shop in front of a café called Blackstrap Molasses. His guitar case was open in front of him, its purple velvet interior (exactly the same shade as the rug in sai King's Bridgton bedroom, can you say amen) scattered with change and bills, just so any unusually innocent passersby would know the right thing to do. He was sitting on a sturdy wooden cube which looked exactly like the one upon which the Rev. Harrigan stood to preach.

There were signs that he was almost through for the night. He had put on his jacket, which bore a New York Yankees patch on the sleeve, and a hat with **JOHN LENNON LIVES** printed above the bill. There had apparently been a sign in front of him but now it was back in his instrument case, words-side down. Not that Mia would have known what was writ upon it in any case, not she.

He looked at her, smiled, and quit his fingerpicking. She raised one of the remaining bills and said, "I'll give you this if you'll play that song again. All of it, this time."

The young man looked about twenty, and while there was nothing very handsome about him, with his pale, spotty complexion, the gold ring in one of his nostrils, and the cigarette jutting from the corner of his mouth, he had an engaging air. His eyes widened as he realized whose face was on the bit of currency she was holding. "Lady, for fifty bucks I'd play every Ralph Stanley song I know . . . and I know quite a few of em."

"Just this one will do us fine," Mia said, and tossed the bill. It fluttered into the busker's guitar case. He watched its prankish descent with disbelief. "Hurry," Mia said. Susannah was quiet, but Mia sensed her listening. "My time is short. Play."

And so the guitar-player sitting on the box in front of the café began to play a song Susannah had first heard in *The Hungry*, a song she had herself sung at God only knew how many hootenannies, a song she'd once sung behind a motel in Oxford, Mississippi. The night before they had all been thrown in jail, that had been. By then those three young voter-registration boys had been missing almost a month, gone into the black Mississippi earth somewhere in the general vicinity

of Philadelphia (they were eventually found in the town of Longdale, can you give me hallelujah, can you please say amen). That fabled White Sledgehammer had begun once more to swing in the redneck toolies, but they had sung anyway. Odetta Holmes—Det, they called her in those days—had begun this particular song and then the rest of them joined in, the boys singing *man* and the girls singing *maid*. Now, rapt within the Dogan which had become her gulag, Susannah listened as this young man, unborn in those terrible old days, sang it again. The cofferdam of her memory broke wide open and it was Mia, unprepared for the violence of these recollections, who was lifted upon the wave.

FOUR

In the Land of Memory, the time is always *Now*.

In the Kingdom of Ago, the clocks tick . . . but their hands never move.

There is an Unfound Door

(O lost)

and memory is the key which opens it.

FIVE

Their names are Cheney, Goodman, Schwerner; these are those who fall beneath the swing of the White Sledgehammer on the 19th of June, 1964.

O Discordia!

SIX

They're staying at a place called the Blue Moon Motor Hotel, on the Negro side of Oxford, Mississippi. The Blue Moon is owned by Lester Bambry, whose brother John is pastor of the First Afro-American Methodist Church of Oxford, can you give me hallelujah, can you say amen.

It is July 19th of 1964, a month to the day after the disappearance of Cheney, Goodman, and Schwerner. Three days after they disappeared somewhere around Philadelphia there was a meeting at John Bambry's church and the local Negro activists told the three dozen or so remaining white northerners that in light of what was now happening, they were of course free to go home. And some of them have gone home, praise God, but Odetta Holmes and eighteen others stay. Yes. They stay at the Blue Moon Motor Hotel. And sometimes at night they go out back, and Delbert Anderson brings his guitar and they sing.

"I Shall Be Released," they sing and

"John Henry," they sing, gonna whop the steel on down (great Gawd, say Gawd-bomb), and they sing

"Blowin in the Wind" and they sing

"Hesitation Blues" by the Rev. Gary Davis, all of them laughing at the amiably risqué verses: a dollar is a dollar and a dime is a dime I got a houseful of chillun ain't none of em mine, and they sing

"I Ain't Marchin Anymore" and they sing

*in the Land of Memory and the Kingdom of Ago they sing
in the blood-heat of their youth, in the strength of their bodies, in
the confidence of their minds they sing*

to deny Discordia

to deny the can toi

in affirmation of Gan the Maker, Gan the Evil-taker

they don't know these names

they know all these names

the heart sings what it must sing

the blood knows what the blood knows

on the Path of the Beam our hearts know all the secrets

and they sing

sing

Odetta begins and Delbert Anderson plays; she sings

“I am a maid of constant sorrow . . . I’ve seen trouble all my days . . . I bid farewell . . . to old Ken-tucky . . .”

SEVEN

So Mia was ushered through the Unfound Door and into the Land of Memory, transported to the weedy yard behind Lester Bambry’s Blue Moon Motor Hotel, and so she heard—

(hears)

EIGHT

Mia hears the woman who will become Susannah as she sings her song. She hears the others join in, one by one, until they are all singing together in a choir, and overhead is the Mississippi moon, raining its radiance down on their faces—some black, some white—and upon the cold steel rails of the tracks which run behind the hotel, tracks which run south from here, which run out to Longdale, the town where on August 5th of 1964 the badly decomposed bodies of their amigos will be found—James Cheney, twenty-one; Andrew Goodman, twenty-one; Michael Schwerner, twenty-four; O Discordia! And to you who favor darkness, give you joy of the red Eye that shines there.

She hears them sing.

All thro’ this Earth I’m bound to ramble . . . Thro’ storm and wind, thro’ sleet and rain . . . I’m bound to ride that Northern railroad . . .

Nothing opens the eye of memory like a song, and it is Odetta’s memories that lift Mia and carry her as they sing together, Det and her ka-mates under the silvery moon. Mia sees them walking hence from here with their arms linked, singing

(oh deep in my heart . . . I do believe . . .)

another song, the one they feel defines them most clearly. The faces lining the street and watching them are twisted with hate. The fists being shaken at them are callused. The mouths of the women who purse their lips to shoot the spit that will clabber their cheeks dirty their hair stain their shirts are paintless and their legs are without stockings and their shoes are nothing but runover lumps. There are men in overalls (Oshkosh-by-gosh, someone say hallelujah). There are teenage boys in clean white sweaters and flattop haircuts and one of them shouts at Odetta, carefully articulating each word: *We Will Kill! Every! Goddam! Nigger! Who Steps Foot On The Campus Of Ole Miss!*

And the camaraderie in spite of the fear. *Because* of the fear. The feeling that they are doing something incredibly important: something for the ages. They will change America, and if the price is blood, why then they will pay it. Say true, say hallelujah, praise God, give up your loud amen.

Then comes the white boy named Darryl, and at first he couldn't, he was limp and he couldn't, and then later on he could and Odetta's secret other—the screaming, laughing, ugly other—never came near. Darryl and Det lay together until morning, slept spoons until morning beneath the Mississippi moon. Listening to the crickets. Listening to the owls. Listening to the soft smooth hum of the Earth turning on its gimbals, turning and turning ever further into the twentieth century. They are young, their blood runs hot, and they never doubt their ability to change everything.

It's fare you well, my own true lover . . .

This is her song in the weeds behind the Blue Moon Motor Hotel; this is her song beneath the moon.

I'll never see your face again . . .

It's Odetta Holmes at the apotheosis of her life, and Mia is *there!* She sees it, feels it, is lost in its glorious and some would say stupid hope (ah but I say hallelujah, we all say Gawd-bomb). She understands how being afraid all the time makes one's friends more

precious; how it makes every bite of every meal sweet; how it stretches time until every day seems to last forever, leading on to velvet night, and they *know* James Cheney is dead

(say true)

they *know* Andrew Goodman is dead

(say hallelujah)

they *know* Michael Schwerner—oldest of them and still just a baby at twenty-four—is dead.

(Give up your loudest amen!)

They know that any of them is also eligible to wind up in the mud of Longdale or Philadelphia. *At any time*. The night after this particular hoot behind the Blue Moon, most of them, Odetta included, will be taken to jail and her time of humiliation will begin. But tonight she's with her friends, with her lover, and they are one, and Discordia has been banished. Tonight they sing swaying with their arms around each other.

The girls sing *maid*, the boys sing *man*.

Mia is overwhelmed by their love for one another; she is exalted by the simplicity of what they believe.

At first, too stunned to laugh or to cry, she can only listen, amazed.

NINE

As the busker began the fourth verse, Susannah joined in, at first tentatively and then—at his encouraging smile—with a will, harmonizing above the young man's voice:

*For breakfast we had bulldog gravy
For supper we had beans and bread
The miners don't have any dinner
And a tick of straw they call a bed . . .*

TEN

The busker quit after that verse, looking at Susannah-Mia with happy surprise. “I thought I was the only one who knew that one,” he said. “It’s the way the Freedom Riders used to—”

“No,” Susannah said quietly. “Not them. It was the voter-registration people who sang the bulldog-gravy verse. The folks who came down to Oxford in the summer of ’64. When those three boys were killed.”

“Schwerner and Goodman,” he said. “I can’t remember the name of the—”

“James Cheney,” she said quietly. “He had the most beautiful *hair*.”

“You talk as though you knew him,” he said, “but you can’t be much over . . . thirty?”

Susannah had an idea she looked a good deal older than thirty, especially tonight, but of course this young man had fifty dollars more in his guitar case now than had been there a single song ago, and it had perhaps affected his eyesight.

“My mother spent the summer of ’64 in Neshoba County,” Susannah said, and with two spontaneously chosen words—*my mother*—did her captor more damage than she could have imagined. Those words flayed open Mia’s heart.

“Cool on Mom!” the young man exclaimed, and smiled. Then the smile faded. He fished the fifty out of the guitar case and held it up to her. “Take it back. It was a pleasure just to sing with you, ma’am.”

“I really couldn’t,” Susannah said, smiling. “Remember the struggle, that’d be enough for me. And remember Jimmy, Andy, and Michael, if it does ya. I know it would do me just fine.”

“Please,” the young man persisted. He was smiling again but the smile was troubled and he might have been any of those young men from the Land of Ago, singing in the moonlight between the slumped ass-ends of the Blue Moon’s shabby little units and the double-hammered heatless moonlight gleam of the railroad tracks; he could have been any in his beauty and the careless flower of his youth and

how in that moment Mia loved him. Even her chap seemed secondary in that glow. She knew it was in many ways a false glow, imparted by the memories of her hostess, and yet she suspected that in other ways it might be real. She knew one thing for sure: only a creature such as herself, who'd had immortality and given it up, could appreciate the raw courage it took to stand against the forces of Discordia. To risk that fragile beauty by putting beliefs before personal safety.

Make him happy, take it back, she told Susannah, but would not *come forward* and make Susannah do so. Let it be her choice.

Before Susannah could reply, the alarm in the Dogan went off, flooding their shared mind with noise and red light.

Susannah turned in that direction, but Mia grabbed her shoulder in a grip like a claw before she could go.

What's happening? What's gone wrong?

Let me loose!

Susannah twisted free. And before Mia could grab her again, she was gone.

ELEVEN

Susannah's Dogan pulsed and flared with red panic-light. A Klaxon hammered an audio tattoo from the overhead speakers. All but two of the TV screens—one still showing the busker on the corner of Lex and Sixtieth, the other the sleeping baby—had shorted out. The cracked floor was humming under Susannah's feet and throwing up dust. One of the control panels had gone dark, and another was in flames.

This looked bad.

As if to confirm her assessment, the Blaine-like Voice of the Dogan began to speak again. "WARNING!" it cried. "SYSTEM OVERLOAD! WITHOUT POWER REDUCTION IN SECTION ALPHA, TOTAL SYSTEM SHUTDOWN WILL OCCUR IN 40 SECONDS!"

Susannah couldn't remember any Section Alpha from her previous visits to the Dogan, but wasn't surprised to now see a sign labeled just that. One of the panels near it suddenly erupted in a gaudy shower of orange sparks, setting the seat of a chair on fire. More ceiling panels fell, trailing snarls of wiring.

"WITHOUT POWER REDUCTION IN SECTION ALPHA, TOTAL SYSTEM SHUTDOWN WILL OCCUR IN 30 SECONDS!"

What about the EMOTIONAL TEMP dial?

"Leave it alone," she muttered to herself.

Okay, CHAP? What about that one?

After a moment's thought, Susannah flipped the toggle from ASLEEP to AWAKE and those disconcerting blue eyes opened at once, staring into Susannah's with what looked like fierce curiosity.

Roland's child, she thought with a strange and painful mixture of emotions. *And mine. As for Mia? Girl, you nothing but a ka-mai. I'm sorry for you.*

Ka-mai, yes. Not just a fool, but ka's fool—a fool of destiny.

"WITHOUT POWER REDUCTION IN SECTION ALPHA, TOTAL SYSTEM SHUTDOWN WILL OCCUR IN 25 SECONDS!"

So waking the baby hadn't done any good, at least not in terms of preventing a complete system crash. Time for Plan B.

She reached out for the absurd LABOR FORCE control-knob, the one that looked so much like the oven-dial on her mother's stove. Turning the dial back to 2 had been difficult, and had hurt like a bastard. Turning it the other way was easier, and there was no pain at all. What she felt was an *easing* somewhere deep in her head, as if some network of muscles which had been flexed for hours was now letting go with a little cry of relief.

The blaring pulse of the Klaxon ceased.

Susannah turned LABOR FORCE to 8, paused there, then shrugged. What the hell, it was time to go for broke, get this over with. She turned the dial all the way to 10. The moment it was there, a great glossy pain hardened her stomach and then rolled lower, gripping her pelvis. She had to tighten her lips against a scream.

“POWER REDUCTION IN SECTION ALPHA HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED,” said the voice, and then it dropped into a John Wayne drawl that Susannah knew all too well. “THANKS A WHOLE HEAP, LI’L COWGIRL.”

She had to tighten her lips against another scream—not pain this time but outright terror. It was all very well to remind herself Blaine the Mono was dead and this voice was coming from some nasty practical joker in her own subconscious, but that didn’t stop the fear.

“LABOR . . . HAS COMMENCED,” said the amplified voice, dropping the John Wayne imitation. “LABOR . . . HAS COMMENCED.” Then, in a horrible (and nasal) Bob Dylan drawl that set her teeth on edge, the voice sang: “HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU . . . *BABE!* . . . HAPPY BIRTHDAY . . . TO YOU! HAPPY BIRTHDAY . . . DEAR MORDRED . . . HAPPY BIRTHDAY . . . TO YOU!”

Susannah visualized a fire extinguisher mounted on the wall behind her, and when she turned it was, of course, right there (she had not imagined the little sign reading ONLY YOU AND SOMBRA CAN HELP PREVENT CONSOLE FIRES, however—that, along with a drawing of Shardik o’ the Beam in a Smokey the Bear hat, was some other joker’s treat). As she hurried across the cracked and uneven floor to get the extinguisher, skirting the fallen ceiling panels, another pain ripped into her, lighting her belly and thighs on fire, making her want to double over and bear down on the outrageous stone in her womb.

Not going to take long, she thought in a voice that was part Susannah and part Detta. *No ma’am. This chap comin in on the express train!*

But then the pain let up slightly. She snatched the extinguisher off the wall when it did, trained the slim black horn on the flaming control panel, and pressed the trigger. Foam billowed out, coating the flames. There was a baleful hissing sound and a smell like burning hair.

“THE FIRE . . . IS OUT,” the Voice of the Dogan proclaimed. “THE FIRE . . . IS OUT.” And then changing, quick as a flash, to a

plummy British Lord Haw-Haw accent: “I SAY, JOLLY GOOD SHOW, SEW-ZANNAH, AB-SO-LUTELY BRILLLL-IANT!”

She lurched across the minefield of the Dogan’s floor again, seized the microphone, and pressed the transmit toggle. Above her, on one of the TV screens still operating, she could see that Mia was on the move again, crossing Sixtieth.

Then Susannah saw the green awning with the cartoon pig, and her heart sank. Not Sixtieth, but *Sixty-first*. The hijacking mommy-bitch had reached her destination.

“Eddie!” she shouted into the microphone. “Eddie or Roland!” And what the hell, she might as well make it a clean sweep. “Jake! Pere Callahan! We’ve reached the Dixie Pig and we’re going to have this damn baby! Come for us if you can, but be careful!”

She looked up at the screen again. Mia was now on the Dixie Pig side of the street, peering at the green awning. Hesitating. Could she read the words DIXIE PIG? Probably not, but she could surely understand the cartoon. The smiling, smoking pig. And she wouldn’t hesitate long in any case, now that her labor had started.

“Eddie, I have to go. I love you, sugar! Whatever else happens, you remember that! Never forget it! *I love you!* This is . . .” Her eye fell on the semicircular readout on the panel behind the mike. The needle had fallen out of the red. She thought it would stay in the yellow until the labor was over, then subside into the green.

Unless something went wrong, that was.

She realized she was still gripping the mike.

“This is Susannah-Mio, signing off. God be with you, boys. God and ka.”

She put the microphone down and closed her eyes.

TWELVE

Susannah sensed the difference in Mia immediately. Although she’d reached the Dixie Pig and her labor had most emphatically

commenced, Mia's mind was for once elsewhere. It had turned to Odetta Holmes, in fact, and to what Michael Schwerner had called the Mississippi Summer Project. (What the Oxford rednecks had called *him* was The Jewboy.) The emotional atmosphere to which Susannah returned was *fraught*, like still air before a violent September storm.

Susannah! Susannah, daughter of Dan!

Yes, Mia.

I agreed to mortality.

So you said.

And certainly Mia had looked mortal in Fedic. Mortal and *terribly* pregnant.

Yet I've missed most of what makes the short-time life worthwhile. Haven't I? The grief in that voice was awful; the surprise was even worse. And there's no time for you to tell me. Not now.

Go somewhere else, Susannah said, with no hope at all. Hail a cab, go to a hospital. We'll have it together, Mia. Maybe we can even raise it toge—

If I have it anywhere but here, it will die and we'll die with it. She spoke with utter certainty. And I will have it. I've been cheated of all but my chap, and I will have it. But . . . Susannah . . . before we go in . . . you spoke of your mother.

I lied. It was me in Oxford. Lying was easier than trying to explain time travel and parallel worlds.

Show me the truth. Show me your mother. Show me, I beg!

There was no time to debate this request pro and con; it was either do it or refuse on the spur of the moment. Susannah decided to do it.

Look, she said.

THIRTEEN

In the Land of Memory, the time is always *Now*.

There is an Unfound Door

(O lost)

and when Susannah found it and opened it, Mia saw a woman with her dark hair pulled back from her face and startling gray eyes. There is a cameo brooch at the woman's throat. She's sitting at the kitchen table, this woman, in an eternal shaft of sun. In this memory it is always ten minutes past two on an afternoon in October of 1946, the Big War is over, Irene Daye is on the radio, and the smell is always gingerbread.

"Odetta, come and sit with me," says the woman at the table, she who is mother. "Have something sweet. You look *good*, girl."

And she smiles.

O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again!

FOURTEEN

Prosaic enough, you would say, so you would. A young girl comes home from school with her book-bag in one hand and her gym-bag in the other, wearing her white blouse and her pleated St. Ann's tartan skirt and the knee-socks with the bows on the side (orange and black, the school colors). Her mother, sitting at the kitchen table, looks up and offers her daughter a piece of the gingerbread that just came out of the oven. It is only one moment in an unmarked million, a single atom of event in a lifetime of them. But it stole Mia's breath

(*you look good, girl*)

and showed her in a concrete way she had previously not understood how rich motherhood could be . . . *if*, that was, it was allowed to run its course uninterrupted.

The rewards?

Immeasurable.

In the end *you* could be the woman sitting in the shaft of sun. *You* could be the one looking at the child sailing bravely out of childhood's harbor. You could be the wind in that child's unfurled sails.

You.

Odetta, come and sit with me.

Mia's breath began to hitch in her chest.

Have something sweet.

Her eyes fogged over, the smiling cartoon pig on the awning first doubling, then quadrupling.

You look good, girl.

Some time was better than no time at all. Even five years—or three—was better than no time at all. She couldn't read, hadn't been to Morehouse, hadn't been to *no* house, but she could do that much math with no trouble: three = better than none. Even one = better than none.

Oh . . .

Oh, but . . .

Mia thought of a blue-eyed boy stepping through a door, one that was found instead of lost. She thought of saying to him *You look good, son!*

She began to weep.

What have I done was a terrible question. *What else could I have done* was perhaps even worse.

O Discordia!

FIFTEEN

This was Susannah's one chance to do something: now, while Mia stood at the foot of the steps leading up to her fate. Susannah reached into the pocket of her jeans and touched the turtle, the *skölpadda*. Her brown fingers, separated from Mia's white leg by only a thin layer of lining, closed around it.

She pulled it out and flipped it behind her, casting it into the gutter. From her hand into the lap of ka.

Then she was carried up the three steps to the double doors of the Dixie Pig.

SIXTEEN

It was very dim inside and at first Mia could see nothing but murky, reddish-orange lights. Electric *flambeaux* of the sort that still lit some of the rooms in Castle Discordia. Her sense of smell needed no adjusting, however, and even as a fresh labor pain clamped her tight, her stomach reacted to the smell of roasting pork and cried out to be fed. Her *chap* cried out to be fed.

That's not pork, Mia, Susannah said, and was ignored.

As the doors were closed behind her—there was a man (or a manlike being) standing at each of them—she began to see better. She was at the head of a long, narrow dining room. White napery shone. On each table was a candle in an orange-tinted holder. They glowed like fox-eyes. The floor here in the foyer was black marble, but beyond the *maître d's* stand there was a rug of darkest crimson.

Beside the stand was a sai of about sixty with white hair combed back from a lean and rather predatory face. It was the face of an intelligent man, but his clothes—the blaring yellow sportcoat, the red shirt, the black tie—were those of a used-car salesman or a gambler who specializes in rooking small-town rubes. In the center of his forehead was a red hole about an inch across, as if he had been shot at close range. It swam with blood that never overflowed onto his pallid skin.

At the tables in the dining room stood perhaps fifty men and half again as many women. Most of them were dressed in clothes as loud or louder than those of the white-haired gent. Big rings glared on fleshy fingers, diamond eardrops sparked back orange light from the *flambeaux*.

There were also some dressed in more sober attire—jeans and plain white shirts seemed to be the costume of choice for this minority. These *folken* were pallid and watchful, their eyes seemingly all pupil. Around their bodies, swirling so faintly that they sometimes disappeared, were blue auras. To Mia these pallid, aura-enclosed creatures looked quite a bit more human than the low men and

women. They were vampires—she didn't have to observe the sharpened fangs which their smiles disclosed to know it—but still they looked more human than Sayre's bunch. Perhaps because they once had *been* human. The others, though . . .

Their faces are only masks, she observed with growing dismay. *Beneath the ones the Wolves wear lie the electric men—the robots—but what is beneath these?*

The dining room was breathlessly silent, but from somewhere nearby came the uninterrupted sounds of conversation, laughter, clinking glasses, and cutlery against china. There was a patter of liquid—wine or water, she supposed—and a louder outburst of laughter.

A low man and a low woman—he in a tuxedo equipped with plaid lapels and a red velvet bow tie, she in a strapless silver lamé evening dress, both of startling obesity—turned to look (with obvious displeasure) toward the source of these sounds, which seemed to be coming from behind some sort of swaggy tapestry depicting knights and their ladies at sup. When the fat couple turned to look, Mia saw their cheeks wrinkle upward like clingy cloth, and for a moment, beneath the soft angle of their jaws, she saw something dark red and tufted with hair.

Susannah, was that skin? Mia asked. *Dear God, was it their skin?*

Susannah made no reply, not even *I told you so* or *Didn't I warn you?* Things had gone past that now. It was too late for exasperation (or any of the milder emotions), and Susannah felt genuinely sorry for the woman who had brought her here. Yes, Mia had lied and betrayed; yes, she had tried her best to get Eddie and Roland killed. But what choice had she ever had? Susannah realized, with dawning bitterness, that she could now give the perfect definition of a ka-mai: one who has been given hope but no choices.

Like giving a motorcycle to a blindman, she thought.

Richard Sayre—slim, middle-aged, handsome in a full-lipped, broad-browed way—began to applaud. The rings on his fingers flashed. His yellow blazer blared in the dim light. “Hile, Mia!” he cried.

“*Hile, Mia!*” the others responded.

“Hile, Mother!”

“*Hile, Mother!*” the vampires and low men and low women cried, and they, too, began to applaud. The sound was certainly enthusiastic enough, but the acoustics of the room dulled it and turned it into the rustle of batwings. A hungry sound, one that made Susannah feel sick to her stomach. At the same time a fresh contraction gripped her and turned her legs to water. She reeled forward, yet almost welcomed the pain, which partially muffled her trepidation. Sayre stepped forward and seized her by the upper arms, steadying her before she could fall. She had thought his touch would be cold, but his fingers were as hot as those of a cholera victim.

Farther back, she saw a tall figure come out of the shadows, something that was neither low man nor vampire. It wore jeans and a plain white shirt, but emerging from the shirt’s collar was the head of a bird. It was covered with sleek feathers of dark yellow. Its eyes were black. It patted its hands together in polite applause, and she saw—with ever-growing dismay—that those hands were equipped with talons rather than fingers.

Half a dozen bugs scampered from beneath one of the tables and looked at her with eyes that hung on stalks. Horribly intelligent eyes. Their mandibles clicked in a sound that was like laughter.

Hile, Mia! she heard in her head. An insectile buzzing. *Hile, Mother!* And then they were gone, back into the shadows.

Mia turned to the door and saw the pair of low men who blocked it. And yes, those *were* masks; this close to the door-guards it was impossible not to see how their sleek black hair had been painted on. Mia turned back to Sayre with a sinking heart.

Too late now.

Too late to do anything but go through with it.

SEVENTEEN

Sayre's grip had slipped when she turned. Now he re-established it by taking her left hand. At the same moment her right hand was seized. She turned that way and saw the fat woman in the silver lamé dress. Her huge bust overflowed the top of her gown, which struggled gamely to hold it back. The flesh of her upper arms quivered loosely, giving off a suffocating scent of talcum powder. On her forehead was a red wound that swam but never overflowed.

It's how they breathe, Mia thought. That's how they breathe when they're wearing their—

In her growing dismay, she had largely forgotten about Susannah Dean and completely about Detta. So when Detta Walker *came forward*—hell, when she *leaped forward*—there was no way Mia could stop her. She watched her arms shoot out seemingly of their own accord and saw her fingers sink into the plump cheek of the woman in the silver lamé gown. The woman shrieked, but oddly, the others, Sayre included, laughed uproariously, as if this were the funniest thing they'd ever seen in their lives.

The mask of humanity pulled away from the low woman's startled eye, then tore. Susannah thought of her final moments on the castle allure, when everything had frozen and the sky had torn open like paper.

Detta ripped the mask almost entirely away. Tatters of what looked like latex hung from the tips of her fingers. Beneath where the mask had been was the head of a huge red rat, a mutie with yellow teeth growing up the outside of its cheeks in a crust and what looked like white worms dangling from its nose.

"Naughty girl," said the rat, shaking a roguish finger at Susannah-Mio. Its other hand was still holding hers. The thing's mate—the low man in the garish tuxedo—was laughing so hard he had doubled over, and when he did, Mia saw something poking out through the seat of his pants. It was too bony to be a tail, but she supposed it was, all the same.

"Come, Mia," Sayre said, drawing her forward. And then he leaned toward her, peering earnestly into her eyes like a lover. "Or is it you,

Odetta? It is, isn't it? It's *you*, you pestering, overeducated, troublesome Negress."

"No, it be *me*, you ratface honky mahfah!" Detta crowed, and then spat into Sayre's face.

Sayre's mouth opened in a gape of astonishment. Then it snapped shut and twisted into a bitter scowl. The room had gone silent again. He wiped the spit from his face—from the mask he wore *over* his face—and looked at it unbelievably.

"Mia?" he asked. "Mia, you let her do this to *me*? Me, who would stand as your baby's godfather?"

"You ain't jack shit!" Detta cried. "You suck yo' ka-daddy's cock while you diddle yo' fuckfinger up his poop-chute and thass all you good fo'! You—"

"*Get RID of her!*" Sayre thundered.

And before the watching audience of vampires and low men in the Dixie Pig's front dining room, Mia did just that. The result was extraordinary. Detta's voice began to *dwindle*, as if she were being escorted out of the restaurant (by the bouncer, and by the scruff of the neck). She quit trying to speak and only laughed raucously, but soon enough that, too, was gone.

Sayre stood with his hands clasped before him, looking solemnly at Mia. The others were also staring. Somewhere behind the tapestry of the knights and their ladies at feast, the low laughter and conversation of some other group continued.

"She's gone," Mia said at last. "The bad one is gone." Even in the room's quiet she was hard to hear, for she spoke in little more than a whisper. Her eyes were timidly cast down, and her cheeks had gone deathly white. "Please, Mr. Sayre . . . *sai* Sayre . . . now that I've done as you ask, please say you've told me the truth, and I may have the raising of my chap. Please say so! If you do, you'll never hear from the other one again, I swear it on my father's face and my mother's name, so I do."

"You had neither," Sayre said. He spoke in a tone of distant contempt. The compassion and mercy for which she begged owned no

space in his eyes. And above them, the red hole in the center of his forehead filled and filled but never spilled.

Another pain, this one the greatest so far, sank its teeth into her. Mia staggered, and this time Sayre didn't bother steadying her. She went to her knees before him, put her hands on the rough, gleaming surface of his ostrich-skin boots, and looked up into his pale face. It looked back at her from above the violent yellow scream of his sports jacket.

"Please," she said. "Please, I beg you: *keep your promise to me.*"

"I may," he said, "or I may not. Do you know, I have never had my boots licked. Can you imagine? To have lived as long as I have and never to have had a single good old-fashioned boot-licking."

Somewhere a woman tittered.

Mia bent forward.

No, Mia, thee mustn't, Susannah moaned, but Mia made no reply. Nor did the paralyzing pain deep in her vitals stop her. She stuck her tongue out between her lips and began licking the rough surface of Richard Sayre's boots. Susannah could taste them, at a great distance. It was a husky, dusty, leathery taste, full of rue and humiliation.

Sayre let her go on so for a bit, then said: "Stop it. Enough."

He pulled her roughly to her feet and stood with his unsmiling face not three inches from her own. Now that she'd seen them, it was impossible to unsee the masks he and the rest of them wore. The taut cheeks were almost transparent, and whorls of dark scarlet hair were faintly visible beneath.

Or perhaps you called it fur when it covered the whole face.

"Your beggary does you no credit," he said, "although I must admit the sensation was extraordinary."

"You promised!" she cried, attempting to pull back and out of his grip. Then another contraction struck and she doubled over, trying only not to shriek. When it eased a little, she pressed on. "You said five years . . . or maybe seven . . . yes, seven . . . the best of everything for my chap, you said—"

“Yes,” Sayre said. “I do seem to recall that, Mia.” He frowned as one does when presented with an especially pernicious problem, then brightened. The area of mask around one corner of his mouth wrinkled up for a moment when he smiled, revealing a yellow snag of tooth growing out of the fold where his lower lip met his upper. He let go of her with one hand in order to raise a finger in the gesture pedagogical. “The best of everything, yes. Question is, do you fill that particular bill?”

Appreciative murmurs of laughter greeted this sally. Mia recalled them calling her Mother and saluting her *hile*, but that seemed distant now, like a meaningless fragment of dream.

You was good enough to tote him, though, wasn't you? Detta asked from someplace deep inside—from the brig, in fact. *Yassuh! You 'us good enough to do dat, sho!*

“I was good enough to carry him, wasn't I?” Mia almost spat at him. “Good enough to send the other one into the swamp to eat frogs, her all the time thinking they were caviar . . . I was good enough for *that*, wasn't I?”

Sayre blinked, clearly startled by so brisk a response.

Mia softened again. “Sai, think of all I gave up!”

“Pish, you had *nothing!*” Sayre replied. “What were you but a meaningless spirit whose existence revolved around no more than fucking the occasional saddletramp? Slut of the winds, isn't that what Roland calls your kind?”

“Then think of the other one,” Mia said. “She who calls herself Susannah. I have stolen all her life and purpose for my chap, and at your bidding.”

Sayre made a dismissive gesture. “Your mouth does you no credit, Mia. Therefore close it.”

He nodded to his left. A low man with a wide, bulldoggy face and a luxuriant head of curly gray hair came forward. The red hole in his brow had an oddly slanted Chinese look. Walking behind him was another of the bird-things, this one with a fierce, dark brown hawk's head protruding from the round neck of a tee-shirt with DUKE BLUE

DEVILS printed on it. They took hold of her. The bird-thing's grip was repulsive—scaly and alien.

“You have been an excellent custodian,” Sayre said, “on that much we can surely agree. But we must also remember that it was Roland of Gilead's jilly who actually bred the child, mustn't we?”

“*That's a lie!*” she screamed. “*Oh, that is a filthy . . . LIE!*”

He went on as if he'd not heard her. “And different jobs require different skills. Different strokes for different folks, as they say.”

“*PLEASE!*” Mia shrieked.

The hawkman put its taloned hands to the sides of its head and then rocked from side to side, as if deafened. This witty pantomime drew laughter and even a few cheers.

Susannah dimly felt warmth gush down her legs—*Mia's* legs—and saw her jeans darken at the crotch and thighs. Her water had finally broken.

“Let's *go-ooo-ooo . . .* and have a *BABY!*” Sayre proclaimed in game-show-host tones of excitement. There were too many teeth in that smile, a double row both top and bottom. “After that, we'll see. I promise you that your request will be taken under consideration. In the meantime . . . Hile, Mia! Hile, Mother!”

“*Hile, Mia! Hile, Mother!*” the rest cried, and Mia suddenly found herself borne toward the back of the room, the bulldog-faced low man gripping her left arm and the hawkman gripping her right. Hawkman made a faint and unpleasant buzzing sound in his throat each time he exhaled. Her feet barely touched the rug as she was carried toward the bird-thing with the yellow feathers; Canary-man, she thought him.

Sayre brought her to a stop with a single hand-gesture and spoke to Canaryman, pointing toward the Dixie Pig's street door as he did. Mia heard Roland's name, and also Jake's. The Canaryman nodded. Sayre pointed emphatically at the door again and shook his head. *Nothing gets in*, that headshake said. *Nothing!*

The Canaryman nodded again and then spoke in buzzing chirps that made Mia feel like screaming. She looked away, and her gaze happened on the mural of the knights and their ladies. They were at a

table she recognized—it was the one in the banqueting hall of Castle Discordia. Arthur Eld sat at the head with his crown on his brow and his lady-wife at his right hand. And his eyes were a blue she knew from her dreams.

Ka might have chosen that particular moment to puff some errant draft across the dining room of the Dixie Pig and twitch aside the tapestry. It was only for a second or two, but long enough for Mia to see there was another dining room—a *private* dining room—behind it.

Sitting at a long wooden table beneath a blazing crystal chandelier were perhaps a dozen men and women, their appledoll faces twisted and shrunken with age and evil. Their lips had burst back from great crogged bouquets of teeth; the days when any of these monstrosities could close their mouths were long gone. Their eyes were black and oozing some sort of noisome tarry stuff from the corners. Their skin was yellow, scaled with teeth, and covered with patches of diseased-looking fur.

What are they? Mia screamed. *What in the name of the gods are they?*

Mutants, Susannah said. *Or perhaps the word is hybrids. And it doesn't matter, Mia. You saw what matters, didn't you?*

She had, and Susannah knew it. Although the velvet swag had been twitched aside but briefly, it had been long enough for both of them to see the rotisserie which had been set in the middle of that table, and the headless corpse twirling upon it, skin browning and puckering and sizzling fragrant juices. No, the smell in the air hadn't been pork. The thing turning on the spit, brown as a squab, was a human baby. The creatures around it dipped delicate china cups into the drippings beneath, toasted each other . . . and drank.

The draft died. The tapestry settled back into place. And before the laboring woman was once more taken by the arms and hustled away from the dining room and deeper into this building that straddled many worlds along the Beam, she saw the joke of that picture. It wasn't a drumstick Arthur Eld was lifting to his lips, as a first, casual,

glance might have suggested; it was a baby's leg. The glass Queen Rowena had raised in toast was not filled with wine but with blood.

"Hile, Mia!" Sayre cried again. Oh, he was in the best of spirits, now that the homing pigeon had come back to the cote.

Hile, Mia! the others screamed back. It was like some sort of crazy football cheer. Those from behind the mural joined in, although their voices were reduced to little more than growls. And their mouths, of course, were stuffed with food.

"Hile, Mother!" This time Sayre offered her a mocking bow to go with the mockery of his respect.

Hile, Mother! the vampires and the low men responded, and on the satiric wave of their applause she was carried away, first into the kitchen, then into the pantry, and then down the stairs beyond.

Ultimately, of course, there was a door.

EIGHTEEN

Susannah knew the kitchen of the Dixie Pig by the smell of obscene cookery: not pork after all, but certainly what the pirates of the eighteenth century had called *long* pork.

For how many years had this outpost served the vampires and low men of New York City? Since Callahan's time, in the seventies and eighties? Since her own, in the sixties? Almost certainly longer. Susannah supposed there might have been a version of the Dixie Pig here since the time of the Dutch, they who had bought off the Indians with sacks of beads and planted their murderous Christian beliefs ever so much more deeply than their flag. A practical folk, the Dutch, with a taste for spareribs and little patience for magic, either white or black.

She saw enough to recognize the kitchen for the twin of the one she had visited in the bowels of Castle Discordia. That was where Mia had killed a rat that had been trying to claim the last remaining food in the place, a pork-roast in the oven.

Except there was no oven and no roast, she thought. Hell, no kitchen. There was a piglet out behind the barn, one of Tian and Zalia Jaffords's. And I was the one who killed it and drank its hot blood, not she. By then she mostly had me, although I still didn't know it. I wonder if Eddie—

As Mia took her away for the last time, tearing her free from her thoughts and sending her a-tumble into the dark, Susannah realized how completely the needy, terrible bitch had possessed her life. She knew why Mia had done it—because of the chap. The question was why she, Susannah Dean, had allowed it to happen. Because she'd been possessed before? Because she was as addicted to the stranger inside as Eddie had been to heroin?

She feared it might be true.

Swirling dark. And when she opened her eyes again, it was upon that savage moon hanging above the Discordia, and the flexing red glow

(forge of the King)
on the horizon.

“Over here!” cried a woman's voice, just as it had cried before. “Over here, out of the wind!”

Susannah looked down and saw she was legless, and sitting in the same rude dog-cart as on her previous visit to the allure. The same woman, tall and comely, with black hair streaming in the wind, was beckoning to her. Mia, of course, and all this no more real than Susannah's vague dream-memories of the banquet room.

She thought: *Fedic, though, was real. Mia's body is there just as mine is at this very moment being hustled through the kitchen behind the Dixie Pig, where unspeakable meals are prepared for inhuman customers. The castle allure is Mia's dream-place, her refuge, her Dogan.*

“To me, Susannah of Mid-World, and away from the Red King's glow! Come out of the wind and into the lee of this merlon!”

Susannah shook her head. “Say what you have to say and be done, Mia. We've got to have a baby—aye, somehow, between us—and once

it's out, we're quits. You've poisoned my life, so you have."

Mia looked at her with desperate intensity, her belly blooming beneath the serape, her hair harried backward at the wind's urging. "Twas you who took the poison, Susannah! 'Twas you who swallowed it! Aye, when the child was still a seed unbloomed in your belly!"

Was it true? And if it was, which of them had invited Mia in, like the vampire she truly was? Had it been Susannah, or Detta?

Susannah thought neither.

She thought it might actually have been Odetta Holmes. Odetta who would never have broken the nasty old blue lady's forspecial plate. Odetta who loved her dolls, even though most of them were as white as her plain cotton panties.

"What do you want with me, Mia, daughter of none? Say and have finished with it!"

"Soon we'll be together—aye, really and truly, lying together in the same childbed. And all I ask is that if a chance comes for me to get away with my chap, you'll help me take it."

Susannah thought it over. In the wilderness of rocks and gaping crevasses, the hyenas cackled. The wind was numbing, but the pain that suddenly clamped her midsection in its jaws was worse. She saw that same pain on Mia's face and thought again how her entire existence seemed to have become a wilderness of mirrors. In any case, what harm could such a promise do? The chance probably wouldn't come, but if it did, was she going to let the thing Mia wanted to call Mordred fall into the hands of the King's men?

"Yes," she said. "All right. If I can help you get away with him, I *will* help you."

"Anywhere!" Mia cried in a harsh whisper. "Even . . ." She stopped. Swallowed. Forced herself to go on. "Even into the todash darkness. For if I had to wander forever with my son by my side, that would be no condemnation."

Maybe not for you, sister, Susannah thought, but said nothing. In truth, she was fed up with Mia's megrims.

“And if there’s no way for us to be free,” Mia said, “kill us.”

Although there was no sound up here but the wind and the cackling hyenas, Susannah could sense her physical body still on the move, now being carried down a flight of stairs. All that real-world stuff behind the thinnest of membranes. For Mia to have transported her to this world, especially while in the throes of childbirth, suggested a being of great power. Too bad that power couldn’t be harnessed, somehow.

Mia apparently mistook Susannah’s continued silence for reluctance, for she rushed around the allure’s circular walkway in her sturdy *huaraches* and almost ran to where Susannah sat in her gawky, balky cart. She seized Susannah’s shoulders and shook her.

“*Yar!*” she cried vehemently. “Kill us! Better we be together in death than to . . .” She trailed off, then spoke in a dull and bitter voice: “I’ve been cozened all along. Haven’t I?”

And now that the moment had come, Susannah felt neither vindication nor sympathy nor sorrow. She only nodded.

“Do they mean to eat him? To feed those terrible elders with his corpse?”

“I’m almost sure not,” Susannah said. And yet cannibalism was in it somewhere; her heart whispered it was so.

“They don’t care about me at all,” Mia said. “Just the baby-sitter, isn’t that what you called me? And they won’t even let me have *that*, will they?”

“I don’t think so,” Susannah said. “You might get six months to nurse him, but even that . . .” She shook her head, then bit her lip as a fresh contraction gusted into her, turning all the muscles in her belly and thighs to glass. When it eased a little she finished, “I doubt it.”

“Then kill us, if it comes to that. Say you will, Susannah, do ya, I beg!”

“And if I do for you, Mia, what will you do for me? Assuming I could believe any word out of your liar’s mouth?”

“I’d free you, if chance allows.”

Susannah thought it over, and decided that a poor bargain was better than no bargain at all. She reached up and took the hands which were gripping her shoulders. “All right. I agree.”

Then, as at the end of their previous palaver in this place, the sky tore open, and the merlon behind them, and the very air between them. Through the rip, Susannah saw a moving hallway. The image was dim, blurry. She understood she was looking through her own eyes, which were mostly shut. Bulldog and Hawkman still had her. They were bearing her toward the door at the end of the hallway—always, since Roland had come into her life, there was another door—and she guessed they must think she’d passed out, or fainted. She supposed that in a way, she had.

Then she fell back into the hybrid body with the white legs . . . only who knew how much of her previously brown skin was now white? She thought that situation, at least, was about to end, and she was delighted. She would gladly swap those white legs, strong though they might be, for a little peace of mind.

A little peace *in* her mind.

NINETEEN

“She’s coming around,” someone growled. The one with the bulldog face, Susannah thought. Not that it mattered; underneath they all looked like humanoid rats with fur growing out of their bone-crusty flesh.

“Good deal.” That was Sayre, walking behind them. She looked around and saw that her entourage consisted of six low men, Hawkman, and a trio of vampires. The low men wore pistols in docker’s clutches . . . only she supposed that in this world you had to call them shoulder holsters. When in Rome, dear, do ya as the Romans do. Two of the vampires had bahs, the crossbow weapon of the Callas. The third was carrying a bitterly buzzing electric sword of the sort the Wolves had wielded.

Ten-to-one odds, Susannah thought coolly. Not good . . . but it could be worse.

Can you—Mia's voice, from somewhere inside.

Shut up, Susannah told her. Talking's done.

Ahead, on the door they were approaching, she saw this:

**NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.
New York/Fedic**

**Maximum Security
VERBAL ENTRY CODE REQUIRED**

It was familiar, and Susannah instantly knew why. She'd seen a sign similar to this during her one brief visit to Fedic. Fedic, where the real Mia—the being who had assumed mortality in what might be history's worst bargain—was imprisoned.

When they reached it, Sayre pushed past her on Hawkman's side. He leaned toward the door and spoke something guttural deep in his throat, some alien word Susannah never could have pronounced herself. *It doesn't matter, Mia whispered. I can say it, and if I need to, I can teach you another that you can say. But now . . . Susannah, I'm sorry for everything. Fare you well.*

The door to the Arc 16 Experimental Station in Fedic came open. Susannah could hear a ragged humming sound and could smell ozone. No magic powered this door between the worlds; this was the work of the old people, and failing. Those who'd made it had lost their faith in magic, had given up their belief in the Tower. In the place of magic was this buzzing, dying thing. This stupid mortal thing. And beyond it she saw a great room filled with beds. Hundreds of them.

It's where they operate on the children. Where they take from them whatever it is the Breakers need.

Now only one of the beds was occupied. Standing at its foot was a woman with one of those terrible rat's heads. A nurse, perhaps. Beside her was a human—Susannah didn't think he was a vampire but

couldn't be sure, as the view through the door was as wavery as the air over an incinerator. He looked up and saw them.

"Hurry!" he shouted. "Move your freight! We have to connect them and finish it, or she'll die! They both will!" The doctor—surely no one but a doctor could have mustered such ill-tempered arrogance in the presence of Richard P. Sayre—made impatient beckoning gestures. "Get her in here! You're late, goddam you!"

Sayre pushed her rudely through the door. She heard a humming deep in her head, and a brief jangle of todash chimes: She looked down but was too late; Mia's borrowed legs were already gone and she went sprawling to the floor before Hawkman and Bulldog could come through behind her and catch her.

She braced on her elbows and looked up, aware that, for the first time in God knew how long—probably since she'd been raped in the circle of stones—she belonged only to herself. Mia was gone.

Then, as if to prove this wasn't so, Susannah's troublesome and newly departed guest let out a scream. Susannah added her own cry—the pain was now too huge for silence—and for a moment their voices sang of the baby's imminence in perfect harmony.

"Christ," said one of Susannah's guards—whether vampire or low man she didn't know. "Are my ears bleeding? They *feel* like they must be—"

"Pick her up, Haber!" Sayre snarled. "Jey! Grab hold! Get her off the floor, for your fathers' sakes!"

Bulldog and Hawkman—or Haber and Jey, if you liked that better—grabbed her beneath the arms and quickly carried her down the aisle of the ward that way, past the rows of empty beds.

Mia turned toward Susannah and managed a weak, exhausted smile. Her face was wet with sweat and her hair was plastered to her flushed skin.

"Well-met . . . and ill," she managed.

"Push the next bed over!" the doctor shouted. "Hurry up, gods damn you! Why are you so Christing *slow*?"

Two of the low men who'd accompanied Susannah from the Dixie Pig bent over the nearest empty bed and shoved it next to Mia's while Haber and Jey continued to hold her up between them. There was something on the bed that looked like a cross between a hair-dryer and the sort of space helmet you saw in the old *Flash Gordon* serials. Susannah didn't much care for the look of it. It had a brain-sucking look.

The rathead nurse, meanwhile, was bending between her patient's splayed legs and peering under the hiked-up hospital gown Mia now wore. She patted Mia's right knee with a plump hand and made a mewling sound. It was almost surely meant to comfort, but Susannah shuddered.

"Don't just stand there with your thumbs up your butts, you idiots!" the doctor cried. He was a stoutish man with brown eyes, flushed cheeks, and black hair swept back against his skull, where each track of the comb seemed as wide as a gutter. He wore a lab-coat of white nylon over a tweed suit. His scarlet cravat had an eye figured into it. This sigil did not surprise Susannah in the slightest.

"We wait your word," said Jey, the Hawkman. He spoke in a queer, inhuman monotone, as unpleasant as the rathead nurse's mewl but perfectly understandable.

"You shouldn't *need* my word!" the doctor snapped. He flapped his hands in a Gallic gesture of disgust. "Didn't your mothers have any children that lived?"

"I—" Haber began, but the doc went right over him. He was on a roll.

"How long have we been waiting for this, hmmm? How many times have we rehearsed the procedure? Why must you be so fucking *stupid*, so Christing *slow*? Put her down on the b—"

Sayre moved with a speed Susannah wasn't sure even Roland could have equaled. At one moment he was standing beside Haber, the low man with the bulldog face. At the next he'd battened on the doctor, digging his chin into the doc's shoulder and grabbing his arm, twisting it high behind his back.

The doc's expression of petulant fury vanished in a heartbeat, and he began to scream in a childish, breaking treble. Spit spilled over his lower lip and the crotch of his tweed trousers darkened as his urine let go.

"*Stop!*" he howled. "*I'm no good to you if you break my arm! Oh stop, that HURRRTS!*"

"If I sh'd break your arm, Scowther, I'd just drag some other pill-pusher in off the street to finish this, and kill him later. Why not? It's a woman having a baby, not brain-surgery, for Gan's sake!"

Yet he relaxed his hold a little bit. Scowther sobbed and wriggled and moaned as breathlessly as someone having sexual intercourse in a hot climate.

"And when it was done and you had no part in it," Sayre continued, "I'd feed you to *them*." He gestured with his chin.

Susannah looked that way and saw that the aisle from the door to the bed where Mia lay was now covered with the bugs she'd glimpsed in the Dixie Pig. Their knowing, greedy eyes were fixed on the plump doctor. Their mandibles clicked.

"What . . . sai, what must I do?"

"Cry my pardon."

"C-Cry pardon!"

"And now these others, for ye've insulted them as well, so you have."

"Sirs, I . . . I . . . c-cry—"

"Doctor!" the rathead nurse broke in. Her speaking voice was thick but understandable. She was still bent between Mia's legs. "The baby's crowning!"

Sayre let go of Scowther's arm. "Go on, Dr. Scowther. Do your duty. Deliver the child." Sayre bent forward and stroked Mia's cheek with extraordinary solicitude. "Be of good cheer and good hope, lady-sai," he said. "Some of your dreams may yet come true."

She looked up at him with a tired gratitude that wrung Susannah's heart. *Don't believe him, his lies are endless*, she tried to send, but for the nonce their contact was broken.

She was tossed like a sack of grain onto the bed which had been pushed next to Mia's. She was unable to struggle as one of the hoods was fitted over her head; another labor pain had gripped her, and once again the two women shrieked together.

Susannah could hear Sayre and the others murmuring. From below and behind them, she could also hear the unpleasant clittering of the bugs. Inside the helmet, round metal protuberances pressed against her temples, almost hard enough to hurt.

Suddenly a pleasant female voice said, "Welcome to the world of North Central Positronics, part of the Sombra Group! 'Sombra, where progress never stops!' Stand by for up-link."

A loud humming began. At first it was in Susannah's ears, but then she could feel it boring in on both sides. She visualized a pair of glowing bullets moving toward each other.

Dimly, as if from the other side of the room instead of right next to her, she heard Mia scream, "*Oh no, don't, that hurts!*"

The left hum and the right hum joined in the center of Susannah's brain, creating a piercing telepathic tone that would destroy her ability to think if it kept up for long. It was excruciating, but she kept her lips shut tight. She would not scream. Let them see the tears oozing out from beneath her closed lids, but she was a gunslinger and they would not make her scream.

After what seemed an eternity, the hum cut out.

Susannah had a moment or two in which to enjoy the blessed silence in her head, and then the next labor pain struck, this one very low down in her belly and with the force of a typhoon. With this pain she *did* allow herself to scream. Because it was different, somehow; to scream with the baby's coming was an honor.

She turned her head and saw a similar steel hood had been fitted over Mia's sweaty black hair. The segmented steel hoses from the two helmets were connected in the middle. These were the gadgets they used on the stolen twins, but now they were being put to some other purpose. What?

Sayre leaned down to her, close enough so she could smell his cologne. Susannah thought it was English Leather.

“To accomplish the final labor and actually push the baby out, we need this physical link,” he said. “Bringing you here to Fedic was absolutely vital.” He patted her shoulder. “Good luck. It won’t be long now.” He smiled at her winsomely. The mask he wore wrinkled upward, revealing some of the red horror which lay beneath. “Then we can kill you.”

The smile broadened.

“And eat you, of course. Nothing goes to waste at the Dixie Pig, not even such an arrogant bitch as yourself.”

Before Susannah could reply, the female voice in her head spoke again. “Please speak your name, slowly and distinctly.”

“Fuck you!” Susannah snarled back.

“Fuk Yu does not register as a valid name for a non-Asian,” said the pleasant female voice. “We detect hostility, and apologize in advance for the following procedure.”

For a moment there was nothing, and then Susannah’s mind lit up with pain beyond anything she had ever been called upon to endure. More than she had suspected could exist. Yet her lips remained closed as it raved through her. She thought of the song, and heard it true even through the thunder of the pain: *I am a maid . . . of constant sorrow . . . I’ve seen trials all my days . . .*

At last the thunder ceased.

“Please speak your name, slowly and distinctly,” said the pleasant female voice in the middle of her head, “or this procedure will be intensified by a factor of ten.”

No need of that, Susannah sent the female voice. *I’m convinced.*

“Suuuu-zaaaa-nahhh,” she said. “Suuu-zannnahhh . . .”

They stood watching her, all of them except for Ms. Rathead, who was peering ecstatically up to where the baby’s down-covered head had once again appeared between the withdrawing lips of Mia’s vagina.

“Miiii-aaaahhhh . . .”

“Suuuu-zaaa . . .”

“Miiii . . .”

“annn-ahhh . . .”

By the time the next contraction began, Dr. Scowther had seized a pair of forceps. The voices of the women became one, uttering a word, a name, that was neither *Susannah* nor *Mia* but some combination of both.

“The link,” said the pleasant female voice, “has been established.” A faint *click*. “Repeat the link has been established. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“This is it, people,” Scowther said. His pain and terror appeared forgotten; he sounded excited. He turned to his nurse. “It may cry, Alia. If it does, let it alone, for your father’s sake! If it doesn’t, swab out its mouth at once!”

“Yes, doctor.” The thing’s lips quivered back, revealing a double set of fangs. Was that a grimace or a smile?

Scowther looked around at them with a touch of his previous arrogance. “All of you stay exactly where you are until I say you can move,” he said. “None of us knows exactly what we’ve got here. We only know that the child belongs to the Crimson King himself—”

Mia screamed at that. In pain and in protest.

“Oh, you idiot,” Sayre said. He drew back a hand and slapped Scowther with enough force to make his hair fly and send blood spraying against the white wall in a pattern of fine droplets.

“No!” Mia cried. She tried to struggle up onto her elbows, failed, fell back. “No, you said I should have the raising of him! Oh, please . . . if only for a little while, I beg . . .”

Then the worst pain yet rolled over Susannah—over both of them, burying them. They screamed in tandem, and Susannah didn’t need to hear Scowther, who was commanding her to *push*, to *push NOW!*

“It’s coming, doctor!” the nurse cried in nervous ecstasy.

Susannah closed her eyes and bore down, and as she felt the pain begin to flow out of her like water whirlpooling its way down a dark drain, she also felt the deepest sorrow she had ever known. For it was

Mia the baby was flowing into; the last few lines of the living message Susannah's body had somehow been made to transmit. It was ending. Whatever happened next, this part was ending, and Susannah Dean let out a cry of mingled relief and regret; a cry that was itself like a song.

And on the wings of that song, Mordred Deschain, son of Roland (and one other, O can you say Discordia), came into the world.

STAVE: *Commala-come-kass!*
The child has come at last!
Sing your song, O sing it well,
The child has come to pass.

RESPONSE: *Commala-come-kass,*
The worst has come to pass.
The Tower trembles on its ground;
The child has come at last.

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C O D A



July 12th, 1977

Man, it's good to be back in Bridgton. They always treat us well in what Joe still calls "Nana-town," but Owen fussed almost nonstop. He's better since we got back home. We only stopped once, in Waterville to grab grub at the Silent Woman (I've had better meals there, I must add).

Anyway, I kept my promise to myself and went on a grand hunt for that Dark Tower story as soon as I got back. I'd almost given up when I found the pages in the farthest corner of the garage, under a box of Tab's old catalogues. There was a lot of "spring thaw drip" over there, and those funny blue pages smell all mildewy, but the copy is perfectly readable. I finished going over it, then sat down and added a small section to the Way Station material (where the gunslinger meets the boy Jake). I thought it would be kind of fun to put in a water pump that runs on an atomic slug, and so I did so without delay. Usually working on an old story is about as appetizing as eating a sandwich made with moldy bread, but this felt perfectly natural . . . like slipping on an old shoe.

What, exactly, was this story supposed to be about?

I can't remember, only that it first came to me a long, long time ago. Driving back from up north, with my entire family snoozing, I got thinking about that time David and I ran away from Aunt Ethelyn's. We were planning to go back to Connecticut, I think. The groups (i.e., grownups) caught us, of course, and put us to work in the barn, sawing wood. Punishment Detail, Uncle Oren called it. It seems

to me that something scary happened to me out there, but I'll be damned if I can remember what it was, only that it was red. And I thought up a hero, a magic gunslinger, to keep me safe from it. There was something about magnetism, too, or Beams of Power. I'm pretty sure that was the genesis of this story, but it's strange how blurry it all seems. Oh well, who remembers all the nasty little nooks of their childhood? Who wants to?

Not much else happening. Joe and Naomi made Playground, and Tabby's plans for her trip to England are pretty much complete. Boy, that story about the gunslinger won't get out of my head!

Tell you what ole Roland needs: some friends!

July 19th, 1977

I went to see Star Wars on my motorcycle tonight, and I think it'll be the last time I climb on the bike until things cool off a little. I ate a ton of bugs. Talk about protein!

I kept thinking about Roland, my gunslinger from the Robert Browning poem (with a tip of Hatlo's Hat to Sergio Leone, of course), while I rode. The manuscript is a novel, no doubt—or a piece of one—but it occurs to me that the chapters also stand on their own. Or almost. I wonder if I could sell them to one of the fantasy mags? Maybe even to Fantasy and Science Fiction, which is, of course, the genre's Holy Grail.

Probably a stupid idea.

Otherwise, not much doing but the All-Star Game (National League 7, American League 5). I was pretty hammered before it was over. Tabby not pleased . . .

August 9th, 1978

Kirby McCauley sold the first chapter of that old Dark Tower story of mine to Fantasy and Science Fiction! Man, I can hardly believe it! That is just so cool! Kirby sez he thinks Ed Ferman (the Ed-in-chief there) will probably run everything of the DT story that I've got. He's going to call the first bit ("The man in black fled across the desert, and

the gunslinger followed,” etc., etc., blah-blah, bang-bang) “The Gunslinger,” which makes sense.

Not bad for an old story that was moldering away forgotten in a wet corner of the garage last year. Ferman told Kirby that Roland “has a feel of reality” that’s missing in a lot of fantasy fiction, and wanted to know if there might be even more adventures. I’m sure there are even more adventures (or were, or will be—what’s the proper tense when you’re talking about unwritten tales?), but I have no idea what they might be. Only that John “Jake” Chambers would have to come back into it.

A rainy, muggy day by the lake. No Playground for the kids. Tonight we had Andy Fulcher sit the big kids while Tab & I & Owen went to the Bridgton Drive-In. Tabby thought the film (The Other Side of Midnight . . . from last year, actually) was a piece of shit, but I didn’t hear her begging to be taken home. As for me, I found my mind drifting off to that damn Roland guy again. This time to questions of his lost love. “Susan, lovely girl at the window.”

Who, pray, be she?

September 9, 1978

Got my first copy of the October issue with “The Gunslinger” in it. Man, this looks fine.

Burt Hatlen called today. He’s talking about me maybe doing a year at the University of Maine as writer in residence. Only Burt would be ballsy enough to think of a hack like me in connection w/ a job like that. Sort of an interesting idea, though.

October 29, 1979

Well, shit, drunk again. I can barely see the goddam page, but suppose I better put down something before I go staggering off to bed. Got a letter from Ed Ferman at F&SF today. He’s going to do the second chapter of The Dark Tower—the part where Roland meets the kid—as “The Way Station.” He really wants to publish the entire run of stories, and I’m agreeable enough. I just wish there was more.

Meanwhile, there's The Stand to think about—and, of course, The Dead Zone.

All of this doesn't seem to mean much to me just now. I hate being here in Orrington—hate being on such a busy road, for one thing. Owen damned near got creamed by one of those Cianbro trucks today. Scared the hell out of me. Also gave me an idea for a story, having to do with that odd little pet cemetery out in back of the house. PET SEMATARY is what the sign sez, isn't that weird? Funny, but also creepy. Almost a Vault of Horror type of thing.

June 19th, 1980

Just got off the phone with Kirby McCauley. He got a call from Donald Grant, who publishes lots of fantasy stuff under his own imprint (Kirby likes to joke that Don Grant is “the man who made Robert E. Howard infamous”). Anyway, Don would like to publish my gunslinger stories, and under their original title, The Dark Tower (subtitle The Gunslinger). Isn't that neat? My own “limited edition.” He'd do 10,000 copies, plus 500 signed and numbered. I told Kirby to go ahead and make the deal.

Anyway, it looks like my teaching career is over, and I got pretty well baked to celebrate. Took out the Pet Sematary ms. and looked it over. Good God, is that grim! Readers would lynch me if I published it, I think. That's one book that'll never see the light of day . . .

July 27th, 1983

Publishers Weekly (our son Owen calls it Pudlishers Weakness, which is actually sorta accurate) reviewed the latest Richard Bachman book . . . and once more, baby, I got roasted. They implied it was boring, and that, my friend, it ain't. Oh well, thinking about it made it that much easier to go to North Windham and pick up those 2 kegs of beer for the party. Got em at Discount Beverage. I'm smoking again, too, so sue me. I'll quit the day I turn 40 and that's a promise.

Oh, and Pet Sematary is published exactly two months from today. Then my career really will be over (joke . . . at least I hope it's a joke).

After some thought, I added The Dark Tower to the author's ad-card at the front of the book. In the end, I thought, why not? Yes, I know it's sold out—there were only 10,000 copies to start with, fa Chris-sake—but it was a real book and I'm proud of it. I don't suppose I'll ever go back to ole Roland the Gun-Toting Knight Errant, but yes, I'm proud of that book.

Good thing I remembered the beer run.

February 21st, 1984

Man, I got this crazy call from Sam Vaughn at Doubleday this afternoon (he edited Pet Sem, you will remember). I knew there were some fans who want The Dark Tower and are pissed off they can't get it, because I also get letters. But Sam sez they have gotten over THREE THOUSAND!! letters. And why, you ask? Because I was dumb enough to put The Dark Tower on the Pet Sematary author ad-card. I think Sam's a little pissed at me, and I suppose he's got a point. He says listing a book that fans want & can't get is a little like holding out a piece of meat to a hungry dog and then yanking it back, saying "No, no, you can't have it, harhar." On the other hand, God & the Man Jesus, people are so fucking spoiled! They just assume that if there's a book anywhere in the world they want, then they have a perfect right to that book. This would be news indeed to those folks in the Middle Ages who might have heard rumors of books but never actually saw one; paper was valuable (which would be a good thing to put in the next "Gunslinger/Dark Tower" novel, if I ever get around to it) and books were treasures you protected with your life. I love being able to make my living writing stories, but anyone who sez there's no dark side to it is full of shit. Someday I'm going to do a novel about a psychotic rare book dealer! (Joke)

Meanwhile, today was Owen's birthday. He's seven! The age of reason! I can hardly believe my youngest is seven and my daughter is thirteen, a lovely young woman.

August 14th, 1984 (NYC)

Just got back from a meeting with Elaine Koster from NAL and my agent, the ole Kirboo. Both of them pitched me on doing The Gunslinger as a trade-sized paperback, but I passed. Maybe someday, but I won't give that many people a chance to read something so unfinished unless/until I go back to work on the story.

Which I probably never will. Meantime, I have this other idea for a long novel about a clown that's really the worst monster in the world. Not a bad idea; clowns are scary. To me, at least. (Clowns & chickens, go figure.)

November 18th, 1984

I had a dream last night that I think breaks the creative logjam on It. Suppose there's a kind of Beam holding the Earth (or even multiple Earths) in place? And that the Beam's generator rests on the shell of a turtle? I could make that part of the book's climax. I know it sounds crazy, but I'm sure I read somewhere that in Hindu mythology there's a great turtle that bears us all on his shell, and that he serves Gan, the creative overforce. Also, I remember an anecdote where some lady sez to some famous scientist, "This evolution stuff is ridiculous. Everyone knows that a turtle holds up the universe." To which the scientist (wish I could remember his name, but I can't) replies, "That may be, madam, but what holds up the turtle?" Scornful laugh from the lady, who says, "Oh, you can't fool me! It's turtles all the way down."

Ha! Take that, ye rational men of science!

Anyway, I keep a blank book by my bed, and have gotten so I write down a lot of dreams and dream elements w/o even fully waking up. This morning I'd written Remember the Turtle! And this: See the TURTLE of enormous girth! On his shell he holds the earth. His thought is slow but always kind; he holds us all within his mind. Not great poetry, I grant you, but not bad for a guy who was three-quarters asleep when he wrote it!

Tabby has been on my case about drinking too much again. I suppose she's right, but . . .

June 10th, 1986 (Lovell/Turtleback Lane).

Man, am I glad we bought this house! I was scared of the expense to begin with, but I've never written better than I have here. And—this is scary, but it's true—I think I want to go back to work on The Dark Tower story. In my heart, I thought I never would, but last night when I was going to the Center General for beer, I could almost hear Roland saying, "There are many worlds and many tales, but not much time."

I ended up turning around and coming back to the house. Can't remember the last time I spent a totally sober night, but this is one of that dying breed. It actually feels fucked up not to be fucked up. That's pretty sad, I guess.

June 13th, 1986

I woke up in the middle of the night, hung-over and needing to pee. While I was standing at the bowl, it was almost as if I could see Roland of Gilead. Telling me to start with the lobstrosities. I will.

I know just what they are.

June 15th, 1986

Started the new book today. Can't believe I'm actually writing about old long, tall, and ugly again, but it felt right from the first page. Hell, from the first word. I've decided it'll be almost like the classic fairy-tales in structure: Roland walks along the beach of the Western Sea, getting sicker & sicker as he goes, and there's a series of doors to our world. He'll draw a new character from behind each one. The first one will be a stone junkie named Eddie Dean . . .

July 16th, 1986

I can't believe this. I mean, I've got the manuscript on the desk right in front of me so I sorta have to, but I still can't. I have written !!300!! PAGES in the last month, and the copy is so clean it's positively squeaky. I've never felt like one of those writers who can actually take credit for their work, who say they plot every move and incident, but I've also never had a book that seemed to flow through me like this one has. It's pretty much taken over my life from Day One. And do

you know, it seems to me that a lot of the other things I've written (especially It) are like "practice shots" for this story. Certainly I've never picked something up after it lay fallow for fifteen years! I mean, sure, I did a little work on the stories Ed Ferman published in F&SF, and I did a little more when Don Grant published The Gunslinger, but nothing like what I'm up to now. I even dream about this story. I have days when I wish I could quit drinking, but I'll tell you something: I'm almost scared to stop. I know inspiration doesn't flow from the neck of a bottle, but there's something . . .

I'm scared, okay? I feel like there's something—Something—that doesn't want me to finish this book. That didn't even want me to start it. Now I know that's crazy ("Like something out of a Stephen King story," har-har), but at the same time it seems very real. Probably a good thing no one'll ever read this diary; very likely they'd put me away if they did. Anyone want to buy a used fruitcake?

I'm going to call it The Drawing of the Three, I think.

September 19th, 1986

It's done. The Drawing of the Three is done. I got drunk to celebrate. Stoned, too. And what's next? Well, It will be published in a month or so, and in two days I'll be thirty-nine. Man, I can hardly believe it. Seems just about a week ago that we were living in Bridgton and the kids were babies.

Ah, fuck. Time to quit. The writer's gettin' maudlin.

June 19th, 1987

Got my first author's copy of Drawing from Donald Grant today. It's a beautiful package. I've also decided to let NAL go ahead and do both Dark Tower books in paperback—give the people what they want. Why the hell not?

Of course, I got drunk to celebrate . . . only these days who needs an excuse?

It's a good book but in many ways it seems like I didn't write the damn thing at all, that it just flowed out of me, like the umbilical cord

from a baby's navel. What I'm trying to say is that the wind blows, the cradle rocks, and sometimes it seems to me that none of this stuff is mine, that I'm nothing but Roland of Gilead's fucking secretary. I know that's stupid, but a part of me sort of believes it. Only maybe Roland's got his own boss. Ka?

I do tend to get depressed when I look at my life: the booze, the drugs, the cigarettes. As if I'm actually trying to kill myself. Or something else is . . .

October 19th, 1987

I'm in Lovell tonight, the house on Turtleback Lane. Came down here to think about the way I'm living my life. Something's got to change, man, because otherwise I might as well just cut to the chase and blow my brains out.

Something's got to change.

The following item from the North Conway (N.H.) Mountain Ear was pasted into the writer's journal, marked April 12th, 1988:

LOCAL SOCIOLOGIST DISMISSES "WALK-IN" TALES

By Logan Merrill

For at least 10 years, the White Mountains have resounded with tales of "Walk-Ins," creatures who may be aliens from space, time travelers, or even "beings from another dimension." In a lively lecture last night at the North Conway Public Library, local sociologist Henry K. Verdon, author of Peer Groups and Myth-Making, used the Walk-In phenomenon as an illustration of just how myths are created and how they grow. He said that the "Walk-Ins" were probably originally created by teenagers in the border towns

between Maine and New Hampshire. He also speculated that sightings of illegal aliens who cross over the northern border from Canada and then into the New England states may have played a part in kindling this myth, which has become so prevalent. "I think we all know," Professor Verdon said, "that there is no Santa Claus, no Tooth Fairy, and no actual beings called Walk-Ins. Yet these tales

(Continued on P. 8)

The rest of the article is missing. Nor is there any explanation as to why King may have included it in his journal.

June 19th, 1989

I just got back from my one-year Alcoholix Anonymous "anniversary." An entire year w/o drugs or booze! I can hardly believe it. No regrets; sobering up undoubtedly saved my life (and probably my marriage), but I wish it wasn't so hard to write stories in the aftermath. People in "the Program" say don't push it, it'll come, but there's another voice (I think of it as the Voice of the Turtle) telling me to hurry up and get going, time is short and I have to sharpen my tools. For what? For The Dark Tower, of course, and not just because letters keep coming in from people who read The Drawing of the Three and want to know what happens next. Something in me wants to go back to work on the story, but I'll be damned if I know how to get back.

July 12th, 1989

There are some amazing treasures on the bookshelves down here in Lovell. Know what I found this morning, while I was looking for something to read? Shardik, by Richard Adams. Not the story about the rabbits but the one about the giant mythological bear. I think I'll read it over again.

Am still not writing much of interest . . .

September 21, 1989

Okay, this is relatively weird, so prepare yourself.

Around 10 A.M., while I was writing (while I was staring at the word processor and dreaming about how great it would be to have an ice-cold keg of Bud, at least), the doorbell rang. It was a guy from Bangor House of Flowers, with a dozen roses. Not for Tab, either, but for me. The card read Happy Birthday from the Mansfields—Dave, Sandy, and Megan.

I had totally forgotten, but today I'm the Big Four-Two. Anyway, I took one of the roses out, and I kind of got lost in it. I know how strange that sounds, believe me, but I did. I seemed to hear this sweet humming, and I just went down & down, following the curves of the rose, kind of splashing thru these drops of dew that seemed as big as ponds. And all the time that humming sound got louder & sweeter, and the rose got . . . well, rosier. And I found myself thinking of Jake from the first Dark Tower story, and Eddie Dean, and a bookstore. I even remember the name: The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind.

Then, boom! I feel a hand on my shoulder, I turn around, and it's Tabby. She wanted to know who sent me the roses. She also wanted to know if I'd fallen asleep. I said no, but I kind of did, right there in the kitchen.

You know what it was like? That scene at the Way Station in The Gunslinger, where Roland hypnotizes Jake with a bullet. I'm immune to hypnosis, myself. A guy got me up on stage at the Topsham Fair when I was a kid and tried it on me, but it didn't work. As I remember, my brother Dave was quite disappointed. He wanted me to cluck like a chicken.

Anyway, I think I want to go back to work on The Dark Tower. I don't know if I'm ready for anything that complex—after some of the failures of the last couple of years let's say I'm dubious—but I want to give it a shot, just the same. I hear those make-believe people calling

to me. And who knows? There might even be a place in this one for a giant bear, like Shardik in the Richard Adams novel!

October 7th, 1989

I started the next Dark Tower book today, and—as with The Drawing of the Three—I finished my first session wondering why in God’s name I waited so long. Being with Roland, Eddie, and Susannah is like a drink of cool water. Or meeting old friends after a long absence. And, once again, there is a sense that I’m not telling the story but only providing a conduit for it. And you know what? That’s okie-fine with me. I sat at the word processor for four hours this morning and did not once think of a drink or any sort of mind-altering drug. I think I’ll call this one The Wastelands.

October 9th, 1989

No—Waste Lands. 2 words, as in the T. S. Eliot poem (his is actually “The Waste Land,” I think).

January 19th, 1990

Finished The Waste Lands tonight, after a marathon 5-hour session. People are going to hate the way it ends, w/ no conclusion to the riddle contest, and I thought the story would go on longer myself, but I can’t help it. I heard a voice speak up clearly in my head (as always it sounds like Roland’s) saying, “You’re done for now—close thy book, wordslinger.”

Cliffhanger ending aside, the story seems fine to me, but, as always, not much like the other ones I write. The manuscript is a brick, over 800 pages long, and I created said brick in just a little over three months.

Un-fucking-real.

Once again, hardly any strike-overs or re-takes. There are a few continuity glitches, but considering the length of the book, I can hardly believe how few. Nor can I believe how, when I needed some sort of inspiration, the right book seemed to fly into my hand time after time. Like The Quincunx, by Charles Palliser, with all the

wonderful, growly 17th-century slang: “Aye, so ye do” and “So ye will” and “my cully.” That argot sounded perfect coming out of Gasher’s mouth (to me, at least). And how cool it was to have Jake come back into the story the way he did!

Only thing that worries me is what’s going to happen to Susannah Dean (who used to be Detta/Odetta). She’s pregnant, and I’m afraid of who or what the father might be. Some demon? I don’t think so, exactly. Maybe I won’t have to deal w/ that until a couple of books further down the line. In any case, my experience is that, in a long book, whenever a woman gets pregnant and nobody knows who the father is, that story is headed down the tubes. Dunno why, but as a plot-thickener, pregnancy just naturally seems to suck!

Oh well, maybe it doesn’t matter. For the time being I’m tired of Roland and his ka-tet. I think it may be awhile before I get back to them again, although the fans are going to howl their heads off about that cliffhanger ending on the train out of Lud. Mark my words.

I’m glad I wrote it, tho, and to me the ending seems just right. In many ways Waste Lands feels like the high point of my “make-believe life.”

Even better than The Stand, maybe.

November 27th, 1991

Remember me saying that I’d get bitched at about the ending of Waste Lands? Look at this!

Letter follows from John T. Spier, of Lawrence, Kansas:

November 16, 91

Dear Mr. King,

Or should I just cut to the chase and say “Dear Asshole”?

I can’t believe I paid such big bucks for a Donald Grant Edition of your GUNSLINGER book The Waste Lands and this is what I got. It had the right title anyway, for it was “a true WASTE.”

I mean the story was all right don’t get me wrong, great in fact, but how could you “tack on” an ending like that? It wasn’t an ending at all but

just a case of you getting tired and saying "Oh well, what the fuck, I don't need to strain my brain to write an ending, those slobbs who buy my books will swallow anything."

I was going to send it back but will keep it because I at least liked the pictures (especially Oy). But the story was a cheat.

Can you spell CHEAT Mr. King? M-O-O-N, that spells CHEAT.

Sincerely yours in criticism,

John T. Spier
Lawrence, Kansas

March 23, 1992

In a way, this one makes me feel even worse.

Letter follows from Mrs. Coretta Vele, of Stowe, Vermont:

March 6th, 1992

Dear Stephen King,

I don't know if this letter will actually reach you but one can always hope. I have read most of your books and have loved them all. I am a 76-yrs-young "gramma" from your "sister state" of Vermont, and I especially like your Dark Tower stories. Well, to the point. Last month I went to see a team of Oncologists at Mass General, and they tell me that the brain tumor I have looks to be malignant after all (at 1st they said "Don't worry Coretta its benine"). Now I know you have to do what you have to do, Mr. King, and "follow your muse," but what they're saying is that I will be fortunate to see the 4th of July this year. I guess I've read my last "Dark Tower yarn." So what I'm wondering is, Can you tell me how the Dark Tower story comes out, at least if Roland and his "Ka-Tet" actually get to the Dark Tower? And if so what they find there? I promise not to tell a soul and you will be making a dying woman very happy.

Sincerely,

Coretta Vele
Stowe, Vt.

I feel like such a shit when I think of how blithe I was concerning the ending of Waste Lands. I gotta answer Coretta Vele's letter, but I don't know how to. Could I make her believe I don't know any more than she does about how Roland's story finishes? I doubt it, and yet "that is the truth," as Jake sez in his Final Essay. I have no more idea what's inside that damned Tower than . . . well, than Oy does! I didn't even know it was in a field of roses until it came off my fingertips and showed up on the screen of my new Macintosh computer! Would Coretta buy that? What would she say if I told her, "Cory, listen: The wind blows and the story comes. Then it stops blowing, and all I can do is wait, same as you."

They think I'm in charge, every one of them from the smartest of the critics to the most mentally challenged reader. And that's a real hoot.

Because I'm not.

September 22, 1992

The Grant edition of The Waste Lands is sold out, and the paperback edition is doing very well. I should be happy and guess I am, but I'm still getting a ton of letters about the cliffhanger ending. They fall into 3 major categories: People who are pissed off, people who want to know when the next book in the series is coming out, and pissed-off people who want to know when the next book in the series is coming out.

But I'm stuck. The wind from that quarter just isn't blowing. Not just now, anyway.

Meanwhile, I have an idea for a novel about a lady who buys a picture in a pawnshop and then kind of falls into it. Hey, maybe it'll be Mid-World she falls into, and she'll meet Roland!

July 9th, 1994

Tabby and I don't fight much since I quit drinking, but oboy, this morning we had a dilly. We're at the Lovell house, of course, and as I was getting ready to leave on my morning walk, she showed me a

story from today's Lewiston Sun. It seems that a Stoneham man, Charles "Chip" McCausland, was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver while walking on Route 7. Which is the road I walk on, of course. Tabby tried to persuade me to stay on Turtleback Lane, I tried to persuade her that I had as much right to use Route 7 as anyone else (and honest to God, I only do half a mile on the blacktop), and things went downhill from there. Finally she asked me to at least stop walking on Slab City Hill, where the sightlines are so short and there's nowhere to jump if someone happens to get off the road and onto the shoulder. I told her I'd think about it (it would have been noon before I got out of the house if we kept on talking), but in truth I'll be damned if I'll live my life in fear that way. Besides, it seems to me that this poor guy from Stoneham has made the odds of me getting hit while out walking about a million to one. I told this to Tabby and she said, "The odds of you ever being as successful at writing as you have been are even higher. You've said so yourself."

To that I'm afraid I had no comeback.

June 19th, 1995 (Bangor).

Tabby and I just got back from the Bangor Auditorium where our youngest (and about four hundred of his classmates) finally got a diploma. He's now officially a high school graduate. Bangor High and the Bangor Rams are behind him. He'll be starting college in the fall and then Tab and I will have to start dealing w/ the ever-popular Empty Nest Syndrome. Everybody sez it all goes by in the wink of an eye and you say yeah yeah yeah . . . and then it does.

Fuck, I'm sad.

Feel lost. What's it all for, anyway? (What's it all about, Alfie, ha-ha?) What, just a big scramble from the cradle to the grave? "The clearing at the end of the path"? Jesus, that's grim.

Meantime, we're headed down to Lovell and the house on Turtleback Lane this afternoon—Owen will join us in a day or two, he sez. Tabby knows I want to write by the lake, and boy, she's so

intuitive it's scary. When we were coming back from the graduation exercises, she asked me if the wind was blowing again.

In fact it is, and this time it's blowing a gale. I can't wait to start the next volume of the DT series. Time to find out what happens in the riddling contest (that Eddie blows Blaine's computerized mind with "silly questions"—i.e., riddles—is something I've known for several months now), but I don't think that's the major story I have to tell this time. I want to write about Susan, Roland's first love, and I want to set their "cowboy romance" in a fictional part of Mid-World called Mejis (i.e., Mexico).

Time to saddle up and take another ride w/ the Wild Bunch.

Meantime, the other kids are doing well, although Naomi had some kind of allergic reaction, maybe to shellfish . . .

July 19th, 1995 (Turtleback Lane, Lovell)

As on my previous expeditions to Mid-World, I feel like somebody who's just spent a month on a jet-propelled rocket-sled. While stoned on hallucinatory happygas. I thought this book would be tougher to get into, much, but in fact it was once more as easy as slipping into a pair of comfortable old shoes, or those Western-style short-boots I got from Bally's in New York 3 or 4 years ago and cannot bear to give up.

I've already got over 200 pages, and was delighted to find Roland and his friends investigating the remains of the superflu; seeing evidence of both Randall Flagg and Mother Abigail.

I think Flagg may turn out to be Walter, Roland's old nemesis. His real name is Walter o'Dim, and he was just a country boy to start with. It makes perfect sense, in a way. I can see now how, to a greater or lesser degree, every story I've ever written is about this story. And you know, I don't have a problem with that. Writing this story is the one that always feels like coming home.

Why does it always feel dangerous, as well? Why should I be so convinced that if I'm ever found slumped over my desk, dead of a heart attack (or wiped out on my Harley, probably on Route 7), it will be while working on one of these Weird Westerns? I guess because I

know so many people are depending on me to finish the cycle. And I want to finish it! God, yes! No Canterbury Tales or Mystery of Edwin Drood in my portfolio if I can help it, thank you very much. And yet I always feel as if some anti-creative force is looking around for me, and that I am easier to see when I'm working on these stories.

Well, enough w/ the heebie-jeebies. I'm off on my walk.

September 2, 1995

I'm expecting the book to be done in another five weeks. This one has been more challenging, but still the story comes to me in wonderful rich details. Watched Kurosawa's The Seven Samurai last nite, and wonder if that might not be the right direction for Vol. #6, The Werewolves of End-World (or some such). I probably ought to see if any of the little side-o'-the-road video rental places around here have got The Magnificent Seven, which is the Americanized version of the Kurosawa film.

Speaking of side-o'-the-road, I almost had to dive into the ditch this afternoon to avoid a guy in a van—swerving from side to side, pretty obviously drunk—on the last part of Route 7 before I turn back into the relatively sheltered environs of Turtleback Lane. I don't think I'll mention this to Tabby; she'd go nuclear. Anyway, I've had my one "pedestrian scare," and I'm just glad it didn't happen on the Slab City Hill portion of the road.

October 19th, 1995

Took me a little longer than I thought, but I finished Wizard and Glass tonight . . .

August 19th, 1997

Tabby and I just said goodbye to Joe and his good wife; they're on their way back to New York. I was glad I could give them a copy of Wizard and Glass. The first bunch of finished books came today. What looks & smells better than a new book, especially one w/ your name on the title page? This is the world's best job I've got; real people pay me real money to hang out in my imagination. Where, I should add,

the only ones who feel completely real to me are Roland and his ka-tet.

I think the CRs* are really going to like this one, and not just because it finishes the story of Blaine the Mono. I wonder if the Vermont Gramma with the brain tumor is still alive? I s'poze not, but if she was, I'd be happy to send her a copy . . .

July 6th, 1998

Tabby, Owen, Joe, and I went to Oxford tonight to see the film Armageddon. I liked it more than I expected, in part because I had my family w/ me. The movie is sfx-driven end-of-the-world stuff. Got me thinking about the Dark Tower and the Crimson King. Probably not surprising.

I wrote for awhile this morning on my Vietnam story, switching over from longhand to my Power-Book, so I guess I'm serious about it. I like the way Sully John reappeared. Question: Will Roland Deschain and his friends ever meet Bobby Garfield's pal, Ted Brautigan? And just who are those low men chasing the old Tedster, anyway? More and more my work feels like a slanted trough where everything eventually drains into Mid-World and End-World.

The Dark Tower is my uberstory, no question about that. When it's done, I plan to ease back. Maybe retire completely.

August 7, 1998

Took my usual walk this afternoon, and tonight I took Fred Hauser with me to the AA meeting in Fryeburg. On the way home he asked me to sponsor him and I said yes; I think he's finally getting serious about sobering up. Good for him. Anyhow, he got talking about the so-called "Walk-Ins." He says there are more of them around the Seven Towns than ever, and all sorts of folks are gossiping about them.

"How come I never hear anything, then?" I asked him. To which I got no answer but an extremely funny look. I kept prodding, and finally Fred sez,

“People don’t like to talk about them around you, Steve, because there have been two dozen reported on Turtleback Lane in the last 8 months and you claim not to have seen a single one.”

To me this seemed like a non sequitur and I made no reply. It wasn’t until after the meeting—and after I’d dropped my new pigeon off—that I realized what he was saying: people don’t talk about the “Walk-Ins” around me because they think that in some crazy way I’M RESPONSIBLE. I thought I was pretty well used to being “America’s boogeyman,” but this is actually sort of outrageous . . .

January 2, 1999 (Boston)

Owen and I are at the Hyatt Harborside tonight, and head off to Florida tomorrow. (Tabby and I are talking about buying a place there but haven’t told the kids. I mean, they’re only 27, 25 and 21—maybe when they’re old enough to understand such things, ha-ha.) Earlier we met Joe and saw a film called Hurlyburly, from the play by David Rabe. Very odd. Speaking of odd, I had some sort of New Year’s Night nightmare before leaving Maine. Can’t remember exactly what it was, but when I woke up this morning I’d written two things in my dream-book. One was Baby Mordred, like something out of a Chas Addams cartoon. That I sort of understand; it must refer to Susannah’s baby in the Dark Tower stories. It’s the other thing that puzzles me. It says 6/19/99, O Discordia.

Discordia also sounds like something out of the DT stories, but it’s not anything I have invented. As for 6/19/99, that’s a date, right? Meaning what? June 19th of this year. Tabby and I should be back at the Turtleback Lane house by then, but so far as I can remember it’s not anybody’s birthday.

Maybe it’s the date I’m going to meet my first walk-in!

June 12, 1999

It’s wonderful to be back at the lake!

I’ve decided to take 10 days off, then finally return to work on the how-to-write book. I’m curious about Hearts in Atlantis; will folks

want to know if Bobby Garfield's friend Ted Brautigan plays a part in the Tower saga? The truth is I really don't know the answer to that. In any case, readership of the Tower stories has fallen off a lot lately—the figures are really disappointing, compared to that of my other books (except for Rose Madder, which was a real tank-job, at least in the sales sense). But it doesn't matter, at least to me, and if the series ever gets done, sales may go up.

Tabby and I had another argument about my walking route; she asked me again to quit going out on the main road. Also she asked me "Is the wind blowing yet?" Meaning am I thinking about the next Dark Tower story. I said no, commala-come-come, the tale has not begun. But it will, and there's a dance called the commala in it. That's the one thing I see clearly: Roland dancing. Why, or for whom, I don't know.

Anyway, I asked T. why she wanted to know about the Dark Tower and she said, "You're safer when you're with the gunslingers."

Joking, I suppose, but an odd joke for T. Not much like her.

June 17, 1999

Talked with Rand Holston and Mark Carliner tonight. They both sound excited about moving on from Storm of the Century to Rose Red (or Kingdom Hospital), but either one would fill my plate up again.

I dreamed of my walk last night & woke up crying. The Tower will fall, I thought. O Discordia, the world grows dark.

????

Headline from the Portland Press-Herald, June 18, 1999:

**"WALK-IN" PHENOMENON IN WESTERN MAINE
CONTINUES TO RESIST EXPLANATION**

June 19, 1999

This is like one of those times when all the planets line up, except in this case it's my family all lined up here on Turtleback Lane. Joe

and his family arrived around noon; their little boy is really cute. Say true! Sometimes I look in the mirror and say, “You are a grandfather.” And the Steve in the mirror just laughs, because the idea is so ridiculous. The Steve in the mirror knows I’m still a college sophomore, going to classes and protesting the war in Viet Nam by day, drinking beer down at Pat’s Pizza with Flip Thompson and George McLeod by night. As for my grandson, the beautiful Ethan? He just tugs on the balloon tied to his toe and laughs.

Daughter Naomi and son Owen got here late last night. We had a great Father’s Day dinner; people saying things to me that were so nice I had to check to make sure I wasn’t dead! God, I’m lucky to have family, lucky to have more stories to tell, lucky to still be alive. The worst thing to happen this week, I hope, will be my wife’s bed collapsing under the weight of our son and daughter-in-law—the idiots were wrestling on it.

You know what? I’ve been thinking of going back to Roland’s story after all. As soon as I finish the book on writing (On Writing would actually not be a bad title—it’s simple and to the point). But right now the sun is shining, the day is beautiful, and what I’m going to do is take a walk.

More later, maybe.

From the Portland Sunday Telegram, June 20, 1999:

**STEPHEN KING
DIES NEAR
LOVELL HOME
POPULAR MAINE WRITER
KILLED WHILE TAKING
AFTERNOON WALK
INSIDER CLAIMS MAN
DRIVING LETHAL VAN**

“TOOK EYES OFF THE ROAD” AS HE APPROACHED KING ON ROUTE 7

By Ray Routhier

LOVELL, ME. (Exclusive) Maine’s most popular author was struck and killed by a van while walking near his summer home yesterday afternoon. The van was driven by Bryan Smith of Fryeburg. According to sources close to the case, Smith has admitted that he “took his eyes off the road” when one of his Rottweilers got out of the back of the van and began nosing into a cooler behind the driver’s seat.

“I never even saw him,” Smith is reported to have said shortly after the collision, which took place on what locals call Slab City Hill.

King, author of such popular novels as *It*, *’Salem’s Lot*, *The Shining*, and *The Stand*, was taken to Northern Cumberland Memorial Hospital in Bridgton, where he was pronounced dead at 6:02 PM Saturday evening. He was 52 years old.

A hospital source said the cause of death was extensive head injuries. King’s family, which had gathered in part to celebrate Father’s Day, is in seclusion tonight . . .

*Commala-come-come,
The battle’s now begun!
And all the foes of men and rose
Rise with the setting sun.*

* Constant Readers

Wordslinger's Note

I'd once more like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Robin Furth, who read this novel in manuscript—and those preceding it—with great and sympathetic attention to detail. If this increasingly complex tale hangs together, Robin should get most of the credit. And if you don't believe it, check out her *Dark Tower* concordance, which makes fascinating reading in and of itself.

Thanks are also due to Chuck Verrill, who has edited the final five novels in the Tower cycle, and to the three publishers, two large and one small, who cooperated to make this massive project a reality: Robert Wiener (Donald M. Grant, Publisher), Susan Petersen Kennedy and Pamela Dorman (Viking), Susan Moldow and Nan Graham (Scribner). Special thanks to Agent Moldow, whose irony and bravery have saved many a bleak day. There are others, plenty of them, but I'm not going to annoy you with the whole list. After all, this ain't the fucking Academy Awards, is it?

Certain geographical details in this book and in the concluding novel of the Tower cycle have been fictionalized. The real people mentioned in these pages have been used in a fictional way. And to the best of my knowledge, there were never coin-op storage lockers in the World Trade Center.

As for you, Constant Reader . . .

One more turn of the path, and then we reach the clearing.

Come along with me, will ya not?

Stephen King
May 28, 2003
(Tell God thank ya.)



Photo by David King



Photo by Tabitha King

STEPHEN KING is the author of more than fifty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. Among his most recent are *From a Buick 8*, *Everything's Eventual*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *Bag of Bones*, and the screenplay *Storm of the Century*. His acclaimed nonfiction book, *On Writing*, was also a bestseller. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

ALSO BY STEPHEN KING

NOVELS

Carrie

'Salem's Lot

The Shining

The Stand

The Dead Zone

Firestarter

Cujo

THE DARK TOWER I:

The Gunslinger

Christine

Pet Sematary

Cycle of the Werewolf

The Talisman (*with Peter Straub*)

It

The Eyes of the Dragon

Misery

The Tommyknockers

THE DARK TOWER II:

The Drawing of the Three

THE DARK TOWER III:

The Waste Lands

The Dark Half

Needful Things

Gerald's Game

Dolores Claiborne

Insomnia

Rose Madder

Desperation

The Green Mile

THE DARK TOWER IV:

Wizard and Glass

Bag of Bones

The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon

Dreamcatcher
Black House (*with Peter Straub*)

From a Buick 8

THE DARK TOWER V:
Wolves of the Calla

THE DARK TOWER VII:
The Dark Tower

AS RICHARD BACHMAN

Rage

The Long Walk

Roadwork

The Running Man

Thinner

The Regulators

COLLECTIONS

Night Shift

Different Seasons

Skeleton Crew

Four Past Midnight

Nightmares and Dreamscapes

Hearts in Atlantis

Everything's Eventual

SCREENPLAYS

Creepshow

Cat's Eye

Silver Bullet

Maximum Overdrive

Pet Sematary

Golden Years

Sleepwalkers

The Stand

The Shining

Rose Red

Storm of the Century

NONFICTION
Danse Macabre
On Writing

Dark Tower-related in bold

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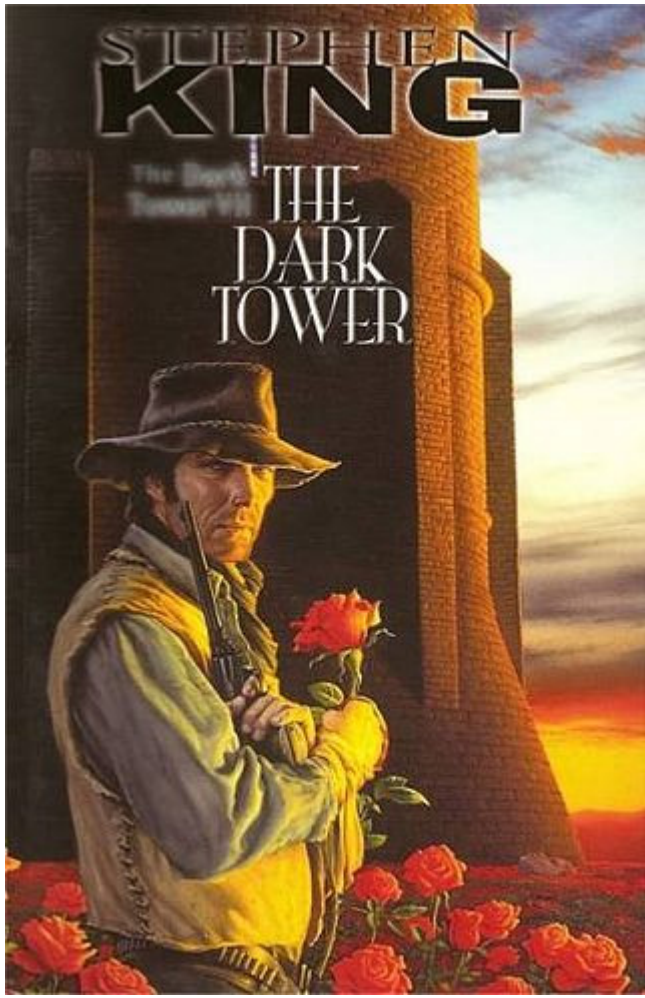
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THE DARK TOWER VII

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THE DARK TOWER VII
THE DARK TOWER
STEPHEN KING





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APPENDIX

ROBERT BROWNING
“CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER CAME”
AUTHOR’S NOTE
ABOUT STEPHEN KING

He who speaks without an attentive ear is mute.

Therefore, Constant Reader, this final book in the *Dark Tower* cycle is dedicated to you.

Long days and pleasant nights.





Not hear? When noise was everywhere! it tolled
Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears
Of all the lost adventurers, my peers—
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
And such was fortunate, yet each of old
Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.

There they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! In a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
And blew. ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.’

—Robert Browning
“Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”

I was born
Six-gun in my hand,
behind a gun
I’ll make my final stand.

—Bad Company



What have I become?
My sweetest friend
Everyone I know
Goes away in the end
You could have it all

My empire of dirt
I will let you down
I will make you hurt

—Trent Reznor

19

99

REPRODUCTION

REVELATION

REDEMPTION

RESUMPTION



PART ONE:
THE LITTLE RED KING
DAN-TETE



CHAPTER I: CALLAHAN AND THE VAMPIRES

ONE

Pere Don Callahan had once been the Catholic priest of a town, 'Salem's Lot had been its name, that no longer existed on any map. He didn't much care. Concepts such as reality had ceased to matter to him.

This onetime priest now held a heathen object in his hand, a scrimshaw turtle made of ivory. There was a nick in its beak and a scratch in the shape of a question mark on its back, but otherwise it was a beautiful thing.

Beautiful and *powerful*. He could feel the power in his hand like volts.

"How lovely it is," he whispered to the boy who stood with him. "Is it the Turtle Maturin? It is, isn't it?"

The boy was Jake Chambers, and he'd come a long loop in order to return almost to his starting-place here in Manhattan. "I don't know," he said. "She calls it the *sköldpadda*, and it may help us, but it can't kill the harriers that are waiting for us in there." He nodded toward the Dixie Pig, wondering if he meant Susannah or Mia when he used that all-purpose feminine pronoun *she*. Once he would have said it didn't matter because the two women were so tightly wound together. Now, however, he thought it did matter, or would soon.

"Will you?" Jake asked the Pere, meaning *Will you stand. Will you fight. Will you kill*.

"Oh yes," Callahan said calmly. He put the ivory turtle with its wise eyes and scratched back into his breast pocket with the extra shells for the gun he carried, then patted the cunningly made thing once to

make sure it rode safely. “I’ll shoot until the bullets are gone, and if I run out of bullets before they kill me, I’ll club them with the . . . the gun-butt.”

The pause was so slight Jake didn’t even notice it. But in that pause, the White spoke to Father Callahan. It was a force he knew of old, even in boyhood, although there had been a few years of bad faith along the way, years when his understanding of that elemental force had first grown dim and then become lost completely. But those days were gone, the White was his again, and he told God thankya.

Jake was nodding, saying something Callahan barely heard. And what Jake said didn’t matter. What that other voice said—the voice of something

(*Gan*)

perhaps too great to be called God—*did*.

The boy must go on, the voice told him. Whatever happens here, however it falls, the boy must go on. Your part in the story is almost done. His is not.

They walked past a sign on a chrome post (**CLOSED FOR PRIVATE FUNCTION**), Jake’s special friend Oy trotting between them, his head up and his muzzle wreathed in its usual toothy grin. At the top of the steps, Jake reached into the woven sack Susannah-Mio had brought out of Calla Bryn Sturgis and grabbed two of the plates—the ’Rizas. He tapped them together, nodded at the dull ringing sound, and then said: “Let’s see yours.”

Callahan lifted the Ruger Jake had brought out of Calla New York, and now back into it; life is a wheel and we all say thankya. For a moment the Pere held the Ruger’s barrel beside his right cheek like a duelist. Then he touched his breast pocket, bulging with shells, and with the turtle. The *sköldpadda*.

Jake nodded. “Once we’re in, we stay together. Always together, with Oy between. On three. And once we start, we never stop.”

“Never stop.”

“Right. Are you ready?”

“Yes. God’s love on you, boy.”

“And on you, Pere. One . . . two . . . *three*.” Jake opened the door and together they went into the dim light and the sweet tangy smell of roasting meat.

TWO

Jake went to what he was sure would be his death remembering two things Roland Deschain, his true father, had said. *Battles that last five minutes spawn legends that live a thousand years. And You needn't die happy when your day comes, but you must die satisfied, for you have lived your life from beginning to end and ka is always served.*

Jake Chambers surveyed the Dixie Pig with a satisfied mind.

THREE

Also with crystal clarity. His senses were so heightened that he could smell not just roasting flesh but the rosemary with which it had been rubbed; could hear not only the calm rhythm of his breath but the tidal murmur of his blood climbing brainward on one side of his neck and descending heartward on the other.

He also remembered Roland's saying that even the shortest battle, from first shot to final falling body, seemed long to those taking part. Time grew elastic; stretched to the point of vanishment. Jake had nodded as if he understood, although he hadn't.

Now he did.

His first thought was that there were too many of them—far, far too many. He put their number at close to a hundred, the majority certainly of the sort Pere Callahan had referred to as “low men.” (Some were low women, but Jake had no doubt the principle was the same.) Scattered among them, all less fleshy than the low *folken* and some as slender as fencing weapons, their complexions ashy and their bodies surrounded in dim blue auras, were what had to be vampires.

Oy stood at Jake's heel, his small, foxy face stern, whining low in his throat.

That smell of cooking meat wafting through the air was not pork.

FOUR

Ten feet between us any time we have ten feet to give, Pere—so Jake had said out on the sidewalk, and even as they approached the *maître d's*

platform, Callahan was drifting to Jake's right, putting the required distance between them.

Jake had also told him to scream as loud as he could for as long as he could, and Callahan was opening his mouth to begin doing just that when the voice of the White spoke up inside again. Only one word, but it was enough.

Sköldpadda, it said.

Callahan was still holding the Ruger up by his right cheek. Now he dipped into his breast pocket with his left hand. His awareness of the scene before him wasn't as hyper-alert as his young companion's, but he saw a great deal: the orangey-crimson electric *flambeaux* on the walls, the candles on each table immured in glass containers of a brighter, Halloweenish orange, the gleaming napkins. To the left of the dining room was a tapestry showing knights and their ladies sitting at a long banquet table. There was a sense in here—Callahan wasn't sure exactly what provoked it, the various tells and stimuli were too subtle—of people just resettling themselves after some bit of excitement: a small kitchen fire, say, or an automobile accident on the street.

Or a lady having a baby, Callahan thought as he closed his hand on the Turtle. *That's always good for a little pause between the appetizer and the entrée.*

"Now come Gilead's ka-mais!" shouted an excited, nervous voice. Not a human one, of that Callahan was almost positive. It was too *buzzy* to be human. Callahan saw what appeared to be some sort of monstrous bird-human hybrid standing at the far end of the room. It wore straight-leg jeans and a plain white shirt, but the head rising from that shirt was painted with sleek feathers of dark yellow. Its eyes looked like drops of liquid tar.

"*Get them!*" this horridly ridiculous thing shouted, and brushed aside a napkin. Beneath it was some sort of weapon. Callahan supposed it was a gun, but it looked like the sort you saw on *Star Trek*. What did they call them? Phasers? Stunners?

It didn't matter. Callahan had a far better weapon, and wanted to make sure they all saw it. He swept the place-settings and the glass container with the candle in it from the nearest table, then snatched away the tablecloth like a magician doing a trick. The last thing he

wanted to do was to trip over a swatch of linen at the crucial moment. Then, with a nimbleness he wouldn't have believed even a week ago, he stepped onto one of the chairs and from the chair to the table-top. Once on the table, he lifted the *skölpadda* with his fingers supporting the turtle's flat undershell, giving them all a good look at it.

I could croon something, he thought. Maybe "Moonlight Becomes You" or "I Left My Heart in San Francisco."

At that point they had been inside the Dixie Pig for exactly thirty-four seconds.

FIVE

High school teachers faced with a large group of students in study hall or a school assembly will tell you that teenagers, even when freshly showered and groomed, reek of the hormones which their bodies are so busy manufacturing. Any group of people under stress emits a similar stink, and Jake, with his senses tuned to the most exquisite pitch, smelled it here. When they passed the *maitre d's* stand (Blackmail Central, his Dad liked to call such stations), the smell of the Dixie Pig's diners had been faint, the smell of people coming back to normal after some sort of dust-up. But when the bird-creature in the far corner shouted, Jake had smelled the patrons more strongly. It was a metallic aroma, enough like blood to incite his temper and his emotions. Yes, he saw Tweety Bird knock aside the napkin on his table; yes, he saw the weapon beneath; yes, he understood that Callahan, standing on the table, was an easy shot. That was of far less concern to Jake than the mobilizing weapon that was Tweety Bird's mouth. Jake was drawing back his right arm, meaning to fling the first of his nineteen plates and amputate the head in which that mouth resided, when Callahan raised the turtle.

It won't work, not in here, Jake thought, but even before the idea had been completely articulated in his mind, he understood it *was* working. He knew by the smell of them. The aggressiveness went out of it. And the few who had begun to rise from their tables—the red holes in the foreheads of the low people gaping, the blue auras of the vampires seeming to pull in and intensify—sat back down again, and hard, as if they had suddenly lost command of their muscles.

“ *Get them, those are the ones Sayre . . .*” Then Tweety stopped talking. His left hand—if you could call such an ugly talon a hand—touched the butt of his high-tech gun and then fell away. The brilliance seemed to leave his eyes. “They’re the ones Sayre . . . S-S-Sayre . . .” Another pause. Then the bird-thing said, “Oh sai, what is the lovely thing that you hold?”

“You know what it is,” Callahan said. Jake was moving and Callahan, mindful of what the boy gunslinger had told him outside—*Make sure that every time I look on my right, I see your face*—stepped back down from the table to move with him, still holding the turtle high. He could almost taste the room’s silence, but—

But there was *another* room. Rough laughter and hoarse, carousing yells—a party from the sound of it, and close by. On the left. From behind the tapestry showing the knights and their ladies at dinner. *Something going on back there, Callahan thought, and probably not Elks’ Poker Night.*

He heard Oy breathing fast and low through his perpetual grin, a perfect little engine. And something else. A harsh rattling sound with a low and rapid clicking beneath. The combination set Callahan’s teeth on edge and made his skin feel cold. Something was hiding under the tables.

Oy saw the advancing insects first and froze like a dog on point, one paw raised and his snout thrust forward. For a moment the only part of him to move was the dark and velvety skin of his muzzle, first twitching back to reveal the clenched needles of his teeth, then relaxing to hide them, then twitching back again.

The bugs came on. Whatever they were, the Turtle Maturin upraised in the Pere’s hand meant nothing to them. A fat guy wearing a tuxedo with plaid lapels spoke weakly, almost questioningly, to the bird-thing: “They weren’t to come any further than here, Meiman, nor to leave. We were told . . .”

Oy lunged forward, a growl coming through his clamped teeth. It was a decidedly un-Oylike sound, reminding Callahan of a comic-strip balloon: *Arrrrrr!*

“No!” Jake shouted, alarmed. “No, Oy!”

At the sound of the boy’s shout, the yells and laughter from behind the tapestry abruptly ceased, as if the *folken* back there had suddenly

become aware that something had changed in the front room.

Oy took no notice of Jake's cry. He crunched three of the bugs in rapid succession, the crackle of their breaking carapaces gruesomely clear in the new stillness. He made no attempt to eat them but simply tossed the corpses, each the size of a mouse, into the air with a snap of the neck and a grinning release of the jaws.

And the others retreated back under the tables.

He was made for this, Callahan thought. *Perhaps once in the long-ago all bumpers were. Made for it the way some breeds of terrier are made to—*

A hoarse shout from behind the tapestry interrupted these thoughts: "*Humes!*" one voice cried, and then a second: "*Ka-humes!*"

Callahan had an absurd impulse to yell *Gesundheit!*

Before he could yell that or anything else, Roland's voice suddenly filled his head.

SIX

"Jake, go."

The boy turned toward Pere Callahan, bewildered. He was walking with his arms crossed, ready to fling the 'Rizas at the first low man or woman who moved. Oy had returned to his heel, although he was swinging his head ceaselessly from side to side and his eyes were bright with the prospect of more prey.

"We go together," Jake said. "They're buffaloed, Pere! And we're close! They took her through here . . . this room . . . and then through the kitchen—"

Callahan paid no attention. Still holding the turtle high (as one might hold a lantern in a deep cave), he had turned toward the tapestry. The silence from behind it was far more terrible than the shouts and feverish, gargling laughter. It was silence like a pointed weapon. And the boy had stopped.

"Go while you can," Callahan said, striving for calmness. "Catch up to her *if* you can. This is the command of your dinh. This is also the will of the White."

"But you can't—"

"Go, Jake!"

The low men and women in the Dixie Pig, whether in thrall to the *sköldpadda* or not, murmured uneasily at the sound of that shout, and well they might have, for it was not Callahan's voice coming from Callahan's mouth.

"You have this one chance and must take it! Find her! As dinh I command you!"

Jake's eyes flew wide at the sound of Roland's voice issuing from Callahan's throat. His mouth dropped open. He looked around, dazed.

In the second before the tapestry to their left was torn aside, Callahan saw its black joke, what the careless eye would first surely overlook: the roast that was the banquet's main entrée had a human form; the knights and their ladies were eating human flesh and drinking human blood. What the tapestry showed was a cannibals' communion.

Then the ancient ones who had been at their own sup tore aside the obscene tapestry and burst out, shrieking through the great fangs that propped their deformed mouths forever open. Their eyes were as black as blindness, the skin of their cheeks and brows—even the backs of their hands—tumorous with wild teeth. Like the vampires in the dining room, they were surrounded with auras, but these were of a poisoned violet so dark it was almost black. Some sort of ichor dribbled from the corners of their eyes and mouths. They were gibbering and several were laughing: seeming not to create the sounds but rather to snatch them out of the air like something that could be rent alive.

And Callahan knew them. Of course he did. Had he not been sent hence by one of their number? Here were the *true* vampires, the Type Ones, kept like a secret and now loosed on the intruders.

The turtle he held up did not slow them in the slightest.

Callahan saw Jake staring, pale, eyes shiny with horror and bulging from their sockets, all purpose forgotten at the sight of these freaks.

Without knowing what was going to come out of his mouth until he heard it, Callahan shouted: *"They'll kill Oy first! They'll kill him in front of you and drink his blood!"*

Oy barked at the sound of his name. Jake's eyes seemed to clear at the sound, but Callahan had no time to follow the boy's fortunes

further.

Turtle won't stop them, but at least it's holding the others back. Bullets won't stop them, but—

With a sense of *déjà vu*—and why not, he had lived all this before in the home of a boy named Mark Petrie—Callahan dipped into the open front of his shirt and brought out the cross he wore there. It clicked against the butt of the Ruger and then hung below it. The cross was lit with a brilliant bluish-white glare. The two ancient things in the lead had been about to grab him and draw him into their midst. Now they drew back instead, shrieking with pain. Callahan saw the surface of their skin sizzle and begin to liquefy. The sight of it filled him with savage happiness.

“Get back from me!” he shouted. “The power of God commands you! The power of Christ commands you! The ka of Mid-World commands you! *The power of the White commands you!*”

One of them darted forward nevertheless, a deformed skeleton in an ancient, moss-encrusted dinner suit. Around its neck it wore some sort of ancient award . . . the Cross of Malta, perhaps? It swiped one of its long-nailed hands at the crucifix Callahan was holding out. He jerked it down at the last second, and the vampire's claw passed an inch above it. Callahan lunged forward without thought and drove the tip of the cross into the yellow parchment of the thing's forehead. The gold crucifix went in like a red-hot skewer into butter. The thing in the rusty dinner suit let out a liquid cry of pained dismay and stumbled backward. Callahan pulled his cross back. For one moment, before the elderly monster clapped its claws to its brow, Callahan saw the hole his cross had made. Then a thick, curdy, yellow stuff began to spill through the ancient one's fingers. Its knees unhinged and it tumbled to the floor between two tables. Its mates shrank away from it, screaming with outrage. The thing's face was already collapsing inward beneath its twisted hands. Its aura whiffed out like a candle and then there was nothing but a puddle of yellow, liquefying flesh spilling like vomit from the sleeves of its jacket and the legs of its pants.

Callahan strode briskly toward the others. His fear was gone. The shadow of shame that had hung over him ever since Barlow had taken his cross and broken it was also gone.

Free at last, he thought. Free at last, great God Almighty, I'm free at last. Then: I believe this is redemption. And it's good, isn't it? Quite good, indeed.

“H'row it aside!” one of them cried, its hands held up to shield its face. “Nasty bauble of the 'heep-God, h'row it aside if you dare!”

Nasty bauble of the sheep-God, indeed. If so, why do you cringe?

Against Barlow he had not dared answer this challenge, and it had been his undoing. In the Dixie Pig, Callahan turned the cross toward the thing which had dared to speak.

“I needn't stake my faith on the challenge of such a thing as you, sai,” he said, his words ringing clearly in the room. He had forced the old ones back almost to the archway through which they had come. Great dark tumors had appeared on the hands and faces of those in front, eating into the paper of their ancient skin like acid. “And I'd never throw away such an old friend in any case. But *put* it away? Aye, if you like.” And he dropped it back into his shirt.

Several of the vampires lunged forward immediately, their fang-choked mouths twisting in what might have been grins. Callahan held his hands out toward them. The fingers (and the barrel of the Ruger) glowed, as if they had been dipped into blue fire. The eyes of the turtle had likewise filled with light; its shell shone.

“Stand away from me!” Callahan cried. “The power of God and the White commands you!”

SEVEN

When the terrible shaman turned to face the Grandfathers, Meiman of the taheen felt the Turtle's awful, lovely glammer lessen a bit. He saw that the boy was gone, and that filled him with dismay, yet at least he'd gone further in rather than slipping out, so that might still be all right. But if the boy found the door to Fedic and used it, Meiman might find himself in very bad trouble, indeed. For Sayre answered to Walter o' Dim, and Walter answered only to the Crimson King himself.

Never mind. One thing at a time. Settle the shaman's hash first. Turn the Grandfathers loose on him. Then go after the boy, perhaps shouting that his friend wanted him after all, that might work—

Meiman (the Canaryman to Mia, Tweety Bird to Jake) crept forward, grasping Andrew—the fat man in the tux with the plaid lapels—with one hand and Andrew’s even fatter jilly with the other. He gestured at Callahan’s turned back.

Tirana shook her head vehemently. Meiman opened his beak and hissed at her. She shrank away from him. Detta Walker had already gotten her fingers into the mask Tirana wore and it hung in shreds about her jaw and neck. In the middle of her forehead, a red wound opened and closed like the gill of a dying fish.

Meiman turned to Andrew, released him long enough to point at the shaman, then drew the talon that served him as a hand across his feathered throat in a grimly expressive gesture. Andrew nodded and brushed away his wife’s pudgy hands when they tried to restrain him. The mask of humanity was good enough to show the low man in the garish tuxedo visibly gathering his courage. Then he leaped forward with a strangled cry, seizing Callahan around the neck not with his hands but his fat forearms. At the same moment his jilly lunged and struck the ivory turtle from the Pere’s hand, screaming as she did so. The *sköldpadda* tumbled to the red rug, bounced beneath one of the tables, and there (like a certain paper boat some of you may remember) passes out of this tale forever.

The Grandfathers still held back, as did the Type Three vampires who had been dining in the public room, but the low men and women sensed weakness and moved in, first hesitantly, then with growing confidence. They surrounded Callahan, paused, and then fell on him in all their numbers.

“Let me go in God’s name!” Callahan cried, but of course it did no good. Unlike the vampires, the things with the red wounds in their foreheads did not respond to the name of Callahan’s God. All he could do was hope Jake wouldn’t stop, let alone double back; that he and Oy would go like the wind to Susannah. Save her if they could. Die with her if they could not. And kill her baby, if chance allowed. God help him, but he had been wrong about that. They should have snuffed out the baby’s life back in the Calla, when they had the chance.

Something bit deeply into his neck. The vampires would come now, cross or no cross. They’d fall on him like the sharks they were

once they got their first whiff of his life's blood. *Help me God, give me strength*, Callahan thought, and felt the strength flow into him. He rolled to his left as claws ripped into his shirt, tearing it to ribbons. For a moment his right hand was free, and the Ruger was still in it. He turned it toward the working, sweaty, hate-congested face of the fat one named Andrew and placed the barrel of the gun (bought for home protection in the long-distant past by Jake's more than a little paranoid TV-executive father) against the soft red wound in the center of the low man's forehead.

"No-ooo, you daren't!" Tirana cried, and as she reached for the gun, the front of her gown finally burst, spilling her massive breasts free. They were covered with coarse fur.

Callahan pulled the trigger. The Ruger's report was deafening in the dining room. Andrew's head exploded like a gourd filled with blood, spraying the creatures who had been crowding in behind him. There were screams of horror and disbelief. Callahan had time to think, *It wasn't supposed to be this way, was it? And: Is it enough to put me in the club? Am I a gunslinger yet?*

Perhaps not. But there was the bird-man, standing right in front of him between two tables, its beak opening and closing, its throat beating visibly with excitement.

Smiling, propping himself on one elbow as blood pumped onto the carpet from his torn throat, Callahan leveled Jake's Ruger.

"No!" Meiman cried, raising his misshapen hands to his face in an utterly fruitless gesture of protection. "No, you CAN'T—"

Can so, Callahan thought with childish glee, and fired again. Meiman took two stumble-steps backward, then a third. He struck a table and collapsed on top of it. Three yellow feathers hung above him on the air, seesawing lazily.

Callahan heard savage howls, not of anger or fear but of hunger. The aroma of blood had finally penetrated the old ones' jaded nostrils, and nothing would stop them now. So, if he didn't want to join them—

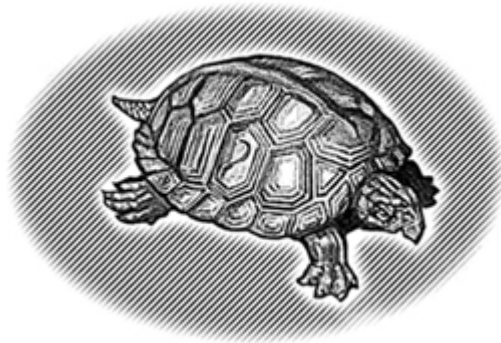
Pere Callahan, once Father Callahan of 'Salem's Lot, turned the Ruger's muzzle on himself. He wasted no time looking for eternity in the darkness of the barrel but placed it deep against the shelf of his chin.

“Hile, Roland!” he said, and knew
(the wave they are lifted by the wave)
that he was heard. “Hile, gunslinger!”

His finger tightened on the trigger as the ancient monsters fell upon him. He was buried in the reek of their cold and bloodless breath, but not daunted by it. He had never felt so strong. Of all the years in his life he had been happiest when he had been a simple vagrant, not a priest but only Callahan o’ the Roads, and felt that soon he would be let free to resume that life and wander as he would, his duties fulfilled, and that was well.

“May you find your Tower, Roland, and breach it, *and may you climb to the top!*”

The teeth of his old enemies, these ancient brothers and sisters of a thing which had called itself Kurt Barlow, sank into him like stingers. Callahan felt them not at all. He was smiling as he pulled the trigger and escaped them for good.



CHAPTER II: LIFTED ON THE WAVE

ONE

On their way out along the dirt camp-road which had taken them to the writer's house in the town of Bridgton, Eddie and Roland came upon an orange pickup truck with the words CENTRAL MAINE POWER MAINTENANCE painted on the sides. Nearby, a man in a yellow hardhat and an orange high-visibility vest was cutting branches that threatened the low-hanging electrical lines. And did Eddie feel something then, some gathering force? Maybe a precursor of the wave rushing down the Path of the Beam toward them? He later thought so, but couldn't say for sure. God knew he'd been in a weird enough mood already, and why not? How many people got to meet their creators? Well . . . Stephen King *hadn't* created Eddie Dean, a young man whose Co-Op City happened to be in Brooklyn rather than the Bronx—not yet, not in that year of 1977, but Eddie felt certain that in time King would. How else could he be here?

Eddie nipped in ahead of the power-truck, got out, and asked the sweating man with the brush-hog in his hands for directions to Turtleback Lane, in the town of Lovell. The Central Maine Power guy passed on the directions willingly enough, then added: "If you're serious about going to Lovell today, you're gonna have to use Route 93. The Bog Road, some folks call it."

He raised a hand to Eddie and shook his head like a man forestalling an argument, although Eddie had not in fact said a word since asking his original question.

"It's seven miles longer, I know, and jouncy as a bugger, but you can't get through East Stoneham today. Cops've got it blocked off.

State Bears, local yokels, even the Oxford County Sheriff's Department."

"You're kidding," Eddie said. It seemed a safe enough response.

The power guy shook his head grimly. "No one seems to know exactly what's up, but there's been shootin—automatic weapons, maybe—and explosions." He patted the battered and sawdusty walkie-talkie clipped to his belt. "I've even heard the t-word once or twice this afternoon. Not s'prised, either."

Eddie had no idea what the t-word might be, but knew Roland wanted to get going. He could feel the gunslinger's impatience in his head; could almost see Roland's impatient finger-twirling gesture, the one that meant *Let's go, let's go*.

"I'm talking 'bout terrorism," the power guy said, then lowered his voice. "People don't think shit like that can happen in America, buddy, but I got news for you, it can. If not today, then sooner or later. Someone's gonna blow up the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building, that's what I think—the right-wingers, the left-wingers, or the goddam A-rabs. Too many crazy people."

Eddie, who had a nodding acquaintance with ten more years of history than this fellow, nodded. "You're probably right. In any case, thanks for the info."

"Just tryin to save you some time." And, as Eddie opened the driver's-side door of John Cullum's Ford sedan: "You been in a fight, mister? You look kinda bunged up. Also you're limping."

Eddie had been in a fight, all right: had been grooved in the arm and plugged in the right calf. Neither wound was serious, and in the forward rush of events he had nearly forgotten them. Now they hurt all over again. Why in God's name had he turned down Aaron Deepneau's bottle of Percocet tablets?

"Yeah," he said, "that's why I'm going to Lovell. Guy's dog bit me. He and I are going to have a talk about it." Bizarre story, didn't have much going for it in the way of plot, but he was no writer. That was King's job. In any case, it was good enough to get him back behind the wheel of Cullum's Ford Galaxie before the power guy could ask him any more questions, and Eddie reckoned that made it a success. He drove away quickly.

"You got directions?" Roland asked.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Everything’s breaking at once, Eddie. We have to get to Susannah as fast as we can. Jake and Pere Callahan, too. And the baby’s coming, whatever it is. May have come already.”

Turn right when you get back out to Kansas Road, the power guy had told Eddie (Kansas as in Dorothy, Toto, and Auntie Em, everything breaking at once), and he did. That put them rolling north. The sun had gone behind the trees on their left, throwing the two-lane blacktop entirely into shadow. Eddie had an almost palpable sense of time slipping through his fingers like some fabulously expensive cloth that was too smooth to grip. He stepped on the gas and Cullum’s old Ford, although wheezy in the valves, walked out a little. Eddie got it up to fifty-five and pegged it there. More speed might have been possible, but Kansas Road was both twisty and badly maintained.

Roland had taken a sheet of notepaper from his shirt pocket, unfolded it, and was now studying it (although Eddie doubted if the gunslinger could actually read much of the document; this world’s written words would always be mostly mystery to him). At the top of the paper, above Aaron Deepneau’s rather shaky but perfectly legible handwriting (and Calvin Tower’s all-important signature), was a smiling cartoon beaver and the words DAM IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO. A silly pun if ever there was one.

I don’t like silly questions, I won’t play silly games, Eddie thought, and suddenly grinned. It was a point of view to which Roland still held, Eddie felt quite sure, notwithstanding the fact that, while riding Blaine the Mono, their lives had been saved by a few well-timed silly questions. Eddie opened his mouth to point out that what might well turn out to be the most important document in the history of the world—more important than the Magna Carta or the Declaration of Independence or Albert Einstein’s Theory of Relativity—was headed by a dumb pun, and how did Roland like them apples? Before he could get out a single word, however, the wave struck.

TWO

His foot slipped off the gas pedal, and that was good. If it had stayed on, both he and Roland would surely have been injured, maybe

killed. When the wave came, staying in control of John Cullum's Ford Galaxie dropped all the way off Eddie Dean's list of priorities. It was like that moment when the roller coaster has reached the top of its first mountain, hesitates a moment . . . tilts . . . *plunges* . . . and you fall with a sudden blast of hot summer air in your face and a pressure against your chest and your stomach floating somewhere behind you.

In that moment Eddie saw everything in Cullum's car had come untethered and was floating—pipe ashes, two pens and a paperclip from the dashboard, Eddie's *dinh*, and, he realized, his *dinh's ka-mai*, good old Eddie Dean. No wonder he had lost his stomach! (He wasn't aware that the car itself, which had drifted to a stop at the side of the road, was also floating, tilting lazily back and forth five or six inches above the ground like a small boat on an invisible sea.)

Then the tree-lined country road was gone. Bridgton was gone. The world was gone. There was the sound of *todash* chimes, repulsive and nauseating, making him want to grit his teeth in protest . . . except his teeth were gone, too.

THREE

Like Eddie, Roland had a clear sense of being first *lifted* and then *hung*, like something that had lost its ties to Earth's gravity. He heard the chimes and felt himself elevated through the wall of existence, but he understood this wasn't real *todash*—at least not of the sort they'd experienced before. This was very likely what Vannay called *aven kal*, words which meant *lifted on the wind* or *carried on the wave*. Only the *kal* form, instead of the more usual *kas*, indicated a natural force of disastrous proportions: not a wind but a hurricane; not a wave but a *tsunami*.

The very Beam means to speak to you, Gabby, Vannay said in his mind—Gabby, the old sarcastic nickname Vannay had adopted because Steven Deschain's boy was so close-mouthed. His limping, brilliant tutor had stopped using it (probably at Cort's insistence) the year Roland had turned eleven. *You would do well to listen if it does*.

I will listen very well, Roland replied, and was dropped. He gagged, weightless and nauseated.

More chimes. Then, suddenly, he was floating again, this time above a room filled with empty beds. One look was enough to assure him that this was where the Wolves brought the children they kidnapped from the Borderland Callas. At the far end of the room—

A hand grasped his arm, a thing Roland would have thought impossible in this state. He looked to his left and saw Eddie beside him, floating naked. They were both naked, their clothes left behind in the writer's world.

Roland had already seen what Eddie was pointing to. At the far end of the room, a pair of beds had been pushed together. A white woman lay on one of them. Her legs—the very ones Susannah had used on their todash visit to New York, Roland had no doubt—were spread wide. A woman with the head of a rat—one of the taheen, he felt sure—bent between them.

Next to the white woman was a dark-skinned one whose legs ended just below the knees. Floating naked or not, nauseated or not, todash or not, Roland had never in his life been so glad to see anyone. And Eddie felt the same. Roland heard him cry out joyfully in the center of his head and reached a hand to still the younger man. He *had* to still him, for Susannah was looking at them, had almost certainly seen them, and if she spoke to them, he needed to hear every word she said. Because although those words would come from her mouth, it would very likely be the Beam that spoke; the Voice of the Bear or that of the Turtle.

Both women wore metal hoods over their hair. A length of segmented steel hose connected them.

Some kind of Vulcan mind-meld, Eddie said, once again filling the center of his head and blotting out everything else. *Or maybe—*

Hush! Roland broke in. *Hush, Eddie, for your father's sake!*

A man wearing a white coat seized a pair of cruel-looking forceps from a tray and pushed the rathead taheen nurse aside. He bent, peering up between Mia's legs and holding the forceps above his head. Standing close by, wearing a tee-shirt with words of Eddie and Susannah's world on it, was a taheen with the head of a fierce brown bird.

He'll sense us, Roland thought. *If we stay long enough, he'll surely sense us and raise the alarm.*

But Susannah was looking at him, the eyes below the clamp of the hood feverish. Bright with understanding. *Seeing* them, aye, say true.

She spoke a single word, and in a moment of inexplicable but perfectly reliable intuition, Roland understood the word came not from Susannah but from Mia. Yet it was also the Voice of the Beam, a force perhaps sentient enough to understand how seriously it was threatened, and to want to protect itself.

Chassit was the word Susannah spoke; he heard it in his head because they were ka-tet and an-tet; he also saw it form soundlessly on her lips as she looked up toward the place where they floated, onlookers at something that was happening in some other where and when at this very moment.

The hawk-headed taheen looked up, perhaps following her gaze, perhaps hearing the chimes with its preternaturally sharp ears. Then the doctor lowered his forceps and thrust them beneath Mia's gown. She shrieked. Susannah shrieked with her. And as if Roland's essentially bodiless being could be pushed away by the force of those combined screams like a milkweed pod lifted and carried on a gust of October wind, the gunslinger felt himself rise violently, losing touch with this place as he went, but holding onto that one word. It brought with it a brilliant memory of his mother leaning over him as he lay in bed. In the room of many colors, this had been, the nursery, and of course now he understood the colors he'd only accepted as a young boy, accepted as children barely out of their clouts accept everything: with unquestioning wonder, with the unspoken assumption that it's *all* magic.

The windows of the nursery had been stained glass representing the Bends o' the Rainbow, of course. He remembered his mother leaning toward him, her face pied with that lovely various light, her hood thrown back so he could trace the curve of her neck with the eye of a child

(it's all magic)

and the soul of a lover; he remembered thinking how he would court her and win her from his father, if she would have him; how they would marry and have children of their own and live forever in that fairy-tale kingdom called the All-A-Glow; and how she sang to him, how Gabrielle Deschain sang to her little boy with his big eyes

looking solemnly up at her from his pillow and his face already stamped with the many swimming colors of his wandering life, singing a lilting nonsense song that went like this:

*Baby-bunting, baby-dear,
Baby, bring your berries here.
Chussit, chissit, chassit!
Bring enough to fill your basket!*

Enough to fill my basket, he thought as he was flung, weightless, through darkness and the terrible sound of the todash chimes. The words weren't quite nonsense but old numbers, she'd told him once when he had asked. *Chussit, chissit, chassit*: seventeen, eighteen, nineteen.

Chassit is nineteen, he thought. *Of course, it's all nineteen*. Then he and Eddie were in light again, a fever-sick orange light, and there were Jake and Callahan. He even saw Oy standing at Jake's left heel, his fur bushed out and his muzzle wrinkled back to show his teeth.

Chussit, chissit, chassit, Roland thought as he looked at his son, a boy so small and terribly outnumbered in the dining room of the Dixie Pig. *Chassit is nineteen. Enough to fill my basket. But what basket? What does it mean?*

FOUR

Beside Kansas Road in Bridgton, John Cullum's twelve-year-old Ford (a hundred and six thousand on the odometer and she was just getting wa'amed up, Cullum liked to tell people) seesawed lazily back and forth above the soft shoulder, front tires touching down and then rising so the back tires could briefly kiss the dirt. Inside, two men who appeared not only unconscious but *transparent* rolled lazily with the car's motion like corpses in a sunken boat. And around them floated the debris which collects in any old car that's been hard-used: the ashes and pens and paperclips and the world's oldest peanut and a penny from the back seat and pine needles from the floormats and even one of the floormats itself. In the darkness of the glove compartment, objects rattled timidly against the closed door.

Someone passing would undoubtedly have been thunderstruck at the sight of all this stuff—and people! people who *might be dead!*—floating around in the car like jetsam in a space capsule. But no one *did* come along. Those who lived on this side of Long Lake were mostly looking across the water toward the East Stoneham side even though there was really nothing over there to see any longer. Even the smoke was almost gone.

Lazily the car floated and inside it, Roland of Gilead rose slowly to the ceiling, where his neck pressed against the dirty roof-liner and his legs cleared the front seat to trail out behind him. Eddie was first held in place by the wheel, but then some random sideways motion of the car slid him free and he also rose, his face slack and dreaming. A silver line of drool escaped the corner of his mouth and floated, shining and full of minuscule bubbles, beside one blood-crust-ed cheek.

FIVE

Roland knew that Susannah had seen him, had probably seen Eddie, as well. That was why she'd labored so hard to speak that single word. Jake and Callahan, however, saw neither of them. The boy and the Pere had entered the Dixie Pig, a thing that was either very brave or very foolish, and now all of their concentration was necessarily focused on what they'd found there.

Foolhardy or not, Roland was fiercely proud of Jake. He saw the boy had established canda between himself and Callahan: that distance (never the same in any two situations) which assures that a pair of outnumbered gunslingers cannot be killed by a single shot. Both had come ready to fight. Callahan was holding Jake's gun . . . and another thing, as well: some sort of carving. Roland was almost sure it was a can-tah, one of the little gods. The boy had Susannah's 'Rizas and their tote-sack, retrieved from only the gods knew where.

The gunslinger spied a fat woman whose humanity ended at the neck. Above her trio of flabby chins, the mask she'd been wearing hung in ruins. Looking at the rathead beneath, Roland suddenly understood a good many things. Some might have come clearly to

him sooner, had not his attention—like that of the boy and the Pere at this very moment—been focused on other matters.

Callahan's low men, for instance. They might well be taheen, creatures neither of the *Prim* nor of the natural world but misbegotten things from somewhere between the two. They certainly weren't the sort of beings Roland called slow mutants, for those had arisen as a result of the old ones' ill-advised wars and disastrous experiments. No, they might be genuine taheen, sometimes known as the third people or the can-toi, and yes, Roland should have known. How many of the taheen now served the being known as the Crimson King? Some? Many?

All?

If the third answer was the correct one, Roland reckoned the road to the Tower would be difficult indeed. But to look beyond the horizon was not much in the gunslinger's nature, and in this case his lack of imagination was surely a blessing.

SIX

He saw what he needed to see. Although the can-toi—Callahan's low folk—had surrounded Jake and Callahan on all sides (the two of them hadn't even seen the duo behind them, the ones who'd been guarding the doors to Sixty-first Street), the Pere had frozen them with the carving, just as Jake had been able to freeze and fascinate people with the key he'd found in the vacant lot. A yellow taheen with the body of a man and the head of a waseau had some sort of gun near at hand but made no effort to grab it.

Yet there was another problem, one Roland's eye, trained to see every possible snare and ambush, fixed upon at once. He saw the blasphemous parody of Eld's Last Fellowship on the wall and understood its significance completely in the seconds before it was ripped away. And the smell: not just flesh but human flesh. This too he would have understood earlier, had he had time to think about it . . . only life in Calla Bryn Sturgis had allowed him little time to think. In the Calla, as in a storybook, life had been one damned thing after another.

Yet it was clear enough now, wasn't it? The low folk might only be taheen; a child's ogres, if it did ya. Those behind the tapestry were what Callahan had called Type One vampires and what Roland himself knew as the Grandfathers, perhaps the most gruesome and powerful survivors of the *Prim's* long-ago recession. And while such as the taheen might be content to stand as they were, gawking at the sigil Callahan held up, the Grandfathers wouldn't spare it a second glance.

Now clattering bugs came pouring out from under the table. They were of a sort Roland had seen before, and any doubts he might still have held about what was behind that tapestry departed at the sight of them. They were parasites, blood-drinkers, camp-followers: Grandfather-fleas. Probably not dangerous while there was a bumbler present, but of course when you spied the little doctors in such numbers, the Grandfathers were never far behind.

As Oy charged at the bugs, Roland of Gilead did the only thing he could think of: he swam down to Callahan.

Into Callahan.

SEVEN

Pere, I am here.

Aye, Roland. What—

No time. GET HIM OUT OF HERE. You must. Get him out while there's still time!

EIGHT

And Callahan tried. The boy, of course, didn't want to go. Looking at him through the Pere's eyes, Roland thought with some bitterness: *I should have schooled him better in betrayal. Yet all the gods know I did the best I could.*

"Go while you can," Callahan told Jake, striving for calmness. "Catch up to her *if* you can. This is the command of your dinh. This is also the will of the White."

It should have moved him but it didn't, he still argued—gods, he was nearly as bad as Eddie!—and Roland could wait no longer.

Pere, let me.

Roland seized control without waiting for a reply. He could already feel the wave, the *aven kal*, beginning to recede. And the Grandfathers would come at any second.

“Go, Jake!” he cried, using the Pere’s mouth and vocal cords like a loudspeaker. If he had thought about how one might do something like this, he would have been lost completely, but thinking about things had also never been his way, and he was grateful to see the boy’s eyes flash wide. “*You have this one chance and must take it! Find her! As dinh I command you!*”

Then, as in the hospital ward with Susannah, he felt himself once more tossed upward like something without weight, blown out of Callahan’s mind and body like a bit of cobweb or a fluff of dandelion thistle. For a moment he tried to flail his way back, like a swimmer trying to buck a strong current just long enough to reach the shore, but it was impossible.

Roland! That was Eddie’s voice, and filled with dismay. *Jesus, Roland, what in God’s name are those things?*

The tapestry had been torn aside. The creatures which rushed out were ancient and freakish, their warlock faces warped with teeth growing wild, their mouths propped open by fangs as thick as the gunslinger’s wrists, their wrinkled and stubbled chins slick with blood and scraps of meat.

And still—gods, oh gods—the boy remained!

“*They’ll kill Oy first!*” Callahan shouted, only Roland didn’t think it *was* Callahan. He thought it was Eddie, using Callahan’s voice as Roland had. Somehow Eddie had found either smoother currents or more strength. Enough to get inside after Roland had been blown out. “*They’ll kill him in front of you and drink his blood!*”

It was finally enough. The boy turned and fled with Oy running beside him. He cut directly in front of the waseau-taheen and between two of the low *folken*, but none made any effort to grab him. They were still staring at the raised Turtle on Callahan’s palm, mesmerized.

The Grandfathers paid no attention to the fleeing boy at all, as Roland had felt sure they would not. He knew from Pere Callahan’s story that one of the Grandfathers had come to the little town of ’Salem’s Lot where the Pere had for awhile preached. The Pere had

lived through the experience—not common for those who faced such monsters after losing their weapons and sigils of power—but the thing had forced Callahan to drink of its tainted blood before letting him go. It had marked him for these others.

Callahan was holding his cross-sigil out toward them, but before Roland could see anything else, he was exhaled back into darkness. The chimes began again, all but driving him mad with their awful tintinnabulation. Somewhere, faintly, he could hear Eddie shouting. Roland reached for him in the dark, brushed Eddie’s arm, lost it, found his hand, and seized it. They rolled over and over, clutching each other, trying not to be separated, hoping not to be lost in the doorless dark between the worlds.



CHAPTER III: EDDIE MAKES A CALL

ONE

Eddie returned to John Cullum's old car the way he'd sometimes come out of nightmares as a teenager: tangled up and panting with fright, totally disoriented, not sure of who he was, let alone where.

He had a second to realize that, incredible as it seemed, he and Roland were floating in each other's arms like unborn twins in the womb, only this was no womb. A pen and a paperclip were drifting in front of his eyes. So was a yellow plastic case he recognized as an eight-track tape. *Don't waste your time, John*, he thought. *No true thread there, that's a dead-end gadget if there ever was one.*

Something was scratching the back of his neck. Was it the domelight of John Cullum's scurgy old Galaxie? By God he thought it w—

Then gravity reasserted itself and they fell, with meaningless objects raining down all around them. The floormat which had been floating around in the Ford's cabin landed draped over the steering wheel. Eddie's midsection hit the top of the front seat and air exploded out of him in a rough whoosh. Roland landed beside him, and on his bad hip. He gave a single barking cry and then began to pull himself back into the front seat.

Eddie opened his mouth to speak. Before he could, Callahan's voice filled his head: *Hile, Roland! Hile, gunslinger!*

How much psychic effort had it cost the Pere to speak from that other world? And behind it, faint but *there*, the sound of bestial, triumphant cries. Howls that were not quite words.

Eddie's wide and startled eyes met Roland's faded blue ones. He reached out for the gunslinger's left hand, thinking: *He's going. Great God, I think the Pere is going.*

May you find your Tower, Roland, and breach it——and may you climb to the top," Eddie breathed.

They were back in John Cullum's car and parked—askew but otherwise peacefully enough—at the side of Kansas Road in the shady early-evening hours of a summer's day, but what Eddie saw was the orange hell-light of that restaurant that wasn't a restaurant at all but a den of cannibals. The thought that there could *be* such things, that people walked past their hiding place each and every day, not knowing what was inside, not feeling the greedy eyes that perhaps marked them and measured them—

Then, before he could think further, he cried out with pain as phantom teeth settled into his neck and cheeks and midriff; as his mouth was violently kissed by nettles and his testicles were skewered. He screamed, clawing at the air with his free hand, until Roland grabbed it and forced it down.

"Stop, Eddie. Stop. They're gone." A pause. The connection broke and the pain faded. Roland was right, of course. Unlike the Pere, they had escaped. Eddie saw that Roland's eyes were shiny with tears. "*He's gone, too. The Pere.*"

"The vampires? You know, the cannibals? Did . . . Did they . . . ?" Eddie couldn't finish the thought. The idea of Pere Callahan as one of *them* was too awful to speak aloud.

"No, Eddie. Not at all. He—" Roland pulled the gun he still wore. The scrolled steel sides gleamed in the late light. He tucked the barrel deep beneath his chin for a moment, looking at Eddie as he did it.

"He escaped them," Eddie said.

"Aye, and how angry they must be."

Eddie nodded, suddenly exhausted. And his wounds were aching again. No, *sobbing*. "Good," he said. "Now put that thing back where it belongs before you shoot yourself with it." And as Roland did: "What just happened to us? Did we go todash or was it another Beamquake?"

"I think it was a bit of both," Roland said. "There's a thing called *aven kal*, which is like a tidal-wave that runs along the Path of the Beam. We were lifted on it."

“And allowed to see what we wanted to see.”

Roland thought about this for a moment, then shook his head with great firmness. “We saw what the *Beam* wanted us to see. Where it wants us to go.”

“Roland, did you study this stuff when you were a kid? Did your old pal Vannay teach classes in . . . I don’t know, *The Anatomy of Beams and Bends o’ the Rainbow?*”

Roland was smiling. “Yes, I suppose that we were taught such things in both *History* and *Summa Logicales*.”

“*Logicka-what?*”

Roland didn’t answer. He was looking out the window of Cullum’s car, still trying to get his breath back—both the physical and the figurative. It really wasn’t that hard to do, not here; being in this part of Bridgton was like being in the neighborhood of a certain vacant lot in Manhattan. Because there was a generator near here. Not sai King, as Roland had first believed, but the *potential* of sai King . . . of what sai King might be able to create, given world enough and time. Wasn’t King also being carried on *aven kal*, perhaps generating the very wave that lifted him?

A man can’t pull himself up by his own bootstraps no matter how hard he tries, Cort had lectured when Roland, Cuthbert, Alain, and Jamie had been little more than toddlers. Cort speaking in the tone of cheery self-assurance that had gradually hardened to harshness as his last group of lads grew toward their trials of manhood. But maybe about bootstraps Cort had been wrong. Maybe, under certain circumstances, a man *could* pull himself up by them. Or give birth to the universe from his navel, as Gan was said to have done. As a writer of stories, was King not a creator? And at bottom, wasn’t creation about making something from nothing—seeing the world in a grain of sand or pulling one’s self up by one’s own bootstraps?

And what was he doing, sitting here and thinking long philosophical thoughts while two members of his tet were lost?

“Get this carriage going,” Roland said, trying to ignore the sweet humming he could hear—whether the Voice of the Beam or the Voice of Gan the Creator, he didn’t know. “We’ve got to get to Turtleback Lane in this town of Lovell and see if we can’t find our way through to where Susannah is.”

And not just for Susannah, either. If Jake succeeded in eluding the monsters in the Dixie Pig, he would also head to where she lay. Of this Roland had no doubt.

Eddie reached for the transmission lever—despite all its gyrations, Cullum’s old Galaxie had never quit running—and then his hand fell away from it. He turned and looked at Roland with a bleak eye.

“What ails thee, Eddie? Whatever it is, spill it quick. The baby’s coming now—may have come already. Soon they’ll have no more use for her!”

“I know,” Eddie said. “But we can’t go to Lovell.” He grimaced as if what he was saying was causing him physical pain. Roland guessed it probably was. “Not yet.”

TWO

They sat quiet for a moment, listening to the sweetly tuned hum of the Beam, a hum that sometimes became joyous voices. They sat looking into the thickening shadows in the trees, where a million faces and a million stories lurked, O can you say unfound door, can you say lost.

Eddie half-expected Roland to shout at him—it wouldn’t be the first time—or maybe clout him upside the head, as the gunslinger’s old teacher, Cort, had been wont to do when his pupils were slow or contrary. Eddie almost hoped he would. A good shot to the jaw might clear his head, by Shardik.

Only muddy thinking’s not the trouble and you know it, he thought. Your head is clearer than his. If it wasn’t, you could let go of this world and go on hunting for your lost wife.

At last Roland spoke. “What is it, then? This?” He bent and picked up the folded piece of paper with Aaron Deepneau’s pinched handwriting on it. Roland looked at it for a moment, then flicked it into Eddie’s lap with a little grimace of distaste.

“You know how much I love her,” Eddie said in a low, strained voice. “You *know* that.”

Roland nodded, but without looking at him. He appeared to be staring down at his own broken and dusty boots, and the dirty floor of the passenger-side footwell. Those downcast eyes, that gaze which

would not turn to him who'd come almost to idolize Roland of Gilead, sort of broke Eddie Dean's heart. Yet he pressed on. If there had ever been room for mistakes, it was gone now. This was the endgame.

"I'd go to her this minute if I thought it was the right thing to do. Roland, this *second!* But we *have* to finish our business in this world. Because this world is one-way. Once we leave today, July 9th, 1977, we can never come here again. We—"

"Eddie, we've been through all of this." Still not looking at him.

"Yes, but do you *understand* it? Only one bullet to shoot, one 'Riza to throw. That's why we came to Bridgton in the first place! God knows I wanted to go to Turtleback Lane as soon as John Cullum told us about it, but I thought we had to see the writer, and talk to him. And I was right, wasn't I?" Almost pleading now. "*Wasn't I?*"

Roland looked at him at last, and Eddie was glad. This was hard enough, *wretched* enough, without having to bear the turned-away, downcast gaze of his dinh.

"And it may not matter if we stay a little longer. If we concentrate on those two women lying together on those two beds, Roland—if we concentrate on Suze and Mia *as we last saw them*—then it's possible we can cut into their history at that point. Isn't it?"

After a long, considering moment during which Eddie wasn't conscious of drawing a single breath, the gunslinger nodded. Such could not happen if on Turtleback Lane they found what the gunslinger had come to think of as an "old-ones door," because such doors were *dedicated*, and always came out at the same place. But were they to find a *magic* door somewhere along Turtleback Lane in Lovell, one that had been left behind when the *Prim* receded, then yes, they might be able to cut in where they wanted. But such doors could be tricky, too; this they had found out for themselves in the Cave of Voices, when the door there had sent Jake and Callahan to New York instead of Roland and Eddie, thereby scattering all their plans into the Land of Nineteen.

"What else must we do?" Roland said. There was no anger in his voice, but to Eddie he sounded both tired and unsure.

"Whatever it is, it's gonna be hard. That much I guarantee you."

Eddie took the bill of sale and gazed at it as grimly as any Hamlet in the history of drama had ever stared upon the skull of poor Yorick. Then he looked back at Roland. “This gives us title to the vacant lot with the rose in it. We need to get it to Moses Carver of Holmes Dental Industries. And where is he? We don’t know.”

“For that matter, Eddie, we don’t even know if he’s still alive.”

Eddie voiced a wild laugh. “You say true, I say thankya! Why don’t I turn us around, Roland? I’ll drive us back to Stephen King’s house. We can cadge twenty or thirty bucks off him—because, brother, I don’t know if you noticed, but we don’t have a crying dime between the two of us—but more important, we can get him to write us a really good hardboiled private eye, someone who looks like Bogart and kicks ass like Clint Eastwood. Let *him* track down this guy Carver for us!”

He shook his head as if to clear it. The hum of the voices sounded sweetly in his ears, the perfect antidote to the ugly todash chimes.

“I mean, my wife is in bad trouble somewhere up the line, for all I know she’s being eaten alive by vampires or vampire bugs, and here I sit beside a country road with a guy whose most basic skill is shooting people, trying to work out how I’m going to start a fucking *corporation!*”

“Slow down,” Roland said. Now that he was resigned to staying in this world a little longer, he seemed calm enough. “Tell me what it is you feel we need to do before we can shake the dirt of this where and when from our heels for good.”

So Eddie did.

THREE

Roland had heard a good deal of it before, but hadn’t fully understood what a difficult position they were in. They owned the vacant lot on Second Avenue, yes, but their basis for ownership was a holographic document that would look mighty shaky in a court o’ legal, especially if the powers-that-be from the Sombra Corporation started throwing lawyers at them.

Eddie wanted to get the writ of trade to Moses Carver, if he could, along with the information that his goddaughter, Odetta Holmes—

missing for thirteen years by the summer of 1977—was alive and well and wanted above all things for Carver to assume guardianship, not just of the vacant lot itself, but of a certain rose growing wild within its borders.

Moses Carver—if still alive—had to be convinced enough by what he heard to fold the so-called Tet Corporation into Holmes Industries (or vice-versa). More! He had to dedicate what was left of his life (and Eddie had an idea Carver might be Aaron Deepneau's age by now) to building a corporate giant whose only real purpose was to thwart two other corporate giants, Sombra and North Central Positronics, at every turn. To strangle them if possible, and keep them from becoming a monster that would leave its destroyer's track across all the dying expanse of Mid-World and mortally wound the Dark Tower itself.

"Maybe we should have left the writ o' trade with sai Deepneau," Roland mused when he had heard Eddie through to the end. "At least he could have located this Carver and sought him out and told our tale for us."

"No, we did right to keep it." This was one of the few things of which Eddie was completely sure. "If we'd left this piece of paper with Aaron Deepneau, it'd be ashes in the wind by now."

"You believe Tower would have repented his bargain and talked his friend into destroying it?"

"I know it," Eddie said. "But even if Deepneau could stand up to his old friend going yatta-yatta-yatta in his ear for hours on end —'Burn it, Aaron, they coerced me and now they mean to screw me, you know it as well as I do, burn it and we'll call the cops on those *momsers*'—do you think Moses Carver would believe such a crazy story?"

Roland smiled bleakly. "I don't think his belief would be an issue, Eddie. Because, think thee a moment, how much of our crazy story has Aaron Deepneau actually *heard*?"

"Not enough," Eddie agreed. He closed his eyes and pressed the heels of his hands against them. Hard. "I can only think of one person who could actually convince Moses Carver to do the things we'd have to ask, and she's otherwise occupied. In the year of '99. And by then, Carver's gonna be as dead as Deepneau and maybe Tower himself."

“Well, what can we do without her? What will satisfy you?”

Eddie was thinking that perhaps Susannah could come back to 1977 without them, since *she*, at least, hadn't visited it yet. Well . . . she'd come here todash, but he didn't think that exactly counted. He supposed she might be barred from 1977 solely on the grounds that she was ka-tet with him and Roland. Or some other grounds. Eddie didn't know. Reading the fine print had never been his strong point. He turned to ask Roland what he thought, but Roland spoke before he got a chance.

“What about our dan-tete?” he asked.

Although Eddie understood the term—it meant baby god or little savior—he did not at first understand what Roland meant by it. Then he did. Had not their Waterford dan-tete loaned them the very car they were sitting in, say thankya? “*Cullum?* Is that who you're talking about, Roland? The guy with the case of autographed baseballs?”

“You say true,” Roland replied. He spoke in that dry tone which indicated not amusement but mild exasperation. “Don't overwhelm me with your enthusiasm for the idea.”

“But . . . you told him to go away! And he agreed to go!”

“And how enthusiastic would you say he was about visiting his friend in Vermong?”

“*Mont,*” Eddie said, unable to suppress a smile. Yet, smiling or not, what he felt most strongly was dismay. He thought that ugly scraping sound he heard in his imagination was Roland's two-fingered right hand, prospecting around at the very bottom of the barrel.

Roland shrugged as if to say he didn't care if Cullum had spoken of going to Vermont or Barony o' Garlan. “Answer my question.”

“Well . . .”

Cullum actually hadn't expressed much enthusiasm for the idea at all. He had from the very first reacted more like one of *them* than one of the grass-eaters among whom he lived (Eddie recognized grass-eaters very easily, having been one himself until Roland first kidnapped him and then began his homicidal lessons). Cullum had been clearly intrigued by the gunslingers, and curious about their business in his little town. But Roland had been very emphatic about what he wanted, and folks had a way of following his orders.

Now he made a twirling motion with his right hand, his old impatient gesture. *Hurry, for your father's sake. Shit or get off the commode.*

"I guess he really didn't *want* to go," Eddie said. "But that doesn't mean he's still at his house in East Stoneham."

"He is, though. He *didn't* go."

Eddie managed to keep his mouth from dropping open only with some effort. "How can you know that? Can you touch him, is that it?"

Roland shook his head.

"Then how—"

"Ka."

"Ka? *Ka?* Just what the fuck does *that* mean?"

Roland's face was haggard and tired, the skin pale beneath his tan. "Who else do we know in this part of the world?"

"No one, but—"

"Then it's him." Roland spoke flatly, as if stating some obvious fact of life for a child: up is over your head, down is where your feet stick to the earth.

Eddie got ready to tell him that was stupid, nothing more than rank superstition, then didn't. Putting aside Deepneau, Tower, Stephen King, and the hideous Jack Andolini, John Cullum *was* the only person they knew in this part of the world (or on this level of the Tower, if you preferred to think of it that way). And, after the things Eddie had seen in the last few months—hell, in the last *week*—who was he to sneer at superstition?

"All right," Eddie said. "I guess we better try it."

"How do we get in touch?"

"We can phone him from Bridgton. But in a story, Roland, a minor character like John Cullum would *never* come in off the bench to save the day. It wouldn't be considered realistic."

"In life," Roland said, "I'm sure it happens all the time."

And Eddie laughed. What the hell else could you do? It was just so perfectly *Roland*.

FOUR

BRIDGTON HIGH STREET 1 HIGHLAND LAKE 2

HARRISON 3
WATERFORD 6
SWEDEN 9
LOVELL 18
FRYEBURG 24

They had just passed this sign when Eddie said, “Root around in the glove-compartment a little, Roland. See if ka or the Beam or whatever left us a little spare change for the pay phone.”

“Glove—? Do you mean this panel here?”

“Yeah.”

Roland first tried to turn the chrome button on the front, then got with the program and pushed it. The inside was a mare’s nest that hadn’t been improved by the Galaxie’s brief period of weightlessness. There were credit card receipts, a very old tube of what Eddie identified as “tooth-paste” (Roland could make out the words **HOLMES DENTAL** on it quite clearly), a foppergraff showing a smiling little girl—Cullum’s niece, mayhap—on a pony, a stick of what he first took for explosive (Eddie said it was a road flare, for emergencies), a magazine that appeared to be called YANKME . . . and a cigar-box. Roland couldn’t quite make out the word on this, although he thought it might be *trolls*. He showed the box to Eddie, whose eyes lit up.

“That says TOLLS,” he said. “Maybe you’re right about Cullum and ka. Open it up, Roland, do it please ya.”

The child who had given this box as a gift had crafted a loving (and rather clumsy) catch on the front to hold it closed. Roland slipped the catch, opened the box, and showed Eddie a great many silver coins. “Is it enough to call sai Cullum’s house?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “Looks like enough to call Fairbanks, Alaska. It won’t help us a bit, though, if Cullum’s on the road to Vermont.”

FIVE

The Bridgton town square was bounded by a drug store and a pizza-joint on one side; a movie theater (The Magic Lantern) and a department store (Reny’s) on the other. Between the theater and the

department store was a little plaza equipped with benches and three pay phones.

Eddie swept through Cullum's box of toll-change and gave Roland six dollars in quarters. "I want you to go over there," he said, pointing at the drug store, "and get me a tin of aspirin. Will you know it when you see it?"

"Astin. I'll know it."

"The smallest size they have is what I want, because six bucks really isn't much money. Then go next door, to that place that says Bridgton Pizza and Sandwiches. If you've still got at least sixteen of those money-coins left, tell them you want a hoagie."

Roland nodded, which wasn't good enough for Eddie. "Let me hear you say it."

"Hoggie."

"Hoagie."

"HOOG-gie."

"Ho—" Eddie quit. "Roland, let me hear you say 'poorboy.'"

"Poor boy."

"Good. If you have at least sixteen quarters left, ask for a poorboy. Can you say 'lots of mayo'?"

"Lots of mayo."

"Yeah. If you have less than sixteen, ask for a salami and cheese sandwich. *Sandwich*, not a popkin."

"Salommy sanditch."

"Close enough. And don't say anything else unless you absolutely have to."

Roland nodded. Eddie was right, it would be better if he did not speak. People only had to look at him to know, in their secret hearts, that he wasn't from these parts. They also had a tendency to step away from him. Better he not exacerbate that.

The gunslinger dropped a hand to his left hip as he turned toward the street, an old habit that paid no comfort this time; both revolvers were in the trunk of Cullum's Galaxie, wrapped in their cartridge belts.

Before he could get going again, Eddie grabbed his shoulder. The gunslinger swung round, eyebrows raised, faded eyes on his friend.

“We have a saying in our world, Roland—we say so-and-so was grasping at straws.”

“And what does it mean?”

“This,” Eddie said bleakly. “What we’re doing. Wish me good luck, fella.”

Roland nodded. “Aye, so I do. Both of us.”

He began to turn away and Eddie called him back again. This time Roland wore an expression of faint impatience.

“Don’t get killed crossing the street,” Eddie said, and then briefly mimicked Cullum’s way of speaking. “Summah folks’re thicker’n ticks on a dog. And they’re not ridin hosses.”

“Make your call, Eddie,” Roland said, and then crossed Bridgton’s high street with slow confidence, walking in the same rolling gait that had taken him across a thousand other high streets in a thousand small towns.

Eddie watched him, then turned to the telephone and consulted the directions. After that he lifted the receiver and dialed the number for Directory Assistance.

SIX

He didn’t go, the gunslinger had said, speaking of John Cullum with flat certainty. And why? Because Cullum was the end of the line, there was no one else for them to call. Roland of Gilead’s damned old ka, in other words.

After a brief wait, the Directory Assistance operator coughed up Cullum’s number. Eddie tried to memorize it—he’d always been good at remembering numbers, Henry had sometimes called him Little Einstein—but this time he couldn’t be confident of his ability. Something seemed to have happened either to his thinking processes in general (which he didn’t believe) or to his ability to remember certain artifacts of this world (which he sort of did). As he asked for the number a second time—and wrote it in the gathered dust on the phone kiosk’s little ledge—Eddie found himself wondering if he’d still be able to read a novel, or follow the plot of a movie from the succession of images on a screen. He rather doubted it. And what did it matter? The Magic Lantern next door was showing *Star Wars*, and

Eddie thought that if he made it to the end of his life's path and into the clearing without another look at Luke Skywalker and another listen to Darth Vader's noisy breathing, he'd still be pretty much okay.

"Thanks, ma'am," he told the operator, and was about to dial again when there was a series of explosions behind him. Eddie whirled, heart-rate spiking, right hand dipping, expecting to see Wolves, or harriers, or maybe that son of a bitch Flagg—

What he saw was a convertible filled with laughing, goofy-faced high school boys with sunburned cheeks. One of them had just tossed out a string of firecrackers left over from the Fourth of July—what kids their age in Calla Bryn Sturgis would have called bangers.

If I'd had a gun on my hip, I might have shot a couple of those bucks, Eddie thought. *You want to talk goofy, start with that.* Yes. Well. And maybe he might not have. Either way, he had to admit the possibility that he was no longer exactly safe in the more civilized quarters.

"Live with it," Eddie murmured, then added the great sage and eminent junkie's favorite advice for life's little problems: "*Deal.*"

He dialed John Cullum's number on the old-fashioned rotary phone, and when a robot voice—Blaine the Mono's great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, mayhap—asked him to deposit ninety cents, Eddie dropped in a buck. What the hell, he was saving the world.

The phone rang once . . . rang twice . . . and was picked up!

"John!" Eddie almost yelled. "Good fucking deal! John, this is—"

But the voice on the other end was already speaking. As a child of the late eighties, Eddie knew this did not bode well.

"—have reached John Cullum of Cullum Caretakin and Camp Checkin," said Cullum's voice in its familiar slow Yankee drawl. "I gut called away kinda sudden, don'tcha know, and can't say with any degree a' certainty just when I'll be back. If this inconveniences ya, I beg pa'aad'n, but you c'n call Gary Crowell, at 926-5555, or Junior Barker, at 929-4211."

Eddie's initial dismay had departed—depaa-aated, Cullum himself would have said—right around the time the man's wavery recorded voice was telling Eddie that he, Cullum, couldn't say with any degree of certainty when he'd be back. Because Cullum was right there, in his hobbit little cottage on the western shore of Keywadin Pond, either sitting on his overstuffed hobbit sofa or in one of the two similarly

overstuffed hobby chairs. Sitting there and monitoring messages on his no-doubt-clunky mid-seventies answering machine. And Eddie knew this because . . . well . . .

Because he just knew.

The primitive recording couldn't completely hide the sly humor that had crept into Cullum's voice by the end of the message. "Coss, if you're still set on talkin to nobody but yours truly, you c'n leave me a message at the beep. Keep it short." The final word came out *shawt*.

Eddie waited for the beep and then said, "It's Eddie Dean, John. I know you're there, and I think you've been waiting for my call. Don't ask me *why* I think that, because I don't really know, but—"

There was a loud click in Eddie's ear, and then Cullum's voice—his *live* voice—said, "Hello there, son, you takin good care of my car?"

For a moment Eddie was too bemused to reply, for Cullum's Downeast accent had turned the question into something quite different: *You takin good care of my ka?*

"Boy?" Cullum asked, suddenly concerned. "You still on the wire?"

"Yeah," Eddie said, "and so are you. I thought you were going to Vermont, John."

"Well, I tell you what. This place ain't seen a day this excitin prob'ly since South Stoneham Shoe burnt down in 1923. The cops've gut all the ruds out of town blocked off."

Eddie was sure they were letting folks through the roadblocks if they could show proper identification, but he ignored that issue in favor of something else. "Want to tell me you couldn't find your way out of that town without seeing a single cop, if it suited your fancy?"

There was a brief pause. In it, Eddie became aware of someone at his elbow. He didn't turn to look; it was Roland. Who else in this world would smell—subtly but unquestionably—of another world?

"Oh, well," Cullum said at last. "Maybe I *do* know a woods road or two that come out over in Lovell. It's been a dry summer, n I guess I could get m'truck up em."

"One or two?"

"Well, say three or four." A pause, which Eddie didn't break. He was having too much fun. "Five or six," Cullum amended, and Eddie chose not to respond to this, either. "Eight," Cullum said at last, and when Eddie laughed, Cullum joined in. "What's on your mind, son?"

Eddie glanced at Roland, who was holding out a tin of aspirin between the two remaining fingers of his right hand. Eddie took it gratefully. "I want you to come over to Lovell," he said to Cullum. "Seems like we might have a little more palavering to do, after all."

"Ayuh, and it seems like I musta known it," Cullum said, "although it was never right up on the top of my mind; up there I kep' thinkin 'I'll be gettin on the road to Montpelier soon,' and still I kep' findin one more thing and one more thing to do around here. If you'da called five minutes ago, you woulda gotten a busy—I 'us on the phone to Charlie Beemer. It was his wife 'n sister-in-law that got killed in the market, don't you know. And then I thought, 'What the hell, I'll just give the whole place a good sweep before I put my gear in the back of the truck and go.' Nothin up on top is what I'm sayin, but down underneath I guess I been waitin for your call ever since I got back here. Where'll you be? Turtleback Lane?"

Eddie popped open the aspirin tin and looked greedily at the little line-up of tablets. Once a junkie, always a junkie, he reckoned. Even when it came to this stuff. "Ayuh," he said, with his tongue only partly in his cheek; he had become quite the mimic of regional dialects since meeting Roland on a Delta jet descending into Kennedy Airport. "You said that lane was nothing but a two-mile loop off Route 7, didn't you?"

"So I did. Some very nice homes along Turtleback." A brief, reflective pause. "And a lot of em for sale. There's been quite a number of walk-ins in that part of the world just lately. As I may have also mentioned. Such things make folks nervous, and rich folks, at least, c'n afford to get away from what makes it ha'ad to sleep at night."

Eddie could wait no longer; he took three of the aspirin and tossed them into his mouth, relishing the bitter taste as they dissolved on his tongue. Bad as the pain currently was, he would have borne twice as much if he could have heard from Susannah. But she was quiet. He had an idea that the line of communication between them, chancy at best, had ceased to exist with the coming of Mia's damned baby.

"You boys might want to keep your shootin irons close at hand if you're headed over to Turtleback in Lovell," Cullum said. "As for me, I think I'll just toss m'shotgun in m'truck before I set sail."

“Why not?” Eddie agreed. “You want to look for your car along the loop, okay? You’ll find it.”

“Ayuh, that old Galaxie’s ha’ad to miss,” Cullum agreed. “Tell me somethin, son. I’m not goin to V’mont, but I gut a feelin you mean to send me somewhere, if I agree to go. You mind tellin me where?”

Eddie thought that Mark Twain might elect to call the next chapter of John Cullum’s no doubt colorful life *A Maine Yankee in the Crimson King’s Court*, but elected not to say so. “Have you ever been to New York City?”

“Gorry, yes. Had a forty-eight-hour pass there, when I was in the Army.” The final word came out in a ridiculously flat drawl. “Went to Radio City Music Hall and the Empire State Buildin, that much I remember. Musta made a few other tourist stops, though, because I lost thirty dollars out of m’wallet and a couple of months later I got diagnosed with a pretty fine case of the clap.”

“This time you’ll be too busy to catch the clap. Bring your credit cards. I know you have some, because I got a look at the receipts in your glove-compartment.” He felt an almost insane urge to draw the last word out, make it *compaa-aaaatment*.

“Mess in there, ennit?” Cullum asked equably.

“Ayuh, looks like what was left when the dog chewed the shoes. See you in Lovell, John.” Eddie hung up. He looked at the bag Roland was carrying and lifted his eyebrows.

“It’s a poorboy sanditch,” Roland said. “With lots of mayo, whatever that is. I’d want a sauce that didn’t look quite so much like come, myself, but may it do ya fine.”

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Gosh, that’s a real appetite-builder.”

“Do you say so?”

Eddie had to remind himself once more that Roland had almost no sense of humor. “I do, I do. Come on. I can eat my come-and-cheese sandwich while I drive. Also, we need to talk about how we’re going to handle this.”

SEVEN

The way to handle it, both agreed, was to tell John Cullum as much of their tale as they thought his credulity (and sanity) could stand. Then,

if all went well, they would entrust him with the vital bill of sale and send him to Aaron Deepneau. With strict orders to make sure he spoke to Deepneau apart from the not entirely trustworthy Calvin Tower.

“Cullum and Deepneau can work together to track Moses Carver down,” Eddie said, “and I think I can give Cullum enough information about Suze—private stuff—to convince Carver that she’s still alive. After that, though . . . well, a lot depends on how convincing those two guys can be. And how eager they are to work for the Tet Corporation in their sunset years. Hey, they may surprise us! I can’t see Cullum in a suit and tie, but traveling around the country and throwing monkey-wrenches in Sombra’s business?” He considered, head cocked, then nodded with a smile. “Yeah. I can see that pretty well.”

“Susannah’s godfather is apt to be an old codger himself,” Roland observed. “Just one of a different color. Such fellows often speak their own language when they’re an-tet. And mayhap I can give John Cullum something that will help convince Carver to throw in with us.”

“A sigul?”

“Yes.”

Eddie was intrigued. “What kind?”

But before Roland could answer, they saw something that made Eddie stomp on the brake-pedal. They were in Lovell now, and on Route 7. Ahead of them, staggering unsteadily along the shoulder, was an old man with snarled and straggly white hair. He wore a clumsy wrap of dirty cloth that could by no means be called a robe. His scrawny arms and legs were whipped with scratches. There were sores on them as well, burning a dull red. His feet were bare, and equipped with ugly and dangerous-looking yellow talons instead of toes. Clashed under one arm was a splintery wooden object that might have been a broken lyre. Eddie thought no one could have looked more out of place on this road, where the only pedestrians they had seen so far were serious-looking exercisers, obviously from “away,” looking ever so put-together in their nylon jogging shorts, baseball hats, and tee-shirts (one jogger’s shirt bore the legend **DON’T SHOOT THE TOURISTS**).

The thing that had been trudging along the berm of Route 7 turned toward them, and Eddie let out an involuntary cry of horror. Its eyes bled together above the bridge of its nose, reminding him of a double-yolked egg in a frypan. A fang depended from one nostril like a bone booger. Yet somehow worst of all was the dull green glow that baked out from the creature's face. It was as if its skin had been painted with some sort of thin fluorescent gruel.

It saw them and immediately dashed into the woods, dropping its splintered lyre behind.

"*Christ!*" Eddie screamed. If that was a walk-in, he hoped never to see another.

"Stop, Eddie!" Roland shouted, then braced the heel of one hand against the dashboard as Cullum's old Ford slid to a dusty halt close to where the thing had vanished.

"Open the backhold," Roland said as he opened the door. "Get my widowmaker."

"Roland, we're in kind of a hurry here, and Turtleback Lane's still three miles north. I really think we ought to—"

"*Shut your fool's mouth and get it!*" Roland roared, then ran to the edge of the woods. He drew a deep breath, and when he shouted after the rogue creature, his voice sent gooseflesh racing up Eddie's arms. He had heard Roland speak so once or twice before, but in between it was easy to forget that the blood of a King ran in his veins.

He spoke several phrases Eddie could not understand, then one he could: "So come forth, ye Child of Roderick, ye spoiled, ye lost, and make your bow before me, Roland, son of Steven, of the Line of Eld!"

For a moment there was nothing. Eddie opened the Ford's trunk and brought Roland his gun. Roland strapped it on without so much as a glance at Eddie, let alone a word of thanks.

Perhaps thirty seconds went by. Eddie opened his mouth to speak. Before he could, the dusty roadside foliage began to shake. A moment or two later, the misbegotten thing reappeared. It staggered with its head lowered. On the front of its robe was a large wet patch. Eddie could smell the reek of a sick thing's urine, wild and strong.

Yet it made a knee and raised one misshapen hand to its forehead, a doomed gesture of fealty that made Eddie feel like weeping. "Hile, Roland of Gilead, Roland of Eld! Will you show me some sigul, dear?"

In a town called River Crossing, an old woman who called herself Aunt Talitha had given Roland a silver cross on a fine-link silver chain. He'd worn it around his neck ever since. Now he reached into his shirt and showed it to the kneeling creature—a slow mutie dying of radiation sickness, Eddie was quite sure—and the thing gave a cracked cry of wonder.

“Would’ee have peace at the end of your course, thou Child of Roderick? Would’ee have the peace of the clearing?”

“Aye, my dear,” it said, sobbing, then added a great deal more in some gibberish tongue Eddie couldn’t understand. Eddie looked both ways along Route 7, expecting to see traffic—this was the height of the summer season, after all—but spied nothing in either direction. For the moment, at least, their luck still held.

“How many of you are there in these parts?” Roland asked, interrupting the walk-in. As he spoke, he drew his revolver and raised that old engine of death until it lay against his shirt.

The Child of Roderick tossed its hand at the horizon without looking up. “Delah, gunslinger,” he said, “for here the worlds are thin, say *anro con fa; sey-sey desene fanno billet cobair can. I Chevin devar dan do*. Because I felt sat for dem. *Can-toi, can-tah, can Discordia, aven la cam mah can. May-mi? Iffin lah vainen, eth—*”

“How many *dan devar*?”

It thought about Roland’s question, then spread its fingers (there *were* ten, Eddie noted) five times. Fifty. Although fifty of what, Eddie didn’t know.

“And Discordia?” Roland asked sharply. “Do you truly say so?”

“Oh aye, so says me, Chevin of Chayven, son of Hamil, minstrel of the South Plains that were once my home.”

“Say the name of the town that stands near Castle Discordia and I’ll release you.”

“Ah, gunslinger, all there are dead.”

“I think not. Say it.”

“Fedic!” screamed Chevin of Chayven, a wandering *musica* who could never have suspected its life would end in such a far, strange place—not the plains of Mid-World but the mountains of western Maine. It suddenly raised its horrid, glowing face to Roland. It spread its arms wide, like something which has been crucified. “*Fedic on the far*

side of Thunderclap, on the Path of the Beam! On V Shardik, V Maturin, the Road to the Dark T—

Roland's revolver spoke a single time. The bullet took the kneeling thing in the center of its forehead, completing the ruin of its ruined face. As it was flung backward, Eddie saw its flesh turn to greenish smoke as ephemeral as a hornet's wing. For a moment Eddie could see Chevin of Chayven's floating teeth like a ghostly ring of coral, and then they were gone.

Roland dropped his revolver back into his holster, then pronged the two remaining fingers of his right hand and drew them downward in front of his face, a benedictory gesture if Eddie had ever seen one.

"Give you peace," Roland said. Then he unbuckled his gunbelt and began to roll the weapon into it once more.

"Roland, was that . . . was it a slow mutant?"

"Aye, I suppose you'd say so, poor old thing. But the Rodericks are from beyond any lands I ever knew, although before the world moved on they gave their grace to Arthur Eld." He turned to Eddie, his blue eyes burning in his tired face. "Fedic is where Mia has gone to have her baby, I have no doubt. Where she's taken Susannah. By the last castle. We must backtrack to Thunderclap eventually, but Fedic's where we need to go first. It's good to know."

"He said he felt sad for someone. Who?"

Roland only shook his head, not answering Eddie's question. A Coca-Cola truck blasted by, and thunder rumbled in the far west.

"Fedic o' the Discordia," the gunslinger murmured instead. "Fedic o' the Red Death. If we can save Susannah—and Jake—we'll backtrack toward the Callas. But we'll return when our business there is done. And when we turn southeast again . . ."

"What?" Eddie asked uneasily. "What then, Roland?"

"Then there's no stopping until we reach the Tower." He held out his hands, watched them tremble minutely. Then he looked up at Eddie. His face was tired but unafraid. "I have never been so close. I hear all my lost friends and their lost fathers whispering to me. They whisper on the Tower's very breath."

Eddie looked at Roland for a minute, fascinated and frightened, and then broke the mood with an almost physical effort. "Well," he said, moving back toward the driver's door of the Ford, "if any of

those voices tells you what to say to Cullum—the best way to convince him of what we want—be sure to let me know.”

Eddie got in the car and closed the door before Roland could reply. In his mind's eye he kept seeing Roland leveling his big revolver. Saw him aiming it at the kneeling figure and pulling the trigger. This was the man he called both dinh and friend. But could he say with any certainty that Roland wouldn't do the same thing to him . . . or Suze . . . or Jake . . . if his heart told him it would take him closer to his Tower? He could not. And yet he would go on with him. Would have gone on even if he'd been sure in his heart—oh, God forbid!—that Susannah was dead. Because he had to. Because Roland had become a good deal more to him than his dinh or his friend.

“My father,” Eddie murmured under his breath just before Roland opened the passenger door and climbed in.

“Did you speak, Eddie?” Roland asked.

“Yes,” Eddie said. “‘Just a little farther.’ My very words.”

Roland nodded. Eddie dropped the transmission back into Drive and got the Ford rolling toward Turtleback Lane. Still in the distance—but a little closer than before—thunder rumbled again.



CHAPTER IV:

DAN-TETE

ONE

As the baby's time neared, Susannah Dean looked around, once more counting her enemies as Roland had taught her. *You must never draw, he'd said, until you know how many are against you, or you've satisfied yourself that you can never know, or you've decided it's your day to die.* She wished she didn't also have to cope with the terrible thought-invading helmet on her head, but whatever that thing was, it didn't seem concerned with Susannah's effort to count those present at the arrival of Mia's chap. And that was good.

There was Sayre, the man in charge. The *low* man, with one of those red spots pulsing in the center of his forehead. There was Scowther, the doctor between Mia's legs, getting ready to officiate at the delivery. Sayre had roughed the doc up when Scowther had displayed a little too much arrogance, but probably not enough to interfere with his efficiency. There were five other low men in addition to Sayre, but she'd only picked out two names. The one with the bulldog jowls and the heavy, sloping gut was Haber. Next to Haber was a bird-thing with the brown feathered head and vicious beebie eyes of a hawk. This creature's name seemed to be Jey, or possibly Gee. That was seven, all armed with what looked like automatic pistols in docker's clutches. Scowther's swung carelessly out from beneath his white coat each time he bent down. Susannah had already marked that one as hers.

There were also three pallid, watchful humanoid things standing beyond Mia. These, buried in dark blue auras, were vampires, Susannah was quite sure. Probably of the sort Callahan had called

Type Threes. (The Pere had once referred to them as pilot sharks.) That made ten. Two of the vampires carried bahs, the third some sort of electrical sword now turned down to no more than a guttering core of light. If she managed to get Scowther's gun (*when* you get it, sweetie, she amended—she'd read *The Power of Positive Thinking* and still believed every word the Rev. Peale had written), she would turn it on the man with the electric sword first. God might know how much damage such a weapon could inflict, but Susannah Dean didn't want to find out.

Also present was a nurse with the head of a great brown rat. The pulsing red eye in the center of her forehead made Susannah believe that most of the other low *folken* were wearing humanizing masks, probably so they wouldn't scare the game while out and about on the sidewalks of New York. They might not all look like rats underneath, but she was pretty sure that none of them looked like Robert Goulet. The rathead nurse was the only one present who wore no weapon that Susannah could see.

Eleven in all. Eleven in this vast and mostly deserted infirmary that wasn't, she felt quite sure, under the borough of Manhattan. And if she was going to settle their hash, it would have to be while they were occupied with Mia's baby—her precious *chap*.

"It's coming, doctor!" the nurse cried in nervous ecstasy.

It was. Susannah's counting stopped as the worst pain yet rolled over her. Over both of them. Burying them. They screamed in tandem. Scowther was commanding Mia to *push*, to *push NOW!*

Susannah closed her eyes and also bore down, for it was her baby, too . . . or had been. As she felt the pain flow out of her like water whirlpooling its way down a dark drain, she experienced the deepest sorrow she had ever known. For it was Mia the baby was flowing into; the last few lines of the living message Susannah's body had somehow been made to transmit. It was ending. Whatever happened next, this part was ending, and Susannah Dean let out a cry of mingled relief and regret; a cry that was itself like a song.

And then, before the horror began—something so terrible she would remember each detail as if in the glare of a brilliant light until the day of her entry into the clearing—she felt a small hot hand grip her wrist. Susannah turned her head, rolling the unpleasant weight of

the helmet with it. She could hear herself gasping. Her eyes met Mia's. Mia opened her lips and spoke a single word. Susannah couldn't hear it over Scowther's roaring (he was bending now, peering between Mia's legs and holding the forceps up and against his brow). Yet she *did* hear it, and understood that Mia was trying to fulfill her promise.

I'd free you, if chance allows, her kidnapper had said, and the word Susannah now heard in her mind and saw on the laboring woman's lips was *chassit*.

Susannah, do you hear me?

I hear you very well, Susannah said.

And you understand our compact?

Aye. I'll help you get away from these with your chap, if I can. And . . .

Kill us if you can't! the voice finished fiercely. It had never been so loud. That was partly the work of the connecting cable, Susannah felt sure. *Say it, Susannah, daughter of Dan!*

I'll kill you both if you—

She stopped there. Mia seemed satisfied, however, and that was well, because Susannah couldn't have gone on if both their lives had depended on it. Her eye had happened on the ceiling of this enormous room, over the aisles of beds halfway down. And there she saw Eddie and Roland. They were hazy, floating in and out of the ceiling, looking down at her like phantom fish.

Another pain, but this one not as severe. She could feel her thighs hardening, pushing, but that seemed far away. Not important. What mattered was whether or not she was really seeing what she thought she was seeing. Could it be that her overstressed mind, wishing for rescue, had created this hallucination to comfort her?

She could almost believe it. *Would* have, very likely, had they not both been naked, and surrounded by an odd collection of floating junk: a matchbook, a peanut, ashes, a penny. And a floormat, by God! A car floormat with FORD printed on it.

"Doctor, I can see the hea—"

A breathless squawk as Dr. Scowther, no gentleman he, elbowed Nurse Ratty unceremoniously aside and bent even closer to the juncture of Mia's thighs. As if he meant to pull her chap out with his

teeth, perhaps. The hawk-thing, Jey or Gee, was speaking to the one called Haber in an excited, buzzing dialect.

They're really there, Susannah thought. *The floormat proves it*. She wasn't sure *how* the floormat proved it, only that it did. And she mouthed the word Mia had given her: *chassit*. It was a password. It would open at least one door and perhaps many. To wonder if Mia had told the truth never even crossed Susannah's mind. They were tied together, not just by the cable and the helmets, but by the more primitive (and far more powerful) act of childbirth. No, Mia hadn't lied.

"Push, you gods-damned lazy bitch!" Scowther almost howled, and Roland and Eddie suddenly disappeared through the ceiling for good, as if blown away by the force of the man's breath. For all Susannah knew, they had been.

She turned on her side, feeling her hair stuck to her head in clumps, aware that her body was pouring out sweat in what could have been gallons. She pulled herself a little closer to Mia; a little closer to Scowther; a little closer to the crosshatched butt of Scowther's dangling automatic.

"Be still, sissa, hear me I beg," said one of the low men, and touched Susannah's arm. The hand was cold and flabby, covered with fat rings. The caress made her skin crawl. "This will be over in a minute and then all the worlds change. When this one joins the Breakers in Thunderclap—"

"Shut up, Straw!" Haber snapped, and pushed Susannah's would-be comforter backward. Then he turned eagerly to the delivery again.

Mia arched her back, groaning. The rathead nurse put her hands on Mia's hips and pushed them gently back down to the bed. "Nawthee, nawthee, push 'ith thy belly."

"Eat shit, you bitch!" Mia screamed, and while Susannah felt a faint tug of her pain, that was all. The connection between them was fading.

Summoning her own concentration, Susannah cried into the well of her own mind. *Hey! Hey Positronics lady! You still there?*

"The link . . . is down," said the pleasant female voice. As before, it spoke in the middle of Susannah's head, but unlike before, it seemed dim, no more dangerous than a voice on the radio that comes from

far away due to some atmospheric flaw. “Repeat: the link . . . is down. We hope you’ll remember North Central Positronics for all your mental enhancement needs. And Sombra Corporation! A leader in mind-to-mind communication since the ten thousands!”

There was a tooth-rattling *BEE-EEEEP* far down in Susannah’s mind, and then the link was gone. It wasn’t just the absence of the horridly pleasant female voice; it was *everything*. She felt as if she’d been let out of some painful body-compressing trap.

Mia screamed again, and Susannah let out a cry of her own. Part of this was not wanting Sayre and his mates to know the link between her and Mia had been broken; part was genuine sorrow. She had lost a woman who had become, in a way, her true sister.

Susannah! Suze, are you there?

She started up on her elbows at this new voice, for a moment almost forgetting the woman beside her. That had been—

Jake? Is it you, honey? It is, isn’t it? Can you hear me?

YES! he cried. *Finally!* God, *who’ve you been talking to? Keep yelling so I can home in on y—*

The voice broke off, but not before she heard a ghostly rattle of distant gunfire. Jake shooting at someone? She thought not. She thought someone was shooting at *him*.

TWO

“Now!” Scowther shouted. “Now, Mia! Push! For your life! Give it all you have! *PUSH!*”

Susannah tried to roll closer to the other woman—*Oh, I’m concerned and wanting comfort, see how concerned I am, concern and wanting comfort is all it is*—but the one called Straw pulled her back. The segmented steel cable swung and stretched out between them. “Keep your distance, bitch,” Straw said, and for the first time Susannah faced the possibility that they weren’t going to let her get hold of Scowther’s gun. Or any gun.

Mia screamed again, crying out to a strange god in a strange language. When she tried to raise her midsection from the table, the nurse—Alia, Susannah thought the nurse’s name was Alia—forced

her down again, and Scowther gave a short, curt cry of what sounded like satisfaction. He tossed aside the forceps he'd been holding.

"Why d'ye do that?" Sayre demanded. The sheets beneath Mia's spread legs were now damp with blood, and the boss sounded flustered.

"Won't need them!" Scowther returned breezily. "She was built for babies, could have a dozen in the rice-patch and never miss a row's worth of picking. Here it comes, neat as you please!"

Scowther made as if to grab the largish basin sitting on the next bed, decided he didn't have quite enough time, and slipped his pink, gloveless hands up the inside of Mia's thighs, instead. This time when Susannah made an effort to move closer to Mia, Straw didn't stop her. All of them, low men and vampires alike, were watching the last stage of the birth with complete fascination, most of them clustered at the end of the two beds which had been pushed together to make one. Only Straw was still close to Susannah. The vampire with the fire-sword had just been demoted; she decided that Straw would be the first to go.

"Once more!" Scowther cried. *"For your baby!"*

Like the low men and the vampires, Mia had forgotten Susannah. Her wounded, pain-filled eyes fixed on Sayre. "May I have him, sir? Please say I may have him, if only for a little while!"

Sayre took her hand. The mask which covered his real face smiled. "Yes, my darling," he said. "The chap is yours for years and years. Only push this one last time."

Mia, don't believe his lies! Susannah cried, but the cry went nowhere. Likely that was just as well. Best she be entirely forgotten for the time being.

Susannah turned her thoughts in a new direction. *Jake! Jake, where are you?*

No answer. Not good. Please God he was still alive.

Maybe he's only busy. Running . . . hiding . . . fighting. Silence doesn't necessarily mean he's—

Mia howled what sounded like a string of obscenities, pushing as she did so. The lips of her already distended vagina spread further. A freshet of blood poured out, widening the muddy delta-shape on the sheet beneath her. And then, through the welter of crimson,

Susannah saw a crown of white and black. The white was skin. The black was hair.

The mottle of white and black began to retreat into the crimson and Susannah thought the baby would settle back, still not quite ready to come into the world, but Mia was done waiting. She pushed with all her considerable might, her hands held up before her eyes in clenched and trembling fists, her eyes slitted, her teeth bared. A vein pulsed alarmingly in the center of her forehead; another stood out on the column of her throat.

“HEEEYAHHHH!” she cried. “COMMALA, YOU PRETTY BASTARD! COMMALA-COME-COME!”

“Dan-tete,” murmured Jey, the hawk-thing, and the others picked it up in a kind of reverent whisper: *Dan-tete . . . dan-tete . . . commala dan-tete*. The coming of the little god.

This time the baby’s head did not just crown but rushed forward. Susannah saw his hands held against his blood-spattered chest in tiny fists that trembled with life. She saw blue eyes, wide open and startling in both their awareness and their similarity to Roland’s. She saw sooty black lashes. Tiny beads of blood jeweled them, barbaric natal finery. Susannah saw—and would never forget—how the baby’s lower lip momentarily caught on the inner lip of his mother’s vulva. The baby’s mouth was pulled briefly open, revealing a perfect row of little teeth in the lower jaw. They *were* teeth—not fangs but perfect little teeth—yet still, to see them in the mouth of a newborn gave Susannah a chill. So did the sight of the chap’s penis, disproportionately large and fully erect. Susannah guessed it was longer than her little finger.

Howling in pain and triumph, Mia surged up on her elbows, her eyes bulging and streaming tears. She reached out and seized Sayre’s hand in a grip of iron as Scowther deftly caught the baby. Sayre yelped and tried to pull away, but he might as well have tried to . . . well, to pull away from a Deputy Sheriff in Oxford, Mississippi. The little chant had died and there was a moment of shocked silence. In it, Susannah’s overstrained ears clearly heard the sound of bones grinding in Sayre’s wrist.

“DOES HE LIVE?” Mia shrieked into Sayre’s startled face. Spittle flew from her lips. “TELL ME, YOU POXY WHORESON, IF MY CHAP LIVES!”

Scowther lifted the chap so that he and the child were face to face. The doctor's brown eyes met the baby's blue ones. And as the chap hung there in Scowther's grip with its penis jutting defiantly upward, Susannah clearly saw the crimson mark on the babe's left heel. It was as if that foot had been dipped in blood just before the baby left Mia's womb.

Rather than spanking the baby's buttocks, Scowther drew in a breath and blew it in puffs directly into the chap's eyes. Mia's chap blinked in comical (and undeniably human) surprise. It drew in a breath of its own, held it for a moment, then let it out. King of Kings he might be, or the destroyer of worlds, but he embarked upon life as had so many before him, squalling with outrage. Mia burst into glad tears at the sound of that cry. The devilish creatures gathered around the new mother were bondservants of the Crimson King, but that didn't make them immune to what they had just witnessed. They broke into applause and laughter. Susannah was not a little disgusted to find herself joining them. The baby looked around at the sound, his expression one of clear amazement.

Weeping, with tears running down her cheeks and clear snot dripping from her nose, Mia held out her arms. "Give him to me!" wept she; so wept Mia, daughter of none and mother of one. "Let me hold him, I beg, let me hold my son! Let me hold my chap! Let me hold my precious!"

And the baby *turned its head* to the sound of his mother's voice. Susannah would have said such a thing was impossible, but of course she would have said a baby born wide awake, with a mouthful of teeth and a boner, was impossible, as well. Yet in every other way the babe seemed completely normal to her: chubby and well-formed, human and thus dear. There was the red mark on his heel, yes, but how many children, normal in every other regard, were born with some sort of birthmark? Hadn't her own father been born red-handed, according to family legend? This mark wouldn't even show, unless the kid was at the beach.

Still holding the newborn up to his face, Scowther looked at Sayre. There was a momentary pause during which Susannah could easily have seized Scowther's automatic. She didn't even think of doing it. She'd forgotten Jake's telepathic cry; had likewise forgotten her weird

visit from Roland and her husband. She was as enrapt as Jey and Straw and Haber and all the rest, enrapt at this moment of a child's arrival in a worn-out world.

Sayre nodded, almost imperceptibly, and Scowther lowered baby Mordred, still wailing (and still looking over his shoulder, apparently for his mother), into Mia's waiting arms.

Mia turned him around at once so she could look at him, and Susannah's heart froze with dismay and horror. For Mia had run mad. It was brilliant in her eyes; it was in the way her mouth managed to sneer and smile at the same time while drool, pinked and thickened with blood from her bitten tongue, trickled down the sides of her chin; most of all it was in her triumphant laughter. She might come back to sanity in the days ahead, but—

Bitch ain't nevah comin back, Detta said, not without sympathy. Gittin this far n den gittin shed of it done broke her. She busted, n you know it as well's Ah do!

"O, such beauty!" Mia crooned. "O, see thy blue eyes, thy skin as white as the sky before Wide Earth's first snow! See thy nipples, such perfect berries they are, see thy prick and thy balls as smooth as new peaches!" She looked around, first at Susannah—her eyes skating over Susannah's face with absolutely no recognition—and then at the others. "*See my chap, ye unfortunates, ye gonicks, my precious, my baby, my boy!*" She shouted to them, demanded of them, laughing with her mad eyes and crying with her crooked mouth. "*See what I gave up eternity for! See my Mordred, see him very well, for never will you see another his like!*"

Panting harshly, she covered the baby's bloody, staring face with kisses, smearing her mouth until she looked like a drunk who has tried to put on lipstick. She laughed and kissed the chubby flap of his infant's double chin, his nipples, his navel, the jutting tip of his penis, and—holding him up higher and higher in her trembling arms, the child she meant to call Mordred goggling down at her with that comic look of astonishment—she kissed his knees and then each tiny foot. Susannah heard that room's first suckle: not the baby at his mother's breast but Mia's mouth on each perfectly shaped toe.

Yon child's my dinh's doom, Susannah thought coldly. *If I do nothing else, I could seize Scowther's gun and shoot it. T'would be the work of two seconds.*

With her speed—her uncanny gunslinger's speed—this was likely true. But she found herself unable to move. She had foreseen many outcomes to this act of the play, but not Mia's madness, never that, and it had caught her entirely by surprise. It crossed Susannah's mind that she was lucky indeed that the Positronics link had gone down when it had. If it hadn't, she might be as mad as Mia.

And that link could kick back in, sister—don't you think you better make your move while you still can?

But she *couldn't*, that was the thing. She was frozen in wonder, held in thrall.

“Stop that!” Sayre snapped at her. “Your job isn't to slurp at him but to feed him! If you'd keep him, hurry up! Give him suck! Or should I summon a wetnurse? There are many who'd give their eyes for the opportunity!”

“Never . . . in . . . your . . . *LIFE!*” Mia cried, laughing, but she lowered the child to her chest and impatiently brushed aside the bodice of the plain white gown she wore, baring her right breast. Susannah could see why men would be taken by her; even now that breast was a perfect, coraltipped globe that seemed more fit for a man's hand and a man's lust than a baby's nourishment. Mia lowered the chap to it. For a moment he rooted as comically as he'd goggled at her, his face striking the nipple and then seeming to bounce off. When it came down again, however, the pink rose of his mouth closed on the erect pink bud of her breast and began to suck.

Mia stroked the chap's tangled and blood-soaked black curls, still laughing. To Susannah, her laughter sounded like screams.

There was a clumping on the floor as a robot approached. It looked quite a bit like Andy the Messenger Robot—same skinny seven- or eight-foot height, same electric-blue eyes, same many-jointed, gleaming body. In its arms it bore a large glass box filled with green light.

“What's that fucking thing for?” Sayre snapped. He sounded both pissed off and incredulous.

“An incubator,” Scowther said. “I felt it would be better to be safe than sorry.”

When he turned to look, his shoulder-holstered gun swung toward Susannah. It was an even better chance, the best she'd ever have, and she knew it, but before she could take it, Mia's chap *changed*.

FOUR

Susannah saw red light run down the child's smooth skin, from the crown of its head to the stained heel of its right foot. It was not a flush but a *flash*, lighting the child from without: Susannah would have sworn it. And then, as it lay upon Mia's deflated stomach with its lips clamped around her nipple, the red flash was followed by a blackness that rose up and spread, turning the child into a lightless gnome, a negative of the rosy baby that had escaped Mia's womb. At the same time its body began to shrivel, its legs pulling up and melting into its belly, its head sliding down—and pulling Mia's breast with it—into its neck, which puffed up like the throat of a toad. Its blue eyes turned to tar, then back to blue again.

Susannah tried to scream and could not.

Tumors swelled along the black thing's sides, then burst and extruded legs. The red mark which had ridden the heel was still visible, but now had become a blob like the crimson brand on a black widow spider's belly. For that was what this thing was: a spider. Yet the baby was not entirely gone. A white excrescence rose from the spider's back. In it Susannah could see a tiny, deformed face and blue sparks that were eyes.

"What—?" Mia asked, and started up on her elbows once again. Blood had begun to pour from her breast. The baby drank it like milk, losing not a drop. Beside Mia, Sayre was standing as still as a graven image, his mouth open and his eyes bulging from their sockets. Whatever he'd expected from this birth—whatever he'd been *told* to expect—it wasn't this. The Detta part of Susannah took a child's vicious pleasure in the man's shocked expression: he looked like the comedian Jack Benny milking a laugh.

For a moment only Mia seemed to realize what had happened, for her face began to lengthen with a kind of informed horror—and, perhaps, pain. Then her smile returned, that angelic madonna's smile. She reached out and stroked the still-changing freak at her

breast, the black spider with the tiny human head and the red mark on its bristly gut.

“Is he not beautiful?” she cried. *“Is my son not beautiful, as fair as the summer sun?”*

These were her last words.

FIVE

Her face didn't freeze, exactly, but *stilled*. Her cheeks and brow and throat, flushed dark with the exertions of childbirth only a moment before, faded to the waxy whiteness of orchid petals. Her shining eyes grew still and fixed in their sockets. And suddenly it was as if Susannah were looking not at a *woman* lying on a bed but the *drawing* of a woman. An extraordinarily good one, but still something that had been created on paper with strokes of charcoal and a few pale colors.

Susannah remembered how she had returned to the Plaza–Park Hyatt Hotel after her first visit to the allure of Castle Discordia, and how she'd come here to Fedic after her last palaver with Mia, in the shelter of the merlon. How the sky and the castle and the very stone of the merlon had torn open. And then, as if her thought had caused it, Mia's face was ripped apart from hairline to chin. Her fixed and dulling eyes fell crookedly away to either side. Her lips split into a crazy double twin-grin. And it wasn't blood that poured out of that widening fissure in her face but a stale-smelling white powder. Susannah had a fragmented memory of T. S. Eliot

(hollow men stuffed men headpiece filled with straw)

and Lewis Carroll

(why you're nothing but a pack of cards)

before Mia's dan-tete raised its unspeakable head from its first meal. Its blood-smeared mouth opened and it hoisted itself, lower legs scrabbling for purchase on its mother's deflating belly, upper ones almost seeming to shadowbox at Susannah.

It squealed with triumph, and if it had at that moment chosen to attack the other woman who had given it nurture, Susannah Dean would surely have died next to Mia. Instead, it returned to the deflated sac of breast from which it had taken its first suck, and tore it off. The sound of its chewing was wet and loose. A moment later it

burrowed into the hole it had made, the white human face disappearing while Mia's was obliterated by the dust boiling out of her deflating head. There was a harsh, almost industrial sucking sound and Susannah thought, *It's taking all the moisture out of her, all the moisture that's left. And look at it! Look at it swell! Like a leech on a horse's neck!*

Just then a ridiculously English voice—it was the plummy intonation of the lifelong gentleman's gentleman—said: "Pardon me, sirs, but will you be wanting this incubator after all? For the situation seems to have altered somewhat, if you don't mind my saying."

It broke Susannah's paralysis. She pushed herself upward with one hand and seized Scowther's automatic pistol with the other. She yanked, but the gun was strapped across the butt and wouldn't come free. Her questing index finger found the little sliding knob that was the safety and pushed it. She turned the gun, holster and all, toward Scowther's ribcage.

"What the dev—" he began, and then she pulled the trigger with her middle finger, at the same time yanking back on the shoulder-rig with all her force. The straps binding the holster to Scowther's body held, but the thinner one holding the automatic in place snapped, and as Scowther fell sideways, trying to look down at the smoking black hole in his white lab-coat, Susannah took full possession of his gun. She shot Straw and the vampire beside him, the one with the electric sword. For a moment the vampire was there, still staring at the spider-god that had looked so much like a baby to begin with, and then its aura whiffed out. The thing's flesh went with it. For a moment there was nothing where it had been but an empty shirt tucked into an empty pair of bluejeans. Then the clothes collapsed.

"*Kill her!*" Sayre screamed, reaching for his own gun. "*Kill that bitch!*"

Susannah rolled away from the spider crouched on the body of its rapidly deflating mother, raking at the helmet she was wearing even as she tumbled off the side of the bed. There was a moment of excruciating pain when she thought it wasn't going to come away and then she hit the floor, free of it. It hung over the side of the bed, fringed with her hair. The spider-thing, momentarily pulled off its roost when its mother's body jerked, chattered angrily.

Susannah rolled beneath the bed as a series of gunshots went off above her. She heard a loud *SPROINK* as one of the slugs hit a spring. She saw the rathead nurse's feet and hairy lower legs and put a bullet into one of her knees. The nurse gave a scream, turned, and began to limp away, squalling.

Sayre leaned forward, pointing the gun at the makeshift double bed just beyond Mia's deflating body. There were already three smoking, smoldering holes in the groundsheet. Before he could add a fourth, one of the spider's legs caressed his cheek, tearing open the mask he wore and revealing the hairy cheek beneath. Sayre recoiled, crying out. The spider turned to him and made a mewling noise. The white thing high on its back—a node with a human face—glared, as if to warn Sayre away from its meal. Then it turned back to the woman, who was really not recognizable as a woman any longer; she looked like the ruins of some incredibly ancient mummy which had now turned to rags and powder.

“I say, this *is* a bit confusing,” the robot with the incubator remarked. “Shall I retire? Perhaps I might return when matters have clarified somewhat.”

Susannah reversed direction, rolling out from beneath the bed. She saw that two of the low men had taken to their heels. Jey, the hawkman, didn't seem to be able to make up his mind. Stay or go? Susannah made it up for him, putting a single shot into the sleek brown head. Blood and feathers flew.

Susannah got up as well as she could, gripping the side of the bed for balance, holding Scowther's gun out in front of her. She had gotten four. The rathead nurse and one other had run. Sayre had dropped his gun and was trying to hide behind the robot with the incubator.

Susannah shot the two remaining vampires and the low man with the bulldog face. That one—Haber—hadn't forgotten Susannah; he'd been holding his ground and waiting for a clear shot. She got hers first and watched him fall backward with deep satisfaction. Haber, she thought, had been the most dangerous.

“Madam, I wonder if you could tell me—” began the robot, and Susannah put two quick shots into its steel face, darkening the blue electric eyes. This trick she had learned from Eddie. A gigantic siren

immediately went off. Susannah felt that if she listened to it long, she would be deafened.

"I HAVE BEEN BLINDED BY GUNFIRE!" the robot bellowed, still in its absurd would-you-like-another-cup-of-tea-madam accent. *"VISION ZERO, I NEED HELP, CODE 7, I SAY, HELP!"*

Sayre stepped away from it, hands held high. Susannah couldn't hear him over the siren and the robot's blating, but she could read the words as they came off the bastard's lips: *I surrender, will you accept my parole?*

She smiled at this amusing idea, unaware that she smiled. It was without humor and without mercy and meant only one thing: she wished she could get him to lick her stumps, as he had forced Mia to lick his boots. But there wasn't time enough. He saw his doom in her grin and turned to run and Susannah shot him twice in the back of the head—once for Mia, once for Pere Callahan. Sayre's skull shattered in a fury of blood and brains. He grabbed the wall, scrabbled at a shelf loaded with equipment and supplies, and then went down dead.

Susannah now took aim at the spider-god. The tiny white human head on its black and bristly back turned to look at her. The blue eyes, so uncannily like Roland's, blazed.

No, you cannot! You must not! For I am the King's only son!

I can't? she sent back, leveling the automatic. *Oh, sugar, you are just . . . so . . . WRONG!*

But before she could pull the trigger, there was a gunshot from behind her. A slug burned across the side of her neck. Susannah reacted instantly, turning and throwing herself sideways into the aisle. One of the low men who'd run had had a change of heart and come back. Susannah put two bullets into his chest and made him mortally sorry.

She turned, eager for more—yes, this was what she wanted, what she had been made for, and she'd always revere Roland for showing her—but the others were either dead or fled. The spider raced down the side of its birthbed on its many legs, leaving the papier-mâché corpse of its mother behind. It turned its white infant's head briefly toward her.

You'd do well to let me pass, Blackie, or—

She fired at it, but stumbled over the hawkman's outstretched hand as she did. The bullet that would have killed the abomination went a little awry, clipping off one of its eight hairy legs instead. A yellowish-red fluid, more like pus than blood, poured from the place where the leg had joined the body. The thing screamed at her in pain and surprise. The audible portion of that scream was hard to hear over the endless cycling blat of the robot's siren, but she heard it in her head loud and clear.

I'll pay you back for that! My father and I, we'll pay you back! Make you cry for death, so we will!

You ain't gonna have a chance, sugar, Susannah sent back, trying to project all the confidence she possibly could, not wanting the thing to know what she believed: that Scowther's automatic might have been shot dry. She aimed with a deliberation that was unnecessary, and the spider scuttled rapidly away from her, darting first behind the endlessly sirening robot and then through a dark doorway.

All right. Not great, not the best solution by any means, but she was still alive, and that much was grand.

And the fact that all of sai Sayre's crew were dead or run off? That wasn't bad, either.

Susannah tossed Scowther's gun aside and selected another, this one a Walther PPK. She took it from the docker's clutch Straw had been wearing, then rummaged in his pockets, where she found half a dozen extra clips. She briefly considered adding the vampire's electric sword to her armory and decided to leave it where it was. Better the tools you knew than those you didn't.

She tried to get in touch with Jake, couldn't hear herself think, and turned to the robot. *"Hey, big boy! Shut off that damn siren, what do you say?"*

She had no idea if it would work, but it did. The silence was immediate and wonderful, with the sensuous texture of moiré silk. Silence might be useful. If there was a counterattack, she'd hear them coming. And the dirty truth? She *hoped* for a counterattack, *wanted* them to come, and never mind whether that made sense or not. She had a gun and her blood was up. That was all that mattered.

(Jake! Jake, do you hear me, kiddo? If you hear, answer your big sis!)

Nothing. Not even that rattle of distant gunfire. He was out of t—

Then, a single word—*was* it a word?

(*wimeweh*)

More important, was it *Jake*?

She didn't know for sure, but she thought yes. And the word seemed familiar to her, somehow.

Susannah gathered her concentration, meaning to call louder this time, and then a queer idea came to her, one too strong to be called intuition. Jake was trying to be quiet. He was . . . hiding? Maybe getting ready to spring an ambush? The idea sounded crazy, but maybe *his* blood was up, too. She didn't know, but thought he'd either sent her that one odd word

(*wimeweh*)

on purpose, or it had slipped out. Either way, it might be better to let him roll his own oats for awhile.

"I say, I have been blinded by gunfire!" the robot insisted. Its voice was still loud, but had dropped to a range at least approaching normal. "I can't see a bloody thing and I have this incubator—"

"Drop it," Susannah said.

"But—"

"*Drop* it, Chumley."

"I beg pawdon, madam, but my name is Nigel the Butler and I really can't—"

Susannah had been hauling herself closer during this little exchange—you didn't forget the old means of locomotion just because you'd been granted a brief vacation with legs, she was discovering—and read both the name and the serial number stamped on the robot's chrome-steel midsection.

"Nigel DNK 45932, drop that fucking glass box, say thankya!"

The robot (**DOMESTIC** was stamped just below its serial number) dropped the incubator and then whimpered when it shattered at its steel feet.

Susannah worked her way over to Nigel, and found she had to conquer a moment's fear before reaching up and taking one three-fingered steel hand. She needed to remind herself that this wasn't Andy from Calla Bryn Sturgis, nor could Nigel *know* about Andy. The butler-robot might or might not be sophisticated enough to crave

revenge—certainly Andy had been—but you couldn't crave what you didn't know about.

She hoped.

“Nigel, pick me up.”

There was a whine of servomotors as the robot bent.

“No, hon, you have to come forward a little bit. There's broken glass where you are.”

“Pawdon, madam, but I'm blind. I believe it was you who shot my eyes out.”

Oh. That.

“Well,” she said, hoping her tone of irritation would disguise the fear beneath, “I can't very well get you new ones if you don't pick me up, can I? Now get a wiggle on, may it do ya. Time's wasting.”

Nigel stepped forward, crushing broken glass beneath its feet, and came to the sound of her voice. Susannah controlled the urge to cringe back, but once the Domestic Robot had set its grip on her, its touch was quite gentle. It lifted her into its arms.

“Now take me to the door.”

“Madam, beg pawdon but there are *many* doors in Sixteen. More still beneath the castle.”

Susannah couldn't help being curious. “How many?”

A brief pause. “I should say five hundred and ninety-five are currently operational.” She immediately noticed that five-ninety-five added up to nineteen. Added up to *chassit*.

“Do you mind giving me a carry to the one I came through before the shooting started?” Susannah pointed toward the far end of the room.

“No, madam, I don't mind at all, but I'm sorry to tell you that it will do you no good,” Nigel said in his plummy voice. “That door, NEW YORK #7/FEDIC, is one-way.” A pause. Relays clicking in the steel dome of its head. “Also, it burned out after its last use. It has, as you might say, gone to the clearing at the end of the path.”

“Oh, that's just *wonderful!*” Susannah cried, but realized she wasn't exactly surprised by Nigel's news. She remembered the ragged humming sound she'd heard it making just before Sayre had pushed her rudely through it, remembered thinking, even in her distress, that it was a dying thing. And yes, it had died. “Just *wonderful!*”

“I sense you are distressed, madam.”

“You’re goddamned right I’m distressed! Bad enough the damned thing only opened one-way! Now it’s shut down completely!”

“Except for the default,” Nigel agreed.

“Default? What do you mean, default?”

“That would be NEW YORK #9/FEDIC,” Nigel told her. “At one time there were over thirty one-way New York–to–Fedic ports, but I believe #9 is the only one that remains. All commands pertaining to NEW YORK #7/FEDIC will now have defaulted to #9.”

Chassit, she thought . . . almost prayed. *He’s talking about chassit, I think. Oh God, I hope he is.*

“Do you mean passwords and such, Nigel?”

“Why, yes, madam.”

“Take me to Door #9.”

“As you wish.”

Nigel began to move rapidly up the aisle between the hundreds of empty beds, their taut white sheets gleaming under the brilliant overhead lamps. Susannah’s imagination momentarily populated this room with screaming, frightened children, freshly arrived from Calla Bryn Sturgis, maybe from the neighboring Callas, as well. She saw not just a single rathead nurse but battalions of them, eager to clamp the helmets over the heads of the kidnapped children and start the process that . . . that did what? Ruined them in some way. Sucked the intelligence out of their heads and knocked their growth-hormones out of whack and ruined them forever. Susannah supposed that at first they would be cheered up to hear such a pleasant voice in their heads, a voice welcoming them to the wonderful world of North Central Positronics and the Sombra Group. Their crying would stop, their eyes fill with hope. Perhaps, they would think the nurses in their white uniforms were good in spite of their hairy, scary faces and yellow fangs. As good as the voice of the nice lady.

Then the hum would begin, quickly building in volume as it moved toward the middle of their heads, and this room would again fill with their frightened screams—

“Madam? Are you all right?”

“Yes. Why do you ask, Nigel?”

“I believe you shivered.”

“Never mind. Just get me to the door to New York, the one that still works.”

SIX

Once they left the infirmary, Nigel bore her rapidly down first one corridor and then another. They came to escalators that looked as if they had been frozen in place for centuries. Halfway down one of them, a steel ball on legs flashed its amber eyes at Nigel and cried, “*Howp! Howp!*” Nigel responded “*Howp, howp!*” in return and then said to Susannah (in the confidential tone certain gossipy people adopt when discussing Those Who Are Unfortunate), “He’s a Mech Foreman and has been stuck there for over eight hundred years—fried boards, I imagine. Poor soul! But he still tries to do his best.”

Twice Nigel asked her if she believed his eyes could be replaced. The first time Susannah told him she didn’t know. The second time—feeling a little sorry for him (definitely him now, not it)—she asked what *he* thought.

“I think my days of service are nearly over,” he said, and then added something that made her arms tingle with gooseflesh: “O Discordia!”

The Diem Brothers are dead, she thought, remembering—had it been a dream? a vision? a glimpse of *her* Tower?—something from her time with Mia. Or had it been her time in Oxford, Mississippi? Or both? *Papa Doc Duvalier is dead. Christa McAuliffe is dead. Stephen King is dead, popular writer killed while taking afternoon walk, O Discordia, O lost!*

But who was Stephen King? Who was Christa McAuliffe, for that matter?

Once they passed a low man who had been present at the birth of Mia’s monster. He lay curled on a dusty corridor floor like a human shrimp with his gun in one hand and a hole in his head. Susannah thought he’d committed suicide. In a way, she supposed that made sense. Because things had gone wrong, hadn’t they? And unless Mia’s baby found its way to where it belonged on its own, Big Red Daddy was going to be mad. Might be mad even if Mordred somehow found his way home.

His *other* father. For this was a world of twins and mirror images, and Susannah now understood more about what she'd seen than she really wanted to. Mordred too was a twin, a Jekyll-and-Hyde creature with two selves, and he—or it—had the faces of two fathers to remember.

They came upon a number of other corpses; all looked like suicides to Susannah. She asked Nigel if he could tell—by their smells, or something—but he claimed he could not.

“How many are still here, do you think?” she asked. Her blood had had time to cool a little, and now she felt nervous.

“Not many, madam. I believe that most have moved on. Very likely to the Derva.”

“What's the Derva?”

Nigel said he was dreadfully sorry, but that information was restricted and could be accessed only with the proper password. Susannah tried *chassit*, but it was no good. Neither was *nineteen* or, her final try, *ninety-nine*. She supposed she'd have to be content with just knowing most of them were gone.

Nigel turned left, into a new corridor with doors on both sides. She got him to stop long enough to try one of them, but there was nothing of particular note inside. It was an office, and long-abandoned, judging by the thick fall of dust. She was interested to see a poster of madly jitterbugging teenagers on one wall. Beneath it, in large blue letters, was this:

**SAY, YOU COOL CATS AND BOPPIN' KITTIES!
I ROCKED AT THE HOP WITH ALAN FREED!
CLEVELAND, OHIO, OCTOBER 1954**

Susannah was pretty sure that the performer on stage was Richard Penniman. Club-crawling folkies such as herself affected disdain for anyone who rocked harder than Phil Ochs, but Suze had always had a soft spot in her heart for Little Richard; good golly, Miss Molly, you sure like to ball. She guessed it was a Detta thing.

Did these people once upon a time use their doors to vacation in various wheres and whens of their choice? Did they use the power of the Beams to turn certain levels of the Tower into tourist attractions?

She asked Nigel, who told her he was sure he did not know. Nigel still sounded sad about the loss of his eyes.

Finally they came into an echoing rotunda with doors marching all around its mighty circumference. The marble tiles on the floor were laid in a black-and-white checkerboard pattern Susannah remembered from certain troubled dreams in which Mia had fed her chap. Above, high and high, constellations of electric stars winked in a blue firmament that was now showing plenty of cracks. This place reminded her of the Cradle of Lud, and even more strongly of Grand Central Station. Somewhere in the walls, air-conditioners or -exchangers ran rustily. The smell in the air was weirdly familiar, and after a short struggle, Susannah identified it: Comet Cleanser. They sponsored *The Price Is Right*, which she sometimes watched on TV if she happened to be home in the morning. *"I'm Don Pardo, now please welcome your host, Mr. Bill Cullen."* Susannah felt a moment of vertigo and closed her eyes.

Bill Cullen is dead. Don Pardo is dead. Martin Luther King is dead, shot down in Memphis. Rule Discordia!

O Christ, those *voices*, would they never stop?

She opened her eyes and saw doors marked SHANGHAI/FEDIC and BOMBAY/FEDIC and one marked DALLAS (NOVEMBER 1963)/FEDIC. Others were written in runes that meant nothing to her. At last Nigel stopped in front of one she recognized.

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS, LTD.

New York/Fedic
Maximum Security

All of this Susannah recognized from the other side, but below **VERBAL ENTRY CODE REQUIRED** was this message, flashing ominous red:

#9 FINAL DEFAULT

SEVEN

"What would you like to do next, madam?" Nigel asked.

“Set me down, sugarpie.”

She had time to wonder what her response would be if Nigel declined to do so, but he didn't even hesitate. She walk-hopped-scuttled to the door in her old way and put her hands on it. Beneath them she felt a texture that was neither wood nor metal. She thought she could hear a very faint hum. She considered trying *chassit*—her version of Ali Baba's *Open, sesame*—and didn't bother. There wasn't even a doorknob. One-way meant one-way, she reckoned; no kidding around.

(*JAKE!*)

She sent it with all her might.

No answer. Not even that faint

(*wimeweh*)

nonsense word. She waited a moment longer, then turned around and sat with her back propped against the door. She dropped the extra ammo clips between her spread knees and then held the Walther PPK up in her right hand. A good weapon to have with your back to a locked door, she reckoned; she liked the weight of it. Once upon a time, she and others had been trained in a protest technique called passive resistance. Lie down on the lunchroom floor, cover your soft middle and softer privates. Do not respond to those who strike you and revile you and curse your parents. Sing in your chains like the sea. What would her old friends make of what she had become?

Susannah said: “You know what? I don't give shit one. Passive resistance is also dead.”

“Madam?”

“Nothing, Nigel.”

“Madam, may I ask—”

“What I'm doing?”

“Exactly, madam.”

“Waiting on a friend, Chumley. Just waiting on a friend.”

She thought that DNK 45932 would remind her that his name was Nigel, but he didn't. Instead, he asked how long she would wait for her friend. Susannah told him until hell froze over. This elicited a long silence. Finally Nigel asked: “May I go, then, madam?”

“How will you see?”

“I have switched to infrared. It is less satisfying than three-X macrovision, but it will suffice to get me to the repair bays.”

“Is there anyone in the repair bays who can fix you?” Susannah asked with mild curiosity. She pushed the button that dropped the clip out of the Walther’s butt, then rammed it back in, taking a certain elemental pleasure in the oily, metallic *SNACK!* sound it made.

“I’m sure I can’t say, madam,” Nigel replied, “although the probability of such a thing is very low, certainly less than one per cent. If no one comes, then I, like you, will wait.”

She nodded, suddenly tired and very sure that this was where the grand quest ended—here, leaning against this door. But you didn’t give up, did you? Giving up was for cowards, not gunslingers.

“May ya do fine, Nigel—thanks for the piggyback. Long days and pleasant nights. Hope you get your eyes back. Sorry I shot em out, but I was in a bit of a tight and didn’t know whose side you were on.”

“And good wishes to you, madam.”

Susannah nodded. Nigel clumped off and then she was alone, leaning against the door to New York. Waiting for Jake. Listening for Jake.

All she heard was the rusty, dying wheeze of the machinery in the walls.



CHAPTER V: IN THE JUNGLE, THE MIGHTY JUNGLE

ONE

The threat that the low men and the vampires might kill Oy was the only thing that kept Jake from dying with the Pere. There was no agonizing over the decision; Jake yelled

(OY, TO ME!)

with all the mental force he could muster, and Oy ran swiftly at his heel. Jake passed low men who stood mesmerized by the turtle and straight-armed a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. From the dim orange-red glow of the restaurant he and Oy entered a zone of brilliant white light and charred, pungent cookery. Steam billowed against his face, hot and wet,

(the jungle)

perhaps setting the stage for what followed,

(the mighty jungle)

perhaps not. His vision cleared as his pupils shrank and he saw he was in the Dixie Pig's kitchen. Not for the first time, either. Once, not too long before the coming of the Wolves to Calla Bryn Sturgis, Jake had followed Susannah (only then she'd have been Mia) into a dream where she'd been searching some vast and deserted kitchen for food. *This* kitchen, only now the place was bustling with life. A huge pig sizzled on an iron spit over an open fire, the flames leaping up through a food-caked iron grate at every drop of grease. To either side were gigantic copper-hooded stoves upon which pots nearly as

tall as Jake himself fumed. Stirring one of these was a gray-skinned creature so hideous that Jake's eyes hardly knew how to look at it. Tusks rose from either side of its gray, heavy-lipped mouth. Dewlapped cheeks hung in great warty swags of flesh. The fact that the creature was wearing foodstained cook's whites and a puffy popcorn chef's toque somehow finished the nightmare, sealed it beneath a coat of varnish. Beyond this apparition, nearly lost in the steam, two other creatures dressed in whites were washing dishes side by side at a double sink. Both wore neckerchiefs. One was human, a boy of perhaps seventeen. The other appeared to be some sort of monster housecat on legs.

"Vai, vai, los mostros pubes, tre cannits en founs!" the tusked chef screeched at the washerboys. It hadn't noticed Jake. One of them—the cat—did. It laid back its ears and hissed. Without thinking, Jake threw the Oriza he'd been holding in his right hand. It sang across the steamy air and sliced through the cat-thing's neck as smoothly as a knife through a cake of lard. The head toppled into the sink with a sudsy splash, the green eyes still blazing.

"San fai, can dit los!" cried the chef. He seemed either unaware of what had happened or was unable to grasp it. He turned to Jake. The eyes beneath his sloping, crenellated forehead were a bleary blue-gray, the eyes of a sentient being. Seen head-on, Jake realized what it was: some kind of freakish, intelligent warthog. Which meant it was cooking its own kind. That seemed perfectly fitting in the Dixie Pig.

"Can foh pube ain-tet can fah! She-so pan! Vai!" This was addressed to Jake. And then, just to make the lunacy complete: *"And eef you won'd scrub, don'd even stard!"*

The other washboy, the human one, was screaming some sort of warning, but the chef paid no attention. The chef seemed to believe that Jake, having killed one of his helpers, was now duty- and honor-bound to take the dead cat's place.

Jake flung the other plate and it sheared through the warthog's neck, putting an end to its blabber. Perhaps a gallon of blood flew onto the stovetop to the thing's right, sizzling and sending up a horrible charred smell. The warthog's head slewed to the left on its neck and then tilted backward, but didn't come off. The being—it was easily seven feet tall—took two stagger-steps to its left and embraced

the sizzling pig turning on its spit. The head tore loose a little further, now lying on Chef Warthog's right shoulder, one eye glaring up at the steam-wreathed fluorescent lights. The heat sealed the cook's hands to the roast and they began to melt. Then the thing fell forward into the open flames and its tunic caught fire.

Jake whirled from this in time to see the other potboy advancing on him with a butcher knife in one hand and a cleaver in the other. Jake grabbed another 'Riza from the bag but held his throw in spite of the voice in his head that was yammering for him to go on, go on and do it, give the bastard what he'd once heard Margaret Eisenhart refer to as a "deep haircut." This term had made the other Sisters of the Plate laugh hard. Yet as much as he wanted to throw, he held his hand.

What he saw was a young man whose skin was a pallid yellowish-gray under the brilliant kitchen lights. He looked both terrified and malnourished. Jake raised the plate in warning and the young man stopped. It wasn't the 'Riza he was looking at, however, but Oy, who stood between Jake's feet. The bumbler's fur was bushed out around his body, seeming to double his size, and his teeth were bared.

"Do you—" Jake began, and then the door to the restaurant burst open. One of the low men rushed in. Jake threw the plate without hesitation. It moaned through the steamy, brilliant air and took off the intruder's head with gory precision just above the Adam's apple. The headless body bucked first to the left and then to the right, like a stage comic accepting a round of applause with a whimsical move, and then collapsed.

Jake had another plate in each hand almost immediately, his arms once more crossed over his chest in the position sai Eisenhart called "the load." He looked at the washerboy, who was still holding the knife and the cleaver. Without much threat, however, Jake thought. He tried again and this time got the whole question out. "Do you speak English?"

"Yar," the boy said. He dropped the cleaver so he could hold one water-reddened thumb and its matching forefinger about a quarter of an inch apart. "Bout just a liddle. I learn since I come over here." He opened his other hand and the knife joined the cleaver on the kitchen floor.

“Do you come from Mid-World?” Jake asked. “You do, don’t you?”

He didn’t think the washerboy was terribly bright (“No quiz-kid,” Elmer Chambers would no doubt have sneered), but he was at least smart enough to be homesick; in spite of his terror, Jake saw an unmistakable flash of that look in the boy’s eyes. “Yar,” he said. “Come from Ludweg, me.”

“Near the city of Lud?”

“North of there, if you do like it or if you don’t,” said the washerboy. “Will’ee kill me, lad? I don’t want to die, sad as I am.”

“I won’t be the one to kill you if you tell me the truth. Did a woman come through here?”

The washerboy hesitated, then said: “Aye. Sayre and his closies had ’er. She ’us out on her feet, that ’un, head all lollin . . .” He demonstrated, rolling his head on his neck and looking more like the village idiot than ever. Jake thought of Sheemie in Roland’s tale of his Mejis days.

“But not dead.”

“Nar. I hurt her breevin, me.”

Jake looked toward the door, but no one came through. Yet. He should go, but—

“What’s your name, cully?”

“Jochabim, that be I, son of Hossa.”

“Well, listen, Jochabim, there’s a world outside this kitchen called New York City, and pubes like you are free. I suggest you get out while you have an opportunity.”

“They’d just bring me back and stripe me.”

“No, you don’t understand how big it is. Like Lud when Lud was —”

He looked at Jochabim’s dull-eyed face and thought, *No, I’m the one who doesn’t understand. And if I hang around here trying to convince him to desert, I’ll no doubt get just what I—*

The door leading to the restaurant popped open again. This time two low men tried to come through at once and momentarily jammed together, shoulder to shoulder. Jake threw both of his plates and watched them crisscross in the steamy air, beheading both newcomers just as they burst through. They fell backward and once more the door swung shut. At Piper School Jake had learned about the Battle of

Thermopylae, where the Greeks had held off a Persian army that had outnumbered them ten to one. The Greeks had drawn the Persians into a narrow mountain pass; he had this kitchen door. As long as they kept coming through by ones and twos—as they must unless they could flank him somehow—he could pick them off.

At least until he ran out of Orizas.

“Guns?” he asked Jochabim. “Are there guns here?”

Jochabim shook his head, but given the young man’s irritating look of density, it was hard to tell if this meant *No guns in the kitchen* or *I don’t ken you*.

“All right, I’m going,” he said. “And if you don’t go yourself while you’ve got a chance, Jochabim, you’re an even bigger fool than you look. Which would be saying a lot. There are *video games* out there, kid—think about it.”

Jochabim continued giving Jake the *duh* look, however, and Jake gave up. He was about to speak to Oy when someone spoke to him through the door.

“Hey, kid.” Rough. Confidential. Knowing. The voice of a man who could hit you for five or sleep with your girlfriend any time he liked, Jake thought. “Your friend the faddah’s dead. In fact, the faddah’s *dinnah*. You come out now, with no more nonsense, maybe you can avoid being dessert.”

“Turn it sideways and stick it up your ass,” Jake called. This got through even Jochabim’s wall of stupidity; he looked shocked.

“Last chance,” said the rough and knowing voice. “Come on out.”

“Come on in!” Jake countered. “I’ve got plenty of plates!” Indeed, he felt a lunatic urge to rush forward, bang through the door, and take the battle to the low men and women in the restaurant dining room on the other side. Nor was the idea all that crazy, as Roland himself would have known; it was the last thing they’d expect, and there was at least an even chance that he could panic them with half a dozen quickly thrown plates and start a rout.

The problem was the monsters that had been feeding behind the tapestry. The vampires. *They’d* not panic, and Jake knew it. He had an idea that if the Grandfathers had been able to come into the kitchen (or perhaps it was just lack of interest that kept them in the dining

room—that and the last scraps of the Pere’s corpse), he would be dead already. Jochabim as well, quite likely.

He dropped to one knee, murmured “Oy, find Susannah!” and reinforced the command with a quick mental picture.

The bumbler gave Jochabim a final distrustful look, then began to nose about on the floor. The tiles were damp from a recent mopping, and Jake was afraid the bumbler wouldn’t be able to find the scent. Then Oy gave a single sharp cry—more dog’s bark than human’s word—and began to hurry down the center of the kitchen between the stoves and the steam tables, nose low to the ground, only going out of his way long enough to skirt Chef Warthog’s smoldering body.

“Listen, to me, you little bastard!” cried the low man outside the door. “I’m losing patience with you!”

“Good!” Jake cried. “Come on in! Let’s see if you go back out again!”

He put his finger to his lips in a shushing gesture while looking at Jochabim. He was about to turn and run—he had no idea how long it would be before the washerboy yelled through the door that the kid and his billy-bumbler were no longer holding Thermopylae Pass—when Jochabim spoke to him in a low voice that was little more than a whisper.

“What?” Jake asked, looking at him uncertainly. It sounded as if the kid had said *mind the mind-trap*, but that made no sense. Did it?

“Mind the mind-trap,” Jochabim said, this time much more clearly, and turned away to his pots and sudsy water.

“*What* mind-trap?” Jake asked, but Jochabim affected not to hear and Jake couldn’t stay long enough to cross-examine him. He ran to catch up with Oy, throwing glances back over his shoulder. If a couple more of the low men burst into the kitchen, Jake wanted to be the first to know.

But none did, at least not before he had followed Oy through another door and into the restaurant’s pantry, a dim room stacked high with boxes and smelling of coffee and spices. It was like the storeroom behind the East Stoneham General Store, only cleaner.

There was a closed door in the corner of the Dixie Pig's pantry. Beyond it was a tiled stairway leading down God only knew how far. It was lit by low-wattage bulbs behind bleary, fly-spotted glass shades. Oy started down without hesitation, descending with a kind of bobbing, front-end/back-end regularity that was pretty comical. He kept his nose pressed to the stairs, and Jake knew he was onto Susannah; he could pick it up from his little friend's mind.

Jake tried counting the stairs, made it as far as a hundred and twenty, then lost his grip on the numbers. He wondered if they were still in New York (or under it). Once he thought he heard a faint, familiar rumbling and decided that if that was a subway train, they were.

Finally they reached the bottom of the stairs. Here was a wide, vaulted area that looked like a gigantic hotel lobby, only without the hotel. Oy made his way across it, snout still low to the ground, his squiggle of a tail wagging back and forth. Jake had to jog in order to keep up. Now that they no longer filled the bag, the 'Rizas jangled back and forth. There was a kiosk on the far side of the lobby-vault, with a sign in one dusty window reading LAST CHANCE FOR NEW YORK SOUVENIRS and another reading VISIT SEPTEMBER 11, 2001! TIX STILL AVAILABLE FOR THIS WONDERFUL EVENT! ASTHMATICS PROHIBITED W/O DR'S CERTIFICATE! Jake wondered what was so fabulous about September 11th of 2001 and then decided that maybe he didn't want to know.

Suddenly, as loud in his head as a voice spoken directly into his ear: *Hey! Hey Positronics lady! You still there?*

Jake had no idea who the Positronics lady might be, but he recognized the voice asking the question.

Susannah! he shouted, coming to a stop near the tourist kiosk. A surprised, joyful grin creased his strained face and made it a kid's again. *Suze, are you there?*

And heard her cry out in happy surprise.

Oy, realizing that Jake was no longer following close behind, turned and gave an impatient *Ake-Ake!* cry. For the moment at least, Jake disregarded him.

"I hear you!" he shouted. "Finally! God, who've you been talking to? Keep yelling so I can home in on y—"

From behind him—perhaps at the top of the long staircase, perhaps already on it—someone yelled, “That’s him!” There were gunshots, but Jake barely heard them. To his intense horror, something had crawled inside his head. Something like a mental hand. He thought it was probably the low man who had spoken to him through the door. The low man’s hand had found dials in some kind of Jake Chambers Dogan, and was fiddling with them. Trying

(to freeze me freeze me in place freeze my feet right to the floor)

to stop him. And that voice had gotten in because while he was sending and receiving, he was *open*—

Jake! Jake, where are you?

There was no time to answer her. Once, while trying to open the unfound door in the Cave of Voices, Jake had summoned a vision of a million doors opening wide. Now he summoned one of them slamming shut, creating a sound like God’s own sonic boom.

Just in time, too. For a moment longer his feet remained stuck to the dusty floor, and then something screamed in agony and pulled back from him. Let him go.

Jake got moving, jerkily at first, then picking up steam. God, that had been close! Very faintly, he heard Susannah call his name again but didn’t dare throw himself open enough to reply. He’d just have to hope that Oy would hold onto her scent, and that she would keep sending.

THREE

He decided later that he must have started singing the song from Mrs. Shaw’s radio shortly after Susannah’s final faint cry, but there was no way of telling for sure. One might as well try to pinpoint the genesis of a headache or the exact moment one consciously realizes he is coming down with a cold. What Jake was sure of was that there were more gunshots, and once the buzzing whine of a ricochet, but all that was a good distance behind, and finally he didn’t bother ducking anymore (or even looking back). Besides, Oy was moving fast now, really shucking those furry little buns of his. Buried machinery thumped and wheezed. Steel rails surfaced in the passageway floor, leading Jake to assume that once a tram or some other kind of shuttle

had run here. At regular intervals, official communiqués (PATRICIA AHEAD; FEDIC; DO YOU HAVE YOUR BLUE PASS?) were printed on the walls. In some places the tiles had fallen off, in others the tram-rails were gone, and in several spots puddles of ancient, verminous water filled what looked for all the world like potholes. Jake and Oy passed two or three stalled vehicles that resembled a cross between golf-carts and flatcars. They also passed a turnip-headed robot that flashed the dim red bulbs of its eyes and made a single croaking sound that might have been *halt*. Jake raised one of the Orizas, having no idea if it could do any good against such a thing if it came after him, but the robot never moved. That single dim flash seemed to have drained the last few ergs in its batteries, or energy cells, or atomic slug, or whatever it ran on. Here and there he saw graffiti. Two were familiar. The first was ALL HAIL THE CRIMSON KING, with the red eye above each of the I's in the message. The other read BANGO SKANK, '84. *Man*, Jake thought distractedly, *that guy Bango gets around*. And then heard himself clearly for the first time, singing under his breath. Not words, exactly, but just an old, barely remembered refrain from one of the songs on Mrs. Shaw's kitchen radio: "A-wimeweh, a-wimeweh, a-weee-ummm-immm-oweh . . ."

He quit it, creaped out by the muttery, talismanic quality of the chant, and called for Oy to stop. "Need to take a leak, boy."

"Oy!" Cocked ears and bright eyes providing the rest of the message: *Don't take too long*.

Jake sprayed urine onto one of the tile walls. Greenish dreck was seeping between the squares. He also listened for the sound of pursuit and was not disappointed. How many back there? What sort of posse? Roland probably would have known, but Jake had no idea. The echoes made it sound like a regiment.

As he was shaking off, it came to Jake Chambers that the Pere would never do this again, or grin at him and point his finger, or cross himself before eating. They had killed him. Taken his life. Stopped his breath and pulse. Save perhaps for dreams, the Pere was now gone from the story. Jake began to cry. Like his smile, the tears made him once again look like a child. Oy had turned around, eager to be off on the scent, but now looked back over one shoulder with an expression of unmistakable concern.

“S’all right,” Jake said, buttoning his fly and then wiping his cheeks with the heel of his hand. Only it wasn’t all right. He was more than sad, more than angry, more than scared about the low men running relentlessly up his backtrail. Now that the adrenaline in his system had receded, he realized he was hungry as well as sad. Tired, too. *Tired?* Verging on exhaustion. He couldn’t remember when he’d last slept. Being sucked through the door into New York, he could remember that, and Oy almost being hit by a taxi, and the God-bomb minister with the name that reminded him of Jimmy Cagney playing George M. Cohan in that old black-and-white movie he’d watched on the TV in his room when he was small. Because, he realized now, there had been a song in that movie about a guy named Harrigan: *H–A–double R–I; Harrigan, that’s me*. He could remember those things, but not when he’d last eaten a square—

“*Ake!*” Oy barked, relentless as fate. If bumblers had a breaking point, Jake thought wearily, Oy was still a long way from his. “*Ake-Ake!*”

“Yeah-yeah,” he agreed, pushing away from the wall. “Ake-Ake will now run-run. Go on. Find Susannah.”

He wanted to plod, but plodding would quite likely not be good enough. Mere walking, either. He flogged his legs into a jog and once more began to sing under his breath, this time the words to the song: “*In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight . . . In the jungle, the quiet jungle, the lion sleeps tonight . . . ohhh . . .*” And then he was off again, *wimeweh, wimeweh, wimeweh*, nonsense words from the kitchen radio that was always tuned to the oldies on WCBS . . . only weren’t memories of some movie wound around and into his memory of this particular song? Not a song from *Yankee Doodle Dandy* but from some other movie? One with scary monsters? Something he’d seen when he was just a little kid, maybe not even out of his

(*clouts*)

diapers?

“*Near the village, the quiet village, the lion sleeps tonight . . . Near the village, the peaceful village, the lion sleeps tonight . . . HUH-oh, a-wimeweh, a-wimeweh . . .*”

He stopped, breathing hard, rubbing his side. He had a stitch there but it wasn’t bad, at least not yet, hadn’t sunk deep enough to stop him. But that goo . . . that greenish goo dribbling between the

tiles . . . it was oozing through the ancient grout and busted ceramic because this was

(the jungle)

deep below the city, deep like catacombs

(wimeweh)

or like—

“Oy,” he said, speaking through chapped lips. Christ, he was so thirsty! “Oy, this isn’t goo, this is *grass*. Or weeds . . . or . . .”

Oy barked his friend’s name, but Jake hardly noticed. The echoing sound of the pursuers continued (had drawn a bit closer, in fact), but for the time being he ignored them, as well.

Grass, growing out of the tiled wall.

Overwhelming the wall.

He looked down and saw more grass, a brilliant green that was almost purple beneath the fluorescent lights, growing up out of the floor. And bits of broken tile crumbling into shards and fragments like remains of the old people, the ancestors who had lived and built before the Beams began to break and the world began to move on.

He bent down. Reached into the grass. Brought up sharp shards of tile, yes, but also *earth*, the earth of

(the jungle)

some deep catacomb or tomb or perhaps—

There was a beetle crawling through the dirt he’d scooped up, a beetle with a red mark on its back like a bloody smile, and Jake cast it away with a cry of disgust. Mark of the King! Say true! He came back to himself and realized that he was down on one knee, practicing at archaeology like the hero in some old movie while the hounds drew closer on his trail. And Oy was looking at him, eyes shining with anxiety.

“Ake! Ake-Ake!”

“Yeah,” he said, heaving himself to his feet. “I’m coming. But Oy . . . what *is* this place?”

Oy had no idea why he heard anxiety in his kadinh’s voice; what *he* saw was the same as before and what he smelled was the same as before: *her* smell, the scent the boy had asked him to find and follow. And it was fresher now. He ran on along its bright brand.

FOUR

Jake stopped again five minutes later, shouting, “Oy! Wait up a minute!”

The stitch in his side was back, and it was deeper, but it still wasn’t the stitch that had stopped him. *Everything* had changed. Or was changing. And God help him, he thought he knew what it was changing into.

Above him the fluorescent lights still shone down, but the tile walls were shaggy with greenery. The air had become damp and humid, soaking his shirt and sticking it against his body. A beautiful orange butterfly of startling size flew past his wide eyes. Jake snatched at it but the butterfly eluded him easily. Almost merrily, he thought.

The tiled corridor had become a jungle path. Ahead of them, it sloped up to a ragged hole in the overgrowth, probably some sort of forest clearing. Beyond it Jake could see great old trees growing in a mist, their trunks thick with moss, their branches looped with vines. He could see giant spreading ferns, and through the green lace of the leaves, a burning jungle sky. He knew he was under New York, must be under New York, but—

What sounded like a monkey chattered, so close by that Jake flinched and looked up, sure he would see it directly overhead, grinning down from behind a bank of lights. And then, freezing his blood, came the heavy roar of a lion. One that was most definitely *not* asleep.

He was on the verge of retreating, and at full speed, when he realized he could *not*; the low men (probably led by the one who’d told him the *faddah* was *dinnah*) were back that way. And Oy was looking at him with bright-eyed impatience, clearly wanting to go on. Oy was no dummy, but he showed no signs of alarm, at least not concerning what was ahead.

For his own part, Oy still couldn’t understand the boy’s problem. He knew the boy was tired—he could smell that—but he also knew Ake was afraid. Why? There were unpleasant smells in this place, the smell of many men chief among them, but they did not strike Oy as immediately dangerous. And besides, *her* smell was here. *Very* fresh now. Almost new.

“Ake!” he yapped again.

Jake had his breath now. “All right,” he said, looking around. “Okay. But slow.”

“Lo,” Oy said, but even Jake could detect the stunning lack of approval in the bumbler’s response.

Jake moved only because he had no other options. He walked up the slope of the overgrown trail (in Oy’s perception the way was perfectly straight, and had been ever since leaving the stairs) toward the vine- and fern-fringed opening, toward the lunatic chitter of the monkey and the testicle-freezing roar of the hunting lion. The song circled through his mind again and again

(in the village . . . in the jungle . . . hush my darling, don’t stir my darling . . .)

and now he knew the name of it, even the name of the group

(that’s the Tokens with “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” gone from the charts but not from our hearts)

that had sung it, but what was the *movie*? What was the name of the goddam *mo*—

Jake reached the top of the slope and the edge of the clearing. He looked through an interlacing of broad green leaves and brilliant purple flowers (a tiny green worm was journeying into the heart of one), and as he looked, the name of the movie came to him and his skin broke out in gooseflesh from the nape of his neck all the way down to his feet. A moment later the first dinosaur came out of the jungle (the mighty jungle), and walked into the clearing.

FIVE

Once upon a time long ago

(far and wee)

when he was just a little lad;

(there’s some for you and some for me)

once upon a time when mother went to Montreal with her art club and father went to Vegas for the annual unveiling of the fall shows;

(blackberry jam and blackberry tea)

once upon a time when ’Bama was four—

'Bama's what the only good one

(Mrs. Shaw Mrs. Greta Shaw)

calls him. She cuts the crusts off his sandwiches, she puts his nursie-school drawings on the fridge with magnets that look like little plastic fruits, she calls him 'Bama and that's a special name to him

(to them)

because his father taught him one drunk Saturday afternoon to chant "Go wide, go wide, roll you Tide, we don't run and we don't hide, we're the 'Bama Crimson Tide!" and so she calls him 'Bama, it's a secret name and how they know what it means and no one else does is like having a house you can go into, a safe house in the scary woods where outside the shadows all look like monsters and ogres and tigers.

("Tyger, tyger, burning bright," his mother sings to him, for this is her idea of a lullabye, along with "I heard a fly buzz . . . when I died," which gives 'Bama Chambers a terrible case of the creeps, although he never tells her; he lies in bed sometimes at night and sometimes during afternoon naptime thinking I will hear a fly and it will be my deathfly, my heart will stop and my tongue will fall down my throat like a stone down a well and these are the memories he denies)

It is good to have a secret name and when he finds out mother is going to Montreal for the sake of art and father is going to Vegas to help present the Network's new shows at the Up-fronts he begs his mother to ask Mrs. Greta Shaw to stay with him and finally his mother gives in. Little Jakie knows Mrs. Shaw is not mother and on more than one occasion Mrs. Greta Shaw herself has told him she is not mother

("I hope you know I'm not your mother, 'Bama," she says, giving him a plate and on the plate is a peanut butter, bacon, and banana sandwich with the crusts cut off as only Greta Shaw knows how to cut them off, "because that is not in my job description")

(And Jakie—only he's 'Bama here, he's 'Bama between them—doesn't know exactly how to tell her he knows that, knows that, knows that, but he'll make do with her until the real thing comes along or until he grows old enough to get over his fear of the Deathfly)

And Jakie says Don't worry, I'm okay, but he is still glad Mrs. Shaw agrees to stay instead of the latest au pair who wears short skirts and is always

*playing with her hair and her lipstick and doesn't care jackshit about him and doesn't know that in his secret heart he is 'Bama, and boy that little Daisy Mae
(which is what his father calls all the au pairs)*

is stupid stupid stupid. Mrs. Shaw isn't stupid. Mrs. Shaw gives him a snack she sometimes calls Afternoon Tea or even High Tea, and no matter what it is—cottage cheese and fruit, a sandwich with the crusts cut off, custard and cake, leftover canapés from a cocktail party the night before—she sings the same little song when she lays it out: “A little snack that's far and wee, there's some for you and some for me, blackberry jam and blackberry tea.”

There is a TV in his room, and every day while his folks are gone he takes his after-school snack in there and watches watches watches and he hears her radio in the kitchen, always the oldies, always WCBS, and sometimes he hears her, hears Mrs. Greta Shaw singing along with the Four Seasons Wanda Jackson Lee “Yah-Yah” Dorsey, and sometimes he pretends his folks die in a plane crash and she somehow does become his mother and she calls him poor little lad and poor little lost tyke and then by virtue of some magical transformation she loves him instead of just taking care of him, loves him loves him loves him the way he loves her, she's his mother (or maybe his wife, he is unclear about the difference between the two), but she calls him 'Bama instead of sugarlove

(his real mother)

or hotshot

(his father)

and although he knows the idea is stupid, thinking about it in bed is fun, thinking about it beats the penis-piss out of thinking about the Deathfly that would come and buzz over his corpse when he died with his tongue down his throat like a stone down a well. In the afternoon when he gets home from nursie-school (by the time he's old enough to know it's actually nursery school he will be out of it) he watches Million Dollar Movie in his room. On Million Dollar Movie they show exactly the same movie at exactly the same time—four o'clock—every day for a week. The week before his parents went away and Mrs. Greta Shaw stayed the night instead of going home

(O what bliss, for Mrs. Greta Shaw negates Discordia, can you say amen)

there was music from two directions every day, there were the oldies in the kitchen

(WCBS can you say God-bomb)

and on the TV James Cagney is strutting in a derby and singing about Harrigan—H—A—double R—I, Harrigan, that's me! Also the one about being a real live nephew of my Uncle Sam.

Then it's a new week, the week his folks are gone, and a new movie, and the first time he sees it it scares the living breathing shit out of him. This movie is called The Lost Continent, and it stars Mr. Cesar Romero, and when Jake sees it again (at the advanced age of ten) he will wonder how he could ever have been afraid of such a stupid movie as that one. Because it's about explorers who get lost in the jungle, see, and there are dinosaurs in the jungle, and at four years of age he didn't realize the dinosaurs were nothing but fucking CARTOONS, no different from Tweety and Sylvester and Popeye the Sailor Man, uck-uck-uck, can ya say Wimpy, can you give me Olive Oyl. The first dinosaur he sees is a triceratops that comes blundering out of the jungle, and the girl explorer

(Bodacious ta-tas, his father would undoubtedly have said, it's what his father always says about what Jake's mother calls A Certain Type Of Girl)

screams her lungs out, and Jake would scream too if he could but his chest is locked down with terror, o here is Discordia incarnate! In the monster's eyes he sees the utter nothing that means the end of everything, for pleading won't work with such a monster and screaming won't work with such a monster, it's too dumb, all screaming does is attract the monster's attention, and does, it turns toward the Daisy Mae with the bodacious ta-tas and then it charges the Daisy Mae with the bodacious ta-tas, and in the kitchen (the mighty kitchen) he hears the Tokens, gone from the charts but not from our hearts, they are singing about the jungle, the peaceful jungle, and here in front of the little boy's huge horrified eyes is a jungle which is anything but peaceful, and it's not a lion but a lumbering thing that looks sort of like a rhinoceros only bigger, and it has a kind of bone collar around its neck, and later Jake will find out you call this kind of monster a triceratops, but for now it is nameless, which makes it even worse, nameless is worse. "Wimeweh," sing the Tokens, "Weee-ummm-a-weh," and of course Cesar Romero shoots the monster just before it can tear the girl with the bodacious ta-tas limb from limb, which is good at the time, but that night the monster comes back, the triceratops comes back, it's in his closet, because even at four he understands that sometimes his closet isn't his closet, that its door can open on different places where there are worse things waiting.

He begins to scream, at night he can scream, and Mrs. Greta Shaw comes into the room. She sits on the edge of his bed, her face ghostly with blue-gray beautymud, and she asks him what's wrong 'Bama and he is actually able to tell her. He could never have told his father or mother, had one of them been there to begin with, which they of course aren't, but he can tell Mrs. Shaw because while she isn't a lot different from the other help—the au pairs babysitters child minders schoolwalkers—she is a little different, enough to put his drawings on the fridge with the little magnets, enough to make all the difference, to hold up the tower of a silly little boy's sanity, say hallelujah, say found not lost, say amen.

She listens to everything he has to say, nodding, and makes him say tri-CER-a-TOPS until finally he gets it right. Getting it right is better. And then she says, “Those things were real once, but they died out a hundred million years ago, 'Bama. Maybe even more. Now don't bother me any more because I need my sleep.”

Jake watches The Lost Continent on Million Dollar Movie every day that week. Every time he watches it, it scares him a little less. Once, Mrs. Greta Shaw comes in and watches part of it with him. She brings him his snack, a big bowl of Hawaiian Fluff (also one for herself) and sings him her wonderful little song: “A little snack that's far and wee, there's some for you and some for me, blackberry jam and blackberry tea.” There are no blackberries in Hawaiian Fluff, of course, and they have the last of the Welch's Grape Juice to go with it instead of tea, but Mrs. Greta Shaw says it is the thought that counts. She has taught him to say Rooty-tooty-salutie before they drink, and to clink glasses. Jake thinks that's the absolute coolest, the cat's ass.

Pretty soon the dinosaurs come. 'Bama and Mrs. Greta Shaw sit side by side, eating Hawaiian Fluff and watching as a big one (Mrs. Greta Shaw says you call that kind a Tyrannasorbet Wrecks) eats the bad explorer. “Cartoon dinosaurs,” Mrs. Greta Shaw sniffs. “Wouldn't you think they could do better than that.” As far as Jake is concerned, this is the most brilliant piece of film criticism he has ever heard in his life. Brilliant and useful.

Eventually his parents come back. Top Hat enjoys a week's run on Million Dollar Movie and little Jakie's night terrors are never mentioned. Eventually he forgets his fear of the triceratops and the Tyrannasorbet.

Now, lying in the high green grass and peering into the misty clearing from between the leaves of a fern, Jake discovered that some things you *never* forgot.

Mind the mind-trap, Jochabim had said, and looking down at the lumbering dinosaur—a cartoon triceratops in a real jungle like an imaginary toad in a real garden—Jake realized that this was it. This was the mind-trap. The triceratops wasn't real no matter how fearsomely it might roar, no matter that Jake could actually smell it—the rank vegetation rotting in the soft folds where its stubby legs met its stomach, the shit caked to its vast armor-plated rear end, the endless cud drooling between its tusk-edged jaws—and hear its panting breath. It *couldn't* be real, it was a *cartoon*, for God's sake!

And yet he knew it was real enough to kill him. If he went down there, the cartoon triceratops would tear him apart just as it would have torn apart the Daisy Mae with the bodacious ta-tas if Cesar Romero hadn't appeared in time to put a bullet into the thing's One Vulnerable Spot with his big-game hunter's rifle. Jake had gotten rid of the hand that had tried to monkey with his motor controls—had slammed all those doors so hard he'd chopped off the hand's intruding fingers, for all he knew—but this was different. He could not close his eyes and just walk by; that was a real monster his traitor mind had created, and it could really tear him apart.

There was no Cesar Romero here to keep it from happening. No Roland, either.

There were only the low men, running his backtrail and getting closer all the time.

As if to emphasize this point, Oy looked back the way they'd come and barked once, piercingly loud.

The triceratops heard and roared in response. Jake expected Oy to shrink against him at that mighty sound, but Oy continued to look back over Jake's shoulder. It was the *low men* Oy was worried about, not the triceratops below them or the Tyrannasorbet Wrecks that might come next, or—

Because Oy doesn't see it, he thought.

He monkeyed with this idea and couldn't pull it apart. Oy hadn't smelled it or heard it, either. The conclusion was inescapable: to Oy the terrible triceratops in the mighty jungle below did not exist.

Which doesn't change the fact that it does to me. It's a trap that was set for me, or for anyone else equipped with an imagination who might happen along. Some gadget of the old people, no doubt. Too bad it's not broken like most of their other stuff, but it's not. I see what I see and there's nothing I can do about it—

No, wait.

Wait just a second.

Jake had no idea how good his mental connection to Oy actually was, but thought he would soon find out.

“Oy!”

The calling voices of the low men were now horribly close. Soon they would see the boy and the bumbler stopped here and break into a charge. Oy could smell them coming but looked at Jake calmly enough anyway. At his beloved Jake, for whom he would die if called upon to do so.

“Oy, can you change places with me?”

It turned out that he could.

EIGHT

Oy tottered erect with Ake in his arms, swaying back and forth, horrified to discover how narrow the boy's range of balance was. The idea of walking even a short distance on but two legs was terribly daunting, yet it would have to be done, and done at once. Ake said so.

For his part, Jake knew he would have to shut the borrowed eyes he was looking through. He was in Oy's head but he could still see the triceratops; now he could also see a pterodactyl cruising the hot air above the clearing, its leathery wings stretched to catch the thermals blowing from the air-exchangers.

Oy! You have to do it on your own. And if we're going to stay ahead of them you have to do it now.

Ake! Oy responded, and took a tentative step forward. The boy's body wavered from side to side, out to the very edge of balance and then beyond. Ake's stupid two-legs body tumbled sideways. Oy tried to save it and only made the tumble worse, going down on the boy's right side and bumping Ake's furry head.

Oy tried to bark his frustration. What came out of Ake's mouth was a stupid thing that was more word than sound: "Bark! Ark! *Shit-bark!*"

"I hear him!" someone shouted. "Run! Come on, double-time, you useless cunts! Before the little bastard gets to the door!"

Ake's ears weren't keen, but with the way the tile walls magnified sounds, that was no problem. Oy could hear their running footfalls.

"*You have to get up and go!*" Jake tried to yell, and what came out was a garbled, barking sentence: "*Ake-Ake, affa! Up n go!*" Under other circumstances it might have been funny, but not under these.

Oy got up by putting Ake's back against the wall and pushing with Ake's legs. At last he was getting the hang of the motor controls; they were in a place Ake called *Dogan* and were fairly simple. Off to the left, however, an arched corridor led into a huge room filled with mirror-bright machinery. Oy knew that if he went into that place—the chamber where Ake kept all his marvelous thoughts and his store of words—he would be lost forever.

Luckily, he didn't need to. Everything he needed was in the *Dogan*. Left foot . . . forward. (*And pause.*) Right foot . . . forward. (*And pause.*) Hold the thing that looks like a billy-bumbler but is really your friend and use the other arm for balance. Resist the urge to drop to all fours and crawl. The pursuers will catch up if he does that; he can no longer smell them (not with Ake's amazingly stupid little bulb of a snout), but he is sure of it, all the same.

For his part, Jake could smell them clearly, at least a dozen and maybe as many as sixteen. Their bodies were perfect engines of stink, and they pushed the aroma ahead of them in a dirty cloud. He could smell the asparagus one had had for dinner; could smell the meaty, wrong aroma of the cancer which was growing in another, probably in his head but perhaps in his throat.

Then he heard the triceratops roar again. It was answered by the bird-thing riding the air overhead.

Jake closed his—well, Oy's—eyes. In the dark, the bumbler's side-to-side motion was even worse. Jake was concerned that if he had to put up with much of it (especially with his eyes shut), he would ralph his guts out. Just call him 'Bama the Seasick Sailor.

Go, Oy, he thought. Fast as you can. Don't fall down again, but . . . fast as you can!

Had Eddie been there, he might have been reminded of Mrs. Mislaburski from up the block: Mrs. Mislaburski in February, after a sleet storm, when the sidewalk was glazed with ice and not yet salted down. But, ice or no ice, she would not be kept from her daily chop or bit of fish at the Castle Avenue Market (or from mass on Sunday, for Mrs. Mislaburski was perhaps the most devout Catholic in Co-Op City). So here she came, thick legs spread, candy-pink in their support hose, one arm clutching her purse to her immense bosom, the other held out for balance, head down, eyes searching for the islands of ashes where some responsible building super had already been out (Jesus and Mother Mary bless those good men), also for the treacherous patches that would defeat her, that would send her whoopsy with her large pink knees flying apart, and down she'd come on her sit-upon, or maybe on her back, a woman could break her spine, a woman could be *paralyzed* like poor Mrs. Bernstein's daughter that was in the car accident in Mamaroneck, such things happened. And so she ignored the catcalls of the children (Henry Dean and his little brother Eddie often among them) and went on her way, head down, arm outstretched for balance, sturdy black old lady's purse curled to her midsection, determined that if she *did* go whoopsy-my-daisy she would protect her purse and its contents at all costs, would fall on it like Joe Namath falling on the football after a sack.

So did Oy of Mid-World walk the body of Jake along a stretch of underground corridor that looked (to him, at least) pretty much like all the rest. The only difference he could see was the three holes on either side, with big glass eyes looking out of them, eyes that made a low and constant humming sound.

In his arms was something that looked like a bumbler with its eyes squeezed tightly shut. Had they been open, Jake might have recognized these things as projecting devices. More likely he would not have seen them at all.

Walking slowly (Oy knew they were gaining, but he also knew that walking slowly was better than falling down), legs spread wide and shuffling along, holding Ake curled to his chest just as Mrs. Mislaburski had held her purse on those icy days, he made his way

past the glass eyes. The hum faded. Was it far enough? He hoped so. Walking like a human was simply too hard, too nerve-wracking. So was being close to all of Ake's thinking machinery. He felt an urge to turn and look at it—all those bright mirror surfaces!—but didn't. To look might well bring on hypnosis. Or something worse.

He stopped. "Jake! Look! See!"

Jake tried to reply *Okay* and barked, instead. Pretty funny. He cautiously opened his eyes and saw tiled wall on both sides. There was grass and tiny sprays of fern still growing out of it, true enough, but it *was* tile. It *was* corridor. He looked behind him and saw the clearing. The triceratops had forgotten them. It was locked in a battle to the death with the Tyrannasorbet, a scene he recalled with complete clarity from *The Lost Continent*. The girl with the bodacious ta-tas had watched the battle from the safety of Cesar Romero's arms, and when the cartoon Tyrannasorbet had clamped its huge mouth over the triceratops's face in a death-bite, the girl had buried her own face against Cesar Romero's manly chest.

"Oy!" Jake barked, but barking was *lame* and he switched to thinking, instead.

Change back with me!

Oy was eager to comply—never had he wanted anything so much—but before they could effect the swap, the pursuers caught sight of them.

"*Theah!*" shouted the one with the Boston accent—he who had proclaimed that the *Faddah* was *dinnah*. "Theah they aah! Get em! Shoot em!"

And, as Jake and Oy switched their minds back into their proper bodies, the first bullets began to flick the air around them like snapping fingers.

TEN

The fellow leading the pursuers was a man named Flaherty. Of the seventeen of them, he was the only hume. The rest save one were low men and vampires. The last was a taheen with the head of an intelligent stoat and a pair of huge hairy legs protruding from Bermuda shorts. Below the legs were narrow feet that ended in

brutally sharp thorns. A single kick from one of Lamla's feet could cut a full-grown man in half.

Flaherty—raised in Boston, for the last twenty years one of the King's men in a score of late-twentieth-century New Yorks—had put together his posse as fast as he could, in a nerve-roasting agony of fear and fury. *Nothing gets into the Pig.* That was what Sayre had told Meiman. And anything that *did* get in was not, under any circumstances, to be allowed out. That went double for the gunslinger or any of his ka-tet. Their meddling had long since passed the merely annoying stage, and you didn't have to be one of the elite to know it. But now Meiman, who had been called the Canary by his few friends, was dead and the kid had somehow gotten past them. A *kid*, for God's love! A fucking *kid*! But how were they to know that the two of them would have such a powerful totem as that turtle? If the damn thing hadn't happened to bounce beneath one of the tables, it might be holding them in place still.

Flaherty knew it was true, but also knew that Sayre would never accept it as a valid argument. Would not even give him, Flaherty, a chance to put it forward. No, he would be dead long before that, and the others, as well. Sprawled on the floor with the doctor-bugs gorging on their blood.

It was easy to say that the kid would be stopped at the door, that he wouldn't—*couldn't*—know any of the authorization phrases that opened it, but Flaherty no longer trusted such ideas, tempting as they might be. All bets were off, and Flaherty felt a soaring sense of relief when he saw the kid and his furry little pal stopped up ahead. Several of the posse fired, but missed. Flaherty wasn't surprised. There was some sort of green area between them and the kid, a fucking swatch of jungle under the city was what it looked like, and a mist was rising, making it hard to aim. Plus some kind of ridiculous cartoon dinosaurs! One of them raised its blood-smeared head and roared at them, holding its tiny forepaws against its scaly chest.

Looks like a dragon, Flaherty thought, and before his eyes the cartoon dinosaur *became* a dragon. It roared and spewed a jet of fire that set several dangling vines and a mat of hanging moss to burning. The kid, meanwhile, was on the move again.

Lamla, the stoat-headed taheen, pushed his way to the forefront and raised one furred fist to his forehead. Flaherty returned the salute impatiently. “What’s down theah, Lam? Do you know?”

Flaherty himself had never been below the Pig. When he traveled on business, it was always between New Yorks, which meant using either the door on Forty-seventh Street between First and Second, the one in the eternally empty warehouse on Bleecker Street (only in some worlds that one was an eternally half-completed building), or the one way up-town on Ninety-fourth Street. (The last was now on the blink much of the time, and of course nobody knew how to fix it.) There were other doors in the city—New York was lousy with portals to other wheres and whens—but those were the only ones that still worked.

And the one to Fedic, of course. The one up ahead.

“’Tis a mirage-maker,” the stoat-thing said. Its voice was wet and rumbling and very far from human. “Yon machine trolls for what ye fear and makes it real. Sayre would’ve turned it on when he and his tet passed with the blackskin jilly. To keep ’is backtrail safe, ye do ken.”

Flaherty nodded. A mind-trap. Very clever. Yet how good was it, really? Somehow the cursed shitting boy had passed, hadn’t he?

“Whatever the boy saw will turn into what *we* fear,” the taheen said. “It works on imagination.”

Imagination. Flaherty seized on the word. “Fine. Whatevah they see down theah, tell em to just ignore it.”

He raised an arm to motion his men onward, greatly relieved by what Lam had told him. Because they had to press the chase, didn’t they? Sayre (or Walter o’ Dim, who was even worse) would very likely kill the lot of them if they failed to stop yon snot-babby. And Flaherty really *did* fear the idea of dragons, that was the other thing; had ever since his father had read him a story about such when he was a boy.

The taheen stopped him before he could complete the let’s-go gesture.

“What now, Lam?” Flaherty snarled.

“You don’t understand. What’s down there is real enough to kill you. To kill *all* of us.”

“What do *you* see, then?” This was no time to be curious, but that had always been Conor Flaherty’s curse.

Lamla lowered his head. “I don’t like to say. ’Tis bad enough. The point is, sai, we’ll die down there if we’re not careful. What happened to you might look like a stroke or a heart attack to a cut-em-up man, but t’would be whatever you see down there. Anyone who doesn’t think the imagination can kill is a fool.”

The rest had gathered behind the taheen now. They were alternating glances into the hazy clearing with looks at Lamla. Flaherty didn’t like what he saw on their faces, not a bit. Killing one or two of those least willing to veil their sullen eyes might restore the enthusiasm of the rest, but what good would that do if Lamla was right? Cursed old people, always leaving their toys behind! Dangerous toys! How they complicated a man’s life! A pox on every last one!

“Then how do we get past?” Flaherty cried. “For that mattah, how did the *brat* get past?”

“Dunno about the brat,” Lamla said, “but all *we* need to do is shoot the projectors.”

“*What* shitting projectors?”

Lamla pointed below . . . or along the course of the corridor, if what the ugly bastard said was true. “There,” Lam said. “I know you can’t see em, but take my word for it, they’re there. Either side.”

Flaherty was watching with a certain fascination as Jake’s misty jungle clearing continued to change before his eyes into the deep dark forest, as in *Once upon a time when everyone lived in the deep dark forest and nobody lived anywhere else, a dragon came to rampage.*

Flaherty didn’t know what Lamla and the rest of them were seeing, but before his eyes the dragon (which had been a Tyrannasorbet Wrecks not so long ago) obediently rampaged, setting trees on fire and looking for little Catholic boys to eat.

“I see *NOTHING!*” he shouted at Lamla. “I think youah out of your shitting *MIND!*”

“I’ve seen em turned off,” Lamla said quietly, “and can recall near about where they lie. If you’ll let me bring up four men and set em shooting on either side, I don’t believe it will take long to shut em down.”

And what will Sayre say when I tell him we shot the hell out of his precious mind-trap? Flaherty could have said. What will Walter o' Dim say, for that mattah? For what's roont can never be fixed, not by such as us who know how to rub two sticks together and make a fire but not much more.

Could have said but didn't. Because getting the boy was more important than any antique gadget of the old people, even one as amazing as yon mind-trap. And Sayre was the one who turned it on, wasn't he? Say aye! If there was explaining to be done, let Sayre do it! Let him make his knee to the big boys and talk till they shut him up! Meanwhile, the gods-damned snot-babby continued to rebuild the lead that Flaherty (who'd had visions of being honored for stepping so promptly into the breach) and his men had so radically reduced. If only one of them had been lucky enough to hit the kid when he and his little furbag friend had been in view! Ah, but wish in one hand, shit in the other! See which one fills up first!

"Bring youah best shots," Flaherty said in his Back Bay/John F. Kennedy accent. "Have at it."

Lamla ordered three low men and one of the vamps forward, put two on each side, and talked to them rapidly in another language. Flaherty gathered that a couple of them had already been down here and, like Lam, remembered about where the projectors lay hidden in the walls.

Meanwhile, Flaherty's dragon—or, more properly speaking, his *da's* dragon—continued to rampage in the deep dark forest (the jungle was completely gone now) and set things on fire.

At last—although it seemed a very long time to Flaherty, it was probably less than thirty seconds—the sharpshooters began to fire. Almost immediately both forest and dragon paled before Flaherty's eyes, turned into something that looked like overexposed movie footage.

"That's one of em, cullies!" Lamla yelled in a voice that became unfortunately ovine when it was raised. *"Pour it on! Pour it on for the love of your fathers!"*

Half this crew probably never had such a thing, Flaherty thought morosely. Then came the clearly audible shatter-sound of breaking glass and the dragon froze in place with billows of flame issuing from

its mouth and nostrils, as well as from the gills on the sides of its armored throat.

Encouraged, the sharpshooters began firing faster, and a few moments later the clearing and the frozen dragon both disappeared. Where they had been was only more tiled hallway, with the tracks of those who had recently passed this way marking the dust. On either side were the shattered projector portals.

“All right!” Flaherty yelled after giving Lamla an approving nod. “Now we’re going after the kid, and we’re going to double-time it, and we’re going to catch him, and we’re going to bring him back with his head on a stick! Are you with me?”

They roared savage agreement, none louder than Lamla, whose eyes glowed the same baleful yellow-orange as the dragon’s breath.

“Good, then!” Flaherty set off, roaring a tune any Marine drill-corps would have recognized: “*We don’t care how far you run—*”

“*WE DON’T CARE HOW FAR YOU RUN!*” they bawled back as they trotted four abreast through the place where Jake’s jungle had been. Their feet crunched in the shattered glass.

“*We’ll bring you back before we’re done!*”

“*WE’LL BRING YOU BACK BEFORE WE’RE DONE!*”

“*You can run to Cain or Lud—*”

“*YOU CAN RUN TO CAIN OR LUD!*”

“*We’ll eat your balls and drink your blood!*”

They called it in return, and Flaherty picked up the pace yet a little more.

ELEVEN

Jake heard them coming again, come-come-commala. Heard them promising to eat his balls and drink his blood.

Brag, brag, brag, he thought, but tried to run faster, anyway. He was alarmed to find he couldn’t. Doing the mindswap with Oy had tired him out quite a little b—

No.

Roland had taught him that self-deception was nothing but pride in disguise, an indulgence to be denied. Jake had done his best to heed this advice, and as a result admitted that “being tired” no longer

described his situation. The stitch in his side had grown fangs that had sunk deep into his armpit. He knew he had gained on his pursuers; he also knew from the shouted cadence-chant that they were making up the distance they'd lost. Soon they would be shooting at him and Oy again, and while men didn't shoot for shit while they were running, someone could always get lucky.

Now he saw something up ahead, blocking the corridor. A door. As he approached it, Jake allowed himself to wonder what he'd do if Susannah wasn't on the other side. Or if she was there but didn't know how to help him.

Well, he and Oy would make a stand, that was all. No cover, no way to reenact Thermopylae Pass this time, but he'd throw plates and take heads until they brought him down.

If he needed to, that was.

Maybe he would not.

Jake pounded toward the door, his breath now hot in his throat—close to burning—and thought, *It's just as well. I couldn't have run much further, anyway.*

Oy got there first. He put his front paws on the ghostwood and looked up as if reading the words stamped into the door and the message flashing below them. Then he looked back at Jake, who came panting up with one hand pressed against his armpit and the remaining Orizas clanging loudly back and forth in their bag.

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VERBAL ENTRY CODE REQUIRED

#9 FINAL DEFAULT

He tried the doorknob, but that was only a formality. When the chilly metal refused to turn in his grip, he didn't bother trying again but hammered the heels of both hands against the wood, instead. "Susannah!" he shouted. "If you're there, let me in!"

Not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin he heard his father say, and his mother, much more gravely, as if she knew storytelling was serious

business: *I heard a fly buzz . . . when I died.*

From behind the door there was nothing. From behind Jake, the chanting voices of the Crimson King's posse swept closer.

"*Susannah!*" he bawled, and when there was no answer this time he turned, put his back to the door (hadn't he always known it would end just this way, with his back to a locked door?), and seized an Oriza in each hand. Oy stood between his feet, and now his fur was bushed out, now the velvety-soft skin of his muzzle wrinkled back to show his teeth.

Jake crossed his arms, assuming "the load."

"Come on then, you bastards," he said. "For Gilead and the Eld. For Roland, son of Steven. For me and Oy."

At first he was too fiercely concentrated on dying well, of taking at least one of them with him (the fellow who'd told him the *Faddah* was *dinnah* would be his personal preference) and more if he could, to realize the voice he was hearing had come from the other side of the door rather than from his own mind.

"Jake! Is it really you, sugarpie?"

His eyes widened. Oh please let it not be a trick. If it was, Jake reckoned that he would never be played another.

"Susannah, they're coming! Do you know how—"

"*Yes!* Should still be *chassit*, do you hear me? If Nigel's right, the word should still be *cha*—"

Jake didn't give her a chance to finish saying it again. Now he could see them sweeping toward him, running full-out. Some waving guns and already shooting into the air.

"*Chassit!*" he yelled. "*Chassit* for the Tower! *Open! Open, you son of a bitch!*"

Behind his pressing back the door between New York and Fedic clicked open. At the head of the charging posse, Flaherty saw it happen, uttered the bitterest curse in his lexicon, and fired a single bullet. He was a good shot, and all the force of his not inconsiderable will went with that particular slug, guiding it. No doubt it would have punched through Jake's forehead above the left eye, entering his brain and ending his life, had not a strong, brown-fingered hand seized Jake by the collar at that very moment and yanked him backward through the shrill elevator-shaft whistle that sounds

endlessly between the levels of the Dark Tower. The bullet buzzed by his head instead of entering it.

Oy came with him, barking his friend's name shrilly—*Ake-Ake, Ake-Ake!*—and the door slammed shut behind them. Flaherty reached it twenty seconds later and hammered on it until his fists bled (when Lamla tried to restrain him, Flaherty thrust him back with such ferocity that the taheen went a-sprawl), but there was nothing he could do. Hammering did not work; cursing did not work; nothing worked.

At the very last minute, the boy and the bumbler had eluded them. For yet a little while longer the core of Roland's ka-tet remained unbroken.



CHAPTER VI: ON TURTLEBACK LANE

ONE

See this, I do beg ya, and see it very well, for it's one of the most beautiful places that still remain in America.

I'd show you a homely dirt lane running along a heavily wooded switchback ridge in western Maine, its north and south ends spilling onto Route 7 about two miles apart. Just west of this ridge, like a jeweler's setting, is a deep green dimple in the landscape. At the bottom of it—the stone in the setting—is Kezar Lake. Like all mountain lakes, it may change its aspect half a dozen times in the course of a single day, for here the weather is beyond prankish; you could call it half-mad and be perfectly accurate. The locals will be happy to tell you about ice-cream snow flurries that came to this part of the world once in late August (that would be 1948) and once spang on the Glorious Fourth (1959). They'll be even more delighted to tell you about the tornado that came blasting across the lake's frozen surface in January of 1971, sucking up snow and creating a whirling mini-blizzard that crackled with thunder in its middle. Hard to believe such crazy-jane weather, but you could go and see Gary Barker, if you don't believe me; he's got the pictures to prove it.

Today the lake at the bottom of the dimple is blacker than homemade sin, not just reflecting the thunderheads massing overhead but amplifying their mood. Every now and then a splinter of silver streaks across that obsidian looking-glass as lightning stabs out of the clouds overhead. The sound of thunder rolls through the congested sky west to east, like the wheels of some great stone bucka rolling down an alley in the sky. The pines and oaks and birches are

still and all the world holds its breath. All shadows have disappeared. The birds have fallen silent. Overhead another of those great waggons rolls its solemn course, and in its wake—hark!—we hear an engine. Soon enough John Cullum's dusty Ford Galaxie appears with Eddie Dean's anxious face rising behind the wheel and the headlights shining in the premature gathering dark.

TWO

Eddie opened his mouth to ask Roland how far they were going, but of course he knew. Turtleback Lane's south end was marked by a sign bearing a large black 1, and each of the driveways splitting off lakeward to their left bore another, higher number. They caught glimpses of the water through the trees, but the houses themselves were below them on the slope and tucked out of sight. Eddie seemed to taste ozone and electric grease with every breath he drew, and twice patted the hair on the nape of his neck, sure it would be standing on end. It wasn't, but knowing it didn't change the nervous, witchy feeling of exhilaration that kept sweeping through him, lighting up his solar plexus like an overloaded circuit-breaker and spreading out from there. It was the storm, of course; he just happened to be one of those people who feel them coming along the ends of their nerves. But never one's approach as strongly as this.

It's not all the storm, and you know it.

No, of course not. Although he thought all those wild volts might somehow have facilitated his contact with Susannah. It came and went like the reception you sometimes got from distant radio stations at night, but since their meeting with

(Ye Child of Roderick, ye spoiled, ye lost)

Chevin of Chayven, it had become much stronger. Because this whole part of Maine was thin, he suspected, and close to many worlds. Just as their ka-tet was close to whole again. For Jake was with Susannah, and the two of them seemed to be safe enough for the time being, with a solid door between them and their pursuers. Yet there was something ahead of those two, as well—something Susannah either didn't want to talk about or couldn't make clear. Even so, Eddie had sensed both her horror of it and her terror that it

might come back, and he thought he knew what it was: Mia's baby. Which had been Susannah's as well in some way he still didn't fully understand. Why an armed woman should be afraid of an infant, Eddie didn't know, but he was sure that if she was, there must be a good reason for it.

They passed a sign that said FENN, 11, and another that said ISRAEL, 12. Then they came around a curve and Eddie stamped on the Galaxie's brakes, bringing the car to a hard and dusty stop. Parked at the side of the road beside a sign reading BECKHARDT, 13, was a familiar Ford pickup truck and an even more familiar man leaning nonchalantly against the truck's rust-spotted longbed, dressed in cuffed bluejeans and an ironed blue chambray shirt buttoned all the way to the closeshaved, wattled neck. He also wore a Boston Red Sox cap tilted just a little to one side as if to say *I got the drop on you, partner*. He was smoking a pipe, the blue smoke rising and seeming to hang suspended around his seamed and good-humored face on the breathless pre-storm air.

All this Eddie saw with the clarity of his amped-up nerves, aware that he was smiling as you do when you come across an old friend in a strange place—the Pyramids of Egypt, the marketplace in old Tangiers, maybe an island off the coast of Formosa, or Turtleback Lane in Lovell on a thunderstruck afternoon in the summer of 1977. And Roland was also smiling. Old long, tall, and ugly—smiling! Wonders never ceased, it seemed.

They got out of the car and approached John Cullum. Roland raised a fist to his forehead and bent his knee a little. "Hile, John! I see you very well."

"Ayuh, see you, too," John Cullum said. "Clear as day." He skimmed a salute outward from beneath the brim of his cap and above the tangle of his eyebrows. Then he dipped his chin in Eddie's direction. "Young fella."

"Long days and pleasant nights," Eddie said, and touched his knuckles to his brow. He was not from this world, not anymore, and it was a relief to give up the pretense.

"That's a pretty thing to say," John remarked. Then: "I beat you here. Kinda thought I might."

Roland looked around at the woods on both sides of the road, and at the lane of gathering darkness in the sky above it. "I don't think this is quite the place . . . ?" In his voice was the barest touch of a question.

"Nope, it ain't quite the place you want to finish up," John agreed, puffing his pipe. "I passed where you want to finish up on m'way in, and I tell you this: if you mean to palaver, we better do it here rather than there. You go up there, you won't be able t'do nawthin but gape. I tell you, I ain't never seen the beat of it." For a moment his face shone like the face of a child who's caught his first firefly in a jar and Eddie saw that he meant every word.

"Why?" he asked. "What's up there? Is it walk-ins? Or is it a door?" The idea occurred to him . . . and then seized him. "It *is* a door, isn't it? And it's open!"

John began to shake his head, then appeared to reconsider. "Might be a door," he said, stretching the noun out until it became something luxurious, like a sigh at the end of a long hard day: *doe-ahh*. "Doesn't exactly *look* like a door, but . . . ayuh. Could be. Somewhere in that light?" He appeared to calculate. "Ayuh. But I think you boys want to palaver, and if we go up there to Cara Laughs, there won't be no palaver; just you standin there with your jaws dropped." Cullum threw back his head and laughed. "Me, too!"

"What's Cara Laughs?" Eddie asked.

John shrugged. "A lot of folks with lakefront properties name their houses. I think it's because they pay s'much for em, they want a little more back. Anyway, Cara's empty right now. Family named McCray from Washington D.C. owns it, but they gut it up for sale. They've run onto some hard luck. Fella had a stroke, and she . . ." He made a bottle-tipping motion.

Eddie nodded. There was a great deal about this Tower-chasing business he didn't understand, but there were also things he knew without asking. One was that the core of the walk-in activity in this part of the world was the house on Turtleback Lane John Cullum had identified as Cara Laughs. And when they got there, they'd find the identifying number at the head of the driveway was 19.

He looked up and saw the storm-clouds moving steadily west above Kezar Lake. West toward the White Mountains, too—what was almost

surely called the Discordia in a world not far from here—and along the Path of the Beam.

Always along the Path of the Beam.

“What do you suggest, John?” Roland asked.

Cullum nodded at the sign reading BECKHARDT. “I’ve caretook for Dick Beckhardt since the late fifties,” he said. “Helluva nice man. He’s in Wasin’ton now, doin something with the Carter administration.” *Caaa-tah*. “I got a key. I think maybe we ought to go on down there. It’s warm n dry, and I don’t think it’s gonna be either one out here before long. You boys c’n tell your tale, and I c’n listen—which is a thing I do tol’ably well—and then we can all take a run up to Cara. I . . . well I just *never* . . .” He shook his head, took his pipe out of his mouth, and looked at them with naked wonder. “I never seen the beat of it, I tell you. It was like I didn’t even know how to look at it.”

“Come on,” Roland said. “We’ll all ride down in your cartomobile, if it does ya.”

“Does me just fine,” John said, and got into the back.

THREE

Dick Beckhardt’s cottage was half a mile down, pine-walled, cozy. There was a pot-bellied stove in the living room and a braided rug on the floor. The west-facing wall was glass from end to end and Eddie had to stand there for a moment, looking out, in spite of the urgency of their errand. The lake had gone a shade of dead ebony that was somehow frightening—*like the eye of a zombie*, he thought, and had no idea why he thought it. He had an idea that if the wind picked up (as it would surely do when the rain came), the whitecaps would ruffle the surface and make it easier to look at. Would take away that look of something looking back at *you*.

John Cullum sat at Dick Beckhardt’s table of polished pine, took off his hat, and held it in the bunched fingers of his right hand. He looked at Roland and Eddie gravely. “We know each other pretty damn well for folks who haven’t known each other very damn long,” he said. “Wouldn’t you say that’s so?”

They nodded. Eddie kept expecting the wind to begin outside, but the world went on holding its breath. He was willing to bet it was

going to be one hellacious storm when it came.

“Folks gut t’know each other that way in the Army,” John said. “In the war.” *Aaa-my*. And *war* too Yankee for representation. “Way it always is when the chips’re down, I sh’d judge.”

“Aye,” Roland agreed. “‘Gunfire makes close relations,’ we say.”

“Do ya? Now I know you gut things to tell me, but before you start, there’s one thing I gut to tell you. And I sh’d smile n kiss a pig if it don’t please you good n hard.”

“What?” Eddie asked.

“County Sheriff Eldon Royster took four fellas into custody over in Auburn couple of hours ago. Seems as though they was tryin to sneak past a police roadblock on a woods road and gut stuck for their trouble.” John put his pipe in his mouth, took a wooden match from his breast pocket, and set his thumb against the tip. For the moment, however, he didn’t flick it; only held it there. “Reason they ’us tryin to sneak around is they seemed to have quite a fair amount of fire-power.” *Fiah-powah*. “Machine-guns, grenades, and some of that stuff they call C-4. One of em was a fella I b’lieve you mentioned—Jack Andolini?” And with that he popped the Diamond Bluetip alight.

Eddie collapsed back in one of sai Beckhardt’s prim Shaker chairs, turned his head up to the ceiling, and bellowed laughter at the rafters. When he was tickled, Roland reflected, no one could laugh like Eddie Dean. At least not since Cuthbert All-good had passed into the clearing. “Handsome Jack Andolini, sitting in a county hoosegow in the State of Maine!” he said. “Roll me in sugar and call me a fuckin jelly-doughnut! If only my brother Henry was alive to see it.”

Then Eddie realized that Henry probably *was* alive right now—some version of him, anyway. Assuming the Dean brothers existed in this world.

“Ayuh, thought that’d please ya,” John said, drawing the flame of the rapidly blackening match down into the bowl of his pipe. It clearly pleased him, too. He was grinning almost too hard to kindle his tobacco.

“Oh deary-dear,” Eddie said, wiping his eyes. “That makes my day. Almost makes my *year*.”

“I gut somethin else for ya,” John said, “but we’ll let her be for now.” The pipe was at last going to his satisfaction and he settled back,

eyes shifting between the two strange, wandering men he had met earlier that day. Men whose ka was now entwined with his own, for better or worse, and richer or poorer. “Right now I’d like t’hear your story. And just what it is you’d have me do.”

“How old are you, John?” Roland asked him.

“Not s’ old I don’t still have a little get up n go,” John replied, a trifle coldly. “What about y’self, chummy? How many times you ducked under the pole?”

Roland gave him a smile—the kind that said *point taken, now let’s change the subject*. “Eddie will speak for both of us,” he said. They had decided on this during their ride from Bridgton. “My own tale’s too long.”

“Do you say so,” John remarked.

“I do,” Roland said. “Let Eddie tell you his story, as much as he has time for, and we’ll both tell what we’d have you do, and then, if you agree, he’ll give you one thing to take to a man named Moses Carver . . . and I’ll give you another.”

John Cullum considered this, then nodded. He turned to Eddie.

Eddie took a deep breath. “The first thing you ought to know is that I met this guy here in a middle of an airplane flight from Nassau, the Bahamas, to Kennedy Airport in New York. I was hooked on heroin at the time, and so was my brother. I was muling a load of cocaine.”

“And when might this have been, son?” John Cullum asked.

“The summer of 1987.”

They saw wonder on Cullum’s face but no shade of disbelief. “So you *do* come from the future! Gorry!” He leaned forward through the fragrant pipe-smoke. “Son,” he said, “tell your tale. And don’tcha skip a goddam word.”

FOUR

It took Eddie almost an hour and a half—and in the cause of brevity he *did* skip some of the things that had happened to them. By the time he’d finished, a premature night had settled on the lake below them. And still the threatening storm neither broke nor moved on. Above Dick Beckhardt’s cottage thunder sometimes rumbled and

sometimes cracked so sharply they all jumped. A stroke of lightning jabbed directly into the center of the narrow lake below them, briefly illuminating the entire surface a delicate nacreous purple. Once the wind arose, making voices move through the trees, and Eddie thought *It'll come now, surely it will come now*, but it did not. Nor did the impending storm leave, and this queer suspension, like a sword hanging by the thinnest of threads, made him think of Susannah's long, strange pregnancy, now terminated. At around seven o'clock the power went out and John looked through the kitchen cabinets for a supply of candles while Eddie talked on—the old people of River Crossing, the mad people in the city of Lud, the terrified people of Calla Bryn Sturgis, where they'd met a former priest who seemed to have stepped directly out of a book. John put the candles on the table, along with crackers and cheese and a bottle of Red Zinger iced tea. Eddie finished with their visit to Stephen King, telling how the gunslinger had hypnotized the writer to forget their visit, how they had briefly seen their friend Susannah, and how they had called John Cullum because, as Roland said, there was no one else in this part of the world they *could* call. When Eddie fell silent, Roland told of meeting Chevin of Chayven on their way to Turtleback Lane. The gunslinger laid the silver cross he'd shown Chevin on the table by the plate of cheese, and John poked the fine links of the chain with one thick thumbnail.

Then, for a long time, there was silence.

When he could bear it no longer, Eddie asked the old caretaker how much of the tale he believed.

"All of it," John said without hesitation. "You gut to take care of that rose in New York, don't you?"

"Yes," Roland said.

"Because that's what's kep' one of those Beams safe while most of the others has been broken down by these what-do-you-call-em telepathics, the Breakers."

Eddie was amazed at how quickly and easily Cullum had grasped that, but perhaps there was no reason to be. *Fresh eyes see clear*, Susannah liked to say. And Cullum was very much what the grays of Lud would have called "a trig cove."

"Yes," Roland said. "You say true."

“The rose is takin care of one Beam. Stephen King’s in charge of the other ’un. Least, that’s what you think.”

Eddie said, “He’d bear watching, John—all else aside, he’s got some lousy habits—but once we leave this world’s 1977, we can never come back and check on him.”

“King doesn’t exist in any of these other worlds?” John asked.

“Almost surely not,” Roland said.

“Even if he does,” Eddie put in, “what he does in them doesn’t matter. This is the key world. This, and the one Roland came from. This world and that one are twins.”

He looked at Roland for confirmation. Roland nodded and lit the last of the cigarettes John had given him earlier.

“I might be able to keep an eye on Stephen King,” John said. “He don’t need to know I’m doin it, either. That is, if I get back from doin your cussed business in New York. I gut me a pretty good idear what it is, but maybe you’d better spell it out.” From his back pocket he took a battered notepad with the words Mead Memo written on the green cover. He paged most of the way through it, found a blank sheet, produced a pencil from his breast pocket, licked the tip (Eddie restrained a shudder), and then looked at them as expectantly as any freshman on the first day of high school.

“Now, dearies,” he said, “why don’t you tell your Uncle John the rest.”

FIVE

This time Roland did most of the talking, and although he had less to say than Eddie, it still took him half an hour, for he spoke with great caution, every now and then turning to Eddie for help with a word or phrase. Eddie had already seen the killer and the diplomat who lived inside Roland of Gilead, but this was his first clear look at the envoy, a messenger who meant to get every word right. Outside, the storm still refused to break or to go away.

At last the gunslinger sat back. In the yellow glow of the candles, his face appeared both ancient and strangely lovely. Looking at him, Eddie for the first time suspected there might be more wrong with him than what Rosalita Munoz had called “the dry twist.” Roland had

lost weight, and the dark circles beneath his eyes whispered of illness. He drank off a whole glass of the red tea at a single draught, and asked: “Do you understand the things I’ve told you?”

“Ayuh.” No more than that.

“Ken it very well, do ya?” Roland pressed. “No questions?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Tell it back to us, then.”

John had filled two pages with notes in his looping scrawl. Now he paged back and forth between them, nodding to himself a couple of times. Then he grunted and returned the pad to his hip pocket. *He may be a country cousin, but he’s a long way from stupid*, Eddie thought. *And meeting him was a long way from just luck; that was ka having a very good day.*

“Go to New York,” John said. “Find this fella Aaron Deepneau. Keep his buddy out of it. Convince Deepneau that takin care of the rose in that vacant lot is just about the most important job in the world.”

“You can cut the just-about,” Eddie said.

John nodded as if that went without saying. He picked up the piece of notepaper with the cartoon beaver on top and tucked it into his voluminous wallet. Passing the bill of sale to him had been one of the harder things Eddie Dean had had to do since being sucked through the unfound door and into East Stoneham, and he came close to snatching it back before it could disappear into the caretaker’s battered old Lord Buxton. He thought he understood much better now about how Calvin Tower had felt.

“Because you boys now own the lot, you own the rose,” John said.

“The Tet Corporation now owns the rose,” Eddie said. “A corporation of which you’re about to become executive vice-president.”

John Cullum looked unimpressed with his putative new title. He said, “Deepneau’s supposed to draw up articles of incorporation and make sure Tet’s legal. Then we go to see this fella Moses Carver and make sure *he* gets on board. That’s apt to be the hard part—” *Haa-aad paa-aat* “—but we’ll give it our best go.”

“Put Auntie’s cross around your neck,” Roland said, “and when you meet with sai Carver, show it to him. It may go a long way toward

convincing him you're on the straight. But first you must blow on it, like this."

On their ride from Bridgton, Roland had asked Eddie if he could think of any secret—no matter how trivial or great—which Susannah and her godfather might have shared in common. As a matter of fact Eddie did know such a secret, and he was now astounded to hear Susannah speak it from the cross which lay on Dick Beckhardt's pine table.

"We buried Pimsy under the apple tree, where he could watch the blossoms fall in the spring," her voice said. "And Daddy Mose told me not to cry anymore, because God thinks to mourn a pet too long . . ."

Here the words faded away, first to a mutter and then to nothing at all. But Eddie remembered the rest and repeated it now: "'. . . to mourn a pet too long's a sin.' She said Daddy Mose told her she could go to Pimsy's grave once in awhile and whisper 'Be happy in heaven' but never to tell anyone else, because preachers don't hold much with the idea of animals going to heaven. And she kept the secret. I was the only one she ever told." Eddie, perhaps remembering that post-coital confidence in the dark of night, was smiling painfully.

John Cullum looked at the cross, then up at Roland, wide-eyed. "What is it? Some kind of tape recorder? It ain't, is it?"

"It's a sigul," Roland said patiently. "One that may help you with this fellow Carver, if he turns out to be what Eddie calls 'a hardass.'" The gunslinger smiled a little. *Hardass* was a term he liked. One he understood. "Put it on."

But Cullum didn't, at least not at once. For the first time since the old fellow had come into their acquaintance—including that period when they'd been under fire in the General Store—he looked genuinely discomposd. "Is it magic?" he asked.

Roland shrugged impatiently, as if to tell John that the word had no useful meaning in this context, and merely repeated: "Put it on."

Gingerly, as if he thought Aunt Talitha's cross might glow redhot at any moment and give him a serious burn, John Cullum did as bid. He bent his head to look down at it (momentarily giving his long Yankee face an amusing burgher's double chin), then tucked it into his shirt.

"Gorry," he said again, very softly.

Aware that he was speaking now as once he'd been spoken to, Eddie Dean said: "Tell the rest of your lesson, John of East Stoneham, and be true."

Cullum had gotten out of bed that morning no more than a country caretaker, one of the world's unknown and unseen. He'd go to bed tonight with the potential of becoming one of the world's most important people, a true prince of the Earth. If he was afraid of the idea, it didn't show. Perhaps he hadn't grasped it yet.

But Eddie didn't believe that. This was the man ka had put in their road, and he was both trig and brave. If Eddie had been Walter at this moment (or Flagg, as Walter sometimes called himself), he believed he would have trembled.

"Well," John said, "it don't mind a mite to ya who runs the company, but you want Tet to swallow up Holmes, because from now on the job doesn't have anything to do with makin toothpaste and cappin teeth, although it may go on lookin that way yet awhile."

"And what's—"

Eddie got no further. John raised a gnarled hand to stop him. Eddie tried to imagine a Texas Instruments calculator in that hand and discovered he could, and quite easily. Weird.

"Gimme a chance, youngster, and I'll tell you."

Eddie sat back, making a zipping motion across his lips.

"Keep the rose safe, that's first. Keep the *writah* safe, that's second. But beyond that, me and this guy Deepneau and this other guy Carver are s'posed to build up one of the world's most powerful corporations. We trade in real estate, we work with . . . uh . . ." He pulled out the battered green pad, consulted it quickly, and put it away. "We work with 'software developers,' whatever they are, because they're gonna be the next wave of technology. We're supposed to remember three words." He ticked them off. "Microsoft. Microchips. Intel. And n'matter how big we grow—or how *fast*—our three real jobs are the same: protect the rose, protect Stephen King, and try to screw over two other companies every chance we get. One's called Sombra. Other's . . ." There was the slightest of hesitations. "The other's North Central Positronics. Sombra's mostly interested in

proppity, accordin to you fellas. Positronics . . . well, science and gadgets, that's obvious even to me. If Sombra wants a piece of land, Tet tries t'get it first. If North Central wants a patent, we try to get it first, or at least to frig it up for them. Throw it to a third party if it comes to that."

Eddie was nodding approval. He hadn't told John that last, the old guy had come up with it on his own.

"We're the Three Toothless Musketeers, the Old Farts of the Apocalypse, and we're supposed to keep those two outfits from gettin what they want, by fair means or foul. Dirty tricks most definitely allowed." John grinned. "I never been to Harvard Business School"—Haa-vid Bi'nness School—"but I guess I can kick a fella in the crotch as well's anyone."

"Good," Roland said. He started to get up. "I think it's time we—"

Eddie raised a hand to stop him. Yes, he wanted to get to Susannah and Jake; couldn't wait to sweep his darling into his arms and cover her face with kisses. It seemed years since he had last seen her on the East Road in Calla Bryn Sturgis. Yet he couldn't leave it at this as easily as Roland, who had spent his life being obeyed and had come to take the death-allegiance of complete strangers as a matter of course. What Eddie saw on the other side of Dick Beckhardt's table wasn't another tool but an independent Yankee who was tough-minded and smart as a whip . . . but really too old for what they were asking. And speaking of too old, what about Aaron Deepneau, the Chemotherapy Kid?

"My friend wants to get moving and so do I," Eddie said. "We've got miles to go yet."

"I know that. It's on your face, son. Like a scar."

Eddie was fascinated by the idea of duty and ka as something that left a mark, something that might look like decoration to one eye and disfigurement to another. Outside, thunder cracked and lightning flashed.

"But why would you do this?" Eddie asked. "I have to know that. Why would you take all this on for two men you just met?"

John thought it over. He touched the cross he wore now and would wear until his death in the year of 1989—the cross given to Roland by an old woman in a forgotten town. He would touch it just that way in the years ahead when contemplating some big decision (the biggest

might have been the one to sever Tet's connection with IBM, a company that had shown an ever-increasing willingness to do business with North Central Positronics) or preparing for some covert action (the firebombing of Sombra Enterprises in New Delhi, for instance, in the year before he died). The cross spoke to Moses Carver and never spoke again in Cullum's presence no matter how much he blew on it, but sometimes, drifting to sleep with his hand clasped around it, he would think: *'Tis a sigul. 'Tis a sigul, dear—something that came from another world.*

If he had regrets toward the end (other than about some of the tricks, which were filthy indeed and cost more than one man his life), it was that he never got a chance to visit the world on the other side, which he glimpsed one stormy evening on Turtleback Lane in the town of Lovell. From time to time Roland's sigul sent him dreams of a field filled with roses, and a sooty-black tower. Sometimes he was visited by terrible visions of two crimson eyes, floating unattached to any body and relentlessly scanning the horizon. Sometimes there were dreams in which he heard the sound of a man relentlessly winding his horn. From these latter dreams he would awake with tears on his cheeks, those of longing and loss and love. He would awake with his hand closed around the cross, thinking *I denied Discordia and regret nothing; I have spat into the bodiless eyes of the Crimson King and rejoice; I threw my lot with the gunslinger's ka-tet and the White and never once questioned the choice.*

Yet for all that he wished he could have walked out, just once, into that other land: the one beyond the door.

Now he said: "You boys want all the right things. I can't put it any clearer than that. I believe you." He hesitated. "I believe *in* you. What I see in your eyes is true."

Eddie thought he was done, and then Cullum grinned like a boy.

"Also it 'pears to me you're offerin the keys to one humongous great engine." *Engyne.* "Who wouldn't want to turn it on, and see what it does?"

"Are you scared?" Roland asked.

John Cullum considered the question, then nodded. "Ayuh," he said.

Roland nodded. "Good," he said.

SEVEN

They drove back up to Turtleback Lane in Cullum's car beneath a black, boiling sky. Although this was the height of the summer season and most of the cottages on Kezar were probably occupied, they saw not a single car moving in either direction. All the boats on the lake had long since run for cover.

"Said I had somethin else for ya," John said, and went to the back of his truck, where there was a steel lockbox snugged up against the cab. Now the wind had begun to blow. It swirled his scanty fluff of white hair around his head. He ran a combination, popped a padlock, and swung back the lockbox's lid. From inside he brought out two dusty bags the wanderers knew well. One looked almost new compared to the other, which was the scuffed no-color of desert dust and laced its long length with rawhide.

"Our gunna!" Eddie cried, so delighted—and so *amazed*—that the words almost came out in a scream. "How in the name of *hell*—?"

John offered them a smile that augured well for his future as a dirty trickster: bemused on the surface, sly beneath. "Nice surprise, ain't it? Thought so m'self. I went back to get a look at Chip's store—what 'us left of it—while there was still a lot of confusion. People runnin hither, thither, and yon is what I mean to say; coverin bodies, stringin that yella tape, takin pitchers. Somebody'd put those bags off to one side and they looked just a dight lonely, so I . . ." He shrugged one bony shoulder. "I scooped em up."

"This would have been while we were visiting with Calvin Tower and Aaron Deepneau in their rented cabin," Eddie said. "After *you* went back home, supposedly to pack for Vermont. Is that right?" He was stroking the side of his bag. He knew that smooth surface very well; hadn't he shot the deer it had come from and scraped off the hair with Roland's knife and stitched the hide himself, with Susannah to help him? Not long after the great robot bear Shardik had almost unzipped Eddie's guts, that had been. Sometime in the last century, it seemed.

"Yuh," Cullum said, and when the old fellow's smile sweetened, Eddie's last doubts about him departed. They had found the right man for this world. Say true and thank Gan big-big.

“Strap on your gun, Eddie,” Roland said, holding out the revolver with the worn sandalwood grips.

Mine. Now he calls it mine. Eddie felt a small chill.

“I thought we were going to Susannah and Jake.” But he took the revolver and belted it on willingly enough.

Roland nodded. “But I believe we have a little work to do first, against those who killed Callahan and then tried to kill Jake.” His face didn’t change as he spoke, but both Eddie Dean and John Cullum felt a chill. For a moment it was almost impossible to look at the gunslinger.

So came—although they did not know it, which was likely more mercy than such as they deserved—the death sentence of Flaherty, the taheen Lamla, and their ka-tet.

EIGHT

Oh my God, Eddie tried to say, but no sound came out.

He had seen brightness growing ahead of them as they drove north along Turtleback Lane, following the one working taillight of Cullum’s truck. At first he thought it might be the carriage-lamps guarding some rich man’s driveway, then perhaps floodlights. But the glow kept strengthening, a blue-golden brilliance to their left, where the ridge sloped down to the lake. As they approached the source of the light (Cullum’s pickup now barely crawling), Eddie gasped and pointed as a circle of radiance broke free of the main body and flew toward them, changing colors as it came: blue to gold to red, red to green to gold and back to blue. In the center of it was something that looked like an insect with four wings. Then, as it soared above the bed of Cullum’s truck and into the dark woods on the east side of the road, it looked toward them and Eddie saw the insect had a human face.

“What . . . dear God, Roland, *what—*”

“Taheen,” Roland said, and said no more. In the growing brilliance his face was calm and tired.

More circles of light broke free of the main body and streamed across the road in cometary splendor. Eddie saw flies and tiny jeweled

hummingbirds and what appeared to be winged frogs. Beyond them . . .

The taillight of Cullum's truck flashed bright, but Eddie was so busy goggling that he would have rear-ended the man had Roland not spoken to him sharply. Eddie threw the Galaxie into Park without bothering to either set the emergency brake or turn off the engine. Then he got out and walked toward the blacktop driveway that descended the steep wooded slope. His eyes were huge in the delicate light, his mouth hung open. Cullum joined him and stood looking down. The driveway was flanked by two signs: CARA LAUGHS on the left and 19 on the right.

"Somethin, ain't it?" Cullum asked quietly.

You got that right, Eddie tried to reply, and still no words would come out of his mouth, only a breathless wheeze.

Most of the light was coming from the woods to the east of the road and to the left of the Cara Laughs driveway. Here the trees—mostly pines, spruces, and birches bent from a late-winter ice storm—were spread far apart, and hundreds of figures walked solemnly among them as though in a rustic ballroom, their bare feet scuffing through the leaves. Some were pretty clearly Children of Roderick, and as roont as Chevin of Chayven. Their skins were covered with the sores of radiation sickness and very few had more than a straggle of hair, but the light in which they walked gave them a beauty that was almost too great to look upon. Eddie saw a one-eyed woman carrying what appeared to be a dead child. She looked at him with an expression of sorrow and her mouth moved, but Eddie could hear nothing. He raised his fist to his forehead and bent his leg. Then he touched the corner of one eye and pointed to her. *I see you*, the gesture said . . . or so he hoped. *I see you very well*. The woman bearing the dead or sleeping child returned the gesture, and then passed from sight.

Overhead, thunder cracked sharply and lightning flashed down into the center of the glow. An ancient fir tree, its lusty trunk girdled with moss, took the bolt and split apart down its center, falling half one way and half the other. The inside was on fire. And a great gust of sparks—not fire, not this, but something with the ethereal quality of swamplight—went twisting up toward the hanging swags of the

clouds. In those sparks Eddie saw tiny dancing bodies, and for a moment he couldn't breathe. It was like watching a squadron of Tinker Bells, there and then gone.

"Look at em," John said reverently. "Walk-ins! Gorry, there's *hundreds!* I wish my friend Donnie was here to see."

Eddie thought he was probably right: hundreds of men, women, and children were walking through the woods below them, walking through the light, appearing and disappearing and then appearing again. As he watched, he felt a cold drop of water splash his neck, followed by a second and a third. The wind swooped down through the trees, provoking another upward gush of those fairy-like creatures and turning the tree that had been halved by lightning into a pair of vast crackling torches.

"Come on," Roland said, grabbing Eddie's arm. "It's going to come a downpour and this'll go out like a candle. If we're still on this side when it does, we'll be stuck here."

"Where—" Eddie began, and then he saw. Near the foot of the driveway, where the forest cover gave way to a tumble of rocks falling down to the lake, was the core of the glow, for the time being too bright to look at. Roland dragged him in that direction. John Cullum remained hypnotized for a moment longer by the walk-ins, then tried to follow them.

"No!" Roland called over his shoulder. The rain was falling harder now, the drops cold on his skin and the size of coins. "You have your work, John! Fare you well!"

"And you, boys!" John called back. He stopped and raised his hand in a wave. A bolt of electricity cut across the sky, momentarily lighting his face in brilliant blue and deepest black. "And you!"

"Eddie, we're going to run into the core of the light," Roland said. "It's not a door of the old people but of the *Prim*—that *is* magic, do ye ken. It'll take us to the place we want, if we concentrate hard enough."

"Where—"

"There's no time! Jake's told me where, by touch! Only hold my hand and keep your mind blank! I can take us!"

Eddie wanted to ask him if he was absolutely sure of that, but there was no time. Roland broke into a run. Eddie joined him. They

sprinted down the slope and into the light. Eddie felt it breathing over his skin like a million small mouths. Their boots crackled in the deep leaf cover. To his right was the burning tree. He could smell the sap and the sizzle of its cooking bark. Now they closed in on the core of the light. At first Eddie could see Kezar Lake through it and then he felt an enormous force grip him and pull him forward through the cold rain and into that brilliant murmuring glare. For just a moment he glimpsed the shape of a doorway. Then he redoubled his grip on Roland's hand and closed his eyes. The leaf-littered ground ran out beneath his feet and they were flying.



CHAPTER VII:

REUNION

ONE

Flaherty stood at the New York/Fedic door, which had been scarred by several gunshots but otherwise stood whole against them, an impassable barrier which the shitting kid had somehow passed. Lamla stood silent beside him, waiting for Flaherty's rage to exhaust itself. The others also waited, maintaining the same prudent silence.

Finally the blows Flaherty had been raining on the door began to slow. He administered one final overhand smash, and Lamla winced as blood flew from the hume's knuckles.

"What?" Flaherty asked, catching his grimace. "*What?* Do you have something to say?"

Lamla cared not at all for the white circles around Flaherty's eyes and the hard red roses in Flaherty's cheeks. Least of all for the way Flaherty's hand had risen to the butt of the Glock automatic hanging beneath his armpit. "No," he said. "No, sai."

"Go on, say what's on your mind, do it please ya," Flaherty persisted. He tried to smile and produced a gruesome grin instead—the leer of a madman. Quietly, with barely a rustle, the rest pulled back. "Others will have plenty to say; why shouldn't you start, my cully? I lost him! Be the first to carp, you ugly motherfucker!"

I'm dead, Lamla thought. *After a life of service to the King, one unguarded expression in the presence of a man who needs a scapegoat, and I'm dead.*

He looked around, verifying that none of the others would step in for him, and then said: "Flaherty, if I've offended you in some way I'm sor—"

“Oh, you’ve *offended* me, sure enough!” Flaherty shrieked, his Boston accent growing thicker as his rage escalated. “I’m sure I’ll pay for tonight’s work, aye, but I think you’ll pay fir—”

There was a kind of gasp in the air around them, as if the corridor itself had inhaled sharply. Flaherty’s hair and Lamla’s fur rippled. Flaherty’s posse of low men and vampires began to turn. Suddenly one of them, a vamp named Albrecht, shrieked and bolted forward, allowing Flaherty a view of two newcomers, men with raindrops still fresh and dark on their jeans and boots and shirts. There was trail-dusty gunna-gar at their feet and revolvers hung at their hips. Flaherty saw the sandalwood grips in the instant before the younger one drew, faster than blue blazes, and understood at once why Albrecht had run. Only one sort of man carried guns that looked like that.

The young one fired a single shot. Albrecht’s blond hair jumped as if flicked by an invisible hand and then he collapsed forward, fading within his clothes as he did so.

“Hile, you bondsmen of the King,” the older one said. He spoke in a purely conversational tone. Flaherty—his hands still bleeding from his extravagant drumming on the door through which the snot-babby had disappeared—could not seem to get the sense of him. It was the one of whom they had been warned, surely it was Roland of Gilead, but how had he gotten here, and on their blindside? *How?*

Roland’s cold blue eyes surveyed them. “Which of this sorry herd calls himself dinh? Will that one honor us by stepping forward or not? Not?” His eyes surveyed them; his left hand departed the vicinity of his gun and journeyed to the corner of his mouth, where a small sarcastic smile had bloomed. “Not? Too bad. Th’art cowards after all, I’m sorry to see. Thee’d kill a priest and chase a lad but not stand and claim thy day’s work. Th’art cowards and the sons of cow—”

Flaherty stepped forward with his bleeding right hand clasped loosely around the butt of the gun that hung below his left armpit in a docker’s clutch. “That would be me, Roland-of-Sтивен.”

“You know my name, do you?”

“Aye! I know your name by your face, and your face by your mouth. T’is the same as the mouth of your mother, who did suck John Farson with such glee until he spewed ’is—”

Flaherty drew as he spoke, a bushwhacker's trick he'd no doubt practiced and used before to advantage. And although he was fast and the forefinger of Roland's left hand still touched the side of his mouth when Flaherty's draw began, the gunslinger beat him easily. His first bullet passed between the lips of Jake's chief harrier, exploding the teeth at the front of his upper jaw to bone fragments which Flaherty drew down his throat with his dying breath. His second pierced Flaherty's forehead between the eyebrows and he was flung back against the New York/Fedic door with the unfired Glock spilling from his hand to discharge a final time on the hallway floor.

Most of the others drew a split-second later. Eddie killed the six in front, having taken time to reload the chamber he'd fired at Albrecht. When the revolver was empty, he rolled behind his dinh to reload, as he had been taught. Roland picked off the next five, then rolled smoothly behind Eddie, who took out the rest save one.

Lamla had been too cunning to try and so was the last standing. He raised his empty hands, the fingers furry and the palms smooth. "Will ye grant me parole, gunslinger, if I promise ye peace?"

"Not a bit," Roland said, and cocked his revolver.

"Be damned to you, then, chary-ka," said the taheen, and Roland of Gilead shot him where he stood, and Lamla of Galee fell down dead.

TWO

Flaherty's posse lay stacked in front of the door like cordwood, Lamla facedown in front. Not a single one had had a chance to fire. The tile-throated corridor stank of the gunsmoke which hung in a blue layer. Then the purifiers kicked in, chugging wearily in the wall, and the gunslingers felt the air first stirred into motion and then sucked across their faces.

Eddie reloaded the gun—his, now, so he had been told—and dropped it back into its holster. Then he went to the dead and yanked four of them absently aside so he could get to the door. "Susannah! Suze, are you there?"

Do any of us, except in our dreams, truly expect to be reunited with our hearts' deepest loves, even when they leave us only for

minutes, and on the most mundane of errands? No, not at all. Each time they go from our sight we in our secret hearts count them as dead. Having been given so much, we reason, how could we expect not to be brought as low as Lucifer for the staggering presumption of our love?

So Eddie didn't expect her to answer until she did—from another world, and through a single thickness of wood. “Eddie? Sugar, is it you?”

Eddie's head, which had seemed perfectly normal only seconds before, was suddenly too heavy to hold up. He leaned it against the door. His eyes were similarly too heavy to hold open and so he closed them. The weight must have been tears, for suddenly he was swimming in them. He could feel them rolling down his cheeks, warm as blood. And Roland's hand, touching his back.

“Susannah,” Eddie said. His eyes were still closed. His fingers were splayed on the door. “Can you open it?”

Jake answered. “No, but you can.”

“What word?” Roland asked. He had been alternating glances at the door with looks behind him, almost hoping for reinforcements (for his blood was up), but the tiled corridor was empty. “What word, Jake?”

There was a pause—brief, but it seemed very long to Eddie—and then both spoke together. “*Chassit*,” they said.

Eddie didn't trust himself to say it; his throat was too full of tears. Roland had no such problem. He hauled several more bodies away from the door (including Flaherty's, his face still fixed in its final snarl) and then spoke the word. Once again the door between the worlds clicked open. It was Eddie who opened it wide and then the four of them were face-to-face again, Susannah and Jake in one world, Roland and Eddie in another, and between them a shimmering transparent membrane like living mica. Susannah held out her hands and they plunged through the membrane like hands emerging from a body of water that had been somehow magically turned on its side.

Eddie took them. He let her fingers close over his and draw him into Fedic.

By the time Roland stepped through, Eddie had already lifted Susannah and was holding her in his arms. The boy looked up at the gunslinger. Neither of them smiled. Oy sat at Jake's feet and smiled for both of them.

"Hile, Jake," Roland said.

"Hile, Father."

"Will you call me so?"

Jake nodded. "Yes, if I may."

"Such would please me ever," Roland said. Then, slowly—as one performs an action with which he's unfamiliar—he held out his arms. Looking up at him solemnly, never taking his eyes from Roland's face, the boy Jake moved between those killer's hands and waited until they locked at his back. He had had dreams of this that he would never have dared to tell.

Susannah, meanwhile, was covering Eddie's face with kisses. "They almost got Jake," she was saying. "I sat down on my side of the door . . . and I was so tired I nodded off. He musta called me three, four times before I . . ."

Later he would hear her tale, every word and to the end. Later there would be time for palaver. For now he cupped her breast—the left one, so he could feel the strong, steady beat of her heart—and then stopped her speech with his mouth.

Jake, meanwhile, said nothing. He stood with his head turned so his cheek rested against Roland's midsection. His eyes were closed. He could smell rain and dust and blood on the gunslinger's shirt. He thought of his parents, who were lost; his friend Benny, who was dead; the Pere, who had been overrun by all those from whom he had so long fled. The man he held had betrayed him once for the Tower, had let him fall, and Jake couldn't say the same might not happen again. Certainly there were miles ahead, and they would be hard ones. Still, for now, he was content. His mind was quiet and his sore heart was at peace. It was enough to hold and be held.

Enough to stand here with his eyes shut and to think *My father has come for me.*



PART TWO:
BLUE HEAVEN

DEVAR-TOI



CHAPTER I: THE DEVAR-TETE

ONE

The four reunited travelers (five, counting Oy of Mid-World) stood at the foot of Mia's bed, looking at what remained of Susannah's *twim*, which was to say her twin. Without the deflated clothes to give the corpse some definition, probably none of them could have said for certain what it had once been. Even the snarl of hair above the split gourd of Mia's head looked like nothing human; it could have been an exceptionally large dust-bunny.

Roland looked down at the disappearing features, wondering that so little remained of the woman whose obsession—the chap, the chap, always the chap—had come so near to wrecking their enterprise for good. And without them, who would remain to stand against the Crimson King and his infernally clever chancellor? John Cullum, Aaron Deepneau, and Moses Carver. Three old men, one of them with blackmouth disease, which Eddie called can't, sir.

So much you did, he thought, gazing raptly at the dusty, dissolving face. *So much you did and so much more you would have done, aye, and all without a check or qualm, and so will the world end, I think, a victim of love rather than hate. For love's ever been the more destructive weapon, sure.*

He leaned forward, smelling what could have been old flowers or ancient spices, and exhaled. The thing that looked vaguely like a head even now blew away like milkweed fluff or a dandy-o ball.

"She meant no harm to the universe," Susannah said, her voice not quite steady. "She only wanted any woman's privilege: to have a baby. Someone to love and raise."

“Aye,” Roland agreed, “you say true. Which is what makes her end so black.”

Eddie said, “Sometimes I think we’d all be better off if the people who mean well would just creep away and die.”

“That’d be the end of *us*, Big Ed,” Jake pointed out.

They all considered this, and Eddie found himself wondering how many they’d already killed with their well-intentioned meddling. The bad ones he didn’t care about, but there had been others, too—Roland’s lost love, Susan, was only one.

Then Roland left the powdery remains of Mia’s corpse and came to Susannah, who was sitting on one of the nearby beds with her hands clasped between her thighs. “Tell me everything that befell since you left us on the East Road, after the battle,” he said. “We need to—”

“Roland, I never meant to leave you. It was Mia. She took over. If I hadn’t had a place to go—a Dogan—she might’ve taken over completely.”

Roland nodded to show he understood that. “Nevertheless, tell me how you came to this devartete. And Jake, I’d hear the same from you.”

“Devar-tete,” Eddie said. The phrase held some faint familiarity. Did it have something to do with Chevin of Chayven, the slow mutie Roland had put out of its misery in Lovell? He thought so. “What’s that?”

Roland swept a hand at the room with all its beds, each with its helmet-like machine and segmented steel hose; beds where the gods only knew how many children from the Callas had lain, and been ruined. “It means little prison, or torture-chamber.”

“Doesn’t look so little to me,” Jake said. He couldn’t tell how many beds there were, but he guessed the number at three hundred. Three hundred at least.

“Mayhap we’ll come upon a larger one before we’re finished. Tell your tale, Susannah, and you too, Jake.”

“Where do we go from here?” Eddie asked.

“Perhaps the tale will tell,” Roland answered.

Roland and Eddie listened in silent fascination as Susannah and Jake recounted their adventures, turn and turn about. Roland first halted Susannah while she was telling them of Mathiessen van Wyck, who had given her his money and rented her a hotel room. The gunslinger asked Eddie about the turtle in the lining of the bag.

“I didn’t *know* it was a turtle. I thought it might be a stone.”

“If you’d tell this part again, I’d hear,” Roland said.

So, thinking carefully, trying to remember completely (for it all seemed a very long time ago), Eddie related how he and Pere Callahan had gone up to the Doorway Cave and opened the ghostwood box with Black Thirteen inside. They’d expected Black Thirteen to open the door, and so it had, but first—

“We put the box in the bag,” Eddie said. “The one that said NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MIDTOWN LANES in New York and NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MID-WORLD LANES on the Calla Bryn Sturgis side. Remember?”

They all did.

“And I felt something in the lining of the bag. I told Callahan, and he said . . .” Eddie mulled it over. “He said, ‘This isn’t the time to investigate it.’ Or something like that. I agreed. I remember thinking we had enough mysteries on our hands already, we’d save this one for another day. Roland, who in God’s name put that thing in the bag, do you think?”

“For that matter, who left the bag in the vacant lot?” Susannah asked.

“Or the key?” Jake chimed in. “I found the key to the house in Dutch Hill in that same lot. Was it the rose? Did the rose somehow . . . I dunno . . . make them?”

Roland thought about it. “Were I to guess,” he said, “I’d say that sai King left those signs and siguls.”

“The writer,” Eddie said. He weighed the idea, then nodded slowly. He vaguely remembered a concept from high school—the god from the machine, it was called. There was a fancy Latin term for it as well, but that one he couldn’t remember. Had probably been writing Mary Lou Kenopensky’s name on his desk while the other kids had been obediently taking notes. The basic concept was that if a playwright got himself into a corner he could send down the god, who arrived in a flower-decked bucka wagon from overhead and rescued the

characters who were in trouble. This no doubt pleased the more religious playgoers, who believed that God—not the special-effects version who came down from some overhead platform the audience couldn't see but the One who wert in heaven—really *did* save people who deserved it. Such ideas had undoubtedly gone out of fashion in the modern age, but Eddie thought that popular novelists—of the sort sai King seemed on his way to becoming—probably still used the technique, only disguising it better. Little escape hatches. Cards that read GET OUT OF JAIL FREE OR ESCAPE THE PIRATES OR FREAK STORM CUTS ELECTRICAL POWER, EXECUTION POSTPONED. The god from the machine (who was actually the writer), patiently working to keep the characters safe so his tale wouldn't end with an unsatisfying line like “And so the ka-tet was wiped out on Jericho Hill and the bad guys won, rule Discordia, so sorry, better luck next time (*what* next time, ha-ha), THE END.”

Little safety nets, like a key. Not to mention a scrimshaw turtle.

“If he wrote those things into his story,” Eddie said, “it was long after we saw him in 1977.”

“Aye,” Roland agreed.

“And I don't think he thought them up,” Eddie said. “Not really. He's just . . . I dunno, just a . . .”

“A bumhug?” Susannah asked, smiling.

“No!” Jake said, sounding a little shocked. “Not that. He's a sender. A telecaster.” He was thinking about his father and his father's job at the Network.

“Bingo,” Eddie said, and leveled a finger at the boy. This idea led him to another: that if Stephen King did not remain alive long enough to write those things into his tale, the key and the turtle would not be there when they were needed. Jake would have been eaten by the Doorkeeper in the house on Dutch Hill . . . always assuming he got that far, which he probably wouldn't have done. And if he escaped the Dutch Hill monster, he would've been eaten by the Grandfathers—Callahan's Type One vampires—in the Dixie Pig.

Susannah thought to tell them about the vision she'd had as Mia was beginning her final journey from the Plaza-Park Hotel to the Dixie Pig. In this vision she'd been jugged in a jail cell in Oxford, Mississippi, and there had been voices coming from a TV somewhere.

Chet Huntley, Walter Cronkite, Frank McGee: newscasters chanting the names of the dead. Some of those names, like President Kennedy and the Diem brothers, she'd known. Others, like Christa McAuliffe, she had not. But one of the names had been Stephen King's, she was quite sure of it. Chet Huntley's partner

(good night Chet good night David)

saying that Stephen King had been struck and killed by a Dodge minivan while walking near his house. King had been fifty-two, according to Brinkley.

Had Susannah told them that, a great many things might have happened differently, or not at all. She was opening her mouth to add it into the conversation—a falling chip on a hillside strikes a stone which strikes a larger stone which then strikes two others and starts a landslide—when there was the clunk of an opening door and the clack of approaching footsteps. They all turned, Jake reaching for a 'Riza, the others for their guns.

“Relax, fellas,” Susannah murmured. “It's all right. I know this guy.” And then to DNK 45932, **DOMESTIC**, she said: “I didn't expect to see you again so soon. In fact, I didn't expect to see you at all. What's up, Nigel old buddy?”

So this time something which might have been spoken was not, and the *deus ex machina* which might have descended to rescue a writer who had a date with a Dodge minivan on a late-spring day in the year of '99 remained where it was, high above the mortals who acted their parts below.

THREE

The nice thing about robots, in Susannah's opinion, was that most of them didn't hold grudges. Nigel told her that no one had been available to fix his visual equipment (although he might be able to do it himself, he said, given access to the right components, discs, and repair tutorials), so he had come back here, relying on the infrared, to pick up the remains of the shattered (and completely unneeded) incubator. He thanked her for her interest and introduced himself to her friends.

“Nice to meet you, Nige,” Eddie said, “but you’ll want to get started on those repairs, I kennit, so we won’t keep you.” Eddie’s voice was pleasant and he’d reholstered his gun, but he kept his hand on the butt. In truth he was a little bit freaked by the resemblance Nigel bore to a certain messenger robot in the town of Calla Bryn Sturgis. That one *had* held a grudge.

“No, stay,” Roland said. “We may have chores for you, but for the time being I’d as soon you were quiet. Turned off, if it please you.” *And if it doesn’t*, his tone implied.

“Certainly, sai,” Nigel replied in his plummy British accent. “You may reactivate me with the words *Nigel, I need you.*”

“Very good,” Roland said.

Nigel folded his scrawny (but undoubtedly powerful) stainless-steel arms across his chest and went still.

“Came back to pick up the broken glass,” Eddie marveled. “Maybe the Tet Corporation could sell em. Every housewife in America would want two—one for the house and one for the yard.”

“The less we’re involved with science, the better,” Susannah said darkly. In spite of her brief nap while leaning against the door between Fedic and New York, she looked haggard, done almost to death. “Look where it’s gotten this world.”

Roland nodded to Jake, who told of his and Pere Callahan’s adventures in the New York of 1999, beginning with the taxi that had almost hit Oy and ending with their two-man attack on the low men and the vampires in the dining room of the Dixie Pig. He did not neglect to tell how they had disposed of Black Thirteen by putting it in a storage locker at the World Trade Center, where it would be safe until early June of 2002, and how they had found the turtle, which Susannah had dropped, like a message in a bottle, in the gutter outside the Dixie Pig.

“So brave,” Susannah said, and ruffled Jake’s hair. Then she bent to stroke Oy’s head. The bumbler stretched his long neck to maximize the caress, his eyes half-closed and a grin on his foxy little face. “So damned brave. Thankee-sai, Jake.”

“Thank Ake!” Oy agreed.

“If it hadn’t been for the turtle, they would have gotten us both.” Jake’s voice was steady, but he had gone pale. “As it was, the Pere . . .

he . . .” Jake wiped away a tear with the heel of his hand and gazed at Roland. “You used his voice to send me on. I heard you.”

“Aye, I had to,” the gunslinger agreed. “’Twas no more than what he wanted.”

Jake said, “The vampires didn’t get him. He used my Ruger before they could take his blood and change him into one of *them*. I don’t think they would’ve done that, anyway. They would have torn him apart and eaten him. They were *mad*.”

Roland was nodding.

“The last thing he sent—I think he said it out loud, although I’m not sure—it was . . .” Jake considered it. He was weeping freely now. “He said ‘May you find your Tower, Roland, and breach it, and may you climb to the top.’ Then . . .” Jake made a little puffing sound between his pursed lips. “Gone. Like a candle-flame. To whatever worlds there are.”

He fell silent. For several moments they all did, and the quiet had the feel of a deliberate thing. Then Eddie said, “All right, we’re back together again. What the hell do we do next?”

FOUR

Roland sat down with a grimace, then gave Eddie Dean a look which said—clearer than any words ever could have done—*Why do you try my patience?*

“All right,” Eddie said, “it’s just a habit. Quit giving me the look.”

“*What’s a habit, Eddie?*”

Eddie thought of his final bruising, addictive year with Henry less frequently these days, but he thought of it now. Only he didn’t like to say so, not because he was ashamed—Eddie really thought he might be past that—but because he sensed the gunslinger’s growing impatience with Eddie’s explaining things in terms of his big brother. And maybe that was fair. Henry had been the defining, shaping force in Eddie’s life, okay. Just as Cort had been the defining, shaping force in Roland’s . . . but the gunslinger didn’t talk about his old teacher *all* the time.

“Asking questions when I already know the answer,” Eddie said.

“And what’s the answer this time?”

“We’re going to backtrack to Thunderclap before we go on to the Tower. We’re either going to kill the Breakers or set them free. Whatever it takes to make the Beams safe. We’ll kill Walter, or Flagg, or whatever he’s calling himself. Because he’s the field marshal, isn’t he?”

“He was,” Roland agreed, “but now a new player has come on the scene.” He looked at the robot. “Nigel, I need you.”

Nigel unfolded his arms and raised his head. “How may I serve?”

“By getting me something to write with. Is there such?”

“Pens, pencils, and chalk in the Supervisor’s cubicle at the far end of the Extraction Room, sai. Or so there was, the last time I had occasion to be there.”

“The Extraction Room,” Roland mused, studying the serried ranks of beds. “Do you call it so?”

“Yes, sai.” And then, almost timidly: “Vocal elisions and fricatives suggest that you’re angry. Is that the case?”

“They brought children here by the hundreds and thousands—healthy ones, for the most part, from a world where too many are still born twisted—and sucked away their minds. Why would I be angry?”

“Sai, I’m sure I don’t know,” Nigel said. He was, perhaps, repenting his decision to come back here. “But I had no part in the extraction procedures, I assure you. I am in charge of domestic services, including maintenance.”

“Bring me a pencil and a piece of chalk.”

“Sai, you won’t destroy me, will you? It was Dr. Scowther who was in charge of the extractions over the last twelve or fourteen years, and Dr. Scowther is dead. This lady-sai shot him, and with his own gun.” There was a touch of reproach in Nigel’s voice, which was quite expressive within its narrow range.

Roland only repeated: “Bring me a pencil and a piece of chalk, and do it jin-jin.”

Nigel went off on his errand.

“When you say a new player, you mean the baby,” Susannah said.

“Certainly. He has two fathers, that bah-bo.”

Susannah nodded. She was thinking about the tale Mia had told her during their todash visit to the abandoned town of Fedic—abandoned, that was, except for the likes of Sayre and Scowther and

the marauding Wolves. Two women, one white and one black, one pregnant and one not, sitting in chairs outside the Gin-Puppy Saloon. There Mia had told Eddie Dean's wife a great deal—more than either of them had known, perhaps.

That's where they changed me, Mia had told her, "they" presumably meaning Scowther and a team of other doctors. Plus magicians? Folk like the Manni, only gone over to the other side? Maybe. Who could say? In the Extraction Room she'd been made mortal. Then, with Roland's sperm already in her, something else had happened. Mia didn't remember much about that part, only a red darkness. Susannah wondered now if the Crimson King had come to her in person, mounting her with its huge and ancient spider's body, or if its unspeakable sperm had been transported somehow to mix with Roland's. In either case, the baby grew into the loathsome hybrid Susannah had seen: not a werewolf but a were-*spider*. And now it was out there, somewhere. Or perhaps it was here, watching them even as they palavered and Nigel returned with various writing implements.

Yes, she thought. It's watching us. And hating us . . . but not equally. Mostly it's Roland the dan-tete hates. Its first father.

She shivered.

"Mordred means to kill you, Roland," she said. "That's its job. What it was made for. To end you, and your quest, and the Tower."

"Yes," Roland said, "and to rule in his father's place. For the Crimson King is old, and I have come more and more to believe that he is imprisoned, somehow. If that's so, then he's no longer our real enemy."

"Will we go to his castle on the other side of the Discordia?" Jake asked. It was the first time he'd spoken in half an hour. "We will, won't we?"

"I think so, yes," Roland said. "*Le Casse Roi Russe*, the old legends call it. We'll go there ka-tet and slay what lives there."

"Let it be so," Eddie said. "By God, let that be so."

"Aye," Roland agreed. "But our first job is the Breakers. The Beamquake we felt in Calla Bryn Sturgis, just before we came here, suggests that their work is nearly done. Yet even if it isn't—"

"Ending what they're doing is our job," Eddie said.

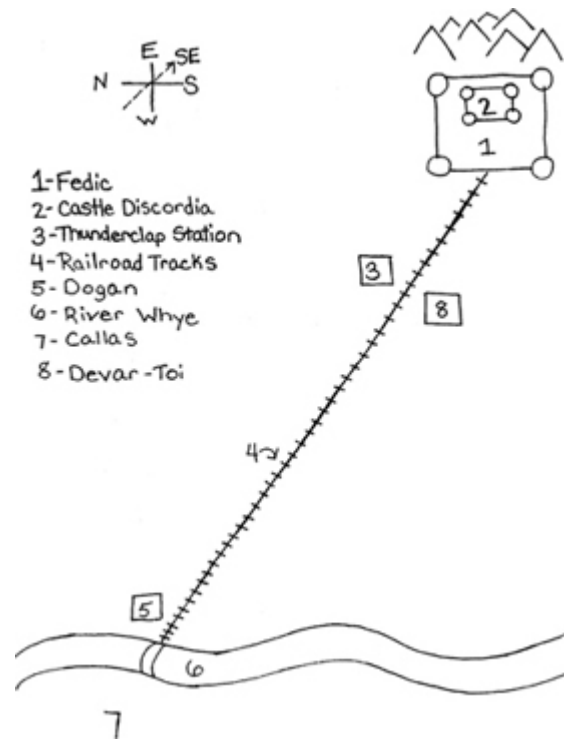
Roland nodded. He looked more tired than ever. “Aye,” he said. “Killing them or setting them free. Either way, we must finish their meddling with the two Beams that remain. And we must finish off the dan-tete. The one that belongs to the Crimson King . . . and to me.”

FIVE

Nigel ended up being quite helpful (although not just to Roland and his ka-tet, as things fell). To begin with he brought two pencils, two pens (one of them a great old thing that would have looked at home in the hand of a Dickens scrivener), and three pieces of chalk, one of them in a silver holder that looked like a lady’s lipstick. Roland chose this and gave Jake another piece. “I can’t write words you’d understand easily,” he said, “but our numbers are the same, or close enough. Print what I say to one side, Jake, and fair.”

Jake did as he was bid. The result was crude but understandable enough, a map with a legend.

“Fedic,” Roland said, pointing to 1, and then drew a short chalk line to 2. “And here’s Castle Discordia, with the doors beneath. An almighty tangle of em, from what we hear. There’ll be a passage that’ll take us from here to there, under the castle. Now, Susannah, tell again how the Wolves go, and what they do.” He handed her the chalk in its holder.



She took it, noticing with some admiration that it sharpened itself as it was used. A small trick but a neat one.

“They ride through a one-way door that brings them out here,” she said, drawing a line from 2 to 3, which Jake had dubbed Thunderclap Station. “We ought to know this door when we see it, because it’ll be *big*, unless they go through single-file.”

“Maybe they do,” Eddie said. “Unless I’m wrong, they’re pretty well stuck with what the old people left them.”

“You’re not wrong,” Roland said. “Go on, Susannah.” He wasn’t hunkering but sitting with his right leg stretched stiffly out. Eddie wondered how badly his hip was hurting him, and if he had any of Rosalita’s cat-oil in his newly recovered purse. He doubted it.

She said, “The Wolves ride from Thunderclap along the course of the railroad tracks, at least until they’re out of the shadow . . . or the darkness . . . or whatever it is. Do you know, Roland?”

“No, but we’ll see soon enough.” He made his impatient twirling gesture with his left hand.

“They cross the river to the Callas and take the children. When they get back to the Thunderclap Station, I think they must board

their horses and their prisoners on a train and go back to Fedic that way, for the door's no good to them."

"Aye, I think that's the way of it," Roland agreed. "They bypass the devar-toi—the prison we've marked with an 8—for the time being."

Susannah said: "Scowther and his Nazi doctors used the hood-things on these beds to extract something from the kids. It's the stuff they give to the Breakers. Feed it to em or inject em with it, I guess. The kids and the brain-stuff go back to Thunderclap Station by the door. The kiddies are sent back to Calla Bryn Sturgis, maybe the other Callas as well, and at what you call the devar-toi—"

"Mawster, dinnah is served," Eddie said bleakly.

Nigel chipped in at this point, sounding absolutely cheerful. "Would you care for a bite, sais?"

Jake consulted his stomach and found it was rumbling. It was horrible to be this hungry so soon after the Pere's death—and after the things he had seen in the Dixie Pig—but he was, nevertheless. "Is there food, Nigel? Is there really?"

"Yes, indeed, young man," Nigel said. "Only tinned goods, I'm afraid, but I can offer better than two dozen choices, including baked beans, tuna-fish, several kinds of soup—"

"Tooter-fish for me," Roland said, "but bring an array, if you will."

"Certainly, sai."

"I don't suppose you could rustle me up an Elvis Special," Jake said longingly. "That's peanut butter, banana, and bacon."

"Jesus, kid," Eddie said. "I don't know if you can tell in this light, but I'm turning green."

"I have no bacon or bananas, unfortunately," Nigel said (pronouncing the latter *ba-NAW-nas*), "but I do have peanut butter and three kinds of jelly. Also apple butter."

"Apple butter'd be good," Jake said.

"Go on, Susannah," Roland said as Nigel moved off on his errand. "Although I suppose I needn't speed you along so; after we eat, we'll need to take some rest." He sounded far from pleased with the idea.

"I don't think there's any more to tell," she said. "It sounds confusing—*looks* confusing, too, mostly because our little map doesn't have any scale—but it's essentially just a loop they make every twenty-four years or so: from Fedic to Calla Bryn Sturgis, then back to Fedic

with the kids, so they can do the extraction. Then they take the kids back to the Callas and the brainfood to this prison where the Breakers are.”

“The devar-toi,” Jake said.

Susannah nodded. “The question is what we do to interrupt the cycle.”

“We go through the door to Thunderclap station,” Roland said, “and from the station to where the Breakers are kept. And there . . .” He looked at each of his ka-tet in turn, then raised his finger and made a dryly expressive shooting gesture.

“There’ll be guards,” Eddie said. “Maybe a lot of them. What if we’re outnumbered?”

“It won’t be the first time,” Roland said.



CHAPTER II: THE WATCHER

ONE

When Nigel returned, he was bearing a tray the size of a wagon-wheel. On it were stacks of sandwiches, two Thermoses filled with soup (beef and chicken), plus canned drinks. There was Coke, Sprite, Nozz-A-La, and something called Wit Green Wit. Eddie tried this last and pronounced it foul beyond description.

All of them could see that Nigel was no longer the same pip-pip, jolly-good fellow he'd been for God alone knew how many decades and centuries. His lozenge-shaped head kept jerking to one side or the other. When it went to the left he would mutter "*Un, deux, trois!*" To the right it was "*Ein, zwei, drei!*" A constant low clacking had begun in his diaphragm.

"Sugar, what's wrong with you?" Susannah asked as the domestic robot lowered the tray to the floor amidst them.

"Self-diagnostic exam series suggests total systemic breakdown during the next two to six hours," Nigel said, sounding glum but otherwise calm. "Pre-existing logic faults, quarantined until now, have leaked into the GMS." He then twisted his head viciously to the right. "*Ein, zwei, drei!* Live free or die, here's Greg in your eye!"

"What's GMS?" Jake asked.

"And who's Greg?" Eddie added.

"GMS stands for general mentation systems," said Nigel. "There are two such systems, rational and irrational. Conscious and subconscious, as you might say. As for Greg, that would be Greg Stillson, a character in a novel I'm reading. Quite enjoyable. It's called *The Dead Zone*, by

Stephen King. As to why I bring him up in this context, I have no idea.”

TWO

Nigel explained that logic faults were common in what he called Asimov Robots. The smarter the robot, the more the logic faults . . . and the sooner they started showing up. The old people (Nigel called them the Makers) compensated for this by setting up a stringent quarantine system, treating mental glitches as though they were smallpox or cholera. (Jake thought this sounded like a really fine way of dealing with insanity, although he supposed that psychiatrists wouldn't care for the idea much; it would put them out of business.) Nigel believed that the trauma of having his eyes shot out had weakened his mental survival-systems somehow, and now all sorts of bad stuff was loose in his circuits, eroding his deductive and inductive reasoning capabilities, gobbling logic-systems left and right. He told Susannah he didn't hold this against her in the slightest. Susannah raised a fist to her forehead and thanked him big-big. In truth, she did not completely believe good old DNK 45932, although she was damned if she knew why. Maybe it was just a holdover from their time in Calla Bryn Sturgis, where a robot not much different from Nigel had turned out to be a nasty, grudge-holding cully indeed. And there was something else.

I spy with my little eye, Susannah thought.

“Hold out thy hands, Nigel.”

When the robot did, they all saw the wiry hairs caught in the joints of his steel fingers. There was also a drop of blood on a . . . would you call it a knuckle? “What's this?” she asked, holding several of the hairs up.

“I'm sorry, mum, I cawn't—”

Couldn't see. No, of course not. Nigel had infrared, but his actual eyesight was gone, courtesy of Susannah Dean, daughter of Dan, gunslinger in the Ka-Tet of Nineteen.

“They're hairs. I also spy some blood.”

“Ah, yes,” Nigel said. “Rats in the kitchen, mum. I'm programmed to dispose of vermin when I detect them. There are a great many

these days, I'm sorry to say; the world is moving on." And then, snapping his head violently to the left: "*Un-deux-trois! Minnie Mouse est la mouse pour moi!*"

"Um . . . did you kill Minnie and Mickey before or after you made the sandwiches, Nige old buddy?" Eddie asked.

"After, sai, I assure you."

"Well, I might pass, anyway," Eddie said. "I had a poorboy back in Maine, and it's sticking to my ribs like a motherfucker."

"You should say *un, deux, trois*," Susannah told him. The words were out before she knew she was going to say them.

"Cry pardon?" Eddie was sitting with his arm around her. Since the four of them had gotten back together, he touched Susannah at every opportunity, as if needing to confirm the fact that she was more than just wishful thinking.

"Nothing." Later, when Nigel was either out of the room or completely broken down, she'd tell him her intuition. She thought that robots of Nigel and Andy's type, like those in the Isaac Asimov stories she'd read as a teenager, weren't supposed to lie. Perhaps Andy had either been modified or had modified himself so that wasn't a problem. With Nigel, she thought it was a problem, indeed: can ya say problem big-big. She had an idea that, unlike Andy, Nigel was essentially goodhearted, but yes—he'd either lied or gilded the truth about the rats in the larder. Maybe about other things, as well. *Ein, zwei, drei* and *Un, deux, trois* was his method of letting off the pressure. For awhile, anyway.

It's Mordred, she thought, looking around. She took a sandwich because she had to eat—like Jake, she was ravenous—but her appetite was gone and she knew she'd take no enjoyment from what she plugged grimly down her throat. *He's been at Nigel, and now he's watching us somewhere. I know it—I feel it.*

And, as she took her first bite of some long-preserved, vacuum-packed mystery-meat:

A mother always knows.

None of them wanted to sleep in the Extraction Room (although they would have had their pick of three hundred or more freshly made beds) nor in the deserted town outside, so Nigel took them to his quarters, pausing every now and then for a vicious head-clearing shake and to count off in either German or French. To this he began adding numbers in some other language none of them knew.

Their way led them through a kitchen—all stainless steel and smoothly humming machines, quite different from the ancient cookhouse Susannah had visited todash beneath Castle Discordia—and although they saw the moderate clutter of the meal Nigel had prepared them, there was no sign of rats, living or dead. None of them commented on this.

Susannah's sense of being observed came and went.

Beyond the pantry was a neat little three-room apartment where Nigel presumably hung his hat. There was no bedroom, but beyond the living room and a butler's pantry full of monitoring equipment was a neat book-lined study with an oak desk and an easy chair beneath a halogen reading lamp. The computer on the desk had been manufactured by North Central Positronics, no surprise there. Nigel brought them blankets and pillows which he assured them were fresh and clean.

"Maybe you sleep on your feet, but I guess you like to sit down to read like anyone else," Eddie said.

"Oh, yes indeedy, one-two-threedy," Nigel said. "I enjoy a good book. It's part of my programming."

"We'll sleep six hours, then push on," Roland told them.

Jake, meanwhile, was examining the books more closely. Oy moved beside him, always at heel, as Jake checked the spines, occasionally pulling one out for a closer peek. "He's got all of Dickens, it looks like," he said. "Also Steinbeck . . . Thomas Wolfe . . . a lot of Zane Grey . . . somebody named Max Brand . . . a guy named Elmore Leonard . . . and the always popular Steve King."

They all took time to look at the two shelves of King books, better than thirty in all, at least four of them very large and two the size of doorstops. King had been an extremely busy writer-bee since his Bridgton days, it appeared. The newest volume was called *Hearts in Atlantis* and had been published in a year with which they were very

familiar: 1999. The only ones missing, so far as they could tell, were the ones about *them*. Assuming King had gone ahead and written them. Jake checked the copyright pages, but there were few obvious holes. That might mean nothing, however, because he had written so much.

Susannah inquired of Nigel, who said he had never seen any books by Stephen King concerning Roland of Gilead or the Dark Tower. Then, having said so, he twisted his head viciously to the left and counted off in French, this time all the way to ten.

“Still,” Eddie said after Nigel had retired, clicking and clacking and clucking his way out of the room, “I bet there’s a lot of information here we could use. Roland, do you think we could pack the works of Stephen King and take them with us?”

“Maybe,” Roland said, “but we won’t. They might confuse us.”

“Why do you say so?”

Roland only shook his head. He didn’t know why he said so, but he knew it was true.

FOUR

The Arc 16 Experimental Station’s nerve-center was four levels down from the Extraction Room, the kitchen, and Nigel’s study. One entered the Control Suite through a capsule-shaped vestibule. The vestibule could only be opened from the outside by using three ID slides, one after the other. The piped-in Muzak on this lowest level of the Fedic Dogan sounded like Beatles tunes as rendered by The Comatose String Quartet.

Inside the Control Suite were over a dozen rooms, but the only one with which we need concern ourselves was the one filled with TV screens and security devices. One of these latter devices ran a small but vicious army of hunter-killer robots equipped with sneetches and laser pistols; another was supposed to release poison gas (the same kind Blaine had used to slaughter the people of Lud) in the event of a hostile takeover. Which, in the view of Mordred Deschain, had happened. He had tried to activate both the hunter-killers and the gas; neither had responded. Now Mordred had a bloody nose, a blue bruise on his forehead, and a swollen lower lip, for he’d fallen out of

the chair in which he sat and rolled about on the floor, bellowing reedy, childish cries which in no way reflected the true depth of his fury.

To be able to see them on at least five different screens and not be able to kill or even hurt them! No wonder he was in a fury! He had felt the living darkness closing in on him, the darkness which signaled his change, and had forced himself to be calm so the change wouldn't happen. He had already discovered that the transformation from his human self to his spider self (and back again) consumed shocking amounts of energy. Later on that might not matter, but for the time being he had to be careful, lest he starve like a bee in a burned-over tract of forest.

What I'd show you is much more bizarre than anything we have looked at so far, and I warn you in advance that your first impulse will be to laugh. That's all right. Laugh if you must. Just don't take your eye off what you see, for even in your imagination, here is a creature which can do you damage. Remember that it came of two fathers, both of them killers.

FIVE

Now, only a few hours after his birth, Mia's chap already weighed twenty pounds and had the look of a healthy six-months' baby. Mordred wore a single garment, a makeshift towel diaper which Nigel had put on when he had brought the baby his first meal of Dogan wildlife. The child *needed* a diaper, for he could not as yet hold his waste. He understood that control over these functions would be his soon—perhaps before the day was out, if he continued to grow at his current rate—but it couldn't happen soon enough to suit him. He was for the nonce imprisoned in this idiotic infant's body.

To be trapped in such a fashion was hideous. To fall out of the chair and be capable of nothing more than lying there, waving his bruised arms and legs, bleeding and squalling! DNK 45932 would have come to pick him up, could no more resist the commands of the King's son than a lead weight dropped from a high window can resist the pull of gravity, but Mordred didn't dare call him. Already the brown bitch suspected something wasn't right with Nigel. The brown

bitch was wickedly perceptive, and Mordred himself was terribly vulnerable. He was able to control every piece of machinery in the Arc 16 station, mating with machinery was one of his many talents, but as he lay on the floor of the room with CONTROL CENTER on the door (it had been called “The Head” back in the long-ago, before the world moved on), Mordred was coming to realize how few machines there were to control. No wonder his father wanted to push down the Tower and begin again! This world was broken.

He’d needed to change back into the spider in order to regain the chair, where he’d once again resumed his human shape . . . but by the time he made it, his stomach was rumbling and his mouth was sour with hunger. It wasn’t just changing that sucked up the energy, he’d come to suspect; the spider was closer to his true form, and when he was in that shape his metabolism ran hot and fast. His thoughts changed, as well, and there was an attraction to that, because his human thoughts were colored by emotions (over which he seemed to have no control, although he supposed he might, in time) that were mostly unpleasant. As a spider, his thoughts weren’t real thoughts at all, at least not in the human sense; they were dark bellowing things that seemed to rise out of some wet interior ground. They were about

(EAT)

and

(ROAM)

and

(RAPE)

and

(KILL)

The many delightful ways to do these things rumbled through the dan-tete’s rudimentary consciousness like huge headlighted machines that went speeding unheeding through the world’s darkest weather. To think in such a way—to let go of his human half—was immensely attractive, but he thought that to do so now, while he had almost no defenses, would get him killed.

And almost already had. He raised his right arm—pink and smooth and perfectly naked—so he could look down at his right hip. This was where the brown bitch had shot him, and although Mordred had grown considerably since then, had doubled both in length and

weight, the wound remained open, seeping blood and some custardy stuff, dark yellow and stinking. He thought that this wound in his human body would never heal. No more than his other body would ever be able to grow back the leg the bitch had shot off. And had she not stumbled—ka: aye, he had no doubt of it—the shot would have taken his head off instead of his leg, and then the game would have been over, because—

There was a harsh, croaking buzz. He looked into the monitor that showed the other side of the main entry and saw the domestic robot standing there with a sack in one hand. The sack was twitching, and the black-haired, clumsily diapered baby sitting at the banks of monitors immediately began to salivate. He reached out one endearingly pudgy hand and punched a series of buttons. The security room's curved outer door slid open and Nigel stepped into the vestibule, which was built like an airlock. Mordred went immediately on to the buttons that would open the inner door in response to the sequence 2-5-4-1-3-1-2-1, but his motor control was still almost nonexistent and he was rewarded by another harsh buzz and an infuriating female voice (infuriating because it reminded him of the brown bitch's voice) which said, "YOU HAVE ENTERED THE WRONG SECURITY CODE FOR THIS DOOR. YOU MAY RETRY ONCE WITHIN THE NEXT TEN SECONDS. TEN . . . NINE . . ."

Mordred would have said *Fuck you* if he'd been capable of speech, but he wasn't. The best he could do was a babble of baby-talk that undoubtedly would have caused Mia to crow with a mother's pride. Now he didn't bother with the buttons; he wanted what the robot had in the bag too badly. The rats (he assumed they were rats) were alive this time. *Alive*, by God, the blood still running in their veins.

Mordred closed his eyes and concentrated. The red light Susannah had seen before his first change once more ran beneath his fair skin from the crown of his head to the stained right heel. When that light passed the open wound in the baby's hip, the sluggish flow of blood and pussy matter grew briefly stronger, and Mordred uttered a low cry of misery. His hand went to the wound and spread blood over the small bowl of his belly in a thoughtless comforting gesture. For a moment there was a sense of blackness rising to replace the red flush, accompanied by a wavering of the infant's shape. This time there was

no transformation, however. The baby slumped back in the chair, breathing hard, a tiny trickle of clear urine dribbling from his penis to wet the front of the towel he wore. There was a muffled pop from beneath the control panel in front of the chair where the baby slumped askew, panting like a dog.

Across the room, a door marked MAIN ACCESS slid open. Nigel tramped stolidly in, twitching his capsule of a head almost constantly now, counting off not in two or three languages but in perhaps as many as a dozen.

“Sir, I really cannot continue to—”

Mordred made a baby’s cheerful goo-goo-ga-ga sounds and held out his hands toward the bag. The thought which he sent was both clear and cold: *Shut up. Give me what I need.*

Nigel put the bag in his lap. From within it came a cheeping sound almost like human speech, and for the first time Mordred realized that the twitches were all coming from a single creature. Not a rat, then! Something bigger! Bigger and bloodier!

He opened the bag and peered in. A pair of gold-ringed eyes looked pleadingly back at him. For a moment he thought it was the bird that flew at night, the hoo-hoo bird, he didn’t know its name, and then he saw the thing had fur, not feathers. It was a throcken, known in many parts of Mid-World as a billy-bumbler, this one barely old enough to be off its mother’s teat.

There now, there, he thought at it, his mouth filling with drool. *We’re in the same boat, my little cully—we’re motherless children in a hard, cruel world. Be still and I’ll give you comfort.*

Dealing with a creature as young and simple-headed as this wasn’t much different from dealing with the machines. Mordred looked into its thoughts and located the node that controlled its simple bit of will. He reached for it with a hand made of thought—made of his will—and seized it. For a moment he could hear the creature’s timid, hopeful thought

(don’t hurt me please don’t hurt me; please let me live; I want to live have fun play a little; don’t hurt me please don’t hurt me please let me live)

and he responded:

All is well, don’t fear, cully, all is well.

The bumbler in the bag (Nigel had found it in the motor-pool, separated from its mother, brothers, and sisters by the closing of an automatic door) relaxed—not believing, exactly, but *hoping* to believe.

SIX

In Nigel's study, the lights had been turned down to quarter-brilliance. When Oy began to whine, Jake woke at once. The others slept on, at least for the time being.

What's wrong, Oy?

The bumbler didn't reply, only went on whining deep in his throat. His gold-ringed eyes peered into the gloomy far corner of the study, as if seeing something terrible there. Jake could remember peering into the corner of his bedroom the same way after waking from some nightmare in the small hours of the morning, a dream of Frankenstein or Dracula or

(Tyrannasorbet Wrecks)

some other boogeyman, God knew what. Now, thinking that perhaps bumlbers also had nightmares, he tried even harder to touch Oy's mind. There was nothing at first, then a deep, blurred image

(eyes eyes looking out of the darkness)

of something that might have been a billy-bumbler in a sack.

"Shhhh," he whispered into Oy's ear, putting his arms around him. "Don't wake em, they need their sleep."

"Leep," Oy said, very low.

"You just had a bad dream," Jake whispered. "Sometimes I have them, too. They're not real. Nobody's got you in a bag. Go back to sleep."

"Leep." Oy put his snout on his right forepaw. "Oy-be ki-yit."

That's right, Jake thought at him, Oy be quiet.

The gold-ringed eyes, still looking troubled, remained open a bit longer. Then Oy winked at Jake with one and closed both. A moment later, the bumbler was asleep again. Somewhere close by, one of his kind had died . . . but dying was the way of the world; it was a hard world and always had been.

Oy dreamed of being with Jake beneath the great orange orb of the Peddler's Moon. Jake, also sleeping, picked it up by touch and

they dreamed of Old Cheap Rover Man's Moon together.

Oy, who died? asked Jake beneath the Peddler's one-eyed, knowing wink.

Oy, said his friend. *Delah*. Many.

Beneath the Old Cheap Man's empty orange stare *Oy* said no more; had, in fact, found a dream within his dream, and here also Jake went with him. This dream was better. In it, the two of them were playing together in bright sunshine. To them came another bumbler: a sad fellow, by his look. He tried to talk to them, but neither Jake nor *Oy* could tell what he said, because he was speaking in English.

SEVEN

Mordred wasn't strong enough to lift the bumbler from the bag, and Nigel either would not or could not help him. The robot only stood inside the door of the Control Center, twisting his head to one side or the other, counting and clanking more loudly than ever. A hot, cooked smell had begun to rise from his innards.

Mordred succeeded in turning the bag over and the bumbler, probably half a yearling, fell into his lap. Its eyes were half-open, but the yellow-and-black orbs were dull and unmoving.

Mordred threw his head back, grimacing in concentration. That red flash ran down his body, and his hair tried to stand on end. Before it could do more than begin to rise, however, it and the infant's body to which it had been attached were gone. The spider came. It hooked four of its seven legs about the bumbler's body and drew it effortlessly up to the craving mouth. In twenty seconds it had sucked the bumbler dry. It plunged its mouth into the creature's soft underbelly, tore it open, lifted the body higher, and ate the guts which came tumbling out: delicious, strength-giving packages of dripping meat. It ate deeper, making muffled mewling sounds of satisfaction, snapping the billy-bumbler's spine and sucking the brief dribble of marrow. Most of the energy was in the blood—aye, always in the blood, as the Grandfathers well knew—but there was strength in meat, as well. As a human baby (Roland had used the old Gilead endearment, *bah-bo*), he could have taken no nourishment from

either the juice or the meat. Would likely have choked to death on it. But as a spider—

He finished and cast the corpse aside onto the floor, just as he had the used-up, desiccated corpses of the rats. Nigel, that dedicated bustling butler, had disposed of those. He would not dispose of this one. Nigel stood silent no matter how many times Mordred bawled *Nigel, I need you!* Around the robot, the smell of charred plastic had grown strong enough to activate the overhead fans. DNK 45932 stood with his eyeless face turned to the left. It gave him an oddly inquisitive look, as if he'd died while on the verge of asking an important question: *What is the meaning of life*, perhaps, or *Who put the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?* In any case, his brief career as a rat- and bumbler-catcher was over.

For the time being, Mordred was full of energy—the meal had been fresh and wonderful—but that wouldn't last long. If he stayed in his spider-shape, he'd use up this new reservoir of strength even faster. If he went back to being a baby, however, he wouldn't even be able to get down from the chair in which he was sitting, or once more put on the diaper—which had, of course, slid off his body when he changed. But he *had* to change back, for in his spider-shape he couldn't think clearly at all. As for deductive reasoning? The idea was a bitter joke.

The white node on the spider's back closed its human eyes, and the black body beneath flushed a congested red. The legs retracted toward the body and disappeared. The node which was the baby's head grew and gained detail as the body beneath paled and took on human shape; the child's blue eyes—bombardier eyes, gunslinger eyes—flashed. He was still full of strength from the bumbler's blood and meat, he could feel it as the transformation rushed toward its conclusion, but a distressing amount of it (something like the foam on top of a glass of beer) had already dissipated. And not just from switching back and forth, either. The fact was that he was growing at a headlong pace. That sort of growth required relentless nourishment, and there was damned little nourishment to be had in the Arc 16 Experimental Station. Or in Fedic beyond, for that matter. There were canned goods and meals in foil packets and powdered power drinks, yar, plenty of those, but none of what was here would feed him

as he needed to be fed. He needed fresh meat and even more than meat he needed *blood*. And the blood of animals would sustain the avalanche of his growth for only so long. Very soon he was going to need human blood, or the pace of his growth would first slow, then stop. The pain of starvation would come, but that pain, twisting relentlessly in his vitals like an auger, would be nothing to the mental and spiritual pain of watching *them* on the various video screens: still alive, reunited in their fellowship, with the comfort of a cause.

The pain of seeing *him*. Roland of Gilead.

How, he wondered, did he know the things he knew? From his mother? Some of them, yes, for he'd felt a million of Mia's thoughts and memories (a good many of them swiped from Susannah) rush into him as he fed on her. But to know it was that way with the Grandfathers, as well, how did he know that? That, for instance, a German vampire who swilled the life's blood of a Frenchman might speak French for a week or ten days, speak it like a native, and then the ability, like his victim's memories, would begin to fade . . .

How could he know a thing like that?

Did it matter?

Now he watched them sleep. The boy Jake had awakened, but only briefly. Earlier Mordred had watched them eat, four fools and a bumbler—full of blood, full of energy—dining in a circle together. Always they would sit in a circle, they would make that circle even when they stopped to rest five minutes on the trail, doing it without even being aware of it, their circle that kept the rest of the world out. Mordred had no circle. Although he was new, he already understood that *outside* was his ka, just as it was the ka of winter's wind to swing through only half the compass: from north to east and then back again to bleak north once more. He accepted this, yet he still looked at them with the outsider's resentment, knowing he would hurt them and that the satisfaction would be bitter. He was of two worlds, the foretold joining of *Prim* and *Am*, of *gadosh* and *godosh*, of *Gan* and *Gilead*. He was in a way like Jesus Christ, but in a way he was *purier* than the sheepgod-man, for the sheepgodman had but one true father, who was in the highly hypothetical heaven, and a stepfather who was on Earth. Poor old Joseph, who wore horns put on him by God Himself.

Mordred Deschain, on the other hand, had two *real* fathers. One of whom now slept on the screen before him.

You're old, Father, he thought. It gave him vicious pleasure to think so; it also made him feel small and mean, no more than . . . well, no more than a spider, looking down from its web. Mordred was twins, and would remain twins until Roland of the Eld was dead and the last ka-tet broken. And the longing voice that told him to go *to* Roland, and call him father? To call Eddie and Jake his brothers, Susannah his sister? That was the gullible voice of his mother. They'd kill him before he could get a single word out of his mouth (assuming he had reached a stage where he could do more than gurgle baby-talk). They'd cut off his balls and feed them to the brat's bumbler. They'd bury his castrated corpse, and shit on the ground where he lay, and then move on.

You're finally old, Father, and now you walk with a limp, and at end of day I see you rub your hip with a hand that's picked up the tiniest bit of a shake.

Look, if you would. Here sits a baby with blood streaking his fair skin. Here sits a baby weeping his silent, eerie tears. Here sits a baby that knows both too much and too little, and although we must keep our fingers away from his mouth (he snaps, this one; snaps like a baby crocodile), we are allowed to pity him a little. If ka is a train—and it is, a vast, hurtling mono, maybe sane, maybe not—then this nasty little lycanthrope is its most vulnerable hostage, not tied to the tracks like little Nell but strapped to the thing's very headlight.

He may tell himself he has two fathers, and there may be some truth to it, but there is no father here and no mother, either. He ate his mother alive, say true, ate her big-big, she was his first meal, and what choice did he have about that? He is the last miracle ever to be spawned by the still-standing Dark Tower, the scarred wedding of the rational and the irrational, the natural and the supernatural, and yet he is alone, and he is a-hungry. Destiny might have intended him to rule a chain of universes (or destroy them all), but so far he has succeeded in establishing dominion over nothing but one old domestic robot who has now gone to the clearing at the end of the path.

He looks at the sleeping gunslinger with love and hate, loathing and longing. But suppose he went to them and was *not* killed? What if

they were to welcome him in? Ridiculous idea, yes, but allow it for the sake of argument. Even then he would be expected to set Roland above him, accept Roland as dinh, and that he will never do, never do, no, never do.



CHAPTER III: THE SHINING WIRE

ONE

“You were watching them,” said a soft, laughing voice. Then it lilted a bit of cradle nonsense Roland would have remembered well from his own early childhood: “‘Penny, posy, Jack’s a-nosy! Do ya say so? Yes I do-so! He’s my sneaky, peeky, darling bah-bo!’ Did you like what you saw before you fell asleep? Did you watch them move on with the rest of the failing world?”

Perhaps ten hours had passed since Nigel the domestic robot had performed his last duty. Mordred, who in fact had fallen deeply asleep, turned his head toward the voice of the stranger with no residual fuzzy-headedness or surprise. He saw a man in bluejeans and a hooded parka standing on the gray tiles of the Control Center. His gunna—nothing more than a beat-up duffelbag—lay at his feet. His cheeks were flushed, his face handsome, his eyes burning hot. In his hand was an automatic pistol, and as he looked into the dark eye of its muzzle, Mordred Deschain for the second time realized that even gods could die once their divinity had been diluted with human blood. But he wasn’t afraid. Not of this one. He *did* look back into the monitors that showed Nigel’s apartment, and confirmed that the newcomer was right: it was empty.

The smiling stranger, who seemed to have sprung from the very floor, raised the hand not holding the gun to the hood of his parka and turned a bit of it outward. Mordred saw a flash of metal. Some kind of woven wire coated the inside of the hood.

“I call it my ‘thinking-cap,’” said the stranger. “I can’t hear your thoughts, which is a drawback, but you can’t get into my head, which

is a—”

(*which is a definite advantage, wouldn't you say*)

“—which is a definite advantage, wouldn't you say?”

There were two patches on the jacket. One read U.S. ARMY and showed a bird—the eagle-bird, not the hoo-hoo bird. The other patch was a name: RANDALL FLAGG. Mordred discovered (also with no surprise) that he could read easily.

“Because, if you're anything like your father—the *red* one, that is—then your mental powers may exceed mere communication.” The man in the parka tittered. He didn't want Mordred to know he was afraid. Perhaps he'd convinced himself he *wasn't* afraid, that he'd come here of his own free will. Maybe he had. It didn't matter to Mordred one way or the other. Nor did the man's plans, which jumbled and ran in his head like hot soup. Did the man really believe the “thinking-cap” had closed off his thoughts? Mordred looked closer, pried deeper, and saw the answer was yes. Very convenient.

“In any case, I believe a bit of protection to be very prudent. Prudence is always the wisest course; how else did I survive the fall of Farson and the death of Gilead? I wouldn't want you to get in my head and walk me off a high building, now would I? Although why would you? You need me or someone, now that yon bucket of bolts has gone silent and you just a bah-bo who can't tie his own clout across the crack of his shitty ass!”

The stranger—who was really no stranger at all—laughed. Mordred sat in the chair and watched him. On the side of the child's cheek was a pink weal, for he'd gone to sleep with his small hand against the side of his small face.

The newcomer said, “I think we can communicate very well if I talk and you nod for yes or shake your head for no. Knock on your chair if you don't understand. Simple enough! Do you agree?”

Mordred nodded. The newcomer found the steady blue glare of those eyes unsettling—*très* unsettling—but tried not to show it. He wondered again if coming here had been the right thing to do, but he had tracked Mia's course ever since she had kindled, and why, if not for this? It was a dangerous game, agreed, but now there were only two creatures who could unlock the door at the foot of the Tower before the Tower fell . . . which it would, and soon, because the writer

had only days left to live in his world, and the final Books of the Tower—three of them—remained unwritten. In the last one that *was* written in that key world, Roland's ka-tet had banished sai Randy Flagg from a dream-palace on an interstate highway, a palace that had looked to Eddie, Susannah, and Jake like the Castle of Oz the Great and Terrible (Oz the Green King, may it do ya fine). They had, in fact, almost killed that bad old bumhug Walter o' Dim, thereby providing what some would no doubt call a happy ending. But beyond page 676 of *Wizard and Glass* not a word about Roland and the Dark Tower had Stephen King written, and Walter considered this the *real* happy ending. The people of Calla Bryn Sturgis, the roont children, Mia and Mia's baby: all those things were still sleeping inchoate in the writer's subconscious, creatures without breath pent behind an unfound door. And now Walter judged it was too late to set them free. Damnably quick though King had been throughout his career—a genuinely talented writer who'd turned himself into a shoddy (but rich) quick-sketch artist, a rhymeless Algernon Swinburne, do it please ya—he couldn't get through even the first hundred pages of the remaining tale in the time he had left, not if he wrote day and night.

Too late.

There had been a day of choice, as Walter well knew: he had been at *Le Casse Roi Russe*, and had seen it in the glass ball the Old Red Thing still possessed (although by now it no doubt lay forgotten in some castle corner). By the summer of 1997, King had clearly known the story of the Wolves, the twins, and the flying plates called Orizas. But to the writer, all that had seemed like too much work. He had chosen a book of loosely interlocked stories called *Hearts in Atlantis* instead, and even now, in his home on Turtleback Lane (where he had never seen so much as a single walk-in), the writer was frittering away the last of his time writing about peace and love and Vietnam. It was true that one character in what would be King's last book had a part to play in the Dark Tower's history as it might be, but that fellow—an old man with talented brains—would never get a chance to speak lines that really mattered. Lovely.

In the only world that really mattered, the true world where time never turns back and there are no second chances (tell ya true), it was

June 12th of 1999. The writer's time had shrunk to less than two hundred hours.

Walter o' Dim knew he didn't have quite that long to reach the Dark Tower, because time (like the metabolism of certain spiders) ran faster and hotter on this side of things. Say five days. Five and a half at the outside. He had that long to reach the Tower with Mordred Deschain's birthmarked, amputated foot in his gunna . . . to open the door at the bottom and mount those murmuring stairs . . . to bypass the trapped Red King . . .

If he could find a vehicle . . . or the right door . . .

Was it too late to become the God of All?

Perhaps not. In any case, what harm in trying?

Walter o' Dim had wandered long, and under a hundred names, but the Tower had always been his goal. Like Roland, he wanted to climb it and see what lived at the top. If anything did.

He had belonged to none of the cliques and cults and faiths and factions that had arisen in the confused years since the Tower began to totter, although he wore their sigils when it suited him. His service to the Crimson King was a late thing, as was his service to John Farson, the Good Man who'd brought down Gilead, the last bastion of civilization, in a tide of blood and murder. Walter had done his own share of murder in those years, living a long and only quasi-mortal life. He had witnessed the end of what he had then believed to be Roland's last ka-tet at Jericho Hill. *Witnessed* it? That was a little overmodest, by all the gods and fishes! Under the name of Rudin Filaro, he had fought with his face painted blue, had screamed and charged with the rest of the stinking barbarians, and had brought down Cuthbert Allgood himself, with an arrow through the eye. Yet through all that he'd kept his gaze on the Tower. Perhaps that was why the damned gunslinger—as the sun went down on that day's work, Roland of Gilead had been the last of them—had been able to escape, having buried himself in a cart filled with the dead and then creeping out of the slaughterpile at sundown, just before the whole works had been set alight.

He had seen Roland years earlier, in Mejis, and had just missed his grip on him there, too (although he put that mostly down to Eldred Jonas, he of the quavery voice and the long gray hair, and Jonas had

paid). The King had told him then that they weren't done with Roland, that the gunslinger would begin the end of matters and ultimately cause the tumble of that which he wished to save. Walter hadn't begun to believe that until the Mohaine Desert, where he had looked around one day and discovered a certain gunslinger on his backtrail, one who had grown old over the course of falling years, and hadn't completely believed it until the reappearance of Mia, who fulfilled an old and grave prophecy by giving birth to the Crimson King's son. Certainly the Old Red Thing was of no more use to him, but even in his imprisonment and insanity, he—*it*—was dangerous.

Still, until he'd had Roland to complete him—to make him greater than his own destiny, perhaps—Walter o' Dim had been little more than a wanderer left over from the old days, a mercenary with a vague ambition to penetrate the Tower before it was brought down. Was that not what had brought him to the Crimson King in the first place? Yes. And it wasn't his fault that the great scuttering spider-king had run mad.

Never mind. Here was his son with the same mark on his heel—Walter could see it at this very moment—and everything balanced. Of course he'd need to be careful. The thing in the chair looked helpless, perhaps even thought it *was* helpless, but it wouldn't do to underestimate it just because it looked like a baby.

Walter slipped the gun into his pocket (for the moment; only for the moment) and held his hands out, empty and palms up. Then he closed one of them into a fist, which he raised to his forehead. Slowly, never taking his eyes from Mordred, wary lest he should change (Walter had seen that change, and what had happened to the little beast's mother), the newcomer dropped to one knee.

“Hile, Mordred Deschain, son of Roland of Gilead that was and of the Crimson King whose name was once spoken from End-World to Out-World; hile you son of two fathers, both of them descended from Arthur Eld, first king to rise after the *Prim* receded, and Guardian of the Dark Tower.”

For a moment nothing happened. In the Control Center there was only silence and the lingering smell of Nigel's fried circuits.

Then the baby lifted its chubby fists, opened them, and raised his hands: *Rise, bondsman, and come to me.*

TWO

“It’s best you not ‘think strong,’ in any case,” the newcomer said, stepping closer. “They knew you were here, and Roland is almighty Christing clever; trig-delah is he. He caught up with me once, you know, and I thought I was done. I truly did.” From his gunna the man who sometimes called himself Flagg (on another level of the Tower, he had brought an entire world to ruin under that name) had taken peanut butter and crackers. He’d asked permission of his new dinh, and the baby (although bitterly hungry himself) had nodded regally. Now Walter sat cross-legged on the floor, eating rapidly, secure in his thinking-cap, unaware there was an intruder inside and all that he knew was being ransacked. He was safe until that ransacking was done, but afterward—

Mordred raised one chubby baby-hand in the air and swooped it gracefully down in the shape of a question mark.

“How did I escape?” Walter asked. “Why, I did what any true cozener would do in such circumstances—told him the truth! Showed him the Tower, at least several levels of it. It stunned him, right and proper, and while he was open in such fashion, I took a leaf from his own book and hypnotized him. We were in one of the fistulas of time which sometimes swirl out from the Tower, and the world moved on all around us as we had our palaver in that bony place, aye! I brought more bones—human ones—and while he slept I dressed em in what was left of my own clothes. I could have killed him then, but what of the Tower if I had, eh? What of *you*, for that matter? You never would have come to be. It’s fair to say, Mordred, that by allowing Roland to live and draw his three, I saved your life before your life was even kindled, so I did. I stole away to the seashore—felt in need of a little vacation, hee! When Roland got there, he went one way, toward the three doors. I’d gone the other, Mordred my dear, and here I am!”

He laughed through a mouthful of crackers and sprayed crumbs on his chin and shirt. Mordred smiled, but he was revolted. This was what he was supposed to work with, *this*? A cracker-gobbling, crumb-spewing fool who was too full of his own past exploits to sense his present danger, or to know his defenses had been breached? By all the gods, he *deserved* to die! But before that could happen, there were

two more things he needed. One was to know where Roland and his friends had gone. The other was to be fed. This fool would serve both purposes. And what made it easy? Why, that Walter had also grown old—old and lethally sure of himself—and too vain to realize it.

“You may wonder why I’m here, and not about your father’s business,” Walter said. “Do you?”

Mordred didn’t, but he nodded, just the same. His stomach rumbled.

“In truth, I *am* about his business,” Walter said, and gave his most charming smile (spoiled somewhat by the peanut butter on his teeth). He had once probably known that any statement beginning with the words *In truth* is almost always a lie. No more. Too old to know. Too vain to know. Too stupid to remember. But he was wary, all the same. He could feel the child’s force. In his head? Rummaging around in his head? Surely not. The thing trapped in the baby’s body was powerful, but surely not *that* powerful.

Walter leaned forward earnestly, clasping his knees.

“Your Red Father is . . . indisposed. As a result of having lived so close to the Tower for so long, and having thought upon it so deeply, I have no doubt. It’s down to you to finish what he began. I’ve come to help you in that work.”

Mordred nodded, as if pleased. He *was* pleased. But ah, he was also so hungry.

“You may have wondered how I reached you in this supposedly secure chamber,” Walter said. “In truth I helped build this place, in what Roland would call the long-ago.”

That phrase again, as obvious as a wink.

He had put the gun in the left pocket of his parka. Now, from the right, he withdrew a gadget the size of a cigarette-pack, pulled out a silver antenna, and pushed a button. A section of the gray tiles withdrew silently, revealing a flight of stairs. Mordred nodded. Walter—or Randall Flagg, if that was what he was currently calling himself—had indeed come out of the floor. A neat trick, but of course he had once served Roland’s father Steven as Gilead’s court magician, hadn’t he? Under the name of Marten. A man of many faces and many neat tricks was Walter o’ Dim, but never as clever as he seemed to think. Not by half. For Mordred now had the final thing he had been

looking for, which was the way Roland and his friends had gotten out of here. There was no need to pluck it from its hiding place in Walter's mind, after all. He only needed to follow the fool's backtrail.

First, however . . .

Walter's smile had faded a little. "Did'ee say something, sire? For I thought I heard the sound of your voice, far back in my mind."

The baby shook his head. And who is more believable than a baby? Are their faces not the very definition of guilelessness and innocence?

"I'd take you with me and go after them, if you'd come," Walter said. "What a team we'd make! They've gone to the devar-toi in Thunder-clap, to release the Breakers. I've already promised to meet your father—your *White* Father—and his ka-tet should they dare go on, and that's a promise I intend to keep. For, hear me well, Mordred, the gunslinger Roland Deschain has stood against me at every turn, and I'll bear it no more. *No more!* Do you hear?" His voice was rising in fury.

Mordred nodded innocently, widening his pretty baby's eyes in what might have been taken for fear, fascination, or both. Certainly Walter o' Dim seemed to preen beneath his regard, and really, the only question now was when to take him—immediately or later? Mordred was very hungry, but thought he would hold off at least a bit longer. There was something oddly compelling about watching this fool stitching the last few inches of his fate with such earnestness.

Once again Mordred drew the shape of a question mark in the air.

Any last vestige of a smile faded from Walter's face. "What do I truly want? Is that what you're asking for?"

Mordred nodded yes.

"Tisn't the Dark Tower at all, if you want the truth; it's Roland who stays on my mind and in my heart. I want him dead." Walter spoke with flat and unsmiling finality. "For the long and dusty leagues he's chased me; for all the trouble he's caused me; and for the Red King, as well—the *true* King, ye do ken; for his presumption in refusing to give over his quest no matter what obstacles were placed in his path; most of all for the death of his mother, whom I once loved." And, in an undertone: "Or at least coveted. In either case, it was he who killed her. No matter what part I or Rhea of the Cöos may have played in

that matter, it was the boy himself who stopped her breath with his damned guns, slow head, and quick hands.

“As for the end of the universe . . . I say let it come as it will, in ice, fire, or darkness. What did the universe ever do for me that I should mind its welfare? All I know is that Roland of Gilead has lived too long and *I want that son of a bitch in the ground*. And those he’s drawn, too.”

For the third and last time, Mordred drew the shape of a question in the air.

“There’s only a single working door from here to the devar-toi, young master. It’s the one the Wolves use . . . or used; I think they’ve made their last run, so I do. Roland and his friends have gone through it, but that’s all right, there’s plenty to occupy em right where they come out—they might find the reception a bit hot! Mayhap we can take care of em while they’ve got the Breakers and the remaining Children of Roderick and the true guards o’ the watch to worry about. Would you like that?”

The infant nodded an affirmative with no hesitation. He then put his fingers to his mouth and chewed at them.

“Yes,” Walter said. His grin shone out. “Hungry, of course you are. But I’m sure we can do better than rats and half-grown billy-bumblers when it comes to dinner. Don’t you?”

Mordred nodded again. He was sure they could, too.

“Will I play the good da’ and carry you?” Walter asked. “That way you don’t have to change to your spider-self. Ugh! Not a shape ’tis easy to love, or even like, I must say.”

Mordred was holding up his arms.

“Y’won’t shit on me, will you?” Walter asked casually, halting halfway across the floor. His hand slid into his pocket, and Mordred realized with a touch of alarm that the sly bastard had been hiding something from him, just the same: he knew the so-called “thinking-cap” wasn’t working. Now he meant to use the gun after all.

THREE

In fact, Mordred gave Walter o’ Dim far too much credit, but isn’t that a trait of the young, perhaps even a survival skill? To a wide-eyed lad, the tacky tricks of the world’s most ham-fisted prestidigitator look like

miracles. Walter did not actually realize what was happening until very late in the game, but he was a wily old survivor, tell ya true, and when understanding came, it came entire.

There's a phrase, *the elephant in the living room*, which purports to describe what it's like to live with a drug addict, an alcoholic, an abuser. People outside such relationships will sometimes ask, "How could you let such a business go on for so many years? Didn't you see *the elephant in the living room*?" And it's so hard for anyone living in a more normal situation to understand the answer that comes closest to the truth: "I'm sorry, but it was there when I moved in. I didn't know it was an *elephant*; I thought it was *part of the furniture*." There comes an *aha*-moment for some folks—the lucky ones—when they suddenly recognize the difference. And that moment came for Walter. It came too late, but not by much.

Y'won't shit on me, will you—that was the question he asked, but between the word *shit* and the phrase *on me*, he suddenly realized there was an intruder in his house . . . *and it had been there all along*. Not a baby, either; this was a gangling, slope-headed adolescent with pockmarked skin and dully curious eyes. It was perhaps the best, truest visualization Walter could have made for Mordred Deschain as he at that moment existed: a teenage housebreaker, probably high on some aerosol cleaning product.

And he had been there *all the time!* God, how could he not have known? The housebreaker hadn't even been hiding! He had been right out in the open, standing there against the wall, gape-mouthed and taking it all in.

His plans for bringing Mordred with him—of using him to end Roland's life (if the guards at the devar-toi couldn't do it first, that was), then killing the little bastard and taking his valuable left foot—collapsed in an instant. In the next one a new plan arose, and it was simplicity itself. *Mustn't let him see that I know. One shot, that's all I can risk, and only because I must risk it. Then I run. If he's dead, fine. If not, perhaps he'll starve before—*

Then Walter realized his hand had stopped. Four fingers had closed around the butt of the gun in the jacket pocket, but they were now frozen. One was very near the trigger, but he couldn't move that, either. It might as well have been buried in cement. And now Walter

clearly saw the shining wire for the first time. It emerged from the toothless pink-gummed mouth of the baby sitting in the chair, crossed the room, glittering beneath the lights, and then encircled him at chest-level, binding his arms to his sides. He understood the wire wasn't really there . . . but at the same time, it *was*.

He couldn't move.

FOUR

Mordred didn't see the shining wire, perhaps because he'd never read *Watership Down*. He'd had the chance to explore Susannah's mind, however, and what he saw now was remarkably like Susannah's Dogan. Only instead of switches saying things like CHAP and EMOTIONAL TEMP, he saw ones that controlled Walter's ambulation (this one he quickly turned to OFF), cogitation, and motivation. It was certainly a more complex setup than the one in the young bumbler's head—there he'd found nothing but a few simple nodes, like granny knots—but still not difficult to operate.

The only problem was that he was a baby.

A damned *baby* stuck in a chair.

If he really meant to change this delicatessen on legs into cold-cuts, he'd have to move quickly.

FIVE

Walter o' Dim was not too old to be gullible, he understood that now—he'd underestimated the little monster, relying too much on what it looked like and not enough on his own knowledge of what it *was*—but he was at least beyond the young man's trap of total panic.

If he means to do anything besides sit in that chair and look at me, he'll have to change. When he does, his control may slip. That'll be my chance. It's not much, but it's the only one I have left.

At that moment he saw a brilliant red light run down the baby's skin from crown to toes. In the wake of it, the chubby-pink bah-bo's body began to darken and swell, the spider's legs bursting out through his sides. At the same instant, the shining wire coming out of

the baby's mouth disappeared and Walter felt the suffocating band which had been holding him in place disappear.

No time to risk even a single shot, not now. Run. Run from him . . . from it. That's all you can do. You never should have come here in the first place. You let your hatred of the gunslinger blind you, but it still may not be too la—

He turned to the trapdoor even as this thought raced through his mind, and was about to put his foot on the first step when the shining wire reestablished itself, this time not looping around his arms and chest but around his throat, like a garrote.

Gagging and choking and spewing spit, eyes bulging from their sockets, Walter turned jerkily around. The loop around his throat loosened the barest bit. At the same time he felt something very like an invisible hand skim up his brow and push the hood back from his head. He'd always gone dressed in such fashion, when he could; in certain provinces to the south even of Garlan he had been known as *Walter Hodji*, the latter word meaning both *dim* and *hood*. But this particular lid (borrowed from a certain deserted house in the town of French Landing, Wisconsin) had done him no good at all, had it?

I think I may have come to the end of the path, he thought as he saw the spider strutting toward him on its seven legs, a bloated, lively thing (livelier than the baby, aye, and four thousand times as ugly) with a freakish blob of human head peering over the hairy curve of its back. On its belly, Walter could see the red mark that had been on the baby's heel. Now it had an hourglass shape, like the one that marks the female black widow, and he understood that was the mark he'd have wanted; killing the baby and amputating its foot likely would have done him no good at all. It seemed he had been wrong all down the line.

The spider reared up on its four back legs. The three in front pawed at Walter's jeans, making a low and ghastly scratching sound. The thing's eyes bulged up at him with that dull intruder's curiosity which he had already imagined too well.

Oh yes, I'm afraid it's the end of the path for you. Huge in his head. Booming like words from a loudspeaker. *But you intended the same for me, didn't you?*

No! At least not immediately—

But you did! "Don't kid a kidder," as Susannah would say. So now I do the one you call my White Father a small favor. You may not have been his greatest enemy, Walter Padick (as you were called when you set out, all in the long-ago), but you were his oldest, I grant. And now I take you out of his road.

Walter did not realize he had held onto some dim hope of escape even with the loathsome thing before him, reared up, the eyes staring at him with dull avidity while the mouth drooled, until he heard for the first time in a thousand years the name a boy from a farm in Delain had once answered to: Walter Padick. Walter, son of Sam the Miller in the Eastar'd Barony. He who had run away at thirteen, had been raped in the ass by another wanderer a year later and yet had somehow withstood the temptation to go crawling back home. Instead he had moved on toward his destiny.

Walter Padick.

At the sound of that voice, the man who had sometimes called himself Marten, Richard Fannin, Rudin Filaro, and Randall Flagg (among a great many others), gave over all hope except for the hope of dying well.

I be a-hungry, Mordred be a-hungry, spoke the relentless voice in the middle of Walter's head, a voice that came to him along the shining wire of the little king's will. *But I'd eat proper, beginning with the appetizer. Your eyes, I think. Give them to me.*

Walter struggled mightily, but without so much as a moment's success. The wire was too strong. He saw his hands rise and hover in front of his face. He saw his fingers bend into hooks. They pushed up his eyelids like windowshades, then dug the orbs out from the top. He could hear the sounds they made as they tore loose of the tendons which turned them and the optic nerves which relayed their marvelous messages. The sound that marked the end of sight was low and wet. Bright red dashes of light filled his head, and then darkness rushed in forever. In Walter's case, forever wouldn't last long, but if time is subjective (and most of us know that it is), then it was far *too* long.

Give them to me, I say! No more dilly-dallying! I'm a-hungry!

Walter o' Dim—now Walter o' Dark—turned his hands over and dropped his eyeballs. They trailed filaments as they fell, making them

look a little like tadpoles. The spider snatched one out of the air. The other plopped to the tile where the surprisingly limber claw at the end of one leg picked it up and tucked it into the spider's mouth. Mordred popped it like a grape but did not swallow; rather he let the delicious slime trickle down his throat. Lovely.

Tongue next, please.

Walter wrapped an obedient hand around it and pulled, but succeeded in ripping it only partly loose. In the end it was too slippery. He would have wept with agony and frustration if the bleeding sockets where his eyes had been could have manufactured tears.

He reached for it again, but the spider was too greedy to wait.

Bend down! Poke your tongue out like you would at your honey's cunny. Quick, for your father's sake! Mordred's a-hungry!

Walter, still all too aware of what was happening to him, struggled against this fresh horror with no more success than against the last. He bent over with his hands on his thighs and his bleeding tongue stuck crookedly out between his lips, wavering wearily as the hemorrhaging muscles at the back of his mouth tried to support it. Once more he heard the scrabbling sounds as Mordred's front legs scratched at the legs of his denim pants. The spider's hairy maw closed over Walter's tongue, sucked it like a lollipop for one or two blissful seconds, and then tore it free with a single powerful wrench. Walter—now speechless as well as eyeless—uttered a swollen scream of pain and fell over, clutching at his distorted face, rolling back and forth on the tiles.

Mordred bit down on the tongue in his mouth. It burst into a bliss of blood that temporarily wiped away all thought. Walter had rolled onto his side and was feeling blindly for the trapdoor, something inside still screaming that he should not give up but keep trying to escape the monster that was eating him alive.

With the taste of blood in his mouth, all interest in foreplay departed Mordred. He was reduced to his central core, which was mostly appetite. He pounced upon Randall Flagg, Walter o' Dim, Walter Padick that was. There were more screams, but only a few. And then Roland's old enemy was no more.

The man had been quasi-immortal (a phrase at least as foolish as “most unique”) and made a legendary meal. After gorging on so much, Mordred’s first urge—strong but not quite insurmountable—was to vomit. He controlled it, as he did his second one, which was even stronger: to change back to his baby-self and sleep.

If he was to find the door of which Walter had spoken, the best time to do so was right now, and in a shape which would make it possible to hurry along at a good speed: the shape of the spider. So, passing the desiccated corpse without a glance, Mordred scarpered nimbly through the trapdoor and down the stairs and into a corridor below. This passage smelled strongly of alkali and seemed to have been cut out of the desert bedrock.

All of Walter’s knowledge—at least fifteen hundred years of it—bellowed in his brain.

The dark man’s backtrail eventually led to an elevator shaft. When a bristly claw pressed on the UP button produced nothing but a tired humming from far above and a smell like frying shoeleather from behind the control panel, Mordred climbed the car’s inner wall, pushed up the maintenance hatch with a slender leg, and squeezed through. That he *had* to squeeze did not surprise him; he was bigger now.

He climbed the cable

(itsy bitsy spider went up the waterspout)

until he came to the door where, his senses told him, Walter had entered the elevator and then sent it on its last ride. Twenty minutes later (and still jazzing on all that wonderful blood; *gallons* of the stuff, it had seemed), he came to a place where Walter’s trail divided. This might have posed him, child that he still very much was, but here the scent and the sense of the others joined Walter’s track and Mordred went that way, now following Roland and his ka-tet rather than the magician’s backtrail. Walter must have followed them for awhile and then turned around to find Mordred. To find his fate.

Twenty minutes later the little fellow came to a door marked with no word but a sigil he could read well enough:



The question was whether to open it now or to wait. Childish eagerness clamored for the former, growing prudence for the latter. He had been well-fed and had no need of more nourishment, especially if he changed back to his hume-self for awhile. Also, Roland and his friends might still be on the far side of this door. Suppose they were, and drew their weapons at the sight of him? They were infernally fast, and he could be killed by gunfire.

He *could* wait; felt no deep need beyond the eagerness of the child that wants everything and wants it *now*. Certainly he didn't suffer the bright intensity of Walter's hate. His own feelings were more complex, tintured by sadness and loneliness and—yes, he'd do better to admit it—love. Mordred felt he wanted to enjoy this melancholy for awhile. There would be food aplenty on the other side of this door, he was sure of it, so he'd eat. And grow. And watch. He would watch his father, and his sister-mother, and his ka-brothers, Eddie and Jake. He'd watch them camp at night, and light their fires, and form their circle around it. He'd watch from his place that was *outside*. Perhaps they would feel him and look uneasily into the dark, wondering what was out there.

He approached the door, reared up before it, and pawed at it questioningly. Too bad, really, there wasn't a peephole. And it probably *would* be safe to go through now. What had Walter said? That Roland's ka-tet meant to release the Breakers, whatever they might be (it had been in Walter's mind, but Mordred hadn't bothered looking for it).

There's plenty to occupy em right where they come out—they might find the reception a trifle hot!

Had Roland and his children perhaps been killed on the other side? Ambushed? Mordred believed he would have known had that happened. Would have felt it in his mind like a Beamquake.

In any case he would wait awhile before creeping through the door with the cloud-and-lightning sigul on it. And when he was through? Why, he'd find them. And overhear their palaver. And watch them,

both awake and asleep. Most of all, he would watch the one Walter had called his White Father. His only *real* father now, if Walter had been right about the Crimson King's having gone insane.

And for the present?

Now, for a little while, I may sleep.

The spider ran up the wall of this room, which was full of great hanging objects, and spun a web. But it was the baby—naked, and now looking fully a year old—that slept in it, head down and high above any predators that might come hunting.



CHAPTER IV: THE DOOR INTO THUNDERCLAP

ONE

When the four wanderers woke from their sleep (Roland first, and after six hours exactly), there were more popkins stacked on a cloth-covered tray, and also more drinks. Of the domestic robot, however, there was no sign.

“All right, enough,” Roland said, after calling Nigel for the third time. “He told us he was on his last legs; seems that while we slept, he fell off em.”

“He was doing something he didn’t want to do,” Jake said. His face looked pale and puffy. From sleeping too heavily was Roland’s first thought, and then wondered how he could be such a fool. The boy had been crying for Pere Callahan.

“Doing what?” Eddie asked, slipping his pack over one shoulder and then hoisting Susannah onto his hip. “For who? And why?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said. “He didn’t *want* me to know, and I didn’t feel right about prying. I know he was just a robot, but with that nice English voice and all, he seemed like more.”

“That’s a scruple you may need to get over,” Roland said, as gently as he could.

“How heavy am I, sugar?” Susannah asked Eddie cheerfully. “Or maybe what I should ask is ‘How bad you missin that good old wheelchair?’ Not to mention the shoulder-rig.”

“Suze, you hated that piggyback rig from the word go and we both know it.”

“Wasn’t askin about that, and *you* know it.”

It always fascinated Roland when Detta crept unheard into Susannah's voice, or—even more spooky—her face. The woman herself seemed unaware of these incursions, as her husband did now.

"I'd carry you to the end of the world," Eddie said sentimentally, and kissed the tip of her nose. "Unless you put on another ten pounds or so, that is. Then I might have to leave you and look for a lighter lady."

She poked him—not gently, either—and then turned to Roland. "This is a damn big place, once you're down underneath. How're we gonna find the door that goes through to Thunderclap?"

Roland shook his head. He didn't know.

"How bout you, Cisco?" Eddie asked Jake. "You're the one who's strong in the touch. Can you use it to find the door we want?"

"Maybe if I knew how to start," Jake said, "but I don't."

And with that, all three of them again looked at Roland. No, make it four, because even the gods-cursed bumbler was staring. Eddie would have made a joke to dispel any discomfort he felt at such a combined stare, and Roland actually fumbled for one. Something about how too many eyes spoiled the pie, maybe? No. That saying, which he'd heard from Susannah, was about cooks and broth. In the end he simply said, "We'll cast about a little, the way hounds do when they've lost the scent, and see what we find."

"Maybe another wheelchair for me to ride in," Susannah said brightly. "This nasty white boy has got his hands all *over* my purity."

Eddie gave her a sincere look. "If it was really pure, hon," he said, "it wouldn't be cracked like it is."

TWO

It was Oy who actually took over and led them, but not until they returned to the kitchen. The humans were poking about with a kind of aimlessness that Jake found rather unsettling when Oy began to bark out his name: "*Ake! Ake-Ake!*"

They joined the bumbler at a chocked-open door that read C-LEVEL. Oy went a little way along the corridor then looked back over his shoulder, eyes brilliant. When he saw they weren't following, he barked his disappointment.

“What do you think?” Roland asked. “Should we follow him?”

“Yes,” Jake said.

“What scent has he got?” Eddie asked. “Do you know?”

“Maybe something from the Dogan,” Jake said. “The real one, on the other side of the River Whye. Where Oy and I overheard Ben Slightman’s Da’ and the . . . you know, the robot.”

“Jake?” Eddie asked. “You okay, kid?”

“Yes,” Jake said, although he’d had a bit of a bad turn, remembering how Benny’s Da’ had screamed. Andy the Messenger Robot, apparently tired of Slightman’s grumbling, had pushed or pinched something in the man’s elbow—a nerve, probably—and Slightman had “hollered like an owl,” as Roland might say (and probably with at least mild contempt). Slightman the Younger was beyond such things, now, of course, and it was that realization—a boy, once full of fun and now cool as riverbank clay—which had made the son of Elmer pause. You had to die, yes, and Jake hoped he could do it at least moderately well when the hour came. He’d had some training in *how* to do it, after all. It was the thought of all that grave-time that chilled him. That downtime. That lie-still-and-continue-to-be-dead time.

Andy’s scent—cold but oily and distinctive—had been all over the Dogan on the far side of the River Whye, for he and Slightman the Elder had met there many times before the Wolf raid that had been greeted by Roland and his makeshift posse. This smell wasn’t exactly the same, but it was interesting. Certainly it was the only familiar one Oy had struck so far, and he wanted to follow it.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Eddie said. “I see something we need.”

He put Susannah down, crossed the kitchen, and returned rolling a stainless-steel table probably meant for transporting stacks of freshly washed dishes or larger utensils.

“Upsy-daisy, don’t be crazy,” Eddie said, and lifted Susannah onto it.

She sat there comfortably enough, gripping the sides, but looked dubious. “And when we come to a flight of stairs? What then, sugarboy?”

“Sugarboy will burn that bridge when he comes to it,” Eddie said, and pushed the rolling table into the hall. “Mush, Oy! On, you huskies!”

“Oy! Husk!” The bumbler hurried briskly along, bending his head every now and again to dip into the scent but mostly not bothering much. It was too fresh and too wide to need much attention. It was the smell of the Wolves he had found. After an hour’s walk, they passed a hangar-sized door marked TO HORSES. Beyond this, the trail led them to a door which read STAGING AREA and AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. (That they were followed for part of their hike by Walter o’ Dim was a thing none of them, not even Jake—strong in the touch though he was—suspected. On the boy, at least, the hooded man’s “thinking-cap” worked quite well. When Walter was sure where the bumbler was leading them, he’d turned back to palaver with Mordred—a mistake, as it turned out, but one with this consolation: he would never make another.)

Oy sat before the closed door, which was the kind that swung both ways, with his cartoon squiggle of tail tight against his hindquarters, and barked. “*Ake, ope-ope! Ope, Ake!*”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jake said, “in a minute. Hold your water.”

“STAGING AREA,” Eddie said. “That sounds at least moderately hopeful.”

They were still pushing Susannah on the stainless-steel table, having negotiated the only stairway they’d come to (a fairly short one) without too much trouble. Susannah had gone down first on her butt—her usual mode of descent—while Roland and Eddie carried the table along behind her. Jake went between the woman and the men with Eddie’s gun raised, the long scrolled barrel laid into the hollow of his left shoulder, a position known as “the guard.”

Roland now drew his own gun, laid it in the hollow of his right shoulder, and pushed the door open. He went through in a slight crouch, ready to dive either way or jump backward if the situation demanded it.

The situation did not. Had Eddie been first, he might have believed (if only momentarily) that he was being attacked by flying Wolves sort of like the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*. Roland, however, was not overburdened with imagination, and even though a

good many of the overhead fluorescent light strips in this huge, barnlike space had gone out, he wasted no time—or adrenaline—in mistaking the suspended objects for anything but what they actually were: broken robot raiders awaiting repair.

“Come on in,” he said, and his words came echoing back to him. Somewhere, high in the shadows, came a flutter of wings. Swallows, or perhaps barn-rusties that had found their way in from outside. “I think all’s well.”

They came, and stood looking up with silent awe. Only Jake’s four-footed friend was unimpressed. Oy was taking advantage of the break to groom himself, first the left side and then the right. At last Susannah, still sitting on the rolling steel table, said: “Tell you what, I’ve seen a lot, but I haven’t ever seen anything quite like this.”

Neither had the others. The huge room was thick with Wolves that seemed suspended in flight. Some wore their green Dr. Doom hoods and capes; others hung naked save for their steel suits. Some were headless, some armless, and a few were missing either one leg or the other. Their gray metal faces seemed to snarl or grin, depending on how the light hit them. Lying on the floor was a litter of green capes and discarded green gauntlets. And about forty yards away (the room itself had to stretch at least two hundred yards from end to end) was a single gray horse, lying on its back with its legs sticking stiffly up into the air. Its head was gone. From its neck there emerged tangles of yellow-, green-, and red-coated wires.

They walked slowly after Oy, who was trotting with brisk unconcern across the room. The sound of the rolling table was loud in here, the returning echo a sinister rumble. Susannah kept looking up. At first—and only because there was now so little light in what must once have been a place of brilliance—she thought the Wolves were floating, held up by some sort of anti-gravity device. Then they came to a place where most of the fluorescents were still working, and she saw the guy-wires.

“They must have repaired em in here,” she said. “If there was anyone left to do it, that is.”

“And I think over there’s where they powered em up,” Eddie said, and pointed. Along the far wall, which they could just now begin to see clearly, was a line of bays. Wolves were standing stiffly in some of

them. Other bays were empty, and in these they could see a number of plug-in points.

Jake abruptly burst out laughing.

“What?” Susannah asked. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just that . . .” His laughter pealed out again, sounding fabulously young in that gloomy chamber. “It’s just that they look like commuters at Penn Station, lined up at the pay telephones to call home or the office.”

Eddie and Susannah considered this for a moment, and then they also burst out laughing. So, Roland thought, Jake’s seeing must have been true. After all they’d been through, this did not surprise him. What made him glad was to hear the boy’s laughter. It was right that Jake should cry for the Pere, who had been his friend, but it was good that he could still laugh. Very good, indeed.

THREE

The door they wanted was to the left of the utility bays. They all recognized the cloud-and-lightning sigul on it at once from the note “R.F.” had left them on the back of a sheet of the *Oz Daily Buzz*, but the door itself was very different from the ones they had encountered so far; except for the cloud and lightning-bolt, it was strictly utilitarian. Although it had been painted green they could see it was steel, not ironwood or the heavier ghostwood. Surrounding it was a gray frame, also steel, with thigh-thick insulated power-cords coming out of each side. These ran into one of the walls. From behind that wall came a rough rumbling sound which Eddie thought he recognized.

“Roland,” he said in a low voice. “Do you remember the Portal of the Beam we came to, way back at the start? Even before Jake joined our happy band, this was.”

Roland nodded. “Where we shot the Little Guardians. Shardik’s retinue. Those of it that still survived.”

Eddie nodded. “I put my ear against that door and listened. ‘*All is silent in the halls of the dead,*’ I thought. ‘*These are the halls of the dead, where the spiders spin and the great circuits fall quiet, one by one.*’”

He had actually spoken this aloud, but Roland wasn't surprised Eddie didn't remember doing so; he'd been hypnotized or close to it.

"We were on the outside, then," Eddie said. "Now we're on the inside." He pointed at the door into Thunderclap, then with one finger traced the course of the fat cables. "The machinery sending power through these doesn't sound very healthy. If we're going to use this thing, I think we ought to right away. It could shut down for good anytime, and then what?"

"Have to call Triple-A Travel," Susannah said dreamily.

"I don't think so. We'd be basted . . . what do you call it, Roland?"

"Basted in a hot oast. 'These are the rooms of ruin.' You said that, too. Do you recall?"

"I *said* it? Right out loud?"

"Aye." Roland led them to the door. He reached out, touched the knob, then pulled his hand back.

"Hot?" Jake asked.

Roland shook his head.

"Electrified?" Susannah asked.

The gunslinger shook his head again.

"Then go on and go for it," Eddie said. "Let's boogie."

They crowded close behind Roland. Eddie was once more holding Susannah on his hip and Jake had picked Oy up. The bumbler was panting through his usual cheery grin and inside their gold rings his eyes were as bright as polished onyx.

"What do we do—" *if it's locked* was how Jake meant to finish, but before he could, Roland turned the knob with his right hand (he had his remaining gun in the left) and pulled the door open. Behind the wall, the machinery cycled up a notch, the sound of it growing almost desperate. Jake thought he could smell something hot: burning insulation, maybe. He was just telling himself to stop imagining things when a number of overhead fans started up. They were as loud as taxiing fighter airplanes in a World War II movie, and they all jumped. Susannah actually put a hand on her head, as if to shield it from falling objects.

"Come on," Roland snapped. "Quick." He stepped through without a backward look. During the brief moment when he was halfway through, he seemed to be broken into two pieces. Beyond the

gunslinger, Jake could see a vast and gloomy room, much bigger than the Staging Area. And silvery crisscrossing lines that looked like dashes of pure light.

“Go on, Jake,” Susannah said. “You next.”

Jake took a deep breath and stepped through. There was no riptide, such as they’d experienced in the Cave of Voices, and no jangling chimes. No sense of going todash, not even for a moment. Instead there was a horrid feeling of being turned inside-out, and he was attacked by the most violent nausea he had ever known. He stepped downward, and his knee buckled. A moment later he was on both knees. Oy spilled out of his arms. Jake barely noticed. He began to retch. Roland was on all fours next to him, doing the same. From somewhere came steady low chugging sounds, the persistent *ding-ding-ding-ding* of a bell, and an echoing amplified voice.

Jake turned his head, meaning to tell Roland that now he understood why they sent *robot* raiders through their damned door, and then he vomited again. The remains of his last meal ran steaming across cracked concrete.

All at once Susannah was crying “No! *No!*” in a distraught voice. Then “Put me down! Eddie, put me down before I—” Her voice was interrupted by harsh yarking sounds. Eddie managed to deposit her on the cracked concrete before turning his head and joining the Upchuck Chorus.

Oy fell on his side, hacked hoarsely, then got back on his feet. He looked dazed and disoriented . . . or maybe Jake was only attributing to the bumbler the way he felt himself.

The nausea was beginning to fade a little when he heard clacking, echoing footfalls. Three men were hurrying toward them, all dressed in jeans, blue chambray shirts, and odd, homemade-looking footwear. One of them, an elderly gent with a mop of untidy white hair, was ahead of the other two. All three had their hands in the air.

“Gunslingers!” cried the man with the white hair. “*Are* you gunslingers? If you are, don’t shoot! We’re on your side!”

Roland, who looked in no condition to shoot anyone (*Not that I’d want to test that*, Jake thought), tried to get up, almost made it, then went back to one knee and made another strangled retching sound.

The man with the white hair seized one of his wrists and hauled him up without ceremony.

“The sickness is bad,” the old man said, “no one knows it any better than I. Fortunately it passes rapidly. You have to come with us right away. I know how little you feel like it but you see, there’s an alarm in the ki’-dam’s study and—”

He stopped. His eyes, almost as blue as Roland’s, were widening. Even in the gloom Jake could see the old guy’s face losing its color. His friends had caught up with him, but he seemed not to notice. It was Jake Chambers he was looking at.

“Bobby?” he said in a voice that was not much more than a whisper. “My God, is it Bobby Garfield?”



CHAPTER V: STEEK-TETE

ONE

The white-haired gent's companions were a good deal younger (one looked to Roland hardly out of his teens), and both seemed absolutely terrified. Afraid of being shot by mistake, of course—that was why they'd come hurrying out of the gloom with their hands raised—but of something else, as well, because it must be clear to them now that they weren't going to be assassinated out of hand.

The older man gave an almost spastic jerk, pulling himself out of some private place. "Of course you're not Bobby," he murmured. "Hair's the wrong color, for one thing . . . and—"

"Ted, we have to get *out* of here," the youngest of the three said urgently. "And I mean *inmediatamente*."

"Yes," the older man said, but his gaze remained on Jake. He put a hand over his eyes (to Eddie he looked like a carny mentalist getting ready to go into his big thought-reading routine), then lowered it again. "Yes, of course." He looked at Roland. "Are you the dinh? Roland of Gilead? Roland of the Eld?"

"Yes, I—" Roland began, then bent over and retched again. Nothing came out but a long silver string of spittle; he'd already lost his share of Nigel's soup and sandwiches. Then he raised a slightly trembling fist to his forehead in greeting and said, "Yes. You have the advantage of me, sai."

"That doesn't matter," the white-haired man replied. "Will you come with us? You and your ka-tet?"

"To be sure," Roland said.

Behind him, Eddie bent over and vomited again. “God-*damn!*” he cried in a choked voice. “And I thought going Greyhound was bad! That thing makes the bus look like a . . . a . . .”

“Like a first-class stateroom on the *Queen Mary*,” Susannah said in a weak voice.

“Come . . . *on!*” the youngest man said in an urgent voice. “If The Weasel’s on the way with his taheen posse, he’ll be here in five minutes! That cat can *scramble!*”

“Yes,” the man with the white hair agreed. “We really must go, Mr. Deschain.”

“Lead,” Roland said. “We’ll follow.”

TWO

They hadn’t come out in a train station but rather in some sort of colossal roofed switching-yard. The silvery lines Jake had seen were crisscrossing rail-lines, perhaps as many as seventy different sets of tracks. On a couple of them, stubby, automated engines went back and forth on errands that had to be centuries outdated. One was pushing a flatcar filled with rusty I-beams. The other began to cry in an automated voice: “Will a Camka-A please go to Portway 9. Camka-A to Portway 9, if you please.”

Pogo-sticking up and down on Eddie’s hip began to make Susannah feel sick to her stomach all over again, but she’d caught the white-haired man’s urgency like a cold. Also, she now knew what the taheen were: monstrous creatures with the bodies of human beings and the heads of either birds or beasts. They reminded her of the things in that Bosch painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

“I may have to puke again, sugarbunch,” she said. “Don’t you dare slow down if I do.”

Eddie made a grunting sound she took for an affirmative. She could see sweat pouring down his pale skin and felt sorry for him. He was as sick as she was. So now she knew what it was like to go through a scientific teleportation device that was clearly no longer working very well. She wondered if she would ever be able to bring herself to go through another one.

Jake looked up and saw a roof made of a million panes of different shapes and sizes; it was like looking at a tile mosaic painted a uniform dark gray. Then a bird flew through one of them, and he realized those weren't tiles up there but panels of glass, some of them broken. That dark gray was apparently just how the outside world looked in Thunderclap. *Like a constant eclipse*, he thought, and shivered. Beside him, Oy made another series of those hoarse hacking sounds and then trotted on, shaking his head.

THREE

They passed a clutter of beached machinery—generators, maybe—then entered a maze of helter-skelter traincars that were very different from those hauled by Blaine the Mono. Some looked to Susannah like the sort of New York Central commuter cars she might have seen in Grand Central Station in her own when of 1964. As if to underline this notion, she noticed one with **BAR CAR** printed on the side. Yet there were others that appeared much older than that; made of dark riveted tin or steel instead of brushed chrome, they looked like the sort of passenger cars you'd see in an old Western movie, or a TV show like *Maverick*. Beside one of these stood a robot with wires sprouting crazily from its neck. It was holding its head—which wore a hat with a badge reading CLASS A CONDUCTOR on it—beneath one arm.

At first Susannah tried to keep count of the lefts and rights they were making in this maze, then gave it up as a bad job. They finally emerged about fifty yards from a clapboard-sided hut with the alliterative message **LADING/LOST LUGGAGE** over the door. The intervening distance was an apron of cracked concrete scattered with abandoned luggage-carts, stacks of crates, and two dead Wolves. *No*, Susannah thought, *make that three*. The third one was leaning against the wall in the deeper shadows just around the corner from **LADING/LOST LUGGAGE**.

“Come on,” said the old man with the mop of white hair, “not much further, now. But we have to hurry, because if the taheen from Heartbreak House catch us, they'll kill you.”

“They'd kill us, too,” said the youngest of the three. He brushed his hair out of his eyes. “All except for Ted. Ted's the only one of us who's

indispensable. He's just too modest to say so."

Past **LADING/LOST LUGGAGE** was (reasonably enough, Susannah thought) **SHIPPING OFFICE**. The fellow with the white hair tried the door. It was locked. This seemed to please rather than upset him. "Dinky?" he said.

Dinky, it seemed, was the youngest of the three. He took hold of the knob and Susannah heard a snapping sound from somewhere inside. Dinky stepped back. This time when Ted tried the door, it opened easily. They stepped into a dim office bisected by a high counter. On it was a sign that almost made Susannah feel nostalgic: **TAKE NUMBER AND WAIT**, it said.

When the door was closed, Dinky once more grasped the knob. There was another brisk snap.

"You just locked it again," Jake said. He sounded accusing, but there was a smile on his face, and the color was coming back into his cheeks. "Didn't you?"

"Not now, please," said the white-haired man—Ted. "No time. Follow me, please."

He flipped up a section of the counter and led them through. Behind it was an office area containing two robots that looked long dead, and three skeletons.

"Why the hell do we keep finding bones?" Eddie asked. Like Jake he was feeling better and only thinking out loud, not really expecting an answer. He got one, however. From Ted.

"Do you know of the Crimson King, young man? You do, of course you do. I believe that at one time he covered this entire part of the world with poison gas. Probably for a lark. Killed almost everyone. The darkness you see is the lingering result. He's mad, of course. It's a large part of the problem. In here."

He led them through a door marked **PRIVATE** and into a room that had once probably belonged to a high poobah in the wonderful world of shipping and lading. Susannah saw tracks on the floor, suggesting that this place had been visited recently. Perhaps by these same three men. There was a desk beneath six inches of fluffy dust, plus two chairs and a couch. Behind the desk was a window. Once it had been covered with venetian blinds, but these had collapsed onto the floor, revealing a vista as forbidding as it was fascinating. The land

beyond Thunderclap Station reminded her of the flat, deserty wastes on the far side of the River Whye, but rockier and even more forbidding.

And of course it was darker.

Tracks (eternally halted trains sat on some of them) radiated out like strands of a steel spiderweb. Above them, a sky of darkest slate-gray seemed to sag almost close enough to touch. Between the sky and the Earth the air was *thick*, somehow; Susannah found herself squinting to see things, although there seemed to be no actual mist or smog in the air.

“Dinky,” the white-haired man said.

“Yes, Ted.”

“What have you left for our friend The Weasel to find?”

“A maintenance drone,” Dinky replied. “It’ll look like it found its way in through the Fedic door, set off the alarm, then got fried on some of the tracks at the far end of the switching-yard. Quite a few are still hot. You see dead birds around em all the time, fried to a crisp, but even a good-sized rustie’s too small to trip the alarm. A drone, though . . . I’m pretty sure he’ll buy it. The Wease ain’t stupid, but it’ll look pretty believable.”

“Good. That’s very good. Look yonder, gunslingers.” Ted pointed to a sharp upthrust of rock on the horizon. Susannah could make it out easily; in this dark countryside all horizons seemed close. She could see nothing remarkable about it, though, only folds of deeper shadow and sterile slopes of tumbled rock. “That’s Can Steek-Tete.”

“The Little Needle,” Roland said.

“Excellent translation. It’s where we’re going.”

Susannah’s heart sank. The mountain—or perhaps you called something like that a butte—had to be eight or ten miles away. At the very limit of vision, in any case. Eddie and Roland and the two younger men in Ted’s party couldn’t carry her that far, she didn’t believe. And how did they know they could trust these new fellows, anyway?

On the other hand, she thought, *what choice do we have?*

“You won’t need to be carried,” Ted told her, “but Stanley can use your help. We’ll join hands, like folks at a séance. I’ll want you all to

visualize that rock formation when we go through. And hold the name in the forefront of your mind: Steek-Tete, the Little Needle.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Eddie said. They had approached yet another door, this one standing open on a closet. Wire hangers and one ancient red blazer hung in there. Eddie grasped Ted’s shoulder and swung him around. “Go through what? Go through where? Because if it’s a door like the last one—”

Ted looked up at Eddie—had to look up, because Eddie was taller—and Susannah saw an amazing, dismaying thing: Ted’s eyes appeared to be *shaking* in their sockets. A moment later she realized this wasn’t actually the case. The man’s pupils were growing and then shrinking with eerie rapidity. It was as if they couldn’t decide if it was light or dark in here.

“It’s not a door we’re going through at all, at least not of the kinds with which you may be familiar. You have to trust me, young man. Listen.”

They all fell silent, and Susannah could hear the snarl of approaching motors.

“That’s The Weasel,” Ted told them. “He’ll have taheen with him, at least four, maybe half a dozen. If they catch sight of us in here, Dink and Stanley are almost certainly going to die. They don’t have to *catch* us but only *catch sight* of us. We’re risking our lives for you. This isn’t a game, and I need you to stop asking questions and *follow* me!”

“We will,” Roland said. “And we’ll think about the Little Needle.”

“Steek-Tete,” Susannah agreed.

“You won’t get sick again,” Dinky said. “Promise.”

“Thank God,” Jake said.

“Thang-odd,” Oy agreed.

Stanley, the third member of Ted’s party, continued to say nothing at all.

FOUR

It was just a closet, and an office closet, at that—narrow and musty. The ancient red blazer had a brass tag on the breast pocket with the words **HEAD OF SHIPPING** stamped on it. Stanley led the way to the back, which was nothing but a blank wall. Coathangers jingled and

jangled. Jake had to watch his step to keep from treading on Oy. He'd always been slightly prone to claustrophobia, and now he began to feel the pudgy fingers of the Panic-Man caressing his neck: first one side and then the other. The 'Rizas clanked softly together in their bag. Seven people and one billy-bumbler crowding into an abandoned office closet? It was nuts. He could still hear the snarl of the approaching engines. The one in charge called The Weasel.

"Join hands," Ted murmured. "And concentrate."

"Steek-Tete," Susannah repeated, but to Jake she sounded dubious this time.

"Little Nee—" Eddie began, and then stopped. The blank wall at the end of the closet was gone. Where it had been was a small clearing with boulders on one side and a steep, scrub-crusting hillside on another. Jake was willing to bet that was Steek-Tete, and if it was a way out of this enclosed space, he was delighted to see it.

Stanley gave a little moan of pain or effort or both. The man's eyes were closed and tears were trickling out from beneath the lids.

"Now," Ted said. "Lead us through, Stanley." To the others he added: "And help him if you can! Help him, for your fathers' sakes!"

Jake tried to hold an image of the outcrop Ted had pointed to through the office window and walked forward, holding Roland's hand ahead of him and Susannah's behind him. He felt a breath of cold air on his sweaty skin and then stepped through onto the slope of Steek-Tete in Thunder-clap, thinking just briefly of Mr. C. S. Lewis, and the wonderful wardrobe that took you to Narnia.

FIVE

They did not come out in Narnia.

It was cold on the slope of the butte, and Jake was soon shivering. When he looked over his shoulder he saw no sign of the portal they'd come through. The air was dim and smelled of something pungent and not particularly pleasant, like kerosene. There was a small cave folded into the flank of the slope (it was really not much more than another closet), and from it Ted brought a stack of blankets and a canteen that turned out to hold a sharp, alkali-tasting water. Jake and Roland wrapped themselves in single blankets. Eddie took two and

bundled himself and Susannah together. Jake, trying not to let his teeth start chattering (once they did, there'd be no stopping them), envied the two of them their extra warmth.

Dink had also wrapped himself in a blanket, but neither Ted nor Stanley seemed to feel the cold.

"Look down there," Ted invited Roland and the others. He was pointing at the spiderweb of tracks. Jake could see the rambling glass roof of the switching-yard and a green-roofed structure next to it that had to be half a mile long. Tracks led away in every direction. *Thunderclap Station*, he marveled. *Where the Wolves put the kidnapped kids on the train and send them along the Path of the Beam to Fedic. And where they bring them back after they've been roont.*

Even after all he'd been through, it was hard for Jake to believe that they had been down there, six or eight miles away, less than two minutes ago. He suspected they'd all played a part in keeping the portal open, but it was the one called Stanley who'd created it in the first place. Now he looked pale and tired, nearly used up. Once he staggered on his feet and Dink (a *very* unfortunate nickname, in Jake's humble opinion) grabbed his arm and steadied him. Stanley seemed not to notice. He was looking at Roland with awe.

Not just awe, Jake thought, and not exactly fear, either. Something else. What?

Approaching the station were two motorized buckas with big balloon tires—ATVs. Jake assumed it was The Weasel (whoever he was) and his taheen buddies.

"As you may have gleaned," Ted told them, "there's an alarm in the Devar-Toi Supervisor's office. The *warden's* office, if you like. It goes off when anyone or anything uses the door between the Fedic staging area and yon station—"

"I believe the term you used for him," Roland said dryly, "wasn't supervisor or warden but ki'-dam."

Dink laughed. "That's a good pickup on your part, dude."

"What does ki'-dam mean?" Jake asked, although he had a fair notion. There was a phrase folks used in the Calla: headbox, heartbox, ki'box. Which meant, in descending order, one's thought processes, one's emotions, and one's lower functions. Animal

functions, some might say; ki'box could be translated as *shitbox* if you were of a vulgar turn of mind.

Ted shrugged. "Ki'-dam means shit-for-brains. It's Dinky's nickname for sai Prentiss, the Devar Master. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"I guess," Jake said. "Kinda."

Ted looked at him long, and when Jake identified that expression, it helped him define how Stanley was looking at Roland: not with fear but with fascination. Jake had a pretty good idea Ted was still thinking about how much he looked like someone named Bobby, and he was pretty sure Ted knew he had the touch. What was the source of Stanley's fascination? Or maybe he was making too much of it. Maybe it was just that Stanley had never expected to see a gunslinger in the flesh.

Abruptly, Ted turned from Jake and back to Roland. "Now look this way," he said.

"*Whoa!*" Eddie cried. "What the *hell?*"

Susannah was amused as well as amazed. What Ted was pointing out reminded her of Cecil B. DeMille's Bible epic *The Ten Commandments*, especially the parts where the Red Sea opened by Moses had looked suspiciously like Jell-O and the voice of God coming from the burning bush sounded quite a bit like Charles Laughton. Still, it *was* amazing. In a cheesy Hollywood-special-effects way, that was.

What they saw was a single fat and gorgeous bolt of sunlight slanting down from a hole in the sagging clouds. It cut through the strangely dark air like a searchlight beam and lit a compound that might have been six miles from Thunderclap Station. And "about six miles" was really all you could say, because there was no more north or south in this world, at least not that you could count on. Now there was only the Path of the Beam.

"Dinky, there's a pair of binoculars in—"

"The lower cave, right?"

"No, I brought them up the last time we were here," Ted replied with carefully maintained patience. "They're sitting on that pile of crates just inside. Get them, please."

Eddie barely noticed this byplay. He was too charmed (and amused) by that single broad ray of sun, shining down on a green and cheerful plot of land, as unlikely in this dark and sterile desert as . . . well, he supposed, as unlikely as Central Park must seem to tourists from the Midwest making their first trip to New York.

He could see buildings that looked like college dormitories—*nice* ones—and others that looked like comfy old manor houses with wide stretches of green lawn before them. At the far side of the sunbeam's area was what looked like a street lined with shops. The perfect little Main Street America, except for one thing: in all directions it ended in dark and rocky desert. He saw four stone towers, their sides agreeably green with ivy. No, make that six. The other two were mostly concealed in stands of graceful old elms. Elms in the desert!

Dink returned with a pair of binoculars and offered them to Roland, who shook his head.

"Don't hold it against him," Eddie said. "His eyes . . . well, let's just say they're something else. I wouldn't mind a peek, though."

"Me, either," Susannah said.

Eddie handed her the binoculars. "Ladies first."

"No, really, I—"

"*Stop it,*" Ted almost snarled. "Our time here is brief, our risk enormous. Don't waste the one or increase the other, if you please."

Susannah was stung but held back a retort. Instead she took the binoculars, raised them to her eyes, and adjusted them. What she saw merely heightened her sense of looking at a small but perfect college campus, one that merged beautifully with the neighboring village. *No town-versus-gown tensions there, I bet, she thought. I bet Elmville and Breaker U go together like peanut butter and jelly, Abbott and Costello, hand and glove.* Whenever there was a Ray Bradbury short in the *Saturday Evening Post*, she always turned to it first, she *loved* Bradbury, and what she was looking at through the binoculars made her think of Greentown, Bradbury's idealized Illinois village. A place where adults sat out on their porches in rocking chairs, drinking lemonade, and the kids played tag with flashlights in the lightning-bug-stitched dusk of summer evenings. And the nearby college campus? No drinking there, at least not to excess. No joysticks or goof-balls or rock and roll, either. It would be a place where the girls kissed the boys goodnight

with chaste ardor and were glad to sign back in so that the Dormitory Mom wouldn't think ill of them. A place where the sun shone all day, where Perry Como and the Andrews Sisters sang on the radio, and nobody suspected they were actually living in the ruins of a world that had moved on.

No, she thought coldly. Some of them know. That's why these three showed up to meet us.

"That's the Devar-Toi," Roland said flatly. Not a question.

"Yeah," Dinky said. "The good old Devar-Toi." He stood beside Roland and pointed at a large white building near the dormitories. "See that white one? That's Heartbreak House, where the can-toi live. Ted calls em the low men. They're taheen-human hybrids. And they don't call it the Devar-Toi, they call it Algul Siento, which means—"

"Blue Heaven," Roland said, and Jake realized why: all of the buildings except for the rock towers had blue tiled roofs. Not Narnia but Blue Heaven. Where a bunch of folks were busy bringing about the end of the world.

All the worlds.

SIX

"It looks like the pleasantest place in existence, at least since In-World fell," Ted said. "Doesn't it?"

"Pretty nice, all right," Eddie agreed. He had at least a thousand questions, and guessed Suze and Jake probably had another thousand between them, but this wasn't the time to ask them. In any case, he kept looking at that wonderful little hundred-acre oasis down there. The one sunny green spot in all of Thunderclap. The one *nice* place. And why not? Nothing but the best for Our Breaker Buddies.

And, in spite of himself, one question *did* slip out.

"Ted, why does the Crimson King want to bring the Tower down? Do you know?"

Ted gave him a brief glance. Eddie thought it cool, maybe downright cold, until the man smiled. When he did, his whole face lit up. Also, his eyes had quit doing that creepy in-and-out thing, which was a *big* improvement.

“He’s mad,” Ted told him. “Nuttier than a fruitcake. Riding the fabled rubber bicycle. Didn’t I tell you that?” And then, before Eddie could reply: “Yes, it’s quite nice. Whether you call it Devar-Toi, the Big Prison, or Algul Siento, it looks a treat. It *is* a treat.”

“Very classy accommos,” Dinky agreed. Even Stanley was looking down at the sunlit community with an expression of faint longing.

“The food is the best,” Ted went on, “and the double feature at the Gem Theater changes twice a week. If you don’t want to go to the movies, you can bring the movies home on DVDs.”

“What are those?” Eddie asked, then shook his head. “Never mind. Go on.”

Ted shrugged, as if to say *What else do you need?*

“Absolutely astral sex, for one thing,” Dinky said. “It’s sim, but it’s still incredible—I made it with Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, and Nicole Kidman all in one week.” He said this with a certain uneasy pride. “I could have had them all at the same time if I’d wanted to. The only way you can tell they’re not real is to breathe directly on them, from close up. When you do, the part you blow on . . . kinda disappears. It’s unsettling.”

“Booze? Dope?” Eddie asked.

“Booze in limited quantities,” Ted replied. “If you’re into oenology, for instance, you’ll experience fresh wonders at every meal.”

“What’s oenology?” Jake asked.

“The science of wine-snobbery, sugarbun,” Susannah said.

“If you come to Blue Heaven addicted to something,” Dinky said, “they get you off it. Kindly. The one or two guys who proved especially tough nuts in that area . . .” His eyes met Ted’s briefly. Ted shrugged and nodded. “Those dudes disappeared.”

“In truth, the low men don’t *need* any more Breakers,” Ted said. “They’ve got enough to finish the job right now.”

“How many?” Roland asked.

“About three hundred,” Dinky said.

“Three hundred and seven, to be exact,” Ted said. “We’re quartered in five dorms, although that word conjures the wrong image. We have our own suites, and as much—or as little—contact with our fellow Breakers as we wish.”

“And you know what you’re doing?” Susannah asked.

“Yes. Although most don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it.”

“I don’t understand why they don’t mutiny.”

“What’s your when, ma’am?” Dinky asked her.

“My . . . ?” Then she understood. “1964.”

He sighed and shook his head. “So you don’t know about Jim Jones and the People’s Temple. It’s easier to explain if you know about that. Almost a thousand people committed suicide at this religious compound a Jesus-guy from San Francisco set up in Guyana. They drank poisoned Kool-Aid out of a tub while he watched them from the porch of his house and used a bullhorn to tell them stories about his mother.”

Susannah was staring at him with horrified disbelief, Ted with poorly disguised impatience. Yet he must have thought something about this was important, because he held silence.

“Almost a thousand,” Dinky reiterated. “Because they were confused and lonely and they thought Jim Jones was their friend. Because—dig it—*they had nothing to go back to*. And it’s like that here. If the Breakers united, they could make a mental hammer that’d knock Prentiss and The Weasel and the taheen and the can-toi all the way into the next galaxy. Instead there’s no one but me, Stanley, and everyone’s favorite super-breaker, the totally eventual Mr. Theodore Brautigan of Milford, Connecticut. Harvard Class of ’20, Drama Society, Debate Club, editor of *The Crimson*, and—of course!—Phi Beta Crapper.”

“Can we trust you three?” Roland asked. The question sounded deceptively idle, little more than a time-passer.

“You have to,” Ted said. “You’ve no one else. Neither do we.”

“If we were on their side,” Dinky said, “don’t you think we’d have something better to wear on our feet than moccasins made out of rubber fuckin tires? In Blue Heaven you get everything except for a few basics. Stuff you wouldn’t ordinarily think of as indispensable, but stuff that . . . well, it’s harder to take a powder when you’ve got nothing to wear but your Algul Siento slippers, let’s put it that way.”

“I still can’t believe it,” Jake said. “All those people working to break the Beams, I mean. No offense, but—”

Dinky turned on him with his fists clenched and a tight, furious smile on his face. Oy immediately stepped in front of Jake, growling

low and showing his teeth. Dinky either didn't notice or paid no attention. "Yeah? Well guess what, kiddo? I *take* offense. I take offense like a motherfucker. What do *you* know about what it's like to spend your whole life on the outside, to be the butt of the joke every time, to always be Carrie at the fuckin prom?"

"Who?" Eddie asked, confused, but Dinky was on a roll and paid no attention.

"There are guys down there who can't walk or talk. One chick with no arms. Several with hydrocephalus, which means they have heads out to fuckin *New Jersey*." He held his hands two feet beyond his head on either side, a gesture they all took for exaggeration. Later they would discover it was not. "Poor old Stanley here, he's one of the ones who can't talk."

Roland glanced at Stanley, with his pallid, stubbly face and his masses of curly dark hair. And the gunslinger almost smiled. "*I* think he can talk," he said, and then: "Do'ee bear your father's name, Stanley? I believe thee does."

Stanley lowered his head, and color mounted in his cheeks, yet he was smiling. At the same time he began to cry again. *Just what in the hell's going on here?* Eddie wondered.

Ted clearly wondered, too. "Sai Deschain, I wonder if I could ask —"

"No, no, cry pardon," Roland said. "Your time is short just now, so you said and we all feel it. Do the Breakers know how they're being fed? *What* they're being fed, to increase their powers?"

Ted abruptly sat on a rock and looked down at the shining steel cobweb of rails. "It has to do with the kiddies they bring through the Station, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"They don't know and *I* don't know," Ted said in that same heavy voice. "Not really. We're fed dozens of pills a day. They come morning, noon, and night. Some are vitamins. Some are no doubt intended to keep us docile. I've had some luck purging those from my system, and Dinky's, and Stanley's. Only . . . for such a purging to work, gunslinger, you must *want* it to work. Do you understand?"

Roland nodded.

“I’ve thought for a long time that they must also be giving us some kind of . . . I don’t know . . . brain-booster . . . but with so many pills, it’s impossible to tell which one it might be. Which one it is that makes us cannibals, or vampires, or both.” He paused, looking down at the improbable sunray. He extended his hands on both sides. Dinky took one, Stanley the other.

“Watch this,” Dinky said. “This is good.”

Ted closed his eyes. So did the other two. For a moment there was nothing to see but three men looking out over the dark desert toward the Cecil B. DeMille sunbeam . . . and they *were* looking, Roland knew. Even with their eyes shut.

The sunbeam winked out. For a space of perhaps a dozen seconds the Devar-Toi was as dark as the desert, and Thunderclap Station, and the slopes of Steek-Tete. Then that absurd golden glow came back on. Dinky uttered a harsh (but not dissatisfied) sigh and stepped back, disengaging from Ted. A moment later, Ted let go of Stanley and turned to Roland.

“You did that?” the gunslinger asked.

“The three of us together,” Ted said. “Mostly it’s Stanley. He’s an extremely powerful sender. One of the few things that terrify Prentiss and the low men and the taheen is when they lose their artificial sunlight. It happens more and more often, you know, and not always because we’re meddling with the machinery. The machinery is just . . .” He shrugged. “It’s running down.”

“Everything is,” Eddie said.

Ted turned to him, unsmiling. “But not fast enough, Mr. Dean. This fiddling with the remaining two Beams must stop, and very soon, or it will make no difference. Dinky, Stanley, and I will help you if we can, even if it means killing the rest of them.”

“Sure,” Dinky said with a hollow smile. “If the Rev. Jim Jones could do it, why not us?”

Ted gave him a disapproving glance, then looked back at Roland’s ka-tet. “Perhaps it won’t come to that. But if it does . . .” He stood up suddenly and seized Roland’s arm. “*Are* we cannibals?” he asked in a harsh, almost strident voice. “Have we been eating the children the Greencloaks bring from the Borderlands?”

Roland was silent.

Ted turned to Eddie. "I want to know."

Eddie made no reply.

"Madam-sai?" Ted asked, looking at the woman who sat astride Eddie's hip. "We're prepared to help you. Will you not help me by telling me what I ask?"

"Would knowing change anything?" Susannah asked.

Ted looked at her for a moment longer, then turned to Jake. "You really could be my young friend's twin," he said. "Do you know that, son?"

"No, but it doesn't surprise me," Jake said. "It's the way things work over here, somehow. Everything . . . um . . . fits."

"Will you tell me what I want to know? Bobby would."

So you can eat yourself alive? Jake thought. *Eat yourself instead of them?*

He shook his head. "I'm not Bobby," he said. "No matter how much I might look like him."

Ted sighed and nodded. "You stick together, and why would that surprise me? You're ka-tet, after all."

"We gotta go," Dink told Ted. "We've already been here too long. It isn't just a question of getting back for room-check; me n Stanley've got to trig their fucking telemetry so when Prentiss and The Wease check it they'll say 'Teddy B was there all the time. So was Dinky Earnshaw and Stanley Ruiz, no problem with *those* boys.'"

"Yes," Ted agreed. "I suppose you're right. Five more minutes?"

Dinky nodded reluctantly. The sound of a siren, made faint by distance, came on the wind, and the young man's teeth showed in a smile of genuine amusement. "They get *so* upset when the sun goes in," he said. "When they have to face up to what's really around them, which is some fucked-up version of nuclear winter."

Ted put his hands in his pockets for a moment, looking down at his feet, then up at Roland. "It's time that this . . . this grotesque comedy came to an end. We three will be back tomorrow, if all goes well. Meanwhile, there's a bigger cave about forty yards down the slope, and on the side away from Thunderclap Station and Algul Siento. There's food and sleeping bags and a stove that runs on propane gas. There's a map, very crude, of the Algul. I've also left you a tape recorder and a number of tapes. They probably don't explain everything you'd like to know, but they'll fill in many of the blank

spots. For now, just realize that Blue Heaven isn't as nice as it looks. The ivy towers are watchtowers. There are three runs of fence around the whole place. If you're trying to get out from the inside, the first run you strike gives you a sting—"

"Like barbwire," Dink said.

"The second one packs enough of a wallop to knock you out," Ted went on. "And the third—"

"I think we get the picture," Susannah said.

"What about the Children of Roderick?" Roland asked. "They have something to do with the Devar, for we met one on our way here who said so."

Susannah looked at Eddie with her eyebrows raised. Eddie gave her a *tell-you-later* look in return. It was a simple and perfect bit of wordless communication, the sort people who love each other take for granted.

"*Those wanks,*" Dinky said, but not without sympathy. "They're . . . what do they call em in the old movies? Trusties, I guess. They've got a little village about two miles beyond the station in that direction." He pointed. "They do groundskeeping work at the Algul, and there might be three or four skilled enough to do roofwork . . . replacing shingles and such. Whatever contaminants there are in the air here, those poor shmucks are especially vulnerable to em. Only on them it comes out looking like radiation sickness instead of just pimples and eczema."

"Tell me about it," Eddie said, remembering poor old Chevin of Chayven: his sore-eaten face and urine-soaked robe.

"They're wandering *folken,*" Ted put in. "Bedouins. I think they follow the railroad tracks, for the most part. There are catacombs under the station and Algul Siento. The Rods know their way around them. There's tons of food down there, and twice a week they'll bring it into the Devar on sledges. Mostly now that's what we eat. It's still good, but . . ." He shrugged.

"Things are falling down fast," Dinky said in a tone of uncharacteristic gloom. "But like the man said, the wine's great."

"If I asked you to bring one of the Children of Roderick with you tomorrow," Roland said, "could you do that?"

Ted and Dinky exchanged a startled glance. Then both of them looked at Stanley. Stanley nodded, shrugged, and spread his hands before him, palms down: *Why, gunslinger?*

Roland stood for a moment lost in thought. Then he turned to Ted. "Bring one with half a brain left in his head," Roland instructed. "Tell him 'Dan sur, dan tur, dan Roland, dan Gilead.' Tell it back."

Without hesitation, Ted repeated it.

Roland nodded. "If he still hesitates, tell him Chevin of Chayven says he must come. They speak a little plain, do they not?"

"Sure," Dinky said. "But mister . . . you couldn't let a Rod come up here and see you and then turn him free again. Their mouths are hung in the middle and run on both ends."

"Bring one," Roland said, "and we'll see what we see. I have what my ka-mai Eddie calls a hunch. Do you ken hunch-think?"

Ted and Dinky nodded.

"If it works out, fine. If not . . . be assured that the fellow you bring will never tell what he saw here."

"You'd kill him if your hunch doesn't pan out?" Ted asked.

Roland nodded.

Ted gave a bitter laugh. "Of course you would. It reminds me of the part in *Huckleberry Finn* when Huck sees a steamboat blow up. He runs to Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas with the news, and when one of them asks if anyone was killed, Huck says with perfect aplomb, 'No, ma'am, only a nigger.' In this case we can say 'Only a Rod. Gunslinger-man had a hunch, but it didn't pan out.'"

Roland gave him a cold smile, one that was unnaturally full of teeth. Eddie had seen it before and was glad it wasn't aimed at him. He said, "I thought you knew what the stakes were, sai Ted. Did I misunderstand?"

Ted met his gaze for a moment, then looked down at the ground. His mouth was working.

During this, Dinky appeared to be engaged in silent palaver with Stanley. Now he said: "If you want a Rod, we'll get you one. It's not much of a problem. The problem may be getting here at all. If we don't . . ."

Roland waited patiently for the young man to finish. When he didn't, the gunslinger asked: "If you don't, what would you have us

do?”

Ted shrugged. The gesture was such a perfect imitation of Dinky’s that it was funny. “The best you can,” he said. “There are also weapons in the lower cave. A dozen of the electric fireballs they call sneetches. A number of machine-guns, what I’ve heard some of the low men call speed-shooters. They’re U.S. Army AR-15s. Other things we’re not sure of.”

“One of them’s some kind of sci-fi raygun like in a movie,” Dinky said. “I think it’s supposed to disintegrate things, but either I’m too dumb to turn it on or the battery’s dead.” He turned anxiously to the white-haired man. “Five minutes are up, and more. We have to put an egg in our shoe and beat it, Tedster. Let’s chug.”

“Yes. Well, we’ll be back tomorrow. Perhaps by then you’ll have a plan.”

“*You* don’t?” Eddie asked, surprised.

“My plan was to run, young man. It seemed like a terribly bright idea at the time. I ran all the way to the spring of 1960. They caught me and brought me back, with a little help from my young friend Bobby’s mother. And now, we really must—”

“One more minute, do it please ya,” Roland said, and stepped toward Stanley. Stanley looked down at his feet, but his beard-scruffy cheeks once more flooded with color. And—

He’s shivering, Susannah thought. Like an animal in the woods, faced with its first human being.

Stanley looked perhaps thirty-five, but he could have been older; his face had the carefree smoothness Susannah associated with certain mental defects. Ted and Dinky both had pimples, but Stanley had none. Roland put his hands on the fellow’s forearms and looked earnestly at him. At first the gunslinger’s eyes met nothing but the masses of dark, curly hair on Stanley’s bowed head.

Dinky started to speak. Ted silenced him with a gesture.

“Will’ee not look me in the face?” Roland asked. He spoke with a gentleness Susannah had rarely heard in his voice. “Will’ee not, before you go, Stanley, son of Stanley? Sheemie that was?”

Susannah felt her mouth drop open. Beside her, Eddie grunted like a man who has been punched. She thought, *But Roland’s old . . . so*

old! Which means that if this is the tavern-boy he knew in Mejis . . . the one with the donkey and the pink sombrero hat . . . then he must also be . . .

The man raised his face slowly. Tears were streaming from his eyes.

“Good old Will Dearborn,” he said. His voice was hoarse, and jiggled up and down through the registers as a voice will do when it has lain long unused. “I’m so sorry, sai. Were you to pull your gun and shoot me, I’d understand. So I would.”

“Why do’ee say so, Sheemie?” Roland asked in that same gentle voice.

Stanley’s tears flowed faster. “You saved my life. Arthur and Richard, too, but mostly you, good old Will Dearborn who was really Roland of Gilead. And I let her die! Her that you loved! And I loved her, too!”

The man’s face twisted in agony and he tried to pull away from Roland. Yet Roland held him.

“None of that was your fault, Sheemie.”

“I should have died for her!” he cried. “I should have died in her place! I’m stupid! Foolish as they said!” He slapped himself across the face, first one way and then the other, leaving red weals. Before he could do it again, Roland seized the hand and forced it down to his side again.

“’Twas Rhea did the harm,” Roland said.

Stanley—who had been Sheemie an eon ago—looked into Roland’s face, searching his eyes.

“Aye,” Roland said, nodding. “’Twas the Cöos . . . and me, as well. I should have stayed with her. If anyone was blameless in the business, Sheemie—*Stanley*—it was you.”

“Do you say so, gunslinger? Truey-true?”

Roland nodded. “We’ll palaver all you would about this, if there’s time, and about those old days, but not now. No time now. You have to go with your friends, and I must stay with mine.”

Sheemie looked at him a moment longer, and yes, Susannah could now see the boy who had bustled about a long-ago tavern called the Travellers’ Rest, picking up empty beer schooners and dropping them into the wash-barrel which stood beneath the two-headed elk’s head that was known as The Romp, avoiding the occasional shove from Coral Thorin or the even more ill-natured kicks that were apt to come

from an aging whore called Pettie the Trotter. She could see the boy who had almost been killed for spilling liquor on the boots of a hardcase named Roy Depape. It had been Cuthbert who had saved Sheemie from death that night . . . but it had been Roland, known to the townsfolk as Will Dearborn, who had saved them all.

Sheemie put his arms around Roland's neck and hugged him tight. Roland smiled and stroked his curly hair with his disfigured right hand. A loud, honking sob escaped Sheemie's throat. Susannah could see the tears in the corners of the gunslinger's eyes.

"Aye," Roland said, speaking in a voice almost too low to hear. "I always knew you were special; Bert and Alain did, too. And here we find each other, well-met further down the path. We're well-met, Sheemie son of Stanley. So we are. So we are."



CHAPTER VI:

THE MASTER OF BLUE HEAVEN

ONE

Pimli Prentiss, the Algul Siento Master, was in the bathroom when Finli (known in some quarters as The Weasel) knocked at the door. Prentiss was examining his complexion by the unforgiving light of the fluorescent bar over the washbasin. In the magnifying mirror, his skin looked like a grayish, crater-pocked plain, not much different from the surface of the wastelands stretching in every direction around the Algul. The sore on which he was currently concentrating looked like an erupting volcano.

“Who be for me?” Prentiss bawled, although he had a pretty good idea.

“Finli o’ Tego!”

“Walk in, Finli!” Never taking his eyes from the mirror. His fingers, closing in on the sides of the infected pimple, looked huge. They applied pressure.

Finli crossed Prentiss’s office and stood in the bathroom door. He had to bend slightly in order to look in. He stood over seven feet, very tall even for a taheen.

“Back from the station like I was never gone,” said Finli. Like most of the taheen, his speaking voice reeled wildly back and forth between a yelp and a growl. To Pimli, they all sounded like the hybrids from H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and he kept expecting them to break into a chorus of “Are we not men?” Finli had picked this out of his mind once and asked about it. Prentiss had replied with complete honesty, knowing that in a society where low-grade telepathy was the

rule, honesty was ever the best policy. The *only* policy, when dealing with the taheen. Besides, he liked Finli o' Tego.

"Back from the station, good," Pimli said. "And what did you find?"

"A maintenance drone. Looks like it went rogue on the Arc 16 side and—"

"Wait," Prentiss said. "If you will, if you will, thanks."

Finli waited. Prentiss leaned even closer toward the mirror, face frowning in concentration. The Master of Blue Heaven was tall himself, about six-two, and possessed of an enormous sloping belly supported by long legs with slab thighs. He was balding and had the turnip nose of a veteran drinker. He looked perhaps fifty. He *felt* like about fifty (younger, when he hadn't spent the previous night tossing them back with Finli and several of the can-toi). He had been fifty when he came here, a good many years ago; at least twenty-five, and that might be a big underestimation. Time was goofy on this side, just like direction, and you were apt to lose both quickly. Some *folken* lost their minds, as well. And if they ever lost the sun machine for good—

The top of the pimple bulged . . . trembled . . . burst. Ah!

A glut of bloody pus leaped from the site of the infection, splattered onto the mirror, and began to drool down its slightly concave surface. Pimli Prentiss wiped it off with the tip of a finger, turned to flick it into the jakes, then offered it to Finli instead.

The taheen shook his head, then made the sort of exasperated noise any veteran dieter would have recognized, and guided the Master's finger into his mouth. He sucked the pus off and then released the finger with an audible pop.

"Shouldn't do it, can't resist," Finli said. "Didn't you tell me that *folken* on the other side decided eating rare beef was bad for them?"

"Yar," Pimli said, wiping the pimple (which was still oozing) with a Kleenex. He had been here a long time, and there would never be any going back, for all sorts of reasons, but until recently he had been up on current events; until the previous—could you call it a year?—he'd gotten *The New York Times* on a fairly regular basis. He bore a great affection for the *Times*, loved doing the daily crossword puzzle. It was a little touch of home.

"But they go on eating it, just the same."

“Yar, I suppose many do.” He opened the medicine cabinet and brought out a bottle of hydrogen peroxide from Rexall.

“It’s your fault for putting it in front of me,” Finli said. “Not that such stuff is bad for us, ordinarily; it’s a natural sweet, like honey or berries. The problem’s Thunderclap.” And, as if his boss hadn’t gotten the point, Finli added: “Too much of what comes out of it don’t run the true thread, no matter how sweet it might taste. Poison, do ya.”

Prentiss dampened a cotton ball with the hydrogen peroxide and swabbed out the wound in his cheek. He knew exactly what Finli was talking about, how could he not? Before coming here and assuming the Master’s mantle, he hadn’t seen a blemish on his skin in well over thirty years. Now he had pimples on his cheeks and brow, acne in the hollows of his temples, nasty nests of blackheads around his nose, and a cyst on his neck that would soon have to be removed by Gangli, the compound doctor. (Prentiss thought Gangli was a terrible name for a physician; it reminded him both of *ganglion* and *gangrene*.) The taheen and the can-toi were less susceptible to dermatological problems, but their flesh often broke open spontaneously, they suffered from nosebleeds, and even minor wounds—the scrape of a rock or a thorn—could lead to infection and death if not promptly seen to. Antibiotics had worked a treat on such infections to begin with; not so well anymore. Same with such pharmaceutical marvels as Accutane. It was the environment, of course; death baking out of the very rocks and earth that surrounded them. If you wanted to see things at their worst you only had to look at the Rods, who were no better than slow mutants these days. Of course, *they* wandered far to the . . . was it still the southeast? They wandered far in the direction where a faint red glow could be seen at night, in any case, and everyone said things were much worse in that direction. Pimli didn’t know for sure if that was true, but he suspected it was. They didn’t call the lands beyond Fedic the Discordia because they were vacation spots.

“Want more?” he asked Finli. “I’ve got a couple on my forehead that’re ripe.”

“Nay, I want to make my report, double-check the videotapes and telemetry, go on over to The Study for a quick peek, and then sign

out. After that I want a hot bath and about three hours with a good book. I'm reading *The Collector*."

"And you like it," Prentiss said, fascinated.

"Very much, say thankya. It reminds me of our situation here. Except I like to think our goals are a little nobler and our motivations a little higher than sexual attraction."

"Noble? So you call it?"

Finli shrugged and made no reply. Close discussion of what was going on here in Blue Heaven was generally avoided by unspoken consent.

Prentiss led Finli into his own library-study, which overlooked the part of Blue Heaven they called the Mall. Finli ducked beneath the light fixture with the unconscious grace of long practice. Prentiss had once told him (after a few shots of graf) that he would have made a hell of a center in the NBA. "The first all-taheen team," he'd said. "They'd call you The Freaks, but so what?"

"These basketball players, they get the best of everything?" Finli had inquired. He had a sleek weasel's head and large black eyes. No more expressive than dolls' eyes, in Pimli's view. He wore a lot of gold chains—they had become fashionable among Blue Heaven personnel, and a brisk trading market in such things had grown up over the last few years. Also, he'd had his tail docked. Probably a mistake, he'd told Prentiss one night when they'd both been drunk. Painful beyond belief and bound to send him to the Hell of Darkness when his life was over, unless . . .

Unless there was nothing. This was an idea Pimli denied with all his mind and heart, but he'd be a liar if he didn't admit (if only to himself) that the idea sometimes haunted him in the watches of the night. For such thoughts there were sleeping pills. And God, of course. His faith that all things served the will of God, even the Tower itself.

In any case, Pimli had confirmed that yes, basketball players—*American* basketball players, at least—got the best of everything, including more pussy than a fuckin toilet seat. This remark had caused Finli to laugh until reddish tears had seeped from the corners of his strangely inexpressive eyes.

“And the best thing,” Pimli had continued, “is this: you’d be able to play near forever, by NBA standards. For instance, do ya hear, the most highly regarded player in my old country (although I never saw him play; he came after my time) was a fellow named Michael Jordan, and—”

“If he were taheen, what would he be?” Finli had interrupted. This was a game they often played, especially when a few drinks over the line.

“A weasel, actually, and a damned handsome one,” Pimli had said, and in a tone of surprise that had struck Finli as comical. Once more he’d roared until tears came out of his eyes.

“But,” Pimli had continued, “his career was over in hardly more than fifteen years, and that includes a retirement and a comeback or two. How many years could you play a game where you’d have to do no more than run back and forth the length of a campa court for an hour or so, Fin?”

Finli of Tego, who was then over three hundred years old, had shrugged and flicked his hand at the horizon. Delah. Years beyond counting.

And how long had Blue Heaven—Devar-Toi to the newer inmates, Algul Siento to the taheen and the Rods—how long had this prison been here? Also delah. But if Finli was correct (and Pimli’s heart said that Finli almost certainly was), then delah was almost over. And what could he, once Paul Prentiss of Rahway, New Jersey, and now Pimli Prentiss of the Algul Siento, do about it?

His job, that was what.

His fackin job.

TWO

“So,” Pimli said, sitting down in one of the two wing chairs by the window, “you found a maintenance drone. Where?”

“Close to where Track 97 leaves the switching-yard,” said Finli. “That track’s still hot—has what you call ‘a third rail’—and so that explains that. Then, after we’d left, you call and say there’s been a *second* alarm.”

“Yes. And you found—?”

“Nothing,” Finli said. “That time, nothing. Probably a malfunction, maybe even caused by the first alarm.” He shrugged, a gesture that conveyed what they both knew: it was all going to hell. And the closer to the end they moved, the faster it went.

“You and your fellows had a good look, though?”

“Of course. No intruders.”

But both of them were thinking in terms of intruders who were human, taheen, can-toi, or mechanical. No one in Finli’s search-party had thought to look up, and likely would not have spotted Mordred even if they had: a spider now as big as a medium-sized dog, crouched in the deep shadow under the main station’s eave, held in place by a little hammock of webbing.

“You’re going to check the telemetry again because of the second alarm?”

“Partly,” Finli said. “Mostly because things feel hinky to me.” This was a word he’d picked up from one of the many other-side crime novels he read—they fascinated him—and he used it at every opportunity.

“Hinky how?”

Finli only shook his head. He couldn’t say. “But telemetry doesn’t lie. Or so I was taught.”

“You question it?”

Aware he was on thin ice again—that they both were—Finli hesitated, and then decided what the hell. “These are the end-times, boss. I question damn near everything.”

“Does that include your duty, Finli o’ Tego?”

Finli shook his head with no hesitation. No, it didn’t include his duty. It was the same with the rest of them, including the former Paul Prentiss of Rahway. Pimli remembered some old soldier—maybe “Dugout” Doug MacArthur—saying, “When my eyes close in death, gentlemen, my final thought will be of the corps. And the corps. And the corps.” Pimli’s own final thought would probably be of Algul Siento. Because what else was there now? In the words of another great American—Martha Reeves of Martha and the Vandellas—they had nowhere to run, baby, nowhere to hide. Things were out of control, running downhill with no brakes, and there was nothing left to do but enjoy the ride.

“Would you mind a little company as you go your rounds?” Pimli asked.

“Why not?” The Weasel replied. He smiled, revealing a mouthful of needle-sharp teeth. And sang, in his odd and wavering voice: “‘Dream with me . . . I’m on my way to the moon of my fa-aathers . . . ’”

“Give me one minute,” Pimli said, and got up.

“Prayers?” Finli asked.

Pimli stopped in the doorway. “Yes,” he said. “Since you ask. Any comments, Finli o’ Tego?”

“Just one, perhaps.” The smiling thing with the human body and the sleek brown weasel’s head continued to smile. “If prayer’s so exalted, why do you kneel in the same room where you sit to shit?”

“Because the Bible suggests that when one is in company, one should do it in one’s closet. Further comments?”

“Nay, nay.” Finli waved a negligent hand. “Do thy best and thy worst, as the Manni say.”

THREE

In the bathroom, Paul o’ Rahway closed the lid on the toilet, knelt on the tiles, and folded his hands.

If prayer’s so exalted, why do you kneel in the same room where you sit to shit?

Maybe I should have said because it keeps me humble, he thought. Because it keeps me right-sized. It’s dirt from which we arose and it’s dirt to which we return, and if there’s a room where it’s hard to forget that, it’s this one.

“God,” he said, “grant me strength when I am weak, answers when I am confused, courage when I am afraid. Help me to hurt no one who doesn’t deserve it, and even then not unless they leave me no other choice. Lord . . .”

And while he’s on his knees before the closed toilet seat, this man who will shortly be asking his God to forgive him for working to end creation (and with absolutely no sense of irony), we might as well look at him a bit more closely. We won’t take long, for Pimli Prentiss isn’t central to our tale of Roland and his ka-tet. Still, he’s a fascinating man, full of folds and contradictions and dead ends. He’s an alcoholic

who believes deeply in a personal God, a man of compassion who is now on the very verge of toppling the Tower and sending the trillions of worlds that spin on its axis flying into the darkness in a trillion different directions. He would quickly put Dinky Earnshaw and Stanley Ruiz to death if he knew what they'd been up to . . . and he spends most of every Mother's Day in tears, for he loved his own Ma dearly and misses her bitterly. When it comes to the Apocalypse, here's the perfect guy for the job, one who knows how to get kneebound and can speak to the Lord God of Hosts like an old friend.

And here's an irony: Paul Prentiss could be right out of the ads that proclaim "I got my job through *The New York Times!*" In 1970, laid off from the prison then known as Attica (he and Nelson Rockefeller missed the mega-riot, at least), he spied an ad in the *Times* with this headline:

**WANTED: EXPERIENCED
CORRECTIONS OFFICER
FOR HIGHLY RESPONSIBLE POSITION
IN PRIVATE INSTITUTION
High Pay! Top Benefits!
Must Be Willing to Travel!**

The high pay had turned out to be what his beloved Ma would have called "a pure-D, high-corn lie," because there was no pay at all, not in the sense an America-side corrections officer would have understood, but the benefits . . . yes, the bennies were exceptional. To begin with he'd wallowed in sex as he now wallowed in food and booze, but that wasn't the point. The point, in sai Prentiss's view, was this: what did you want out of life? If it was to do no more than watch the zeros increase in your bank account, than clearly Algul Siento was no place for you . . . which would be a terrible thing, because once you had signed on, there was no turning back; it was all the corps. And the corps. And every now and then, when an example needed to be made, a corpse or two.

Which was a hundred per cent okey-fine with Master Prentiss, who had gone through the solemn taheen name-changing ceremony some

twelve years before and had never regretted it. Paul Prentiss had become Pimli Prentiss. It was at that point he had turned his heart as well as his mind away from what he now only called “America-side.” And not because he’d had the best baked Alaska and the best champagne of his life here. Not because he’d had sim sex with hundreds of beautiful women, either. It was because this was his job, and he intended to finish it. Because he’d come to believe that their work at the Devar-Toi was God’s as well as the Crimson King’s. And behind the idea of God was something even more powerful: the image of a billion universes tucked into an egg which he, the former Paul Prentiss of Rahway, once a forty-thousand-dollar-a-year man with a stomach ulcer and a bad medical benefits program okayed by a corrupt union, now held in the palm of his hand. He understood that he was also in that egg, and that he would cease to exist as flesh when he broke it, but surely if there was heaven and a God in it, then both superseded the power of the Tower. It was to that heaven he would go, and before that throne he would kneel to ask forgiveness for his sins. And he would be welcomed in with a hearty *Well done, thou good and faithful servant*. His Ma would be there, and she would hug him, and they would enter the fellowship of Jesus together. That day would come, Pimli was quite sure, and probably before Reap Moon rolled around again.

Not that he considered himself a religious nut. Not at all. These thoughts of God and heaven he kept strictly to himself. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, he was just a joe doing a job, one he intended to do well to the very end. Certainly he saw himself as no villain, but no truly dangerous man ever has. Think of Ulysses S. Grant, that Civil War general who’d said he intended to fight it out on this line if it took all summer.

In the Algul Siento, summer was almost over.

FOUR

The Master’s home was a tidy Cape Cod at one end of the Mall. It was called Shapleigh House (Pimli had no idea why), and so of course the Breakers called it Shit House. At the other end of the Mall was a much larger dwelling—a gracefully rambling Queen Anne called (for

equally obscure reasons) Damli House. It would have looked at home on Fraternity Row at Clemson or Ole Miss. The Breakers called this one Heartbreak House, or sometimes Heartbreak Hotel. Fine. It was where the taheen and a sizable contingent of can-toi lived and worked. As for the Breakers, let them have their little jokes, and by all means let them believe that the staff didn't know.

Pimli Prentiss and Finli o' Tego strolled up the Mall in companionable silence . . . except, that was, when they passed off-duty Breakers, either alone or in company. Pimli greeted each of them with unfailing courtesy. The greetings they returned varied from the completely cheerful to sullen grunts. Yet each made some sort of response, and Pimli counted this a victory. He cared about them. Whether they liked it or not—many didn't—he cared about them. They were certainly easier to deal with than the murderers, rapists, and armed robbers of Attica.

Some were reading old newspapers or magazines. A foursome was throwing horseshoes. Another foursome was on the putting green. Tanya Leeds and Joey Rastosovich were playing chess under a graceful old elm, the sunlight making dapples on their faces. They greeted him with real pleasure, and why not? Tanya Leeds was now actually Tanya Rastosovich, for Pimli had married them a month ago, just like the captain of a ship. And he supposed that in a way, that was what this was: the good ship *Algul Siento*, a cruise vessel that sailed the dark seas of Thunderclap in her own sunny spotlight. The sun went out from time to time, say true, but today's outage had been minimal, only forty-three seconds.

"How's it going, Tanya? Joseph?" Always Joseph and never Joey, at least not to his face; he didn't like it.

They said it was going fine and gave him those dazed, fuckstruck smiles of which only newlyweds are capable. Finli said nothing to the Rastosoviches, but near the Damli House end of the Mall, he stopped before a young man sitting on a faux marble bench beneath a tree, reading a book.

"Sai Earnshaw?" the taheen asked.

Dinky looked up, eyebrows raised in polite enquiry. His face, studded with a bad case of acne, bore the same polite no-expression.

“I see you’re reading *The Magus*,” Finli said, almost shyly. “I myself am reading *The Collector*. Quite a coincidence!”

“If you say so,” Dinky replied. His expression didn’t change.

“I wonder what you think of Fowles? I’m quite busy right now, but perhaps later we could discuss him.”

Still wearing that politely expressionless expression, Dinky Earnshaw said, “Perhaps later you could take your copy of *The Collector*—hardcover, I hope—and stick it up your furry ass. Sideways.”

Finli’s hopeful smile disappeared. He gave a small but perfectly correct bow. “I’m sorry you feel that way, sai.”

“The fuck outta here,” Dinky said, and opened his book again. He raised it pointedly before his face.

Pimli and Finli o’ Tego walked on. There was a period of silence during which the Master of Algul Siento tried out different approaches to Finli, wanting to know how badly he’d been hurt by the young man’s comment. The taheen was proud of his ability to read and appreciate hume literature, that much Pimli knew. Then Finli saved him the trouble by putting both of his long-fingered hands—his ass wasn’t actually furry, but his fingers were—between his legs.

“Just checking to make sure my nuts are still there,” he said, and Pimli thought the good humor he heard in the Chief of Security’s voice was real, not forced.

“I’m sorry about that,” Pimli said. “If there’s anyone in Blue Heaven who has an authentic case of post-adolescent angst, it’s sai Earnshaw.”

“‘You’re tearing me apart!’” Finli moaned, and when the Master gave him a startled look, Finli grinned, showing those rows of tiny sharp teeth. “It’s a famous line from a film called *Rebel Without a Cause*,” he said. “Dinky Earnshaw makes me think of James Dean.” He paused to consider. “Without the haunting good looks, of course.”

“An interesting case,” Prentiss said. “He was recruited for an assassination program run by a Positronics subsidiary. He killed his control and ran. We caught him, of course. He’s never been any real trouble—not for us—but he’s got that pain-in-the-ass attitude.”

“But you feel he’s not a problem.”

Pimli gave him a sideways glance. “Is there something *you* feel I should know about him?”

“No, no. I’ve never seen you so jumpy as you’ve been over the last few weeks. Hell, call a spade a spade—so *paranoid*.”

“My grandfather had a proverb,” Pimli said. “‘You don’t worry about dropping the eggs until you’re almost home.’ We’re almost home now.”

And it was true. Seventeen days ago, not long before the last batch of Wolves had come galloping through the door from the Arc 16 Staging Area, their equipment in the basement of Damli House had picked up the first appreciable bend in the Bear-Turtle Beam. Since then the Beam of Eagle and Lion had snapped. Soon the Breakers would no longer be needed; soon the disintegration of the second-to-last Beam would happen with or without their help. It was like a precariously balanced object that had now picked up a sway. Soon it would go too far beyond its point of perfect balance, and then it would fall. Or, in the case of the Beam, it would break. Wink out of existence. It was the Tower that would fall. The last Beam, that of Wolf and Elephant, might hold for another week or another month, but not much longer.

Thinking of that should have pleased Pimli, but it didn’t. Mostly because his thoughts had returned to the Greencloaks. Sixty or so had gone through Calla-bound last time, the usual deployment, and they should have been back in the usual seventy-two hours with the usual catch of Calla children.

Instead . . . nothing.

He asked Finli what *he* thought about that.

Finli stopped. He looked grave. “I think it may have been a virus,” he said.

“Cry pardon?”

“A computer virus. We’ve seen it happen with a good deal of our computer equipment in Damli, and you want to remember that, no matter how fearsome the Greencloaks may look to a bunch of rice-farmers, computers on legs is all they really are.” He paused. “Or the Calla-*folken* may have found a way to kill them. Would it surprise me to find that they’d gotten up on their hind legs to fight? A little, but not a lot. Especially if someone with guts stepped forward to lead them.”

“Someone like a gunslinger, mayhap?”

Finli gave him a look that stopped just short of patronizing.

Ted Brautigan and Stanley Ruiz rode up the sidewalk on ten-speed bikes, and when the Master and the Security Head raised hands to them, both raised their hands in return. Brautigan didn't smile but Ruiz did, the loose happy smile of a true mental defective. He was all eye-boogers, stubbly cheeks, and spit-shiny lips, but a powerful bugger just the same, before God he was, and such a man could do worse than chum around with Brautigan, who had changed completely since being hauled back from his little "vacation" in Connecticut. Pimli was amused by the identical tweed caps the two men were wearing—their bikes were also identical—but not by Finli's look.

"Quit it," Pimli said.

"Quit what, sai?" Finli asked.

"Looking at me as if I were a little kid who just lost the top off his ice cream cone and doesn't have the wit to realize it."

But Finli didn't back down. He rarely did, which was one of the things Pimli liked about him. "If you don't want folk to look at you like a child, then you mustn't act like one. There've been rumors of gunslingers coming out of Mid-World to save the day for a thousand years and more. And never a single authenticated sighting. Personally, I'd be more apt to expect a visit from your Man Jesus."

"The Rods say—"

Finli winced as if this actually hurt his head. "Don't start with what the Rods say. Surely you respect my intelligence—and your own—more than that. Their brains have rotted even faster than their skins. As for the Wolves, let me advance a radical concept: it doesn't matter *where* they are or what's happened to them. We've got enough booster to finish the job, and that's all I care about."

The Security Head stood for a moment at the steps that led up to the Damli House porch. He was looking after the two men on the identical bikes and frowning thoughtfully. "Brautigan's been a lot of trouble."

"Hasn't he just!" Pimli laughed ruefully. "But his troublesome days are over. He's been told that his special friends from Connecticut—a boy named Robert Garfield and a girl named Carol Gerber—will die if he makes any more trouble. Also he's come to realize that while a number of his fellow Breakers regard him as a mentor, and some, such as the softheaded boy he's with, revere him, no one is interested

in his . . . philosophical ideas, shall we say. Not any longer, if they ever were. And I had a talk with him after he came back. A heart-to-heart.”

This was news to Finli. “About what?”

“Certain facts of life. Sai Brautigan has come to understand that his unique powers no longer matter as much as they once did. It’s gone too far for that. The remaining two Beams are going to break with him or without him. And he knows that at the end there’s apt to be . . . confusion. Fear and confusion.” Pimli nodded slowly. “Brautigan wants to be here at the end, if only to comfort such as Stanley Ruiz when the sky tears open.

“Come, let’s have another look at the tapes and the telemetry. Just to be safe.”

They went up the wide wooden steps of Damli House, side by side.

FIVE

Two of the can-toi were waiting to escort the Master and his Security Chief downstairs. Pimli reflected on how odd it was that everyone—Breakers and Algul Siento staff alike—had come to call them “the low men.” Because it was Brautigan who coined the phrase. “Speak of angels, hear the flutter of their wings,” Prentiss’s beloved Ma might have said, and Pimli supposed that if there were true manimals in these final days of the true world, then the can-toi would fill the bill much better than the taheen. If you saw them without their weird living masks, you would have thought they *were* taheen, with the heads of rats. But unlike the true taheen, who regarded humes (less a few remarkable exceptions such as Pimli himself) as an inferior race, the can-toi worshipped the human form as divine. Did they wear the masks in worship? They were closemouthed on the subject, but Pimli didn’t think so. He thought they believed they were *becoming* human—which was why, when they first put on their masks (these were living flesh, grown rather than made), they took a hume name to go with their hume aspect. Pimli knew they believed they would somehow replace human beings after the Fall . . . although *how* they could believe such a thing was entirely beyond him. There would be heaven after the Fall, that was obvious to anyone who’d ever read the Book of Revelation . . . but Earth?

Some *new* Earth, perhaps, but Pimli wasn't even sure of that.

Two can-toi security guards, Beeman and Trelawney, stood at the end of the hall, guarding the head of the stairs going down to the basement. To Pimli, all can-toi men, even those with blond hair and skinny builds, looked weirdly like that actor from the forties and fifties, Clark Gable. They all seemed to have the same thick, sensual lips and batty ears. Then, when you got very close, you could see the artificial wrinkles at the neck and behind the ears, where their hume masks twirled into pigtails and ran into the hairy, toothy flesh that was their reality (whether they accepted it or not). And there were the eyes. Hair surrounded them, and if you looked closely, you could see that what you originally took for *sockets* were, in fact, holes in those peculiar masks of living flesh. Sometimes you could hear the masks themselves breathing, which Pimli found both weird and a little revolting.

"Hile," said Beeman.

"Hile," said Trelawney.

Pimli and Finli returned the greeting, they all fisted their foreheads, and then Pimli led the way downstairs. In the lower corridor, walking past the sign which read WE MUST ALL WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE A FIRE-FREE ENVIRONMENT and another reading ALL HAIL THE CAN-TOI, Finli said, very low: "They are *so* odd."

Pimli smiled and clapped him on the back. That was why he genuinely liked Finli o' Tego: like Ike and Mike, they thought alike.

SIX

Most of the Damli House basement was a large room jammed with equipment. Not all of the stuff worked, and they had no use for some of the instruments that did (there was plenty they didn't even understand), but they were very familiar with the surveillance equipment and the telemetry that measured *darks*: units of expended psychic energy. The Breakers were expressly forbidden from using their psychic abilities outside of The Study, and not all of them could, anyway. Many were like men and women so severely toilet-trained that they were unable to urinate without the visual stimuli that assured them that yes, they were in the toilet, and yes, it was all right to let go.

Others, like children who aren't yet completely toilet-trained, were unable to prevent the occasional psychic outburst. This might amount to no more than giving someone they didn't like a transient headache or knocking over a bench on the Mall, but Pimli's men kept careful track, and outbursts that were deemed "on purpose" were punished, first offenses lightly, repeat offenses with rapidly mounting severity. And, as Pimli liked to lecture to the newcomers (back in the days when there had *been* newcomers), "Be sure your sin will find you out." Finli's scripture was even simpler: *Telemetry doesn't lie.*

Today they found nothing but transient blips on the telemetry readouts. It was as meaningless as a four-hour audio recording of some group's farts and burps would have been. The videotapes and the swing-guards' daybooks likewise produced nothing of interest.

"Satisfied, sai?" Finli asked, and something in his voice caused Pimli to swing around and look at him sharply.

"Are *you*?"

Finli o' Tego sighed. At times like this Pimli wished that either Finli were hume or that he himself were truly taheen. The problem was Finli's inexpressive black eyes. They were almost the shoe-button eyes of a Raggedy Andy doll, and there was simply no way to read them. Unless, maybe, you were another taheen.

"I haven't felt right for weeks now," Finli said at last. "I drink too much graf to put myself asleep, then drag myself through the day, biting people's heads off. Part of it's the loss of communications since the last Beam went—"

"You know that was inevitable—"

"Yes, of course I know. What I'm saying is that I'm trying to find rational reasons to explain irrational feelings, and that's never a good sign."

On the far wall was a picture of Niagara Falls. Some can-toi guard had turned it upside down. The low men considered turning pictures upside down the absolute height of humor. Pimli had no idea why. But in the end, who gave a shit? *I know how to do my fucking job*, he thought, re-hanging Niagara Falls rightside up. *I know how to do that, and nothing else matters, tell God and the Man Jesus thank ya.*

"We always knew things were going to get wacky at the end," Finli said, "so I tell myself that's all this is. This . . . you know . . ."

“This feeling you have,” the former Paul Prentiss supplied. Then he grinned and laid his right forefinger over a circle made by his left thumb and index finger. This was a taheen gesture which meant *I tell you the truth*. “This *irrational* feeling.”

“Yar. Certainly I know that the Bleeding Lion hasn’t reappeared in the north, nor do I believe that the sun’s cooling from the inside. I’ve heard tales of the Red King’s madness and that the Dan-Tete has come to take his place, and all I can say is ‘I’ll believe it when I see it.’ Same with this wonderful news about how a gunslinger-man’s come out of the west to save the Tower, as the old tales and songs predict. Bullshit, every bit of it.”

Pimli clapped him on the shoulder. “Does my heart good to hear you say so!”

It did, too. Finli o’ Tego had done a hell of a job during his tenure as Head. His security cadre had had to kill half a dozen Breakers over the years—all of them homesick fools trying to escape—and two others had been lobotomized, but Ted Brautigan was the only one who’d actually made it “under the fence” (this phrase Pimli had picked up from a film called *Stalag 17*), and they had reeled him back in, by God. The can-toi took the credit, and the Security Chief let them, but Pimli knew the truth: it was Finli who’d choreographed each move, from beginning to end.

“But it might be more than just nerves, this feeling of mine,” Finli continued. “I *do* believe that sometimes folk can have bona fide intuitions.” He laughed. “How could one not believe that, in a place as lousy with precogs and postcogs as this one?”

“But no teleports,” Pimli said. “Right?”

Teleportation was the one so-called wild talent of which all the Devar staff was afraid, and with good reason. There was no end to the sort of havoc a teleport could wreak. Bringing in about four acres of outer space, for instance, and creating a vacuum-induced hurricane. Fortunately there was a simple test to isolate that particular talent (easy to administer, although the equipment necessary was another leftover of the old people and none of them knew how long it would continue to work) and a simple procedure (also left behind by the old ones) for shorting out such dangerous organic circuits. Dr. Gangli was

able to take care of potential teleports in under two minutes. “So simple it makes a vasectomy look like brain-surgery,” he’d said once.

“Absafackinlutely no teleports,” was what Finli said now, and led Prentiss to an instrument console that looked eerily like Susannah Dean’s visualization of her Dogan. He pointed at two dials marked in the henscratch of the old people (marks similar to those on the Unfound Door). The needle of each dial lay flat against the **O** mark on the left. When Finli tapped them with his furry thumbs, they jumped a little and then fell back.

“We don’t know exactly what these dials were actually meant to measure,” he said, “but one thing they *do* measure is teleportation potential. We’ve had Breakers who’ve tried to shield the talent and it doesn’t work. If there was a teleport in the woodpile, Pimli o’ New Jersey, these needles would be jittering all the way up to fifty or even eighty.”

“So.” Half-smiling, half-serious, Pimli began to count off on his fingers. “No teleports, no Bleeding Lion stalking from the north, no gunslinger. Oh, and the Greencloaks succumbed to a computer virus. If all that’s the case, what’s gotten under your skin? What feels hinky-di-di to ya?”

“The approaching end, I suppose.” Finli sighed heavily. “I’m going to double the guard in the watchtowers tonight, any ro’, and humes along the fence, as well.”

“Because it feels hinky-di-di.” Pimli, smiling a little.

“Hinky-di-di, yar.” Finli did not smile; his cunning little teeth remained hidden inside his shiny brown muzzle.

Pimli clapped him on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s go up to The Study. Perhaps seeing all those Breakers at work will soothe you.”

“P’rhaps it will,” Finli said, but he still didn’t smile.

Pimli said gently, “It’s all right, Fin.”

“I suppose,” said the taheen, looking doubtfully around at the equipment, and then at Beeman and Trelawney, the two low men, who were respectfully waiting at the door for the two big bugs to finish their palaver. “I suppose ’tis.” Only his heart didn’t believe it. The only thing he was sure his heart believed was that there were no teleports left in Algul Siento.

Telemetry didn’t lie.

SEVEN

Beeman and Trelawney saw them all the way down the oak-paneled basement corridor to the staff elevator, which was also oak-paneled. There was a fire-extinguisher on the wall of the car and another sign reminding *Devar-folken* that they had to work together to create a fire-free environment.

This too had been turned upside down.

Pimli's eyes met Finli's. The Master believed he saw amusement in his Security Chief's look, but of course what he saw might have been no more than his own sense of humor, reflected back at him like a face in a mirror. Finli untacked the sign without a word and turned it rightside up. Neither of them commented on the elevator machinery, which was loud and ill-sounding. Nor on the way the car shuddered in the shaft. If it froze, escape through the upper hatch would be no problem, not even for a slightly overweight (well . . . *quite* overweight) fellow like Prentiss. Damli House was hardly a skyscraper, and there was plenty of help near at hand.

They reached the third floor, where the sign on the closed elevator door was rightside up. It said **STAFF ONLY** and **PLEASE USE KEY and GO DOWN IMMEDIATELY IF YOU HAVE REACHED THIS LEVEL IN ERROR. YOU WILL NOT BE PENALIZED IF YOU REPORT IMMEDIATELY.**

As Finli produced his key-card, he said with a casualness that might have been feigned (God *damn* his unreadable black eyes): "Have you heard from sai Sayre?"

"No," Pimli said (rather crossly), "nor do I really expect to. We're isolated here for a reason, deliberately forgotten in the desert just like the scientists of the Manhattan Project back in the 1940s. The last time I saw him, he told me it might be . . . well, the last time I saw him."

"Relax," Finli said. "I was just asking." He swiped the key-card down its slot and the elevator door slid open with a rather hellish *screee* sound.

EIGHT

The Study was a long, high room in the center of Damli, also oak-paneled and rising three full stories to a glass roof that allowed the Algul's hard-won sunlight to pour in. On the balcony opposite the door through which Prentiss and the Tego entered was an odd trio consisting of a ravenhead taheen named Jakli, a can-toi technician named Conroy, and two hume guards whose names Pimli could not immediately recall. Taheen, can-toi, and humes got on together during work hours by virtue of careful—and sometimes brittle—courtesy, but one did not expect to see them socializing off-duty. And indeed the balcony was strictly off-limits when it came to “socializing.” The Breakers below were neither animals in a zoo nor exotic fish in an aquarium; Pimli (Finli o' Tego, as well) had made this point to the staff over and over. The Master of Algul Siento had only had to lobo one staff member in all his years here, a perfectly idiotic hume guard named David Burke, who had actually been throwing something—had it been peanut-shells?—down on the Breakers below. When Burke had realized the Master was serious about lobotomizing him, he begged for a second chance, promising he'd never do anything so foolish and demeaning again. Pimli had turned a deaf ear. He'd seen a chance to make an example which would stand for years, perhaps for decades, and had taken it. You could see the now *truly* idiotic Mr. Burke around to this day, walking on the Mall or out by Left'rds Bound'ry, mouth slack and eyes vaguely puzzled—*I almost know who I am, I almost remember what I did to end up like this*, those eyes said. He was a living example of what simply wasn't done when one was in the presence of working Breakers. But there was no rule expressly prohibiting staff from coming up here and they all did from time to time.

Because it was refreshing.

For one thing, being near working Breakers made talk unnecessary. What they called “good mind” kicked in as you walked down the third-floor hall on either side, from either elevator, and when you opened the doors giving on the balcony good mind bloomed in your head, opening all sorts of perceptual doorways. Aldous Huxley, Pimli had thought on more than one occasion, would have gone absolutely bonkers up here. Sometimes one found one's heels leaving the floor in a kind of half-assed float. The stuff in your pockets tended to rise

and hang in the air. Formerly baffling situations seemed to resolve themselves the moment you turned your thoughts to them. If you'd forgotten something, your five o'clock appointment or your brother-in-law's middle name, for instance, this was the place where you could remember. And even if you realized that what you'd forgotten was important, you were never distressed. *Folken* left the balcony with smiles on their faces even if they'd come up in the foulest of moods (a foul mood was an excellent reason to visit the balcony in the first place). It was as if some sort of happy-gas, invisible to the eye and unmeasurable by even the most sophisticated telemetry, always rose from the Breakers below.

The two of them hiled the trio across the way, then approached the wide fumed-oak railing and looked down. The room below might have been the capacious library of some richly endowed gentlemen's club in London. Softly glowing lamps, many with genuine Tiffany shades, stood on little tables or shone on the walls (oak-paneled, of course). The rugs were the most exquisite Turkish. There was a Matisse on one wall, a Rembrandt on another . . . and on a third was the *Mona Lisa*. The real one, as opposed to the fake hanging in the Louvre on Keystone Earth. A man stood before it with his arms clasped behind him. From up here he looked as though he were studying the painting—trying to decipher the famously enigmatic smile, maybe—but Pimli knew better. The men and women holding magazines looked as though they were reading, too, but if you were right down there you'd see that they were gazing blankly over the tops of their *McCall's* and their *Harper's* or a little off to one side. An eleven- or twelve-year-old girl in a gorgeous striped summer dress that might have cost sixteen hundred dollars in a Rodeo Drive kiddie boutique was sitting before a dollhouse on the hearth, but Pimli knew she wasn't paying any attention to the exquisitely made replica of Damli at all.

Thirty-three of them down there. Thirty-three in all. At eight o'clock, an hour after the artificial sun snapped off, thirty-three fresh Breakers would troop in. And there was one fellow—one and one only—who came and went just as he pleased. A fellow who'd gone under the wire and paid no penalty for it at all . . . except for being brought back, that was, and for this man, that was penalty enough.

As if the thought had summoned him, the door at the end of the room opened, and Ted Brautigan slipped quietly in. He was still wearing his tweed riding cap. Daneeka Rostov looked up from the doll-house and gave him a smile. Brautigan dropped her a wink in return. Pimli gave Finli a little nudge.

Finli: (*I see him*)

But it was more than seeing. They *felt* him. The moment Brautigan came into the room, those on the balcony—and, much more important, those on the floor—felt the power-level rise. They still weren't completely sure what they'd gotten in Brautigan, and the testing equipment didn't help in that regard (the old dog had blown out several pieces of it himself, and on purpose, the Master was quite sure). If there were others like him, the low men had found none on their talent hunts (now suspended; they had all the talent they needed to finish the job). One thing that *did* seem clear was Brautigan's talent as a facilitator, a psychic who was not just powerful by himself but was able to up the abilities of others just by being near them. Finli's thoughts, ordinarily unreadable even to Breakers, now burned in Pimli's mind like neon.

Finli: (*He is extraordinary*)

Pimli: (*And, so far as we know, unique Have you seen the thing*)

Image: Eyes growing and shrinking, growing and shrinking.

Finli: (*Yes Do you know what causes it*)

Pimli: (*Not at all Nor care dear Finli nor care That old*)

Image: An elderly mongrel with burdocks in his matted fur, limping along on three legs.

(*has almost finished his work almost time to*)

Image: A gun, one of the hume guards' Berettas, against the side of the old mongrel's head.

Three stories below them, the subject of their conversation picked up a newspaper (the newspapers were all old, now, old like Brautigan himself, years out of date), sat in a leather-upholstered club chair so voluminous it seemed almost to swallow him, and appeared to read.

Pimli felt the psychic force rising past them and through them, to the skylight and through that, too, rising to the Beam that ran directly above Algul, working against it, chipping and eroding and rubbing relentlessly against the grain. Eating holes in the magic. Working

patiently to put out the eyes of the Bear. To crack the shell of the Turtle. To break the Beam which ran from Shardik to Maturin. To topple the Dark Tower which stood between.

Pimli turned to his companion and wasn't surprised to realize he could now see the cunning little teeth in the Tego's weasel head. Smiling at last! Nor was he surprised to realize he could read the black eyes. Taheen, under ordinary circumstances, could send and receive some very simple mental communications, but not be progged. Here, though, all that changed. Here—

—Here Finli o' Tego was at peace. His concerns

(*hinky-di-di*)

were gone. At least for the time being.

Pimli sent Finli a series of bright images: a champagne bottle breaking over the stern of a boat; hundreds of flat black graduation caps rising in the air; a flag being planted on Mount Everest; a laughing couple escaping a church with their heads bent against a pelting storm of rice; a planet—Earth—suddenly glowing with fierce brilliance.

Images that all said the same thing.

“Yes,” Finli said, and Pimli wondered how he could ever have thought those eyes hard to read. “Yes, indeed. Success at the end of the day.”

Neither of them looked down at that moment. Had they done, they would have seen Ted Brautigan—an old dog, yes, and tired, but perhaps not *quite* as tired as some thought—looking up at them.

With a ghost of his own smile.

NINE

There was never rain out here, at least not during Pimli's years, but sometimes, in the Stygian blackness of its nights, there were great volleys of dry thunder. Most of the Devar-Toi's staff had trained themselves to sleep through these fusillades, but Pimli often woke up, heart hammering in his throat, the Our Father running through his mostly unconscious mind like a circle of spinning red ribbon.

Earlier that day, talking to Finli, the Master of Algul Siento had used the phrase *hinky-di-di* with a self-conscious smile, and why not? It

was a child's phrase, almost, like *allee-allee-in-free* or *eenie-meenie-minie-moe*.

Now, lying in his bed at Shapleigh House (known as Shit House to the Breakers), a full Mall's length away from Damli House, Pimli remembered the feeling—the flat-out *certainty*—that everything was going to be okay; success assured, only a matter of time. On the balcony Finli had shared it, but Pimli wondered if his Security Chief was now lying awake as Pimli himself was, and thinking how easy it was to be misled when you were around working Breakers. Because, do ya, they sent up that happy-gas. That good-mind vibe.

And suppose . . . just *suppose*, now . . . someone was actually *channeling* that feeling? Sending it up to them like a lullabye? *Go to sleep, Pimli, go to sleep, Finli, go to sleep all of you good children . . .*

Ridiculous idea, totally paranoid. Still, when another double-boom of thunder rolled out of what might still be the southeast—from the direction of Fedic and the Discordia, anyway—Pimli Prentiss sat up and turned on the bedside lamp.

Finli had spoken of doubling the guard tonight, both in the watchtowers and along the fences. Perhaps tomorrow they might triple it. Just to be on the safe side. And because complacency this close to the end would be a very bad thing, indeed.

Pimli got out of bed, a tall man with a hairy slab of gut, now wearing blue pajama pants and nothing else. He pissed, then knelt in front of the toilet's lowered lid, folded his hands, and prayed until he felt sleepy. He prayed to do his duty. He prayed to see trouble before trouble saw him. He prayed for his Ma, just as Jim Jones had prayed for his as he watched the line move toward the tub of poisoned Kool-Aid. He prayed until the thunder had died to little more than a senile mutter, then went back to bed, calm again. His last thought before drifting off was about tripling the guard first thing in the morning, and that was the first thing he thought of when he woke to a room awash in artificial sunlight. Because you had to take care of the eggs when you were almost home.



CHAPTER VII:

KA-SHUME

ONE

A feeling both blue and strange crept among the gunslingers after Brautigan and his friends left, but at first no one spoke of it. Each of them thought that melancholy belonged to him or her alone. Roland, who might have been expected to know the feeling for what it was (ka-shume, Cort would have called it), ascribed it instead to worries about the following day and even more to the debilitating atmosphere of Thunderclap, where day was dim and night was as dark as blindness.

Certainly there was enough to keep them busy after the departure of Brautigan, Earnshaw, and Sheemie Ruiz, that friend of Roland's childhood. (Both Susannah and Eddie had attempted to talk to the gunslinger about Sheemie, and Roland had shaken them off. Jake, strong in the touch, hadn't even tried. Roland wasn't ready to talk about those old days again, at least not yet.) There was a path leading down and around the flank of Steek-Tete, and they found the cave of which the old man had told them behind a cunning camouflage of rocks and desert-dusty bushes. This cave was much bigger than the one above, with gas lanterns hung from spikes that had been driven into the rock walls. Jake and Eddie lit two of these on each side, and the four of them examined the cave's contents in silence.

The first thing Roland noticed was the sleeping-bags: a quartet lined up against the left-hand wall, each considerately placed on an inflated air mattress. The tags on the bags read PROPERTY OF U.S. ARMY. Beside the last of these, a fifth air mattress had been covered with a layer of bath towels. *They were expecting four people and one animal, the*

gunslinger thought. *Precognition, or have they been watching us somehow? And does it matter?*

There was a plastic-swaddled object sitting on a barrel marked **DANGER! MUNITIONS!** Eddie removed the protective plastic and revealed a machine with reels on it. One of the reels was loaded. Roland could make nothing of the single word on the front of the speaking machine and asked Susannah what it was.

“Wollensak,” she said. “A German company. When it comes to these things, they make the best.”

“Not no mo’, sugarbee,” Eddie said. “In my when we like to say ‘Sony! No baloney!’ *They* make a tape-player you can clip right to your belt. It’s called a Walkman. I bet this dinosaur weighs twenty pounds. More, with the batteries.”

Susannah was examining the unmarked tape boxes that had been stacked beside the Wollensak. There were three of them. “I can’t wait to hear what’s on these,” she said.

“After the daylight goes, maybe,” Roland said. “For now, let’s see what else we’ve got here.”

“Roland?” Jake asked.

The gunslinger turned toward him. There was something about the boy’s face that almost always softened Roland’s own. Looking at Jake did not make the gunslinger handsome, but seemed to give his features a quality they didn’t ordinarily have. Susannah thought it was the look of love. And, perhaps, some thin hope for the future.

“What is it, Jake?”

“I know we’re going to fight—”

“Join us next week for *Return to the O.K. Corral*, starring Van Heflin and Lee Van Cleef,” Eddie murmured, walking toward the back of the cave. There a much larger object had been covered with what looked like a quilted mover’s pad.

“—but when?” Jake continued. “Will it be tomorrow?”

“Perhaps,” Roland replied. “I think the day after’s more likely.”

“I have a terrible feeling,” Jake said. “It’s not being afraid, exactly —”

“Do you think they’re going to beat us, hon?” Susannah asked. She put a hand on Jake’s neck and looked into his face. She had come to respect his feelings. She sometimes wondered how much of what he

was now had to do with the creature he'd faced to get here: the thing in the house on Dutch Hill. No robot there, no rusty old clockwork toy. The doorkeeper had been a genuine leftover of the *Prim*. "You smell a whuppin in the wind? That it?"

"I don't think so," Jake said. "I don't know what it is. I've only felt something like it once, and that was just before . . ."

"Just before what?" Susannah asked, but before Jake had a chance to reply, Eddie broke in. Roland was glad. *Just before I fell*. That was how Jake had meant to finish. *Just before Roland let me fall*.

"Holy *shit!* Come here, you guys! You gotta see this!"

Eddie had pulled away the mover's pad and revealed a motorized vehicle that looked like a cross between an ATV and a gigantic tricycle. The tires were wide balloon jobs with deep zigzag treads. The controls were all on the handlebars. And there was a playing card propped on the rudimentary dashboard. Roland knew what it was even before Eddie plucked it up between two fingers and turned it over. The card showed a woman with a shawl over her head at a spinning wheel. It was the Lady of Shadows.

"Looks like our pal Ted left you a ride, sugarbee," Eddie said.

Susannah had hurried over at her rapid crawl. Now she lifted her arms. "Boost me up! Boost me, Eddie!"

He did, and when she was in the saddle, holding handlebars instead of reins, the vehicle looked made for her. Susannah thumbed a red button and the engine thrummed to life, so low you could barely hear it. Electricity, not gasoline, Eddie was quite sure. Like a golf-cart, but probably a lot faster.

Susannah turned toward them, smiling radiantly. She patted the three-wheeler's dark brown nacelle. "Call me Missus Centaur! I been lookin for this my whole life and never even knew."

None of them noticed the stricken expression on Roland's face. He bent over to pick up the card Eddie had dropped so no one would.

Yes, it was her, all right—the Lady of the Shadows. Under her shawl she seemed to be smiling craftily and sobbing, both at the same time. On the last occasion he'd seen that card, it had been in the hand of the man who sometimes went by the name of Walter, sometimes that of Flagg.

You have no idea how close you stand to the Tower now, he had said. Worlds turn about your head.

And now he recognized the feeling that had crept among them for what it almost certainly was: not worry or weariness but ka-shume. There was no real translation for that rue-laden term, but it meant to sense an approaching break in one's ka-tet.

Walter o' Dim, his old nemesis, was dead. Roland had known it as soon as he saw the face of the Lady of Shadows. Soon one of his own would die as well, probably in the coming battle to break the power of the Devar-Toi. And once again the scales which had temporarily tilted in their favor would balance.

It never once crossed Roland's mind that the one to die might be him.

TWO

There were three brand names on what Eddie immediately dubbed "Suzie's Cruisin Trike." One was Honda; one was Takuro (as in that wildly popular pre-superflu import, the Takuro Spirit); the third was North Central Positronics. And a fourth, as well: U.S. ARMY, as in PROPERTY OF.

Susannah was reluctant to get off it, but finally she did. God knew there was plenty more to see; the cave was a treasure trove. Its narrowing throat was filled with food supplies (mostly freeze-dried stuff that probably wouldn't taste as good as Nigel's chow but would at least nourish them), bottled water, canned drinks (plenty of Coke and Nozz-A-La but nothing alcoholic), and the promised propane stove. There were also crates of weaponry. Some of the crates were marked U.S. ARMY, but by no means all.

Now their most basic abilities came out: the true thread, Cort might have called it. Those talents and intuitions that could have remained sleeping for most of their lives, only stirring long enough to get them into occasional trouble, if Roland had not deliberately wakened them . . . cosseted them . . . and then filed their teeth to deadly points.

Hardly a word was spoken among them as Roland produced a wide prying tool from his purse and levered away the tops of the crates.

Susannah had forgotten about the Cruisin Trike she had been waiting for all her life; Eddie forgot to make jokes; Roland forgot about his sense of foreboding. They became absorbed in the weaponry that had been left for them, and there was no piece of it they did not understand either at once or after a bit of study.

There was a crate of AR-15 rifles, the barrels packed in grease, the firing mechanisms fragrant with banana oil. Eddie noted the added selector switches, and looked in the crate next to the 15's. Inside, covered with plastic and also packed in grease, were metal drums. They looked like the ones you saw on tommy-guns in gangster epics like *White Heat*, only these were bigger. Eddie lifted one of the 15's, turned it over, and found exactly what he expected: a conversion clip that would allow these drums to be attached to the guns, turning them into rapid-fire rice-cutters. How many shots per drum? A hundred? A hundred and twenty-five? Enough to mow down a whole company of men, that was sure.

There was a box of what looked like rocket shells with the letters STS stenciled on each. In a rack beside them, propped against the cave wall, were half a dozen handheld launchers. Roland pointed at the atom-symbol on them and shook his head. He did not want them shooting off weapons that would release potentially lethal radiation no matter how powerful they might be. He was willing to kill the Breakers if that was what it took to stop their meddling with the Beam, but only as a last resort.

Flanking a metal tray filled with gas-masks (to Jake they looked gruesome, like the severed heads of strange bugs) were two crates of handguns: snub-nosed machine-pistols with the word COYOTE embossed on the butts and heavy automatics called Cobra Stars. Jake was attracted to both weapons (in truth his heart was attracted to *all* the weapons), but he took one of the Stars because it looked a little bit like the gun he had lost. The clip fed up the handle and held either fifteen or sixteen shots. This was not a matter of counting but only of *looking* and *knowing*.

"Hey," Susannah said. She'd gone back toward the front of the cave. "Come look at this. Sneetches."

"Check out the crate-lid," Jake said when they joined her. Susannah had set it aside; Jake picked it up and was studying it with admiration.

It showed the face of a smiling boy with a lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. He was wearing round glasses and brandishing what appeared to be a magician's wand at a floating sneetch. The words stenciled beneath the drawing read:

**PROPERTY 449th SQUADRON
24 "SNEETCHES"**

HARRY POTTER MODEL

SERIAL #465-17-CC NDJKR

**"Don't Mess with the 449!"
We'll Kick the "Slytherin" Out of You!**

There were two dozen sneetches in the crate, packed like eggs in little nests of plastic excelsior. None of Roland's band had had the opportunity to study live ones closely during their battle with the Wolves, but now they had a good swatch of time during which they could indulge their most natural interests and curiosities. Each took up a sneetch. They were about the size of tennis balls, but a great deal heavier. Their surfaces had been gridded, making them resemble globes marked with lines of latitude and longitude. Although they looked like steel, the surfaces had a faint giving quality, like very hard rubber.

There was an ID-plate on each sneetch and a button beside it. "That wakes it up," Eddie murmured, and Jake nodded. There was also a small depressed area in the curved surface, just the right size for a finger. Jake pushed it without the slightest worry that the thing would explode, or maybe extrude a mini-buzzsaw that would cut off his fingers. You used the button at the bottom of the depression to access the programming. He didn't know how he knew that, but he most certainly did.

A curved section of the sneetch's surface slid away with a faint *Auowwm!* sound. Revealed were four tiny lights, three of them dark and one flashing slow amber pulses. There were seven windows, now showing **0 00 00 00**. Beneath each was a button so small that you'd

need something like the end of a straightened paperclip to push it. “The size of a bug’s asshole,” as Eddie grumbled later on, while trying to program one. To the right of the windows were another two buttons, these marked **S** and **W**.

Jake showed it to Roland. “This one’s SET and the other one’s WAIT. Do you think so? I think so.”

Roland nodded. He’d never seen such a weapon before—not close up, at any rate—but, coupled with the windows, he thought the use of the buttons was obvious. And he thought the sneetches might be useful in a way the long-shooters with their atom-shells would not be. SET and WAIT.

SET . . . and WAIT.

“Did Ted and his two pals leave all this stuff for us here?” Susannah asked.

Roland hardly thought it mattered who’d left it—it was here and that was enough—but he nodded.

“How? And where’d they get it?”

Roland didn’t know. What he did know was that the cave was a ma’sun—a war-chest. Below them, men were making war on the Tower which the line of Eld was sworn to protect. He and his tet would fall upon them by surprise, and with these tools they would smite and smite until their enemies lay with their boots pointed to the sky.

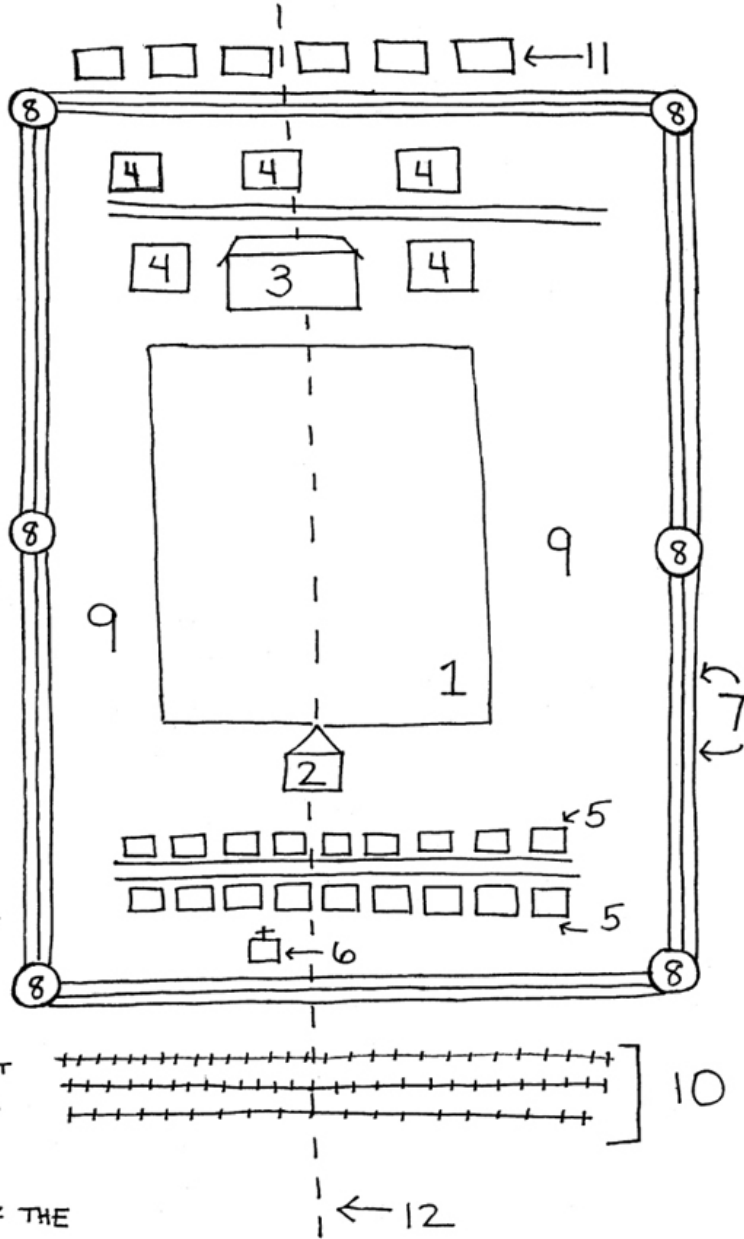
Or until theirs did.

“Maybe he explains on one of the tapes he left us,” Jake said. He had engaged the safety of his new Cobra automatic and tucked it away in the shoulder-bag with the remaining Orizas. Susannah had also helped herself to one of the Cobras, after twirling it around her finger a time or two, like Annie Oakley.



→ DEVAR-TOI ←

- 1- THE MALL
- 2- SHAPLEIGH WARDEN'S HOUSE
- 3- DAMU HOUSE [STUDY]
- 4- BREAKER DORMS
- 5- PLEASANT-VILLE [MAIN STREET/ SHOPS]
- 6- CHURCH/ GRASSY AREA
- 7- WIRE [3x]
- 8- WATCH TOWERS
- 9- LANDSCAPED GROUNDS
- 10- RAILROAD SIDETRACKS [TRAIN & ROBOT GRAVEYARD]
- 11- EMPTY SHEDS
- 12- PATH OF THE BEAM



“Maybe he does,” she said, and gave Jake a smile. It had been a long time since Susannah had felt so physically well. So *not-preg*. Yet her mind was troubled. Or perhaps it was her spirit.

Eddie was holding up a piece of cloth that had been rolled into a tube and tied with three hanks of string. “That guy Ted said he was leaving us a map of the prison-camp. Bet this is it. Anyone ’sides me want a look?”

They all did. Jake helped Eddie to unroll the map. Brautigan had warned them it was rough, and it surely was: really no more than a series of circles and squares. Susannah saw the name of the little town—Pleasantville—and thought again of Ray Bradbury. Jake was tickled by the crude compass, where the map-maker had added a question mark beside the letter *N*.

While they were studying this hastily rendered example of cartography, a long and wavering cry rose in the murk outside. Eddie, Susannah, and Jake looked around nervously. Oy raised his head from his paws, gave a low, brief growl, then put his head back down again and appeared to go to sleep: *Hell wit’choo, bad boy, I’m wit’ my homies and I ain’t ascairt.*

“What is it?” Eddie asked. “A coyote? A jackal?”

“Some kind of desert dog,” Roland agreed absently. He was squatted on his hunkers (which suggested his hip was better, at least temporarily) with his arms wrapped around his shins. He never took his eyes from the crude circles and squares drawn on the cloth. “Can-toi-tete.”

“Is that like *Dan-Tete*?” Jake asked.

Roland ignored him. He scooped up the map and left the cave with it, not looking back. The others shared a glance and then followed him, once more wrapping their blankets about them like shawls.

THREE

Roland returned to where Sheemie (with a little help from his friends) had brought them through. This time the gunslinger used the binoculars, looking down at Blue Heaven long and long.

Somewhere behind them, the desert dog howled again, a lonely sound in the gloom.

And, Jake thought, the gloom was gloomier now. Your eyes adjusted as the day dialed itself down, but that brilliant spotlight of sun seemed brighter than ever by contrast. He was pretty sure the deal with the sun-machine was that you got your full-on, your full-off, and nothing in between. Maybe they even let it shine all night, but Jake doubted it. People's nervous systems were set up for an orderly progression of dark and day, he'd learned that in science class. You could make do with long periods of low light—people did it every year in the Arctic countries—but it could really mess with your head. Jake didn't think the guys in charge down there would want to goof up their Breakers if they could help it. Also, they'd want to save their "sun" for as long as they could; everything here was old and prone to breakdowns.

At last Roland gave the binoculars to Susannah. "Do look ya especially at the buildings on either end of the grassy rectangle." He unrolled the map like a character about to read a scroll in a stageplay, glanced at it briefly, and then said, "They're numbered 2 and 3 on the map."

Susannah studied them carefully. The one marked 2, the Warden's House, was a small Cape Cod painted electric blue with white trim. It was what her mother might have called a fairy-tale house, because of the bright colors and the gingerbread scalloping around the eaves.

Damli House was much bigger, and as she looked, she saw several people going in and out. Some had the carefree look of civilians. Others seemed much more—oh, call it watchful. And she saw two or three slumping along under loads of stuff. She handed the glasses to Eddie and asked him if those were Children of Roderick.

"I think so," he said, "but I can't be completely—"

"Never mind the Rods," Roland said, "not now. What do you think of those two buildings, Susannah?"

"Well," she said, proceeding carefully (she did not, in fact, have the slightest idea what it was he wanted from her), "they're both beautifully maintained, especially compared to some of the falling-down wrecks we've seen on our travels. The one they call Damli House is especially handsome. It's a style we call Queen Anne, and—"

“Are they of wood, do you think, or just made to look that way? I’m particularly interested in the one called Damli.”

Susannah redirected the binoculars there, then handed them to Eddie. He looked, then handed them to Jake. While Jake was looking, there was an audible CLICK! sound that rolled to them across the miles . . . and the Cecil B. DeMille sunbeam which had been shining down on the Devar-Toi like a spotlight went out, leaving them in a thick purple dusk which would soon be complete and utter dark.

In it, the desert-dog began to howl again, raising the skin on Jake’s arms into gooseflesh. The sound rose . . . rose . . . and suddenly cut off with one final choked syllable. It sounded like some final cry of surprise, and Jake had no doubt that the desert-dog was dead. Something had crept up behind it, and when the big overhead light went out—

There were still lights on down there, he saw: a double white row that might have been streetlights in “Pleasantville,” yellow circles that were probably arc-sodiums along the various paths of what Susannah was calling Breaker U . . . and spotlights running random patterns across the dark.

No, Jake thought, not spotlights. Searchlights. Like in a prison movie. “Let’s go back,” he said. “There’s nothing to see anymore, and I don’t like it out here in the dark.”

Roland agreed. They followed him in single file, with Eddie carrying Susannah and Jake walking behind them with Oy at his heel. He kept expecting a second desert-dog to take up the cry of the first, but none did.

FOUR

“They were wood,” Jake said. He was sitting cross-legged beneath one of the gas lanterns, letting its welcome white glow shine down on his face.

“Wood,” Eddie agreed.

Susannah hesitated a moment, sensing it was a question of real importance and reviewing what she had seen. Then she also nodded. “Wood, I’m almost positive. *Especially* the one they call Damli House.

A Queen Anne built out of stone or brick and camouflaged to look like wood? It makes no sense.”

“If it fools wandering folk who’d burn it down,” Roland said, “it does. It does make sense.”

Susannah thought about it. He was right, of course, but—

“I still say wood.”

Roland nodded. “So do I.” He had found a large green bottle marked PERRIER. Now he opened it and ascertained that Perrier was water. He took five cups and poured a measure into each. He set them down in front of Jake, Susannah, Eddie, Oy, and himself.

“Do you call me dinh?” he asked Eddie.

“Yes, Roland, you know I do.”

“Will you share khef with me, and drink this water?”

“Yes, if you like.” Eddie had been smiling, but now he wasn’t. The feeling was back, and it was strong. Ka-shume, a rueful word he did not yet know.

“Drink, bondsman.”

Eddie didn’t exactly like being called bondsman, but he drank his water. Roland knelt before him and put a brief, dry kiss on Eddie’s lips. “I love you, Eddie,” he said, and outside in the ruin that was Thunderclap, a desert wind arose, carrying gritty poisoned dust.

“Why . . . I love you, too,” Eddie said. It was surprised out of him. “What’s wrong? And don’t tell me nothing is, because I feel it.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Roland said, smiling, but Jake had never heard the gunslinger sound so sad. It terrified him. “It’s only ka-shume, and it comes to every ka-tet that ever was . . . but now, while we are whole, we share our water. We share our khef. ’Tis a jolly thing to do.”

He looked at Susannah.

“Do you call me dinh?”

“Yes, Roland, I call you dinh.” She looked very pale, but perhaps it was only the white light from the gas lanterns.

“Will you share khef with me, and drink this water?”

“With pleasure,” said she, and took up the plastic cup.

“Drink, bondswoman.”

She drank, her grave dark eyes never leaving his. She thought of the voices she’d heard in her dream of the Oxford jail-cell: this one

dead, that one dead, t'other one dead; O Discordia, and the shadows grow deeper.

Roland kissed her mouth. "I love you, Susannah."

"I love you, too."

The gunslinger turned to Jake. "Do you call me dinh?"

"Yes," Jake said. There was no question about *his* pallor; even his lips were ashy. "Ka-shume means death, doesn't it? Which one of us will it be?"

"I know not," Roland said, "and the shadow may yet lift from us, for the wheel's still in spin. Did you not feel ka-shume when you and Callahan went into the place of the vampires?"

"Yes."

"Ka-shume for both?"

"Yes."

"Yet here you are. Our ka-tet is strong, and has survived many dangers. It may survive this one, too."

"But I feel—"

"Yes," Roland said. His voice was kind, but that awful look was in his eyes. The look that was beyond mere sadness, the one that said this would be whatever it was, but the Tower was beyond, the Dark Tower was beyond and it was there that he dwelt, heart and soul, ka and khef. "Yes, I feel it, too. So do we all. Which is why we take water, which is to say fellowship, one with the other. Will you share khef with me, and share this water?"

"Yes."

"Drink, bondsman."

Jake did. Then, before Roland could kiss him, he dropped the cup, flung his arms about the gunslinger's neck, and whispered fiercely into his ear: "Roland, I love you."

"I love you, too," he said, and released him. Outside, the wind gusted again. Jake waited for something to howl—perhaps in triumph—but nothing did.

Smiling, Roland turned to the billy-bumbler.

"Oy of Mid-World, do you call me dinh?"

"Dinh!" Oy said.

"Will you share khef with me, and this water?"

"Khaf! Wat'!"

“Drink, bondsman.”

Oy inserted his snout into his plastic cup—an act of some delicacy—and lapped until the water was gone. Then he looked up expectantly. There were beads of Perrier on his whiskers.

“Oy, I love you,” Roland said, and leaned his face within range of the bumbler’s sharp teeth. Oy licked his cheek a single time, then poked his snout back into the glass, hoping for a missed drop or two.

Roland put out his hands. Jake took one and Susannah the other. Soon they were all linked. *Like drunks at the end of an A.A. meeting*, Eddie thought.

“We are ka-tet,” Roland said. “We are one from many. We have shared our water as we have shared our lives and our quest. If one should fall, that one will not be lost, for we are one and will not forget, even in death.”

They held hands a moment longer. Roland was the first to let go.

“What’s your plan?” Susannah asked him. She didn’t call him sugar; never called him that or any other endearment ever again, so far as Jake was aware. “Will you tell us?”

Roland nodded toward the Wollensak tape recorder, still sitting on the barrel. “Perhaps we should listen to that first,” he said. “I do have a plan of sorts, but what Brautigan has to say might help with some of the details.”

FIVE

Night in Thunderclap is the very definition of darkness: no moon, no stars. Yet if we were to stand outside the cave where Roland and his tet have just shared khef and will now listen to the tapes Ted Brautigan has left them, we’d see two red coals floating in that wind-driven darkness. If we were to climb the path up the side of Steek-Tete toward those floating coals (a dangerous proposition in the dark), we’d eventually come upon a seven-legged spider now crouched over the queerly deflated body of a mutie coyote. This can-toi-tete was a literally misbegotten thing in life, with the stub of a fifth leg jutting from its chest and a jellylike mass of flesh hanging down between its rear legs like a deformed udder, but its flesh nourishes Mordred, and its blood—taken in a series of long, steaming gulps—is as sweet as a

dessert wine. There are, in truth, all sorts of things to eat over here. Mordred has no friends to lift him from place to place via the seven-league boots of teleportation, but he found his journey from Thunderclap Station to Steek-Tete far from arduous.

He has overheard enough to be sure of what his father is planning: a surprise attack on the facility below. They're badly outnumbered, but Roland's band of shooters is fiercely devoted to him, and surprise is ever a powerful weapon.

And gunslingers are what Jake would call *fou*, crazy when their blood is up, and afraid of nothing. Such insanity is an even more powerful weapon.

Mordred was born with a fair amount of inbred knowledge, it seems. He knows, for instance, that his Red Father, possessed of such information as Mordred now has, would have sent word of the gunslinger's presence at once to the Devar-Toi's Master or Security Chief. And then, sometime later tonight, the ka-tet out of Mid-World would have found *themselves* ambushed. Killed in their sleep, mayhap, thus allowing the Breakers to continue the King's work. Mordred wasn't born with a knowledge of that work, but he's capable of logic and his ears are sharp. He now understands what the gunslingers are about: they have come here to break the Breakers.

He could stop it, true, but Mordred feels no interest in his Red Father's plans or ambitions. What he most truly enjoys, he's discovering, is the bitter loneliness of *outside*. Of watching with the cold interest of a child watching life and death and war and peace through the glass wall of the antfarm on his bureau.

Would he let yon ki'-dam actually kill his White Father? Oh, probably not. Mordred is reserving that pleasure for himself, and he has his reasons; already he has his reasons. But as for the others—the young man, the shor'-leg woman, the kid—yes, if ki'-dam Prentiss gets the upper hand, by all means let him kill any or all three of them. As for Mordred Deschain, he will let the game play out straight. He will watch. He will listen. He will hear the screams and smell the burning and watch the blood soak into the ground. And then, if he judges that Roland won't win his throw, he, Mordred, will step in. On behalf of the Crimson King, if it seems like a good idea, but really on his own

behalf, and for his own reason, which is really quite simple: *Mordred's a-hungry.*

And if Roland and his ka-tet should win their throw? Win and press on to the Tower? Mordred doesn't really think it will happen, for he is in his own strange way a member of their ka-tet, he shares their khuf and feels what they do. He feels the impending break of their fellowship.

Ka-shume! Mordred thinks, smiling. There's a single eye left in the desert-dog's face. One of the hairy black spider-legs caresses it and then plucks it out. Mordred eats it like a grape, then turns back to where the white light of the gas-lanterns spills around the corners of the blanket Roland has hung across the cave's mouth.

Could he go down closer? Close enough to listen?

Mordred thinks he could, especially with the rising wind to mask the sound of his movements. An exciting idea.

He scuttles down the rocky slope toward the errant sparks of light, toward the murmur of the voice from the tape recorder and the thoughts of those listening: his brothers, his sister-mother, the pet billy, and, of course, overseeing them all, Big White Ka-Daddy.

Mordred creeps as close as he dares and then crouches in the cold and windy dark, miserable and enjoying his misery, dreaming his outside dreams. Inside, beyond the blanket, is light. Let them have it, if they like; for now let there be light. Eventually he, Mordred, will put it out. And in the darkness, he will have his pleasure.



CHAPTER VIII: NOTES FROM THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE

ONE

Eddie looked at the others. Jake and Roland were sitting on the sleeping-bags which had been left for them. Oy lay curled up at Jake's feet. Susannah was parked comfortably on the seat of her Cruisin Trike. Eddie nodded, satisfied, and pushed the tape recorder's PLAY button. The reels spun . . . there was silence . . . they spun . . . and silence . . . then, after clearing his throat, Ted Brautigan began to speak. They listened for over four hours, Eddie replacing each empty reel with the next full one, not bothering to rewind.

No one suggested they stop, certainly not Roland, who listened with silent fascination even when his hip began to throb again. Roland thought he understood more, now; certainly he knew they had a real chance to stop what was happening in the compound below them. The knowledge frightened him because their chances of success were slim. The feeling of ka-shume made that clear. And one did not really understand the stakes until one glimpsed the goddess in her white robe, the bitch-goddess whose sleeve fell back to reveal her comely white arm as she beckoned: *Come to me, run to me. Yes, it's possible, you may gain your goal, you may win, so run to me, give me your whole heart. And if I break it? If one of you falls short, falls into the pit of coffah (the place your new friends call hell)? Too bad for you.*

Yes, if one of them fell into coffah and burned within sight of the fountains, that would be too bad, indeed. And the bitch in the white robe? Why, she'd only put her hands on her hips, and throw back her

head, and laugh as the world ended. So much depended on the man whose weary, rational voice now filled the cave. The Dark Tower itself depended on him, for Brautigan was a man of staggering powers.

The surprising thing was that the same could be said of Sheemie.

TWO

“Test, one two . . . test, one two . . . test, test, test. This is Ted Stevens Brautigan and this is a test . . .”

A brief pause. The reels turned, one full, the other now beginning to fill.

“Okay, good. Great, in fact. I wasn’t sure this thing would work, especially here, but it seems fine. I prepared for this by trying to imagine you four—five, counting the boy’s little friend—listening to me, because I’ve always found visualization an excellent technique when preparing some sort of presentation. Unfortunately, in this case it doesn’t work. Sheemie can send me very good mental pictures—brilliant ones, in fact—but Roland is the only one of you he’s actually seen, and him not since the fall of Gilead, when both of them were very young. No disrespect, fellows, but I suspect the Roland now coming toward Thunderclap looks hardly anything like the young man my friend Sheemie so worshipped.

“Where are you now, Roland? In Maine, looking for the writer? The one who also created me, after a fashion? In New York, looking for Eddie’s wife? Are any of you even still alive? I know the chances of you reaching Thunderclap aren’t good; ka is drawing you to the Devar-Toi, but a very powerful anti-ka, set in motion by the one you call the Crimson King, is working against you and your tet in a thousand ways. All the same . . .

“Was it Emily Dickinson who called hope the thing with feathers? I can’t remember. There are a great many things I can’t remember any longer, but it seems I still remember how to fight. Maybe that’s a good thing. I *hope* it’s a good thing.

“Has it crossed your mind to wonder where I’m recording this, lady and gentlemen?”

It hadn’t. They simply sat, mesmerized by the slightly dusty sound of Brautigan’s voice, passing a bottle of Perrier and a tin filled with

graham crackers back and forth.

“I’ll tell you,” Brautigan went on, “partly because the three of you from America will surely find it amusing, but mostly because you may find it useful in formulating a plan to destroy what’s going on in Algul Siento.

“As I speak, I’m sitting on a chair made of slab chocolate. The seat is a big blue marshmallow, and I doubt if the air mattresses we’re planning to leave you could be any more comfortable. You’d think such a seat would be sticky, but it’s not. The walls of this room—and the kitchen I can see if I look through the gumdrop arch to my left—are made of green, yellow, and red candy. Lick the green one and you taste lime. Lick the red one and you taste raspberry. Although taste (in any sense of that slippery word) had very little to do with Sheemie’s choices, or so I believe; I think he simply has a child’s love of bright primary colors.”

Roland was nodding and smiling a little.

“Although I must tell you,” the voice from the tape recorder said dryly, “I’d be happy to have at least one room with a slightly more reserved décor. Something in blue, perhaps. Earth-tones would be even better.

“Speaking of earth tones, the stairs are also chocolate. The banister’s a candy-cane. One cannot, however, say ‘the stairs going up to the second floor,’ because there *is* no second floor. Through the window you can see cars that look suspiciously like bonbons going by, and the street itself looks like licorice. But if you open the door and take more than a single step toward Twizzler Avenue, you find yourself back where you started. In what we may as well call ‘the real world,’ for want of a better term.

“Gingerbread House—which is what we call it because that’s what you always smell in here, warm gingerbread, just out of the oven—is as much Dinky’s creation as it is Sheemie’s. Dink wound up in the Corbett House dorm with Sheemie, and heard Sheemie crying himself to sleep one night. A lot of people would have passed by on the other side in a case like that, and I realize that no one in the world looks less like the Good Samaritan than Dinky Earnshaw, but instead of passing by he knocked on the door of Sheemie’s suite and asked if he could come in.

“Ask him about it now and Dinky will tell you it was no big deal. ‘I was new in the place, I was lonely, I wanted to make some friends,’ he’ll say. ‘Hearing a guy bawling like that, it hit me that *he* might want a friend, too.’ As though it were the most natural thing in the world. In a lot of places that might be true, but not in Algul Siento. And you need to understand that above all else, I think, if you’re going to understand *us*. So forgive me if I seem to dwell on the point.

“Some of the hume guards call us morks, after a space alien in some television comedy. And morks are the most selfish people on Earth. Antisocial? Not exactly. Some are *extremely* social, but only insofar as it will get them what they currently want or need. Very few morks are sociopaths, but most sociopaths are morks, if you understand what I’m saying. The most famous, and thank God the low men never brought him over here, was a mass murderer named Ted Bundy.

“If you have an extra cigarette or two, no one can be more sympathetic—or admiring—than a mork in need of a smoke. Once he’s got it, though, he’s gone.

“Most morks—I’m talking ninety-eight or -nine out of a hundred—would have heard crying behind that closed door and never so much as slowed down on their way to wherever. Dinky knocked and asked if he could come in, even though he was new in the place and justifiably confused (he also thought he was going to be punished for murdering his previous boss, but that’s a story for another day).

“And we should look at Sheemie’s side of it. Once again, I’d say ninety-eight or even ninety-nine morks out of a hundred would have responded to a question like that by shouting ‘Get lost!’ or even ‘Fuck off!’ Why? Because we are exquisitely aware that we’re different from most people, and that it’s a difference most people don’t like. Any more than the Neanderthals liked the first Cro-Magnons in the neighborhood, I would imagine. Morks don’t like to be caught off-guard.”

A pause. The reels spun. All four of them could sense Brautigan thinking hard.

“No, that’s not quite right,” he said at last. “What morks don’t like is to be caught in an emotionally vulnerable state. Angry, happy, in

tears or fits of hysterical laughter, anything like that. It would be like you fellows going into a dangerous situation without your guns.

“For a long time, I was alone here. I was a mork who cared, whether I liked it or not. Then there was Sheemie, brave enough to accept comfort if comfort was offered. And Dink, who was willing to reach out. Most morks are selfish introverts masquerading as rugged individualists—they want the world to see them as Dan’l Boone types—and the Algul staff loves it, believe me. No community is easier to govern than one that rejects the very concept of community. Do you see why I was attracted to Sheemie and Dinky, and how lucky I was to find them?”

Susannah’s hand crept into Eddie’s. He took it and squeezed it gently.

“Sheemie was afraid of the dark,” Ted continued. “The low men—I call em all low men, although there are humes and taheen at work here as well as can-toi—have a dozen sophisticated tests for psychic potential, but they couldn’t seem to realize that they had caught a halfwit who was simply afraid of the dark. Their bad luck.

“Dinky understood the problem right away, and solved it by telling Sheemie stories. The first ones were fairy-tales, and one of them was ‘Hansel and Gretel.’ Sheemie was fascinated by the idea of a candy house, and kept asking Dinky for more details. So, you see, it was Dinky who actually thought of the chocolate chairs with the marshmallow seats, the gumdrop arch, and the candy-cane banister. For a little while there *was* a second floor; it had the beds of the Three Bears in it. But Sheemie never cared much for that story, and when it slipped his mind, the upstairs of Casa Gingerbread . . .” Ted Brautigan chuckled. “Well, I suppose you could say it biodegraded.

“In any case, I believe that this place I’m in is actually a fistula in time, or . . .” Another pause. A sigh. Then: “Look, there are a billion universes comprising a billion realities. That’s something I’ve come to realize since being hauled back from what the ki’dam insists on calling ‘my little vacation in Connecticut.’ Smarmy son of a bitch!”

Real hate in Brautigan’s voice, Roland thought, and that was good. Hate was good. It was useful.

“Those realities are like a hall of mirrors, only no two reflections are exactly the same. I may come back to that image eventually, but

not yet. What I want you to understand for now—or simply accept—is that reality is *organic*, reality is *alive*. It's something like a muscle. What Sheemie does is poke a hole in that muscle with a mental hypo. He only has a needle like this because he's special—"

"Because he's a mork," Eddie murmured.

"Hush!" Susannah said.

"—using it," Brautigan went on.

(Roland considered rewinding in order to pick up the missing words and decided they didn't matter.)

"It's a place outside of time, outside of reality. I know you understand a little bit about the function of the Dark Tower; you understand its unifying purpose. Well, think of Gingerbread House as a balcony on the Tower: when we come here, we're outside the Tower but still attached *to* the Tower. It's a real place—real enough so I've come back from it with candy-stains on my hands and clothes—but it's a place only Sheemie Ruiz can access. And once we're there, it's whatever he wants it to be. One wonders, Roland, if you or your friends had any inkling of what Sheemie truly was and what he could do when you met him in Mejis."

At this, Roland reached out and pushed the STOP button on the tape recorder. "We knew he was . . . odd," he told the others. "We knew he was special. Sometimes Cuthbert would say, 'What *is* it about that boy? He makes my skin itch!' And then he showed up in Gilead, he and his mule, Cappi. Claimed to have followed us. And we *knew* that was impossible, but so much was happening by then that a saloon-boy from Mejis—not bright but cheerful and helpful—was the least of our worries."

"He teleported, didn't he?" Jake asked.

Roland, who had never even heard the word before today, nodded immediately. "At least part of the distance; he had to have. For one thing, how else could he have crossed the Xay River? There was only the one bridge, a thing made out of ropes, and once we were across, Alain cut it. We watched it fall into the water a thousand feet below."

"Maybe he went around," Jake said.

Roland nodded. "Maybe he did . . . but it would have taken him at least six hundred wheels out of his way."

Susannah whistled.

Eddie waited to see if Roland had more to say. When it was clear he didn't, Eddie leaned forward and pushed the PLAY button again. Ted's voice filled the cave once more.

"Sheemie's a teleport. Dinky himself is a precog . . . among other things. Unfortunately, a good many avenues into the future are blocked to him. If you're wondering if young sai Earnshaw knows how all this is going to turn out, the answer is no.

"In any case, there's this hypodermic hole in the living flesh of reality . . . this balcony on the flank of the Dark Tower . . . this Gingerbread House. A real place, as hard as that might be to believe. It's here that we'll store the weapons and camping gear we eventually mean to leave for you in one of the caves on the far side of Steek-Tete, and it's here that I'm making this tape. When I left my room with this old-fashioned but fearsomely efficient machine under my arm, it was 10:14 AM, BHST—Blue Heaven Standard Time. When I return, it will still be 10:14 AM. No matter how long I stay. That is only one of the terribly convenient things about Gingerbread House.

"You need to understand—perhaps Sheemie's old friend Roland already does—that we are three rebels in a society dedicated to the idea of going along to get along, even if it means the end of existence . . . and sooner rather than later. We have a number of extremely useful talents, and by pooling them we've managed to stay one step ahead. But if Prentiss or Finli o' Tego—he's Prentiss's Security Chief—finds out what we're trying to do, Dinky would be worm-food by nightfall. Sheemie as well, quite likely. I'd probably be safe awhile longer, for reasons I'll get to, but if Pimli Prentiss found out we were trying to bring a true gunslinger into his affairs—one who may already have orchestrated the deaths of over five dozen Greencloaks not far from here—even my life might not be safe." A pause. "Worthless thing that it is."

There was a longer pause. The reel that had been empty was now half-full. "Listen, then," Brautigan said, "and I'll tell you the story of an unfortunate and unlucky man. It may be a longer story than you have time to listen to; if that be the case, I'm sure at least three of you will understand the use of the button labeled FF. As for me, I'm in a place where clocks are obsolete and broccoli is no doubt prohibited by law. I have all the time in the world."

Eddie was again struck by how weary the man sounded.

“I’d just suggest that you not fast-forward unless you really have to. As I’ve said, there may be something here that can help you, although I don’t know what. I’m simply too close to it. And I’m tired of keeping my guard up, not just when I’m awake but when I’m sleeping, too. If I wasn’t able to slip away to Gingerbread House every now and again and sleep with no defenses, Finli’s can-toi boys would surely have bagged the three of us a long time ago. There’s a sofa in the corner, also made out of those wonderful non-stick marshmallows. I can go there and lie down and have the nightmares I need to have in order to keep my sanity. Then I can go back to the Devar-Toi, where my job isn’t just protecting myself but protecting Sheemie and Dink, too. Making sure that when we go about our covert business, it appears to the guards and their fucking telemetry that we were right where we belonged the whole time: in our suites, in The Study, maybe taking in a movie at the Gem or grabbing ice cream sodas at Henry Graham’s Drug Store and Fountain afterward. It also means continuing to Break, and every day I can feel the Beam we’re currently working on—Bear and Turtle—bending more and more.

“Get here quick, boys. That’s my wish for you. Get here just as quick as ever you can. Because it isn’t just a question of me slipping up, you know. Dinky’s got a terrible temper and a habit of going off on foul-mouthed tirades if someone pushes his hot-buttons. He could say the wrong thing in a state like that. And Sheemie does his best, but if someone were to ask him the wrong question or catch him doing the wrong thing when I’m not around to fix it . . .”

Brautigan didn’t finish that particular thought. As far as his listeners were concerned, he didn’t need to.

THREE

When he begins again, it’s to tell them he was born in Milford, Connecticut, in the year 1898. We have all heard similar introductory lines, enough to know that they signal—for better or worse—the onset of autobiography. Yet as they listen to that voice, the gunslingers are visited by another familiarity; this is true even of Oy. At first they’re not able to put their finger on it, but in time it comes to them. The story of Ted Brautigan, a Wandering Accountant instead

of a Wandering Priest, is in many ways similar to that of Pere Donald Callahan. They could almost be twins. And the sixth listener—the one beyond the blanket-blocked cave entrance in the windy dark—hears with growing sympathy and understanding. Why not? Booze isn't a major player in Brautigan's story, as it was in the Pere's, but it's still a story of addiction and isolation, the story of an outsider.

FOUR

At the age of eighteen, Theodore Brautigan is accepted into Harvard, where his Uncle Tim went, and Uncle Tim—childless himself—is more than willing to pay for Ted's higher education. And so far as Timothy Atwood knows, what happens is perfectly straightforward: offer made, offer accepted, nephew shines in all the right areas, nephew graduates and prepares to enter uncle's furniture business after six months spent touring post-World War I Europe.

What Uncle Tim doesn't know is that before going to Harvard, Ted tries to enlist in what will soon be known as the American Expeditionary Force. "Son," the doctor tells him, "you've got one hell of a loud heart murmur, and your hearing is substandard. Now are you going to tell me that you came here not knowing those things would get you a red stamp? Because, pardon me if I'm out of line, here, you look too smart for that."

And then Ted Brautigan does something he's never done before, has sworn he never will do. He asks the Army doc to pick a number, not just between one and ten but between one and a thousand. To humor him (it's rainy in Hartford, and that means things are slow in the enlistment office), the doctor thinks of the number 748. Ted gives it back to him. Plus 419 . . . 89 . . . and 997. When Ted invites him to think of a famous person, living or dead, and when Ted tells him Andrew Johnson, not Jackson but Johnson, the doc is finally amazed. He calls over another doc, a friend, and Ted goes through the same rigmarole again . . . with one exception. He asks the second doctor to pick a number between one and a million, then tells the doctor he was thinking of eighty-seven thousand, four hundred and sixteen. The second doctor looks momentarily surprised—stunned, in fact—then covers with a big shitlicking smile. "Sorry, son," he says, "you were only off by a hundred and thirty thousand or so." Ted looks at him, not smiling, not responding to the shitlicking smile in any way at all of which he is aware, but he's eighteen, and still young enough to be flabbergasted by such utter and seemingly pointless

mendacity. Meanwhile, Doc Number Two's shitlicking smile has begun to fade on its own. Doc Number Two turns to Doc Number One and says "Look at his eyes, Sam—look at what's happening to his eyes."

The first doctor tries to shine an ophthalmoscope in Ted's eyes and Ted brushes it impatiently aside. He has access to mirrors and has seen the way his pupils sometimes expand and contract, is aware when it's happening even when there's no mirror handy by a kind of shuttering, stuttering effect in his vision, and it doesn't interest him, especially not now. What interests him now is that Doc Number Two is fucking with him and he doesn't know why. "Write the number down this time," he invites. "Write it down so you can't cheat."

Doc Number Two blusters. Ted reiterates his challenge. Doc Sam produces a piece of paper and a pen and the second doctor takes it. He is actually about to write a number when he reconsiders and tosses the pen on Sam's desk and says: "This is some kind of cheap streetcorner trick, Sam. If you can't see that, you're blind." And stalks away.

*Ted invites Dr. Sam to think of a relative, any relative, and a moment later tells the doctor he's thinking of his brother Guy, who died of appendicitis when Guy was fourteen; ever since, their mother has called Guy Sam's guardian angel. This time Dr. Sam looks as though he's been slapped. At last he's afraid. Whether it's the odd in-and-out movement of Ted's pupils, or the matter-of-fact demonstration of telepathy with no dramatic forehead-rubbing, no "I'm getting a picture . . . wait . . . ," Dr. Sam is finally afraid. He stamps **REJECTED** on Ted's enlistment application with the big red stamp and tries to get rid of him—next case, who wants to go to France and sniff the mustard gas?—but Ted takes his arm in a grip which is gentle but not in the least tentative.*

"Listen to me," says Ted Stevens Brautigan. "I am a genuine telepath. I've suspected it since I was six or seven years old—old enough to know the word—and I've known it for sure since I was sixteen. I could be of great help in Army Intelligence, and my substandard hearing and heart murmur wouldn't matter in such a post. As for the thing with my eyes?" He reaches into his breast pocket, produces a pair of sunglasses, and slips them on. "Ta-da!"

He gives Dr. Sam a tentative smile. It does no good. There is a Sergeant-at-Arms standing at the door of the temporary recruitment office in East Hartford High's physical education department, and the medic summons him. "This fellow is 4-F and I'm tired of arguing with him. Perhaps you'd be good enough to escort him off the premises."

Now it is Ted's arm which is gripped, and none too gently.

“Wait a minute!” Ted says. “There’s something else! Something even more valuable! I don’t know if there’s a word for it, but . . .”

Before he can continue, the Sergeant-at-Arms drags him out and hustles him rapidly down the hall, past several gawking boys and girls almost exactly his own age. There is a word, and he’ll learn it years later, in Blue Heaven. The word is facilitator, and as far as Paul “Pimli” Prentiss is concerned, it makes Ted Stevens Brautigan just about the most valuable hume in the universe.

Not on that day in 1916, though. On that day in 1916, he is dragged briskly down the hallway and deposited on the granite step outside the main doors and told by a man with a foot-thick accent that “Y’all just want t’stay outta heah, boa.” After some consideration, Ted decides the Sergeant-at-Arms isn’t calling him a snake; boa in this context is most likely Dixie for boy.

For a little while Ted just stands where he has been left. He’s thinking What does it take to convince you? and How blind can you be? He can’t believe what just happened to him.

But he has to believe it, because here he is, on the outside. And at the end of a six-mile walk around Hartford he thinks he understands something else as well. They will never believe. None of them. Not ever. They’ll refuse to see that a fellow who could read the collective mind of the German High Command might be mildly useful. A fellow who could tell the Allied High Command where the next big German push was going to come. A fellow who could do a thing like that a few times—maybe even just once or twice!—might be able to end the war by Christmas. But he won’t have the chance because they won’t give it to him. And why? It has something to do with the second doctor changing his number when Ted landed on it, and then refusing to write another one down. Because somewhere down deep they want to fight, and a guy like him would spoil everything.

It’s something like that.

Fuck it, then. He’ll go to Harvard on his uncle’s nickel.

And does. Harvard’s all Dinky told them, and more: Drama, Debate, Harvard Crimson, Mathematical Odd Fellows and, of course, the capper, Phi Beta Crapper. He even saves Unc a few bucks by graduating early.

*He is in the south of France, the war long over, when a telegram reaches him: UNCLE DEAD **STOP** RETURN HOME SOONEST **STOP**.*

*The key word here seemed to be **STOP**.*

God knows it was one of those watershed moments. He went home, yes, and he gave comfort where comfort was due, yes. But instead of stepping into the furniture business, Ted decides to **STOP** his march toward financial success and **START** his march toward financial obscurity. In the course of the man's long story, Roland's ka-tet never once hears Ted Brautigan blame his deliberate anonymity on his outré talent, or on his moment of epiphany: this is one valuable talent that no one in the world wants.

And God, how he comes to understand that! For one thing, his "wild talent" (as the pulp science-fiction magazines sometimes call it) is actually physically dangerous under the right circumstances. Or the wrong ones.

In 1935, in Ohio, it makes Ted Brautigan a murderer.

He has no doubt that some would feel the word is too harsh, but he will be the judge of that in this particular case, thank you oh so very much, and he thinks the word is apt. It's Akron and it's a blue summer dusk and kids are playing kick-the-can at one end of Stossy Avenue and stickball at the other and Brautigan stands on the corner in a summerweight suit, stands by the pole with the white stripe painted on it, the white stripe that means the bus stops here. Behind him is a deserted candystore with a blue NRA eagle in one window and a whitewashed message in the other that says THEIR KILLING THE LITTLE MAN. Ted is just standing there with his scuffed cordovan briefcase and a brown sack—a pork chop for his supper, he got it at Mr. Dale's Fancy Butcher Shop—when all at once somebody runs into him from behind and he's driven into the telephone pole with the white stripe on it. He connects nose-first. His nose breaks. It sprays blood. Then his mouth connects, and he feels his teeth cut into the soft lining of his lips, and all at once his mouth is filled with a salty taste like hot tomato juice. There's a thud in the small of his back and a ripping sound. His trousers are pulled halfway down over his ass by the force of the hit, hanging crooked and twisted, like the pants of a clown, and all at once a guy in a tee-shirt and gabardine slacks with a shiny seat is running off down Stossy Avenue toward the stickball game and that thing flapping in his right hand, flapping like a brown leather tongue, why, that thing is Ted Brautigan's wallet. He has just been mugged out of his wallet, by God!

The purple dusk of that summer night deepens suddenly to full dark, then lightens up again, then deepens once more. It's his eyes, doing the trick that so amazed the second doctor almost twenty years before, but Ted hardly notices. His attention is fixed on the fleeing man, the son of a bitch who just mugged him out of his wallet and spoiled his face in the process. He's never been so

angry in his life, never, and although the thought he sends at the fleeing man is innocuous, almost gentle

(say buddy I would've given you a dollar if you'd asked maybe even two)

it has the deadly weight of a thrown spear. And it was a spear. It takes him some time to fully accept that, but when the time comes he realizes that he's a murderer and if there's a God, Ted Brautigan will someday have to stand at His throne and answer for what he's just done. The fleeing man looks like he stumbles over something, but there's nothing there, only HARRY LOVES BELINDA printed on the cracked sidewalk in fading chalk. The sentiment is surrounded with childish doodles—stars, a comet, a crescent moon—which he will later come to fear. Ted feels like he just took a spear in the middle of the back himself, but he, at least, is still standing. And he didn't mean it. There's that. He knows in his heart that he didn't mean it. He was just . . . surprised into anger.

He picks up his wallet and sees the stickball kids staring at him, their mouths open. He points his wallet at them like some kind of gun with a floppy barrel, and the boy holding the sawed-off broomhandle flinches. It's the flinch even more than the falling body that will haunt Ted's dreams for the next year or so, and then off and on for the rest of his life. Because he likes kids, would never scare one on purpose. And he knows what they are seeing: a man with his pants mostly pulled down so his boxer shorts show (for all he knows his dingus could be hanging out of the fly front, and wouldn't that just be the final magical touch), a wallet in his hand and a loony look on his bloody kisser.

"You didn't see anything!" he shouts at them. "You hear me, now! You hear me! You didn't see anything!"

Then he hitches up his pants. Then he goes back to his briefcase and picks it up, but not the pork chop in the brown paper sack, fuck the pork chop, he lost his appetite along with one of his incisors. Then he takes another look at the body on the sidewalk, and the frightened kids. Then he runs.

Which turns into a career.

FIVE

The end of the second tape pulled free of the hub and made a soft *fwip-fwip-fwip* sound as it turned.

“Jesus,” Susannah said. “Jesus, that poor man.”

“So long ago,” Jake said, and shook his head as if to clear it. To him, the years between his when and Mr. Brautigan’s seemed an unbridgeable chasm.

Eddie picked up the third box and displayed the tape inside, raising his eyebrows at Roland. The gunslinger twirled a finger in his old gesture, the one that said go on, go on.

Eddie threaded the tape through the heads. He’d never done this before, but you didn’t have to be a rocket scientist, as the saying went. The tired voice began again, speaking from the Gingerbread House Dinky Earnshaw had made for Sheemie, a real place created from nothing more than imagination. A balcony on the side of the Dark Tower, Brautigan had called it.

He’d killed the man (by accident, they all would have agreed; they had come to live by the gun and knew the difference between *by accident* and *on purpose* without needing to discuss the matter) around seven in the evening. By nine that night, Brautigan was on a westbound train. Three days later he was scanning the Accountants Wanted ads in the Des Moines newspaper. He knew something about himself by then, knew how careful he would have to be. He could no longer allow himself the luxury of anger even when anger was justified. Ordinarily he was just your garden-variety telepath—could tell you what you had for lunch, could tell you which card was the queen of hearts because the streetcorner sharpie running the monte-con knew—but when angry he had access to this spear, this terrible spear . . .

“And just by the way, that’s not true,” said the voice from the tape recorder. “The part about being just a garden-variety telepath, I mean, and I understood that even when I was a wet-behind-the-ears kid trying to get into the Army. I just didn’t know the word for what I was.”

The word, it turned out, was *facilitator*. And he later became sure that certain folks—certain *talent scouts*—were watching him even then, sizing him up, knowing he was different even in the subset of telepaths but not *how* different. For one thing, telepaths who did not come from the Keystone Earth (it was their phrase) were rare. For another, Ted had come to realize by the mid-nineteen-thirties that

what he had was actually *catching*: if he touched a person while in a state of high emotion, that person for a short time became a telepath. What he hadn't known then was that people who were *already* telepaths became stronger.

Exponentially stronger.

"But that's ahead of my story," he said.

He moved from town to town, a hobo who rode the rods in a passenger car and wearing a suit instead of in a boxcar wearing Oshkosh biballs, never staying in one place long enough to put down roots. And in retrospect, he supposed he knew that even then he was being watched. It was an intuitive thing, or like oddities one sometimes glimpsed from the corner of one's eye. He became aware of a certain *kind* of people, for instance. A few were women, most were men, and all had a taste for loud clothes, rare steak, and fast cars painted in colors as garish as their clothing. Their faces were oddly heavy and strangely inexpressive. It was a look he much later came to associate with dumbbells who'd gotten plastic surgery from quack doctors. During that same twenty-year period—but once again not consciously, only in the corner of his mind's eye—he became aware that no matter what city he was in, those childish simple symbols had a way of turning up on fences and stoops and sidewalks. Stars and comets, ringed planets and crescent moons. Sometimes a red eye. There was often a hopscotch grid in the same area, but not always. Later on, he said, it all fit together in a crazy sort of way, but not back in the thirties and forties and early fifties, when he was drifting. No, back then he'd been a little bit like Docs One and Two, not wanting to see what was right in front of him, because it was . . . disturbing.

And then, right around the time Korea was winding down, he saw The Ad. It promised **THE JOB OF A LIFETIME** and said that if you were **THE MAN WITH THE RIGHT QUALIFICATIONS**, there would be **ABSOLUTELY NO QUESTIONS ASKED**. A number of required skills were enumerated, accountancy being one of them. Brautigan was sure the ad ran in newspapers all over the country; he happened to read it in the *Sacramento Bee*.

"Holy crap!" Jake cried. "That's the same paper Pere Callahan was reading when he found out his friend George Magruder—"

"Hush," Roland said. "Listen."

They listened.

SIX

The tests are administered by humes (a term Ted Brautigan won't know for another few weeks—not until he steps out of the year 1955 and into the no-time of the Algul). The interviewer he eventually meets in San Francisco is also a hume. Ted will learn (among a great many other things) that the disguises the low men wear, most particularly the masks they wear, are not good, not when you're up close and personal. Up close and personal you can see the truth: they are hume/taheen hybrids who take the matter of their becoming with a religious fervor. The easiest way to find yourself wrapped in a low-man bearhug with a set of murderous low-man teeth searching for your carotid artery is to aver that the only two things they are becoming is older and uglier. The red marks on their foreheads—the Eye of the King—usually disappear when they are America-side (or dry up, like temporarily dormant pimples), and the masks take on a weird organic quality, except for behind the ears, where the hairy, tooth-scabbed underflesh shows, and inside the nostrils, where one can see dozens of little moving cilia. But who is so impolite as to look up a fellow's snot-gutters?

Whatever they think, up close and personal there's something definitely wrong with them even when they're America-side, and no one wants to scare the new fish before the net's properly in place. So it's humes (an abbreviation the can-toi won't even use; they find it demeaning, like “nigger” or “vamp”) at the exams, humes in the interview rooms, nothing but humes until later, when they go through one of the working America-side doorways and come out in Thunderclap.

Ted is tested, along with a hundred or so others, in a gymnasium that reminds him of the one back in East Hartford. This one has been filled with rows and rows of study-hall desks (wrestling mats have been considerately laid down to keep the desks' old-fashioned round iron bases from scratching the varnished hardwood), but after the first round of testing—a ninety-minute diagnostic full of math, English, and vocabulary questions—half of them are empty. After the second round, it's three quarters. Round Two consists of some mighty weird questions, highly subjective questions, and in several cases Ted gives an answer in which he does not believe, because he thinks—maybe knows

—that the people giving the test want a different answer from the one he (and most people) would ordinarily give. For instance, there's this little honey:

23. You come to a stop near an over-turned car on a little-traveled road. Trapped in the car is a Young Man crying for rescue. You ask, "Are you hurt, Young Man?" to which he responds, "I don't think so!" In the field nearby is a Satchel filled with Money. You:
- Rescue the Young Man and give him back his Money
 - Rescue the Young Man but insist that the Money be taken to the local Police
 - Take the Money and go on your way, knowing that although the road may be little traveled, someone will be along eventually to free the Young Man
 - None of the above

Had this been a test for the Sacramento PD, Ted would have circled "b" in a heartbeat. He may be little more than a hobo on the road, but his mama didn't raise no fools, thank you oh so very much. That choice would be the correct one in most circumstances, too—the play-it-safe choice, the can't-go-wrong choice. And, as a fall-back position, the one that says "I don't have a frigging clue what this is about but at least I'm honest enough to say so," there's "d."

*Ted circles "c," but not because that is necessarily what he'd do in that situation. On the whole he tends to think that he'd go for "a," presuming he could at least ask the "Young Man" a few questions about where the loot came from. And if outright torture wasn't involved (and he would know, wouldn't he, no matter what the "Young Man" might have to say on the subject), sure, here's your money, Vaya con Dios. And why? Because Ted Brautigan happens to believe that the owner of the defunct candystore had a point: **THEIR KILLING THE LITTLE MAN.***

But he circles "c," and five days later he finds himself in the anteroom of an out-of-business dance studio in San Francisco (his train-fare from Sacramento prepaid), along with three other men and a sullen-looking teenage girl (the girl's the former Tanya Leeds of Bryce, Colorado, as it turns out). Better than four hundred people showed up for the test in the gym, lured by the honeypot ad. Goats, for the most part. Here, however, are four sheep. One per cent. And

even this, as Brautigam will discover in the full course of time, is an amazing catch.

Eventually he is shown into an office marked PRIVATE. It is mostly filled with dusty ballet stuff. A broad-shouldered, hard-faced man in a brown suit sits in a folding chair, incongruously surrounded by filmy pink tutus. Ted thinks, A real toad in an imaginary garden.

The man sits forward, arms on his elephantine thighs. "Mr. Brautigam," he says, "I may or may not be a toad, but I can offer you the job of a lifetime. I can also send you out of here with a handshake and a much-obliged. It depends on the answer to one question. A question about a question, in fact."

The man, whose name turns out to be Frank Armitage, hands Ted a sheet of paper. On it, blown up, is Question 23, the one about the Young Man and the Satchel of Money.

"You circled 'c,'" Frank Armitage says. "So now, with absolutely no hesitation whatever, please tell me why."

"Because 'c' was what you wanted," Ted replies with absolutely no hesitation whatever.

"And how do you know that?"

"Because I'm a telepath," Ted says. "And that's what you're really looking for." He tries to keep his poker face and thinks he succeeds pretty well, but inside he's filled with a great and singing relief. Because he's found a job? No. Because they'll shortly make him an offer that would make the prizes on the new TV quiz shows look tame? No.

Because someone finally wants what he can do.

Because someone finally wants him.

SEVEN

The job offer turned out to be another honeypot, but Brautigam was honest enough in his taped memoir to say he might have gone along even if he'd known the truth.

"Because talent won't be quiet, doesn't know *how* to be quiet," he said. "Whether it's a talent for safe-cracking, thought-reading, or dividing ten-digit numbers in your head, it screams to be used. It never shuts up. It'll wake you in the middle of your tiredest night, screaming, 'Use me, use me, use me! I'm tired of just sitting here! Use me, fuckhead, use me!'"

Jake broke into a roar of pre-adolescent laughter. He covered his mouth but kept laughing through his hands. Oy looked up at him, those black eyes with the gold wedding rings floating in them, grinning fiendishly.

There in the room filled with the frilly pink tutus, his fedora hat cocked back on his crewcut head, Armitage asked if Ted had ever heard of “the South American Seabees.” When Ted replied that he hadn’t, Armitage told him that a consortium of wealthy South American businessmen, mostly Brazilian, had hired a bunch of American engineers, construction workers, and roughnecks in 1946. Over a hundred in all. These were the South American Seabees. The consortium hired them all for a four-year period, and at different pay-grades, but the pay was extremely generous—almost embarrassingly so—at all grades. A ’dozer operator might sign a contract for \$20,000 a year, for instance, which was tall tickets in those days. But there was more: a bonus equal to one year’s pay. A total of \$100,000. If, that was, the fellow would agree to one unusual condition: you go, you work, and you don’t come back until the four years are up or the work is done. You got two days off every week, just like in America, and you got a vacation every year, just like in America, but in the pampas. You couldn’t go back to North America (or even Rio) until your four-year hitch was over. If you died in South America, you got planted there—no one was going to pay to have your body shipped back to Wilkes-Barre. But you got fifty grand up front, and a sixty-day grace period during which you could spend it, save it, invest it, or ride it like a pony. If you chose investment, that fifty grand might be seventy-five when you came waltzing out of the jungle with a bone-deep tan, a whole new set of muscles, and a lifetime of stories to tell. And, of course, once you were out you had what the limeys liked to call “the other half” to put on top of it.

This was like that, Armitage told Ted earnestly. Only the front half would be a cool quarter of a million and the back end half a million.

“Which sounded incredible,” Ted said from the Wollensak. “Of course it did, by jiminy. I didn’t find out until later how incredibly cheap they were buying us, even at those prices. Dinky is particularly eloquent on the subject of their stinginess . . . ‘they’ in this case being all the King’s bureaucrats. He says the Crimson King is trying to bring

about the end of all creation on the budget plan, and of course he's right, but I think even Dinky realizes—although he won't admit it, of course—that if you offer a man too much, he simply refuses to believe it. Or, depending on his imagination (many telepaths and precogs have almost no imagination at all), be *unable* to believe it. In our case the period of indenture was to be six years, with an option to renew, and Armitage needed my decision immediately. Few techniques are so successful, lady and gentlemen, as the one where you boggle your target's mind, freeze him with greed, then blitz him.

“I was duly blitzed, and agreed at once. Armitage told me that my quarter-mil would be in the Seaman's San Francisco Bank as of that afternoon, and I could draw on it as soon as I got down there. I asked him if I had to sign a contract. He reached out one of his hands—big as a ham, it was—and told me *that* was our contract. I asked him where I'd be going and what I'd be doing—all questions I should have asked first, I'm sure you'd agree, but I was so stunned it never crossed my mind.

“Besides, I was pretty sure I knew. I thought I'd be working for the government. Some kind of Cold War deal. The telepathic branch of the CIA or FBI, set up on an island in the Pacific. I remember thinking it would make one hell of a radio play.

“Armitage told me, ‘You'll be traveling far, Ted, but it will also be right next door. And for the time being, that's all I can say. Except to keep your mouth shut about our arrangement during the eight weeks before you actually . . . mmm . . . ship out. Remember that loose lips sink ships. At the risk of inculcating you with paranoia, assume that you are being watched.’

“And of course I *was* watched. Later—*too* later, in a manner of speaking—I was able to replay my last two months in Frisco and realize that the can-toi were watching me the whole time.

“The low men.”

EIGHT

“Armitage and two other humes met us outside the Mark Hopkins Hotel,” said the voice from the tape recorder. “I remember the date with perfect clarity; it was Halloween of 1955. Five o'clock in the afternoon. Me, Jace McGovern, Dave Ittaway, Dick . . . I can't

remember his last name, he died about six months later, Humma said it was pneumonia and the rest of the ki'cans backed him up—ki'can sort of means shit-people or shit-folken, if you're interested—but it was suicide and I knew it if no one else did. The rest . . . well, remember Doc Number Two? The rest were and are like him. 'Don't tell me what I don't want to know, sai, don't mess up my worldview.' Anyway, the last one was Tanya Leeds. Tough little thing . . ."

A pause and a click. Then Ted's voice resumed, sounding temporarily refreshed. The third tape had almost finished. *He must have really burned through the rest of the story*, Eddie thought, and found that the idea disappointed him. Whatever else he was, Ted was a hell of a good tale-spinner.

"Armitage and his colleagues showed up in a Ford station wagon, what we called a woody in those charming days. They drove us inland, to a town called Santa Mira. There was a paved main street. The rest of them were dirt. I remember there were a lot of oil-derricks, looking like praying mantises, sort of . . . although it was dark by then and they were really just shapes against the sky.

"I was expecting a train depot, or maybe a bus with CHARTERED in the destination window. Instead we pulled up to this empty freight depot with a sign reading SANTA MIRA SHIPPING hanging askew on the front and I got a thought, clear as day, from Dick whatever-his-name was. *They're going to kill us*, he was thinking. *They brought us out here to kill us and steal our stuff.*

"If you're not a telepath, you don't know how scary something like that can be. How the surety of it kind of . . . invades your head. I saw Dave Ittaway go pale, and although Tanya didn't make a sound—she was a tough little thing, as I told you—it was bright enough in the car to see there were tears standing in the corners of her eyes.

"I leaned over her, took Dick's hands in mine, and squeezed down on them when he tried to pull away. I thought at him, *They didn't give us a quarter of a mill each, most of it still stashed safe in the Seaman's Bank, so they could bring us out to the williwags and steal our watches.* And Jace thought at me, *I don't even have a watch. I pawned my Gruen two years ago in Albuquerque, and by the time I thought about buying another one—around midnight last night, this was—all the stores were closed and I was too drunk to climb down off the barstool I was on, anyway.*

“That relaxed us, and we all had a laugh. Armitage asked us what we were laughing about and that relaxed us even more, because we had something they didn’t, could communicate in a way they couldn’t. I told him it was nothing, then gave Dick’s hands another little squeeze. It did the job. I . . . facilitated him, I suppose. It was my first time doing that. The first of many. That’s part of the reason I’m so tired; all that facilitating wears a man out.

“Armitage and the others led us inside. The place was deserted, but at the far end there was a door with two words chalked on it, along with those moons and stars. THUNDERCLAP STATION, it said. Well, there *was* no station: no tracks, no buses, no road other than the one we’d used to get there. There were windows on either side of the door and nothing on the other side of the building but a couple of smaller buildings—deserted sheds, one of them just a burnt-out shell—and a lot of scrubland littered with trash.

“Dave Ittaway said, ‘Why are we going out there?’ and one of the others said, ‘You’ll see,’ and we certainly did.

“‘Ladies first,’ Armitage said, and he opened the door.

“It was dark on the other side, but not the same *kind* of dark. It was *darker* dark. If you’ve seen Thunderclap at night, you’ll know. And it sounded different. Old buddy Dick there had some second thoughts and turned around. One of the men pulled a gun. And I’ll never forget what Armitage said. Because he sounded . . . kindly. ‘Too late to back out now,’ he said. ‘Now you can only go forward.’

“And I think right then I knew that business about the six-year plan, and re-upping if we wanted to, was what my friend Bobby Garfield and *his* friend Sully-John would have called just a shuck and jive. Not that we could read it in their thoughts. They were all wearing hats, you see. You never see a low man—or a low lady, for that matter—without a hat on. The men’s looked like plain old fedoras, the sort most guys wore back then, but these were no ordinary lids. They were thinking-caps. Although *anti*-thinking-caps would be more accurate; they muffle the thoughts of the people wearing them. If you try to prog someone who’s wearing one—*prog* is Dinky’s word for thought-reading—you just get a hum with a lot of whispering underneath. Very unpleasant, like the todash chimes. If you’ve heard them, you know. Discourages too much effort, and effort’s the last thing most of

the telepaths in the Algul are interested in. What the Breakers are mostly interested in, lady and gentlemen, is going along to get along. Which only shows up for what it is—monstrous—if you pull back and take the long view. One more thing most Breakers are not into. Quite often you hear a saying—a little poem—around campus, or see it chalked on the walls: ‘Enjoy the cruise, turn on the fan, there’s nothing to lose, so work on your tan.’ It means a lot more than ‘Take it easy.’ The implications of that little piece of doggerel are extremely unpleasant. I wonder if you can see that.”

Eddie thought *he* could, at least, and it occurred to him that his brother Henry would have made an absolutely wonderful Breaker. Always assuming he’d been allowed to take along his heroin and his Creedence Clearwater Revival albums, that was.

A longer pause from Ted, then a rueful sort of laugh.

“I believe it’s time to make a long story a little shorter. We went through the door, leave it at that. If you’ve done it, you know it can be very unpleasant, if the door’s not in tip-top working order. And the door between Santa Mira, California, and Thunderclap was in better shape than some I’ve been through since.

“For a moment there was only darkness on the other side, and the howl of what the taheen call desert-dogs. Then a cluster of lights went on and we saw these . . . these *things* with the heads of birds and weasels and one with the head of a bull, horns and all. Jace screamed, and so did I. Dave Ittaway turned and tried to run, but Armitage grabbed him. Even if he hadn’t, where was there to go? Back through the door? It was closed, and for all I know, that’s a one-way. The only one of us who never made a sound was Tanya, and when she looked at me, what I saw in her eyes and read in her thoughts was relief. Because we knew, you see. Not all the questions were answered, but the two that mattered were. Where were we? In another world. When were we coming back? Never in life. Our money would sit in the Seaman’s of San Francisco until it turned into millions, and no one would ever spend it. We were in for the long haul.

“There was a bus there, with a robot driver named Phil. ‘My name’s Phil, I’m over the hill, but the best news is that I never spill,’ he said. He smelled like lightning and there were all sorts of discordant clicking sounds coming from deep in his guts. Old Phil’s dead now,

dumped in the train and robot graveyard with God alone knows how many others, but they've got enough mechanized help to finish what they've started, I'm sure.

"Dick fainted when we came out on Thunderclap-side, but by the time we could see the lights of the compound, he'd come around again. Tanya had his head in her lap, and I remember how gratefully he was looking up at her. It's funny what you remember, isn't it? They checked us in at the gate. Assigned us our dorms, assigned us our suites, saw that we were fed . . . and a damned fine meal it was. The first of many.

"The next day, we went to work. And, barring my little 'vacation in Connecticut,' we've been working ever since."

Another pause. Then:

"God help us, we've been working ever since. And, God forgive us, most of us have been happy. Because the only thing talent wants is to be used."

NINE

He tells them of his first few shifts in The Study, and his realization—not gradual but almost immediate—that they are not here to search out spies or read the thoughts of Russian scientists, "or any of that space-shot nonsense," as Dinky would say (not that Dinky was there at first, although Sheemie was). No, what they are doing is breaking something. He can feel it, not just in the sky above Algul Siento but everywhere around them, even under their feet.

Yet he is content enough. The food is good, and although his sexual appetites have subsided quite a bit over the years, he's not a bit averse to the odd bonk, just reminding himself every time that sim sex is really nothing but accessorized masturbation. But then, he's had the odd bonk with the odd whore over the years, as many men living on the road have, and he could testify that that sort of sex is also not much different than masturbation; you're putting it to her just as hard as you can, the sweat pouring off you, and she's going "Baby-baby-baby," and all the time wondering if she ought to gas the car and trying to remember which day is double stamps at the Red & White. As with most things in life, you have to use your imagination, and Ted can do that, he's good at the old visualization thing, thank you oh so very much. He likes the roof over his head, he likes the company—the guards are guards, yeah, but

he believes them when they say it's as much their job to keep bad stuff from getting in as it is to make sure the Breakers don't get out. He likes most of the inmates, too, and realizes after a year or two that the inmates need him in some strange way. He's able to comfort them when they get the mean reds; he's able to assuage their crampy waves of homesickness with an hour or so of murmured conversation. And surely this is a good thing. Maybe it's all a good thing—certainly it feels like a good thing. To be homesick is human, but to Break is divine. He tries to explain to Roland and his tet, but the best he can do, the closest he can come, is to say it's like finally being able to scratch that out-of-reach place on your back that always drives you crazy with its mild but persistent itch. He likes to go to The Study, and so do all the others. He likes the feeling of sitting there, of smelling the good wood and good leather, of searching . . . searching . . . and then, suddenly, aahhh. There you are. You're hooked in, swinging like a monkey on a limb. You're breaking, baby, and to break is divine.

Dinky once said that The Study was the only place in the world where he really felt in touch with himself, and that was why he wanted to see it shut down. Burned down, if possible. "Because I know the kind of shit I get up to when I'm in touch with myself," he told Ted. "When I, you know, really get in the groove." And Ted knew exactly what he was talking about. Because The Study was always too good to be true. You sat down, maybe picked up a magazine, looked at pictures of models and margarine, movie stars and motor cars, and you felt your mind rise. The Beam was all around, it was like being in some vast corridor full of force, but your mind always rose to the roof and when it got there it found that big old sliding groove.

Maybe once, just after the Prim withdrew and Gan's voice still echoed in the rooms of the macroverse, the Beams were smooth and polished, but those days are gone. Now the Way of the Bear and the Turtle is lumpy and eroded, full of coves and cols and bays and cracks, plenty of places to get your fingers in and take hold, and sometimes you drag at it and sometimes you can feel yourself worming your way into it like a drop of acid that can think. All these sensations are intensely pleasurable. Sexy.

And for Ted there's something else, as well, although he doesn't know he's the only one who's got it until Trampas tells him. Trampas never means to tell him anything, but he's got this lousy case of eczema, you see, and it changes everything. Hard to believe a flaky scalp might be responsible for saving the Dark Tower, but the idea's not entirely farfetched.

Not entirely farfetched at all.

TEN

“There are about a hundred and eighty full-time personnel at work in the Algul,” Ted said. “I’m not the guy to tell anyone how to do his job, but that’s something you may want to write down, or at least remember. Roughly speaking, it’s sixty per eight-hour shift and split twenty-twenty-twenty. Taheen have the sharpest eyes and generally man the watchtowers. Humes patrol the outer run of fence. With guns, mind you—hard calibers. Topside there’s Prentiss, the Master, and Finli o’ Tego, the Security Chief—hume and taheen, respectively—but most of the floaters are can-toi . . . the low men, you understand.

“Most low men don’t get along with the Breakers; a little stiff camaraderie is the best they can do. Dinky told me once that they’re jealous of us because we’re what he calls ‘finished humes.’ Like the hume guards, the can-toi wear thinking-caps when they’re on duty so we can’t prog them. The fact is most Breakers haven’t tried to prog anyone or anything but the Beam in years, and maybe can’t, anymore; the mind is also a muscle, and like any other, it atrophies if you don’t use it.”

A pause. A click on the tape. Then:

“I’m not going to be able to finish. I’m disappointed but not entirely surprised. This will have to be my last story, folks. I’m sorry.”

A low sound. A sipping sound, Susannah was quite sure; Ted having another drink of water.

“Have I told you that the taheen don’t need the thinking-caps? They speak perfectly good English, and I’ve sensed from time to time that some have limited proggng abilities of their own, can send and receive—at least a little—but if you dip into them, you get these mind-numbing blasts of what sounds like mental static—white noise. I assumed it was some sort of protective device; Dinky believes it’s the way they actually *think*. Either way, it makes it easier for them. They don’t have to remember to put on hats in the morning when they go out!

“Trampas was one of the can-toi rovers. You might see him one day strolling along Main Street in Pleasantville, or sitting on a bench in the middle of the Mall, usually with some self-help book like *Seven Steps to Positive Thinking*. Then, the next day, there he is leaning against the side of Heartbreak House, taking in the sun. Same with the other can-toi floaters. If there’s a pattern, I’ve never been able to anticipate it, or Dinky either. We don’t think there is one.

“What’s always made Trampas different is a complete lack of that sense of jealousy. He’s actually friendly—or was; in some ways he hardly seemed to be a low man at all. Not many of his can-toi colleagues seem to like him a whole hell of a lot. Which is ironic, you know, because if there really *is* such a thing as *becoming*, then Trampas is one of the few who actually seem to be getting somewhere with it. Simple laughter, for instance. When most low men laugh, it sounds like a basket of rocks rolling down a tin coal-chute: makes you fair shiver, as Tanya says. When Trampas laughs, he sounds a little high-pitched but otherwise normal. Because he *is* laughing, I think. Genuinely laughing. The others are just forcing it.

“Anyway, I struck up a conversation with him one day. On Main Street, this was, outside the Gem. *Star Wars* was back for its umpty-umpth revival. If there’s any movie the Breakers never get enough of, it’s *Star Wars*.

“I asked him if he knew where his name came from. He said yes, of course, from his clan-fam. Each can-toi is given a hume name by his clan-fam at some point in his development; it’s a kind of maturity-marker. Dinky says they get that name the first time they successfully whack off, but that’s just Dinky being Dinky. The fact is we don’t know and it doesn’t matter, but some of the names are pretty hilarious. There’s one fellow who looks like Rondo Hatton, a film actor from the thirties who suffered from acromegaly and got work playing monsters and psychopaths, but his name is Thomas Carlyle. There’s another one named Beowulf and a fellow named Van Gogh Baez.”

Susannah, a Bleecker Street folkie from way back, put her face in her hands to stifle a gust of giggles.

“Anyway, I told him that Trampas was a character from a famous Western novel called *The Virginian*. Only second banana to the actual hero, true, but Trampas has got the one line from the book everyone

remembers: ‘*Smile* when you say that!’ It tickled our Trampas, and I ended up telling him the whole plot of the book over cups of drug-store coffee.

“We became friends. I’d tell him what was going on in our little community of Breakers, and he’d tell me all sorts of interesting but innocent things about what was going on over on *his* side of the fence. He also complained about his eczema, which made his head itch terribly. He kept lifting his hat—this little beanie-type of thing, almost like a *yarmulke*, only made of denim—to scratch underneath. He claimed that was the worst place of all, even worse than down there on your makieman. And little by little, I realized that every time he lifted his beanie to scratch, I could read his thoughts. Not just the ones on top but *all* of them. If I was fast—and I learned to be—I could pick and choose, exactly the way you’d pick and choose articles in an encyclopedia by turning the pages. Only it wasn’t really like that; it was more like someone turning a radio on and off during a news broadcast.”

“Holy shit,” Eddie said, and took another graham cracker. He wished mightily for milk to dip them in; graham crackers without milk were almost like Oreos without the white stuff in the middle.

“Imagine turning a radio or a TV on full-blast,” Ted said in his rusty, failing voice, “and then turning it off again . . . justasquick.” He purposely ran this together, and they all smiled—even Roland. “That’ll give you the idea. Now I’ll tell you what I learned. I suspect you know it already, but I just can’t take the risk that you don’t. It’s too important.

“There is a Tower, lady and gentlemen, as you *must* know. At one time six beams crisscrossed there, both taking power from it—it’s some kind of unimaginable power-source—and lending support, the way guy-wires support a radio tower. Four of these Beams are now gone, the fourth very recently. The only two remaining are the Beam of the Bear, Way of the Turtle—Shardik’s Beam—and the Beam of the Elephant, Way of the Wolf—some call that one Gan’s Beam.

“I wonder if you can imagine my horror at discovering what I’d actually been doing in The Study. When I’d been scratching that innocent itch. Although I knew all along that it was something important, *knew* it.

“And there was something worse, something I *hadn't* suspected, something that applied only to me. I'd known that I was different in some ways; for one thing, I seemed to be the only Breaker with an ounce of compassion in my makeup. When they've got the mean reds, I am, as I told you, the one they come to. Pimli Prentiss, the Master, married Tanya and Joey Rastosovich—insisted on it, wouldn't hear a word against the idea, kept saying that it was his privilege and his responsibility, he was just like the captain on an old cruise-ship—and of course they let him do it. But afterward, they came to my rooms and Tanya said, 'You marry us, Ted. Then we'll really be married.'

“And sometimes I ask myself, 'Did you think that was all it was? Before you started visiting with Trampas, and listening every time he lifted up his cap to scratch, did you truly think that having a little pity and a little love in your soul were the only things that set you apart from the others? Or were you fooling yourself about that, too?'

“I don't know for sure, but maybe I can find myself innocent on that particular charge. I really did not understand that my talent goes far beyond propping and Breaking. I'm like a microphone for a singer or a steroid for a muscle. I . . . *hype* them. Say there's a unit of force—call it *darks*, all right? In The Study, twenty or thirty people might be able to put out fifty darks an hour without me. *With* me? Maybe it jumps to five *hundred* darks an hour. And it jumps all at once.

“Listening to Trampas's head, I came to see that they considered me the catch of the century, maybe of all time, the one truly indispensable Breaker. I'd already helped them to snap one Beam and I was cutting *centuries* off their work on Shardik's Beam. And when Shardik's Beam snaps, lady and gentlemen, Gan's can only last a little while. And when Gan's Beam also snaps, the Dark Tower will fall, creation will end, and the very Eye of Existence will turn blind.

“How I ever kept Trampas from seeing my distress I don't know. And I've reason to believe that I didn't keep as complete a poker face as I thought at the time.

“I knew I had to get out. And that was when Sheemie came to me the first time. I *think* he'd been reading me all along, but even now I don't know for sure, and neither does Dinky. All I know is that one night he came to my room and thought to me, 'I'll make a hole for you, sai, if you want, and you can go boogie-bye-bye.' I asked him what

he meant, and he just looked at me. It's funny how much a single look can say, isn't it? *Don't insult my intelligence. Don't waste my time. Don't waste your own.* I didn't read those thoughts in his mind, not at all. I saw them on his face."

Roland grunted agreement. His brilliant eyes were fixed on the turning reels of the tape recorder.

"I *did* ask him where the hole would come out. He said he didn't know—I'd be taking luck of the draw. All the same, I didn't think it over for long. I was afraid that if I did, I'd find reasons to stay. I said, 'Go ahead, Sheemie—send me boogie-bye-bye.'

"He closed his eyes and concentrated, and all at once the corner of my room was gone. I could see cars going by. They were distorted, but they were actual American cars. I didn't argue or question any more, I just went for it. I wasn't completely sure I could go through into that other world, but I'd reached a point where I hardly even cared. I thought dying might be the best thing I could do. It would slow them down, at least.

"And just before I took the plunge, Sheemie thought to me, 'Look for my friend Will Dearborn. His real name is Roland. His friends are dead, but I know he's not, because I can hear him. He's a gunslinger, and he has new friends. Bring them here and they'll make the bad folks stop hurting the Beam, the way he made Jonas and his friends stop when they were going to kill me.' For Sheemie, this was a sermon.

"I closed my eyes and went through. There was a brief sensation of being turned on my head, but that was all. No chimes, no nausea. Really quite pleasant, at least compared to the Santa Mira doorway. I came out on my hands and knees beside a busy highway. There was a piece of newspaper blowing around in the weeds. I picked it up and saw I'd landed in April of 1960, almost five years after Armitage and his friends herded us through the door in Santa Mira, on the other side of the country. I was looking at a piece of the *Hartford Courant*, you see. And the road turned out to be the Merritt Parkway."

"Sheemie can make magic doors!" Roland cried. He had been cleaning his revolver as he listened, but now he put it aside. "That's what teleporting is! *That's what it means!*"

“Hush, Roland,” Susannah said. “This must be his Connecticut adventure. I want to hear this part.”

ELEVEN

But none of them hear about Ted’s Connecticut adventure. He simply calls it “a story for another day” and tells his listeners that he was caught in Bridgeport while trying to accumulate enough cash to disappear permanently. The low men bundled him into a car, drove him to New York, and took him to a ribjoint called the Dixie Pig. From there to Fedic, and from Fedic to Thunderclap Station; from the station right back to the Devar-Toi, oh Ted, so good to see you, welcome back.

The fourth tape is now three-quarters done, and Ted’s voice is little more than a croak. Nevertheless, he gamely pushes on.

“I hadn’t been gone long, but over here time had taken one of its erratic slips forward. Humma o’ Tego was out, possibly because of me, and Prentiss of New Jersey, the ki’-dam, was in. He and Finli interrogated me in the Master’s suite a good many times. There was no physical torture—I guess they still reckoned me too important to chance spoiling me—but there was a lot of discomfort and plenty of mind-games. They also made it clear that if I tried to run again, my Connecticut friends would be put to death. I said, ‘Don’t you boys get it? If I keep doing my job, they’re going out, anyway. Everybody’s going out, with the possible exception of the one you call the Crimson King.’

“Prentiss steepled his fingers in the annoying way he has and said, ‘That may be or may not be true, sai, but if it is, we won’t suffer when we “go out,” as you put it. Little Bobby and little Carol, on the other hand . . . not to mention Carol’s mother and Bobby’s friend, Sully-John . . .’ He didn’t have to finish. I still wonder if they knew how terribly frightened they’d made me with that threat against my young friends. And how terribly angry.

“All their questions came down to two things they really wanted to know: Why had I run, and who helped me do it. I could have fallen back on the old name—rank—serial number routine, but decided to chance being a bit more expansive. I’d wanted to run, I said, because I’d gotten a glimmering from some of the can-toi guards about what we were really doing, and I didn’t like the idea. As for how I’d gotten out, I told them I didn’t know. I went to sleep one night, I said, and just woke up beside the Merritt Parkway. They went from scoffing at this story to semi-believing it, mostly because I never varied it a

single jot or tittle, no matter how many times they asked. And of course they already knew how powerful I was, and in ways that were different from the others.

“Do you think you’re a teleport in some subconscious way, sai?” Finli asked me.

“How could I say?” I asked in turn—always answer a question with a question is a good rule to follow during interrogation, I think, as long as it’s a relatively soft interrogation, as this one was. ‘I’ve never sensed any such ability, but of course we don’t always know what’s lurking in our subconscious, do we?’

“You better hope it wasn’t you,” Prentiss said. ‘We can live with almost any wild talent around here except that one. That one, Mr. Brautigan, would spell the end even for such a valued employee as yourself.’ I wasn’t sure I believed that, but later Trampas gave me reason to think Prentiss might have been telling the truth. Anyway, that was my story and I never went beyond it.

“Prentiss’s houseboy, a fellow named Tassa—a hume, if it matters—would bring in cookies and cans of Nozz-A-La—which I like because it tastes a bit like root beer—and Prentiss would offer me all I wanted . . . after, that was, I told them where I’d gotten my information and how I’d escaped Algul Siento. Then the whole round of questions would start again, only this time with Prentiss and the Wease munching cookies and drinking Nozzie. But at some point they’d always give in and allow me a drink and a bite to eat. As interrogators, I’m afraid there just wasn’t enough Nazi in them to make me give up my secrets. They tried to prog me, of course, but . . . have you heard that old saying about never bullshitting a bullshitter?”

Eddie and Susannah both nod. So does Jake, who has heard his father say that during numerous conversations concerning Programming at the Network.

“I bet you have,” Ted resumes. “Well, it’s also fair to say that you can’t prog a progger, at least not one who’s gone beyond a certain level of understanding. And I’d better get to the point before my voice gives out entirely.

“One day about three weeks after the low men hauled me back, Trampas approached me on Main Street in Pleasantville. By then I’d met Dinky, had identified him as a kindred spirit, and was, with his help, getting to know Sheemie better. A lot was going on in addition to my daily interrogations in Warden’s House. I’d hardly even thought about Trampas since returning, but he’d thought of little else than me. As I quickly found out.

“I know the answers to the questions they keep asking you,” he said. “What I don’t know is why you haven’t given me up.”

“I said the idea had never crossed my mind—that tattle-taleing wasn’t the way I’d been raised to do things. And besides, it wasn’t as if they were putting an electrified cattle-prod up my rectum or pulling my fingernails . . . although they might have resorted to such techniques, had it been anyone other than me. The worst they’d done was to make me look at the plate of cookies on Prentiss’s desk for an hour and a half before relenting and letting me have one.

“I was angry at you at first,” Trampas said, “but then I realized—reluctantly—that I might have done the same thing in your place. The first week you were back I didn’t sleep much, I can tell you. I’d lie on my bed there in Damli, expecting them to come for me at any minute. You know what they’d do if they found out it was me, don’t you?”

“I told him I did not. He said that he’d be flogged by Gaskie, Finli’s Second, and then sent raw-backed into the wastes, either to die in the Discordia or to find service in the castle of the Red King. But such a trip would not be easy. Southeast of Fedic one may also contract such things as the Eating Sickness (probably cancer, but a kind that’s very fast, very painful, and very nasty) or what they just call the Crazy. The Children of Roderick commonly suffer from both these problems, and others, as well. The minor skin diseases of Thunderclap—the eczema, pimples, and rashes—are apparently only the beginning of one’s problems in End-World. But for an exile, service in the Court of the Crimson King would be the only hope. Certainly a can-toi such as Trampas couldn’t go to the Callas. They’re closer, granted, and there’s genuine sunshine there, but you can imagine what would happen to low men or the taheen in the Arc of the Callas.”

Roland’s tet can imagine that very well.

“Don’t make too much of it,” I said. “As that new fellow Dinky might say, I don’t put my business on the street. It’s really as simple as that. There’s no chivalry involved.”

“He said he was grateful nevertheless, then looked around and said, very low: ‘I’d pay you back for your kindness, Ted, by telling you to cooperate with them, to the extent that you can. I don’t mean you should get me in trouble, but I don’t want you to get in more trouble yourself, either. They may not need you quite as badly as you may think.’

“And I’d have you hear me well now, lady and gentlemen, for this may be very important; I simply don’t know. All I know for certain is that what

Trampas told me next gave me a terrible deep chill. He said that of all the other-side worlds, there's one that's unique. They call it the Real World. All Trampas seems to know about it is that it's real in the same way Mid-World was, before the Beams began to weaken and Mid-World moved on. In America-side of this special 'Real' World, he says, time sometimes jerks but always runs one way: ahead. And in that world lives a man who also serves as a kind of facilitator; he may even be a mortal guardian of Gan's Beam."

TWELVE

Roland looked at Eddie, and as their eyes met, both mouthed the same word: *King*.

THIRTEEN

"Trampas told me that the Crimson King has tried to kill this man, but ka has ever protected his life. 'They say his song has cast the circle,' Trampas told me, 'although no one seems to know exactly what that means.' Now, however, ka—not the Red King but plain old ka—has decreed that this man, this guardian or whatever he is, should die. He's stopped, you see. Whatever song it was he was supposed to sing, he's stopped, and that has finally made him vulnerable. But not to the Crimson King. Trampas kept telling me that. No, it's ka he's vulnerable to. 'He no longer sings,' Trampas said. 'His song, the one that matters, has ended. He has forgotten the rose.'"

FOURTEEN

In the outer silence, Mordred heard this and then withdrew to ponder it.

FIFTEEN

"Trampas told me all this only so I'd understand I was no longer completely indispensable. Of course they want to keep me; presumably there would be honor in bringing down Shardik's Beam before this man's death could cause Gan's Beam to break."

A pause.

“Do they see the lethal insanity of a race to the brink of oblivion, and then over the edge? Apparently not. If they did, surely they wouldn’t be racing to begin with. Or is it a simple failure of imagination? One doesn’t like to think such a rudimentary failing could bring about the end, yet . . .”

SIXTEEN

Roland, exasperated, twirled his fingers almost as if the old man to whose voice they were listening could see them. He wanted to hear, very well and every word, what the can-toi guard knew about Stephen King, and instead Brautigan had gotten off onto some rambling, discursive sidetrack. It was understandable—the man was clearly exhausted—but there was something here more important than everything else. Eddie knew it, too. Roland could read it on the young man’s strained face. Together they watched the remaining brown tape—now no more than an eighth of an inch deep—melt away.

SEVENTEEN

“. . . yet we’re only poor benighted humies, and I suppose we can’t know about these things, not with any degree of certainty . . .”

He fetches a long, tired sigh. The tape turns, melting off the final reel and running silently and uselessly between the heads. Then, at last:

“I asked this magic man’s name and Trampas said, ‘I know it not, Ted, but I do know there’s no magic in him anymore, for he’s ceased whatever it was that ka meant him to do. If we leave him be, the Ka of Nineteen, which is that of his world, and the Ka of Ninety-nine, which is that of our world, will combine to—”

But there is no more. That is where the tape runs out.

EIGHTEEN

The take-up reel turned and the shiny brown tape-end flapped, making that low *fwip-fwip-fwip* sound until Eddie leaned forward and pressed STOP. He muttered “Fuck!” under his breath.

“Just when it was getting interesting,” Jake said. “And those numbers again. Nineteen . . . and ninety-nine.” He paused, then said

them together. “Nineteen-ninety-nine.” Then a third time. “1999. The Keystone Year in the Keystone World. Where Mia went to have her baby. Where Black Thirteen is now.”

“Keystone World, Keystone Year,” Susannah said. She took the last tape off the spindle, held it up to one of the lamps for a moment, then put it back in its box. “Where time always goes in one direction. Like it’s s’posed to.”

“Gan *created* time,” Roland said. “This is what the old legends say. Gan rose from the void—some tales say from the sea, but both surely mean the *Prim*—and made the world. Then he tipped it with his finger and set it rolling and that was time.”

Something was gathering in the cave. Some revelation. They all felt it, a thing as close to bursting as Mia’s belly had been at the end. Nineteen. Ninety-nine. They had been haunted by these numbers. They had turned up everywhere. They saw them in the sky, saw them written on board fences, heard them in their dreams.

Oy looked up, ears cocked, eyes bright.

Susannah said, “When Mia left the room we were in at the Plaza-Park to go to the Dixie Pig—room 1919, it was—I fell into a kind of trance. I had dreams . . . jailhouse-dreams . . . newscasters announcing that this one, that one, and t’other one had died—”

“You told us,” Eddie said.

She shook her head violently. “Not *all* of it, I didn’t. Because some of it didn’t seem to make any sense. Hearing Dave Garroway say that President Kennedy’s little *boy* was dead, for instance—little John-John, the one who saluted his Daddy’s coffin when the catafalque went by. I didn’t tell you because that part was nuts. Jake, Eddie, had little John-John Kennedy died in your whens? Either of your whens?”

They shook their heads. Jake was not even sure of whom Susannah was speaking.

“But he *did*. In the Keystone World, and in a when beyond any of ours. I bet it was in the when of ’99. So dies the son of the last gunslinger, O Discordia. What I think now is that I was kind of hearing the obituary page from *The Time Traveler’s Weekly*. It was all different times mixed together. John-John Kennedy, then Stephen King. I’d never heard of him, but David Brinkley said he wrote *Salem’s Lot*. That’s the book Father Callahan was in, right?”

Roland and Eddie nodded.

“Father Callahan told us his story.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “But what—”

She overrode him. Her eyes were hazy, distant. Eyes just a look away from understanding. “And then comes Brautigan to the Ka-Tet of Nineteen, and tells *his* tale. And look! Look at the tape counter!”

They leaned over. In the windows were

1999.

“I think King might have written Ted’s story, too,” she said. “Anybody want to take a guess what year *that* story showed up, or *will* show up, in the Keystone World?”

“1999,” Jake said, low. “But not the part we heard. The part we *didn’t* hear. Ted’s Connecticut Adventure.”

“And you met him,” Susannah said, looking at her dinh and her husband. “You met Stephen King.”

They nodded again.

“He made the Pere, he made Brautigan, he made *us*,” she said, as if to herself, then shook her head. “No. ‘All things serve the Beam.’ He . . . he *facilitated* us.”

“Yeah.” Eddie was nodding. “Yeah, okay. That feels just about right.”

“In my dream I was in a cell,” she said. “I was wearing the clothes I had on when I got arrested. And David Brinkley said Stephen King was dead, woe, Discordia—something like that. Brinkley said he was . . .” She paused, frowning. She would have demanded that Roland hypnotize the complete recollection out of her if it had been necessary, but it turned out not to be. “Brinkley said King was killed by a minivan while walking near his home in Lovell, Maine.”

Eddie jerked. Roland sat forward, his eyes burning. “Do you say so?”

Susannah nodded firmly.

“*He bought the house on Turtleback Lane!*” the gunslinger roared. He reached out and took hold of Eddie’s shirt. Eddie seemed not to even notice. “Of *course* he did! Ka speaks and the wind blows! He moved a little further along the Path of the Beam and bought the house where

it's thin! Where we saw the walk-ins! Where we talked to John Cullum and then came back through! Do you doubt it? *Do you doubt it so much as a single goddam bit?*"

Eddie shook his head. Of course he didn't doubt it. It had a ring, like the one you got when you were at the carnival and hit the pedal just right with the mallet, hit it with all your force, and the lead slug flew straight to the top of the post and rang the bell up there. You got a Kewpie doll when you rang the bell, and was that because Stephen King *thought* it was a Kewpie doll? Because King came from the world where Gan started time rolling with His holy finger? Because if *King* says Kewpie, we *all* say Kewpie, and we all say thankya? If he'd somehow gotten the idea that the prize for ringing the Test Your Strength bell at the carnival was a *Cloopie* doll, would *they* say Cloopie? Eddie thought the answer was yes. He thought the answer was yes just as surely as Co-Op City was in Brooklyn.

"David Brinkley said King was fifty-two. You boys met him, so do the math. Could he have been fifty-two in the year of '99?"

"You bet your purity," Eddie said. He tossed Roland a dark, dismayed glance. "And since nineteen's the part we keep running into—Ted Stevens Brautigan, go on, count the letters!—I bet it has to do with more than just the year. Nineteen—"

"It's a date," Jake said flatly. "Sure it is. Keystone Date in Keystone Year in Keystone World. The nineteenth of something, in the year of 1999. Most likely a summer month, because he was out walking."

"*It's summer over there right now,*" Susannah said. "It's June. The 6-month. Turn 6 on its head and you get 9."

"Yeah, and spell dog backward, you get god," Eddie said, but he sounded uneasy.

"I think she's right," Jake said. "I think it's June 19th. That's when King gets turned into roadkill and even the *chance* that he might go back to work on the *Dark Tower* story—*our* story—is kaput. Gan's Beam is lost in the overload. Shardik's Beam is left, but it's already eroded." He looked at Roland, his face pale, his lips almost blue. "It'll snap like a toothpick."

"Maybe it's happened already," Susannah said.

"No," Roland said.

"How can you be sure?" she asked.

He gave her a wintry, humorless smile. "Because," he said, "we'd no longer be here."

NINETEEN

"How can we stop it from happening?" Eddie asked. "That guy Trampas told Ted it was ka."

"Maybe he got it wrong," Jake said, but his voice was thin. Trailing. "It was only a rumor, so maybe he got it wrong. And hey, maybe King's got until July. Or August. Or what about September? It could be September, doesn't that seem likely? September's the 9-month, after all . . ."

They looked at Roland, who was now sitting with his leg stretched out before him. "Here's where it hurts," he said, as if speaking to himself. He touched his right hip . . . then his ribs . . . last the side of his head. "I've been having headaches. Worse and worse. Saw no reason to tell you." He drew his diminished right hand down his right side. "This is where he'll be hit. Hip smashed. Ribs busted. Head crushed. Thrown dead into the ditch. Ka . . . and the end of ka." His eyes cleared and he turned urgently to Susannah. "What date was it when you were in New York? Refresh me."

"June first of 1999."

Roland nodded and looked to Jake. "And you? The same, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then to Fedic . . . a rest . . . and on to Thunderclap." He paused, thinking, then spoke four words with measured emphasis. "There is still time."

"But time moves faster over there—"

"And if it takes one of those hitches—"

"Ka—"

Their words overlapped. Then they fell quiet again, looking at him again.

"We can change ka," Roland said. "It's been done before. There's always a price to pay—kashume, mayhap—but it can be done."

"How do we get there?" Eddie asked.

"There's only one way," Roland said. "Sheemie must send us."

Silence in the cave, except for a distant roll of the thunder that gave this dark land its name.

“We have two jobs,” Eddie said. “The writer and the Breakers. Which comes first?”

“The writer,” Jake said. “While there’s still time to save him.”

But Roland was shaking his head.

“Why not?” Eddie cried. “Ah, man, why *not*? You *know* how slippery time is over there! And it’s oneway! If we miss the window, we’ll never get another chance!”

“But we have to make Shardik’s Beam safe, too,” Roland said.

“Are you saying Ted and this guy Dinky wouldn’t let Sheemie help us unless we help them first?”

“No. Sheemie would do it for me, I’m sure. But suppose something happened to him while we were in the Keystone World? We’d be stranded in 1999.”

“There’s the door on Turtleback Lane—” Eddie began.

“Even if it’s still there in 1999, Eddie, Ted told us that Shardik’s Beam has already started to bend.” Roland shook his head. “My heart says yonder prison is the place to start. If any of you can say different, I will listen, and gladly.”

They were quiet. Outside the cave, the wind blew.

“We need to ask Ted before we make any final decision,” Susannah said at last.

“No,” Jake said.

“No!” Oy agreed. Zero surprise there; if Ake said it, you could take it to the bumbler bank, as far as Oy was concerned.

“Ask *Sheemie*,” Jake said. “Ask Sheemie what *he* thinks we should do.”

Slowly, Roland nodded.



CHAPTER IX: TRACKS ON THE PATH

ONE

When Jake awoke from a night of troubled dreams, most of them set in the Dixie Pig, a thin and listless light was seeping into the cave. In New York, that kind of light had always made him want to skip school and spend the entire day on the sofa, reading books, watching game-shows on TV, and napping the afternoon away. Eddie and Susannah were curled up together inside a single sleeping-bag. Oy had eschewed the bed which had been left him in order to sleep beside Jake. He was curled into a U, snout on left forepaw. Most people would have thought him asleep, but Jake saw the sly glimmer of gold beneath his lids and knew that Oy was peeking. The gunslinger's sleeping-bag was unzipped and empty.

Jake thought about this for a moment or two, then got up and went outside. Oy followed along, padding quietly over the tamped dirt as Jake walked up the trail.

TWO

Roland looked haggard and unwell, but he was squatting on his hunkers, and Jake decided that if he was limber enough to do that, he was probably okay. He squatted beside the gunslinger, hands dangling loosely between his thighs. Roland glanced at him, said nothing, then looked back toward the prison the staff called Algul Siento and the inmates called the Devar-Toi. It was a brightening blur beyond and below them. The sun—electric, atomic, whatever—wasn't shining yet.

Oy plopped down next to Jake with a little *whuffing* sound, then appeared to go back to sleep. Jake wasn't fooled.

"Hile and merry-greet-the-day," Jake said when the silence began to feel oppressive.

Roland nodded. "Merry see, merry be." He looked as merry as a funeral march. The gunslinger who had danced a furious commala by torchlight in Calla Bryn Sturgis might have been a thousand years in his grave.

"How are you, Roland?"

"Good enough to hunker."

"Aye, but how are you?"

Roland glanced at him, then reached into his pocket and brought out his tobacco pouch. "Old and full of aches, as you must know. Would you smoke?"

Jake considered, then nodded.

"They'll be shorts," Roland warned. "There's plenty in my purse I was glad to have back, but not much blow-weed."

"Save it for yourself, if you want."

Roland smiled. "A man who can't bear to share his habits is a man who needs to quit them." He rolled a pair of cigarettes, using some sort of leaf which he tore in two, handed one to Jake, then lit them up with a match he popped alight on his thumbnail. In the still, chill air of Can Steek-Tete, the smoke hung in front of them, then rose slowly, stacking on the air. Jake thought the tobacco was hot, harsh, and stale, but he said no word of complaint. He liked it. He thought of all the times he'd promised himself he wouldn't smoke like his father did—never in life—and now here he was, starting the habit. And with his new father's agreement, if not approval.

Roland reached out a finger and touched Jake's forehead . . . his left cheek . . . his nose . . . his chin. The last touch hurt a little. "Pimples," Roland said. "It's the air of this place." He suspected it was emotional upset, as well—grief over the Pere—but to let Jake know he thought that would likely just increase the boy's unhappiness over Callahan's passing.

"You don't have any," Jake said. "Skin's as clear as a bell. Luck-ee."

"No pimples," Roland agreed, and smoked. Below them in the seeping light was the village. *The peaceful village*, Jake thought, but it

looked more than peaceful; it looked downright dead. Then he saw two figures, little more than specks from here, strolling toward each other. Hume guards patrolling the outer run of the fence, he presumed. They joined together into a single speck long enough for Jake to imagine a bit of their palaver, and then the speck divided again. “No pimples, but my hip hurts like a son of a bitch. Feels like someone opened it in the night and poured it full of broken glass. *Hot* glass. But this is far worse.” He touched the right side of his head. “It feels cracked.”

“You really think it’s Stephen King’s injuries you’re feeling?”

Instead of making a verbal reply, Roland laid the forefinger of his left hand across a circle made by the thumb and pinky of his right: that gesture which meant *I tell you the truth*.

“That’s a bummer,” Jake said. “For him as well as you.”

“Maybe; maybe not. Because, think you, Jake; think you well. Only living things feel pain. What I’m feeling suggests that King won’t be killed instantly. And that means he might be easier to save.”

Jake thought it might only mean King was going to lie beside the road in semi-conscious agony for awhile before expiring, but didn’t like to say so. Let Roland believe what he liked. But there was something else. Something that concerned Jake a lot more, and made him uneasy.

“Roland, may I speak to you dan-dinh?”

The gunslinger nodded. “If you would.” A slight pause. A flick at the left corner of the mouth that wasn’t quite a smile. “If *thee* would.”

Jake gathered his courage. “Why are you so angry now? What are you angry *at*? Or whom?” Now it was his turn to pause. “Is it me?”

Roland’s eyebrows rose, then he barked a laugh. “Not you, Jake. Not a bit. Never in life.”

Jake flushed with pleasure.

“I keep forgetting how strong the touch has become in you. You’d have made a fine Breaker, no doubt.”

This wasn’t an answer, but Jake didn’t bother saying so. And the idea of being a Breaker made him repress a shiver.

“Don’t you know?” Roland asked. “If thee knows I’m what Eddie calls royally pissed, don’t you know why?”

“I could look, but it wouldn’t be polite.” But it was a lot more than that. Jake vaguely remembered a Bible story about Noah getting loaded on the ark, while he and his sons were waiting out the flood. One of the sons had come upon his old man lying drunk on his bunk, and had laughed at him. God had cursed him for it. To peek into Roland’s thoughts wouldn’t be the same as looking—and laughing—while he was drunk, but it was close.

“Thee’s a fine boy,” Roland said. “Fine and good, aye.” And although the gunslinger spoke almost absently, Jake could have died happily enough at that moment. From somewhere beyond and above them came that resonant CLICK! sound, and all at once the special-effects sunbeam speared down on the Devar-Toi. A moment later, faintly, they heard the sound of music: “Hey Jude,” arranged for elevator and supermarket. Time to rise and shine down below. Another day of Breaking had just begun. Although, Jake supposed, down there the Breaking never really stopped.

“Let’s have a game, you and I,” Roland proposed. “You try to get into my head and see who I’m angry at. I’ll try to keep you out.”

Jake shifted position slightly. “That doesn’t sound like a fun game to me, Roland.”

“Nevertheless, I’d play against you.”

“All right, if you want to.”

Jake closed his eyes and called up an image of Roland’s tired, stubbled face. His brilliant blue eyes. He made a door between and slightly above those eyes—a little one, with a brass knob—and tried to open it. For a moment the knob turned. Then it stopped. Jake applied more pressure. The knob began to turn again, then stopped once again. Jake opened his eyes and saw that fine beads of sweat had broken on Roland’s brow.

“This is stupid. I’m making your headache worse,” he said.

“Never mind. Do your best.”

My worst, Jake thought. But if they had to play this game, he wouldn’t draw it out. He closed his eyes again and once again saw the little door between Roland’s tangled brows. This time he applied more force, piling it on quickly. It felt a little like arm-wrestling. After a moment the knob turned and the door opened. Roland grunted,

then uttered a painful laugh. “That’s enough for me,” he said. “By the gods, thee’s strong!”

Jake paid no attention to that. He opened his eyes. “The writer? King? Why are you mad at *him*?”

Roland sighed and cast away the smoldering butt of his cigarette; Jake had already finished with his. “Because we have two jobs to do where we should have only one. Having to do the second one is sai King’s fault. He knew what he was supposed to do, and I think that on some level he knew that doing it would keep him safe. But he was *afraid*. He was *tired*.” Roland’s upper lip curled. “Now his irons are in the fire, and we have to pull them out. It’s going to cost us, and probably a-dearly.”

“You’re angry at him because he’s afraid? But . . .” Jake frowned. “But why wouldn’t he be afraid? He’s only a writer. A tale-spinner, not a gunslinger.”

“I know that,” Roland said, “but I don’t think it was fear that stopped him, Jake, or not *just* fear. He’s lazy, as well. I felt it when I met him, and I’m sure that Eddie did, too. He looked at the job he was made to do and it daunted him and he said to himself, ‘All right, I’ll find an *easier* job, one that’s more to my liking and more to my abilities. And if there’s trouble, they’ll take care of me. They’ll *have* to take care of me.’ And so we do.”

“You didn’t like him.”

“No,” Roland agreed, “I didn’t. Not a bit. Nor trusted him. I’ve met tale-spinners before, Jake, and they’re all cut more or less from the same cloth. They tell tales because they’re afraid of life.”

“Do you say so?” Jake thought it was a dismal idea. He also thought it had the ring of truth.

“I do. But . . .” He shrugged. *It is what it is*, that shrug said.

Ka-shume, Jake thought. If their ka-tet broke, and it was King’s fault . . .

If it was King’s fault, what? Take revenge on him? It was a gunslinger’s thought; it was also a stupid thought, like the idea of taking revenge on God.

“But we’re stuck with it,” Jake finished.

“Aye. That wouldn’t stop me from kicking his yellow, lazy ass if I got the chance, though.”

Jake burst out laughing at that, and the gunslinger smiled. Then Roland got to his feet with a grimace, both hands planted on the ball of his right hip. “*Bugger*,” he growled.

“Hurts bad, huh?”

“Never mind my aches and mollies. Come with me. I’ll show you something more interesting.”

Roland, limping slightly, led Jake to where the path curled around the flank of the lumpy little mountain, presumably bound for the top. Here the gunslinger tried to hunker, grimaced, and settled to one knee, instead. He pointed to the ground with his right hand. “What do you see?”

Jake also dropped to one knee. The ground was littered with pebbles and fallen chunks of rock. Some of this talus had been disturbed, leaving marks in the scree. Beyond the spot where they knelt side by side, two branches of what Jake thought was a mesquite bush had been broken off. He bent forward and smelled the thin and acrid aroma of the sap. Then he examined the marks in the scree again. There were several of them, narrow and not too deep. If they were tracks, they certainly weren’t *human* tracks. Or those of a desert-dog, either.

“Do you know what made these?” Jake asked. “If you do, just say it—don’t make me arm-rattle you for it.”

Roland gave him a brief grin. “Follow them a little. See what you find.”

Jake rose and walked slowly along the marks, bent over at the waist like a boy with a stomach-ache. The scratches in the talus went around a boulder. There was dust on the stone, and scratches in the dust—as if something bristly had brushed against the boulder on its way by.

There were also a couple of stiff black hairs.

Jake picked one of these up, then immediately opened his fingers and blew it off his skin, shivering with revulsion as he did it. Roland watched this keenly.

“You look like a goose just walked over your grave.”

“It’s awful!” Jake heard a faint stutter in his voice. “Oh God, what was it? What was w-watching us?”

“The one Mia called Mordred.” Roland’s voice hadn’t changed, but Jake found he could hardly bring himself to look into the gunslinger’s

eyes; they were that bleak. “The chap she says I fathered.”

“He was here? In the night?”

Roland nodded.

“Listening . . . ?” Jake couldn’t finish.

Roland could. “Listening to our palaver and our plans, aye, I think so. And Ted’s tale as well.”

“But you don’t know for sure. Those marks could be anything.” Yet the only thing Jake could think of in connection with those marks, now that he’d heard Susannah’s tale, were the legs of a monster spider.

“Go thee a little further,” Roland said.

Jake looked at him questioningly, and Roland nodded. The wind blew, bringing them the Muzak from the prison compound (now he thought it was “Bridge Over Troubled Water”), also bringing the distant sound of thunder, like rolling bones.

“What—”

“Follow,” Roland said, nodding to the stony talus on the slope of the path.

Jake did, knowing this was another lesson—with Roland you were always in school. Even when you were in the shadow of death there were lessons to be learned.

On the far side of the boulder, the path carried on straight for about thirty yards before curving out of sight once more. On this straight stretch, those dash-marks were very clear. Groups of three on one side, groups of four on the other.

“She said she shot off one of its legs,” Jake said.

“So she did.”

Jake tried to visualize a seven-legged spider as big as a human baby and couldn’t do it. Suspected he didn’t *want* to do it.

Beyond the next curve there was a desiccated corpse in the path. Jake was pretty sure it had been flayed open, but it was hard to tell. There were no innards, no blood, no buzzing flies. Just a lump of dirty, dusty stuff that vaguely—*very* vaguely—resembled something canine.

Oy approached, sniffed, then lifted his leg and pissed on the remains. He returned to Jake’s side with the air of one who has concluded some important piece of business.

“That was our visitor’s dinner last night,” Roland said.

Jake was looking around. “Is he watching us now? What do you think?”

Roland said, “I think growing boys need their rest.”

Jake felt a twinge of some unpleasant emotion and put it behind him without much examination. Jealousy? Surely not. How could he be jealous of a thing that had begun life by eating its own mother? It was blood-kin to Roland, yes—his true son, if you wanted to be picky about it—but that was no more than an accident.

Wasn’t it?

Jake became aware that Roland was looking at him closely, looking in a way that made Jake uneasy.

“Penny for em, dimmy-da,” the gunslinger said.

“Nothing,” Jake said. “Just wondering where he’s laid up.”

“Hard to tell,” Roland said. “There’s got to be a hundred holes in this hill alone. Come.”

Roland led the way back around the boulder where Jake had found the stiff black hairs, and once he was there, he began to methodically scuff away the tracks Mordred had left behind.

“Why are you doing that?” Jake asked, more sharply than he had intended.

“There’s no need for Eddie and Susannah to know about this,” Roland said. “He only means to watch, not to interfere in our business. At least for the time being.”

How do you know that? Jake wanted to ask, but that twinge came again—the one that absolutely couldn’t be jealousy—and he decided not to. Let Roland think whatever he wanted. Jake, meanwhile, would keep his eyes open. And if Mordred should be foolish enough to show himself . . .

“It’s Susannah I’m most concerned about,” Roland said. “She’s the one most likely to be distracted by the chap’s presence. And her thoughts would be the easiest for him to read.”

“Because she’s its mother,” Jake said. He didn’t notice the change of pronoun, but Roland did.

“The two of them are connected, aye. Can I count on you to keep your mouth shut?”

“Sure.”

“And try to guard your mind—that’s important, as well.”

“I can try, but . . .” Jake shrugged in order to say that he didn’t really know how one did that.

“Good,” Roland said. “And I’ll do the same.”

The wind gusted again. “Bridge Over Troubled Water” had changed to (Jake was pretty sure) a Beatles tune, the one with the chorus that ended *Beep-beep-mmm-beep-beep, yeah!* Did they know that one in the dusty, dying towns between Gilead and Mejis? Jake wondered. Were there Shebs in some of those towns that played “Drive My Car” jagtime on out-of-tune pianos while the Beams weakened and the glue that held the worlds together slowly stretched into strings and the worlds themselves sagged?

He gave his head a hard, brisk shake, trying to clear it. Roland was still watching him, and Jake felt an uncharacteristic flash of irritation. “I’ll keep my mouth shut, Roland, and at least try to keep my thoughts to myself. Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m not worried,” Roland said, and Jake found himself fighting the temptation to look inside his dinh’s head and find out if that was actually true. He still thought looking was a bad idea, and not just because it was impolite, either. Mistrust was very likely a kind of acid. Their ka-tet was fragile enough already, and there was much work to do.

“Good,” Jake said. “That’s good.”

“Good!” Oy agreed, in a hearty *that’s settled* tone that made them both grin.

“We know he’s there,” Roland said, “and it’s likely he doesn’t know we know. Under the circumstances, there’s no better way for things to be.”

Jake nodded. The idea made him feel a little calmer.

Susannah came to the mouth of the cave at her usual speedy crawl while they were walking back toward it. She sniffed at the air and grimaced. When she glimpsed them, the grimace turned into a grin. “I see handsome men! How long have you boys been up?”

“Only a little while,” Roland said.

“And how are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Roland said. “I woke up with a headache, but now it’s almost gone.”

“Really?” Jake asked.

Roland nodded and squeezed the boy’s shoulder.

Susannah wanted to know if they were hungry. Roland nodded. So did Jake.

“Well, come on in here,” she said, “and we’ll see what we can do about that situation.”

THREE

Susannah found powdered eggs and cans of Prudence corned beef hash. Eddie located a can-opener and a small gas-powered hibachi grill. After a little muttering to himself, he got it going and was only a bit startled when the hibachi began talking.

“Hello! I’m three-quarters filled with Gamry Bottled Gas, available at Wal-Mart, Burnaby’s, and other fine stores! When you call for Gamry, you’re calling for quality! Dark in here, isn’t it? May I help you with recipes or cooking times?”

“You could help me by shutting up,” Eddie said, and the grill spoke no more. He found himself wondering if he had offended it, then wondered if perhaps he should kill himself and spare the world a problem.

Roland opened four cans of peaches, smelled them, and nodded. “Okay, I think,” he said. “Sweet.”

They were just finishing this repast when the air in front of the cave shimmered. A moment later, Ted Brautigan, Dinky Earnshaw, and Sheemie Ruiz appeared. With them, cringing and very frightened, dressed in fading and tattered biballs, was the Rod Roland had asked them to bring.

“Come in and have something to eat,” Roland said amiably, as if a quartet of teleports showing up was a common occurrence. “There’s plenty.”

“Maybe we’ll skip breakfast,” Dinky said. “We don’t have much t—”

Before he could finish, Sheemie’s knees buckled and he collapsed at the mouth of the cave, his eyes rolling up to whites and a thin froth of spit oozing out between his cracked lips. He began to shiver and buck, his legs kicking aimlessly, his rubber moccasins scratching lines in the talus.



CHAPTER X:

THE LAST PALAVER

(SHEEMIE'S DREAM)

ONE

Susannah supposed you couldn't classify what came next as pandemonium; surely it took at least a dozen people to induce such a state, and they were but seven. Eight counting the Rod, and you certainly had to count him, because he was creating a large part of the uproar. When he saw Roland he dropped to his knees, raised his hands over his head like a ref signaling a successful extra-point kick, and began salaaming rapidly. Each downstroke was extreme enough to thump his forehead on the ground. He was at the same time babbling at the top of his lungs in his odd, vowelly language. He never took his eyes off Roland while he performed these gymnastics. Susannah had little doubt the gunslinger was being saluted as some kind of god.

Ted also dropped on his knees, but it was Sheemie with whom he was concerned. The old man put his hands on the sides of Sheemie's head to stop it whipping back and forth; already Roland's old acquaintance from his Mejis days had cut one cheek on a sharp bit of stone, a cut that was dangerously close to his left eye. And now blood began to pour from the corners of Sheemie's mouth and run up his modestly stubbled cheeks.

"Give me something to put in his mouth!" Ted cried. "Come on, somebody! Wake up! He's biting the *shit* out of himself!"

The wooden lid was still leaning against the open crate of sneetches. Roland brought it smartly down on his raised knee—no sign of dry twist in that hip now, she noted—and smashed it to bits. Susannah grabbed a piece of board on the fly, then turned to

Sheemie. No need to get on her knees; she was always on them, anyway. One end of the wooden piece was jagged with splinters. She wrapped a protective hand around this and then put the piece of wood in Sheemie's mouth. He bit down on it so hard she could hear the crunch.

The Rod, meanwhile, continued his high, almost falsetto chant. The only words she could pick out of the gibberish were *Hile, Roland, Gilead, and Eld*.

"Somebody shut him up!" Dinky cried, and Oy began barking.

"Never mind the Rod, get Sheemie's feet!" Ted snapped. "Hold him still!"

Dinky dropped to his knees and grabbed Sheemie's feet, one now bare, the other still wearing its absurd rubber moc.

"Oy, hush!" Jake said, and Oy did. But he was standing with his short legs spread and his belly low to the ground, his fur bushed out so he seemed nearly double his normal size.

Roland crouched by Sheemie's head, forearms on the dirt floor of the cave, mouth by one of Sheemie's ears. He began to murmur. Susannah could make out very little of it because of the Rod's falsetto babbling, but she did hear *Will Dearborn that was* and *All's well* and—she thought—*rest*.

Whatever it was, it seemed to get through. Little by little Sheemie relaxed. She could see Dinky easing his hold on the former tavern-boy's ankles, ready to grab hard again if Sheemie renewed his kicking. The muscles around Sheemie's mouth also relaxed, and his teeth unlocked. The piece of wood, still nailed lightly to his mouth by his upper incisors, seemed to levitate. Susannah pulled it gently free, looking with amazement at the blood-rimmed holes, some almost half an inch deep, that had been driven into the soft wood. Sheemie's tongue lolled from the side of his mouth, reminding her of how Oy looked at siesta time, sleeping on his back with his legs spread to the four points of the compass.

Now there was only the rapid auctioneer's babble of the Rod, and the low growl deep in Oy's chest as he stood protectively at Jake's side, looking at the newcomer with narrowed eyes.

"Shut your mouth and be still," Roland told the Rod, then added something else in another language.

The Rod froze halfway into another salaam, hands still raised above his head, staring at Roland. Eddie saw the side of his nose had been eaten away by a juicy sore, red as a strawberry. The Rod put his scabbed, dirty palms over his eyes, as if the gunslinger were a thing too bright to look at, and fell on his side. He drew his knees up to his chest, producing a loud fart as he did so.

“Harpo speaks,” Eddie said, a joke snappy enough to make Susannah laugh. Then there was silence except for the whine of the wind outside the cave, the faint sound of recorded music from the Devar-Toi, and the distant rumble of thunder, that sound of rolling bones.

Five minutes later Sheemie opened his eyes, sat up, and looked around with the bewildered air of one who knows not where he is, how he got there, or why. Then his eyes fixed on Roland, and his poor, tired face lit in a smile.

Roland returned it, and held out his arms. “Can’ee come to me, Sheemie? If not, I’ll come to you, sure.”

Sheemie crawled to Roland of Gilead on his hands and knees, his dark and dirty hair hanging in his eyes, and laid his head on Roland’s shoulder. Susannah felt tears stinging her eyes and looked away.

TWO

Some short time later Sheemie sat propped against the wall of the cave with the mover’s pad that had been over Suzie’s Cruisin Trike cushioning his head and back. Eddie had offered him a soda, but Ted suggested water might be better. Sheemie drank the first bottle of Perrier at a single go, and now sat sipping another. The rest of them had instant coffee, except for Ted; he was drinking a can of Nozz-A-La.

“Don’t know how you stand that stuff,” Eddie said.

“Each to his own taste, said the old maid as she kissed the cow,” Ted replied.

Only the Child of Roderick had nothing. He lay where he was, at the mouth of the cave, with his hands pressed firmly over his eyes. He was trembling lightly.

Ted had checked Sheemie over between Sheemie's first and second bottle of water, taking his pulse, looking in his mouth, and feeling his skull for any soft places. Each time he asked Sheemie if it hurt, Sheemie solemnly shook his head, never taking his eyes off Roland during the examination. After feeling Sheemie's ribs ("Tickles, sai, so it do," Sheemie said with a smile), Ted pronounced him fit as a fiddle.

Eddie, who could see Sheemie's eyes perfectly well—one of the gas-lanterns was nearby and cast a strong glow on Sheemie's face—thought that was a lie of near Presidential quality.

Susannah was cooking up a fresh batch of powdered eggs and corned beef hash. (The grill had spoken up again—"More of the same, eh?" it asked in a tone of cheery approval.) Eddie caught Dinky Earnshaw's eye and said, "Want to step outside with me for a minute while Suze makes with the chow?"

Dinky glanced at Ted, who nodded, then back at Eddie. "If you want. We've got a little more time this morning, but that doesn't mean we can waste any."

"I understand," Eddie said.

THREE

The wind had strengthened, but instead of freshening the air, it smelled fouler than ever. Once, in high school, Eddie had gone on a field trip to an oil refinery in New Jersey. Until now he thought that was hands-down the worst thing he'd ever smelled in his life; two of the girls and three of the boys had puked. He remembered their tour-guide laughing heartily and saying, "Just remember that's the smell of money—it helps." Maybe Perth Oil and Gas was still the all-time champeen, but only because what he was smelling now wasn't quite so strong. And just by the way, what was there about Perth Oil and Gas that seemed familiar? He didn't know and it probably didn't matter, but it was strange, the way things kept coming around over here. Only "coming around" wasn't quite right, was it?

"Echoing back," Eddie murmured. "That's what it is."

"Beg pardon, partner?" Dinky asked. They were once again standing on the path, looking down at the blue-roofed buildings in the distance, and the tangle of stalled traincars, and the perfect little

village. Perfect, that was, until you remembered it was behind a triple run of wire, one of those runs carrying an electrical charge strong enough to kill a man on contact.

“Nothing,” Eddie said. “What’s that smell? Any idea?”

Dinky shook his head, but pointed beyond the prison compound in a direction that might or might not be south or east. “Something poison out there is all I know,” he said. “Once I asked Finli and he said there used to be factories in that direction. Positronics business. You know that name?”

“Yes. But who’s Finli?”

“Finli o’ Tego. The top security guy, Prentiss’s number one boy, also known as The Weasel. A taheen. Whatever your plans are, you’ll have to go through him to make them work. And he won’t make it easy for you. Seeing him stretched out dead on the ground would make me feel like it was a national holiday. By the way, my real name’s Richard Earnshaw. Pleased as hell to meetcha.” He put out his hand. Eddie shook it.

“I’m Eddie Dean. Known as Eddie of New York out here west of the Pecos. The woman’s Susannah. My wife.”

Dinky nodded. “Uh-huh. And the boy’s Jake. Also of New York.”

“Jake Chambers, right. Listen, Rich—”

“I salute the effort,” he said, smiling, “but I’ve been Dinky too long to change now, I guess. And it could be worse. I worked for awhile at the Supr Savr Supermarket with a twentysomething guy known as JJ the Fuckin Blue Jay. People will still be calling him that when he’s eighty and wearing a pee-bag.”

“Unless we’re brave, lucky, and good,” Eddie said, “*nobody’s* gonna see eighty. Not in this world or any of the others.”

Dinky looked startled, then glum. “You got a point.”

“That guy Roland used to know looks bad,” Eddie said. “Did you see his *eyes*?”

Dinky nodded, glummer than ever. “I think those little spots of blood in the whites are called petechiae. Something like that.” Then, in a tone of apology Eddie found rather bizarre, under the circumstances: “I don’t know if I’m saying that right.”

“I don’t care what you call them, it’s not good. And him pitching a fit like that—”

“Not a very nice way to put it,” Dinky said.

Eddie didn’t give a shit if it was or wasn’t. “Has it ever happened to him before?”

Dinky’s eyes broke contact with Eddie’s and looked down at his own shuffling feet, instead. Eddie thought that was answer enough.

“How many times?” Eddie hoped he didn’t sound as appalled as he felt. There were enough pinprick-sized bloodspots in the whites of Sheemie’s eyes to make them look as if someone had flung paprika into them. Not to mention the bigger ones in the corners.

Still without looking at him, Dinky raised four fingers.

“Four times?”

“Yuh,” Dinky said. He was still studying his makeshift mocs. “Starting with the time he sent Ted to Connecticut in 1960. It was like doing that ruptured something inside him.” He looked up, trying to smile. “But he didn’t faint yesterday, when the three of us went back to the Devar.”

“Let me make sure I’ve got this right. In the prison down there, you guys have all sorts of venial sins, but only one mortal one: teleportation.”

Dinky considered this. The rules certainly weren’t that liberal for the taheen and the can-toi; they could be exiled or lobotomized for all sorts of reasons, including such wrongs as negligence, teasing the Breakers, or the occasional act of outright cruelty. Once—so he had been told—a Breaker had been raped by a low man, who was said to have explained earnestly to the camp’s last Master that it was part of his *becoming*—the Crimson King himself had appeared to this fellow in a dream and told him to do it. For this the can-toi had been sentenced to death. The Breakers had been invited to attend his execution (accomplished by a single pistol-shot to the head), which had taken place in the middle of Pleasantville’s Main Street.

Dinky told Eddie about this, then admitted that yes, for the inmates, at least, teleportation was the only mortal sin. That he knew of, anyway.

“And Sheemie’s your teleport,” Eddie said. “You guys help him—*facilitate* for him, to use the Tedster’s word—and you cover up for him by fudging the records, somehow—”

“They have no idea how easy it is to cook their telemetry,” Dinky said, almost laughing. “Partner, they’d be *shocked*. The hard part is making sure we don’t tip over the whole works.”

Eddie didn’t care about that, either. It worked. That was the only thing that mattered. Sheemie also worked . . . but for how long?

“—but *he’s* the one who does it,” Eddie finished. “Sheemie.”

“Yuh.”

“The only one who *can* do it.”

“Yuh.”

Eddie thought about their two tasks: freeing the Breakers (or killing them, if there was no other way to make them stop) and keeping the writer from being struck and killed by a minivan while taking a walk. Roland thought they might be able to accomplish both things, but they’d need Sheemie’s teleportation ability at least twice. Plus, their visitors would have to get back inside the triple run of wire after today’s palaver was done, and presumably that meant he’d have to do it a third time.

“He says it doesn’t hurt,” Dinky said. “If that’s what you’re worried about.”

Inside the cave the others laughed at something, Sheemie back to consciousness and taking nourishment, everyone the best of friends.

“It’s not,” Eddie said. “What does Ted think is happening to Sheemie when he teleports?”

“That he’s having brain hemorrhages,” Dinky said promptly. “Little tiny strokes on the surface of his brain.” He tapped a finger at different points on his own skull in demonstration. “Boink, boink, boink.”

“Is it getting worse? It is, isn’t it?”

“Look, if you think him jaunting us around is my idea, you better think again.”

Eddie raised one hand like a traffic cop. “No, no. I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on.” *And what our chances are.*

“I hate using him that way!” Dinky burst out. He kept his voice pitched low, so those in the cave wouldn’t hear, but Eddie never for a moment considered that he was exaggerating. Dinky was badly upset. “He doesn’t mind—he *wants* to do it—and that makes it worse, not better. The way he looks at Ted . . .” He shrugged. “It’s the way a

dog'd look at the best master in the universe. He looks at your dinh the same way, as I'm sure you've noticed."

"He's doing it *for* my dinh," Eddie said, "and that makes it okay. You may not believe that, Dink, but—"

"But you do."

"Totally. Now here's the really important question: does Ted have any idea how long Sheemie can last? Keeping in mind that now he's got a little more help at this end?"

Who you tryin to cheer up, bro? Henry spoke up suddenly inside his head. Cynical as always. *Him or yourself?*

Dinky was looking at Eddie as if he were crazy, or soft in the head, at least. "Ted was an accountant. Sometimes a tutor. A day-laborer when he couldn't get anything better. He's no doctor."

But Eddie kept pushing. "What does he think?"

Dinky paused. The wind blew. The music wafted. Farther away, thunder mumbled out of the murk. At last he said: "Three or four times, maybe . . . but the effects are getting worse. Maybe only twice. But there are no guarantees, okay? He could drop dead of a massive stroke the next time he bears down to make that hole we go through."

Eddie tried to think of another question and couldn't. That last answer pretty well covered the waterfront, and when Susannah called them back inside, he was more than glad to go.

FOUR

Sheemie Ruiz had rediscovered his appetite, which all of them took as a good sign, and was tucking in happily. The bloodspots in his eyes had faded somewhat, but were still clearly visible. Eddie wondered what the guards back in Blue Heaven would make of those if they noticed them, and also wondered if Sheemie could wear a pair of sunglasses without exciting comment.

Roland had gotten the Rod to his feet and was now conferring with him at the back of the cave. Well . . . sort of. The gunslinger was talking and the Rod was listening, occasionally sneaking tiny awed peeks at Roland's face. It was gibberish to Eddie, but he was able to pick out two words: Chevin and Chayven. Roland was asking this one about the one they'd met staggering along the road in Lovell.

“Does he have a name?” Eddie asked Dink and Ted, taking a second plate of food.

“I call him Chucky,” Dinky said. “Because he looks a little bit like the doll in this horror movie I saw once.”

Eddie grinned. “*Child’s Play*, yeah. I saw that one. After your when, Jake. And *way* after yours, Suziella.” The Rod’s hair wasn’t right, but the chubby, freckled cheeks and the blue eyes were. “Do you think he can keep a secret?”

“If no one asks him, he can,” Ted said. Which was not, in Eddie’s view, a very satisfactory answer.

After five minutes or so of chat, Roland seemed satisfied and rejoined the others. He hunkered—no problem doing that now that his joints had limbered up—and looked at Ted. “This fellow’s name is Haylis of Chayven. Will anyone miss him?”

“Unlikely,” Ted said. “The Rods show up at the gate beyond the dorms in little groups, looking for work. Fetching and carrying, mostly. They’re given a meal or something to drink as pay. If they don’t show up, no one misses them.”

“Good. Now—how long are the days here? Is it twenty-four hours from now until tomorrow morning at this time?”

Ted seemed interested in the question and considered it for several moments before replying. “Call it twenty-five,” he said. “Maybe a little longer. Because time is slowing down, at least here. As the Beams weaken, there seems to be a growing disparity in the time-flow between the worlds. It’s probably one of the major stress points.”

Roland nodded. Susannah offered him food and he shook his head with a word of thanks. Behind them, the Rod was sitting on a crate, looking down at his bare and sore-covered feet. Eddie was surprised to see Oy approach the fellow, and more surprised still when the bumbler allowed Chucky (or Haylis) to stroke his head with one misshapen claw of a hand.

“And is there a time of morning when things down there might be a little less . . . I don’t know . . .”

“A little disorganized?” Ted suggested.

Roland nodded.

“Did you hear a horn a little while ago?” Ted asked. “Just before we showed up?”

They all shook their heads.

Ted didn't seem surprised. "But you heard the music start, correct?"

"Yes," Susannah said, and offered Ted a fresh can of Nozz-A-La. He took it and drank with gusto. Eddie tried not to shudder.

"Thank you, ma'am. In any case, the horn signals the change of shifts. The music starts then."

"I hate that music," Dinky said moodily.

"If there's any time when control wavers," Ted went on, "that would be it."

"And what o'clock is that?" Roland asked.

Ted and Dinky exchanged a doubtful glance. Dinky showed eight fingers, his eyebrows raised questioningly. He looked relieved when Ted nodded at once.

"Yes, eight o'clock," Ted said, then laughed and gave his head a cynical little shake. "What *would* be eight, anyway, in a world where yon prison might always lie firmly east and not east by southeast on some days and dead east on others."

But Roland had been living with the dissolving world long before Ted Brautigan had even dreamed of such a place as Algul Siento, and he wasn't particularly upset by the way formerly hard-and-fast facts of life had begun to bend. "About twenty-five hours from right now," Roland said. "Or a little less."

Dinky nodded. "But if you're counting on raging confusion, forget it. They know their places and go to them. They're old hands."

"Still," Roland said, "it's the best we're apt to do." Now he looked at his old acquaintance from Mejis. And beckoned to him.

FIVE

Sheemie set his plate down at once, came to Roland, and made a fist. "Hile, Roland, Will Dearborn that was."

Roland returned this greeting, then turned to Jake. The boy gave him an uncertain look. Roland nodded at him, and Jake came. Now Jake and Sheemie stood facing each other with Roland hunkered between them, seeming to look at neither now that they were brought together.

Jake raised a hand to his forehead.

Sheemie returned the gesture.

Jake looked down at Roland and said, "What do you want?"

Roland didn't answer, only continued to look serenely toward the mouth of the cave, as if there were something in the apparently endless murk out there which interested him. And Jake knew what was wanted, as surely as if he had used the touch on Roland's mind to find out (which he most certainly had not). They had come to a fork in the road. It had been Jake who'd suggested Sheemie should be the one to tell them which branch to take. At the time it had seemed like a weirdly good idea—who knew why. Now, looking into that earnest, not-very-bright face and those bloodshot eyes, Jake wondered two things: what had ever possessed him to suggest such a course of action, and why someone—probably Eddie, who retained a relatively hard head in spite of all they'd been through—hadn't told him, kindly but firmly, that putting their future in Sheemie Ruiz's hands was a dumb idea. Totally noodgy, as his old schoolmates back at Piper might have said. Now Roland, who believed that even in the shadow of death there were still lessons to be learned, wanted Jake to ask the question Jake himself had proposed, and the answer would no doubt expose him as the superstitious scatterbrain he had become. Yet still, why not ask? Even if it were the equivalent of flipping a coin, why not? Jake had come, possibly at the end of a short but undeniably interesting life, to a place where there were magic doors, mechanical butlers, telepathy (of which he was capable, at least to some small degree, himself), vampires, and were-spiders. So why not let Sheemie choose? They *had* to go one way or the other, after all, and he'd been through too goddam much to worry about such a paltry thing as looking like an idiot in front of his companions. *Besides*, he thought, *if I'm not among friends here, I never will be.*

"Sheemie," he said. Looking into those bloody eyes was sort of horrible, but he made himself do it. "We're on a quest. That means we have a job to do. We—"

"You have to save the Tower," said Sheemie. "And my old friend is to go in, and mount to the top, and see what's to see. There may be renewal, there may be death, or there may be both. He was Will Dearborn once, aye, so he was. Will Dearborn to me."

Jake glanced at Roland, who was still hunkered down, looking out of the cave. But Jake thought his face had gone pale and strange.

One of Roland's fingers made his twirling go-ahead gesture.

"Yes, we're supposed to save the Dark Tower," Jake agreed. And thought he understood some of Roland's lust to see it and enter it, even if it killed him. What lay at the center of the universe? What man (or boy) could but wonder, once the question was thought of, and want to see?

Even if looking drove him mad?

"But in order to do that, we have to do two jobs. One involves going back to our world and saving a man. A writer who's telling our story. The other job is the one we've been talking about. Freeing the Breakers." Honesty made him add: "Or stopping them, at least. Do you understand?"

But this time Sheemie didn't reply. He was looking where Roland was looking, out into the murk. His face was that of someone who's been hypnotized. Looking at it made Jake uneasy, but he pushed on. He had come to his question, after all, and where else was there to go but on?

"The question is, which job do we do first? It'd seem that saving the writer might be easier because there's no opposition . . . that we know of, anyway . . . but there's a chance that . . . well . . ." Jake didn't want to say *But there's a chance that teleporting us might kill you*, and so came to a lame and unsatisfying halt.

For a moment he didn't think Sheemie would make any reply, leaving him with the job of deciding whether or not to try again, but then the former tavern-boy spoke. He looked at none of them as he did so, but only out of the cave and into the dim of Thunderclap.

"I had a dream last night, so I did," said Sheemie of Mejis, whose life had once been saved by three young gunslingers from Gilead. "I dreamed I was back at the Travellers' Rest, only Coral wasn't there, nor Stanley, nor Pettie, nor Sheb—him that used to play the pianer. There was nobbut me, and I was moppin the floor and singin 'Careless Love.' Then the batwings screeked, so they did, they had this funny sound they made . . ."

Jake saw that Roland was nodding, a trace of a smile on his lips.

“I looked up,” Sheemie resumed, “and in come this boy.” His eyes shifted briefly to Jake, then back to the mouth of the cave. “He looked like you, young sai, so he did, close enough to be twim. But his face were covert wi’ blood and one of his eye’n were put out, spoiling his pretty, and he walked all a-limp. Looked like death, he did, and frighten’t me terrible, and made me sad to see him, too. I just kept moppin, thinkin that if I did that he might not never mind me, or even see me at all, and go away.”

Jake realized he knew this tale. Had he seen it? Had he actually been that bloody boy?

“But he looked right at you . . .” Roland murmured, still a-hunker, still looking out into the gloom.

“Aye, Will Dearborn that was, right at me, so he did, and said ‘Why must you hurt me, when I love you so? When I can do nothing else nor want to, for love made me and fed me and—’”

“And kept me in better days,” Eddie murmured. A tear fell from one of his eyes and made a dark spot on the floor of the cave.

“—and kept me in better days? Why will you cut me, and disfigure my face, and fill me with woe? I have only loved you for your beauty as you once loved me for mine in the days before the world moved on. Now you scar me with nails and put burning drops of quicksilver in my nose; you have set the animals on me, so you have, and they have eaten of my softest parts. Around me the can-toi gather and there’s no peace from their laughter. Yet still I love you and would serve you and even bring the magic again, if you would allow me, for that is how my heart was cast when I rose from the *Prim*. And once I was strong as well as beautiful, but now my strength is almost gone.”

“You cried,” Susannah said, and Jake thought: *Of course he did*. He was crying himself. So was Ted; so was Dinky Earnshaw. Only Roland was dry-eyed, and the gunslinger was pale, so pale.

“He wept,” said Sheemie (tears were rolling down his cheeks as he told his dream), “and I did, too, for I could see that he had been fair as daylight. He said, ‘If the torture were to stop now, I might still recover—if never my looks, then at least my strength—’”

“My *kes*,” Jake said, and although he’d never heard the word before he pronounced it correctly, almost as if it were *kiss*.

“—and my *kes*. But another week . . . or maybe five days . . . or even three . . . and it will be too late. Even if the torture stops, I’ll die. And you’ll die too, for when love leaves the world, all hearts are still. Tell them of my love and tell them of my pain and tell them of my hope, which still lives. For this is all I have and all I am and all I ask.’ Then the boy turned and went out. The batwing door made its same sound. *Skree-eek.*”

He looked at Jake, now, and smiled like one who has just awakened. “I can’t answer your question, sai.” He knocked a fist on his forehead. “Don’t have much in the way of brains up here, me—only cobwebbies. Cordelia Delgado said so, and I reckon she was right.”

Jake made no reply. He was dazed. He had dreamed about the same disfigured boy, but not in any saloon; it had been in Gage Park, the one where they’d seen Charlie the Choo-Choo. Last night. Had to have been. He hadn’t remembered until now, would probably never have remembered if Sheemie hadn’t told his own dream. And had Roland, Eddie, and Susannah also had a version of the same dream? Yes. He could see it on their faces, just as he could see that Ted and Dinky looked moved but otherwise bewildered.

Roland stood up with a wince, clamped his hand briefly to his hip, then said, “Thankee-sai, Sheemie, you’ve helped us greatly.”

Sheemie smiled uncertainly. “How did I do that?”

“Never mind, my dear.” Roland turned his attention to Ted. “My friends and I are going to step outside briefly. We need to speak an-tet.”

“Of course,” Ted said. He shook his head as if to clear it.

“Do my peace of mind a favor and keep it short,” Dinky said. “We’re probably still all right, but I don’t want to push our luck.”

“Will you need him to jump you back inside?” Eddie asked, nodding to Sheemie. This was in the nature of a rhetorical question; how else would the three of them get back?

“Well, yeah, but . . .” Dinky began.

“Then you’ll be pushing your luck plenty.” That said, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake followed Roland out of the cave. Oy stayed behind, sitting with his new friend, Haylis of Chayven. Something about that troubled Jake. It wasn’t a feeling of jealousy but rather one of dread. As if he were seeing an omen someone wiser than himself—

one of the Manni-folk, perhaps—could interpret. But would he want to know?

Perhaps not.

SIX

“I didn’t remember my dream until he told his,” Susannah said, “and if he *hadn’t* told his, I probably never would have remembered.”

“Yeah,” Jake said.

“But I remember it clearly enough now,” she went on. “I was in a subway station and the boy came down the stairs—”

Jake said, “I was in Gage Park—”

“And I was at the Markey Avenue playground, where me and Henry used to play one-on-one,” Eddie said. “In my dream, the kid with the bloody face was wearing a tee-shirt that said NEVER A DULL MOMENT—”

“—IN MID-WORLD,” Jake finished, and Eddie gave him a startled look.

Jake barely noticed; his thoughts had turned in another direction. “I wonder if Stephen King ever uses dreams in his writing. You know, as yeast to make the plot rise.”

This was a question none of them could answer.

“Roland?” Eddie asked. “Where were you in your dream?”

“The Travellers’ Rest, where else? Wasn’t I there with Sheemie, once upon a time?” *With my friends, now long gone*, he could have added, but did not. “I was sitting at the table Eldred Jonas used to favor, playing one-hand Watch Me.”

Susannah said quietly, “The boy in the dream *was* the Beam, wasn’t he?”

As Roland nodded, Jake realized that Sheemie had told them which task came first, after all. Had told them beyond all doubt.

“Do any of you have a question?” Roland asked.

One by one, his companions shook their heads.

“We are ka-tet,” Roland said, and in unison they answered: “*We are one from many.*”

Roland tarried a moment longer, looking at them—more than looking, seeming to savor their faces—and then he led them back inside.

“Sheemie,” he said.

“Yes, sai! Yes, Roland, Will Dearborn that was!”

“We’re going to save the boy you told us about. We’re going to make the bad folk stop hurting him.”

Sheemie smiled, but it was a puzzled smile. He didn’t remember the boy in his dream, not anymore. “Good, sai, that’s good!”

Roland turned his attention to Ted. “Once Sheemie gets you back this time, put him to bed. Or, if that would attract the wrong sort of attention, just make sure he takes it easy.”

“We can write him down for the sniffles and keep him out of The Study,” Ted agreed. “There are a lot of colds Thunder-side. But you folks need to understand that there are no guarantees. He could get us back inside this time, and then—” He snapped his fingers in the air.

Laughing, Sheemie imitated him, only snapping both sets of fingers. Susannah looked away, sick to her stomach.

“I *know* that,” Roland said, and although his tone did not change very much, each member of his ka-tet knew it was a good thing this palaver was almost over. Roland had reached the rim of his patience. “Keep him quiet even if he’s well and feeling fine. We won’t need him for what I have in mind, and thanks to the weapons you’ve left us.”

“They’re good weapons,” Ted agreed, “but are they good enough to wipe out sixty men, can-toi, and taheen?”

“Will the two of you stand with us, once the fight begins?” Roland asked.

“With the greatest pleasure,” Dinky said, baring his teeth in a remarkably nasty grin.

“Yes,” Ted said. “And it might be that I have another weapon. Did you listen to the tapes I left you?”

“Yes,” Jake replied.

“So you know the story about the guy who stole my wallet.”

This time they all nodded.

“What about that young woman?” Susannah asked. “One tough cookie, you said. What about Tanya and her boyfriend? Or her husband, if that’s what he is?”

Ted and Dinky exchanged a brief, doubtful look, then shook their heads simultaneously.

“Once, maybe,” Ted said. “Not now. Now she’s married. All she wants to do is cuddle with her fella.”

“And Break,” Dinky added.

“But don’t they understand . . .” She found she couldn’t finish. She was haunted not so much by the remnants of her own dream as by Sheemie’s. *Now you scar me with nails*, the dream-boy had told Sheemie. The dream-boy who had once been fair.

“They don’t *want* to understand,” Ted told her kindly. He caught a glimpse of Eddie’s dark face and shook his head. “But I won’t let you hate them for it. You—*we*—may have to kill some of them, but I won’t let you hate them. They did not put understanding away from them out of greed or fear, but from despair.”

“And because to Break is divine,” Dinky said. He was also looking at Eddie. “The way the half an hour after you shoot up can be divine. If you know what I’m talking about.”

Eddie sighed, stuck his hands in his pockets, said nothing.

Sheemie surprised them all by picking up one of the Coyote machine-pistols and swinging it in an arc. Had it been loaded, the great quest for the Dark Tower would have ended right there. “I’ll fight, too!” he cried. *“Pow, pow, pow! Bam-bam-bamba-dam!”*

Eddie and Susannah ducked; Jake threw himself instinctively in front of Oy; Ted and Dinky raised their hands in front of their faces, as if that could possibly have saved them from a burst of a hundred high-caliber, steel-jacketed slugs. Roland plucked the machine-pistol calmly from Sheemie’s hands.

“Your time to help will come,” he said, “but after this first battle’s fought and won. Do you see Jake’s bumbler, Sheemie?”

“Aye, he’s with the Rod.”

“He talks. See if you can get him to talk to you.”

Sheemie obediently went to where Chucky/Haylis was still stroking Oy’s head, dropped to one knee, and commenced trying to get Oy to say his name. The bumbler did almost at once, and with remarkable clarity. Sheemie laughed, and Haylis joined in. They sounded like a couple of kids from the Calla. The roont kind, perhaps.

Roland, meanwhile, turned to Dinky and Ted, his lips little more than a white line in his stern face.

SEVEN

“He’s to be kept out of it, once the shooting starts.” The gunslinger mimed turning a key in a lock. “If we lose, what happens to him later on won’t matter. If we win, we’ll need him at least one more time. Probably twice.”

“To go where?” Dinky asked.

“Keystone World America,” Eddie said. “A small town in western Maine called Lovell. As early in June of 1999 as one-way time allows.”

“Sending me to Connecticut appears to have inaugurated Sheemie’s seizures,” Ted said in a low voice. “You know that sending you back America-side is apt to make him worse, don’t you? Or kill him?” He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. *Just askin, gents.*

“We know,” Roland said, “and when the time comes, I’ll make the risk clear and ask him if—”

“Oh man, you can stick *that* one where the sun don’t shine,” Dinky said, and Eddie was reminded so strongly of himself—the way he’d been during his first few hours on the shore of the Western Sea, confused, pissed off, and jonesing for heroin—that he felt a moment of *déjà vu*. “If you told him you wanted him to set himself on fire, the only thing he’d want to know would be if you had a match. He thinks you’re Christ on a cracker.”

Susannah waited, with a mixture of dread and almost prurient interest, for Roland’s response. There was none. Roland only stared at Dinky, his thumbs hooked into his gunbelt.

“Surely you realize that a dead man can’t bring you back from America-side,” Ted said in a more reasonable tone.

“We’ll jump that fence when and if we come to it,” Roland said. “In the meantime, we’ve got several other fences to get over.”

“I’m glad we’re taking on the Devar-Toi first, whatever the risk,” Susannah said. “What’s going on down there is an abomination.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dinky drawled, and pushed up an imaginary hat. “Ah reckon that’s the word.”

The tension in the cave eased. Behind them, Sheemie was telling Oy to roll over, and Oy was doing so willingly enough. The Rod had a big, sloppy smile on his face. Susannah wondered when Haylis of

Chayven had last had occasion to use his smile, which was childishly charming.

She thought of asking Ted if there was any way of telling what day it was in America right now, then decided not to bother. If Stephen King was dead, they'd know; Roland had said so, and she had no doubt he was right. For now the writer was fine, happily frittering away his time and valuable imagination on some meaningless project while the world he'd been born to imagine continued to gather dust in his head. If Roland was pissed at him, it was really no wonder. She was a little pissed at him herself.

"What's your plan, Roland?" Ted asked.

"It relies on two assumptions: that we can surprise them and then stampede them. I don't think they expect to be interrupted in these last days; from Pimli Prentiss down to the lowliest hume guard outside the fence, they have no reason to believe they'll be bothered in their work, certainly not attacked. If my assumptions are correct, we'll succeed. If we fail, at least we won't live long enough to see the Beams break and the Tower fall."

Roland found the crude map of the Algul and put it on the floor of the cave. They all gathered around it.

"These railroad sidetracks," he said, indicating the hash-marks labeled 10. "Some of the dead engines and traincars on them stand within twenty yards of the south fence, it looks like through the binoculars. Is that right?"

"Yeah," Dinky said, and pointed to the center of the nearest line. "Might as well call it south, anyway—it's as good a word as any. There's a boxcar on this track that's real close to the fence. Only ten yards or so. It says SOO LINE on the side."

Ted was nodding.

"Good cover," Roland said. "Excellent cover." Now he pointed to the area beyond the north end of the compound. "And here, all sorts of sheds."

"There used to be supplies in them," Ted said, "but now most are empty, I think. For awhile a gang of Rods slept there, but six or eight months ago, Pimli and the Wease kicked them out."

"But more cover, empty or full," Roland said. "Is the ground behind and around them clear of obstacles and pretty much smooth?"

Smooth enough for that thing to go back and forth?” He cocked a thumb at Suzie’s Cruisin Trike.

Ted and Dinky exchanged a glance. “Definitely,” Ted said.

Susannah waited to see if Eddie would protest, even before he knew what Roland had in mind. He didn’t. Good. She was already thinking about what weapons she’d want. What guns.

Roland sat quiet for a moment or two, gazing at the map, almost seeming to commune with it. When Ted offered him a cigarette, the gunslinger took it. Then he began to talk. Twice he drew on the side of a weapons crate with a piece of chalk. Twice more he drew arrows on the map, one pointing to what they were calling north, one to the south. Ted asked a question; Dinky asked another. Behind them, Sheemie and Haylis played with Oy like a couple of children. The bumbler mimicked their laughter with eerie accuracy.

When Roland had finished, Ted Brautigan said: “You mean to spill an almighty lot of blood.”

“Indeed I do. As much as I can.”

“Risky for the lady,” Dink remarked, looking first at her and then at her husband.

Susannah said nothing. Neither did Eddie. He recognized the risk. He also understood why Roland would want Suze north of the compound. The Cruisin Trike would give her mobility, and they’d need it. As for risk, they were six planning to take on sixty. Or more. Of course there would be risk, and of course there would be blood.

Blood and fire.

“I may be able to rig a couple of other guns,” Susannah said. Her eyes had taken on that special Detta Walker gleam. “Radio-controlled, like a toy airplane. I dunno. But I’ll move, all right. I’m goan speed around like grease on a hot griddle.”

“Can this work?” Dinky asked bluntly.

Roland’s lips parted in a humorless grin. “It *will* work.”

“How can you say that?” Ted asked.

Eddie recalled Roland’s reasoning before their call to John Cullum and could have answered that question, but answers were for their katet’s dinh to give—if he would—and so he left this one to Roland.

“Because it has to,” the gunslinger said. “I see no other way.”



CHAPTER XI:

THE ATTACK ON ALGUL SIENTO

ONE

It was a day later and not long before the horn signaled the morning change of shift. The music would soon start, the sun would come on, and the Breaker night-crew would exit The Study stage left while the Breaker day-crew entered stage right. Everything was as it should be, yet Pimli Prentiss had slept less than an hour the previous night and even that brief time had been haunted by sour and chaotic dreams. Finally, around four (what his bedside clock in fact *claimed* was four, but who knew anymore, and what did it matter anyway, this close to the end), he'd gotten up and sat in his office chair, looking out at the darkened Mall, deserted at this hour save for one lone and pointless robot who'd taken it into its head to patrol, waving its six pincer-tipped arms aimlessly at the sky. The robots that still ran grew wonkier by the day, but pulling their batteries could be dangerous, for some were booby-trapped and would explode if you tried it. There was nothing you could do but put up with their antics and keep reminding yourself that all would be over soon, praise Jesus and God the Father Almighty. At some point the former Paul Prentiss opened the desk drawer above the knee-hole, pulled out the .40 Peacemaker Colt inside, and held it in his lap. It was the one with which the previous Master, Humma, had executed the rapist Cameron. Pimli hadn't had to execute anyone in his time and was glad of it, but holding the pistol in his lap, feeling its grave weight, always offered a certain comfort. Although why he should require comfort in the watches of the night, especially when everything was going so well, he had no idea. All he knew for sure was that there had been some

anomalous blips on what Finli and Jenkins, their chief technician, liked to call the Deep Telemetry, as if these were instruments at the bottom of the ocean instead of just in a basement closet adjacent to the long, low room holding the rest of the more useful gear. Pimli recognized what he was feeling—call a spade a spade—as a sense of impending doom. He tried to tell himself it was only his grandfather’s proverb in action, that he was almost home and so it was time to worry about the eggs.

Finally he’d gone into his bathroom, where he closed the lid of the toilet and knelt to pray. And here he was still, only something had changed in the atmosphere. He’d heard no footfall but knew someone had stepped into his office. Logic suggested who it must be. Still without opening his eyes, still with his hands clasped on the closed cover of the toilet, he called: “Finli? Finli o’ Tego? Is that you?”

“Yar, boss, it’s me.”

What was *he* doing here before the horn? Everyone, even the Breakers, knew what a fiend for sleep was Finli the Weasel. But all in good time. At this moment Pimli was entertaining the Lord (although in truth he’d nearly dozed off on his knees when some deep sub-instinct had warned him he was no longer alone on the first floor of Warden’s House). One did not snub such an important guest as the Lord God of Hosts, and so he finished his prayer—“Grant me the grace of Thy will, amen!”—before rising with a wince. His damned back didn’t care a bit for the belly it had to hoist in front.

Finli was standing by the window, holding the Peacemaker up to the dim light, turning it to and fro in order to admire the delicate scrollwork on the butt-plates.

“This is the one that said goodnight to Cameron, true?” Finli asked. “The rapist Cameron.”

Pimli nodded. “Have a care, my son. It’s loaded.”

“Six-shot?”

“Eight! Are you blind? Look at the size of the cylinder, for God’s love.”

Finli didn’t bother. He handed the gun back to Pimli, instead. “I know how to pull the trigger, so I do, and when it comes to guns that’s enough.”

“Aye, if it’s loaded. What are you doing up at this hour, and bothering a man at his morning prayers?”

Finli eyed him. “If I were to ask you why I find you *at* your prayers, dressed and combed instead of in your bathrobe and slippers with only one eye open, what answer would you make?”

“I’ve got the jitters. It’s as simple as that. I guess you do, too.”

Finli smiled, charmed. “Jitters! Is that like heebie-jeebies, and harum-scarum, and hinky-di-di?”

“Sort of—yar.”

Finli’s smile widened, but Pimli thought it didn’t look quite genuine. “I like it! I like it very well! Jittery! Jittersome!”

“No,” Pimli said. “‘Got the jitters,’ that’s how you use it.”

Finli’s smile faded. “I also have the jitters. I’m heebie and jeebie. I feel hinky-di-di. I’m harum and you’re scarum.”

“More blips on the Deep Telemetry?”

Finli shrugged, then nodded. The problem with the Deep Telemetry was that none of them were sure exactly what it measured. It might be telepathy, or (God forbid) teleportation, or even deep tremors in the fabric of reality—precursors of the Bear Beam’s impending snap. Impossible to tell. But more and more of that previously dark and quiet equipment had come alive in the last four months or so.

“What does Jenkins say?” Pimli asked. He slipped the .40 into his docker’s clutch almost without thinking, so moving us a step closer to what you will not want to hear and I will not want to tell.

“Jenkins says whatever rides out of his mouth on the flying carpet of his tongue,” said the Tego with a rude shrug. “Since he don’t even know what the symbols on the Deep Telemetry dials and vid screens signify, how can you ask his opinion?”

“Easy,” Pimli said, putting a hand on his Security Chief’s shoulder. He was surprised (and a little alarmed) to feel the flesh beneath Finli’s fine Turnbull & Asser shirt thrumming slightly. Or perhaps trembling. “Easy, pal! I was only asking.”

“I can’t sleep, I can’t read, I can’t even fuck,” Finli said. “I tried all three, by Gan! Walk down to Damli House with me, would you, and have a look at the damned readouts. Maybe you’ll have some ideas.”

“I’m a trailboss, not a technician,” Pimli said mildly, but he was already moving toward the door. “However, since I’ve nothing better to do—”

“Maybe it’s just the end coming on,” Finli said, pausing in the doorway. “As if there could be any *just* about such a thing.”

“Maybe that’s it,” Pimli said equably, “and a walk in the morning air can’t do us any ha—Hey! Hey, you! You, there! You Rod! Turn around when I talk to you, hadn’t you just better!”

The Rod, a scrawny fellow in an ancient pair of denim biballs (the deeply sagging seat had gone completely white), obeyed. His cheeks were chubby and freckled, his eyes an engaging shade of blue even though at the moment alarmed. He actually wouldn’t have been bad-looking except for his nose, which had been eaten away almost completely on one side, giving him a bizarre one-nostril look. He was toting a basket. Pimli was pretty sure he’d seen this shufflefoot bah-bo around the ranch before, but couldn’t be sure; to him, all Rods looked alike.

It didn’t matter. Identification was Finli’s job and he took charge now, pulling a rubber glove out of his belt and putting it on as he strode forward. The Rod cringed back against the wall, claspng his wicker basket tighter and letting go a loud fart that had to have been pure nerves. Pimli needed to bite down on the inside of his cheek, and quite fiercely, to keep a smile from rising on his lips.

“Nay, nay, *nay!*” the Security Chief cried, and slapped the Rod briskly across the face with his newly gloved hand. (It did not do to touch the Children of Roderick skin to skin; they carried too many diseases.) Loose spit flew from the Rod’s mouth and blood from the hole in his nose. “Speak not with your ki’box to me, sai Haylis! The hole in thy head’s not much better, but at least it can give me a word of respect. It had better be able to!”

“Hile, Finli o’ Tego!” Haylis muttered, and fisted himself in the forehead so hard the back of his head bounced off the wall—*bonk!* That did it: Pimli barked a laugh in spite of himself. Nor would Finli be able to reproach him with it on their walk to Damli House, for he was smiling now, too. Although Pimli doubted that the Rod named Haylis would find much to comfort him in that smile. It exposed too

many sharp teeth. “Hile, Finli o’ the Watch, long days and pleasant nights to’ee, sai!”

“Better,” Finli allowed. “Not much, but a little. What in hell’s name are you doing here before Horn and Sun? And tell me what’s in thy bascomb, wiggins?”

Haylis hugged it tighter against his chest, his eyes flashing with alarm. Finli’s smile disappeared at once.

“You flip the lid and show me what’s in thy bascomb this second, cully, or thee’ll be picking thy teeth off the carpet.” These words came out in a smooth, low growl.

For a moment Pimli thought the Rod still would not comply, and he felt a twinge of active alarm. Then, slowly, the fellow lifted the lid of the wicker basket. It was the sort with handles, known in Finli’s home territory as a bascomb. The Rod held it reluctantly out. At the same time he closed his sore-looking, booger-rimmed eyes and turned his head aside, as if in anticipation of a blow.

Finli looked. For a long time he said nothing, then gave his own bark of laughter and invited Pimli to have a peek. The Master knew what he was seeing at once, but figuring out what it meant took a moment longer. Then his mind flashed back to popping the pimple and offering Finli the bloody pus, as one would offer a friend left-over *hors d’oeuvre* at the end of a dinner-party. In the bottom of the Rod’s basket was a little pile of used tissues. Kleenex, in fact.

“Did Tammy Kelly send you to pick up the swill this morning?” Pimli asked.

The Rod nodded fearfully.

“Did she tell you that you could have whatever you found and fancied from the wastecans?”

He thought the Rod would lie. If and when he did, the Master would command Finli to beat the fellow, as an object-lesson in honesty.

But the Rod—Haylis—shook his head, looking sad.

“All right,” Pimli said, relieved. It was really too early in the day for beatings and howlings and tears. They spoiled a man’s breakfast. “You can go, and with your prize. But next time, cully, ask permission or you’ll leave here a-hurt. Do’ee ken?”

The Rod nodded energetically.

“Go on, then, go! Out of my house and out of my sight!”

They watched him leave, him with his basket of snotty tissues that he'd undoubtedly eat like candy nougat, each shaming the other into keeping his face grave and stern until the poor disfigured son of no one was gone. Then they burst into gales of laughter. Finli o' Tego staggered back against the wall hard enough to knock a picture off its hook, then slid to the floor, howling hysterically. Pimli put his face in his hands and laughed until his considerable gut ached. The laughter erased the tension with which each had begun the day, venting it all at once.

“A dangerous fellow, indeed!” Finli said when he could speak a little again. He was wiping his streaming eyes with one furry paw-hand.

“The Snot Saboteur!” Pimli agreed. His face was bright red.

They exchanged a look and were off again, braying gales of relieved laughter until they woke the housekeeper way up on the third floor. Tammy Kelly lay in her narrow bed, listening to yon kamais bellow below, looking disapprovingly up into the gloom. Men were much the same, in her view, no matter what sort of skin they wore.

Outside, the hume Master and the taheen Security Chief walked up the Mall, arm in arm. The Child of Roderick, meanwhile, scurried out through the north gate, head down, heart thumping madly in his chest. How close it had been! Aye! If Weasel-Head had asked him, ‘Haylis, didjer plant anything?’ he would have lied as best he could, but such as him couldn't lie successfully to such as Finli o' Tego; never in life! He would have been found out, sure. But he *hadn't* been found out, praise Gan. The ball-thing the gunslinger had given him was now stowed away in the back bedroom, humming softly to itself. He'd put it in the wastebasket, as he had been told, and covered it with fresh tissue from the box on the washstand, also as he had been told. Nobody had told him he might take the cast-away tissues, but he hadn't been able to resist their soupy, delicious smell. And it had worked for the best, hadn't it? Yar! For instead of asking him all manner of questions he couldn't have answered, they'd laughed at him and let him go. He wished he could climb the mountain and play with the bumbler again, so he did, but the white-haired old hume

named Ted had told him to go away, far and far, once his errand was done. And if he heard shooting, Haylis was to hide until it was over. And he would—oh yes, nair doot. Hadn't he done what Roland o' Gilead had asked of him? The first of the humming balls was now in Feneral, one of the dorms, two more were in Damli House, where the Breakers worked and the off-duty guards slept, and the last was in Master's House . . . where he'd almost been caught! Haylis didn't know what the humming balls did, nor wanted to know. He would go away, possibly with his friend, Garma, if he could find her. If shooting started, they would hide in a deep hole, and he would share his tissues with her. Some had nothing on them but bits of shaving soap, but there were wet snots and big boogies in some of the others, he could smell their enticing aroma even now. He would save the biggest of the latter, the one with the jellied blood in it, for Garma, and she might let him pokey-poke. Haylis walked faster, smiling at the prospect of going pokey-poke with Garma.

TWO

Sitting on the Cruisin Trike in the concealment afforded by one of the empty sheds north of the compound, Susannah watched Haylis go. She noted that the poor, disfigured sai was smiling about something, so things had probably gone well with him. That was good news, indeed. Once he was out of sight, she returned her attention to her end of Algul Siento.

She could see both stone towers (although only the top half of the one on her left; the rest was concealed by a fold of hillside). They were shackled about with some sort of ivy. Cultivated rather than wild, Susannah guessed, given the barrenness of the surrounding countryside. There was one fellow in the west tower, sitting in what appeared to be an easy chair, maybe even a La-Z-Boy. Standing at the railing of the east one were a taheen with a beaver's head and a low man (if he was a hume, Susannah thought, he was one butt-ugly son of a bitch), the two of them in conversation, pretty clearly waiting for the horn that would send them off-shift and to breakfast in the commissary. Between the two watchtowers she could see the triple line of fencing, the runs strung widely enough apart so that more sentries

could walk in the aisles between the wire without fear of getting a lethal zap of electricity. She saw no one there this morning, though. The few *folken* moving about inside the wire were idling along, none of them in a great hurry to get anywhere. Unless the lackadaisical scene before her was the biggest con of the century, Roland was right. They were as vulnerable as a herd of fat shoats being fed their last meal outside the slaughtering-pen: come-come-commala, shor'-ribs to folla. And while the gunslingers had had no luck finding any sort of radio-controlled weaponry, they *had* discovered that three of the more science-fictiony rifles were equipped with switches marked INTERVAL. Eddie said he thought these rifles were *lazers*, although nothing about them looked lazy to Susannah. Jake had suggested they take one of them out of sight of the Devar-Toi and try it out, but Roland vetoed the idea immediately. Last evening, this had been, while going over the plan for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"He's right, kid," Eddie had said. "The clowns down there might know we were shooting those things even if they couldn't see or hear anything. We don't know what kind of vibes their telemetry can pick up."

Under cover of dark, Susannah had set up all three of the "lazers." When the time came, she'd set the interval switches. The guns might work, thus adding to the impression they were trying to create; they might not. She'd give it a try when the time came, and that was all she could do.

Heart thumping heavily, Susannah waited for the music. For the horn. And, if the sneetches the Rod had set worked the way Roland *believed* they would work, for the fires.

"The ideal would be for all of them to go hot during the five or ten minutes when they're changing the guard," Roland had said. "Everyone scurrying hither and thither, waving to their friends and exchanging little bits o' gossip. We can't expect that—not really—but we can hope for it."

Yes, they could do that much . . . but wish in one hand, shit in the other, see which one fills up first. In any case, it would be her decision as to when to fire the first shot. After that, everything would happen jin-jin.

Please, God, help me pick the right time.

She waited, holding one of the Coyote machine-pistols with the barrel in the hollow of her shoulder. When the music started—a recorded version of what she thought might be “’At’s Amore”—Susannah lurched on the seat of the SCT and squeezed the trigger involuntarily. Had the safety not been on, she would have poured a stream of bullets into the shed’s ceiling and no doubt queered the pitch at once. But Roland had taught her well, and the trigger didn’t move beneath her finger. Still, her heartbeat had doubled—trebled, maybe—and she could feel sweat trickling down her sides, even though the day was once again cool.

The music had started and that was good. But the music wasn’t enough. She sat on the SCT’s saddle, waiting for the horn.

THREE

“Dino Martino,” Eddie said, almost too low to hear.

“Hmmm?” Jake asked.

The three of them were behind the SOO LINE boxcar, having worked their way through the graveyard of old engines and traincars to that spot. Both of the boxcar’s loading doors were open, and all three of them had had a peek through them at the fence, the south watchtowers, and the village of Pleasantville, which consisted of but a single street. The six-armed robot which had earlier been on the Mall was now here, rolling up and down Main Street past the quaint (and closed) shops, bellowing what sounded like math equations at the top of its . . . lungs?

“Dino Martino,” Eddie repeated. Oy was sitting at Jake’s feet, looking up with his brilliant gold-ringed eyes; Eddie bent and gave his head a brief pat. “Dean Martin did that song originally.”

“Yeah?” Jake asked doubtfully.

“Sure. Only we used to sing it, ‘When-a da moon hits-a yo’ lip like a big piece-a shit, ’at’s amore—”

“Hush, do ya please,” Roland murmured.

“Don’t suppose you smell any smoke yet, do you?” Eddie asked.

Jake and Roland shook their heads. Roland had his big iron with the sandalwood grips. Jake was armed with an AR-15, but the bag of

Orizas was once more hung over his shoulder, and not just for good luck. If all went well, he and Roland would be using them soon.

FOUR

Like most men with what's known as "house-help," Pimli Prentiss had no clear sense of his employees as creatures with goals, ambitions, and feelings—as humes, in other words. As long as there was someone to bring him his afternoon glass of whiskey and set his chop (rare) in front of him at six-thirty, he didn't think of them at all. Certainly he would have been quite astounded to learn that Tammy (his housekeeper) and Tassa (his houseboy) loathed each other. They treated each other with perfect—if chilly—respect when they were around him, after all.

Only Pimli wasn't around this morning as "At's Amore" (interpreted by the Billion Bland Strings) rose from Algul Siento's hidden speakers. The Master was walking up the Mall, now in the company of Jakli, a ravenhead taheen tech, as well as his Security Chief. They were discussing the Deep Telemetry, and Pimli had no thought at all for the house he had left behind for the last time. Certainly it never crossed his mind that Tammy Kelly (still in her nightgown) and Tassa of Sonesh (still in his silk sleep-shorts) were on the verge of battle about the pantry-stock.

"Look at this!" she cried. They were standing in the kitchen, which was deeply gloomy. It was a large room, and all but three of the electric lights were burned out. There were only a few bulbs left in Stores, and they were earmarked for The Study.

"Look at what?" Sulky. *Pouty*. And was that the remains of lip paint on his cunning little Cupid's-bow of a mouth? She thought it was.

"Do'ee not see the empty spots on the shelves?" she asked indignantly. "Look! No more baked beans—"

"He don't care beans for beans, as you very well know—"

"No tuna-fish, either, and will'ee tell me he don't eat *that*? He'd eat it until it ran out his ears, and thee knows it!"

"Can you not—"

"No more soup—"

"Balls there ain't!" he cried. "Look there, and there, and *th*—"

“Not the Campbell’s Tamater he likes best,” she overrode him, drawing closer in her excitement. Their arguments had never developed into outright fisticuffs before, but Tassa had an idea this might be the day. And if it were so, it were fine-oh! He’d love to sock this fat old run-off-at-the-mouth bitch in the eye. “Do you see any Campbell’s Tamater, Tassa o’ wherever-you-grew?”

“Can you not bring back a box of tins yourself?” he asked, taking his own step forward; now they were nearly nose-to-nose, and although the woman was large and the young man was willowy, the Master’s houseboy showed no sign of fear. Tammy blinked, and for the first time since Tassa had shuffled into the kitchen—wanting no more than a cup of coffee, say thanks—an expression that was not irritation crossed her face. It might have been nervousness; it might even have been fear. “Are you so weak in the arms, Tammy of wherever-*you*-grew, that you can’t carry a box of soup-tins out of Stores?”

She drew herself up to her full height, stung. Her jowls (greasy and a-glow with some sort of night-cream) quivered with self-righteousness. “Fetching pantry supplies has ever been the houseboy’s job! And thee knows it very well!”

“That don’t make it a law that you can’t help out. I was mowing his lawn yest’y, as surely you know; I spied you sitting a-kitchen with a glass of cold tea, didn’t I, just as comfortable as old Ellie in your favorite chair.”

She bristled, losing any fear she might have had in her outrage. “I have as much right to rest as anyone else! I’d just warshed the floor —”

“Looked to me like Dobbie was doing it,” he said. Dobbie was the sort of domestic robot known as a “house-elf,” old but still quite efficient.

Tammy grew hotter still. “What would you know about house chores, you mincy little queer?”

Color flushed Tassa’s normally pale cheeks. He was aware that his hands had rolled themselves into fists, but only because he could feel his carefully cared-for nails biting into his palms. It occurred to him that this sort of petty bitch-and-whistle was downright ludicrous, coming as it did with the end of everything stretching black just

beyond them; they were two fools sparring and catcalling on the very lip of the abyss, but he didn't care. Fat old sow had been sniping at him for years, and now here was the real reason. Here it was, finally naked and out in the open.

"Is that what bothers thee about me, sai?" he enquired sweetly. "That I kiss the pole instead of plug the hole, no more than that?"

Now there were torches instead of roses flaring in Tammy Kelly's cheeks. She'd not meant to go so far, but now that she had—that *they* had, for if there was to be a fight, it was his fault as much as hers—she wouldn't back away. Was damned if she would.

"Master's Bible says queerin be a sin," she told him righteously. "I've read it myself, so I have. Book of Leviticracks, Chapter Three, Verse—"

"And what do Leviticracks say about the sin of gluttony?" he enquired. "What do it say about a woman with tits as big as bolsters and an ass as big as a kitchen ta—"

"Never mind the size o' my ass, you little *cocksucker!*"

"At least I can *get* a man," he said sweetly, "and don't have to lie abed with a dustclout—"

"Don't you dare!" she cried shrilly. "Shut your foul mouth before I shut it for you!"

"—to get rid of the cobwebs in my cunny so I can—"

"I'll knock thy teeth out if thee doesn't—"

"—finger my tired old pokeberry pie." Then something which would offend her even more deeply occurred to him. "My tired, *dirty* old pokeberry pie!"

She balled her own fists, which were considerably bigger than his. "At least I've never—"

"Go no further, sai, I beg you."

"—never had some man's nasty old . . . nasty . . . old . . ."

She trailed off, looking puzzled, and sniffed the air. He sniffed it himself, and realized the aroma he was getting wasn't new. He'd been smelling it almost since the argument started, but now it was stronger.

Tammy said, "Do you smell—"

"—smoke!" he finished, and they looked at each other with alarm, their argument forgotten perhaps only five seconds before it would have come to blows. Tammy's eyes fixed on the sampler hung beside

the stove. There were similar ones all over Algul Siento, because most of the buildings which made up the compound were wood. *Old* wood. WE ALL MUST WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE A FIRE-FREE ENVIRONMENT, it said.

Somewhere close by—in the back hallway—one of the still-working smoke detectors went off with a loud and frightening bray. Tammy hurried into the pantry to grab the fire-extinguisher in there.

“Get the one in the library!” she shouted, and Tassa ran to do it without a word of protest. Fire was the one thing they all feared.

FIVE

Gaskie o’ Tego, the Deputy Security Chief, was standing in the foyer of Feneral Hall, the dormitory directly behind Damli House, talking with James Cagney. Cagney was a redhaired can-toi who favored Western-style shirts and boots that added three inches to his actual five-foot-five. Both had clipboards and were discussing certain necessary changes in the following week’s Damli security. Six of the guards who’d been assigned to the second shift had come down with what Gangli, the compound doctor, said was a hume disease called “momps.” Sickness was common enough in Thunderclap—it was the air, as everyone knew, and the poisoned leavings of the old people—but it was ever inconvenient. Gangli said they were lucky there had never been an actual plague, like the Black Death or the Hot Shivers.

Beyond them, on the paved court behind Damli House, an early-morning basketball game was going on, several taheen and can-toi guards (who would be officially on duty as soon as the horn blew) against a ragtag team of Breakers. Gaskie watched Joey Rastosovich take a shot from way downtown—*swish*. Trampas snared the ball and took it out of bounds, briefly lifting his cap to scratch beneath it. Gaskie didn’t care much for Trampas, who had an entirely inappropriate liking for the talented animals who were his charges. Closer by, sitting on the dorm’s steps and also watching the game, was Ted Brautigan. As always, he was sipping at a can of Nozz-A-La.

“Well fuggit,” James Cagney said, speaking in the tones of a man who wants to be finished with a boring discussion. “If you don’t mind taking a couple of humies off the fence-walk for a day or two—”

“What’s Brautigan doing up so early?” Gaskie interrupted. “He almost never rolls out until noon. That kid he pals around with is the same way. What’s his name?”

“Earnshaw?” Brautigan also palled around with that half-bright Ruiz, but Ruiz was no kid.

Gaskie nodded. “Aye, Earnshaw, that’s the one. He’s on duty this morning. I saw him earlier in The Study.”

Cag (as his friends called him) didn’t give a shit why Brautigan was up with the birdies (not that there were many birdies left, at least in Thunderclap); he only wanted to get this roster business settled so he could stroll across to Damli and get a plate of scrambled eggs. One of the Rods had found fresh chives somewhere, or so he’d heard, and—

“Do’ee smell something, Cag?” Gaskie o’ Tego asked suddenly.

The can-toi who fancied himself James Cagney started to enquire if Gaskie had farted, then rethought this humorous riposte. For in fact he did smell something. Was it smoke?

Cag thought it was.

SIX

Ted sat on the cold steps of Federal Hall, breathing the bad-smelling air and listening to the humes and the taheen trash-talk each other from the basketball court. (Not the can-toi; they refused to indulge in such vulgarity.) His heart was beating hard but not fast. If there was a Rubicon that needed crossing, he realized, he’d crossed it some time ago. Maybe on the night the low men had hauled him back from Connecticut, more likely on the day he’d approached Dinky with the idea of reaching out to the gunslingers that Sheemie Ruiz insisted were nearby. Now he was wound up (to the max, Dinky would have said), but nervous? No. Nerves, he thought, were for people who still hadn’t entirely made up their minds.

Behind him he heard one idiot (Gaskie) asking t’other idiot (Cagney) if he smelled something, and Ted knew for sure that Haylis had done his part; the game was afoot. Ted reached into his pocket and brought out a scrap of paper. Written on it was a line of perfect pentameter, although hardly Shakespearian: *GO SOUTH WITH YOUR HANDS UP, YOU WON’T BE HURT.*

He looked at this fixedly, preparing to broadcast.

Behind him, in the Federal rec room, a smoke detector went off with a loud donkey-bray.

Here we go, here we go, he thought, and looked north, to where he hoped the first shooter—the woman—was hiding.

SEVEN

Three-quarters of the way up the Mall toward Damli House, Master Prentiss stopped with Finli on one side of him and Jakli on the other. The horn still hadn't gone off, but there was a loud braying sound from behind them. They had no more begun to turn toward it when another bray began from the other end of the compound—the dormitory end.

“What the devil—” Pimli began.

—*is that* was how he meant to finish, but before he could, Tammy Kelly came rushing out through the front door of Warden's House, with Tassa, his houseboy, scampering along right behind her. Both of them were waving their arms over their heads.

“*Fire!*” Tammy shouted. “*Fire!*”

Fire? But that's impossible, Pimli thought. *For if that's the smoke detector I'm hearing in my house and also the smoke detector I'm hearing from one of the dorms, then surely—*

“It must be a false alarm,” he told Finli. “Those smoke detectors do that when their batteries are—”

Before he could finish this hopeful assessment, a side window of Warden's House exploded outward. The glass was followed by an exhalation of orange flame.

“Gods!” Jakli cried in his buzzing voice. “It *is* fire!”

Pimli stared with his mouth open. And suddenly yet *another* smoke-and-fire alarm went off, this one in a series of loud, hiccuping whoops. Good God, sweet Jesus, that was one of the *Damli House* alarms! Surely nothing could be wrong at—

Finli o' Tego grabbed his arm. “Boss,” he said, calmly enough. “We've got real trouble.”

Before Pimli could reply, the horn went off, signaling the change of shifts. And suddenly he realized how vulnerable they would be for

the next seven minutes or so. Vulnerable to all sorts of things.

He refused to admit the word *attack* into his consciousness. At least not yet.

EIGHT

Dinky Earnshaw had been sitting in the overstuffed easy chair for what seemed like forever, waiting impatiently for the party to begin. Usually being in The Study cheered him up—hell, cheered *everybody* up, it was the “good-mind” effect—but today he only felt the wires of tension inside him winding tighter and tighter, pulling his guts into a ball. He was aware of taheen and can-toi looking down from the balconies every now and again, riding the good-mind wave, but didn’t have to worry about being progged by the likes of them; from that, at least, he was safe.

Was that a smoke alarm? From Feveral, perhaps?

Maybe. But maybe not, too. No one else was looking around.

Wait, he told himself. *Ted told you this would be the hard part, didn’t he? And at least Sheemie’s out of the way. Sheemie’s safe in his room, and Corbett Hall’s safe from fire. So calm down. Relax.*

That *was* the bray of a smoke alarm. Dinky was sure of it. Well . . . *almost* sure.

A book of crossword puzzles was open in his lap. For the last fifty minutes he’d been filling one of the grids with nonsense-letters, ignoring the definitions completely. Now, across the top, he printed this in large dark block letters: **GO SOUTH WITH YOUR HANDS UP, YOU WON’T BE HU**

That was when one of the upstairs fire alarms, probably the one in the west wing, went off with a loud, warbling bray. Several of the Breakers, jerked rudely from a deep daze of concentration, cried out in surprised alarm. Dinky also cried out, but in relief. Relief and something more. Joy? Yeah, very likely it *was* joy. Because when the fire alarm began to bray, he’d felt the powerful hum of good-mind snap. The eerie combined force of the Breakers had winked out like an overloaded electrical circuit. For the moment, at least, the assault on the Beam had stopped.

Meanwhile, he had a job to do. No more waiting. He stood up, letting the crossword magazine tumble to the Turkish rug, and threw his mind at the Breakers in the room. It wasn't hard; he'd been practicing almost daily for this moment, with Ted's help. And if it worked? If the Breakers picked it up, rebroadcasting it and amping what Dinky could only suggest to the level of a command? Why then it would rise. It would become the dominant chord in a new good-mind gestalt.

At least that was the hope.

(IT'S A FIRE FOLKS THERE'S A FIRE IN THE BUILDING)

As if to underscore this, there was a soft bang-and-tinkle as something imploded and the first puff of smoke seeped from the ventilator panels. Breakers looked around with wide, dazed eyes, some getting to their feet.

And Dinky sent:

(DON'T WORRY DON'T PANIC ALL IS WELL WALK UP THE)

He sent a perfect, practiced image of the north stairway, then added Breakers. Breakers walking up the north stairway. Breakers walking through the kitchen. Crackle of fire, smell of smoke, but both coming from the guards' sleeping area in the west wing. And would anyone question the truth of this mental broadcast? Would anyone wonder who was beaming it out, or why? Not now. Now they were only scared. Now they were *wanting* someone to tell them what to do, and Dinky Earnshaw was that someone.

(NORTH STAIRWAY WALK UP THE NORTH STAIRWAY WALK OUT ONTO THE BACK LAWN)

And it worked. They began to walk that way. Like sheep following a ram or horses following a stallion. Some were picking up the two basic ideas

(NO PANIC NO PANIC)

(NORTH STAIRWAY NORTH STAIRWAY)

and rebroadcasting them. And, even better, Dinky heard it from above, too. From the can-toi and the taheen who had been observing from the balconies.

No one ran and no one panicked, but the exodus up the north stairs had begun.

NINE

Susannah sat astride the SCT in the window of the shed where she'd been concealed, not worrying about being seen now. Smoke detectors—at least three of them—were yowling. A fire alarm was whooping even more loudly; that one was from Damli House, she was quite sure. As if in answer, a series of loud electronic goose-honks began from the Pleasantville end of the compound. This was joined by a multitude of clanging bells.

With all that happening to their south, it was no wonder that the woman north of the Devar-Toi saw only the backs of the three guards in the ivy-covered watchtowers. Three didn't seem like many, but it was five per cent of the total. A start.

Susannah looked down the barrel of her gun at the one in her sights and prayed. *God grant me true aim . . . true aim . . .*

Soon.

It would be soon.

TEN

Finli grabbed the Master's arm. Pimli shook him off and started toward his house again, staring unbelievably at the smoke that was now pouring out of all the windows on the left side.

"Boss!" Finli shouted, renewing his grip. "Boss, never mind that! It's the Breakers we have to worry about! The *Breakers!*"

It didn't get through, but the shocking warble of the Damli House fire alarm did. Pimli turned back in that direction, and for a moment he met Jakli's beady little bird's eyes. He saw nothing in them but panic, which had the perverse but welcome effect of steadying Pimli himself. Sirens and buzzers everywhere. One of them was a regular pulsing honk he'd never heard before. Coming from the direction of Pleasantville?

"Come on, boss!" Finli o' Tego almost pleaded. "We have to make sure the Breakers are okay—"

“Smoke!” Jakli cried, fluttering his dark (and utterly useless) wings. “Smoke from Damli House, smoke from Feneral, too!”

Pimli ignored him. He pulled the Peacemaker from the docker’s clutch, wondering briefly what premonition had caused him to put it on. He had no idea, but he was glad for the weight of the gun in his hand. Behind him, Tassa was yelling—Tammy was, too—but Pimli ignored the pair of them. His heart was beating furiously, but he was calm again. Finli was right. The Breakers were the important thing right now. Making sure they didn’t lose a third of their trained psychics in some sort of electrical fire or half-assed act of sabotage. He nodded at his Security Chief and they began to run toward Damli House with Jakli squawking and flapping along behind them like a refugee from a Warner Bros. cartoon. Somewhere up there, Gaskie was hollering. And then Pimli o’ New Jersey heard a sound that chilled him to the bone, a rapid *chow-chow-chow* sound. Gunfire! If some clown was shooting at his Breakers, that clown’s head would finish the day on a high pole, by the gods. That the guards rather than the Breakers might be under attack had at that point still not crossed his mind, nor that of the slightly wilier Finli, either. Too much was happening too fast.

ELEVEN

At the south end of the Devar compound, the syncopated honking sound was almost loud enough to split eardrums. “Christ!” Eddie said, and couldn’t hear himself.

In the south watchtowers, the guards were turned away from them, looking north. Eddie couldn’t see any smoke yet. Perhaps the guards could from their higher vantage-points.

Roland grabbed Jake’s shoulder, then pointed at the SOO LINE boxcar. Jake nodded and scrambled beneath it with Oy at his heels. Roland held both hands out to Eddie—*Stay where you are!*—and then followed. On the other side of the boxcar the boy and the gunslinger stood up, side by side. They would have been clearly visible to the sentries, had the attention of those worthies not been distracted by the smoke detectors and fire alarms inside the compound.

Suddenly the entire front of the Pleasantville Hardware Company descended into a slot in the ground. A robot fire engine, all bright red paint and gleaming chrome, came bolting out of the hitherto concealed garage. A line of red lights pulsed down the center of its elongated body, and an amplified voice bellowed, "*STAND CLEAR! THIS IS FIRE-RESPONSE TEAM BRAVO! STAND CLEAR! MAKE WAY FOR FIRE-RESPONSE TEAM BRAVO!*"

There must be no gunfire from this part of the Devar, not yet. The south end of the compound must seem safe to the increasingly frightened inmates of Algul Siento: don't worry, folks, here's your port in today's unexpected shitstorm.

The gunslinger dipped a 'Riza from Jake's dwindling supply and nodded for the boy to take another. Roland pointed to the guard in the righthand tower, then once more at Jake. The boy nodded, cocked his arm across his chest, and waited for Roland to give him the go.

TWELVE

Once you hear the horn that signals the change of shifts, Roland had told Susannah, take it to them. Do as much damage as you can, but don't let them see they're only facing a single person, for your father's sake!

As if he needed to tell her that.

She could have taken the three watchtower guards while the horn was still blaring, but something made her wait. A few seconds later, she was glad she had. The rear door of the Queen Anne burst open so violently it tore off its upper hinge. Breakers piled out, clawing at those ahead of them in their panic (*these are the would-be destroyers of the universe, she thought, these sheep*), and among them she saw half a dozen of the freakboys with animal heads and at least four of those creepy humanoids with the masks on.

Susannah took the guard in the west tower first, and had shifted her aim to the pair in the east tower before the first casualty in the Battle of Algul Siento had fallen over the railing and tumbled to the ground with his brains dribbling out of his hair and down his cheeks. The Coyote machine-pistol, switched to the middle setting, fired in low-pitched bursts of three: *Chow! Chow! Chow!*

The taheen and the low man in the east tower spun widdershins to each other, like figures in a dance. The taheen crumpled on the catwalk that skirted the top of the watchtower; the low man was driven into the rail, flipped over it with his bootheels in the sky, then plummeted head-first to the ground. She heard the crack his neck made when it broke.

A couple of the milling Breakers spotted this unfortunate fellow's descent and screamed.

"Put up your hands!" That was Dinky, she recognized his voice. "Put up your hands if you're a Breaker!"

No one questioned the idea; in these circumstances, anyone who sounded like he knew what was going on was in unquestioned charge. Some of the Breakers—but not all, not yet—put their hands up. It made no difference to Susannah. She didn't need raised hands to tell the difference between the sheep and the goats. A kind of haunted clarity had fallen over her vision.

She flicked the fire-control switch from BURST to SINGLE SHOT and began to pick off the guards who'd come up from The Study with the Breakers. *Taheen . . . can-toi, get him . . . a hume but don't shoot her, she's a Breaker even though she doesn't have her hands up . . . don't ask me how I know but I do . . .*

Susannah squeezed the Coyote's trigger and the head of the hume next to the woman in the bright red slacks exploded in a mist of blood and bone. The Breakers screamed like children, staring around with their eyes bulging and their hands up. And now Susannah heard Dinky again, only this time not his physical voice. It was his mental voice she heard, and it was much louder:

(GO SOUTH WITH YOUR HANDS UP, YOU WON'T BE HURT)

Which was her cue to break cover and start moving. She'd gotten eight of the Crimson King's bad boys, counting the three in the towers—not that it was much of an accomplishment, given their panic—and she saw no more, at least for the time being.

Susannah twisted the hand-throttle and scooted the SCT toward one of the other abandoned sheds. The gadget's pickup was so lively that she almost tumbled off the bicycle-style seat. Trying not to laugh

(and laughing anyway), she shouted at the top of her lungs, in her best Detta Walker vulture-screech:

“Git outta here, muthafuckahs! Git south! Hands up so we know you fum the bad boys! Everyone doan have their hands up goan get a bullet in the haid! Y’all trus’ me on it!”

In through the door of the next shed, scraping a balloon tire of the SCT on the jamb, but not quite hard enough to tip it over. Praise God, for she never would have had enough strength to right it on her own. In here, one of the “lazars” was set on a snap-down tripod. She pushed the toggle-switch marked ON and was wondering if she needed to do something else with the INTERVAL switch when the weapon’s muzzle emitted a blinding stream of reddish-purple light that arrowed into the compound above the triple run of fence and made a hole in the top story of Damli House. To Susannah it looked as big as a hole made by a point-blank artillery shell.

This is good, she thought. I gotta get the other ones going.

But she wondered if there would be time. Already other Breakers were picking up on Dinky’s suggestion, rebroadcasting it and boosting it in the process:

(GO SOUTH! HANDS UP! WON’T BE HURT!)

She flicked the Coyote’s fire-switch to FULL AUTO and raked it across the upper level of the nearest dorm to emphasize the point. Bullets whined and ricocheted. Glass broke. Breakers screamed and began to stampede around the side of Damli House with their hands up. Susannah saw Ted come around the same side. He was hard to miss, because he was going against the current. He and Dinky embraced briefly, then raised their hands and joined the southward flow of Breakers, who would soon lose their status as VIPs and become just one more bunch of refugees struggling to survive in a dark and poisoned land.

She’d gotten eight, but it wasn’t enough. The hunger was upon her, that dry hunger. Her eyes saw everything. They pulsed and ached in her head, and they saw everything. She hoped that other taheen, low men, or hume guards would come around the side of Damli House.

She wanted more.

THIRTEEN

Sheemie Ruiz lived in Corbett Hall, which happened to be the dormitory Susannah, all unknowing, had raked with at least a hundred bullets. Had he been on his bed, he almost certainly would have been killed. Instead he was on his knees, at the foot of it, praying for the safety of his friends. He didn't even look up when the window blew in but simply redoubled his supplications. He could hear Dinky's thoughts

(GO SOUTH)

pounding in his head, then heard other thought-streams join it,

(WITH YOUR HANDS UP)

making a river. And then *Ted's* voice was there, not just joining the others but amping them up, turning what had been a river

(YOU WON'T BE HURT)

into an ocean. Without realizing it, Sheemie changed his prayer. *Our Father* and *P'teck my pals* became *go south with your hands up, you won't be hurt*. He didn't even stop this when the propane tanks behind the Damli House cafeteria blew up with a shattering roar.

FOURTEEN

Gangli Tristum (that's *Doctor* Gangli to you, say thankya) was in many ways the most feared man in Damli House. He was a can-toi who had—perversely—taken a taheen name instead of a human one, and he ran the infirmary on the third floor of the west wing with an iron fist. And on roller skates.

Things on the ward were fairly relaxed when Gangli was in his office doing paperwork, or off on his rounds (which usually meant visiting Breakers with the sniffles in their dorms), but when he came out, the whole place—nurses and orderlies as well as patients—fell respectfully (and nervously) silent. A newcomer might laugh the first time he saw the squat, dark-complected, heavily jowled man-thing gliding slowly down the center aisle between the beds, arms folded over the stethoscope which lay on his chest, the tails of his white coat wafting out behind him (one Breaker had once commented, “He looks like John Irving after a bad facelift”). Such a one who was *caught*

laughing would never laugh again, however. Dr. Gangli had a sharp tongue, indeed, and no one made fun of his roller skates with impunity.

Now, instead of gliding on them, he went flying up and down the aisles, the steel wheels (for his skating gear far predated rollerblades) rumbling on the hardwood. “All the papers!” he shouted. “Do you hear me? . . . If I lose one file in this fucking mess, *one gods-damned file*, I’ll have someone’s eyes with my afternoon tea!”

The patients were already gone, of course; he’d had them out of their beds and down the stairs at the first bray of the smoke detector, at the first whiff of smoke. A number of orderlies—gutless wonders, and he knew who each of them was, oh yes, and a complete report would be made when the time came—had fled with the sickfolk, but five had stayed, including his personal assistant, Jack London. Gangli was proud of them, although one could not have told it from his hectoring voice as he skated up and down, up and down, in the thickening smoke.

“Get the papers, d’ye hear? You better, by all the gods that ever walked or crawled! *You better!*”

A red glare shot in through the window. Some sort of weapon, for it blew in the glass wall that separated his office from the ward and set his favorite easy-chair a-smolder.

Gangli ducked and skated under the laser beam, never slowing.

“Gan-a-damn!” cried one of the orderlies. He was a hume, extraordinarily ugly, his eyes bulging from his pale face. “What in the hell was th—”

“Never mind!” Gangli bawled. “Never mind what it was, you pissface clown! Get the papers! *Get my motherfucking papers!*”

From somewhere in front—the Mall?—came the hideous approaching clang-and-yowl of some rescue vehicle. “*STAND CLEAR!*” Gangli heard. “*THIS IS FIRE-RESPONSE TEAM BRAVO!*”

Gangli had never heard of such a thing as Fire-Response Team Bravo, but there was so much they didn’t know about this place. Why, he could barely use a third of the equipment in his own surgical suite! Never mind, the thing that mattered right now—

Before he could finish his thought, the gas-pods behind the kitchen blew up. There was a tremendous roar—seemingly from

directly beneath them—and Gangli Tristum was thrown into the air, the metal wheels on his roller skates spinning. The others were thrown as well, and suddenly the smoky air was full of flying papers. Looking at them, knowing that the papers would burn and he would be lucky not to burn with them, a clear thought came to Dr. Gangli: the end had come early.

FIFTEEN

Roland heard the telepathic command

(GO SOUTH WITH YOUR HANDS UP, YOU WON'T BE HURT)

begin to beat in his mind. It was time. He nodded at Jake and the Orizas flew. Their eerie whistling wasn't loud in the general cacophony, yet one of the guards must have heard something coming, because he was beginning to pivot when the plate's sharpened edge took his head off and tumbled it backward into the compound, the eyelashes fluttering in bewildered surprise. The headless body took two steps and then collapsed with its arms over the rail, blood pouring from the neck in a gaudy stream. The other guard was already down.

Eddie rolled effortlessly beneath the SOO LINE boxcar and bounced to his feet on the compound side. Two more automated fire engines had come bolting out of the station hitherto hidden by the hardware store façade. They were wheelless, seeming to run on cushions of compressed air. Somewhere toward the north end of the campus (for so Eddie's mind persisted in identifying the Devar-Toi), something exploded. Good. Lovely.

Roland and Jake took fresh plates from the dwindling supply and used them to cut through the three runs of fence. The high-voltage one parted with a bitter, sizzling crack and a brief blink of blue fire. Then they were in. Moving quickly and without speaking, they ran past the now-unguarded towers with Oy trailing closely at Jake's heels. Here was an alley running between Henry Graham's Drug Store & Soda Fountain and the Pleasantville Book Store.

At the head of the alley, they looked out and saw that Main Street was currently empty, although a tangy electric smell (a subway-station smell, Eddie thought) from the last two fire engines still hung in the

air, making the overall stench even worse. In the distance, fire-sirens whooped and smoke detectors brayed. Here in Pleasantville, Eddie couldn't help but think of the Main Street in Disneyland: no litter in the gutters, no rude graffiti on the walls, not even any dust on the plate-glass windows. This was where homesick Breakers came when they needed a little whiff of America, he supposed, but didn't any of them want anything better, anything more *realistic*, than this plastic-fantastic still life? Maybe it looked more inviting with folks on the sidewalks and in the stores, but that was hard to believe. Hard for *him* to believe, at least. Maybe it was only a city boy's chauvinism.

Across from them were Pleasantville Shoes, Gay Paree Fashions, Hair Today, and the Gem Theater (**COME IN IT'S KOOL INSIDE** said the banner hanging from the bottom of the marquee). Roland raised a hand, motioning Eddie and Jake across to that side of the street. It was there, if all went as he hoped (it almost never did), that they would set their ambush. They crossed in a crouch, Oy still scurrying at Jake's heel. So far everything seemed to be working like a charm, and that made the gunslinger nervous, indeed.

SIXTEEN

Any battle-seasoned general will tell you that, even in a small-scale engagement (as this one was), there always comes a point where coherence breaks down, and narrative flow, and any real sense of how things are going. These matters are re-created by historians later on. The need to recreate the myth of coherence may be one of the reasons why history exists in the first place.

Never mind. We have reached that point, the one where the Battle of Algul Siento took on a life of its own, and all I can do now is point here and there and hope you can bring your own order out of the general chaos.

SEVENTEEN

Trampas, the eczema-plagued low man who inadvertently let Ted in on so much, rushed to the stream of Breakers who were fleeing from

Damli House and grabbed one, a scrawny ex-carpenter with a receding hairline named Birdie McCann.

“Birdie, what is it?” Trampas shouted. He was currently wearing his thinking-cap, which meant he could not share in the telepathic pulse all around him. “What’s happening, do you kn—”

“Shooting!” Birdie yelled, pulling free. “*Shooting!* They’re out there!” He pointed vaguely behind him.

“Who? How m—”

“*Watch out you idiots it’s not slowing down!*” yelled Gaskie o’ Tego, from somewhere behind Trampas and McCann.

Trampas looked up and was horrified to see the lead fire engine come roaring and swaying along the center of the Mall, red lights flashing, two stainless-steel robot firemen now clinging to the back. Pimli, Finli, and Jakli leaped aside. So did Tassa the houseboy. But Tammy Kelly lay facedown on the grass in a spreading soup of blood. She had been flattened by Fire-Response Team Bravo, which had not actually scrambled to fight a fire in over eight hundred years. Her complaining days were over.

And—

“*STAND CLEAR!*” blared the fire engine. Behind it, two more engines swerved gaudily around either side of Warden’s House. Once again Tassa the houseboy barely leaped in time to save his skin. “*THIS IS FIRE-RESPONSE TEAM BRAVO!*” Some sort of metallic node rose from the center of the engine, split open, and produced a steel whirligig that began to spray high-pressure streams of water in eight different directions. “*MAKE WAY FOR FIRE-RESPONSE TEAM BRAVO!*”

And—

James Cagney—the can-toi who was standing with Gaskie in the foyer of the Feneral Hall dormitory when the trouble started, remember him?—saw what was going to happen and began yelling at the guards who were staggering out of Damli’s west wing, red-eyed and coughing, some with their pants on fire, a few—oh, praise Gan and Bessa and all the gods—with weapons.

Cag screamed at them to get out of the way and could hardly hear himself in the cacophony. He saw Joey Rastosovich pull two of them aside and watched the Earnshaw kid bump aside another. A few of the

coughing, weeping escapees saw the oncoming fire engine and scattered on their own. Then Fire-Response Team Bravo was plowing through the guards from the west wing, not slowing, roaring straight for Damli House, spraying water to every point of the compass.

And—

“Dear Christ, no,” Pimli Prentiss moaned. He clapped his hands over his eyes. Finli, on the other hand, was helpless to look away. He saw a low man—Ben Alexander, he was quite sure—chewed beneath the firetruck’s huge wheels. He saw another struck by the grille and mashed against the side of Damli House as the engine crashed, spraying boards and glass, then breaking through a bulkhead which had been partially concealed by a bed of sickly flowers. One wheel dropped down into the cellar stairwell and a robot voice began to boom, “*ACCIDENT! NOTIFY THE STATION! ACCIDENT!*”

No shit, Sherlock, Finli thought, looking at the blood on the grass with a kind of sick wonder. How many of his men and his valuable charges had the goddamned malfunctioning firetruck mowed down? Six? Eight? A motherfucking dozen?

From behind Damli House came that terrifying *chow-chow-chow* sound once again, the sound of automatic weapons fire.

A fat Breaker named Waverly jostled him. Finli snared him before Waverly could fly on by. “What happened? Who told you to go south?” For Finli, unlike Trampas, wasn’t wearing any sort of thinking-cap and the message

(GO SOUTH WITH YOUR HANDS UP, YOU WON’T BE HURT)

was slamming into his head so hard and loud it was nearly impossible to think of anything else.

Beside him, Pimli—struggling to gather his wits—seized on the beating thought and managed one of his own: *That’s almost got to be Brautigan, grabbing an idea and amplifying it that way. Who else could?*

And—

Gaskie grabbed first Cag and then Jakli and shouted at them to gather up all the armed guards and put them to work flanking the Breakers who were hurrying south on the Mall and the streets that flanked the Mall. They looked at him with blank, starey eyes—panic-eyes—and he could have screamed with balked fury. And here came

the next two engines with their sirens whooping. The larger of the pair struck two of the Breakers, bearing them to the ground and running them over. One of these new casualties was Joey Rastosovich. When the engine had passed, beating at the grass with its compressed-air vents, Tanya fell on her knees beside her dying husband, raising her hands to the sky. She was screaming at the top of her lungs but Gaskie could barely hear her. Tears of frustration and fear prickled the corners of his eyes. *Dirty dogs*, he thought. *Dirty ambushing dogs!*

And—

North of the Algul compound, Susannah broke cover, moving in on the triple run of fence. This wasn't in the plan, but the need to keep shooting, to keep knocking them down, was stronger than ever. She simply couldn't help herself, and Roland would have understood. Besides, the billowing smoke from Damli House had momentarily obscured everything at this end of the compound. Red beams from the "lazars" stabbed into it—on and off, on and off, like some sort of neon sign—and Susannah reminded herself not to get in the way of them, not unless she wanted a hole two inches across all the way through her.

She used bullets from the Coyote to cut her end of the fence—outer run, middle run, inner run—and then vanished into the thickening smoke, reloading as she went.

And—

The Breaker named Waverly tried to pull free of Finli. *Nar, nar, none of that, may it please ya*, Finli thought. He yanked the man—who'd been a bookkeeper or some such thing in his pre-Algul life—closer to him, then slapped him twice across the face, hard enough to make his hand hurt. Waverly screamed in pain and surprise.

"*Who the fuck is back there!*" Finli roared. "*WHO THE FUCK IS DOING THIS?*" The follow-up fire engines had halted in front of Damli House and were pouring streams of water into the smoke. Finli didn't know if it could help, but probably it couldn't hurt. And at least the damned things hadn't crashed into the building they were supposed to save, like the first one.

"*Sir, I don't know!*" Waverly sobbed. Blood was streaming from one of his nostrils and the corner of his mouth. "*I don't know, but there has*

to be fifty, maybe a hundred of the devils! Dinky got us out! God bless Dinky Earnshaw!"

Gaskie o' Tego, meanwhile, wrapped one good-sized hand around James Cagney's neck and the other around Jakli's. Gaskie had an idea son of a bitching crowhead Jakli had been on the verge of running, but there was no time to worry about that now. He needed them both.

And—

"Boss!" Finli shouted. "Boss, grab the Earnshaw kid! Something about this smells!"

And—

With Cag's face pressing against one of his cheeks and Jakli's against the other, the Wease (who thought as clearly as anyone that terrible morning) was finally able to make himself heard. Gaskie, meanwhile, repeated his command: divide up the armed guards and put them with the retreating Breakers. "*Don't try to stop them, but stay with them! And for Christ's sake, keep em from getting electrocuted! Keep em off the fence if they go past Main Stree—*"

Before he could finish this admonishment, a figure came plummeting out of the thickening smoke. It was Gangli, the compound doctor, his white coat on fire, his roller skates still on his feet.

And—

Susannah Dean took up a position at the left rear corner of Damli House, coughing. She saw three of the sons of bitches—Gaskie, Jakli, and Cagney, had she but known it. Before she could draw a bead, eddying smoke blotted them out. When it cleared, Jakli and Cag were gone, rounding up armed guards to act as sheepdogs who would at least try to protect their panicked charges, even if they could not immediately stop them. Gaskie was still there, and Susannah took him with a single headshot.

Pimli didn't see it. It was becoming clear to him that all the confusion was on the surface. Quite likely deliberate. The Breakers' decision to move away from the attackers north of the Algul had come a little too quickly and was a little too organized.

Never mind Earnshaw, he thought, *Brautigan's the one I want to talk to.*

But before he could catch up to Ted, Tassa grabbed the Master in a frantic, terrified hug, babbling that Warden's House was on fire, he

was afraid, terribly afraid, that all of Master's clothes, his books—

Pimli Prentiss knocked him aside with a hammer-blow to the side of his head. The pulse of the Breakers' unified thought (bad-mind now instead of good-mind), yammered

(WITH YOUR HANDS UP YOU WON'T BE)

crazily in his head, threatening to drive out all thought. Fucking Brautigan had done this, he *knew* it, and the man was too far ahead . . . unless . . .

Pimli looked at the Peacemaker in his hand, considered it, then jammed it back into the docker's clutch under his left arm. He wanted fucking Brautigan alive. Fucking Brautigan had some explaining to do. Not to mention some more goddamned breaking.

Chow-chow-chow. Bullets flicking all around him. Running hume guards, taheen, and can-toi all around him. And Christ, only a few of them were armed, mostly humes who'd been down for fence-patrol. Those who guarded the Breakers didn't really *need* guns, by and large the Breakers were as tame as parakeets and the thought of an outside attack had seemed ludicrous until . . .

Until it happened, he thought, and spied Trampas.

"Trampas!" he bawled. "*Trampas!* Hey, cowboy! Grab Earnshaw and bring him to me! *Grab Earnshaw!*"

Here in the middle of the Mall it was a little less noisy and Trampas heard sai Prentiss quite clearly. He sprinted after Dinky and grabbed the young man by one arm.

And—

Eleven-year-old Daneeka Rostov came out of the rolling smoke that now entirely obscured the lower half of Damli House, pulling two red wagons behind her. Daneeka's face was red and swollen; tears were streaming from her eyes; she was bent over almost double with the effort it was taking her to keep pulling Baj, who sat in one Radio Flyer wagon, and Sej, who sat in the other. Both had the huge heads and tiny, wise eyes of hydrocephalic savants, but Sej was equipped with waving stubs of arms while Baj had none. Both were now foaming at the mouth and making hoarse gagging sounds.

"Help me!" Dani managed, coughing harder than ever. "Help me, someone, before they choke!"

Dinky saw her and started in that direction. Trampas restrained him, although it was clear his heart wasn't in it. "No, Dink," he said. His tone was apologetic but firm. "Let someone else do it. Boss wants to talk to—"

Then Brautigan was there again, face pale, mouth a single stitched line in his lower face. "Let him go, Trampas. I like you, dog, but you don't want to get in our business today."

"Ted? What—"

Dink started toward Dani again. Trampas pulled him back again. Beyond them, Baj fainted and tumbled headfirst from his wagon. Although he landed on the soft grass, his head made a dreadful rotten *splitting* sound, and Dani Rostov shrieked.

Dinky lunged for her. Trampas yanked him back once more, and hard. At the same time he pulled the .38 Colt Woodsman he was wearing in his own docker's clutch.

There was no more time to reason with him. Ted Brautigan hadn't thrown the mind-spear since using it against the wallet-thief in Akron, back in 1935; hadn't even used it when the low men took him prisoner again in the Bridgeport, Connecticut, of 1960, although he'd been sorely tempted. He had promised himself he'd never use it again, and he certainly didn't want to throw it at

(smile *when you say that*)

Trampas, who had always treated him decently. But he had to get to the south end of the compound before order was restored, and he meant to have Dinky with him when he arrived.

Also, he was furious. Poor little Baj, who always had a smile for anyone and everyone!

He concentrated and felt a sick pain rip through his head. The mind-spear flew. Trampas let go of Dinky and gave Ted a look of unbelieving reproach that Ted would remember to the end of his life. Then Trampas grabbed the sides of his head like a man with the worst Excedrin Headache in the universe, and fell dead on the grass with his throat swollen and his tongue sticking out of his mouth.

"Come on!" Ted cried, and grabbed Dinky's arm. Prentiss was looking away for the time being, thank God, distracted by another explosion.

"But Dani . . . and Sej!"

“She can get Sej!” Sending the rest of it mentally:

(now that she doesn't have to pull Baj too)

Ted and Dinky fled while behind them Pimli Prentiss turned, looked unbelievably at Trampas, and bawled for them to stop—to stop in the name of the Crimson King.

Finli o' Tego unlimbered his own gun, but before he could fire, Daneeka Rostov was on him, biting and scratching. She weighed almost nothing, but for a moment he was so surprised to be attacked from this unexpected quarter that she almost bowled him over. He curled a strong, furry arm around her neck and threw her aside, but by then Ted and Dinky were almost out of range, cutting to the left side of Warden's House and disappearing into the smoke.

Finli steadied his pistol in both hands, took in a breath, held it, and squeezed off a single shot. Blood flew from the old man's arm; Finli heard him cry out and saw him swerve. Then the young pup grabbed the old cur and they cut around the corner of the house.

“I'm coming for you!” Finli bellowed after them. “Yar I am, and when I catch you, I'll make you wish you were never born!” But the threat felt horribly empty, somehow.

Now the entire population of Algul Siento—Breakers, taheen, hume guards, can-toi with bloody red spots glaring on their foreheads like third eyes—was in tidal motion, flowing south. And Finli saw something he really did not like at all: the Breakers and *only* the Breakers were moving that way with their arms raised. If there were more harriers down there, they'd have no trouble at all telling which ones to shoot, would they?

And—

In his room on the third floor of Corbett Hall, still on his knees at the foot of his glass-covered bed, coughing on the smoke that was drifting in through his broken window, Sheemie Ruiz had his revelation . . . or was spoken to by his imagination, take your pick. In either case, he leaped to his feet. His eyes, normally friendly but always puzzled by a world he could not quite understand, were clear and full of joy.

“*BEAM SAYS THANKYA!*” he cried to the empty room.

He looked around, as happy as Ebenezer Scrooge discovering that the spirits have done it all in one night, and ran for the door with his

slippers crunching on the broken glass. One sharp spear of glass pierced his foot—carrying his death on its tip, had he but known it, say sorry, say Discordia—but in his joy he didn't even feel it. He dashed into the hall and then down the stairs.

On the second floor landing, Sheemie came upon an elderly female Breaker named Belle O'Rourke, grabbed her, shook her. "BEAM SAYS THANKYA!" he hollered into her dazed and uncomprehending face. "BEAM SAYS ALL MAY YET BE WELL! NOT TOO LATE! JUST IN TIME!"

He rushed on to spread the glad news (glad to him, anyway), and

—
On Main Street, Roland looked first at Eddie Dean, then at Jake Chambers. "They're coming, and this is where we have to take them. Wait for my command, then stand and be true."

EIGHTEEN

First to appear were three Breakers, running full out with their arms raised. They crossed Main Street that way, never seeing Eddie, who was in the box-office of the Gem (he'd knocked out the glass on all three sides with the sandalwood grip of the gun which had once been Roland's), or Jake (sitting inside an engineless Ford sedan parked in front of the Pleasantville Bake Shoppe), or Roland himself (behind a mannequin in the window of Gay Patee Fashions).

They reached the other sidewalk and looked around, bewildered.

Go, Roland thought at them. Go on and get out of here, take the alley, get away while you can.

"Come on!" one of them shouted, and they ran down the alley between the drug store and the bookshop. Another appeared, then two more, then the first of the guards, a hume with a pistol raised to the side of his frightened, wide-eyed face. Roland sighted him . . . and then held his fire.

More of the Devar personnel began to appear, running into Main Street from between the buildings. They spread themselves wide apart. As Roland had hoped and expected, they were trying to flank their charges and channel them. Trying to keep the retreat from turning into a rout.

“Form two lines!” a taheen with a raven’s head was shouting in a buzzing, out-of-breath voice. *“Form two lines and keep em between, for your fathers’ sakes!”*

One of the others, a redheaded taheen with his shirttail out, yelled: *“What about the fence, Jakli? What if they run on the fence?”*

“Can’t do nothing about that, Cag, just—”

A shrieking Breaker tried to run past the raven before he could finish, and the raven—Jakli—gave him such a mighty push that the poor fellow went sprawling in the middle of the street. “Stay together, you maggots!” he snarled. “Run if’ee will, but keep some fucking order about it!” As if there could be any order in this, Roland thought (and not without satisfaction). Then, to the redhead, the one called Jakli shouted: “Let one or two of em fry—the rest’ll see and stop!”

It would complicate things if either Eddie or Jake started shooting at this point, but neither did. The three gunslingers watched from their places of concealment as a species of order rose from the chaos. More guards appeared. Jakli and the redhead directed them into the two lines, which was now a corridor running from one side of the street to the other. A few Breakers got past them before the corridor was fully formed, but only a few.

A new taheen appeared, this one with the head of a weasel, and took over for the one called Jakli. He pounded a couple of running Breakers on the back, actually hurrying them up.

From south of Main Street came a bewildered shout: “Fence is cut!” And then another: “I think the guards are dead!” This latter cry was followed by a howl of horror, and Roland knew as surely as if he had seen it that some unlucky Breaker had just come upon a severed watchman’s head in the grass.

The terrified babble on the heels of this hadn’t run itself out when Dinky Earnshaw and Ted Brautigan appeared from between the bakery and the shoe store, so close to Jake’s hiding place that he could have reached out the window of his car and touched them. Ted had been winged. His right shirtsleeve had turned red from the elbow down, but he was moving—with a little help from Dinky, who had an arm around him. Ted turned as the two of them ran through the gauntlet of guards and looked directly at Roland’s hiding place for a moment. Then he and Earnshaw entered the alley and were gone.

That made them safe, at least for the time being, and that was good. But where was the big bug? Where was Prentiss, the man in charge of this hateful place? Roland wanted him and yon Weasel-head taheen sai both—cut off the snake’s head and the snake dies. But they couldn’t afford to wait much longer. The stream of fleeing Breakers was drying up. The gunslinger didn’t think sai Weasel would wait for the last stragglers; he’d want to keep his precious charges from escaping through the cut fence. He’d know they wouldn’t go far, given the sterile and gloomy countryside all around, but he’d also know that if there were attackers at the north end of the compound, there might be rescuers standing by at the—

And there he was, thank the gods and Gan—sai Pimli Prentiss, staggering and winded and clearly in a state of shock, with a loaded docker’s clutch swinging back and forth under his meaty arm. Blood was coming from one nostril and the corner of one eye, as if all this excitement had caused something to rupture inside of his head. He went to the Weasel, weaving slightly from side to side—it was this drunken weave that Roland would later blame in his bitter heart for the final outcome of that morning’s work—probably meaning to take command of the operation. Their short but fervent embrace, both giving comfort and taking it, told Roland all he needed to know about the closeness of their relationship.

He leveled his gun on the back of Prentiss’s head, pulled the trigger, and watched as blood and hair flew. Master Prentiss’s hands shot out, the fingers spread against the dark sky, and he collapsed almost at the stunned Weasel’s feet.

As if in response to this, the atomic sun came on, flooding the world with light.

“Hile, you gunslingers, kill them all!” Roland cried, fanning the trigger of his revolver, that ancient murder-machine, with the flat of his right hand. Four had fallen to his fire before the guards, lined up like so many clay ducks in a shooting gallery, had registered the sound of the gunshots, let alone had time to react. *“For Gilead, for New York, for the Beam, for your fathers! Hear me, hear me! Leave not one of them standing! KILL THEM ALL!”*

And so they did: the gunslinger out of Gilead, the former drug addict out of Brooklyn, the lonely child who had once been known to

Mrs. Greta Shaw as 'Bama. Coming south from behind them, rolling through thickening banners of smoke on the SCT (diverting from a straight course only once, to swerve around the flattened body of another housekeeper, this one named Tammy), was a fourth: she who had once been instructed in the ways of nonviolent protest by young and earnest men from the N-double A-C-P and who had now embraced, fully and with no regrets, the way of the gun. Susannah picked off three laggard humie guards and one fleeing taheen. The taheen had a rifle slung over one shoulder but never tried for it. Instead he raised his sleek, fur-covered arms—his head was vaguely bearish—and cried for quarter and parole. Mindful of all that had gone on here, not in the least how the pureed brains of children had been fed to the Beam-killers in order to keep them operating at top efficiency, Susannah gave him neither, although neither did she give him cause to suffer or time to fear his fate.

By the time she rolled down the alley between the movie theater and the hair salon, the shooting had stopped. Finli and Jakli were dying; James Cagney was dead with his hume mask torn half-off his repulsive rat's head; lying with these were another three dozen, just as dead. The formerly immaculate gutters of Pleasantville ran with their blood.

There were undoubtedly other guards about the compound, but by now they'd be in hiding, positive that they had been set upon by a hundred or more seasoned fighters, land-pirates from God only knew where. The majority of Algul Siento's Breakers were in the grassy area between the rear of Main Street and the south watchtowers, huddled like the sheep they were. Ted, unmindful of his bleeding arm, had already begun taking attendance.

Then the entire northern contingent of the harrier army appeared at the head of the alley next to the movieshow: one shor'leg black lady mounted on an ATV. She was steering with one hand and holding the Coyote machine-pistol steady on the handlebars with the other. She saw the bodies heaped in the street and nodded with joyless satisfaction.

Eddie came out of the box-office and embraced her.

"Hey, sugarman, hey," she murmured, fluttering kisses along the side of his neck in a way that made him shiver. Then Jake was there—

pale from the killing, but composed—and she slung an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close. Her eyes happened on Roland, standing on the sidewalk behind the three he had drawn to Mid-World. His gun dangled beside his left thigh, and could he feel the expression of longing on his face? Did he even know it was there? She doubted it, and her heart went out to him.

“Come here, Gilead,” she said. “This is a *group* hug, and you’re part of the group.”

For a moment she didn’t think he understood the invitation, or was pretending not to understand. Then he came, pausing to reholster his gun and to pick up Oy. He moved in between Jake and Eddie. Oy jumped into Susannah’s lap as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Then the gunslinger put one arm around Eddie’s waist and the other around Jake’s. Susannah reached up (the bumbler scrabbling comically for purchase on her suddenly tilting lap), put her arms around Roland’s neck, and put a hearty smack on his sunburned forehead. Jake and Eddie laughed. Roland joined them, smiling as we do when we have been surprised by happiness.

I’d have you see them like this; I’d have you see them very well. Will you? They are clustered around Suzie’s Cruisin Trike, embracing in the aftermath of their victory. I’d have you see them this way not because they have won a great battle—they know better than that, every one of them—but because now they are ka-tet for the last time. The story of their fellowship ends here, on this make-believe street and beneath this artificial sun; the rest of the tale will be short and brutal compared to all that’s gone before. Because when katet breaks, the end always comes quickly.

Say sorry.

NINETEEN

Pimli Prentiss watched through blood-crusts, dying eyes as the younger of the two men broke from the group embrace and approached Finli o’ Tego. The young man saw that Finli was still stirring and dropped to one knee beside him. The woman, now dismounted from her motorized tricycle, and the boy began to check the rest of their victims and dispatch the few who still lived. Even as he

lay dying with a bullet in his own head, Pimli understood this as mercy rather than cruelty. And when the job was done, Pimli supposed they'd meet with the rest of their cowardly, sneaking friends and search those buildings of the Algul that were not yet on fire, looking for the remaining guards, and no doubt shooting out of hand those they discovered. *You won't find many, my yellowback friends*, he thought. *You've wiped out two-thirds of my men right here*. And how many of the attackers had Master Pimli, Security Chief Finli, and their men taken in return? So far as Pimli knew, not a single one.

But perhaps he could do something about that. His right hand began its slow and painful journey up toward the docker's clutch, and the Peacemaker holstered there.

Eddie, meanwhile, had put the barrel of the Gilead revolver with the sandalwood grips against the side of Weasel-boy's head. His finger was tightening on the trigger when he saw that Weasel-boy, although shot in the chest, bleeding heavily, and clearly dying fast, was looking at him with complete awareness. And something else, something Eddie did not much care for. He thought it was contempt. He looked up, saw Susannah and Jake checking bodies at the eastern end of the killzone, saw Roland on the far sidewalk, speaking with Dinky and Ted as he knotted a makeshift bandage around the latter's arm. The two former Breakers were listening carefully, and although both of them looked dubious, they were nodding their heads.

Eddie returned his attention to the dying taheen. "You're at the end of the path, my friend," he said. "Plugged in the pump, it looks like to me. Do you have something you want to say before you step into the clearing?"

Finli nodded.

"Say it, then, chum. But I'd keep it short if you want to get it all out."

"Thee and thine are a pack of yellowback dogs," Finli managed. He probably *was* shot in the heart—so it felt, anyway—but he would say this; it needed to be said, and he willed his damaged heart to beat until it was out. Then he'd die and welcome the dark. "Piss-stinking yellowback dogs, killing men from ambush. That's what I'd say."

Eddie smiled humorlessly. "And what about yellowback dogs who'd use children to kill the whole world from ambush, my friend? The

whole *universe*?”

The Weasel blinked at that, as if he'd expected no such reply. Perhaps any reply at all. “I had . . . my orders.”

“I have no doubt of that,” Eddie said. “And followed them to the end. Enjoy hell or Na'ar or whatever you call it.” He put the barrel of his gun against Finli's temple and pulled the trigger. The Weasel jerked a single time and was still. Grimacing, Eddie got to his feet.

He caught movement from the corner of his eye as he did so and saw another one—the boss of the show—had struggled up onto one elbow. His gun, the Peacemaker .40 that had once executed a rapist, was leveled. Eddie's reflexes were quick, but there was no time to use them. The Peacemaker roared a single time, fire licking from the end of its barrel, and blood flew from Eddie Dean's brow. A lock of hair flipped on the back of his head as the slug exited. He slapped his hand to the hole that had appeared over his right eye, like a man who has remembered something of vital importance just a little too late.

Roland whirled on the rundown heels of his boots, pulling his own gun in a dip too quick to see. Jake and Susannah also turned. Susannah saw her husband standing in the street with the heel of his hand pressed to his brow.

“Eddie? *Sugar*?”

Pimli was struggling to cock the Peacemaker again, his upper lip curled back from his teeth in a doglike snarl of effort. Roland shot him in the throat and Algul Siento's Master snap-rolled to his left, the still-uncocked pistol flying out of his hand and clattering to a stop beside the body of his friend the Weasel. It finished almost at Eddie's feet.

“*Eddie!*” Susannah screamed, and began a loping crawl toward him, thrusting herself on her hands. *He's not hurt bad*, she told herself, *not hurt bad, dear God don't let my man be hurt bad—*

Then she saw the blood running from beneath his pressing hand, pattering down into the street, and knew it *was* bad.

“Suze?” he asked. His voice was perfectly clear. “Suzie, where are you? I can't see.”

He took one step, a second, a third . . . and then fell facedown in the street, just as Gran-pere Jaffords had known he would, aye, from

the first moment he'd laid eyes on him. For the boy was a gunslinger, say true, and it was the only end that one such as he could expect.



CHAPTER XII: THE TET BREAKS

ONE

That night found Jake Chambers sitting disconsolately outside the Clover Tavern at the east end of Main Street in Pleasantville. The bodies of the guards had been carted away by a robot maintenance crew, and that was at least something of a relief. Oy had been in the boy's lap for an hour or more. Ordinarily he would never have stayed so close for so long, but he seemed to understand that Jake needed him. On several occasions, Jake wept into the bumbler's fur.

For most of that endless day Jake found himself thinking in two different voices. This had happened to him before, but not for years; not since the time when, as a very young child, he suspected he might have suffered some sort of weird, below-the-parental-radar breakdown.

Eddie's dying, said the first voice (the one that used to assure him there were monsters in his closet, and soon they would emerge to eat him alive). *He's in a room in Corbett Hall and Susannah's with him and he won't shut up, but he's dying.*

No, denied the second voice (the one that used to assure him—feebly—that there were no such things as monsters). *No, that can't be. Eddie's . . . Eddie! And besides, he's ka-tet. He might die when we reach the Dark Tower, we might all die when we get there, but not now, not here, that's crazy.*

Eddie's dying, replied the first voice. It was implacable. *He's got a hole in his head almost big enough to stick your fist in, and he's dying.*

To this the second voice could offer only more denials, each weaker than the last.

Not even the knowledge that they had likely saved the Beam (Sheemie certainly seemed to think they had; he'd crisscrossed the weirdly silent campus of the Devar-Toi, shouting the news—*BEAM SAYS ALL MAY BE WELL! BEAM SAYS THANKYA!*—at the top of his lungs) could make Jake feel better. The loss of Eddie was too great a price to pay even for such an outcome. And the breaking of the tet was an even greater price. Every time Jake thought of it, he felt sick to his stomach and sent up inarticulate prayers to God, to Gan, to the Man Jesus, to any or all of them to do a miracle and save Eddie's life.

He even prayed to the writer.

Save my friend's life and we'll save yours, he prayed to Stephen King, a man he had never seen. *Save Eddie and we won't let that van hit you. I swear it.*

Then again he'd think of Susannah screaming Eddie's name, of trying to turn him over, and Roland wrapping his arms around her and saying *You mustn't do that, Susannah, you mustn't disturb him*, and how she'd fought him, her face crazy, her face *changing* as different personalities seemed to inhabit it for a moment or two and then flee. *I have to help him!* she'd sob in the Susannah-voice Jake knew, and then in another, harsher voice she'd shout *Let me go, mahfah! Let me do mah voodoo on him, make mah houngun, he goan git up an walk, you see! Sho!* And Roland holding her through all of it, holding her and rocking her while Eddie lay in the street, but not dead, it would have been better, almost, if he'd been dead (even if being dead meant the end of talking about miracles, the end of hope), but Jake could see his dusty fingers twitching and could hear him muttering incoherently, like a man who talks in his sleep.

Then Ted had come, and Dinky just behind him, and two or three of the other Breakers trailing along hesitantly behind them. Ted had gotten on his knees beside the struggling, screaming woman and motioned for Dinky to get kneebound on the other side of her. Ted had taken one of her hands, then nodded for Dink to take the other. And something had flowed out of them—something deep and soothing. It wasn't meant for Jake, no, not at all, but he caught some of it, anyway, and felt his wildly galloping heart slow. He looked into Ted Brautigan's face and saw that Ted's eyes were doing their trick, the pupils swelling and shrinking, swelling and shrinking.

Susannah's cries faltered, subsiding to little hurt groans. She looked down at Eddie, and when she bent her head her eyes had spilled tears onto the back of Eddie's shirt, making dark places, like raindrops. That was when Sheemie appeared from one of the alleys, shouting glad hosannahs to all who would hear him—*"BEAM SAYS NOT TOO LATE! BEAM SAYS JUST IN TIME, BEAM SAYS THANKYA AND WE MUST LET HIM HEAL!"*—and limping badly on one foot (none of them thought anything of it then or even noticed it). Dinky murmured to the growing crowd of Breakers looking at the mortally wounded gunslinger, and several went to Sheemie and got him to quiet down. From the main part of the Devar-Toi the alarms continued, but the follow-up fire engines were actually getting the three worst fires (those in Damli House, Warden's House, and Feneral Hall) under control.

What Jake remembered next was Ted's fingers—unbelievably gentle fingers—spreading the hair on the back of Eddie's head and exposing a large hole filled with a dark jelly of blood. There were little white flecks in it. Jake had wanted to believe those flecks were bits of bone. Better than thinking they might be flecks of Eddie's brain.

At the sight of this terrible head-wound Susannah leaped to her knees and began to scream again. Began to struggle. Ted and Dinky (who was paler than paste) exchanged a glance, tightened their grip on her hands, and once more sent the

(peace ease quiet wait calm slow peace)

soothing message that was as much colors—cool blue shading to quiet ashes of gray—as it was words. Roland, meanwhile, held her shoulders.

"Can anything be done for him?" Roland asked Ted. "Anything at all?"

"He can be made comfortable," Ted said. "We can do that much, at least." Then he pointed toward the Devar. "Don't you still have work there to finish, Roland?"

For a moment Roland didn't quite seem to understand that. Then he looked at the bodies of the downed guards, and did. "Yes," he said. "I suppose I do. Jake, can you help me? If the ones left were to find a new leader and regroup . . . that wouldn't do at all."

“What about Susannah?” Jake had asked.

“Susannah’s going to help us see her man to a place where he can be at his ease, and die as peacefully as possible,” said Ted Brautigan. “Aren’t you, dear heart?”

She’d looked at him with an expression that was not quite vacant; the understanding (and the pleading) in that gaze went into Jake’s heart like the tip of an icicle. “*Must* he die?” she had asked him.

Ted had lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Yes,” he said. “He must die and you must bear it.”

“Then you have to do something for me,” she said, and touched Ted’s cheek with her fingers. To Jake those fingers looked cold. Cold.

“What, love? Anything I can.” He took hold of her fingers and wrapped them

(peace ease quiet wait calm slow peace)
in his own.

“Stop what you’re doing, unless I tell you different,” said she.

He looked at her, surprised. Then he glanced at Dinky, who only shrugged. Then he looked back at Susannah.

“You mustn’t use your good-mind to steal my grief,” Susannah told him, “for I’d open my mouth and drink it to the dregs. Every drop.”

For a moment Ted only stood with his head lowered and a frown creasing his brow. Then he looked up and gave her the sweetest smile Jake had ever seen.

“Aye, lady,” Ted replied. “We’ll do as you ask. But if you need us . . . *when* you need us . . .”

“I’ll call,” Susannah said, and once more slipped to her knees beside the muttering man who lay in the street.

TWO

As Roland and Jake approached the alley which would take them back to the center of the Devar-Toi, where they would put off mourning their fallen friend by taking care of any who might still stand against them, Sheemie reached out and plucked the sleeve of Roland’s shirt.

“Beam says thankya, Will Dearborn that was.” He had blown out his voice with shouting and spoke in a hoarse croak. “Beam says all may yet be well. Good as new. *Better.*”

“That’s fine,” Roland said, and Jake supposed it was. There had been no real joy then, however, as there was no real joy now. Jake kept thinking of the hole Ted Brautigan’s gentle fingers had exposed. That hole filled with red jelly.

Roland put an arm around Sheemie’s shoulders, squeezed him, gave him a kiss. Sheemie smiled, delighted. “I’ll come with you, Roland. Will’ee have me, dear?”

“Not this time,” Roland said.

“Why are you crying?” Sheemie asked. Jake had seen the happiness draining from Sheemie’s face, being replaced with worry. Meanwhile, more Breakers were returning to Main Street, milling around in little groups. Jake had seen consternation in the expressions they directed toward the gunslinger . . . and a certain dazed curiosity . . . and, in some cases, clear dislike. Hate, almost. He had seen no gratitude, not so much as a speck of gratitude, and for that he’d hated *them*.

“My friend is hurt,” Roland had said. “I cry for him, Sheemie. And for his wife, who is my friend. Will you go to Ted and sai Dinky, and try to soothe her, should she ask to be soothed?”

“If you want, aye! Anything for you!”

“Thankee-sai, son of Stanley. And help if they move my friend.”

“Your friend Eddie! Him who lays hurt!”

“Aye, his name is Eddie, you say true. Will you help Eddie?”

“Aye!”

“And there’s something else—”

“Aye?” Sheemie asked, then seemed to remember something. “Aye! Help you go away, travel far, you and your friends! Ted told me. ‘Make a hole,’ he said, ‘like you did for me.’ Only they brought him back. The bad ’uns. They’d not bring you back, for the bad ’uns are gone! Beam’s at peace!” And Sheemie laughed, a jarring sound to Jake’s grieving ear.

To Roland’s too, maybe, because his smile was strained. “In time, Sheemie . . . although I think Susannah may stay here, and wait for us to return.”

If we do return, Jake thought.

“But I have another chore you may be able to do. Not helping someone travel to that other world, but *like* that, a little. I’ve told Ted

and Dinky, and they'd tell you, once Eddie's been put at his ease. Will you listen?"

"Aye! And help, if I can!"

Roland clapped him on the shoulder. "Good!" Then Jake and the gunslinger had gone in a direction that might have been north, headed back to finish what they had begun.

THREE

They flushed out another fourteen guards in the next three hours, most of them humes. Roland surprised Jake—a little—by only killing the two who shot at them from behind the fire engine that had crashed with one wheel stuck in the cellar bulkhead. The rest he disarmed and then gave parole, telling them that any Devar-Toi guards still in the compound when the late-afternoon change-of-shifts horn blew would be shot out of hand.

"But where will we go?" asked a taheen with a snowy-white rooster's head below a great floppyred coxcomb (he reminded Jake a little of Foghorn Leghorn, the cartoon character).

Roland shook his head. "I care not where you fetch," he said, "as long as you're not here when the next horn blows, kennit. You've done hell's work here, but hell's shut, and I mean to see it will never open this particular set of doors again."

"What do you mean?" asked the rooster-taheen, almost timidly, but Roland wouldn't say, had only told the creature to pass on the message to any others he might run across.

Most of the remaining taheen and can-toi left Algul Siento in pairs and triplets, going without argument and nervously looking back over their shoulders every few moments. Jake thought they were right to be afraid, because his dinh's face that day had been abstract with thought and terrible with grief. Eddie Dean lay on his deathbed, and Roland of Gilead would not bear crossing.

"What are you going to do to the place?" Jake asked after the afternoon horn had blown. They were making their way past the smoking husk of Damli House (where the robot firemen had posted signs every twenty feet reading **OFF-LIMITS PENDING FIRE DEPT. INVESTIGATION**), on their way to see Eddie.

Roland only shook his head, not answering the question.

On the Mall, Jake spied six Breakers standing in a circle, holding hands. They looked like folks having a séance. Sheemie was there, and Ted, and Dani Rostov; there also was a young woman, an older one, and a stout, bankerly-looking man. Beyond, lying with their feet sticking out under blankets, was a line of the nearly fifty guards who had died during the brief action.

“Do you know what they’re doing?” Jake asked, meaning the *séance-folken*—the ones behind them were just being dead, a job that would occupy them from now on.

Roland glanced toward the circle of Breakers briefly. “Yes.”

“What?”

“Not now,” said the gunslinger. “Now we’re going to pay our respects to Eddie. You’re going to need all the serenity you can manage, and that means emptying your mind.”

FOUR

Now, sitting with Oy outside the empty Clover Tavern with its neon beer-signs and silent jukebox, Jake reflected on how right Roland had been, and how grateful Jake himself had been when, after forty-five minutes or so, the gunslinger had looked at him, seen his terrible distress, and excused him from the room where Eddie lingered, giving up his vitality an inch at a time, leaving the imprint of his remarkable will on every last inch of his life’s tapestry.

The litter-bearing party Ted Brautigan had organized had borne the young gunslinger to Corbett Hall, where he was laid in the spacious bedroom of the first-floor proctor’s suite. The litter-bearers lingered in the dormitory’s courtyard, and as the afternoon wore on, the rest of the Breakers joined them. When Roland and Jake arrived, a pudgy red-haired woman stepped into Roland’s way.

Lady, I wouldn’t do that, Jake had thought. Not this afternoon.

In spite of the day’s alarms and excursions, this woman—who’d looked to Jake like the Lifetime President of his mother’s garden club—had found time to put on a fairly heavy coat of makeup: powder, rouge, and lipstick as red as the side of a Devar fire engine. She introduced herself as Grace Rumbelow (formerly of Aldershot,

Hampshire, England) and demanded to know what was going to happen next—where they would go, what they would do, who would take care of them. The same questions the rooster-headed taheen had asked, in other words.

“For we have *been* taken care of,” said Grace Rumbelow in ringing tones (Jake had been fascinated with how she said “been,” so it rhymed with “seen”), “and are in no position, at least for the time being, to care for ourselves.”

There were calls of agreement at this.

Roland looked her up and down, and something in his face had robbed the lady of her measured indignation. “Get out of my road,” said the gunslinger, “or I’ll push you down.”

She grew pale beneath her powder and did as he said without uttering another word. A birdlike clatter of disapproval followed Jake and Roland into Corbett Hall, but it didn’t start until the gunslinger was out of their view and they no longer had to fear falling beneath the unsettling gaze of his blue eyes. The Breakers reminded Jake of some kids with whom he’d gone to school at Piper, classroom nitwits willing to shout out stuff like *this test sucks* or *bite my bag* . . . but only when the teacher was out of the room.

The first-floor hallway of Corbett was bright with fluorescent lights and smelled strongly of smoke from Damli House and Federal Hall. Dinky Earnshaw was seated in a folding chair to the right of the door marked PROCTOR’S SUITE, smoking a cigarette. He looked up as Roland and Jake approached, Oy trotting along in his usual position just behind Jake’s heel.

“How is he?” Roland asked.

“Dying, man,” Dinky said, and shrugged.

“And Susannah?”

“Strong. Once he’s gone—” Dinky shrugged again, as if to say it could go either way, any way.

Roland knocked quietly on the door.

“Who is it?” Susannah’s voice, muffled.

“Roland and Jake,” the gunslinger said. “Will you have us?”

The question was met with what seemed to Jake an unusually long pause. Roland, however, didn’t seem surprised. Neither did Dinky, for that matter.

At last Susannah said: "Come in."
They did.

FIVE

Sitting with Oy in the soothing dark, waiting for Roland's call, Jake reflected on the scene that had met his eyes in the darkened room. That, and the endless three-quarters of an hour before Roland had seen his discomfort and let him go, saying he'd call Jake back when it was "time."

Jake had seen a lot of death since being drawn to Mid-World; had dealt it; had even experienced his own, although he remembered very little of that. But this was the death of a ka-mate, and what had been going on in the bedroom of the proctor's suite just seemed pointless. And *endless*. Jake wished with all his heart that he'd stayed outside with Dinky; he didn't want to remember his wisecracking, occasionally hot-tempered friend this way.

For one thing, Eddie looked worse than frail as he lay in the proctor's bed with his hand in Susannah's; he looked old and (Jake hated to think of it) stupid. Or maybe the word was *senile*. His mouth had folded in at the corners, making deep dimples. Susannah had washed his face, but the stubble on his cheeks made them look dirty anyway. There were big purple patches beneath his eyes, almost as though that bastard Prentiss had beaten him up before shooting him. The eyes themselves were closed, but they rolled almost ceaselessly beneath the thin veils of his lids, as though Eddie were dreaming.

And he talked. A steady low muttering stream of words. Some of the things he said Jake could make out, some he couldn't. Some of them made at least minimal sense, but a lot of it was what his friend Benny would have called ki'come: utter nonsense. From time to time Susannah would wet a rag in the basin on the table beside the bed, wring it out, and wipe her husband's brow and dry lips. Once Roland got up, took the basin, emptied it in the bathroom, refilled it, and brought it back to her. She thanked him in a low and perfectly pleasant tone of voice. A little later Jake had freshened the water, and she thanked him in the same way. As if she didn't even know they were there.

We go for her, Roland had told Jake. Because later on she'll remember who was there, and be grateful.

But would she? Jake wondered now, in the darkness outside the Clover Tavern. *Would* she be grateful? It was down to Roland that Eddie Dean was lying on his deathbed at the age of twenty-five or -six, wasn't it? On the other hand, if not for Roland, she would never have met Eddie in the first place. It was all too confusing. Like the idea of multiple worlds with New Yorks in every one, it made Jake's head ache.

Lying there on his deathbed, Eddie had asked his brother Henry why he never remembered to box out.

He'd asked Jack Andolini who hit him with the ugly-stick.

He'd shouted, "Look out, Roland, it's Big-Nose George, he's back!"

And "Suze, if you can tell him the one about Dorothy and the Tin Woodman, I'll tell him all the rest."

And, chilling Jake's heart: "I do not shoot with my hand; he who aims with his hand has forgotten the face of his father."

At that last one, Roland had taken Eddie's hand in the gloom (for the shades had been drawn) and squeezed it. "Aye, Eddie, you say true. Will you open your eyes and see my face, dear?"

But Eddie hadn't opened his eyes. Instead, chilling Jake's heart more deeply yet, the young man who now wore a useless bandage about his head had murmured, "All is forgotten in the stone halls of the dead. These are the rooms of ruin where the spiders spin and the great circuits fall quiet, one by one."

After that there was nothing intelligible for awhile, only that ceaseless muttering. Jake had refilled the basin of water, and when he had come back, Roland saw his drawn white face and told him he could go.

"But—"

"Go on and go, sugarbunch," Susannah said. "Only be careful. Might still be some of em out there, looking for payback."

"But how will I—"

"I'll call you when it's time," Roland said, and tapped Jake's temple with one of the remaining fingers on his right hand. "You'll hear me."

Jake had wanted to kiss Eddie before leaving, but he was afraid. Not that he might catch death like a cold—he knew better than that

—but afraid that even the touch of his lips might be enough to push Eddie into the clearing at the end of the path.

And then Susannah might blame him.

SIX

Outside in the hallway, Dinky asked him how it was going.

“Real bad,” Jake said. “Do you have another cigarette?”

Dinky raised his eyebrows but gave Jake a smoke. The boy tamped it on his thumbnail, as he’d seen the gunslinger do with tailor-made smokes, then accepted a light and inhaled deeply. The smoke still burned, but not so harshly as the first time. His head only swam a little and he didn’t cough. *Pretty soon I’ll be a natural*, he thought. *If I ever make it back to New York, maybe I can go to work for the Network, in my Dad’s department. I’m already getting good at The Kill.*

He lifted the cigarette in front of his eyes, a little white missile with smoke issuing from the top instead of the bottom. The word CAMEL was written just below the filter. “I told myself I’d never do this,” Jake told Dinky. “Never in life. And here I am with one in my hand.” He laughed. It was a bitter laugh, an *adult* laugh, and the sound of it coming out of his mouth made him shiver.

“I used to work for this guy before I came here,” Dinky said. “Mr. Sharpton, his name was. He used to tell me that *never’s* the word God listens for when he needs a laugh.”

Jake made no reply. He was thinking of how Eddie had talked about the rooms of ruin. Jake had followed Mia into a room like that, once upon a time and in a dream. Now Mia was dead. Callahan was dead. And Eddie was dying. He thought of all the bodies lying out there under blankets while thunder rolled like bones in the distance. He thought of the man who’d shot Eddie snap-rolling to the left as Roland’s bullet finished him off. He tried to remember the welcoming party for them back in Calla Bryn Sturgis, the music and dancing and colored torches, but all that came clear was the death of Benny Slightman, another friend. Tonight the world seemed made of death.

He himself had died and come back: back to Mid-World and back to Roland. All afternoon he had tried to believe the same thing might

happen to Eddie and knew somehow that it would not. Jake's part in the tale had not been finished. Eddie's was. Jake would have given twenty years of his life—thirty!—not to believe that, but he did. He supposed he had progged it somehow.

The rooms of ruin where the spiders spin and the great circuits fall quiet, one by one.

Jake knew a spider. Was Mia's child watching all of this? Having fun? Maybe rooting for one side or the other, like a fucking Yankee fan in the bleachers?

He is. I know he is. I feel him.

"Are you all right, kiddo?" Dinky asked.

"No," Jake said. "Not all right." And Dinky nodded as if that was a perfectly reasonable answer. *Well, Jake thought, probably he expected it. He's a telepath, after all.*

As if to underline this, Dinky had asked who Mordred was.

"You don't want to know," Jake said. "Believe me." He snuffed his cigarette half-smoked ("All your lung cancer's right here, in the last quarter-inch," his father used to say in tones of absolute certainty, pointing to one of his own filterless cigarettes like a TV pitchman) and left Corbett Hall. He used the back door, hoping to avoid the cluster of waiting, anxious Breakers, and in that he had succeeded. Now he was in Pleasantville, sitting on the curb like one of the homeless people you saw back in New York, waiting to be called. Waiting for the end.

He thought about going into the tavern, maybe to draw himself a beer (surely if he was old enough to smoke and to kill people from ambush he was old enough to drink a beer), maybe just to see if the jukebox would play without change. He bet that Algul Siento had been what his Dad had claimed America would become in time, a cashless society, and that old Seeberg was rigged so you only had to push the buttons in order to start the music. And he bet that if he looked at the song-strip next to 19, he'd see "Someone Saved My Life Tonight," by Elton John.

He got to his feet, and that was when the call came. Nor was he the only one who heard it; Oy let go a short, hurt-sounding yip. Roland might have been standing right next to them.

To me, Jake, and hurry. He's going.

SEVEN

Jake hurried back down one of the alleys, skirted the still-smoldering Warden's House (Tassa the houseboy, who had either ignored Roland's order to leave or hadn't been informed of it, was sitting silently on the stoop in a kilt and a sweatshirt, his head in his hands), and began to trot up the Mall, sparing a quick and troubled glance at the long line of dead bodies. The little séance-circle he'd seen earlier was gone.

I won't cry, he promised himself grimly. If I'm old enough to smoke and think about drawing myself a beer, I'm old enough to control my stupid eyes. I won't cry.

Knowing he almost certainly would.

EIGHT

Sheemie and Ted had joined Dinky outside the proctor's suite. Dinky had given up his seat to Sheemie. Ted looked tired, but Sheemie looked like shit on a cracker to Jake: eyes bloodshot again, a crust of dried blood around his nose and one ear, cheeks leaden. He had taken off one of his slippers and was massaging his foot as though it pained him. Yet he was clearly happy. Maybe even exalted.

"Beam says all may yet be well, young Jake," Sheemie said. "Beam says not too late. Beam says thankya."

"That's good," Jake said, reaching for the doorknob. He barely heard what Sheemie was saying. He was concentrating

(won't cry and make it harder for her)

on controlling his emotions once he was inside. Then Sheemie said something that brought him back in a hurry.

"Not too late in the Real World, either," Sheemie said. "We know. We peeked. Saw the moving sign. Didn't we, Ted?"

"Indeed we did." Ted was holding a can of Nozz-A-La in his lap. Now he raised it and took a sip. "When you get in there, Jake, tell Roland that if it's June 19th of '99 you're interested in, you're still okay. But the margin's commencing to get a little thin."

"I'll tell him," Jake said.

“And remind him that time sometimes slips over there. Slips like an old transmission. That’s apt to continue for quite awhile, regardless of the Beam’s recovery. And once the 19th is gone . . .”

“It can never come again,” Jake said. “Not there. We know.” He opened the door and slipped into the darkness of the proctor’s suite.

NINE

A single circle of stringent yellow light, thrown by the lamp on the bedtable, lay upon Eddie Dean’s face. It cast the shadow of his nose on his left cheek and turned his closed eyes into dark sockets. Susannah was kneeling on the floor beside him, holding both of his hands in both of hers and looking down at him. Her shadow ran long upon the wall. Roland sat on the other side of the bed, in deep shadow. The dying man’s long, muttered monologue had ceased, and his respiration had lost all semblance of regularity. He would snatch a deep breath, hold it, then let it out in a lengthy, whistling whoosh. His chest would lie still so long that Susannah would look up into his face, her eyes shining with anxiety until the next long, tearing breath had begun.

Jake sat down on the bed next to Roland, looked at Eddie, looked at Susannah, then looked hesitantly into the gunslinger’s face. In the gloom he could see nothing there except weariness.

“Ted says to tell you it’s almost June 19th America-side, please and thankya. Also that time could slip a notch.”

Roland nodded. “Yet we’ll wait for this to be finished, I think. It won’t be much longer, and we owe him that.”

“How much longer?” Jake murmured.

“I don’t know. I thought he might be gone before you got here, even if you ran—”

“I did, once I got to the grassy part—”

“—but, as you see . . .”

“He fights hard,” Susannah said, and that this was the only thing left for her to take pride in made Jake cold. “My man fights hard. Mayhap he still has a word to say.”

TEN

And so he did. Five endless minutes after Jake had slipped into the bedroom, Eddie's eyes opened. "Sue . . ." He said, "Su . . . sie—"

She leaned close, still holding his hands, smiling into his face, all her concentration fiercely narrowed. And with an effort Jake wouldn't have believed possible, Eddie freed one of his hands, swung it a little to the right, and grasped the tight kinks of her curls. If the weight of his arm pulled at the roots and hurt her, she showed no sign. The smile that bloomed on her mouth was joyous, welcoming, perhaps even sensuous.

"Eddie! Welcome back!"

"Don't bullshit . . . a bullshitter," he whispered. "I'm goin, sweetheart, not comin."

"That's just plain sil—"

"Hush," he whispered, and she did. The hand caught in her hair pulled. She brought her face to his willingly and kissed his living lips one last time. "I . . . will . . . wait for you," he said, forcing each word out with immense effort.

Jake saw beads of sweat surface on his skin, the dying body's last message to the living world, and that was when the boy's heart finally understood what his head had known for hours. He began to cry. They were tears that burned and scoured. When Roland took his hand, Jake squeezed it fiercely. He was frightened as well as sad. If it could happen to Eddie, it could happen to anybody. It could happen to him.

"Yes, Eddie. I know you'll wait," she said.

"In . . ." He pulled in another of those great, wretched, rasping breaths. His eyes were as brilliant as gemstones. "In the clearing." Another breath. Hand holding her hair. Lamplight casting them both in its mystic yellow circle. "The one at the end of the path."

"Yes, dear." Her voice was calm now, but a tear fell on Eddie's cheek and ran slowly down to the line of jaw. "I hear you very well. Wait for me and I'll find you and we'll go together. I'll be walking then, on my own legs."

Eddie smiled at her, then turned his eyes to Jake.

"Jake . . . to me."

No, Jake thought, panicked, no, I can't, I can't.

But he was already leaning close, into that smell of the end. He could see the fine line of grit just below Eddie's hairline turning to paste as more tiny droplets of sweat sprang up.

"Wait for me, too," Jake said through numb lips. "Okay, Eddie? We'll all go on together. We'll be katet, just like we were." He tried to smile and couldn't. His heart hurt too much for smiling. He wondered if it might not explode in his chest, the way stones sometimes exploded in a hot fire. He had learned that little fact from his friend Benny Slightman. Benny's death had been bad, but this was a thousand times worse. *A million.*

Eddie was shaking his head. "Not . . . so fast, buddy." He drew in another breath and then grimaced, as if the air had grown quills only he could feel. He whispered then—not from weakness, Jake thought later, but because this was just between them. "Watch . . . for Mordred. Watch . . . Dandelo."

"Dandelion? Eddie, I don't—"

"*Dandelo.*" Eyes widening. Enormous effort. "Protect . . . your . . . dinh . . . from Mordred. From Dandelo. You . . . Oy. *Your* job." His eyes cut toward Roland, then back to Jake. "*Shhh.*" Then: "Protect . . ."

"I . . . I will. *We* will."

Eddie nodded a little, then looked at Roland. Jake moved aside and the gunslinger leaned in for Eddie's word to him.

ELEVEN

Never, ever, had Roland seen an eye so bright, not even on Jericho Hill, when Cuthbert had bade him a laughing goodbye.

Eddie smiled. "We had . . . some times."

Roland nodded again.

"You . . . you . . ." But this Eddie couldn't finish. He raised one hand and made a weak twirling motion.

"I danced," Roland said, nodding. "Danced the commala."

Yes, Eddie mouthed, then drew in another of those whooping, painful breaths. It was the last.

"Thank you for my second chance," he said. "Thank you . . . Father."

That was all. Eddie's eyes still looked at him, and they were still aware, but he had no breath to replace the one expended on that final word, that *father*. The lamplight gleamed on the hairs of his bare arms, turning them to gold. The thunder murmured. Then Eddie's eyes closed and he laid his head to one side. His work was finished. He had left the path, stepped into the clearing. They sat around him a-circle, but ka-tet no more.

TWELVE

And so, thirty minutes later.

Roland, Jake, Ted, and Sheemie sat on a bench in the middle of the Mall. Dani Rostov and the bankerly-looking fellow were nearby. Susannah was in the bedroom of the proctor's suite, washing her husband's body for burial. They could hear her from where they were sitting. She was singing. All the songs seemed to be ones they'd heard Eddie singing along the trail. One was "Born to Run." Another was "The Rice Song," from Calla Bryn Sturgis.

"We have to go, and right away," Roland said. His hand had gone to his hip and was rubbing, rubbing. Jake had seen him take a bottle of aspirin (gotten God knew where) from his purse and dry-swallow three. "Sheemie, will you send us on?"

Sheemie nodded. He had limped to the bench, leaning on Dinky for support, and still none of them had had a chance to look at the wound on his foot. His limp seemed so minor compared to their other concerns; surely if Sheemie Ruiz were to die this night it would be as a result of opening a makeshift door between Thunder-side and America. Another strenuous act of teleportation might be lethal to him—what was a sore foot compared to that?

"I'll try," he said. "I'll try my very hardest, so I will."

"Those who helped us look into New York will help us do this," Ted said.

It was Ted who had figured out how to determine the current when on America-side of the Keystone World. He, Dinky, Fred Worthington (the bankerly-looking man), and Dani Rostov had all been to New York, and were all able to summon up clear mental images of Times Square: the lights, the crowds, the movie marquees . . . and, most

important, the giant news-ticker which broadcast the events of the day to the crowds below, making a complete circuit of Broadway and Forty-eighth Street every thirty seconds or so. The hole had opened long enough to inform them that UN forensics experts were examining supposed mass graves in Kosovo, that Vice President Gore had spent the day in New York City campaigning for President, that Roger Clemens had struck out thirteen Texas Rangers but the Yankees had still lost the night before.

With the help of the rest, Sheemie could have held the hole open a good while longer (the others had been staring into the brilliance of that bustling New York night with a kind of hungry amazement, not Breaking now but Opening, Seeing), only there turned out to be no need for that. Following the baseball score, the date and time had gone speeding past them in brilliant yellow-green letters a story high: **JUNE 18, 1999 9:19 PM.**

Jake opened his mouth to ask how they could be sure they had been looking into Keystone World, the one where Stephen King had less than a day to live, and then shut it again. The answer was in the time, stupid, as the answer always was: the numbers comprising 9:19 also added up to nineteen.

THIRTEEN

“And how long ago was it that you saw this?” Roland asked.

Dinky calculated. “Had to’ve been five hours, at least. Based on when the change-of-shifts horn blew and the sun went out for the night.”

Which should make it two-thirty in the morning right now on the other side, Jake calculated, counting the hours on his fingers. Thinking was hard now, even simple addition slowed by constant thoughts of Eddie, but he found he could do it if he really tried. *Only you can’t depend on its only being five hours, because time goes faster on America-side. That may change now that the Breakers have quit beating up on the Beam—it may equalize—but probably not yet. Right now it’s probably still running fast.*

And it might slip.

One minute Stephen King could be sitting in front of his typewriter in his office on the morning of June 19th, fine as paint,

and the next . . . boom! Lying in a nearby funeral parlor that evening, eight or twelve hours gone by in a flash, his grieving family sitting in their own circle of lamplight and trying to decide what kind of service King would've wanted, always assuming that information wasn't in his will; maybe even trying to decide where he'd be buried. And the Dark Tower? Stephen King's version of the Dark Tower? Or Gan's version, or the *Prim's* version? Lost forever, all of them. And that sound you hear? Why, that must be the Crimson King, laughing and laughing and laughing from somewhere deep in the Discordia. And maybe Mordred the Spider-Boy, laughing along with him.

For the first time since Eddie's death, something besides grief came to the forefront of Jake's mind. It was a faint ticking sound, like the one the Sneetches had made when Roland and Eddie programmed them. Just before giving them to Haylis to plant, this had been. It was the sound of time, and time was not their friend.

"He's right," Jake said. "We have to go while we can still do something."

Ted: "Will Susannah—"

"No," Roland said. "Susannah will stay here, and you'll help her bury Eddie. Do you agree?"

"Yes," Ted said. "Of course, if that's how you'd have it."

"If we're not back in . . ." Roland calculated, one eye squinted shut, the other looking off into the darkness. "If we're not back by this time on the night after next, assume that we've come back to End-World at Fedic." *Yes, assume Fedic, Jake thought. Of course. Because what good would it do to make the other, even more logical assumption, that we're either dead or lost between the worlds, todash forever?*

"Do'ee ken Fedic?" Roland was asking.

"South of here, isn't it?" asked Worthington. He had wandered over with Dani, the pre-teen girl. "Or what *was* south? Trampas and a few of the other can-toi used to talk of it as though it were haunted."

"It's haunted, all right," Roland said grimly. "Can you put Susannah on a train to Fedic in the event that we're not able to come back here? I know that at least some trains must still run, because of—"

"The Greencloaks?" Dinky said, nodding. "Or the Wolves, as you think of them. All the D-line trains still run. They're automated."

“Are they monos? Do they talk?” Jake asked. He was thinking of Blaine.

Dinky and Ted exchanged a doubtful look, then Dinky returned his attention to Jake and shrugged. “How would we know? I probably know more about *D-cups* than *D-lines*, and I think that’s true of everyone here. The Breakers, at least. I suppose some of the guards might know something more. Or that guy.” He jerked a thumb at Tassa, who was still sitting on the stoop of Warden’s House, head in hands.

“In any case, we’ll tell Susannah to be careful,” Roland murmured to Jake. Jake nodded. He supposed that was the best they could do, but he had another question. He made a mental note to ask either Ted or Dinky, if he got a chance to do so without being overheard by Roland. He didn’t like the idea of leaving Susannah behind—every instinct of his heart cried out against it—but he knew she would refuse to leave Eddie unburied, and Roland knew it, too. They could make her come, but only by binding and gagging her, and that would only make things worse than they were already.

“It might be,” Ted said, “that a few Breakers would be interested in taking the train-trip south with Susannah.”

Dani nodded. “We’re not exactly loved around here for helping you out,” she said. “Ted and Dinky are getting it the worst, but somebody spit at me half an hour ago, while I was in my room, getting this.” She held up a battered-looking and clearly much-loved Pooh Bear. “I don’t think they’ll do anything while you guys are around, but after you go . . .” She shrugged.

“Man, I don’t get that,” Jake said. “They’re *free*.”

“Free to do what?” Dinky asked. “Think about it. Most of them were misfits on America-side. Fifth wheels. Over here we were VIPs, and we got the best of everything. Now all that’s gone. When you think about it that way, is it so hard to understand?”

“Yes,” Jake said bluntly. He supposed he didn’t *want* to understand.

“They lost something else, too,” Ted told them quietly. “There’s a novel by Ray Bradbury called *Fahrenheit 451*. ‘It was a pleasure to burn’ is that novel’s first line. Well, it was a pleasure to Break, as well.”

Dinky was nodding. So were Worthington and Dani Rostov.

Even Sheemie was nodding his head.

FOURTEEN

Eddie lay in that same circle of light, but now his face was clean and the top sheet of the proctor's bed had been folded neatly down to his midsection. Susannah had dressed him in a clean white shirt she'd found somewhere (in the proctor's closet was Jake's guess), and she must have found a razor, too, because his cheeks were smooth. Jake tried to imagine her sitting here and shaving the face of her dead husband—singing “Commala-come-come, the rice has just begun” as she did it—and at first he couldn't. Then, all at once, the image came to him, and it was so powerful that he had to struggle once again to keep from bursting into sobs.

She listened quietly as Roland spoke to her, sitting on the side of the bed, hands folded in her lap, eyes downcast. To the gunslinger she looked like a shy virgin receiving a marriage proposal.

When he had finished, she said nothing.

“Do you understand what I've told you, Susannah?”

“Yes,” she said, still without looking up. “I'm to bury my man. Ted and Dinky will help me, if only to keep their friends—” she gave this word a bitterly sarcastic little twist that actually encouraged Roland a bit; she was in there after all, it seemed “—from taking him away from me and lynching his body from a sour apple tree.”

“And then?”

“Either you'll find a way to come back here and we'll return to Fedic together, or Ted and Dinky will put me on the train and I'll go there alone.”

Jake didn't just hate the cold disconnection in her voice; it terrified him, as well. “You know why we have to go back to the other side, don't you?” he asked anxiously. “I mean, you *know*, don't you?”

“To save the writer while there's still time.” She had picked up one of Eddie's hands, and Jake noted with fascination that his nails were perfectly clean. What had she used to get the dirt out from beneath them, he wondered—had the proctor had one of those little nail-care gadgets, like the one his father always kept on a keychain in his pocket? “Sheemie says we've saved the Beam of Bear and Turtle. We *think* we've saved the rose. But there's at least one more job to do. The writer. The lazybones *writer*.” Now she did look up, and her eyes

flashed. Jake suddenly thought it might be good that Susannah wouldn't be with them when—if—they met sai Stephen King.

"You *bettah* save him," she said. Both Roland and Jake could hear old sneak-thief Detta creeping into her voice. "After what's happened today, you just *bettah*. And this time, Roland, you tell him not to stop with his writin. Not come hell, high water, cancer, or gangrene of the dick. Never mind worryin about the Pulitzer Prize, neither. You tell him to go on and be *done* with his motherfuckin *story*."

"I will pass the message on," Roland said.

She nodded.

"You'll come to us when this job is finished," Roland said, and his voice rose just slightly on the last word, almost turning it into a question. "You'll come with us and finish the final job, won't you?"

"Yes," she said. "Not because I want to—all the spit and git is out of me—but because *he* wanted me to." Gently, very gently, she put Eddie's hand back on his chest with the other one. Then she pointed a finger at Roland. The tip trembled minutely. "Just don't start up with any of that 'we are ka-tet, we are one from many' crap. Because those days are gone. Ain't they?"

"Yes," Roland said. "But the Tower still stands. And waits."

"Lost my taste for that, too, big boy." Not quite *los' mah tase fo' dat, too*, but almost. "Tell you the truth."

But Jake realized that she was *not* telling the truth. She *hadn't* lost her desire to see the Dark Tower any more than Roland had. Any more than Jake had himself. Their tet might be broken, but ka remained. And she felt it just as they did.

FIFTEEN

They kissed her (and Oy licked her face) before leaving.

"You be careful, Jake," Susannah said. "Come back safe, hear? Eddie would have told you the same."

"I know," Jake said, and then kissed her again. He was smiling because he could hear Eddie telling him to watch his ass, it was cracked already, and starting to cry once more for the same reason. Susannah held him tight a moment longer, then let him go and turned back to her husband, lying so still and cold in the proctor's

bed. Jake understood that she had little time for Jake Chambers or Jake Chambers's grief just now. Her own was too big.

SIXTEEN

Outside the suite, Dinky waited by the door. Roland was walking on with Ted, the two of them already at the end of the corridor and deep in conversation. Jake supposed they were headed back to the Mall, where Sheemie (with a little help from the others) would attempt to send them once more to America-side. That reminded him of something.

"The D-line trains go south," Jake said. "Or what's supposed to be south—is that right?"

"More or less, partner," Dinky said. "Some of the engines have got names, like *Delicious Rain* or *Spirit of the Snow Country*, but they've all got letters and numbers."

"Does the D stand for Dandelo?" Jake asked.

Dinky looked at him with a puzzled frown. "Dandelo? What in the hell is that?"

Jake shook his head. He didn't even want to tell Dinky where he'd heard the word.

"Well, I don't know, not for sure," Dinky said as they resumed walking, "but I always assumed the D stood for Discordia. Because that's where all the trains supposedly end up, you know—somewhere deep in the universe's baddest Badlands."

Jake nodded. D for Discordia. That made sense. Sort of, anyway.

"You didn't answer my question," Dinky said. "What's a Dandelo?"

"Just a word I saw written on the wall in Thunderclap Station. It probably doesn't mean anything."

SEVENTEEN

Outside Corbett Hall, a delegation of Breakers waited. They looked grim and frightened. *D for Dandelo*, Jake thought. *D for Discordia*. Also *D for desperate*.

Roland faced them with his arms folded over his chest. "Who speaks for you?" he asked. "If one speaks, let him come forward now,

for our time here is up.”

A gray-haired gentleman—another bankerly-looking fellow, in truth—stepped forward. He was wearing gray suit-pants, a white shirt open at the collar, and a gray vest, also open. The vest sagged. So did the man wearing it.

“You’ve taken our lives from us,” he said. He spoke these words with a kind of morose satisfaction—as if he’d always known it would come to this (or something like this). “The lives we knew. What will you give back in return, Mr. Gilead?”

There was a rumble of approval at this. Jake Chambers heard it and was suddenly more angry than ever before in his life. His hand, seemingly of its own accord, stole to the handle of the Coyote machine-pistol, caressed it, and found a cold comfort in its shape. Even a brief respite from grief. And Roland knew, for he reached behind him without looking and put his hand on top of Jake’s. He squeezed until Jake let loose of the gun.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll give, since you ask,” Roland said. “I meant to have this place, where you have fed on the brains of helpless children in order to destroy the universe, burned to the ground; aye, every stick of it. I intended to set certain flying balls that have come into our possession to explode, and blow apart anything that would not burn. I intended to point you the way to the River Whye and the green Callas which lie beyond it, and set you on with a curse my father taught me: may you live long, but not in good health.”

A resentful murmur greeted this, but not an eye met Roland’s own. The man who had agreed to speak for them (and even in his rage, Jake gave him points for courage) was swaying on his feet, as if he might soon faint away.

“The Callas still lie in that direction,” Roland said, and pointed. “If you go, some—many, even—may die on the way, for there are animals out there that are hungry, and what water there is may be poison. I’ve no doubt the *Calla-folken* will know who you are and what you’ve been about even if you lie, for they have the Manni among them and the Manni see much. Yet you may find forgiveness there rather than death, for the capacity for forgiveness in the hearts of such people is beyond the capacity of hearts such as yours to understand. Or mine, for that matter.

“That they would put you to work and that the rest of your lives would pass not in the comfort you’ve known but in toil and sweat I have no doubt, yet I urge you to go, if only to find some redemption for what you have done.”

“We didn’t *know* what we were doing, ye chary man!” a woman in the back yelled furiously.

“*YOU KNEW!*” Jake shouted back, screaming so loudly that he saw black dots in front of his eyes, and Roland’s hand was once again instantly over his to stay his draw. Would he actually have sprayed the crowd with the Coyote, bringing more death to this terrible place? He didn’t know. What he did know was that a gunslinger’s hands were sometimes not under his control once a weapon was in them. “Don’t you dare say you didn’t! *You knew!*”

“I’ll give this much, may it do ya,” Roland said. “My friends and I—those who survive, although I’m sure the one who lies dead yonder would agree, which is why I speak as I do—will let this place stand. There’s food enough to see you through the rest of your lives, I have no doubt, and robots to cook it and wash your clothes and even wipe your asses, if that’s what you think you need. If you prefer purgatory to redemption, then stay here. Were I you, I’d make the trek instead. Follow the railroad tracks out of the shadows. Tell them what you did before they can tell you, and get on your knees with your heads bared, and beg their forgiveness.”

“Never!” someone shouted adamantly, but Jake thought some of the others looked unsure.

“As you will,” said Roland. “I’ve spoken my last word on it, and the next who speaks back to me may remain silent ever after, for one of my friends is preparing another, her husband, to lie in the ground and I am full of grief and rage. Would you speak more? Would you dare my rage? If so, you dare this.” He drew his gun and laid it in the hollow of his shoulder. Jake stepped up beside him, at last drawing his own.

There was a moment of silence, and then the man who had spoken turned away.

“Don’t shoot us, mister, you’ve done enough,” someone said bitterly.

Roland made no reply and the crowd began to disperse. Some went running, and the others caught that like a cold. They fled in silence, except for a few who were weeping, and soon the dark had swallowed them up.

“Wow,” Dinky said. His voice was soft and respectful.

“Roland,” Ted said. “What they did wasn’t entirely their fault. I thought I had explained that, but I guess I didn’t do a very good job.”

Roland holstered his revolver. “You did an excellent job,” he said. “That’s why they’re still alive.”

Now they had the Damli House end of the Mall to themselves again, and Sheemie limped up to Roland. His eyes were round and solemn. “Will you show me where you’d go, dear?” he asked. “Can you show me the place?”

The place. Roland had been so fixed on the *when* that he’d scarcely thought of the *where*. And his memories of the road they had traveled in Lovell were pretty skimpy. Eddie had been driving John Cullum’s car, and Roland had been deep in his own thoughts, concentrating on the things he would say to convince the caretaker to help them.

“Did Ted show you a place before you sent him on?” he asked Sheemie.

“Aye, so he did. Only he didn’t know he was showing me. It was a baby-picture . . . I don’t know how to tell you, exactly . . . stupid head! Full of cobwebbies!” Sheemie made a fist and clouted himself between the eyes.

Roland took the hand before Sheemie could hit himself again and unrolled the fingers. He did this with surprising gentleness. “No, Sheemie. I think I understand. You found a thought . . . a memory from when he was a little boy.”

Ted had come over to them. “Of course that must be it,” he said. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it before now. Too simple, maybe. I grew up in Milford, and the place where I came out in 1960 was barely a spit from there in geographical terms. Sheemie must have found a memory of a carriage-ride, or maybe a trip on the Hartford Trolley to see my Uncle Jim and Aunt Molly in Bridgeport. Something in my subconscious.” He shook his head. “I *knew* the place where I came out looked familiar, but of course it was years later. The Merritt Parkway wasn’t there when I was a boy.”

“Can you show me a picture like that?” Sheemie asked Roland hopefully.

Roland thought once more of the place in Lovell where they’d parked on Route 7, the place where he’d called Chevin of Chayven out of the woods, but it simply wasn’t sure enough; there was no landmark that made the place only itself and no other. Not one that he remembered, anyway.

Then another idea came. One that had to do with Eddie.

“Sheemie!”

“Aye, Roland of Gilead, Will Dearborn that was!”

Roland reached out and placed his hands on the sides of Sheemie’s head. “Close your eyes, Sheemie, son of Stanley.”

Sheemie did as he was told, then reached out his own hands and grasped the sides of Roland’s head. Roland closed his own eyes.

“See what I see, Sheemie,” he said. “See where we would go. See it very well.”

And Sheemie did.

EIGHTEEN

While they stood there, Roland projecting and Sheemie seeing, Dani Rostov softly called to Jake.

Once he was before her she hesitated, as if unsure what she would say or do. He began to ask her, but before he could, she stopped his mouth with a kiss. Her lips were amazingly soft.

“That’s for good luck,” she said, and when she saw his look of amazement and understood the power of what she had done, her timidity lessened. She put her arms around his neck (still holding her scuffed Pooh Bear in one hand; he felt it soft against his back) and did it again. He felt the push of her tiny, hard breasts and would remember the sensation for the rest of his life. Would remember *her* for the rest of his life.

“And that’s for me.” She retreated to Ted Brautigan’s side, eyes downcast and cheeks burning red, before he could speak. Not that he could have, even if his life had depended upon it. His throat was locked shut.

Ted looked at him and smiled. “You judge the rest of them by the first one,” he said. “Take it from me. I know.”

Jake could still say nothing. She might have punched him in the head instead of kissing him on the lips. He was that dazed.

NINETEEN

Fifteen minutes later, four men, one girl, a billy-bumbler, and one dazed, amazed (and very tired) boy stood on the Mall. They seemed to have the grassy quad to themselves; the rest of the Breakers had disappeared completely. From where he stood, Jake could see the lighted window on the first floor of Corbett Hall where Susannah was tending to her man. Thunder rumbled. Ted spoke now as he had in Thundercap Station’s office closet, where the red blazer’s brass tag read **HEAD OF SHIPPING**, back when Eddie’s death had been unthinkable: “Join hands. And concentrate.”

Jake started to reach for Dani Rostov’s hand, but Dinky shook his head, smiling a little. “Maybe you can hold hands with her another day, hero, but right now you’re the monkey in the middle. And your dinh’s another one.”

“You hold hands with each other,” Sheemie said. There was a quiet authority in his voice that Jake hadn’t heard before. “That’ll help.”

Jake tucked Oy into his shirt. “Roland, were you able to show Sheemie—”

“Look,” Roland said, taking his hands. The others now made a tight circle around them. “Look. I think you’ll see.”

A brilliant seam opened in the darkness, obliterating Sheemie and Ted from Jake’s view. For a moment it trembled and darkened, and Jake thought it would disappear. Then it grew bright again and spread wider. He heard, very faintly (the way you heard things when you were underwater), the sound of a car or truck passing in that other world. And saw a building with a small asphalt lot in front of it. Three cars and a pickup truck were parked there.

Daylight! he thought, dismayed. Because if time never ran backward in the Keystone World, that meant that time *had* slipped. If that was Keystone World, then it was Saturday, the nineteenth of June, in the year—

“Quick!” Ted shouted from the other side of that brilliant hole in reality. “If you’re going, go now! He’s going to faint! If you’re going —”

Roland yanked Jake forward, his purse bouncing on his back as he did so.

Wait! Jake wanted to shout. *Wait, I forgot my stuff!*

But it was too late. There was the sensation of big hands squeezing his chest, and he felt all the air whoosh out of his lungs. He thought, *Pressure change*. There was a sensation of falling *up* and then he was reeling onto the pavement of the parking lot with his shadow tacked to his heels, squinting and grimacing, wondering in some distant part of his mind how long it had been since his eyes had been exposed to plain old natural daylight. Not since entering the Doorway Cave in pursuit of Susannah, maybe.

Very faintly he heard someone—he thought it was the girl who had kissed him—call *Good luck*, and then it was gone. Thunderclap was gone, and the Devar-Toi, and the darkness. They were America-side, in the parking lot of the place to which Roland’s memory and Sheemie’s power—boosted by the other four Breakers—had taken them. It was the East Stoneham General Store, where Roland and Eddie had been ambushed by Jack Andolini. Only unless there had been some horrible error, that had been twenty-two years earlier. This was June 19th of 1999, and the clock in the window (IT’S ALWAYS TIME FOR BOAR’S HEAD MEATS! was written in a circle around the face) said it was nineteen minutes of four in the afternoon.

Time was almost up.



PART THREE:

IN THIS HAZE OF
GREEN AND GOLD



VES'-KA GAN

CHAPTER I: MRS. TASSENBAUM DRIVES SOUTH

ONE

The fact of his own almost unearthly speed of hand never occurred to Jake Chambers. All he knew was that when he staggered out of the Devar-Toi and back into America, his shirt—belled out into a pregnant curve by Oy’s weight—was pulling out of his jeans. The bumbler, who never had much luck when it came to passing between the worlds (he’d nearly been squashed by a taxicab the last time), tumbled free. Almost anyone else in the world would have been unable to prevent that fall (and in fact it very likely wouldn’t have hurt Oy at all), but Jake wasn’t almost anyone. Ka had wanted him so badly that it had even found its way around death to put him at Roland’s side. Now his hands shot out with a speed so great that they momentarily blurred away to nothing. When they reappeared, one was curled into the thick shag at the nape of Oy’s neck and the other into the shorter fur at the rump end of his long back. Jake set his friend down on the pavement. Oy looked up at him and gave a single short bark. It seemed to express not one idea but two: *thanks*, and *don’t do that again*.

“Come on,” Roland said. “We have to hurry.”

Jake followed him toward the store, Oy falling in at his accustomed place by the boy’s left heel. There was a sign hanging in the door from a little rubber suction cup. It read WE’RE OPEN, SO COME IN N VISIT, just as it had in 1977. Taped in the window to the left of the door was this:

COME ONE COME ALL
TO THE
1st CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
BEANHOLE BEAN SUPPER

Saturday June 19th, 1999
Intersection Route 7 & Klatt Road

PARISH HOUSE (In Back)
5 PM–7:30 PM

AT 1st CONGO
“WE’RE ALWAYS GLAD TO SEEYA, NAYBAH!”

Jake thought, *The bean supper will be starting in an hour or so. They’ll already be putting down the tablecloths and setting the places.*

Taped to the right of the door was a more startling message to the public:

1st Lovell-Stoneham Church of the Walk-Ins
Will YOU join us for Worship?

Sunday services: 10 AM

Thursday services: 7 PM

EVERY WEDNESDAY IS
YOUTH NIGHT!!! 7–9 PM!

Games! Music! Scripture!

AND

NEWS OF WALK-INS!

Hey, Teens!

“Be There or Be Square!!!”

“We Seek the Doorway to Heaven—
Will You Seek With Us?”

Jake found himself thinking of Harrigan, the street-preacher on the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street, and wondering to which of these two churches he might have been attracted. His head might have told him First Congo, but his *heart*—

“Hurry, Jake,” Roland repeated, and there was a jingle as the gunslinger opened the door. Good smells wafted out, reminding Jake (as they had reminded Eddie) of Took’s on the Calla high street: coffee and peppermint candy, tobacco and salami, olive oil, the salty tang of brine, sugar and spice and most things nice.

He followed Roland into the store, aware that he had brought at least two things with him, after all. The Coyote machine-pistol was stuffed into the waistband of his jeans, and the bag of Orizas was still slung over his shoulder, hanging on his left side so that the half a dozen plates remaining inside would be within easy reach of his right hand.

TWO

Wendell “Chip” McAvoy was at the deli counter, weighing up a pretty sizable order of sliced honey-cured turkey for Mrs. Tassenbaum, and until the bell over the door rang, once more turning Chip’s life upside down (*You’ve turned turtle*, the oldtimers used to say when your car rolled in the ditch), they had been discussing the growing presence of Jet Skis on Keywadin Pond . . . or rather Mrs. *Tassenbaum* had been discussing it.

Chip thought Mrs. T. was a more or less typical summer visitor: rich as Croesus (or at least her husband, who had one of those new dot-com businesses, was), gabby as a parrot loaded on whiskey, and as crazy as Howard Hughes on a morphine toot. She could afford a cabin cruiser (and two dozen Jet Skis to pull it, if she fancied), but she came down to the market on this end of the lake in a battered old rowboat, tying up right about where John Cullum used to tie his up, until That Day (as the years had refined his story to ever greater purity, burnishing it like an oft-polished piece of teak furniture, Chip

had come more and more to convey its capital-letter status with his voice, speaking of That Day in the same reverential tones the Reverend Conveigh used when speaking of Our Lord). La Tassenbaum was talky, meddlesome, good-looking (kinda . . . he supposed . . . if you didn't mind the makeup and the hairspray), loaded with green, and a Republican. Under the circumstances, Chip McAvoy felt perfectly justified in sneaking his thumb onto the corner of the scale . . . a trick he had learned from his father, who had told him you practically had a duty to rook folks from away if they could afford it, but you must never rook folks from the home place, not even if they were as rich as that writer, King, from over in Lovell. Why? Because word got around, and the next thing you knew, out-of-town custom was all a man had to get by on, and try doing *that* in the month of February when the snowbanks on the sides of Route 7 were nine feet high. This wasn't February, however, and Mrs. Tassenbaum—a Daughter of Abraham if he had ever seen one—was not from these parts. No, Mrs. Tassenbaum and her rich-as-Croesus dot-com husband would be gone back to Jew York as soon as they saw the first colored leaf fall. Which was why he felt perfectly comfortable in turning her six-dollar order of turkey into seven dollars and eighty cents with the ball of his thumb on the scale. Nor did it hurt to agree with her when she switched topics and started talking about what a terrible man that Bill Clinton was, although in fact Chip had voted twice for Bubba and would have voted for him a third time, had the Constitution allowed him to run for another term. Bubba was smart, he was good at persuading the ragheads to do what he wanted, he hadn't *entirely* forgotten the working man, and by the Lord Harry he got more pussy than a toilet seat.

“And now *Gore* expects to just . . . ride in on his coattails!” Mrs. Tassenbaum said, digging for her checkbook (the turkey on the scale magically gained another two ounces, and there Chip felt it prudent to lock it in). “Claims he invented the Internet! Huh! I know better! In fact, I know the man who really *did* invent the Internet!” She looked up (Chip's thumb now nowhere near the scales, he had an instinct about such things, damned if he didn't) and gave Chip a roguish little smile. She lowered her voice into its confidential just-we-

two register. “I ought to, I’ve been sleeping in the same bed with him for almost twenty years!”

Chip gave a hearty laugh, took the sliced turkey off the scale, and put it on a piece of white paper. He was glad to leave the subject of Jet Skis behind, as he had one on order from Viking Motors (“The Boys with the Toys”) in Oxford himself.

“I know what you mean! That fella Gore, too slick!” Mrs. Tassenbaum was nodding enthusiastically, and so Chip decided to lay on a little more. Never hurt, by Christ. “His hair, for instance—how can you trust a man who puts that much goo in his—”

That was when the bell over the door jingled. Chip looked up. Saw. And froze. A goddamned lot of water had gone under the bridge since That Day, but Wendell “Chip” McAvoy knew the man who’d caused all the trouble the moment he stepped through the door. Some faces you simply never forgot. And hadn’t he always known, deep in his heart’s most secret place, that the man with the terrible blue eyes hadn’t finished his business and would be back?

Back for him?

That idea broke his paralysis. Chip turned and ran. He got no more than three steps along the inside of the counter before a shot rang out, loud as thunder in the store—the place was bigger and fancier than it had been in ’77, thank God for his father’s insistence on extravagant insurance coverage—and Mrs. Tassenbaum uttered a piercing scream. Three or four people who had been browsing the aisles turned with expressions of astonishment, and one of them hit the floor in a dead faint. Chip had time to register that it was Rhoda Beemer, eldest daughter of one of the two women who’d been killed in here on That Day. Then it seemed to him that time had folded back on itself and it was Ruth herself lying there with a can of creamed corn rolling free of one relaxing hand. He heard a bullet buzz over his head like an angry bee and skidded to a stop, hands raised.

“Don’t shoot, mister!” he heard himself bawl in the thin, wavering voice of an old man. “Take whatever’s in the register but don’t shoot me!”

“Turn around,” said the voice of the man who had turned Chip’s world turtle on That Day, the man who’d almost gotten him killed

(he'd been in the hospital over in Bridgton for two weeks, by the living Jesus) and had now reappeared like an old monster from some child's closet. "The rest of you on the floor, but you turn around, shopkeeper. Turn around and see me.

"See me very well."

THREE

The man swayed from side to side, and for a moment Roland thought he would faint instead of turning. Perhaps some survival-oriented part of his brain suggested that fainting was more likely to get him killed, for the shopkeeper managed to keep his feet and *did* finally turn and face the gunslinger. His dress was eerily similar to what he'd been wearing the last time Roland was here; it could have been the same black tie and butcher's apron, tied up high on his midriff. His hair was still slicked back along his skull, but now it was wholly white instead of salt-and-pepper. Roland remembered the way blood had dashed back from the left side of the shopkeeper's temple as a bullet—one fired by Andolini himself, for all the gunslinger knew—grooved him. Now there was a grayish knot of scar-tissue there. Roland guessed the man combed his hair in a way that would display that mark rather than hide it. He'd either had a fool's luck that day or been saved by ka. Roland thought ka the more likely.

Judging from the sick look of recognition in the shopkeeper's eyes, he thought so, too.

"Do you have a cartomobile, a truckomobile, or a tack-see?" Roland asked, holding the barrel of his gun on the shopkeeper's middle.

Jake stepped up beside Roland. "What are you driving?" he asked the shopkeeper. "That's what he means."

"Truck!" the shopkeeper managed. "International Harvester pickup! It's outside in the lot!" He reached under his apron so suddenly that Roland came within an ace of shooting him. The shopkeeper—mercifully—didn't seem to notice. All of the store's customers were now lying prone, including the woman who'd been at the counter. Roland could smell the meat she had been in the process of trading for, and his stomach rumbled. He was tired, hungry, overloaded with grief, and there were too many things to think about,

too many by far. His mind couldn't keep up. Jake would have said he needed to "take a time-out," but he didn't see any time-outs in their immediate future.

The shopkeeper was holding out a set of keys. His fingers were trembling, and the keys jingled. The late-afternoon sun slanting in the windows struck them and bounced complicated reflections into the gunslinger's eyes. First the man in the white apron had plunged a hand out of sight without asking permission (and not slowly); now this, holding up a bunch of reflective metal objects as if to blind his adversary. It was as if he were *trying* to get killed. But it had been that way on the day of the ambush, too, hadn't it? The storekeeper (quicker on his feet then, and without that widower's hump in his back) had followed him and Eddie from place to place like a cat who won't stop getting under your feet, seemingly oblivious to the bullets flying all around them (just as he'd seemed oblivious of the one that grooved the side of his head). At one point, Roland remembered, he had talked about his son, almost like a man in a barbershop making conversation while he waits his turn to sit under the scissors. A ka-mai, then, and such were often safe from harm. At least until ka tired of their antics and swatted them out of the world.

"Take the truck, take it and go!" the shopkeeper was telling him. "It's yours! I'm giving it to you! Really!"

"If you don't stop flashing those damned keys in my eyes, sai, what I'll take is your breath," Roland said. There was another clock behind the counter. He had already noticed that this world was full of clocks, as if the people who lived here thought that by having so many they could cage time. Ten minutes of four, which meant they'd been America-side for nine minutes already. Time was racing, racing. Somewhere nearby Stephen King was almost certainly on his afternoon walk, and in desperate danger, although he didn't know it. Or had it happened already? They—Roland, anyway—had always assumed that the writer's death would hit them hard, like another Beamquake, but maybe not. Maybe the impact of his death would be more gradual.

"How far from here to Turtleback Lane?" Roland rapped at the storekeeper.

The elderly sai only stared, eyes huge and liquid with terror. Never in his life had Roland felt more like shooting a man . . . or at least pistol-whipping him. He looked as foolish as a goat with its foot stuck in a crevice.

Then the woman lying in front of the meat-counter spoke. She was looking up at Roland and Jake, her hands clasped together at the small of her back. "That's in Lovell, mister. It's about five miles from here."

One look in her eyes—large and brown, fearful but not panicky—and Roland decided this was the one he wanted, not the storekeeper. Unless, that was—

He turned to Jake. "Can you drive the shopkeeper's truck five miles?"

Roland saw the boy wanting to say yes, then realizing he couldn't afford to risk ultimate failure by trying to do a thing he—city boy that he was—had never done in his life.

"No," Jake said. "I don't think so. What about you?"

Roland had watched Eddie drive John Cullum's car. It didn't look that hard . . . but there was his hip to consider. Rosa had told him that dry twist moved fast—like a fire driven by strong winds, she'd said—and now he knew what she'd meant. On the trail into Calla Bryn Sturgis, the pain in his hip had been no more than an occasional twinge. Now it was as if the socket had been injected with red-hot lead, then wrapped in strands of barbed wire. The pain radiated all the way down his leg to the right ankle. He'd watched how Eddie manipulated the pedals, going back and forth between the one that made the car speed up and the one that made it slow down, always using the right foot. Which meant the ball of the right hip was always rolling in its socket.

He didn't think he could do that. Not with any degree of safety.

"I think not," he said. He took the keys from the shopkeeper, then looked at the woman lying in front of the meat-counter. "Stand up, sai," he said.

Mrs. Tassenbaum did as she was told, and when she was on her feet, Roland gave her the keys. *I keep meeting useful people in here*, he thought. *If this one's as good as Cullum turned out to be, we might still be all right.*

“You’re going to drive my young friend and me to Lovell,” Roland said.

“To Turtleback Lane,” she said.

“You say true, I say thankya.”

“Are you going to kill me after you get to where you want to go?”

“Not unless you dawdle,” Roland said.

She considered this, then nodded. “Then I won’t. Let’s go.”

“Good luck, Mrs. Tassenbaum,” the shopkeeper told her faintly as she started for the door.

“If I don’t come back,” she said, “you just remember one thing: it was my husband who invented the Internet—him and his friends, partly at CalTech and partly in their own garages. *Not* Albert Gore.”

Roland’s stomach rumbled again. He reached over the counter (the shopkeeper cringed away from him as if he suspected Roland of carrying the red plague), grabbed the woman’s pile of turkey, and folded three slices into his mouth. The rest he handed to Jake, who ate two slices and then looked down at Oy, who was looking up at the meat with great interest.

“I’ll give you your share when we get in the truck,” Jake promised.

“Ruck,” Oy said; then, with much greater emphasis: “Share!”

“Holy jumping Jesus Christ,” the shopkeeper said.

FOUR

The Yankee shopkeeper’s accent might have been cute, but his truck wasn’t. It was a standard shift, for one thing. Irene Tassenbaum of Manhattan hadn’t driven a standard since she had been Irene Cantora of Staten Island. It was also a stick shift, and she had never driven one of those.

Jake was sitting beside her with his feet placed around said stick and Oy (still chewing turkey) on his lap. Roland swung into the passenger seat, trying not to snarl at the pain in his leg. Irene forgot to depress the clutch when she keyed the ignition. The I-H lurched forward, then stalled. Luckily it had been rolling the roads of western Maine since the mid-sixties and it was the sedate jump of an elderly mare rather than the spirited buck of a colt; otherwise Chip McAvoy would once more have lost at least one of his plate-glass windows. Oy

scrabbled for balance on Jake's lap and sprayed out a mouthful of turkey along with a word he had learned from Eddie.

Irene stared at the bumbler with wide, startled eyes. "Did that creature just say *fuck*, young man?"

"Never mind what he said," Jake replied. His voice was shaking. The hands of the Boar's Head clock in the window now stood at five to four. Like Roland, the boy had never had a sense of time as a thing so little in their control. "Use the clutch and get us *out* of here."

Luckily, the shifting pattern had been embossed on the head of the stick shift and was still faintly visible. Mrs. Tassenbaum pushed in the clutch with a sneakered foot, ground the gears hellishly, and finally found Reverse. The truck backed out onto Route 7 in a series of jerks, then stalled halfway across the white line. She turned the ignition key, realizing she'd once more forgotten the clutch just a little too late to prevent another series of those spastic leaps. Roland and Jake were now bracing their hands against the dusty metal dashboard, where a faded sticker proclaimed AMERICA! LOVE IT OR LEAVE! in red white and blue. This series of jerks was actually a good thing, for at that moment a truck loaded with logs—it was impossible for Roland not to think of the one that had crashed the last time they'd been here—crested the rise to the north of the store. Had the pickup not jerked its way back into the General Store's parking lot (bashing the fender of a parked car as it came to a stop), they would have been centerpunched. And very likely killed. The logging truck swerved, horn blaring, rear wheels spuming up dust.

The creature in the boy's lap—it looked to Mrs. Tassenbaum like some weird mixture of dog and raccoon—barked again.

Fuck. She was almost sure of it.

The storekeeper and the other patrons were lined up on the other side of the glass, and she suddenly knew what a fish in an aquarium must feel like.

"Lady, can you drive this thing or not?" the boy yelled. He had some sort of bag over his shoulder. It reminded her of a newsboy's bag, only it was leather instead of canvas and there appeared to be plates inside.

"I can drive it, young man, don't you worry." She was terrified, and yet at the same time . . . was she *enjoying* this? She almost thought she

was. For the last eighteen years she'd been little more than the great David Tassenbaum's ornament, a supporting character in his increasingly famous life, the lady who said "Try one of *these*" as she passed around *hors d'oeuvres* at parties. Now, suddenly, she was at the center of something, and she had an idea it was something very important indeed.

"Take a deep breath," said the man with the hard sunburned face. His brilliant blue eyes fastened upon hers, and when they did it was hard to think of anything else. Also, the sensation was pleasant. *If this is hypnosis, she thought, they ought to teach it in the public schools.* "Hold it, then let it out. And then *drive* us, for your father's sake."

She pulled in a deep breath as instructed, and suddenly the day seemed brighter—nearly brilliant. And she could hear faint singing voices. Lovely voices. Was the truck's radio on, tuned to some opera program? No time to check. But it was nice, whatever it was. As calming as the deep breath.

Mrs. Tassenbaum pushed in the clutch and restarted the engine. This time she found Reverse on the first try and backed into the road almost smoothly. Her first effort at a forward gear netted her Second instead of First and the truck almost stalled when she eased the clutch out, but then the engine seemed to take pity on her. With a wheeze of loose pistons and a manic rapping from beneath the hood, they began rolling north toward the Stoneham-Lovell line.

"Do you know where Turtleback Lane is?" Roland asked her. Ahead of them, near a sign marked MILLION DOLLAR CAMPGROUND, a battered blue minivan swung out onto the road.

"Yes," she said.

"You're sure?" The last thing the gunslinger wanted was to waste precious time casting about for the back road where King lived.

"Yes. We have friends who live there. The Beckhardts."

For a moment Roland could only grope, knowing he'd heard the name but not where. Then he got it. Beckhardt was the name of the man who owned the cabin where he and Eddie had had their final palaver with John Cullum. He felt a fresh stab of grief in his heart at the thought of Eddie as he'd been on that thundery afternoon, still so strong and vital.

"All right," he said. "I believe you."

She glanced at him across the boy sitting between. “You’re in one hell of a hurry, mister—like the white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. What very important date are you almost too late for?”

Roland shook his head. “Never mind, just drive.” He looked at the clock on the dashboard, but it didn’t work, had stopped in the long-ago with the hands pointed at (of course) 9:19. “It may not be too late yet,” he said, while ahead of them, unheeded, the blue van began to pull away. It strayed across the white line of Route 7 into the southbound lane and Mrs. Tassenbaum almost committed a *bon mot*—something about people who started drinking before five—but then the blue van pulled back into the northbound lane, breasted the next hill, and was gone toward the town of Lovell.

Mrs. Tassenbaum forgot about it. She had more interesting things to think about. For instance—

“You don’t have to answer what I’m going to ask now if you don’t want to,” she said, “but I admit that I’m curious: are you boys walkers?”

FIVE

Bryan Smith has spent the last couple of nights—along with his rottweilers, litter-twins he has named Bullet and Pistol—in the Million Dollar Campground, just over the Lovell-Stoneham line. It’s nice there by the river (the locals call the rickety wooden structure spanning the water Million Dollar Bridge, which Bryan understands is a joke, and a pretty funny one, by God). Also, folks—hippie-types down from the woods in Sweden, Harrison, and Waterford, mostly—sometimes show up there with drugs to sell. Bryan likes to get mellow, likes to get down, may it do ya, and he’s down this Saturday afternoon . . . not a lot, not the way he likes, but enough to give him a good case of the munchies. They have those Marses’ Bars at the Center Lovell Store. Nothing better for the munchies than those.

He pulls out of the campground and onto Route 7 without so much as a glance in either direction, then says “Whoops, forgot again!” No traffic, though. Later on—especially after the Fourth of July and until Labor Day—there’ll be plenty of traffic to contend with, even out here in the boonies, and he’ll probably stay closer to home. He knows he isn’t much of a driver; one more

speeding ticket or fender-bender and he'll probably lose his license for six months. Again.

No problem this time, though; nothing coming but an old pick-em-up, and that baby's almost half a mile back.

"Eat my dust, cowboy!" he says, and giggles. He doesn't know why he said cowboy when the word in his mind was muthafuckah, as in eat my dust muthafuckah, but it sounds good. It sounds right. He sees he's drifted into the other lane and corrects his course. "Back on the road again!" he cries, and lets loose another highpitched giggle. Back on the road again is a good one, and he always uses it on girls. Another good one is when you twist the wheel from side to side, making your car loop back and forth, and you say Ahh jeez, musta had too much cough-syrup! He knows lots of lines like this, even once thought of writing a book called Crazy Road Jokes, wouldn't that be a sketch, Bryan Smith writing a book just like that guy King over in Lovell!

He turns on the radio (the van yawing onto the soft shoulder to the left of the tarvy, throwing up a rooster-tail of dust, but not quite running into the ditch) and gets Steely Dan, singing "Hey Nineteen." Good one! Yassuh, wicked good one! He drives a little faster in response to the music. He looks into the rearview mirror and sees his dogs, Bullet and Pistol, looking over the rear seat, bright-eyed. For a moment Bryan thinks they're looking at him, maybe thinking what a good guy he is, then wonders how he can be so stupid. There's a Styrofoam cooler behind the driver's seat, and a pound of fresh hamburger in it. He means to cook it later over a campfire back at Million Dollar. Yes, and a couple more Marses' Bars for dessert, by the hairy old Jesus! Marses' Bars are wicked good!

"You boys ne'mine that cooler," Bryan Smith says, speaking to the dogs he can see in the rear-view mirror. This time the minivan pitches instead of yawing, crossing the white line as it climbs a blind grade at fifty miles an hour. Luckily—or unluckily, depending on your point of view—nothing is coming the other way; nothing puts a stop to Bryan Smith's northward progress.

"You ne'mine that hamburg, that's my supper." He says suppah, as John Cullum would, but the face looking back at the bright-eyed dogs from the rearview mirror is the face of Sheemie Ruiz. Almost exactly.

Sheemie could be Bryan Smith's litter-twin.

Irene Tassenbaum was driving the truck with more assurance now, standard shift or not. She almost wished she didn't have to turn right a quarter of a mile from here, because that would necessitate using the clutch again, this time to downshift. But that was Turtleback Lane right up ahead, and Turtleback was where these boys wanted to go.

Walk-ins! They said so, and *she* believed it, but who else would? Chip McAvoy, maybe, and surely the Reverend Peterson from that crazy Church of the Walk-Ins down in Stoneham Corners, but anyone else? Her husband, for instance? Nope. Never. If you couldn't engrave a thing on a microchip, David Tassenbaum didn't believe it was real. She wondered—not for the first time lately—if forty-seven was too old to think about a divorce.

She shifted back to Second without grinding the gears *too* much, but then, as she turned off the highway, had to shift all the way down to First when the silly old pickup began to grunt and chug. She thought that one of her passengers would make some sort of smart comment (perhaps the boy's mutant dog would even say *fuck* again), but all the man in the passenger seat said was, "This doesn't look the same."

"When were you here last?" Irene Tassenbaum asked him. She considered shifting up to second gear again, then decided to leave things just as they were. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," David liked to say.

"It's been awhile," the man admitted. She had to keep sneaking glances at him. There was something strange and exotic about him—especially his eyes. It was as if they'd seen things she'd never even dreamed of.

Stop it, she told herself. He's probably a drugstore cowboy all the way from Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

But she kind of doubted that. The boy was odd, as well—him and his exotic crossbreed dog—but they were nothing compared to the man with the haggard face and the strange blue eyes.

"Eddie said it was a loop," the boy said. "Maybe last time you guys came in from the other end."

The man considered this and nodded. "Would the other end be the Bridgton end?" he asked the woman.

"Yes indeed."

The man with the odd blue eyes nodded. “We’re going to the writer’s house.”

“Cara Laughs,” she said at once. “It’s a beautiful house. I’ve seen it from the lake, but I don’t know which driveway—”

“It’s nineteen,” the man said. They were currently passing the one marked 27. From this end of Turtleback Lane, the numbers would go down rather than up.

“What do you want with him, if I may I be so bold?”

It was the boy who answered. “We want to save his life.”

SEVEN

Roland recognized the steeply descending driveway at once, even though he’d last seen it under black, thundery skies, and much of his attention had been taken by the brilliant flying taheen. There was no sign of taheen or other exotic wildlife today. The roof of the house below had been dressed with copper instead of shingles at some point during the intervening years, and the wooded area beyond it had become a lawn, but the driveway was the same, with a sign reading CARA LAUGHS on the lefthand side and one bearing the number **19** in large numerals on the right. Beyond was the lake, sparkling blue in the strong afternoon light.

From the lawn came the blat of a hard-working small engine. Roland looked at Jake and was dismayed by the boy’s pale cheeks and wide, frightened eyes.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“He’s not here, Roland. Not him, not any of his family. Just the man cutting the grass.”

“Nonsense, you can’t—” Mrs. Tassenbaum began.

“I *know!*” Jake shouted at her. “I *know*, lady!”

Roland was looking at Jake with a frank and horrified sort of fascination . . . but in his current state, the boy either did not understand the look or missed it entirely.

Why are you lying, Jake? the gunslinger thought. And then, on the heels of that: *He’s not.*

“What if it’s already happened?” Jake demanded, and yes, he was worried about King, but Roland didn’t think that was *all* he was

worried about. “What if he’s dead and his family’s not here because the police called them, and—”

“It hasn’t happened,” Roland said, but that was all of which he was sure. *What do you know, Jake, and why won’t you tell me?*

There was no time to wonder about it now.

EIGHT

The man with the blue eyes sounded calm as he spoke to the boy, but he didn’t *look* calm to Irene Tassenbaum; not at all. And those singing voices she’d first noticed outside the East Stoneham General Store had changed. Their song was still sweet, but wasn’t there a note of desperation in it now, as well? She thought so. A high, pleading quality that made her temples throb.

“How can you *know* that?” the boy called Jake shouted at the man—his father, she assumed. “How can you be so fucking sure?”

Instead of answering the kid’s question, the one called Roland looked at *her*. Mrs. Tassenbaum felt the skin of her arms and back break out in gooseflesh.

“Drive down, sai, may it do ya.”

She looked doubtfully at the steep slope of the Cara Laughs driveway. “If I do, I might not get this bucket of bolts back up.”

“You’ll have to,” Roland said.

NINE

The man cutting the grass was King’s bondservant, Roland surmised, or whatever passed for such in this world. He was white-haired under his straw hat but straight-backed and hale, wearing his years with little effort. When the truck drove down the steep driveway to the house, the man paused with one arm resting on the handle of the mower. When the passenger door opened and the gunslinger got out, he used the switch to turn the mower off. He also removed his hat—without being exactly aware that he was doing it, Roland thought. Then his eyes registered the gun that hung at Roland’s hip, and widened enough to make the crow’s-feet around them disappear.

“Howdy, mister,” he said cautiously. *He thinks I’m a walk-in*, Roland thought. *Just as she did.*

And they *were* walk-ins of a sort, he and Jake; they just happened to have come to a time and place where such things were common.

And where time was racing.

Roland spoke before the man could go on. “Where are they? Where is *he*? Stephen King? Speak, man, and tell me the truth!”

The hat slipped from the old man’s relaxing fingers and fell beside his feet on the newly cut grass. His hazel eyes stared into Roland’s, fascinated: the bird looking at the snake.

“Fambly’s across the lake, at that place they gut on t’other side,” he said. “T’old Schindler place. Havin some kind of pa’ty, they are. Steve said he’d drive over after his walk.” And he gestured to a small black car parked on the driveway extension, its nose just visible around the side of the house.

“Where is he walking? Do ya know, tell this lady!”

The old man looked briefly over Roland’s shoulder, then back to the gunslinger. “Be easier was I t’drive ya there m’self.”

Roland considered this, but only briefly. Easier to begin with, yes. Maybe harder on the other end, where King would either be saved or lost. Because they’d found the woman in ka’s road. However minor a role she might have to play, it was her they had found first on the Path of the Beam. In the end it was as simple as that. As for the size of her part, it was better not to judge such things in advance. Hadn’t he and Eddie believed John Cullum, met in that same roadside store some three wheels north of here, would have but a minor role to play in their story? Yet it had turned out to be anything but.

All of this crossed his consciousness in less than a second, information (*hunch*, Eddie would have called it) delivered in a kind of brilliant mental shorthand.

“No,” he said, and jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. “Tell her. *Now.*”

TEN

The boy—Jake—had fallen back against the seat with his hands lying limp at his sides. The peculiar dog was looking anxiously up into the

kid's face, but the kid didn't see him. His eyes were closed, and Irene Tassenbaum at first thought he'd fainted.

"Son? . . . Jake?"

"I have him," the boy said without opening his eyes. "Not Stephen King—I can't touch him—but the other one. I have to slow him down. How can I slow him down?"

Mrs. Tassenbaum had listened to her husband enough at work—holding long, muttered dialogues with himself—to know a self-directed enquiry when she heard one. Also, she had no idea of whom the boy was speaking, only that it wasn't Stephen King. Which left about six billion other possibilities, globally speaking.

Nevertheless, she *did* answer, because she knew what always slowed *her* down.

"Too bad he doesn't need to go to the bathroom," she said.

ELEVEN

Strawberries aren't out in Maine, not this early in the season, but there are raspberries. Justine Anderson (of Maybrook, New York) and Elvira Toothaker (her Lovell friend) are walking along the side of Route 7 (which Elvira still calls The Old Fryeburg Road) with their plastic buckets, harvesting from the bushes which run for at least half a mile along the old rock wall. Garrett McKeen built that wall a hundred years ago, and it is to Garrett's great-grandson that Roland Deschain of Gilead is speaking at this very moment. Ka is a wheel, do ya not kennit.

The two women have enjoyed their hour's walk, not because either of them has any great love of raspberries (Justine reckons she won't even eat hers; the seeds get caught in her teeth) but because it's given them a chance to catch up on their respective families and to laugh a little together about the years when their friendship was new and probably the most important thing in either girl's life. They met at Vassar College (a thousand years ago, so it does seem) and carried the Daisy Chain together at graduation the year they were juniors. This is what they are talking about when the blue minivan—it is a 1985 Dodge Caravan, Justine recognizes the make and model because her oldest son had one just like it when his tribe started growing—comes around the curve by Melder's German Restaurant and Brathaus. It's all over the road, looping from side to side, first spuming up dust from the southbound shoulder, then

plunging giddily across the tar and spuming up more from the northbound one. The second time it does this—rolling toward them now, and coming at a pretty damned good clip—Justine thinks it may actually go into the ditch and turn over (“turn turtle,” they used to say back in the forties, when she and Elvira had been at Vassar), but the driver hauls it back on the road just before that can happen.

“Look out, that person’s drunk or something!” Justine says, alarmed. She pulls Elvira back, but they find their way blocked by the old wall with its dressing of raspberry bushes. The thorns catch at their slacks (thank goodness neither of us was wearing shorts, Justine will think later . . . when she has time to think) and pull out little puffs of cloth.

Justine is thinking she should put an arm around her friend’s shoulder and tumble them both over the thigh-high wall—do a backflip, just like in gym class all those years ago—but before she can make up her mind to do it, the blue van is by them, and at the moment it passes, it’s more or less on the road and not a danger to them.

Justine watches it go by in a muffled blare of rock music, her heart thumping heavily in her chest, the taste of something her body has dumped—adrenaline would be the most likely possibility—flat and metallic on her tongue. And halfway up the hill the little blue van once again lurches across the white line. The driver corrects the drift . . . no, overcorrects. Once more the blue van is on the righthand shoulder, spuming up yellow dust for fifty yards.

“Gosh, I hope Stephen King sees that asshole,” Elvira says. They have passed the writer half a mile or so back, and said hello. Probably everyone in town has seen him on his afternoon walk, at one time or another.

As if the driver of the blue van has heard Elvira Toothaker call him an asshole, the van’s brakelights flare. The van suddenly pulls all the way off the road and stops. When the door opens, the ladies hear a louder blast of rock and roll music. They also hear the driver—a man—yelling at someone (Elvira and Justine just pity the person stuck driving with that guy on such a beautiful June afternoon). “You leave ’at alone!” he shouts. “That ain’t yoahs, y’hear?” And then the driver reaches back into the van, brings out a cane, and uses it to help him over the rock wall and into the bushes. The van sits rumbling on the soft shoulder, driver’s door open, emitting blue exhaust from one end and rock from the other.

“What’s he doing?” Justine asks, a little nervously.

“Taking a leak would be my guess,” her friend replies. “But if Mr. King back there is lucky, maybe doing Number Two, instead. That might give him time to get off Route 7 and back onto Turtleback Lane.”

Suddenly Justine doesn’t feel like picking berries anymore. She wants to go back home and have a strong cup of tea.

The man comes limping briskly out of the bushes and uses his cane to help him back over the rock wall.

“I guess he didn’t need to Number Two,” Elvira says, and as the bad driver climbs back into his blue van, the two going-on-old women look at each other and burst into giggles.

TWELVE

Roland watched the old man give the woman instructions—something about using Warrington’s Road as a shortcut—and then Jake opened his eyes. To Roland the boy looked unutterably weary.

“I was able to make him stop and take a leak,” he said. “Now he’s fixing something behind his seat. I don’t know what it is, but it won’t keep him busy for long. Roland, this is bad. We’re awfully late. We have to go.”

Roland looked at the woman, hoping that his decision not to replace her behind the wheel with the old man had been the right one. “Do you know where to go? Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she said. “Up Warrington’s to Route 7. We sometimes go to dinner at Warrington’s. I know that road.”

“Can’t guarantee you’ll cut his path goin that way,” said the caretaker, “but it seems likely.” He bent down to pick up his hat and began to brush bits of freshly cut grass from it. He did this with long, slow strokes, like a man caught in a dream. “Ayuh, seems likely t’me.” And then, still like a man who dreams awake, he tucked his hat beneath his arm, raised a fist to his forehead, and bent a leg to the stranger with the big revolver on his hip. Why would he not?

The stranger was surrounded by white light.

THIRTEEN

When Roland pulled himself back into the cab of the storekeeper's truck—a chore made more difficult by the rapidly escalating pain in his right hip—his hand came down on Jake's leg, and just like that he knew what Jake had been keeping back, and why. He had been afraid that knowing might cause the gunslinger's focus to drift. It was not *kashume* the boy had felt, or Roland would have felt it, too. How *could* there be *ka-shume* among them, with the tet already broken? Their special power, something greater than all of them, perhaps drawn from the Beam itself, was gone. Now they were just three friends (four, counting the bumbler) united by a single purpose. And they could save King. Jake knew it. They could save the writer and come a step closer to saving the Tower by doing so. But one of them was going to die doing it.

Jake knew that, too.

FOURTEEN

An old saying—one taught to him by his father—came to Roland then: *If ka will say so, let it be so*. Yes; all right; let it be so.

During the long years he had spent on the trail of the man in black, the gunslinger would have sworn nothing in the universe could have caused him to renounce the Tower; had he not literally killed his own mother in pursuit of it, back at the start of his terrible career? But in those years he had been friendless, childless, and (he didn't like to admit it, but it was true) heartless. He had been bewitched by that cold romance the loveless mistake for love. Now he had a son and he had been given a second chance and he had changed. Knowing that one of them must die in order to save the writer—that their fellowship must be reduced again, and so soon—would not make him cry off. But he would make sure that Roland of Gilead, not Jake of New York, provided the sacrifice this time.

Did the boy know that he'd penetrated his secret? No time to worry about that now.

Roland slammed the truckomobile's door shut and looked at the woman. "Is your name Irene?" he asked.

She nodded.

“Drive, Irene. Do it as if Lord High Splitfoot were on your trail with rape on his mind, do ya I beg. Out Warrington’s Road. If we don’t see him there, out the Seven-Road. Will you?”

“You’re fucking right,” said Mrs. Tassenbaum, and shoved the gearshift into First with real authority.

The engine screamed, but the truck began to roll backward, as if so frightened by the job ahead that it would rather finish up in the lake. Then she engaged the clutch and the old International Harvester leaped ahead, charging up the steep incline of the driveway and leaving a trail of blue smoke and burnt rubber behind.

Garrett McKeen’s great-grandson watched them go with his mouth hanging open. He had no idea what had just happened, but he felt sure that a great deal depended on what would happen next.

Maybe everything.

FIFTEEN

Needing to piss that bad was weird, because pissing was the last thing Bryan Smith had done before leaving the Million Dollar Campground. And once he’d clambered over the fucking rock wall, he hadn’t been able to manage more than a few drops, even though it had felt like a real bladder-buster at the time. Bryan hopes he’s not going to have trouble with his prostate; trouble with the old prostate is the last thing he needs. He’s got enough other problems, by the hairy old Jesus.

Oh well, now that he’s stopped he might as well try to fix the Styrofoam cooler behind the seat—the dogs are still staring at it with their tongues hanging out. He tries to wedge it underneath the seat, but it won’t go—there’s not quite enough clearance. What he does instead is to point a dirty finger at his rotties and tell them again to ne’mine the cooler and the meat inside, that’s his, that’s gonna be his suppah. This time he even thinks to add a promise that later on he’ll mix a little of the hamburger in with their Purina, if they’re good. This is fairly deep thinking for Bryan Smith, but the simple expedient of swinging the cooler up front and putting it in the unoccupied passenger seat never occurs to him.

“You leave it alone!” he tells them again, and hops back behind the wheel. He slams the door, takes a brief glance in the rearview mirror, sees two old ladies back there (he didn’t notice them before because he wasn’t exactly looking

at the road when he passed them), gives them a wave they never see through the Caravan's filthy rear window, and then pulls back onto Route 7. Now the radio is playing "Gangsta Dream 19," by Owt-Ray-Juss, and Bryan turns it up (once more swerving across the white line and into the northbound lane as he does so—this is the sort of person who simply cannot fix the radio without looking at it). Rap rules! And metal rules, too! All he needs now to make his day complete is a tune by Ozzy—"Crazy Train" would be good.

And some of those Marses bars.

SIXTEEN

Mrs. Tassenbaum came bolting out of the Cara Laughs driveway and onto Turtleback Lane in second gear, the old pickup truck's engine over-cranking (if there'd been an RPM gauge on the dashboard, the needle would undoubtedly have been red-lining), the few tools in the back tap-dancing crazily in the rusty bed.

Roland had only a bit of the touch—hardly any at all, compared to Jake—but he had met Stephen King, and taken him down into the false sleep of hypnosis. That was a powerful bond to share, and so he wasn't entirely surprised when he touched the mind Jake hadn't been able to reach. It probably didn't hurt that King was thinking about *them*.

He often does on his walks, Roland thought. When he's alone, he hears the Song of the Turtle and knows that he has a job to do. One he's shirking. Well, my friend, that ends today.

If, that was, they could save him.

He leaned past Jake and looked at the woman. "Can't you make this gods-cursed thing go faster?"

"Yes," she said. "I believe I can." And then, to Jake: "Can you really read minds, son, or is that only a game you and your friend play?"

"I can't read them, exactly, but I can touch them," Jake said.

"I hope to hell that's the truth," she said, "because Turtleback's hilly and only one lane wide in places. If you sense someone coming the other way, you have to let me know."

"I will."

"Excellent," said Irene Tassenbaum. She bared her teeth in a grin. Really, there was no longer any doubt: this was the best thing that had

ever happened to her. The most *exciting* thing. Now, as well as hearing those singing voices, she could see faces in the leaves of the trees on the sides of the road, as if they were being watched by a multitude. She could feel some tremendous force gathering all around them, and she was possessed by a sudden giddy notion: that if she floored the gas-pedal of Chip McAvoy's old rusty pickup, it might go faster than the speed of light. Powered by the energy she sensed around them, it might outrace time itself.

Well, let's just see about that, she thought. She swung the I-H into the middle of Turtleback Lane, then punched the clutch and yanked the gearshift into Third. The old truck didn't go faster than the speed of light, and it didn't outrace time, but the speedometer needle climbed to fifty . . . and then past. The truck crested a hill, and when it started down the other side it flew briefly into the air.

At least someone was happy; Irene Tassenbaum shouted in excitement.

SEVENTEEN

Stephen King takes two walks, the short one and the long one. The short one takes him out to the intersection of Warrington's Road and Route 7, then back to his house, Cara Laughs, the same way. That one is three miles. The long walk (which also happens to be the name of a book he once wrote under the Bachman name, back before the world moved on) takes him past the Warrington's intersection, down Route 7 as far as the Slab City Road, then all the way back Route 7 to Berry Hill, bypassing Warrington's Road. This walk returns him to his house by way of the north end of Turtleback Lane, and is four miles. This is the one he means to take today, but when he gets back to the intersection of 7 and Warrington's he stops, playing with the idea of going back the short way. He's always careful about walking on the shoulder of the public road, though traffic is light on Route 7, even in summer; the only time this highway ever gets busy is when the Fryeburg Fair's going on, and that doesn't start until the first week of October. Most of the sightlines are good, anyway. If a bad driver's coming (or a drunk) you can usually spot him half a mile away, which gives you plenty of time to vacate the area. There's only one blind hill, and that's the one directly beyond the Warrington's intersection. Yet that's also an aerobic hill, one that gets the old heart really pumping, and

isn't that what he's doing all these stupid walks for? To promote what the TV talking heads call "heart healthiness?" He's quit drinking, he's quit doping, he's almost quit smoking, he exercises. What else is there?

*Yet a voice whispers to him just the same. Get off the main road, it says. Go on back to the house. You'll have an extra hour before you have to meet the rest of them for the party on the other side of the lake. You can do some work. Maybe start the next *Dark Tower* story; you know it's been on your mind.*

*Aye, so it has, but he already has a story to work on, and he likes it fine. Going back to the tale of the Tower means swimming in deep water. Maybe drowning there. Yet he suddenly realizes, standing here at this crossroads, that if he goes back early he will begin. He won't be able to help himself. He'll have to listen to what he sometimes thinks of as *Ves'-Ka Gan*, the *Song of the Turtle* (and sometimes as *Susannah's Song*). He'll junk the current story, turn his back on the safety of the land, and swim out into that dark water once again. He's done it four times before, but this time he'll have to swim all the way to the other side.*

Swim or drown.

"No," he says. He speaks aloud, and why not? There's no one to hear him out here. He perceives, faintly, the attenuate sound of an approaching vehicle—or is it two? one on Route 7 and one on Warrington's Road?—but that's all.

"No," he says again. "I'm gonna walk, and then I'm gonna party. No more writing today. Especially not that."

*And so, leaving the intersection behind, he begins making his way up the steep hill with its short sightline. He begins to walk toward the sound of the oncoming *Dodge Caravan*, which is also the sound of his oncoming death. The *ka* of the rational world wants him dead; that of the *Prim* wants him alive, and singing his song. So it is that on this sunny afternoon in western Maine, the irresistible force rushes toward the immovable object, and for the first time since the *Prim* receded, all worlds and all existence turn toward the *Dark Tower* which stands at the far end of *Can'-Ka No Rey*, which is to say the *Red Fields of None*. Even the *Crimson King* ceases his angry screaming. For it is the *Dark Tower* that will decide.*

"Resolution demands a sacrifice," King says, and although no one hears but the birds and he has no idea what this means, he is not disturbed. He's

always muttering to himself; it's as though there is a Cave of Voices in his head, one full of brilliant—but not necessarily intelligent—mimics.

He walks, swinging his arms beside his bluejeaned thighs, unaware that his heart is

(isn't)

finishing its last few beats, that his mind is

(isn't)

thinking its last few thoughts, that his voices are

(aren't)

making their last Delphic pronouncements.

“Ves’-Ka Gan,” he says, amused by the sound of it—yet attracted, too. He has promised himself that he’ll try not to stuff his Dark Tower fantasies with unpronounceable words in some made-up (not to say fucked-up) language—his editor, Chuck Verrill in New York, will only cut most of them if he does—but his mind seems to be filling up with such words and phrases all the same: ka, katet, sai, soh, can-toi (that one at least is from another book of his, Desperation), taheen. Can Tolkien’s Cirith Ungol and H. P. Lovecraft’s Great Blind Fiddler, Nyarlathotep, be far behind?

He laughs, then begins to sing a song one of his voices has given him. He thinks he will certainly use it in the next gunslinger book, when he finally allows the Turtle its voice again. “Commala-come-one,” he sings as he walks, “there’s a young man with a gun. That young man lost his honey when she took it on the run.”

And is that young man Eddie Dean? Or is it Jake Chambers?

“Eddie,” he says out loud. “Eddie’s the gunny with the honey.” He’s so deep in thought that at first he doesn’t see the roof of the blue Dodge Caravan as it comes over the short horizon ahead of him and so does not realize this vehicle is not on the highway at all, but on the soft shoulder where he is walking. Nor does he hear the oncoming roar of the pickup truck behind him.

EIGHTEEN

Bryan hears the scrape of the cooler’s lid even over the funky rip-rap beat of the music, and when he looks in the rearview mirror he’s both dismayed and outraged to see that Bullet, always the more forward of the two rotties, has leaped from the storage area at the rear of the van into the passenger

compartment. Bullet's rear legs are up on the dirty seat, his stubby tail is wagging happily, and his nose is buried in Bryan's cooler.

At this point any reasonable driver would pull over to the side of the road, stop his vehicle, and take care of his wayward animal. Bryan Smith, however, has never gotten high marks for reason when behind the wheel, and has the driving record to prove it. Instead of pulling over, he twists around to the right, steering with his left hand and shoving ineffectually at the top of the rottweiler's flat head with his right.

"Leave 'at alone!" he shouts at Bullet as his minivan drifts first toward the righthand shoulder and then onto it. "Din' you hear me, Bullet? Are you foolish? Leave 'at alone!" He actually succeeds in shoving the dog's head up for a moment, but there's no fur for his fingers to grasp and Bullet, while no genius, is smart enough to know he has at least one more chance to grab the stuff in the white paper, the stuff radiating that entrancing red smell. He dips beneath Bryan's hand and seizes the wrapped package of hamburger in his jaws.

"Drop it!" Bryan screams. "You drop it right . . . NOW!"

In order to gain the purchase necessary to twist further in the driver's bucket, he presses down firmly with both feet. One of them, unfortunately, is on the accelerator. The van puts on a burst of speed as it rushes toward the top of the hill. At this moment, in his excitement and outrage, Bryan has completely forgotten where he is (Route 7) and what he's supposed to be doing (driving a van). All he cares about is getting the package of meat out of Bullet's jaws.

"Gimme it!" he shouts, tugging. Tail wagging more furiously than ever (to him it's now a game as well as a meal), Bullet tugs back. There's the sound of ripping butcher's paper. The van is now all the way off the road. Beyond it is a grove of old pines lit by lovely afternoon light: a haze of green and gold. Bryan thinks only of the meat. He's not going to eat hamburg with dog-drool on it, and you best believe it.

"Gimme it!" he says, not seeing the man in the path of his van, not seeing the truck that has now pulled up just behind the man, not seeing the truck's passenger door open or the lanky cowboy-type who leaps out, a revolver with big yellow grips spilling from the holster on his hip and onto the ground as he does; Bryan Smith's world has narrowed to one very bad dog and one package of meat. In the struggle for the meat, blood-roses are blooming on the butcher's paper like tattoos.

NINETEEN

“There he is!” the boy named Jake shouted, but Irene Tassenbaum didn’t need him to tell her. Stephen King was wearing jeans, a chambray workshirt, and a baseball cap. He was well beyond the place where the road to Warrington’s intersected with Route 7, about a quarter of the way up the slope.

She punched the clutch, downshifted to Second like a NASCAR driver with the checkered flag in view, then turned hard left, hauling on the wheel with both hands. Chip McAvoy’s pickup truck teetered but did not roll. She saw the twinkle of sun on metal as a vehicle coming the other way reached the top of the hill King was climbing. She heard the man sitting by the door shout, “Pull in behind him!”

She did as he told her, even though she could now see that the oncoming vehicle was off the road and thus apt to broadside them. Not to mention crushing Stephen King in a metal sandwich between them.

The door popped open and the one named Roland half-rolled, half-jumped out of the truck.

After that, things happened very, very fast.



CHAPTER II: VES'-KA GAN

ONE

What happened was lethally simple: Roland's bad hip betrayed him. He went to his knees with a cry of mingled rage, pain, and dismay. Then the sunlight was blotted out as Jake leaped over him without so much as breaking stride. Oy was barking crazily from the cab of the truck: "*Ake-Ake! Ake-Ake!*"

"*Jake, no!*" Roland shouted. He saw it all with a terrible clarity. The boy seized the writer around the waist as the blue vehicle—neither a truck nor a car but seemingly a cross between the two—bore down upon them in a roar of dissonant music. Jake turned King to the left, shielding him with his body, and so it was Jake the vehicle struck. Behind the gunslinger, who was now on his knees with his bleeding hands buried in the dirt, the woman from the store screamed.

"*JAKE, NO!*" Roland bellowed again, but it was too late. The boy he thought of as his son disappeared beneath the blue vehicle. The gunslinger saw one small upraised hand—would never forget it—and then that was gone, too. King, struck first by Jake and then by the weight of the van behind Jake, was thrown to the edge of the little grove of trees, ten feet from the point of impact. He landed on his right side, hitting his head on a stone hard enough to send the cap flying from his head. Then he rolled over, perhaps intending to try for his feet. Or perhaps intending nothing at all; his eyes were shocked zeroes.

The driver hauled on his vehicle's steering wheel and it slipped past on Roland's left, missing him by inches, merely throwing dust into his face instead of running him down. By then it was slowing, the

driver perhaps applying the machine's brake now that it was too late. The side squalled across the hood of the pickup truck, slowing the van further, but it was not done doing damage even so. Before coming to a complete stop it struck King again, this time as he lay on the ground. Roland heard the snap of a breaking bone. It was followed by the writer's cry of pain. And now Roland knew for sure about the pain in his own hip, didn't he? It had never been dry twist at all.

He scrambled to his feet, only peripherally aware that his pain was entirely gone. He looked at Stephen King's unnaturally twisted body beneath the left front wheel of the blue vehicle and thought *Good!* with unthinking savagery. *Good! If someone has to die here, let it be you! To hell with Gan's navel, to hell with the stories that come out of it, to hell with the Tower, let it be you and not my boy!*

The bumbler raced past Roland to where Jake lay on his back at the rear of the van with blue exhaust blowing into his open eyes. Oy did not hesitate; he seized the Oriza pouch that was still slung over Jake's shoulder and used it to pull the boy away from the van, doing it inch by inch, his short strong legs digging up puffs of dust. Blood was pouring from Jake's ears and the corners of his mouth. The heels of his shor'boots left a double line of tracks in the dirt and crisp brown pine needles.

Roland staggered to Jake and fell on his knees beside him. His first thought was that Jake was all right after all. The boy's limbs were straight, thank all the gods, and the mark running across the bridge of his nose and down one beardless cheek was oil flecked with rust, not blood as Roland had first assumed. There *was* blood coming out of his ears, yes, and his mouth, too, but the latter stream might only be flowing from a cut in the lining of his cheek, or—

"Go and see to the writer," Jake said. His voice was calm, not at all constricted by pain. They might have been sitting around a little cookfire after a day on the trail, waiting for what Eddie liked to call vittles . . . or, if he happened to be feeling particularly humorous (as he often was), "wittles."

"The writer can wait," Roland said curtly, thinking: *I've been given a miracle. One made by the combination of a boy's yielding, not-quite-finished*

body, and the soft earth that gave beneath him when that bastard's truckomobile ran over him.

"No," Jake said. "He can't." And when he moved, trying to sit up, his shirt pulled a little tighter against the top half of his body and Roland saw the dreadful concavity of the boy's chest. More blood poured from Jake's mouth, and when he tried to speak again he began to cough, instead. Roland's heart seemed to twist like a rag inside his chest, and there was a moment to wonder how it could possibly go on beating in the face of this.

Oy voiced a moaning cry, Jake's name expressed in a half-howl that made Roland's arms burst out in gooseflesh.

"Don't try to talk," Roland said. "Something may be sprung inside of you. A rib, mayhap two."

Jake turned his head to the side. He spat out a mouthful of blood—some of it ran down his cheek like chewing tobacco—and took a hold on Roland's wrist. His grip was strong; so was his voice, each word clear.

"Everything's sprung. This is dying—I know because I've done it before." What he said next was what Roland had been thinking just before they started out from Cara Laughs: "If ka will say so, let it be so. *See to the man we came to save!*"

It was impossible to deny the imperative in the boy's eyes and voice. It was done, now, the Ka of Nineteen played out to the end. Except, perhaps, for King. The man they had come to save. How much of their fate had danced from the tips of his flying, tobacco-stained fingers? All? Some? This?

Whatever the answer, Roland could have killed him with his bare hands as he lay pinned beneath the machine that had struck him, and never mind that King hadn't been driving the van; if he had been doing what ka had meant him to be doing, he never would have been here when the fool came calling, and Jake's chest wouldn't have that terrible sunken look. It was too much, coming so soon after Eddie had been bushwhacked.

And yet—

"Don't move," he said, getting up. "Oy, don't *let* him move."

"I won't move." Every word still clear, still sure. But now Roland could see blood also darkening the bottom of Jake's shirt and the

crotch of his jeans, blooming there like roses. Once before he died and had come back. But not from this world. In this one, death was always for keeps.

Roland turned to where the writer lay.

TWO

When Bryan Smith tried to get out from behind the wheel of his van, Irene Tassenbaum pushed him rudely back in. His dogs, perhaps smelling blood or Oy or both, were barking and capering wildly behind him. Now the radio was pounding out some new and utterly hellish heavy metal tune. She thought her head would split, not from the shock of what had just happened but from pure racket. She saw the man's revolver lying on the ground and picked it up. The small part of her mind still capable of coherent thought was amazed by the weight of the thing. Nevertheless, she pointed it at the man, then reached past him and punched the power button on the radio. With the blaring fuzz-tone guitars gone, she could hear birds as well as two barking dogs and one howling . . . well, one howling whatever-it-was.

"Back your van off the guy you hit," she said. "Slowly. And if you run over the kid again when you do it, I swear I'll blow your jackass head off."

Bryan Smith stared at her with bloodshot, bewildered eyes. "What kid?" he asked.

THREE

When the van's front wheel rolled slowly off the writer, Roland saw that his lower body was twisted unnaturally to the right and a lump pushed out the leg of his jeans on that side. His thighbone, surely. In addition, his forehead had been split by the rock against which it had fetched up, and the right side of his face was drowned in blood. He looked worse than Jake, worse by far, but a single glance was enough to tell the gunslinger that if his heart was strong and the shock didn't kill him, he'd probably live through this. Again he saw Jake seizing the man about the waist, shielding him, taking the impact with his own smaller body.

“You again,” King said in a low voice.

“You remember me.”

“Yes. Now.” King licked his lips. “Thirsty.”

Roland had nothing to drink, and wouldn't have given more than enough to wet King's lips even if he had. Liquid could induce vomiting in a wounded man, and vomiting could lead to choking. “Sorry,” he said.

“No. You're not.” He licked his lips again. “Jake?”

“Over there, on the ground. You know him?”

King tried to smile. “*Wrote* him. Where's the one that was with you before? Where's Eddie?”

“Dead,” Roland said. “In the Devar-Toi.”

King frowned. “Devar . . . ? I don't know that.”

“No. That's why we're here. Why we had to come here. One of my friends is dead, another may be dying, and the tet is broken. All because one lazy, fearful man stopped doing the job for which ka intended him.”

No traffic on the road. Except for the barking dogs, the howling bumbler, and the chirping birds, the world was silent. They might have been frozen in time. *Perhaps we are*, Roland thought. He had now seen enough to believe that might be possible. *Anything* might be possible.

“I lost the Beam,” King said from where he lay on the carpet of needles at the edge of the trees. The light of early summer streamed all around him, that haze of green and gold.

Roland reached under King and helped him to sit up. The writer cried out in pain as the swollen ball of his right hip grated in the shattered, compressed remains of its socket, but he did not protest. Roland pointed into the sky. Fat white fair-weather clouds—*los ángeles*, the cowpokes of Mejis had called them—hung motionless in the blue, except for those directly above them. There they hied rapidly across the sky, as if blown by a narrow wind.

“There!” Roland whispered furiously into the writer's scraped, dirt-clogged ear. “Directly above you! All around you! Does thee not feel it? Does thee not *see* it?”

“Yes,” King said. “I see it now.”

“Aye, and ’twas always there. You didn’t lose it, you turned your coward’s eye away. My friend had to save you for you to see it again.”

Roland’s left hand fumbled in his belt and brought out a shell. At first his fingers wouldn’t do their old, dexterous trick; they were trembling too badly. He was only able to still them by reminding himself that the longer it took him to do this, the greater the chance that they would be interrupted, or that Jake would die while he was busy with this miserable excuse for a man.

He looked up and saw the woman holding his gun on the driver of the van. That was good. *She* was good: why hadn’t Gan given the story of the Tower to someone like her? In any case, his instinct to keep her with them had been true. Even the infernal racket of dogs and bumbler had quieted. Oy was licking the dirt and oil from Jake’s face, while in the van, Pistol and Bullet were gobbling up the hamburger, this time without interference from their master.

Roland turned back to King, and the shell did its old sure dance across the backs of his fingers. King went under almost immediately, as most people did when they’d been hypnotized before. His eyes were still open, but now they seemed to look through the gunslinger, beyond him.

Roland’s heart screamed at him to get through this as quickly as he could, but his head knew better. *You must not botch it. Not unless you want to render Jake’s sacrifice worthless.*

The woman was looking at him, and so was the van’s driver as he sat in the open door of his vehicle. Sai Tassenbaum was fighting it, Roland saw, but Bryan Smith had followed King into the land of sleep. This didn’t surprise the gunslinger much. If the man had the slightest inkling of what he’d done here, he’d be apt to seize any opportunity for escape. Even a temporary one.

The gunslinger turned his attention back to the man who was, he supposed, his biographer. He started just as he had before. Days ago in his own life. Over two decades ago in the writer’s.

“Stephen King, do you see me?”

“Gunslinger, I see you very well.”

“When did you last see me?”

“When we lived in Bridgton. When my tet was young. When I was just learning how to write.” A pause, and then he gave what Roland

supposed was, for him, the most important way of marking time, a thing that was different for every man: “When I was still drinking.”

“Are you deep asleep now?”

“Deep.”

“Are you under the pain?”

“Under it, yes. I thank you.”

The billy-bumbler howled again. Roland looked around, terribly afraid of what it might signify. The woman had gone to Jake and was kneeling beside him. Roland was relieved to see Jake put an arm around her neck and draw her head down so he could speak into her ear. If he was strong enough to do that—

Stop it! You saw the changed shape of him under his shirt. You can't afford to waste time on hope.

There was a cruel paradox here: because he loved Jake, he had to leave the business of Jake's dying to Oy and a woman they had met less than an hour ago.

Never mind. His business now was with King. Should Jake pass into the clearing while his back was turned . . . *if ka will say so, let it be so.*

Roland summoned his will and concentration. He focused them to a burning point, then turned his attention to the writer once more. “Are you Gan?” he asked abruptly, not knowing why this question came to him—only that it was the *right* question.

“No,” King said at once. Blood ran into his mouth from the cut on his head and he spat it out, never blinking. “Once I thought I was, but that was just the booze. And pride, I suppose. No writer is Gan—no painter, no sculptor, no maker of music. We are kas-ka Gan. Not *ka*-Gan but *kas*-ka Gan. Do you understand? Do you . . . do you ken?”

“Yes,” Roland said. The prophets of Gan or the singers of Gan: it could signify either or both. And now he knew why he had asked. “And the song you sing is *Ves'-Ka Gan*. Isn't it?”

“Oh, *yes!*” King said, and smiled. “The Song of the Turtle. It's far too lovely for the likes of me, who can hardly carry a tune!”

“I don't care,” Roland said. He thought as hard and as clearly as his dazed mind would allow. “And now you've been hurt.”

“Am I paralyzed?”

“I don't know.” *Nor care.* “All I know is that you'll live, and when you can write again, you'll listen for the Song of the Turtle, *Ves'-Ka Gan*,

as you did before. Paralyzed or not. And this time you'll sing until the song is done."

"All right."

"You'll—"

"And Urs-Ka Gan, the Song of the Bear," King interrupted him. Then he shook his head, although this clearly hurt him despite the hypnotic state he was in. "Urs-A-Ka Gan."

The Cry of the Bear? The *Scream* of the Bear? Roland didn't know which. He would have to hope it didn't matter, that it was no more than a writer's quibble.

A car hauling a motor home went past the scene of the accident without slowing, then a pair of large motor-bicycles sped by heading the other way. And an oddly persuasive thought came to Roland: time hadn't stopped, but they were, for the time being, *dim*. Being protected in that fashion by the Beam, which was no longer under attack and thus able to help, at least a little.

FOUR

Tell him again. There must be no misunderstanding. And no weakening, as he weakened before.

He bent down until his face was before King's face, their noses nearly touching. "This time you'll sing until the song is done, write until the tale is done. Do you truly ken?"

"And they lived happily ever after until the end of their days," King said dreamily. "I wish I could write that."

"So do I." And he did, more than anything. Despite his sorrow, there were no tears yet; his eyes felt like hot stones in his head. Perhaps the tears would come later, when the truth of what had happened here had a chance to sink in a little.

"I'll do as you say, gunslinger. No matter how the tale falls when the pages grow thin." King's voice was itself growing thin. Roland thought he would soon fall into unconsciousness. "I'm sorry for your friends, truly I am."

"Thank you," Roland said, still restraining the urge to put his hands around the writer's neck and choke the life out of him. He started to stand, but King said something that stopped him.

“Did you listen for *her* song, as I told you to do? For the Song of Susannah?”

“I . . . yes.”

Now King forced himself up on one elbow, and although his strength was clearly failing, his voice was dry and strong. “She needs you. And you need her. Leave me alone now. Save your hate for those who deserve it more. I didn’t make your *ka* any more than I made Gan or the world, and we both know it. Put your foolishness behind you—and your grief—and do as you’d have me do.” King’s voice rose to a rough shout; his hand shot out and gripped Roland’s wrist with amazing strength. “*Finish the job!*”

At first nothing came out when Roland tried to reply. He had to clear his throat and start again. “Sleep, sai—sleep and forget everyone here except the man who hit you.”

King’s eyes slipped closed. “Forget everyone here except the man who hit me.”

“You were taking your walk and this man hit you.”

“Walking . . . and this man hit me.”

“No one else was here. Not me, not Jake, not the woman.”

“No one else,” King agreed. “Just me and him. Will he say the same?”

“Yar. Very soon you’ll sleep deep. You may feel pain later, but you feel none now.”

“No pain now. Sleep deep.” King’s twisted frame relaxed on the pine needles.

“Yet before you sleep, listen to me once more,” Roland said.

“I’m listening.”

“A woman may come to y—wait. Do’ee dream of love with men?”

“Are you asking if I’m gay? Maybe a latent homosexual?” King sounded weary but amused.

“I don’t know.” Roland paused. “I think so.”

“The answer is no,” King said. “Sometimes I dream of love with women. A little less now that I’m older . . . and probably not at all for awhile, now. That fucking guy really beat me up.”

Not near so bad as he beat up mine, Roland thought bitterly, but he didn’t say this.

“If’ee dream only of love with women, it’s a woman that may come to you.”

“Do you say so?” King sounded faintly interested.

“Yes. If she comes, she’ll be fair. She may speak to you about the ease and pleasure of the clearing. She may call herself Morphia, Daughter of Sleep, or Selena, Daughter of the Moon. She may offer you her arm and promise to take you there. You must refuse.”

“I must refuse.”

“Even if you are tempted by her eyes and breasts.”

“Even then,” King agreed.

“Why will you refuse, sai?”

“Because the Song isn’t done.”

At last Roland was satisfied. Mrs. Tassenbaum was kneeling by Jake. The gunslinger ignored both her and the boy and went to the man sitting slumped behind the wheel of the motor-carriage that had done all the damage. This man’s eyes were wide and blank, his mouth slack. A line of drool hung from his beard-stubby chin.

“Do you hear me, sai?”

The man nodded fearfully. Behind him, both dogs had grown silent. Four bright eyes regarded the gunslinger from between the seats.

“What’s your name?”

“Bryan, do it please you—Bryan Smith.”

No, it didn’t please him at all. Here was yet one more he’d like to strangle. Another car passed on the road, and this time the person behind the wheel honked the horn as he or she passed. Whatever their protection might be, it had begun to grow thin.

“Sai Smith, you hit a man with your car or truckomobile or whatever it is thee calls it.”

Bryan Smith began to tremble all over. “I ain’t never had so much as a parking ticket,” he whined, “and I have to go and run into the most famous man in the state! My dogs ’us fightin—”

“Your lies don’t anger me,” Roland said, “but the fear which brings them forth does. Shut thy mouth.”

Bryan Smith did as told. The color was draining slowly but steadily from his face.

“You were alone when you hit him,” Roland said. “No one here but you and the storyteller. Do you understand?”

“I was alone. Mister, are you a walk-in?”

“Never mind what I am. You checked him and saw that he was still alive.”

“Still alive, good,” Smith said. “I didn’t mean to hurt nobody, honest.”

“He spoke to you. That’s how you knew he was alive.”

“Yes!” Smith smiled. Then he frowned. “What’d he say?”

“You don’t remember. You were excited and scared.”

“Scared and excited. Excited and scared. Yes I was.”

“You drive now. As you drive, you’ll wake up, little by little. And when you get to a house or a store, you’ll stop and say there’s a man hurt down the road. A man who needs help. Tell it back, and be true.”

“Drive,” he said. His hands caressed the steering wheel as if he longed to be gone immediately. Roland supposed he did. “Wake up, little by little. When I get to a house or store, tell them Stephen King’s hurt side o’ the road and he needs help. I know he’s still alive because he talked to me. It was an accident.” He paused. “It wasn’t my fault. He was walking in the road.” A pause. “Probably.”

Do I care upon whom the blame for this mess falls? Roland asked himself. In truth he did not. King would go on writing either way. And Roland almost hoped he *would* be blamed, for it was indeed King’s fault; he’d had no business being out here in the first place.

“Drive away now,” he told Bryan Smith. “I don’t want to look at you anymore.”

Smith started the van with a look of profound relief. Roland didn’t bother watching him go. He went to Mrs. Tassenbaum and fell on his knees beside her. Oy sat by Jake’s head, now silent, knowing his howls could no longer be heard by the one for whom he grieved. What the gunslinger feared most had come to pass. While he had been talking to two men he didn’t like, the boy whom he loved more than all others—more than he’d loved anyone ever in his life, even Susan Delgado—had passed beyond him for the second time. Jake was dead.

“He talked to you,” Roland said. He took Jake in his arms and began to rock him gently back and forth. The ’Rizas clanked in their pouch. Already he could feel Jake’s body growing cool.

“Yes,” she said.

“What did he say?”

“He told me to come back for you ‘after the business here is done.’ Those were his exact words. And he said, ‘Tell my father I love him.’”

Roland made a sound, choked and miserable, deep in his throat. He was remembering how it had been in Fedic, after they had stepped through the door. *Hile, Father*, Jake had said. Roland had taken him in his arms then, too. Only then he had felt the boy’s beating heart. He would give anything to feel it beat again.

“There was more,” she said, “but do we have time for it now, especially when I could tell you later?”

Roland took her point immediately. The story both Bryan Smith and Stephen King knew was a simple one. There was no place in it for a lank, travel-scoured man with a big gun, nor a woman with graying hair; certainly not for a dead boy with a bag of sharp-edged plates slung over his shoulder and a machine-pistol in the waistband of his pants.

The only question was whether or not the woman would come back at all. She was not the first person he had attracted into doing things they might not ordinarily have done, but he knew things might look different to her once she was away from him. Asking for her promise—*Do you swear to come back for me, sai? Do you swear on this boy’s stilled heart?*—would do no good. She could mean every word here and then think better of it once she was over the first hill.

Yet when he’d had a chance to take the shopkeeper who owned the truck, he didn’t. Nor had he swapped her for the old man cutting the grass at the writer’s house.

“Later will do,” he said. “For now, hurry on your way. If for some reason you feel you can’t come back here, I’ll not hold it against you.”

“Where would you go on your own?” she asked him. “Where would you *know* to go? This isn’t your world. Is it?”

Roland ignored the question. “If there are people still here the first time you come back—peace officers, guards o’ the watch, bluebacks, I don’t know—drive past without stopping. Come back again in half an

hour's time. If they're still here, drive on again. Keep doing that until they're gone."

"Will they notice me going back and forth?"

"I don't know," he said. "Will they?"

She considered, then almost smiled. "The cops in this part of the world? Probably not."

He nodded, accepting her judgment. "When you feel it's safe, stop. You won't see me, but I'll see you. I'll wait until dark. If you're not here by then, I go."

"I'll come for you, but I won't be driving that miserable excuse for a truck when I do," she said. "I'll be driving a Mercedes-Benz S600." She said this with some pride.

Roland had no idea what a Mercedes-Bends was, but he nodded as though he did. "Go. We'll talk later, after you come back."

If you come back, he thought.

"I think you may want this," she said, and slipped his revolver back into its holster.

"Thankee-sai."

"You're welcome."

He watched her go to the old truck (which he thought she'd rather come to like, despite her dismissive words) and haul herself up by the wheel. And as she did, he realized there was something he needed, something that might be in the truck. "*Whoa!*"

Mrs. Tassenbaum had put her hand on the key in the ignition. Now she took it off and looked at him inquiringly. Roland settled Jake gently back to the earth beneath which he must soon lie (it was that thought which had caused him to call out) and got to his feet. He winced and put his hand to his hip, but that was only habit. There was no pain.

"What?" she asked as he approached. "If I don't go soon—"

It wouldn't matter if she went at all. "Yes. I know."

He looked in the bed of the truck. Along with the careless scatter of tools there was a square shape under a blue tarpaulin. The edges of the tarp had been folded beneath the object to keep it from blowing away. When Roland pulled the tarp free, he saw eight or ten boxes made of the stiff paper Eddie called "card-board." They'd been pushed together to make the square shape. The pictures printed on

the card-board told him they were boxes of beer. He wouldn't have cared if they had been boxes of high explosive.

It was the tarpaulin he wanted.

He stepped back from the truck with it in his arms and said, "*Now you can go.*"

She grasped the key that started the engine once more, but did not immediately turn it. "Sir," said she, "I am sorry for your loss. I just wanted to tell you that. I can see what that boy meant to you."

Roland Deschain bowed his head and said nothing.

Irene Tassenbaum looked at him for a moment longer, reminded herself that sometimes words were useless things, then started the engine and slammed the door. He watched her drive into the road (her use of the clutch had already grown smooth and sure), making a tight turn so she could drive north, back toward East Stoneham.

Sorry for your loss.

And now he was alone with that loss. Alone with Jake. For a moment Roland stood surveying the little grove of trees beside the highway, looking at two of the three who had been drawn to this place: a man, unconscious, and a boy dead. Roland's eyes were dry and hot, throbbing in their sockets, and for a moment he was sure that he had again lost the ability to weep. The idea horrified him. If he was incapable of tears after all of this—after what he'd regained and then lost again—what good was any of it? So it was an immense relief when the tears finally came. They spilled from his eyes, quieting their nearly insane blue glare. They ran down his dirty cheeks. He cried almost silently, but there was a single sob and Oy heard it. He raised his snout to the corridor of fast-moving clouds and howled a single time at them. Then he too was silent.

SIX

Roland carried Jake deeper into the woods, with Oy padding at his heel. That the bumbler was also weeping no longer surprised Roland; he had seen him cry before. And the days when he had believed Oy's demonstrations of intelligence (and empathy) might be no more than mimicry had long since passed. Most of what Roland thought about on that short walk was a prayer for the dead he had heard

Cuthbert speak on their last campaign together, the one that had ended at Jericho Hill. He doubted that Jake needed a prayer to send him on, but the gunslinger needed to keep his mind occupied, because it did not feel strong just now; if it went too far in the wrong direction, it would certainly break. Perhaps later he could indulge in hysteria—or even *irina*, the healing madness—but not now. He would not break now. He would not let the boy's death come to nothing.

The hazy green-gold summerglow that lives only in forests (and *old* forests, at that, like the one where the Bear Shardik had rampaged), deepened. It fell through the trees in dusky beams, and the place where Roland finally stopped felt more like a church than a clearing. He had gone roughly two hundred paces from the road on a westerly line. Here he set Jake down and looked about. He saw two rusty beer-cans and a few ejected shell-casings, probably the leavings of hunters. He tossed them further into the woods so the place would be clean. Then he looked at Jake, wiping away his tears so he could see as clearly as possible. The boy's face was as clean as the clearing, Oy had seen to that, but one of Jake's eyes was still open, giving the boy an evil winky look that must not be allowed. Roland rolled the lid closed with a finger, and when it sprang back up again (like a balky windowshade, he thought), he licked the ball of his thumb and rolled the lid shut again. This time it stayed closed.

There was dust and blood on Jake's shirt. Roland took it off, then took his own off and put it on Jake, moving him like a doll in order to get it on him. The shirt came almost to Jake's knees, but Roland made no attempt to tuck it in; this way it covered the bloodstains on Jake's pants.

All of this Oy watched, his gold-ringed eyes bright with tears.

Roland had expected the soil to be soft beneath the thick carpet of needles, and it was. He had a good start on Jake's grave when he heard the sound of an engine from the roadside. Other motor-carriages had passed since he'd carried Jake into the woods, but he recognized the dissonant beat of this one. The man in the blue vehicle had come back. Roland hadn't been entirely sure he would.

"Stay," he murmured to the bumbler. "Guard your master." But that was wrong. "Stay and guard your friend."

It wouldn't have been unusual for Oy to repeat the command (*S'ay!* was about the best he could manage) in the same low voice, but this time he said nothing. Roland watched him lie down beside Jake's head, however, and snap a fly out of the air when it came in for a landing on the boy's nose. Roland nodded, satisfied, then started back the way he had come.

SEVEN

Bryan Smith was out of his motor-carriage and sitting on the rock wall by the time Roland got back in view of him, his cane drawn across his lap. (Roland had no idea if the cane was an affectation or something the man really needed, and didn't care about this, either.) King had regained some soupy version of consciousness, and the two men were talking.

"Please tell me it's just sprained," the writer said in a weak, worried voice.

"Nope! I'd say that leg's broke in six, maybe seven places." Now that he'd had time to settle down and maybe work out a story, Smith sounded not just calm but almost happy.

"Cheer me up, why don't you," King said. The visible side of his face was very pale, but the flow of blood from the gash on his temple had slowed almost to a stop. "Have you got a cigarette?"

"Nope," Smith said in that same weirdly cheerful voice. "Gave em up."

Although not particularly strong in the touch, Roland had enough of it to know this wasn't so. But Smith only had three and didn't want to share them with this man, who could probably afford enough cigarettes to fill Smith's entire van with them. *Besides*, Smith thought —

"Besides, folks who been in a accident ain't supposed to smoke," Smith said virtuously.

King nodded. "Hard to breathe, anyway," he said.

"Prolly bust a rib or two, too. My name's Bryan Smith. I'm the one who hit you. Sorry." He held out his hand and—incredibly—King shook it.

“Nothin like this ever happened to me before,” Smith said. “I ain’t ever had so much as a parkin ticket.”

King might or might not have known this for the lie it was, but chose not to comment on it; there was something else on his mind. “Mr. Smith—Bryan—was anyone else here?”

In the trees, Roland stiffened.

Smith actually appeared to consider this. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a Mars bar and began to unwrap it. Then he shook his head. “Just you n me. But I called 911 and Rescue, up to the store. They said someone was real close. Said they’d be here in no time. Don’t you worry.”

“You know who I am.”

“God *yeah!*” Bryan Smith said, and chuckled. He took a bite of the candy bar and talked through it. “Reckonized you right away. I seen all your movies. My favorite was the one about the Saint Bernard. What was that dog’s name?”

“Cujo,” King said. This was a word Roland knew, one Susan Delgado had sometimes used when they were alone together. In Mejis, *cujo* meant “sweet one.”

“Yeah! That was great! Scary as hell! I’m glad that little boy lived!”

“In the book he died.” Then King closed his eyes and lay back, waiting.

Smith took another bite, a humongous one this time. “I liked the show they made about the clown, too! *Very cool!*”

King made no reply. His eyes stayed closed, but Roland thought the rise and fall of the writer’s chest looked deep and steady. That was good.

Then a truck roared toward them and swerved to a stop in front of Smith’s van. The new motor-carriage was about the size of a funeral bucka, but orange instead of black and equipped with flashing lights. Roland was not displeased to see it roll over the tracks of the storekeeper’s truck before coming to a stop.

Roland half-expected a robot to get out of the coach, but it was a man. He reached back inside for a black sawbones’ bag. Satisfied that everything here would be as well as it could be, Roland returned to where he had laid Jake, moving with all his old unconscious grace: he cracked not a single twig, surprised not a single bird into flight.

EIGHT

Would it surprise you, after all we've seen together and all the secrets we've learned, to know that at quarter past five that afternoon, Mrs. Tassenbaum pulled Chip McAvoy's old truck into the driveway of a house we've already visited? Probably not, because *ka* is a wheel, and all it knows how to do is roll. When last we visited here, in 1977, both it and the boathouse on the shore of Keywadin Pond were white with green trim. The Tassenbaums, who bought the place in '94, had painted it an entirely pleasing shade of cream (no trim; to Irene Tassenbaum's way of thinking, trim is for folks who can't make up their minds). They have also put a sign reading SUNSET COTTAGE on a post at the head of the driveway, and as far as Uncle Sam's concerned it's part of their mailing address, but to the local folk, this house at the south end of Keywadin Pond will always be the old John Cullum place.

She parked the truck beside her dark red Benz and went inside, mentally rehearsing what she'd tell David about why she had the local shopkeeper's pickup, but Sunset Cottage hummed with the peculiar silence only empty places have; she picked up on it immediately. She had come back to a lot of empty places—apartments at the beginning, bigger and bigger houses as time went by—over the years. Not because David was out drinking or womanizing, good Lord forbid. No, he and his friends had usually been out in one garage or another, one basement workshop or another, drinking cheap wine and discount beer from the Beverage Barn, creating the Internet plus all the software necessary to support it and make it user-friendly. The profits, although most would not believe it, had only been a side-effect. The silence to which their wives so often came home was another. After awhile all that humming silence kind of got to you, made you *mad*, even, but not today. Today she was delighted the house was just hers.

Are you going to sleep with Marshal Dillon, if he wants you?

It wasn't a question she even had to think about. The answer was yes, she would sleep with him if he wanted her: sideways, backward, doggy-style, or straight-up fuck, if that was his pleasure. He wouldn't—even if he hadn't been grieving for his young

(*sai? son?*)

friend, he wouldn't have wanted to sleep with her, she with her wrinkles, she with her hair going gray at the roots, she with the spare tire which her designer clothes could not quite conceal. The very idea was ludicrous.

But yes. If he wanted her, she would.

She looked on the fridge and there, under one of the magnets that dotted it (**WE ARE POSITRONICS, BUILDING THE FUTURE ONE CIRCUIT AT A TIME**, this one said) was a brief note.

Ree—

You wanted me to relax, so I'm relaxing (dammit!). I.e. gone fishin' with Sonny Emerson, t'other end of the lake, ayuh, ayuh. Will be back by 7 unless the bugs are too bad. If I bring you a bass, will you cook & clean?

D.

PS: Something going on at the store big enuf to rate 3 police cars. WALK-INS, maybe???? ☺ If you hear, fill me in.

She'd told him *she* was going to the store this afternoon—eggs and milk that she'd of course never gotten—and he had nodded. *Yes dear, yes dear.* But his note held no hint of worry, no sense that he even remembered what she'd said. Well, what else did she expect? When it came to David, info entered ear A, info exited ear B. Welcome to GeniusWorld.

She turned the note over, plucked a pen from a teacup filled with them, hesitated, then wrote:

David,

Something has happened, and I have to be gone for awhile. 2 days at least, I think maybe 3 or 4. Please don't worry about me and don't call anyone. ESPECIALLY NOT POLICE. It's a stray cat thing.

Would he understand that? She thought he would if he remembered how they'd met. At the Santa Monica ASPCA, that had been, among the stacked rows of kennels in back: love blooms as the

mongrels yap. It sounded like James Joyce to her, by God. He had brought in a stray dog he'd found on a suburban street near the apartment where he was staying with half a dozen egghead friends. She'd been looking for a kitten to liven up what was an essentially friendless life. He'd had all his hair then. As for her, she'd thought women who dyed theirs mildly amusing. Time was a thief, and one of the first things it took was your sense of humor.

She hesitated, then added

*Love you,
Ree*

Was that true any longer? Well, let it stand, either way. Crossing out what you'd written in ink always looked ugly. She put the note back on the fridge with the same magnet to hold it in place.

She got the keys to the Mercedes out of the basket by the door, then remembered the rowboat, still tied up at the little stub of dock behind the store. It would be all right there. But then she thought of something else, something the boy had told her. *He doesn't know about money.*

She went into the pantry, where they always kept a slim roll of fifties (there were places out here in the boondocks where she would be willing to swear they'd never even *heard* of MasterCard) and took three. She started away, shrugged, went back, and took the other three, as well. Why not? She was living dangerously today.

On her way out, she paused again to look at the note. And then, for absolutely no reason she could understand, she took the Positronics magnet away and replaced it with an orange slice. Then she left.

Never mind the future. For the time being, she had enough to keep her occupied in the present.

NINE

The emergency bucka was gone, bearing the writer to the nearest hospital or infirmary, Roland assumed. Peace officers had come just as it left, and they spent perhaps half an hour talking with Bryan Smith.

The gunslinger could hear the palaver from where he was, just over the first rise. The bluebacks' questions were clear and calm, Smith's answers little more than mumbles. Roland saw no reason to stop working. If the blues came back here and found him, he would deal with them. Just incapacitate them, unless they made that impossible; gods knew there had been enough killing. But he would bury his dead, one way or another.

He would bury his dead.

The lovely green-gold light of the clearing deepened. Mosquitoes found him but he did not stop what he was doing in order to slap them, merely let them drink their fill and then lumber off, heavy with their freight of blood. He heard engines starting as he finished hand-digging the grave, the smooth roar of two cars and the more uneven sound of Smith's van-mobile. He had heard the voices of only two peace officers, which meant that, unless there had been a third blueback with nothing to say, they were allowing Smith to drive away by himself. Roland thought this rather odd, but—like the question of whether or not King was paralyzed—it was none of his matter or mind. All that mattered was this; all that mattered was seeing to his own.

He made three trips to collect stones, because a grave dug by hand must necessarily be a shallow one and animals, even in such a tame world as this, are always hungry. He stacked the stones at the head of the hole, a scar lined with earth so rich it could have been black satin. Oy lay by Jake's head, watching the gunslinger come and go, saying nothing. He'd always been different from his kind as they were since the world had moved on; Roland had even speculated that it was Oy's extraordinary chattiness that had caused the others in his tet to expel him, and not gently, either. When they'd come upon this fellow, not too far from the town of River Crossing, he'd been scrawny to the point of starvation, and with a half-healed bite-mark on one flank. The bumbler had loved Jake from the first: "That's as clear as Earth needs," Cort might have said (or Roland's own father, for that matter). And it was to Jake the bumbler had talked the most. Roland had an idea that Oy might fall mostly silent now that the boy was dead, and this thought was another way of defining what was lost.

He remembered the boy standing before the people of Calla Bryn Sturgis in the torchlight, his face young and fair, as if he would live forever. *I am Jake Chambers, son of Elmer, the Line of Eld, the ka-tet of the Ninety and Nine*, he had said, and oh, aye, for here he was in the Ninety and Nine, with his grave all dug, clean and ready for him.

Roland began to weep again. He put his hands over his face and rocked back and forth on his knees, smelling the sweet aromatic needles and wishing he had cried off before ka, that old and patient demon, had taught him the real price of his quest. He would have given anything to change what had happened, anything to close this hole with nothing in it, but this was the world where time ran just one way.

TEN

When he had gained control of himself again, he wrapped Jake carefully in the blue tarpaulin, fashioning a kind of hood around the still, pale face. He would close that face away for good before refilling the grave, but not until.

“Oy?” he asked. “Will you say goodbye?”

Oy looked at Roland, and for a moment the gunslinger wasn’t sure he understood. Then the bumbler extended his neck and caressed the boy’s cheek a last time with his tongue. “I, Ake,” he said: *Bye, Jake* or *I ache*, it came to the same.

The gunslinger gathered the boy up (how light he was, this boy who had jumped from the barn loft with Benny Slightman, and stood against the vampires with Pere Callahan, how curiously light; as if the growing weight of him had departed with his life) and lowered him into the hole. A crumble of dirt spilled down one cheek and Roland wiped it away. That done, he closed his eyes again and thought. Then, at last—haltingly—he began. He knew that any translation into the language of this place would be clumsy, but he did the best he could. If Jake’s spirit-man lingered near, it was this language that he would understand.

“Time flies, knells call, life passes, so hear my prayer.

“Birth is nothing but death begun, so hear my prayer.

“Death is speechless, so hear my speech.”

The words drifted away into the haze of green and gold. Roland let them, then set upon the rest. He spoke more quickly now.

“This is Jake, who served his ka and his tet. Say true.

“May the forgiving glance of S’mana heal his heart. Say please.

“May the arms of Gan raise him from the darkness of this earth. Say please.

“Surround him, Gan, with light.

“Fill him, Chloe, with strength.

“If he is thirsty, give him water in the clearing.

“If he is hungry, give him food in the clearing.

“May his life on this earth and the pain of his passing become as a dream to his waking soul, and let his eyes fall upon every lovely sight; let him find the friends that were lost to him, and let every one whose name he calls call his in return.

“This is Jake, who lived well, loved his own, and died as ka would have it.

“Each man owes a death. This is Jake. Give him peace.”

He knelt a moment longer with his hands clasped between his knees, thinking he had not understood the true power of sorrow, nor the pain of regret, until this moment.

I cannot bear to let him go.

But once again, that cruel paradox: if he didn’t, the sacrifice was in vain.

Roland opened his eyes and said, “Goodbye, Jake. I love you, dear.”

Then he closed the blue hood around the boy’s face against the rain of earth that must follow.

ELEVEN

When the grave was filled and the rocks placed over it, Roland walked back to the clearing by the road and examined the tale the various tracks told, simply because there was nothing else to do. When that meaningless task was finished, he sat down on a fallen log. Oy had stayed by the grave, and Roland had an idea he might bide there. He would call the bumbler when Mrs. Tassenbaum returned, but knew Oy might not come; if he didn’t, it meant that Oy had decided to join his friend in the clearing. The bumbler would simply stand watch by

Jake's grave until starvation (or some predator) took him. The idea deepened Roland's sorrow, but he would bide by Oy's decision.

Ten minutes later the bumbler came out of the woods on his own and sat down by Roland's left boot. "Good boy," Roland said, and stroked the bumbler's head. Oy had decided to live. It was a small thing, but it was a good thing.

Ten minutes after that, a dark red car rolled almost silently up to the place where King had been struck and Jake killed. It pulled over. Roland opened the door on the passenger side and got in, still wincing against pain that wasn't there. Oy jumped up between his feet without being asked, lay down with his nose against his flank, and appeared to go to sleep.

"Did you see to your boy?" Mrs. Tassenbaum asked, pulling away.

"Yes. Thankee-sai."

"I guess I can't put a marker there," she said, "but later on I could plant something. Is there something you think he might like?"

Roland looked up, and for the first time since Jake's death, he smiled. "Yes," he said. "A rose."

TWELVE

They rode for almost twenty minutes without speaking. She stopped at a small store over the Bridgton town line and pumped gas: MOBIL, a brand Roland recognized from his wanderings. When she went in to pay, he looked up at *los ángeles*, running clear and true across the sky. The Path of the Beam, and stronger already, unless that was just his imagination. He supposed it didn't matter if it was. If the Beam wasn't stronger now, it soon would be. They had succeeded in saving it, but Roland felt no gladness at the idea.

When Mrs. Tassenbaum came out of the store, she was holding a singlet-style shirt with a picture of a bucka-wagon on it—a *real* bucka-wagon—and words written in a circle. He could make out *HOME*, but nothing else. He asked her what the words said.

"BRIDGTON OLD HOME DAYS, JULY 27TH TO JULY 30TH, 1999," she told him. "It doesn't really matter what it says as long as it covers your chest. Sooner or later we'll want to stop, and there's a saying we have in these parts: 'No shirt, no shoes, no service.' Your boots look beat-up and busted down, but I guess they'll get you through the door of most

places. But topless? Huh-uh, no way José. I'll get you a better shirt later on—one with a collar—and some decent pants, too. Those jeans are so dirty I bet they'd stand up on their own." She engaged in a brief (but furious) interior debate, then plunged. "You've got I'm going to say roughly two billion scars. And that's just on the part of you I can see."

Roland did not respond to this. "Do you have money?" he asked.

"I got three hundred dollars when I went back to the house to get my car, and I had thirty or forty with me. Also credit cards, but your late friend said to use cash as long as I could. Until you go on by yourself, if possible. He said there might be folks looking for you. He called them 'low men.'"

Roland nodded. Yes, there would be low men out there, and after all he and his ka-tet had done to thwart the plans of their master, they'd be twice as eager to have his head. Preferably smoking, and on the end of a stick. Also the head of sai Tassenbaum, if they found out about her.

"What else did Jake tell you?" Roland asked.

"That I must take you to New York City, if you wanted to go there. He said there's a door there that will take you to a place called Faydag."

"Was there more?"

"Yes. He said there was another place you might want to go before you used the door." She gave him a timid little sideways glance. "Is there?"

He considered this, then nodded.

"He also spoke to the dog. It sounded as if he was giving the dog . . . orders? Instructions?" She looked at him doubtfully. "Could that be?"

Roland thought it could. The woman Jake could only ask. As for Oy . . . well, it might explain why the bumbler hadn't stayed by the grave, much as he might have wanted to.

For awhile they traveled in silence. The road they were on led to a much busier one, filled with cars and trucks running at high speed in many lanes. She had to stop at a tollbooth and give money to get on. The toll-taker was a robot with a basket for an arm. Roland thought he might be able to sleep, but he saw Jake's face when he closed his

eyes. Then Eddie's, with the useless bandage covering his forehead. *If this is what comes when I close my eyes*, he thought, *what will my dreams be like?*

He opened his eyes again and watched as she drove down a smooth, paved ramp, slipping into the heavy flow of traffic without a pause. He leaned over and looked up through the window on his side. There were the clouds, *los ángeles*, traveling above them, in the same direction. They were still on the Path of the Beam.

THIRTEEN

"Mister? Roland?"

She thought he had been dozing with his eyes open. Now he turned to her from where he sat in the passenger bucket seat with his hands in his lap, the good one folded over the mutilated one, hiding it. She thought she had never seen anyone who looked less like he belonged in a Mercedes-Benz. Or any automobile. She also thought she had never seen a man who looked so tired.

But he's not used up. I don't think he's anywhere near used up, although he may think otherwise.

"The animal . . . Oy?"

"Oy, yes." The bumbler looked up at the sound of his name, but didn't repeat it as he might have done only yesterday.

"Is it a dog? It isn't, exactly, is it?"

"He, not it. And no, he's not a dog."

Irene Tassenbaum opened her mouth, then closed it again. This was difficult, because silence in company did not come naturally to her. And she was with a man she found attractive, even in his grief and exhaustion (perhaps to some degree because of those things). A dying boy had asked her to take this man to New York City, and get him to the places he needed to go once they were there. He'd said that his friend knew even less about New York than he did about money, and she believed that was true. But she also believed this man was dangerous. She wanted to ask more questions, but what if he answered them? She understood that the less she knew, the better her chance, once he was gone, of merging into the life she'd been living

at quarter to four this afternoon. To merge the way you merged onto the turnpike from a side road. That would be best.

She turned on the radio and found a station playing “Amazing Grace.” The next time she looked at her strange companion, she saw that he was looking out at the darkening sky and weeping. Then she chanced to look down and saw something much odder, something that moved her heart as it had not been moved in fifteen years, when she had miscarried her one and only effort to have a child.

The animal, the not-dog, the Oy . . . he was crying, too.

FOURTEEN

She got off 95 just over the Massachusetts state line and checked them into a pair of side-by-side rooms in a dump called the Sea Breeze Inn. She hadn’t thought to bring her driving glasses, the ones she called her bug’s-asshole glasses (as in “when I’m wearing these things I can see up a bug’s asshole”), and she didn’t like driving at night, anyway. Bug’sasshole glasses or not, driving at night fried her nerves, and that was apt to bring on a migraine. With a migraine she would be of no use to either of them, and her Imitrex was sitting uselessly in the medicine cabinet back in East Stoneham.

“Plus,” she told Roland, “if this Tet Corporation you’re looking for is in a business building, you won’t be able to get inside until Monday, anyway.” Probably not true; this was the sort of man who got into places when he wanted. You couldn’t keep him out. She guessed that was part of his attraction to a certain kind of woman.

In any case, he did not object to the motel. No, he would not go out to dinner with her, and so she found the nearest bearable fast-food franchise and brought back a late dinner from KFC. They ate in Roland’s room. Irene fixed Oy a plate without being asked. Oy ate a single piece of the chicken, holding it neatly between his paws, then went into the bathroom and appeared to fall asleep on the mat in front of the tub.

“Why do they call this the Sea Breeze?” Roland asked. Unlike Oy, he was eating some of everything, but he did it with no sign of pleasure. He ate like a man doing work. “I get no smell of the ocean.”

“Well, probably you can when the wind’s in the right quarter and blowing a hurricane,” she said. “It’s what we call poetic license, Roland.”

He nodded, showing unexpected (to her, at least) understanding. “Pretty lies,” he said.

“Yes, I suppose.”

She turned on the television, thinking it would divert him, and was shocked by his reaction (although she told herself that what she felt was amusement). When he told her he couldn’t see it, she had no idea how to take what he was saying; her first thought that it was some sort of oblique and *teddibly* intellectual criticism of the medium itself. Then she thought he might be speaking (in equally oblique fashion) of his sorrow, his state of mourning. It wasn’t until he told her that he heard voices, yes, but saw only lines which made his eyes water that she realized he was telling her the literal truth: he could not see the pictures on the screen. Not the rerun of *Roseanne*, not the infomercial for Ab-Flex, not the talking head on the local news. She held on until the story about Stephen King (taken by LifeFlight helicopter to Central Maine General in Lewiston, where an early-evening operation seemed to have saved his right leg—condition listed as fair, more operations ahead, road to recovery expected to be long and uncertain), then turned the TV off.

She bussed up the trash—there was always so much *more* of it from a KFC meal, somehow—bade Roland an uncertain goodnight (which he returned in a distracted, I’m-not-really-here way that made her nervous and sad), then went to her own room next door. There she watched an hour of an old movie in which Yul Brynner played a robot cowboy that had run amok before turning it off and going into the bathroom to brush her teeth. There she realized that she had—of *course*, dollink!—forgotten her toothbrush. She did the best she could with her finger, then lay down on the bed in her bra and panties (no nightgown either). She spent an hour like that before realizing that she was listening for sounds from beyond the paper-thin wall, and for one sound in particular: the crash of the gun he had considerably not worn from the car to the motel room. The single loud shot that would mean he had ended his sorrow in the most direct fashion.

When she couldn't stand the quiet from the other side of the wall any longer she got up, put her clothes back on, and went outside to look at the stars. There, sitting on the curb, she found Roland, with the not-dog at his side. She wanted to ask how he had gotten out of his room without her being aware of it (the walls were so thin and she had been listening so *hard*), but she didn't. She asked him what he was doing out here, instead, and found herself unprepared for both his answer and for the utter nakedness of the face he turned to hers. She kept expecting a patina of civilization from him—a nod in the direction of the niceties—but there was none of that. His honesty was terrifying.

“I'm afraid to go to sleep,” he said. “I'm afraid my dead friends will come to me, and that seeing them will kill me.”

She looked at him steadily in the mixture of light: that which fell from her room and the horrible heartless Halloween glare of the parking-lot arc sodiums. Her heart was beating hard enough to shake her entire chest, but when she spoke her voice sounded calm enough: “Would it help if I lay down with you?”

He considered this, and nodded. “I think it would.”

She took his hand and they went into the room she had rented him. He stripped off his clothes with no sign of embarrassment and she looked, awestruck and afraid, at the scars which lapped and dented his upper body: the red pucker of a knife-slash on one bicep, the milky weal of a burn on another, the white crisscross of lash-marks between and on the shoulderblades, three deep dimples that could only be old bullet-holes. And, of course, there were the missing fingers on his right hand. She was curious but knew she'd never dare ask about those.

She took off her own outer clothes, hesitated, then took off her bra, as well. Her breasts hung down, and there was a dented scar of her own on one, from a lumpectomy instead of a bullet. And so what? She never would have been a Victoria's Secret model, even in her prime. And even in her prime she'd never mistaken herself for tits and ass attached to a life-support system. Nor had ever let anyone else—including her husband—make the same mistake.

She left her panties on, however. If she had trimmed her bush, maybe she would have taken them off. If she'd known, getting up that

morning, that she would be lying down with a strange man in a cheap hotel room while some weird animal snoozed on the bathmat in front of the tub. Of course she would have packed a toothbrush and a tube of Crest, too.

When he put his arms around her, she gasped and stiffened, then relaxed. But very slowly. His hips pressed against her bottom and she felt the considerable weight of his package, but it was apparently only comfort he had in mind; his penis was limp.

He clasped her left breast, and ran his thumb into the hollow of the scar left by the lumpectomy. "What's this?" he asked.

"Well," she said (now her voice was no longer even), "according to my doctor, in another five years it would have been cancer. So they cut it out before it could . . . I don't know, exactly—metastasizing comes later, if it comes at all."

"Before it could flower?" he asked.

"Yes. Right. Good." Her nipple was now as hard as a rock, and surely he must feel that. Oh, this was so weird.

"Why is your heart beating so hard?" he asked. "Do I frighten you?"

"I . . . yes."

"Don't be frightened," he said. "Killing's done." A long pause in the dark. They could hear the faint drone of cars on the turnpike. "For now," he added.

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "Good."

His hand on her breast. His breath on her neck. After some endless time that might have been an hour or only five minutes, his breathing lengthened, and she knew he had gone to sleep. She was pleased and disappointed at the same time. A few minutes later she went to sleep herself, and it was the best rest she'd had in years. If he had bad dreams of his gone friends, he did not disturb her with them. When she woke in the morning it was eight o'clock and he was standing naked at the window, looking out through a slit he'd made in the curtains with one finger.

"Did you sleep?" she asked.

"A little. Will we go on?"

They could have been in Manhattan by three o'clock in the afternoon, and the drive into the city on a Sunday would have been far easier than during the Monday morning rush hour, but hotel rooms in New York were expensive and even doubling up would have necessitated breaking out a credit card. They stayed at a Motel 6 in Harwich, Connecticut, instead. She took only a single room and that night he made love to her. Not because he exactly wanted to, she sensed, but because he understood it was what she wanted. Perhaps what she needed.

It was extraordinary, although she could not have said precisely how; despite the feel of all those scars beneath her hands—some rough, some smooth—there was the sense of making love to a dream. And that night she *did* dream. It was a field filled with roses she dreamed of, and a huge Tower made of slate-black stone standing at the far end. Partway up, red lamps glowed . . . only she had an idea they weren't lamps at all, but eyes.

Terrible eyes.

She heard many singing voices, thousands of them, and understood that some were the voices of his lost friends. She awoke with tears on her cheeks and a feeling of loss even though he was still beside her. After today she'd see him no more. And that was for the best. Still, she would have given anything in her life to have him make love to her again, even though she understood it had not been really her he had been making love to; even when he came into her, his thoughts had been far away, with those voices.

Those lost voices.



CHAPTER III: NEW YORK AGAIN (ROLAND SHOWS ID)

ONE

On the morning of Monday the 21st of June in the year of '99, the sun shone down on New York City just as if Jake Chambers did not lie dead in one world and Eddie Dean in another; as if Stephen King did not lie in a Lewiston hospital's Intensive Care ward, drifting out into the light of consciousness only for brief intervals; as if Susannah Dean did not sit alone with her grief aboard a train racing on ancient, chancy tracks across the dark wastes of Thunderclap toward the ghost-town of Fedic. There were others who had elected to accompany her on her journey at least that far, but she'd asked them to give her space, and they had complied with her wish. She knew she would feel better if she could cry, but so far she hadn't been able to do that—a few random tears, like meaningless showers in the desert, was the best she had been able to manage—although she had a terrible feeling that things were worse than she knew.

Fuck, dat ain't no "feelin," Detta crowed contemptuously from her place deep inside, as Susannah sat looking out at the dark and rocky wastelands or the occasional ruins of towns and villages that had been abandoned when the world moved on. *You havin a jenna-wine intuition, girl! Only question you cain't answer is whether it be ole long tall and ugly or Young Master Sweetness now visitin wit' yo man in the clearin.*

"Please, no," she murmured. "Please not either of them, God, I can't stand another one."

But God remained deaf to her prayer, Jake remained dead, the Dark Tower remained standing at the end of Can'-Ka No Rey, casting

its shadow over a million shouting roses, and in New York the hot summer sun shone down on the just and the unjust alike.

Can you give me hallelujah?

Thankee-sai.

Now somebody yell me a big old God-bomb amen.

TWO

Mrs. Tassenbaum left her car at Sir Speedy-Park on Sixty-third Street (the sign on the sidewalk showed a knight in armor behind the wheel of a Cadillac, his lance sticking jauntily out of the driver's window), where she and David rented two stalls on a yearly basis. They kept an apartment nearby, and Irene asked Roland if he would like to go there and clean up . . . although the man actually didn't look all that bad, she had to admit. She'd bought him a fresh pair of jeans and a white button-up shirt which he had rolled to the elbows; she had also bought a comb and a tube of hair-mousse so strong its molecular makeup was probably closer to Super-Glue than it was to Vitalis. With the unruly mop of gray-flecked hair combed straight back from his brow, she had revealed the spare good looks and angular features of an interesting crossbreed: a mixture of Quaker and Cherokee was what she imagined. The bag of Orizas was once more slung over his shoulder. His gun, the holster wrapped in its shell-belt, was in there, too. He had covered it from enquiring eyes with the Old Home Days tee-shirt.

Roland shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, but I'd as soon do what needs doing and then go back to where I belong." He surveyed the hurrying throngs on the sidewalks bleakly. "If I belong anywhere."

"You could stay at the apartment for a couple of days and rest up," she said. "I'd stay with you." *And fuck thy brains out, do it please ya*, she thought, and could not help a smile. "I mean, I know you won't, but *you* need to know the offer's open."

He nodded. "Thankee, but there's a woman who needs me to get back to her as soon as I can." It felt like a lie to him, and a grotesque one at that. Based on everything that had happened, part of him thought that Susannah Dean needed Roland of Gilead back in her life almost as much as nursery bah-bos needed rat poison added to

their bedtime bottles. Irene Tassenbaum accepted it, however. And part of her was actually anxious to get back to her husband. She had called him last night (using a pay phone a mile from the motel, just to be safe), and it seemed that she had finally gotten David Seymour Tassenbaum's attention again. Based on her encounter with Roland, David's attention was definitely second prize, but it was better than nothing, by God. Roland Deschain would vanish from her life soon, leaving her to find her way back to northern New England on her own and explain what had happened as best she could. Part of her mourned the impending loss, but she'd had enough adventure in the last forty hours or so to last her for the rest of her life, hadn't she? And things to think about, that too. For one thing, it seemed that the world was thinner than she had ever imagined. And reality wider.

"All right," she said. "It's Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street you want to go to first, correct?"

"Yes." Susannah hadn't had a chance to tell them much about her adventures after Mia had hijacked their shared body, but the gunslinger knew there was a tall building—what Eddie, Jake, and Susannah called a skyscraper—now standing on the site of the former vacant lot, and the Tet Corporation must surely be inside. "Will we need a tack-see?"

"Can you and your furry friend walk seventeen short blocks and two or three long ones? It's your call, but I wouldn't mind stretching my legs."

Roland didn't know how long a long block or how short a short one might be, but he was more than willing to find out now that the deep pain in his right hip had departed. Stephen King had that pain now, along with the one in his smashed ribs and the right side of his split head. Roland did not envy him those pains, but at least they were back with their rightful owner.

"Let's go," he said.

THREE

Fifteen minutes later he stood across from the large dark structure thrusting itself at the summer sky, trying to keep his jaw from coming unhinged and perhaps dropping all the way to his chest. It wasn't the

Dark Tower, not *his* Dark Tower, at least (although it wouldn't have surprised him to know there were people working in yon sky-tower—some of them readers of Roland's adventures—who called 2 Hammarskjöld Plaza exactly that), but he had no doubt that it was the Tower's representative in this Keystone World, just as the rose represented a field filled with them; the field he had seen in so many dreams.

He could hear the singing voices from here, even over the jostle and hum of the traffic. The woman had to call his name three times and finally tug on one sleeve to get his attention. When he turned to her—reluctantly—he saw it wasn't the tower across the street that she was looking at (she had grown up just an hour from Manhattan and tall buildings were an old story to her) but at the pocket park on their side of the street. Her expression was delighted. "Isn't it a beautiful little place? I must have been by this corner a hundred times and I never noticed it until now. Do you see the fountain? And the turtle sculpture?"

He did. And although Susannah hadn't told them this part of her story, Roland knew she had been here—along with Mia, daughter of none—and sat on the bench closest to the turtle's wet shell. He could almost see her there.

"I'd like to go in," she said timidly. "May we? Is there time?"

"Yes," he said, and followed her through the little iron gate.

FOUR

The pocket park was peaceful, but not entirely quiet.

"Do you hear people singing?" Mrs. Tassenbaum asked in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper. "A chorus from somewhere?"

"Bet your bottom dollar," Roland answered, and was sorry immediately. He'd learned the phrase from Eddie, and saying it hurt. He walked to the turtle and dropped on one knee to examine it more closely. There was a tiny piece gone from the beak, leaving a break like a missing tooth. On the back was a scratch in the shape of a question mark, and fading pink letters.

"What does it say?" she asked. "Something about a turtle, but that's all I can make out."

“See the TURTLE of enormous girth.” He knew this without reading it.

“What does it mean?”

Roland stood up. “It’s too much to go into. Would you like to wait for me while I go in there?” He nodded in the direction of the tower with its black glass windows glittering in the sun.

“Yes,” she said. “I would. I’ll just sit on the bench in the sunshine and wait for you. It’s . . . refreshing. Does that sound crazy?”

“No,” he said. “If someone whose looks you don’t trust should speak to you, Irene—I think it unlikely, because this is a safe place, but it’s certainly possible—concentrate just as hard as you can, and call for me.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you talking ESP?”

He didn’t know what ESP stood for, but he understood what she meant, and nodded.

“You’d hear that? Hear *me*?”

He couldn’t say for sure that he would. The building might be equipped with damping devices, like the thinking-caps the can-toi wore, that would make it impossible.

“I might. And as I say, trouble’s unlikely. This is a safe place.”

She looked at the turtle, its shell gleaming with spray from the fountain. “It is, isn’t it?” She started to smile, then stopped. “You’ll come back, won’t you? You wouldn’t dump me without at least . . .” She shrugged one shoulder. The gesture made her look very young. “Without at least saying goodbye?”

“Never in life. And my business in yonder tower shouldn’t take long.” In fact it was hardly business at all . . . unless, that was, whoever was currently running the Tet Corporation had some with him. “We have another place to go, and it’s there Oy and I would take our leave of you.”

“Okay,” she said, and sat on the bench with the bumbler at her feet. The end of it was damp and she was wearing a new pair of slacks (bought in the same quick shopping-run that had netted Roland’s new shirt and jeans), but this didn’t bother her. They would dry quickly on such a warm, sunny day, and she found she wanted to be near the turtle sculpture. To study its tiny, timeless black eyes while she listened to those sweet voices. She thought that would be very

restful. It was not a word she usually thought of in connection with New York, but this was a very un-New York place, with its feel of quiet and peace. She thought she might bring David here, that if they could sit on this bench he might hear the story of her missing three days without thinking her insane. Or *too* insane.

Roland started away, moving easily—moving like a man who could walk for days and weeks without ever varying his pace. *I wouldn't like to have him on my trail*, she thought, and shivered a little at the idea. He reached the iron gate through which he would pass to the sidewalk, then turned to her once more. He spoke in a soft singsong.

“See the TURTLE of enormous girth!
On his shell he holds the earth.
His thought is slow but always kind;
He holds us all within his mind.
On his back all vows are made;
He sees the truth but mayn't aid.
He loves the land and loves the sea,
And even loves a child like me.”

Then he left her, moving swiftly and cleanly, not looking back. She sat on the bench and watched him wait with the others clustered on the corner for the WALK light, then cross with them, the leather bag slung over his shoulder bouncing lightly against his hip. She watched him mount the steps of 2 Hammarskjöld Plaza and disappear inside. Then she leaned back, closed her eyes, and listened to the voices sing. At some point she realized that at least two of the words they were singing were the ones that made her name.

FIVE

It seemed to Roland that great multitudes of *folken* were streaming into the building, but this was the perception of a man who had spent the latter years of his quest in mostly deserted places. If he'd come at quarter to nine, while people were still arriving, instead of at quarter to eleven, he would have been stunned by the flood of bodies. Now

most of those who worked here were settled in their offices and cubicles, generating paper and bytes of information.

The lobby windows were of clear glass and at least two stories high, perhaps three. Consequently the lobby was full of light, and as he stepped inside, the grief that had possessed him ever since kneeling by Eddie in the street of Pleasantville slipped away. In here the singing voices were louder, not a chorus but a great choir. And, he saw, he wasn't the only one who heard them. On the street, people had been hurrying with their heads down and looks of distracted concentration on their faces, as if they were deliberately not seeing the delicate and perishable beauty of the day which had been given them; in here they were helpless not to feel at least some of that to which the gunslinger was so exquisitely attuned, and which he drank like water in the desert.

As if in a dream, he drifted across the rose-marble tile, hearing the echoing clack of his bootheels, hearing the faint and shifting conversation of the Orizas in their pouch. He thought, *People who work here wish they lived here. They may not know it, exactly, but they do. People who work here find excuses to work late. And they will live long and productive lives.*

In the center of the high, echoing room, the expensive marble floor gave way to a square of humble dark earth. It was surrounded by ropes of wine-dark velvet, but Roland knew that even the ropes didn't need to be there. No one would transgress that little garden, not even a suicidal can-toi desperate to make a name for himself. It was holy ground. There were three dwarf palm trees, and plants he hadn't seen since leaving Gilead: *Spathiphyllum*, he believed they had been called there, although they might not have the same name in this world. There were other plants as well, but only one mattered.

In the middle of the square, by itself, was the rose.

It hadn't been transplanted; Roland saw that at once. No. It was where it had been in 1977, when the place where he was now standing had been a vacant lot, filled with trash and broken bricks, dominated by a sign which announced the coming of Turtle Bay Luxury Condominiums, to be built by Mills Construction and Sombra Real Estate Associates. This building, all one hundred stories of it, had

been built instead, and *around* the rose. Whatever business might be done here was secondary to that purpose.

2 Hammarskjöld Plaza was a shrine.

SIX

There was a tap on his shoulder and Roland whirled about so suddenly that he drew glances of alarm. He was alarmed himself. Not for years—perhaps since his early teenage years—had anyone been quiet enough to come within shoulder-tapping distance of him without being overheard. And on this marble floor, he surely should have—

The young (and extremely beautiful) woman who had approached him was clearly surprised by the suddenness of his reaction, but the hands he shot out to seize her shoulders only closed on thin air and then themselves, making a soft clapping sound that echoed back from the ceiling above, a ceiling at least as high as that in the Cradle of Lud. The woman's green eyes were wide and wary, and he would have sworn there was no harm in them, but still, first to be surprised, then to *miss* like that—

He glanced down at the woman's feet and got at least part of the answer. She was wearing a kind of shoe he'd never seen before, something with deep foam soles and what might have been canvas uppers. Shoes that would move as softly as moccasins on a hard surface. As for the woman herself—

A queer double certainty came to him as he looked at her: first, that he had “seen the boat she came in,” as familial resemblance was sometimes expressed in Calla Bryn Sturgis; second, that a society of gunslingers was a-breeding in this world, this special Keystone World, and he had just been accosted by one of them.

And what better place for such an encounter than within sight of the rose?

“I see your father in your face, but can't quite name him,” Roland said in a low voice. “Tell me who he was, do it please you.”

The woman smiled, and Roland almost had the name he was looking for. Then it slipped away, as such things often did: memory could be bashful. “You never met him . . . although I can understand

why you might think you had. I'll tell you later, if you like, but right now I'm to take you upstairs, Mr. Deschain. There's a person who wants . . ." For a moment she looked self-conscious, as if she thought someone had instructed her to use a certain word so she'd be laughed at. Then dimples formed at the corners of her mouth and her green eyes slanted enchantingly up at the corners; it was as if she were thinking *If it's a joke on me, let them have it*. ". . . a person who wants to *palaver* with you," she finished.

"All right," he said.

She touched his shoulder lightly, to hold him where he was yet a moment longer. "I'm asked to make sure that you read the sign in the Garden of the Beam," she said. "Will you do it?"

Roland's response was dry, but still a bit apologetic. "I will if I may," he said, "but I've ever had trouble with your written language, although it seems to come out of my mouth well enough when I'm on this side."

"I think you'll be able to read this," she said. "Give it a try." And she touched his shoulder again, gently turning him back to the square of earth in the lobby floor—not earth that had been brought in wheelbarrows by some crew of gifted gardeners, he knew, but the actual earth of this place, ground which might have been tilled but had not been otherwise changed.

At first he had no more success with the small brass sign in the garden than he'd had with most signs in the shop windows, or the words on the covers of the "magda-seens." He was about to say so, to ask the woman with the faintly familiar face to read it to him, when the letters changed, becoming the Great Letters of Gilead. He was then able to read what was writ there, and easily. When he had finished, it changed back again.

"A pretty trick," he said. "Did it respond to my thoughts?"

She smiled—her lips were coated with some pink candylke stuff—and nodded. "Yes. If you were Jewish, you might have seen it in Hebrew. If you were Russian, it would have been in Cyrillic."

"Say true?"

"True."

The lobby had regained its normal rhythm . . . except, Roland understood, the rhythm of this place would never be like that in other

business buildings. Those living in Thunderclap would suffer all their lives from little ailments like boils and eczema and headaches and ear-styke; at the end of it, they would die (probably at an early age) of some big and painful trum, likely the cancers that ate fast and burned the nerves like brushfires as they made their meals. Here was just the opposite: health and harmony, goodwill and generosity. These *folken* did not hear the rose singing, exactly, but they didn't need to. They were the lucky ones, and on some level every one of them knew it . . . which was luckiest of all. He watched them come in and cross to the lift-boxes that were called elevaydors, moving briskly, swinging their pokes and packages, their gear and their gunna, and not one course was a perfectly straight line from the doors. A few came to what she'd called the Garden of the Beam, but even those who didn't bent their steps briefly in that direction, as if attracted by a powerful magnet. And if anyone tried to harm the rose? There was a security guard sitting at a little desk by the elevators, Roland saw, but he was fat and old. And it didn't matter. If anyone made a threatening move, everyone in this lobby would hear a scream of alarm in his or her head, as piercing and imperative as that kind of whistle only dogs can hear. And they would converge upon the would-be assassin of the rose. They would do so swiftly, and with absolutely no regard for their own safety. The rose had been able to protect itself when it had been growing in the trash and the weeds of the vacant lot (or at least draw those who would protect it), and that hadn't changed.

"Mr. Deschain? Are you ready to go upstairs now?"

"Aye," he said. "Lead me as you would."

SEVEN

The familiarity of the woman's face clicked into place for him just as they reached the ele-vaydor. Perhaps it was seeing her in profile that did it, something about the shape of the cheekbone. He remembered Eddie telling him about his conversation with Calvin Tower after Jack Andolini and George Biondi had left the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. Tower had been speaking of his oldest friend's family. *They like to boast that they have the most unique legal letterhead in New York, perhaps in the United States. It simply reads "DEEPNEAU."*

“Are you sai Aaron Deepneau’s daughter?” he asked her. “Surely not, you’re too young. His granddaughter?”

Her smile faded. “Aaron never had children, Mr. Deschain. I’m the granddaughter of his older brother, but my own parents and grandfather died young. Airy was the one who mostly raised me.”

“Did you call him so? Airy?” Roland was charmed.

“As a child I did, and it just kind of stuck.” She held out a hand, her smile returning. “Nancy Deepneau. And I am so pleased to meet you. A little frightened, but pleased.”

Roland shook her hand, but the gesture was perfunctory, hardly more than a touch. Then, with considerably more feeling (for this was the ritual he had grown up with, the one he understood), he placed his fist against his forehead and made a leg. “Long days and pleasant nights, Nancy Deepneau.”

Her smile widened into a cheerful grin. “And may you have twice the number, Roland of Gilead! May you have twice the number.”

The ele-vaydor came, they got on, and it was to the ninety-ninth floor that they went.

EIGHT

The doors opened on a large round foyer. The floor was carpeted in a dusky pink shade that exactly matched the hue of the rose. Across from the ele-vaydor was a glass door with **THE TET CORPORATION** lettered on it. Beyond, Roland saw another, smaller lobby where a woman sat at a desk, apparently talking to herself. To the right of the outer lobby door were two men wearing business suits. They were chatting to each other, hands in pockets, seemingly relaxed, but Roland saw they were anything but. And they were armed. The coats of their suits were well-tailored, but a man who knows how to look for a gun usually sees one, if a gun is there. These two fellows would stand in this foyer for an hour, maybe two (it was difficult for even good men to remain totally alert for much longer), falling into their little just-chatting routine each time the ele-vaydor came, ready to move instantly if they smelled something wrong. Roland approved.

He didn't spend much time looking at the guards, however. Once he had identified them for what they were, he let his gaze go where it had wanted to be from the moment the ele-vaydor doors opened. There was a large black-and-white picture on the wall to his left. This was a photograph (he had originally thought the word was *fottergraf*) about five feet long and three wide, mounted without a frame, curved so cunningly to the shape of the wall that it looked like a hole into some unnaturally still reality. Three men in jeans and open-necked shirts sat on the top rail of a fence, their boots hooked under the lowest rail. How many times, Roland wondered, had he seen cowboys or *pastorillas* sitting just that way while they watched branding, roping, gelding, or the breaking of wild horses? How many times had he sat so himself, sometimes with one or more of his old tet—Cuthbert, Alain, Jamie DeCurry—sitting to either side of him, as John Cullum and Aaron Deepneau sat flanking the black man with the gold-rimmed spectacles and the tiny white moustache? The remembering made him ache, and this was no mere ache of the mind; his stomach clenched and his heart sped up. The three in the picture had been caught laughing at something, and the result was a kind of timeless perfection, one of those rare moments when men are glad to be what they are and where they are.

"The Founding Fathers," Nancy said. She sounded both amused and sad. "That photo was taken on an executive retreat in 1986. Taos, New Mexico. Three city boys in cow country, how about that. And don't they look like they're having the time of their lives?"

"You say true," Roland said.

"Do you know all three?"

Roland nodded. He knew them, all right, although he had never met Moses Carver, the man in the middle. Dan Holmes's partner, Odetta Holmes's godfather. In the picture he looked to be a robust and healthy seventy, but surely by 1986 he had to be closer to eighty. Perhaps eighty-five. Of course, Roland reminded himself, there was a wild card here: the marvelous thing he'd just seen in the lobby of this building. The rose was no more a fountain of youth than the turtle in the little pocket park across the street was the real Maturin, but did he think it had certain beneficent qualities? Yes he did. Certain healing qualities? Yes he did. Did he believe that the nine years of life Aaron

Deepneau had gotten between 1977 and the taking of this picture in 1986 had just been a matter of the *Prim*-replacing pills and medical treatments of the old people? No he did not. These three men—Carver, Cullum, and Deepneau—had come together, almost magically, to fight for the rose in their old age. Their tale, the gunslinger believed, would make a book in itself, very likely a fine and exciting one. What Roland believed was simplicity itself: the rose had shown its gratitude.

“When did they die?” he asked Nancy Deepneau.

“John Cullum went first, in 1989,” she said. “Victim of a gunshot wound. He lasted twelve hours in the hospital, long enough for everyone to say goodbye. He was in New York for the annual board meeting. According to the NYPD, it was a streetside mugging gone bad. We believe he was killed by an agent of either Sombra or North Central Positronics. Probably one of the can-toi. There were other attempts that missed.”

“Both Sombra and Positronics come to the same thing,” said Roland. “They’re the agencies of the Crimson King in this world.”

“We know,” she said, then pointed to the man on the left side of the picture, the one she so strongly resembled. “Uncle Aaron lived until 1992. When you met him . . . in 1977?”

“Yes,” Roland said.

“In 1977, no one would have believed he could live so long.”

“Did the *fayen-folken* kill him, too?”

“No, the cancer came back, that’s all. He died in his bed. I was there. The last thing he said was, ‘Tell Roland we did our best.’ And so I do tell you.”

“Thankee-sai.” He heard the roughness in his voice and hoped she would mistake it for curtness. Many had done their best for him, was it not true? A great many, beginning with Susan Delgado, all those years ago.

“Are you all right?” she asked in a low, sympathetic voice.

“Yes,” he said. “Fine. And Moses Carver? When did *he* pass?”

She raised her eyebrows, then laughed.

“What—?”

“Look for yourself!”

She pointed toward the glass doors. Now approaching them from the inside, passing the desk-minding woman who had apparently been talking to herself, was a wizened man with fluffy fly-away hair and white eyebrows to match. His skin was dark, but the woman upon whose arm he leaned was even darker. He was tall—perhaps six-and-three, if the bend had been taken out of his spine—but the woman was even taller, at least six-and-six. Her face was not beautiful but almost savagely handsome. The face of a warrior.

The face of a gunslinger.

NINE

Had Moses Carver's spine been straight, he and Roland would have been eye-to-eye. As it was, Carver needed to look up slightly, which he did by cocking his head, birdlike. He seemed incapable of actually bending his neck; arthritis had locked it in place. His eyes were brown, the whites so muddy it was difficult to tell where the irises ended, and they were full of merry laughter behind their gold-rimmed spectacles. He still had the tiny white moustache.

"Roland of Gilead!" said he. "How I've longed to meet you, sir! I b'lieve it's what's kept me alive so long after John and Aaron passed. Let loose of me a minute, Marian, let loose! There's something I have to do!"

Marian Carver let go of him and looked at Roland. He didn't hear her voice in his head and didn't need to; what she wanted to tell him was clear in her eyes: *Catch him if he falls, sai.*

But the man Susannah had called Daddy Mose didn't fall. He put his loosely clenched, arthritic fist to his forehead, then bent his right knee, taking all of his weight on his trembling right leg. "Hile you last gunslinger, Roland Deschain out of Gilead, son of Steven and true descendent of Arthur Eld. I, the last of what was called among ourselves the Ka-Tet of the Rose, salute you."

Roland put his own fisted hand to his forehead and did more than make a leg; he went to his knee. "Hile Daddy Mose, godfather of Susannah, dinh of the Ka-Tet of the Rose, I salute you with my heart."

"Thankee," said the old man, and then laughed like a boy. "We're well met in the House of the Rose! What was once meant to be the

Grave of the Rose! Ha! Tell me we're not! Can you?"

"Nay, for it would be a lie."

"Speak it!" the old man cried, then uttered that cheery go-to-hell laugh once again. "But I'm f'gettin my manners in my awe, gunslinger. This handsome stretch of woman standing beside me, it'd be natural for you to call her my granddaughter, 'cause I was sem'ty in the year she was born, which was nineteen-and-sixty-nine. But the truth is"—*But'na troof is* was what reached Roland's ear—"that sometimes the best things in life are started late, and having children"—*Chirrun*—"is one of'm, in my opinion. Which is a long-winded way of saying this is my daughter, Marian Odetta Carver, President of the Tet Corporation since I stepped down in '97, at the age of ninety-eight. And do you think it would frost some country-club balls, Roland, to know that this business, now worth just about ten billion dollars, is run by a Negro?" His accent, growing deeper as his excitement and joy grew, turned the last into *Dis bid'ness, now wuth jus 'bout tin binnion dolla, is run bah NEE-grow?*

"Stop, Dad," the tall woman beside him said. Her voice was kind but brooked no denial. "You'll have that heart monitor you wear sounding the alarm if you don't, and this man's time is short."

"She run me like a ray'road!" the old man cried indignantly. At the same time he turned his head slightly and dropped Roland a wink of inexpressible slyness and good humor with the eye his daughter could not see.

As if she wasn't onto your tricks, old man, Roland thought, amused even in his sorrow. *As if she hasn't been on to them for many and many a year—say delah.*

Marian Carver said, "We'd palaver with you for just a little while, Roland, but first there's something I need to see."

"Ain't a bit o' need for that!" the old man said, his voice cracking with indignation. "Not a bit o' need, and you know it! Did I raise a jackass?"

"He's very likely right," Marian said, "but always safe—"

"—never sorry," the gunslinger said. "It's a good rule, aye. What is it you'd see? What will tell you that I am who I say I am, and you believe I am?"

"Your gun," she said.

Roland took the Old Home Days shirt out of the leather bag, then pulled out the holster. He unwrapped the shell-belt and pulled out his revolver with the sandalwood grips. He heard Marian Carver draw in a sharp, awed breath and chose to ignore it. He noticed that the two guards in their well-cut suits had drawn close, their eyes wide.

“You see it!” Moses Carver shouted. “Aye, every one of you here! Say *God!* Might as well tell your gran-babbies you saw Excalibur, the Sword of Arthur, for’t comes to the same!”

Roland held his father’s revolver out to Marian. He knew she would need to take it in order to confirm who he was, that she must do this before leading him into the Tet Corporation’s soft belly (where the wrong someone could do terrible damage), but for a moment she was unable to fulfill her responsibility. Then she steeled herself and took the gun, her eyes widening at the weight of it. Careful to keep all of her fingers away from the trigger, she brought the barrel up to her eyes and then traced a bit of the scrollwork near the muzzle:



“Will you tell me what this means, Mr. Deschain?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he said, “if you will call me Roland.”

“If you ask, I’ll try.”

“This is Arthur’s mark,” he said, tracing it himself. “The only mark on the door of his tomb, do ya. ’Tis his dinh mark, and means WHITE.”

The old man held out his trembling hands, silent but imperative.

“Is it loaded?” she asked Roland, and then, before he could answer: “Of course it is.”

“Give it to him,” Roland said.

Marian looked doubtful, the two guards even more so, but Daddy Mose still held his hands out for the widowmaker, and Roland nodded. The woman reluctantly held the gun out to her father. The old man took it, held it in both hands, and then did something that both warmed and chilled the gunslinger’s heart: he kissed the barrel with his old, folded lips.

“What does thee taste?” Roland asked, honestly curious.

“The years, gunslinger,” Moses Carver said. “So I do.” And with that he held the gun out to the woman again, butt first.

She handed it back to Roland as if glad to be rid of its grave and killing weight, and he wrapped it once more in its belt of shells.

“Come in,” she said. “And although our time is short, we’ll make it as joyful as your grief will allow.”

“Amen to that!” the old man said, and clapped Roland on the shoulder. “She’s still alive, my Odetta—she you call Susannah. There’s that. Thought you’d be glad to know it, sir.”

Roland *was* glad, and nodded his thanks.

“Come now, Roland,” Marian Carver said. “Come and be welcome in our place, for it’s your place as well, and we know the chances are good that you’ll never visit it again.”

TEN

Marian Carver’s office was on the northwest corner of the ninety-ninth floor. Here the walls were all glass unbroken by a single strut or muntin, and the view took the gunslinger’s breath away. Standing in that corner and looking out was like hanging in midair over a skyline more fabulous than any mind could imagine. Yet it was one he had seen before, for he recognized yonder suspension bridge as well as some of the tall buildings on this side of it. He *should* have recognized the bridge, for they’d almost died on it in another world. Jake had been kidnapped off it by Gasher, and taken to the Tick-Tock Man. This was the City of Lud as it must have been in its prime.

“Do you call it New York?” he asked. “You do, yes?”

“Yes,” Nancy Deepneau said.

“And yonder bridge, that swoops?”

“The George Washington,” Marian Carver said. “Or just the GWB, if you’re a native.”

So yonder lay not only the bridge which had taken them into Lud but the one beside which Pere Callahan had walked when he left New York to start his wandering days. That Roland remembered from his story, and very well.

“Would you care for some refreshment?” Nancy asked.

He began to say no, took stock of how his head was swimming, and changed his mind. Something, yes, but only if it would sharpen wits that needed to be sharp. “Tea, if you have it,” he said. “Hot, strong tea, with sugar or honey. Can you?”

“We can,” Marian said, and pushed a button on her desk. She spoke to someone Roland couldn’t see, and all at once the woman in the outer office—the one who had appeared to be talking to herself—made more sense to him.

When the ordering of hot drinks and sandwiches (what Roland supposed he would always think of as popkins) was done, Marian leaned forward and captured Roland’s eye. “We’re well-met in New York, Roland, so I hope, but our time here isn’t . . . isn’t *vital*. And I suspect you know why.”

The gunslinger considered this, then nodded. A trifle cautiously, but over the years he had built a degree of caution into his nature. There were others—Alain Johns had been one, Jamie DeCurry another—for whom a sense of caution had been inbred, but that had never been the case with Roland, whose tendency had been to shoot first and ask questions later.

“Nancy told you to read the plaque in the Garden of the Beam,” Marian said. “Did—”

“Garden of the Beam, say *Gawd!*” Moses Carver interjected. On the walk down the corridor to his daughter’s office, he had picked a cane out of a faux elephant-foot stand, and now he thumped it on the expensive carpet for emphasis. Marian bore this patiently. “Say *Gawd-bomb!*”

“My father’s recent friendship with the Reverend Harrigan, who holds court down below, has not been the high point in my life,” Marian said with a sigh, “but never mind. Did you read the plaque, Roland?”

He nodded. Nancy Deepneau had used a different word—sign or sigul—but he understood it came to the same. “The letters changed into Great Letters. I could read it very well.”

“And what did it say?”

“GIVEN BY THE TET CORPORATION, IN HONOR OF EDWARD CANTOR DEAN AND JOHN “JAKE” CHAMBERS.” He paused. “Then it said ‘Cam-a-cam-mal,

Pria-toi, Gan delah,' which you might say as WHITE OVER RED, THUS GAN WILL EVER."

"And to us it says GOOD OVER EVIL, THIS IS THE WILL OF GOD," Marian said.

"God be praised!" Moses Carver said, and thumped his cane. "May the *Prim* rise!"

There was a perfunctory knock at the door and then the woman from the outer desk came in, carrying a silver tray. Roland was fascinated to see a small black knob suspended in front of her lips, and a narrow black armature that disappeared into her hair. Some sort of far-speaking device, surely. Nancy Deepneau and Marian Carver helped her set out steaming cups of tea and coffee, bowls of sugar and honey, a crock of cream. There was also a plate of sandwiches. Roland's stomach rumbled. He thought of his friends in the ground—no more popkins for them—and also of Irene Tassenbaum, sitting in the little park across the street, patiently waiting for him. Either thought alone should have been enough to kill his appetite, but his stomach once more made its impudent noise. Some parts of a man were conscienceless, a fact he supposed he had known since childhood. He helped himself to a popkin, dumped a heaping spoonful of sugar into his tea, then added honey for good measure. He would make this as brief as possible and return to Irene as soon as he could, but in the meantime . . .

"May it do you fine, sir," Moses Carver said, and blew across his coffee cup. "Over the teeth, over the gums, look out guts, here it comes! Hee!"

"Dad and I have a house on Montauk Point," said Marian, pouring cream into her own coffee, "and we were out there this past weekend. At around five-fifteen on Saturday afternoon, I got a call from one of the security people here. The Hammarskjöld Plaza Association employs them, but the Tet Corporation pays them a bonus so we may know . . . certain things of interest, let's say . . . as soon as they occur. We've been watching that plaque in the lobby with extraordinary interest as the nineteenth of June approached, Roland. Would it surprise you to know that, until roughly quarter of five on that day, it read GIVEN BY THE TET CORPORATION, IN HONOR OF THE BEAM FAMILY, AND IN MEMORY OF GILEAD?"

Roland considered this, sipped his tea (it was hot and strong and good), then shook his head. “No.”

She leaned forward, eyes gleaming. “And why do you say so?”

“Because until Saturday afternoon between four and five o’clock, nothing was sure. Even with the Breakers stopped, nothing was sure until Stephen King was safe.” He glanced around at them. “Do you know about the Breakers?”

Marian nodded. “Not the details, but we know the Beam they were working to destroy is safe from them now, and that it wasn’t so badly damaged it can’t regenerate.” She hesitated, then said: “And we know of your loss. Both of your losses. We’re ever so sorry, Roland.”

“Those boys are safe in the arms of Jesus,” Marian’s father said. “And even if they ain’t, they’re together in the clearing.”

Roland, who wanted to believe this, nodded and said thankya. Then he turned back to Marian. “The thing with the writer was very close. He was hurt, and badly. Jake died saving him. He put his body between King and the van-mobile that would have taken his life.”

“King is going to live,” Nancy said. “And he’s going to write again. We have that on very good authority.”

“Whose?”

Marian leaned forward. “In a minute,” she said. “The point is, Roland, we believe it, we’re sure of it, and King’s safety over the next few years means that your work in the matter of the Beams is done: Ves’-Ka Gan.”

Roland nodded. The song would continue.

“There’s plenty of work for us ahead,” Marian went on, “thirty years’ worth at least, we calculate, but—”

“But it’s *our* work, not yours,” Nancy said.

“You have this on the same ‘good authority’?” Roland asked, sipping his tea. Hot as it was, he’d gotten half of the large cup inside of him already.

“Yes. Your quest to defeat the forces of the Crimson King has been successful. The Crimson King himself—”

“That wa’n’t *never* this man’s quest and you know it!” the centenarian sitting next to the handsome black woman said, and he once more thumped his cane for emphasis. “His quest—”

“Dad, that’s enough.” Her voice was hard enough to make the old man blink.

“Nay, let him speak,” Roland said, and they all looked at him, surprised by (and a little afraid of) that dry whipcrack. “Let him speak, for he says true. If we’re going to have it out, let us have it all out. For me, the Beams have always been no more than means to an end. Had they broken, the Tower would have fallen. Had the Tower fallen, I should never have gained it, and climbed to the top of it.”

“You’re saying you cared more for the Dark Tower than for the continued existence of the universe,” Nancy Deepneau said. She spoke in a just-let-me-make-sure-I’ve-got-this-right voice and looked at Roland with a mixture of wonder and contempt. “For the continued existence of *all* the universes.”

“The Dark Tower *is* existence,” Roland said, “and I have sacrificed many friends to reach it over the years, including a boy who called me father. I have sacrificed my own soul in the bargain, lady-sai, so turn thy impudent glass another way. May you do it soon and do it well, I beg.”

His tone was polite but dreadfully cold. All the color was dashed from Nancy Deepneau’s face, and the teacup in her hands trembled so badly that Roland reached out and plucked it from her hand, lest it spill and burn her.

“Take me not amiss,” he said. “Understand me, for we’ll never speak more. What was done was done in both worlds, well and ill, for ka and against it. Yet there’s more beyond all worlds than you know, and more behind them than you could ever guess. My time is short, so let’s move on.”

“Well said, sir!” Moses Carver growled, and thumped his cane again.

“If I offended, I’m truly sorry,” Nancy said.

To this Roland made no reply, for he knew she was not sorry a bit—she was only afraid of him. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence that Marian Carver finally broke. “We don’t have any Breakers of our own, Roland, but at the ranch in Taos we employ a dozen telepaths and precogs. What they make together is sometimes uncertain but always greater than the sum of its parts. Do you know the term ‘good-mind’?”

The gunslinger nodded.

“They make a version of that,” she said, “although I’m sure it’s not so great or powerful as that the Breakers in Thunderclap were able to produce.”

“B’cause they had hundreds,” the old man grumped. “*And* they were better fed.”

“Also because the servants of the King were more than willing to kidnap any who were particularly powerful,” Nancy said, “they always had what we’d call ‘the pick of the litter.’ Still, ours have served us well enough.”

“Whose idea was it to put such folk to work for you?” Roland asked.

“Strange as it might seem to you, partner,” Moses said, “it was Cal Tower. He never contributed much—never did much but c’lect his books and drag his heels, greedy highfalutin whitebread sumbitch that he was—”

His daughter gave him a warning look. Roland found he had to struggle to keep a straight face. Moses Carver might be a hundred years old, but he had pegged Calvin Tower in a single phrase.

“Anyway, he read about putting tellypaths to work in a bunch of science fiction books. Do you know about science fiction?”

Roland shook his head.

“Well, ne’mine. Most of it’s bullshit, but every now and then a good idear crops up. Listen to me and I’ll tell you a good ’un. You’ll understand if you know what Tower and your friend Mist’ Dean talked about twenty-two years ago, when Mist’ Dean come n saved Tower from them two honky thugs.”

“Dad,” Marian said warningly. “You quit with the nigger talk, now. You’re old but not stupid.”

He looked at her; his muddy old eyes gleamed with malicious good cheer; he looked back at Roland and once more came that sly droop of a wink. “Them two honky *dago* thugs!”

“Eddie spoke of it, yes,” Roland said.

The slur disappeared from Carver’s voice; his words became crisp. “Then you know they spoke of a book called *The Hogan*, by Benjamin Slightman. The title of the book was misprinted, and so was the writer’s name, which was just the sort of thing that turned old fatty’s dials.”

“Yes,” Roland said. The title misprint had been *The Dogan*, a phrase that had come to have great meaning to Roland and his tet.

“Well, after your friend came to visit, Cal Tower got interested in that fella all over again, and it turned out he’d written four other books under the name of *Daniel Holmes*. He was as white as a Klansman’s sheet, this Slightman, but the name he chose to write his other books under was the name of Odetta’s father. And I bet that don’t surprise you none, does it?”

“No,” Roland said. It was just one more faint click as the combination-dial of ka turned.

“And all the books he wrote under the Holmes name were science fiction yarns, about the government hiring tellypaths and precogs to find things out. And that’s where *we* got the idea.” He looked at Roland and gave his cane a triumphant thump. “There’s more to the tale, a good deal, but I don’t guess you’ve got the time. That’s what it all comes back to, isn’t it? Time. And in this world it only runs one way.” He looked wistful. “I’d give a great lot, gunslinger, to see my goddaughter again, but I don’t guess that’s in the cards, is it? Unless we meet in the clearing.”

“I think you say true,” Roland told him, “but I’ll take her word of you, and how I found you still full of hot spit and fire—”

“Say *God*, say *Gawd-bomb!*” the old man interjected, and thumped his cane. “Tell it, brother! And see that you tell *her!*”

“So I will.” Roland finished the last of his tea, then put the cup on Marian Carver’s desk and stood with a supporting hand on his right hip as he did. It would take him a long time to get used to the lack of pain there, quite likely more time than he had. “And now I must take my leave of you. There’s a place not far from here where I need to go.”

“We know where,” Marian said. “There’ll be someone to meet you when you arrive. The place has been kept safe for you, and if the door you seek is still there and still working, you’ll go through it.”

Roland made a slight bow. “Thankee-sai.”

“But sit a few moments longer, if you will. We have gifts for you, Roland. Not enough to pay you back for all you’ve done—whether doing it was your first purpose or not—but things you may want, all the same. One’s news from our good-mind folk in Taos. One’s from

more . . .” She considered. “. . . more normal researchers, folks who work for us in this very building. They call themselves the Calvins, but not because of any religious bent. Perhaps it’s a little homage to Mr. Tower, who died of a heart attack in his new shop nine years ago. Or perhaps it’s only a joke.”

“A bad one if it is,” Moses Carver grumped.

“And then there are two more . . . from us. From Nancy, and me, and my Dad, and one who’s gone on. Will you sit a little longer?”

And although he was anxious to be off, Roland did as he was asked. For the first time since Jake’s death, a true emotion other than sorrow had risen in his mind.

Curiosity.

ELEVEN

“First, the news from the folks in New Mexico,” Marian said when Roland had resumed his seat. “They have watched you as well as they can, and although what they saw Thunder-side was hazy at best, they believe that Eddie told Jake Chambers something—perhaps something of importance—not long before he died. Likely as he lay on the ground, and before he . . . I don’t know . . .”

“Before he slipped into twilight?” Roland suggested.

“Yes,” Nancy Deepneau agreed. “We think so. That is to say, *they* think so. Our version of the Breakers.”

Marian gave her a little frown that suggested this was a lady who did not appreciate being interrupted. Then she returned her attention to Roland. “Seeing things on this side is easier for our people, and several of them are quite sure—not positive but quite sure—that Jake may have passed this message on before he himself died.” She paused. “This woman you’re traveling with, Mrs. Tannenbaum—”

“Tassenbaum,” Roland corrected. He did it without thinking, because his mind was otherwise occupied. Furiously so.

“Tassenbaum,” Marian agreed. “She’s undoubtedly told you some of what Jake told her before he passed on, but there may be something else. Not a thing she’s holding back, but something she

didn't recognize as important. Will you ask her to go over what Jake said to her once more before you and she part company?"

"Yes," Roland said, and of course he would, but he didn't believe Jake had passed on Eddie's message to Mrs. Tassenbaum. No, not to her. He realized that he'd hardly thought of Oy since they'd parked Irene's car, but Oy had been with them, of course; would now be lying at Irene's feet as she sat in the little park across the street, lying in the sun and waiting for him.

"All right," she said. "That's good. Let's move on."

Marian opened the wide center drawer of her desk. From it she brought out a padded envelope and a small wooden box. The envelope she handed to Nancy Deepneau. The box she placed on the desktop in front of her.

"This next is Nancy's to tell," she said. "And I'd just ask you to be brief, Nancy, because this man looks very anxious to be off."

"Tell it," Moses said, and thumped his cane.

Nancy glanced at him, then at Roland . . . or in the vicinity of him, anyway. Color was climbing in her cheeks, and she looked flustered. "Stephen King," she said, then cleared her throat and said it again. From there she didn't seem to know how to go on. Her color burned even deeper beneath her skin.

"Take a deep breath," Roland said, "and hold it."

She did as he told her.

"Now let it out."

And this, too.

"Now tell me what you would, Nancy niece of Aaron."

"Stephen King has written nearly forty books," she said, and although the color remained in her cheeks (Roland supposed he would find out what it signified soon enough), her voice was calmer now. "An amazing number of them, even the very early ones, touch on the Dark Tower in one way or another. It's as though it was always on his mind, from the very first."

"You say what I know is true," Roland told her, folding his hands, "I say thankya."

This seemed to calm her even further. "Hence the Calvins," she said. "Three men and two women of a scholarly bent who do nothing

from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon but read the works of Stephen King.”

“They don’t just read them,” Marian said. “They cross-reference them by settings, by characters, by themes—such as they are—even by mention of popular brand-name products.”

“Part of their work is looking for references to people who live or did live in the Keystone World,” Nancy said. “Real people, in other words. And references to the Dark Tower, of course.” She handed him the padded envelope and Roland felt the corners of what could only be a book inside. “If King ever wrote a keystone *book*, Roland—outside the Dark Tower series itself, I mean—we think it must be this one.”

The flap of the envelope was held by a clasp. Roland looked askance at both Marian and Nancy. They nodded. The gunslinger opened the clasp and pulled out an extremely thick volume with a cover of red and white. There was no picture on it, only Stephen King’s name and a single word.

Red for the King, White for Arthur Eld, he thought. *White over Red, thus Gan wills ever.*

Or perhaps it was just a coincidence.

“What is this word?” Roland asked, tapping the title.

“*Insomnia*,” Nancy said. “It means—”

“I know what it means,” Roland said. “Why do you give me the book?”

“Because the story hinges on the Dark Tower,” Nancy said, “and because there’s a character in it named Ed Deepneau. He happens to be the villain of the piece.”

The villain of the piece, Roland thought. *No wonder her color rose.*

“Do you have anyone by that name in your family?” he asked her.

“We did,” she said. “In Bangor, which is the town King is writing about when he writes about Derry, as he does in this book. The real Ed Deepneau died in 1947, the year King was born. He was a bookkeeper, as inoffensive as milk and cookies. The one in *Insomnia* is a lunatic who falls under the power of the Crimson King. He attempts to turn an airplane into a bomb and crash it into a building, killing thousands of people.”

“Pray it never happens,” the old man said gloomily, looking out at the New York City skyline. “God knows it could.”

“In the story the plan fails,” Nancy said. “Although some people *are* killed, the main character in the book, an old man named Ralph Roberts, manages to keep the absolute worst from happening.”

Roland was looking intently at Aaron Deepneau’s grand-niece. “The Crimson King is mentioned in here? By *actual name*?”

“Yes,” she said. “The Ed Deepneau in Bangor—the *real* Ed Deepneau—was a cousin of my father’s, four or five times removed. The Calvins could show you the family tree if you wanted, but there really isn’t much of a connection to Uncle Aaron’s part of it. We think King may have used the name in the book as a way of getting your attention—or ours—without even realizing what he was doing.”

“A message from his undermind,” the gunslinger mused.

Nancy brightened. “His subconscious, yes! Yes, that’s exactly what we think!”

It *wasn’t* exactly what Roland was thinking. The gunslinger had been recalling how he had hypnotized King in the year of 1977; how he had told him to listen for Ves’-Ka Gan, the Song of the Turtle. Had King’s undermind, the part of him that would never have stopped trying to obey the hypnotic command, put part of the Song of the Turtle in this book? A book the Servants of the King might have neglected because it wasn’t part of the “Dark Tower Cycle”? Roland thought that could be, and that the name Deepneau might indeed be a sigil. But—

“I can’t read this,” he said. “A word here and a word there, perhaps, but no more.”

“You can’t, but my girl can,” Moses Carver said. “My girl Odetta, that you call Susannah.”

Roland nodded slowly. And although he had already begun to have his doubts, his mind nevertheless cast up a brilliant image of the two of them sitting close by a fire—a large one, for the night was cold—with Oy between. In the rocks above them the wind howled bitter notes of winter, but they cared not, for their bellies were full, their bodies were warm, dressed in the skins of animals they had killed themselves, and they had a story to entertain them.

Stephen King’s story of insomnia.

“She’ll read it to you on the trail,” Moses said. “On your last trail, say God!”

Yes, Roland thought. *One last story to hear, one last trail to follow. The one that leads to Can’-Ka No Rey, and the Dark Tower. Or it would be nice to think so.*

Nancy said, “In the story, the Crimson King is using Ed Deepneau to kill one single child, a boy named Patrick Danville. Just before the attack, while Patrick and his mother are waiting for a woman to make a speech, the boy draws a picture, one that shows you, Roland, and the Crimson King, apparently imprisoned at the top of the Dark Tower.”

Roland started in his seat. “The *top*? Imprisoned at the *top*?”

“Easy,” Marian said. “Take it easy, Roland. The Calvins have been analyzing King’s work for years, every word and every reference, and everything they produce gets forwarded to the good-mind *folken* in New Mexico. Although these two groups have never seen each other, it would be perfectly correct to say that they work together.”

“Not that they’re always in agreement,” Nancy said.

“They sure *aren’t!*” Marian spoke in the exasperated tone of one who’s had to referee more than her share of squabbles. “But one thing that they *are* in agreement about is that King’s references to the Dark Tower are almost always masked, and sometimes mean nothing at all.”

Roland nodded. “He speaks of it because his undermind is always thinking of it, but sometimes he lapses into gibberish.”

“Yes,” Nancy said.

“But obviously you don’t think this entire book is a false trail, or you would not want to give it to me.”

“Indeed we do not,” Nancy said. “But that doesn’t mean the Crimson King is necessarily imprisoned at the *top* of the Tower. Although I suppose it might.”

Roland thought of his own belief that the Red King was locked out of the Tower, on a kind of balcony. Was it a genuine intuition, or just something he wanted to believe?

“In any case, we think you should watch for this Patrick Danville,” Marian said. “The consensus is that he’s a real person, but we haven’t been able to find any trace of him here. Perhaps you may find him in Thunderclap.”

“Or beyond it,” Moses put in.

Marian was nodding. “According to the story King tells in *Insomnia*—you’ll see for yourself—Patrick Danville dies as a young man. *But that may not be true.* Do you understand?”

“I’m not sure I do.”

“When you find Patrick Danville—or when he finds you—he may still be the child described in this book,” Nancy said, “or he could be as old as Uncle Mose.”

“Bad luck f’him if that be true!” said the old man, and chortled.

Roland lifted the book, stared at the red and white cover, traced the slightly raised letters that made a word he could not read. “Surely it’s just a story?”

“From the spring of 1970, when he typed the line *The man in black fled across the desert and the gunslinger followed,*” Marian Carver said, “very few of the things Stephen King wrote were ‘just stories.’ He may not believe that; we do.”

But years of dealing with the Crimson King may have left you with a way of jumping at shadows, do it please ya, Roland thought. Aloud he said, “If not stories, what?”

It was Moses Carver who answered. “We think maybe messages in bottles.” In the way he spoke this word—*boh’uls*, almost—Roland heard a heartbreaking echo of Susannah, and suddenly wanted to see her and know she was all right. This desire was so strong it left a bitter taste on his tongue.

“—that great sea.”

“Beg your pardon,” the gunslinger said. “I was wool-gathering.”

“I said we believe that Stephen King’s cast his bottles upon that great sea. The one we call the *Prim*. In hopes that they’ll reach you, and the messages inside will make it possible for you and my Odetta to gain your goal.”

“Which brings us to our final gifts,” Marian said. “Our true gifts. First . . .” She handed him the box.

It opened on a hinge. Roland placed his left hand splayed over the top, meaning to swing it back, then paused and studied his interlocutors. They were looking at him with hope and suspenseful interest, an expression that made him uneasy. A mad (but surprisingly persuasive) idea came to him: that these were in truth agents of the Crimson King, and when he opened the box, the last thing he’d see

would be a primed sneetch, counting down the last few clicks to red zero. And the last sound he'd hear before the world blew up around him would be their mad laughter and a cry of *Hile the Red King!* It wasn't impossible, either, but a point came where one had to trust, because the alternative was madness.

If ka will say so, let it be so, he thought, and opened the box.

TWELVE

Within, resting on dark blue velvet (which they might or might not have known was the color of the Royal Court of Gilead), was a watch within a coiled chain. Engraved upon its gold cover were three objects: a key, a rose, and—between and slightly above them—a tower with tiny windows marching around its circumference in an ascending spiral.

Roland was amazed to find his eyes once more filling with tears. When he looked at the others again—two young women and one old man, the brains and guts of the Tet Corporation—he at first saw six instead of three. He blinked the phantom doubles away.

“Open the cover and look inside,” Moses Carver said. “And there’s no need to hide your tears in this company, you son of Steven, for we’re not the machines the others would replace us with, if they had their way.”

Roland saw that the old man spoke true, for tears were slipping down the weathered darkness of his cheeks. Nancy Deepneau was also weeping freely. And although Marian Carver no doubt prided herself on being made of sterner stuff, her eyes held a suspicious gleam.

He depressed the stem protruding from the top of the case, and the lid sprang up. Inside, finely scrolled hands told the hour and the minute, and with perfect accuracy, he had no doubt. Below, in its own small circle, a smaller hand raced away the seconds. Carved on the inside of the lid was this:

To the Hand of ROLAND DESCHAIN
From Those of
MOSES ISAAC CARVER

MARIAN ODETTA CARVER
NANCY REBECCA DEEPNEAU

With Our Gratitude

White Over Red, Thus GOD Wills Ever

“Thankee-sai,” Roland said in a hoarse and trembling voice. “I thank you, and so would my friends, were they here to speak.”

“In our hearts they *do* speak, Roland,” Marian said. “And in your face we see them very well.”

Moses Carver was smiling. “In our world, Roland, giving a man a gold watch has a special significance.”

“What would that be?” Roland asked. He held the watch—easily the finest timepiece he’d ever had in his life—up to his ear and listened to the precise and delicate ticking of its machinery.

“That his work is done and it’s time for him to go fishing or play with his grandchildren,” Nancy Deepneau said. “But we gave it to you for a different reason. May it count the hours to your goal and tell you when you near it.”

“How can it do that?”

“We have one exceptional good-mind fellow in New Mexico,” Marian said. “His name is Fred Towne. He sees a great deal and is rarely if ever mistaken. This watch is a Patek Philippe, Roland. It cost nineteen thousand dollars, and the makers guarantee a full refund of the price if it’s ever fast or slow. It needs no winding, for it runs on a battery—*not* made by North Central Positronics or any subsidiary thereof, I can assure you—that will last a hundred years. According to Fred, when you near the Dark Tower, the watch may nevertheless stop.”

“Or begin to run backward,” Nancy said. “Watch for it.”

Moses Carver said, “I believe you will, won’t you?”

“Aye,” Roland agreed. He put the watch carefully in one pocket (after another long look at the carvings on the golden cover) and the box in another. “I will watch this watch very well.”

“You must watch for something else, too,” Marian said. “Mordred.”

Roland waited.

“We have reason to believe that he’s murdered the one you called Walter.” She paused. “And I see that does not surprise you. May I ask why?”

“Walter’s finally left my dreams, just as the ache has left my hip and my head,” Roland said. “The last time he visited them was in Calla Bryn Sturgis, the night of the Beamquake.” He would not tell them how terrible those dreams had been, dreams in which he wandered, lost and alone, down a dank castle corridor with cobwebs brushing his face; the scuttering sound of something approaching from the darkness behind him (or perhaps above him), and, just before waking up, the gleam of red eyes and a whispered, inhuman voice: “*Father.*”

They were looking at him grimly. At last Marian said: “Beware him, Roland. Fred Towne, the fellow I mentioned, says ‘Mordred be a-hungry.’ He says that’s a literal hunger. Fred’s a brave man, but he’s afraid of your . . . your enemy.”

My son, why don’t you say it? Roland thought, but believed he knew. She withheld out of care for his feelings.

Moses Carver stood and set his cane beside his daughter’s desk. “I have one more thing for you,” he said, “on’y it was yours all along—yours to carry and lay down when you get to where you’re bound.”

Roland was honestly perplexed, and more perplexed still when the old man began to slowly unbutton his shirt down the front. Marian made as if to help him and he motioned her away brusquely. Beneath his dress-shirt was an old man’s strap-style undershirt, what the gunslinger thought of as a slinkum. Beneath it was a shape that Roland recognized at once, and his heart seemed to stop in his chest. For a moment he was cast back to the cabin on the lake—Beckhardt’s cabin, Eddie by his side—and heard his own words: *Put Auntie’s cross around your neck, and when you meet with sai Carver, show it to him. It may go a long way toward convincing him you’re on the straight. But first . . .*

The cross was now on a chain of fine gold links. Moses Carver pulled it free of his slinkum by this, looked at it for a moment, looked up at Roland with a little smile on his lips, then down at the cross again. He blew upon it. Faint and faint, raising the hair on the gunslinger’s arms, came Susannah’s voice:

“We buried Pimsey under the apple tree . . .”

Then it was gone. For a moment there was nothing, and Carver, frowning now, drew in breath to blow again. There was no need. Before he could, John Cullum's Yankee drawl arose, not from the cross itself, but seemingly from the air just above it.

"We done our best, partner"—*paaa't-nuh*—"and I hope 'twas good enough. Now, I always knew this was on loan to me, and here it is, back where it belongs. You know where it finishes up, I . . ." Here the words, which had been fading ever since *here it is*, became inaudible even to Roland's keen ears. Yet he had heard enough. He took Aunt Talitha's cross, which he had promised to lay at the foot of the Dark Tower, and donned it once more. It had come back to him, and why would it not have done? Was ka not a wheel?

"I thank you, sai Carver," he said. "For myself, for my ka-tet that was, and on behalf of the woman who gave it to me."

"Don't thank me," Moses Carver said. "Thank Johnny Cullum. He give it to me on his deathbed. That man had some hard bark on him."

"I—" Roland began, and for a moment could say no more. His heart was too full. "I thank you all," he said at last. He bowed his head to them with the palm of his right fist against his brow and his eyes closed.

When he opened them again, Moses Carver was holding out his thin old arms. "Now it's time for us to go our way and you to go yours," he said. "Put your arms around me, Roland, and kiss my cheek in farewell if you would, and think of my girl as you do, for I'd say goodbye to her if I may."

Roland did as he was bid, and in another world, as she dozed aboard a train bound for Fedic, Susannah put a hand to her cheek, for it seemed to her that Daddy Mose had come to her, and put an arm around her, and bid her goodbye, good luck, good journey.

THIRTEEN

When Roland stepped out of the ele-vaydor in the lobby, he wasn't surprised to see a woman in a gray-green pullover and slacks the color of moss standing in front of the garden with a few other quietly respectful *folken*. An animal which was not quite a dog sat by her left

shoe. Roland crossed to her and touched her elbow. Irene Tassenbaum turned to him, her eyes wide with wonder.

“Do you hear it?” she asked. “It’s like the singing we heard in Lovell, only a hundred times sweeter.”

“I hear it,” he said. Then he bent and picked up Oy. He looked into the bumbler’s bright gold-ringed eyes as the voices sang. “Friend of Jake,” he said, “what message did he give?”

Oy tried, but the best he could manage was something that sounded like *Dandy-o*, a word Roland vaguely remembered from an old drinking song, where it rimed with *Adelina says she’s randy-o*.

Roland put his forehead down against Oy’s forehead and closed his eyes. He smelled the bumbler’s warm breath. And more: a scent deep in his fur that was the hay into which Jake and Benny Slightman had taken turns jumping not so long before. In his mind, mingled with the sweet singing of those voices, he heard the voice of Jake Chambers for the last time:

Tell him Eddie says, “Watch for Dandelo.” Don’t forget!

And Oy had not.

FOURTEEN

Outside, as they descended the steps of 2 Hammarskjöld Plaza, a deferential voice said, “Sir? Madam?”

It was a man in a black suit and a soft black cap. He stood by the longest, blackest car Roland had ever seen. Looking at it made the gunslinger uneasy.

“Who’s sent us a funeral bucka?” he asked.

Irene Tassenbaum smiled. The rose had refreshed her—excited and exhilarated her, as well—but she was still tired. And concerned to get in touch with David, who would likely be out of his mind with worry by this time.

“It’s not a hearse,” she said. “It’s a limousine. A car for special people . . . or people who think they’re special.” Then, to the driver: “While we’re riding, can you have someone in your office check some airline info for me?”

“Of course, madam. May I ask your carrier of choice and your destination?”

“My destination’s Portland, Maine. My carrier of choice is Rubberband Airlines, if they’re going there this afternoon.”

The limousine’s windows were smoked glass, the interior dim and ringed with colored lights. Oy jumped up on one of the seats and watched with interest as the city rolled past. Roland was mildly amazed to see that there was a completely stocked liquor-bar on one side of the long passenger compartment. He thought of having a beer and decided that even such a mild drink would be enough to dim his own lights. Irene had no such worries. She poured herself what looked like whiskey from a small bottle and then held the glass toward him.

“May your road wind ever upward and the wind be ever at your back, me foine bucko,” she said.

Roland nodded. “A good toast. Thankee-sai.”

“These have been the most amazing three days of my life. I want to thankee-sai *you*. For choosing me.” *Also for laying me*, she thought but did not add. She and Dave still enjoyed the occasional snuggle, but not like that of the previous night. It had never been like that. And if Roland hadn’t been distracted? Very likely she would have blown her silly self up, like a Black Cat firecracker.

Roland nodded and watched the streets of the city—a version of Lud, but still young and vital—go by. “What about your car?” he asked.

“If we want it before we come back to New York, we’ll have someone drive it up to Maine. Probably David’s Beemer will do us. It’s one of the advantages of being wealthy—why are you looking at me that way?”

“You have a cartomobile called a *Beamer*?”

“It’s slang,” she said. “It’s actually BMW. Stands for Bavarian Motor Works.”

“Ah.” Roland tried to look as if he understood.

“Roland, may I ask you a question?”

He twirled his hand for her to go ahead.

“When we saved the writer, did we also save the world? We did, somehow, didn’t we?”

“Yes,” he said.

“How does it happen that a writer who’s not even very good—and I can say that, I’ve read four or five of his books—gets to be in charge of the world’s destiny? Or of the entire universe’s?”

“If he’s not very good, why didn’t you stop at one?”

Mrs. Tassenbaum smiled. “*Touché*. He *is* readable, I’ll give him that—tells a good story, but has a tin ear for language. I answered your question, now answer mine. God knows there are writers who feel that the whole world hangs on what they say. Norman Mailer comes to mind, also Shirley Hazzard and John Updike. But apparently in this case the world really does. How did it happen?”

Roland shrugged. “He hears the right voices and sings the right songs. Which is to say, ka.”

It was Irene Tassenbaum’s turn to look as though she understood.

FIFTEEN

The limousine drew up in front of a building with a green awning out front. Another man in another well-cut suit was standing by the door. The steps leading up from the sidewalk were blocked with yellow tape. There were words printed on it which Roland couldn’t read.

“It says CRIME SCENE, DO NOT ENTER,” Mrs. Tassenbaum told him. “But it looks like it’s been there awhile. I think they usually take the tape down once they’re finished with their cameras and little brushes and things. You must have powerful friends.”

Roland was sure the tape had indeed been there awhile; three weeks, give or take. That was when Jake and Pere Callahan had entered the Dixie Pig, positive they were going to their deaths but pushing ahead anyway. He saw there was a little puddle of liquor left in Irene’s glass and swallowed it, grimacing at the hot taste of the alcohol but relishing the burn on the way down.

“Better?” she asked.

“Aye, thanks.” He reset the bag with the Orizas in it more firmly on his shoulder and got out with Oy at his heel. Irene paused to talk to the driver, who seemed to have been successful in making her travel arrangements. Roland ducked beneath the tape and then just stood where he was for a moment, listening to the honk and pound of the city on this bright June day, relishing its adolescent vitality. He would

never see another city, of that much he was almost positive. And perhaps that was just as well. He had an idea that after New York, all others would be a step down.

The guard—obviously someone who worked for the Tet Corporation and not this city’s constabulary—joined him on the walk. “If you want to go in there, sir, there’s something you should show me.”

Roland once more took his gunbelt from the pouch, once more unwrapped it from the holster, once more drew his father’s gun. This time he did not offer to hand it over, nor did that gentleman ask to take it. He only examined the scrollwork, particularly that at the end of the barrel. Then he nodded respectfully and stepped back. “I’ll unlock the door. Once you go inside, you’re on your own. You understand that, don’t you?”

Roland, who had been on his own for most of his life, nodded.

Irene took his elbow before he could move forward, turned him, and put her arms around his neck. She had also bought herself a pair of low-heeled shoes, and only needed to tilt her head back slightly in order to look into his eyes.

“You take care of yourself, cowboy.” She kissed him briefly on the mouth—the kiss of a friend—and then knelt to stroke Oy. “And take care of the little cowboy, too.”

“I’ll do my best,” Roland said. “Will you remember your promise about Jake’s grave?”

“A rose,” she said. “I’ll remember.”

“Thankee.” He looked at her a moment longer, consulted the workings of his own inner instincts—hunch-think—and came to a decision. From the bag containing the Orizas, he took the envelope containing the bulky book . . . the one Susannah would never read to him on the trail, after all. He put it in Irene’s hands.

She looked at it, frowning. “What’s in here? Feels like a book.”

“Yar. One by Stephen King. *Insomnia*, it’s called. Has thee read that one?”

She smiled a bit. “No, thee hasn’t. Has thee?”

“No. And won’t. It feels tricksy to me.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“It feels . . . thin.” He was thinking of Eyebolt Canyon, in Mejis.

She hefted it. "Feels pretty goddamned thick to me. A Stephen King book for sure. He sells by the inch, America buys by the pound."

Roland only shook his head.

Irene said, "Never mind. I'm being smart because Ree doesn't do goodbyes well, never has. You want me to keep this, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Maybe when Big Steve gets out of the hospital, I'll get him to sign it. The way I look at it, he owes me an autograph."

"Or a kiss," Roland said, and took another for himself. With the book out of his hands, he felt somehow lighter. Freer. *Safer*. He drew her fully into his arms and hugged her. Irene Tassenbaum returned his strength with her own.

Then Roland let her go, touched his forehead lightly with his fist, and turned to the door of the Dixie Pig. He opened it and slipped inside with no look back. That, he had found, was ever the easiest way.

SIXTEEN

The chrome post which had been outside on the night Jake and Pere Callahan had come here had been put in the lobby for safekeeping. Roland stumbled against it, but his reflexes were as quick as ever and he grabbed it before it could fall over. He read the sign on top slowly, sounding the words out and getting the sense of only one: CLOSED. The orange electric *flambeaux* which had lit the dining room were off but the battery-powered emergency lights were on, filling the area beyond the lobby and the bar with a flat glare. To the left was an arch and another dining room beyond it. There were no emergency lights there; that part of the Dixie Pig was as dark as a cave. The light from the main dining room seemed to creep in about four feet—just far enough to illuminate the end of a long table—and then fall dead. The tapestry of which Jake had spoken was gone. It might be in the evidence room of the nearest police station, or it might already have joined some collector's trove of oddities. Roland could smell the faint aroma of charred meat, vague and unpleasant.

In the main dining room, two or three tables were overturned. Roland saw stains on the red rug, several dark ones that were almost certainly blood and a yellowish curd that was . . . something else.

H'row it aside! Nasty bauble of the 'heep-God, h'row it aside if you dare!

And the Pere's voice, echoing dimly in Roland's ears, unafraid: *I needn't stake my faith on the challenge of such a thing as you, sai.*

The Pere. Another of those he had left behind.

Roland thought briefly of the scrimshaw turtle that had been hidden in the lining of the bag they had found in the vacant lot, but didn't waste time looking for it. If it had been here, he thought he would have heard its voice, calling to him in the silence. No, whoever had appropriated the tapestry of the vampire-knights at dinner had very likely taken the *sköldpadda* as well, not knowing what it was, only knowing it was something strange and wonderful and otherworldly. Too bad. It might have come in handy.

The gunslinger moved on, weaving his way among the tables with Oy trotting at his heel.

SEVENTEEN

He paused in the kitchen long enough to wonder what the constabulary of New York had made of it. He was willing to bet they had never seen another like it, not in this city of clean machinery and bright electric lights. This was a kitchen in which Hax, the cook he remembered best from his youth (and beneath whose dead feet he and his best friend had once scattered bread for the birds), would have felt at home. The cookfires had been out for weeks, but the smell of the meat that had been roasted here—some of the variety known as long pork—was strong and nasty. There were more signs of trouble here, as well (a scum-caked pot lying on the green tiles of the floor, blood which had been burned black on one of the stovetops), and Roland could imagine Jake fighting his way through the kitchen. But not in panic; no, not he. Instead he had paused to demand directions of the cook's boy.

What's your name, cully?

Jochabim, that be I, son of Hossa.

Jake had told them this part of his story, but it was not memory that spoke to Roland now. It was the voices of the dead. He had heard such voices before, and knew them for what they were.

EIGHTEEN

Oy took the lead as he had done the last time he had been here. He could still smell Ake's scent, faint and sorrowful. Ake had gone on ahead now, but not so very far; he was good, Ake was good, Ake would wait, and when the time came—when the job Ake had given him was done—Oy would catch up and go with him as before. His nose was strong, and he would find fresher scent than this when the time came to search for it. Ake had saved him from death, which did not matter. Ake had saved him from loneliness and shame after Oy had been cast out by the tet of his kind, and that did.

In the meantime, there was this job to finish. He led the man Olan into the pantry. The secret door to the stairs had been closed, but the man Olan felt patiently along the shelves of cans and boxes until he found the way to open it. All was as it had been, the long, descending stair dimly lit by overhead bulbs, the scent damp and overlaid with mold. He could smell the rats which scuttered in the walls; rats and other things, too, some of them bugs of the sort he had killed the last time he and Ake had come here. That had been good killing, and he would gladly have more, if more were offered. Oy wished the bugs would show themselves again and challenge him, but of course they didn't. They were afraid, and they were right to be afraid, for ever had his kind stood enemy to theirs.

He started down the stairs with the man Olan following behind.

NINETEEN

They passed the deserted kiosk with its age-yellowed signs (NEW YORK SOUVENIRS, LAST CHANCE, and VISIT SEPTEMBER 11, 2001), and fifteen minutes later—Roland checked his new watch to be sure of the time—they came to a place where there was a good deal of broken glass on the dusty corridor floor. Roland picked Oy up so he wouldn't cut the pads of his feet. On both walls he saw the shattered remains of what had been glass-covered hatches of some kind. When he looked in, he saw complicated machinery. They had almost caught Jake here, snared him in some kind of mind-trap, but once again Jake had been clever enough and brave enough to get through. *He survived everything*

but a man too stupid and too careless to do the simple job of driving his bucka on an empty road, Roland thought bitterly. *And the man who brought him there—that man, too*. Then Oy barked at him and Roland realized that in his anger at Bryan Smith (and at himself), he was squeezing the poor little fellow too tightly.

“Cry pardon, Oy,” he said, and put him down.

Oy trotted on without making any reply, and not long after Roland came to the scattered bodies of the boogers who had harried his boy from the Dixie Pig. Here also, printed in the dust that coated the floor of this ancient corridor, were the tracks he and Eddie had made when they arrived. Again he heard a ghost-voice, this time that of the man who had been the harriers’ leader.

I know your name by your face, and your face by your mouth. ’Tis the same as the mouth of your mother, who did suck John Farson with such glee.

Roland turned the body over with the toe of his boot (a hume named Flaherty, whose da’ had put a fear of dragons in his head, had the gunslinger known or cared . . . which he did not) and looked down into the dead face, which was already growing a crop of mold. Next to him was the stoat-head taheen whose final proclamation had been *Be damned to you, then, chary-ka*. And beyond the heaped bodies of these two and their mates was the door that would take him out of the Keystone World for good.

Assuming that it still worked.

Oy trotted to it and sat down before it, looking back at Roland. The bumbler was panting, but his old, amiably fiendish grin was gone. Roland reached the door and placed his hands against the close-grained ghostwood. Deep within he felt a low and troubled vibration. This door was still working but might not be for much longer.

He closed his eyes and thought of his mother bending over him as he lay in his little bed (how soon before he had been promoted from the cradle he didn’t know, but surely not long), her face a patchwork of colors from the nursery windows, Gabrielle Deschain who would later die at those hands which she caressed so lightly and lovingly with her own; daughter of Candor the Tall, wife of Steven, mother of Roland, singing him to sleep and dreams of those lands only children know.

*Baby-bunting, baby-dear,
Baby, bring your berries here.
Chussit, chissit, chassit!
Bring enough to fill your basket!*

So far I've traveled, he thought with his hands splayed on the ghostwood door. So far I've traveled and so many I've hurt along the way, hurt or killed, and what I may have saved was saved by accident and can never save my soul, do I have one. Yet there's this much: I've come to the head of the last trail, and I need not travel it alone, if only Susannah will go with me. Mayhap there's still enough to fill my basket.

“Chassit,” Roland said, and opened his eyes as the door opened. He saw Oy leap nimbly through. He heard the shrill scream of the void between the worlds, and then stepped through himself, sweeping the door shut behind him and still without a backward look.



CHAPTER IV: FEDIC (TWO VIEWS)

ONE

Look at how brilliant it is here!

When we came before, Fedic was shadowless and dull, but there was a reason for that: it wasn't the real Fedic but only a kind of todash substitute; a place Mia knew well and remembered well (just as she remembered the castle allure, where she went often before circumstances—in the person of Walter o' Dim—gave her a physical body) and could thus re-create. Today, however, the deserted village is almost too bright to look at (although we'll no doubt see better once our eyes have adjusted from the murk of Thunderclap and the passage beneath the Dixie Pig). Every shadow is crisp; they might have been cut from black felt and laid upon the oggan. The sky is a sharp and cloudless blue. The air is chill. The wind whining around the eaves of the empty buildings and through the battlements of Castle Discordia is autumnal and somehow introspective. Sitting in Fedic Station is an atomic locomotive—what was called a hot-enj by the old people—with the words **SPIRIT OF TOPEKA** written on both sides of the bullet nose. The slim pilot-house windows have been rendered almost completely opaque by centuries of desert grit flung against the glass, but little does that matter; the *Spirit of Topeka* has made her last trip, and even when she *did* run regularly, no mere hume ever guided her course. Behind the engine are only three cars. There were a dozen when she set out from Thunderclap Station on her last run, and there were a dozen when she arrived in sight of this ghost town, but . . .

Ah, well, that's Susannah's tale to tell, and we will listen as she tells it to the man she called dinh when there was a ka-tet for him to guide. And here is Susannah herself, sitting where we saw her once before, in front of the Gin-Puppy Saloon. Parked at the hitching rail is her chrome steed, which Eddie dubbed Suzie's Cruisin Trike. She's cold and hasn't so much as a sweater to pull close around her, but her heart tells her that her wait is almost over. And how she hopes her heart is right, for this is a haunted place. To Susannah, the whine of the wind sounds too much like the bewildered cries of the children who were brought here to have their bodies roont and their minds murdered.

Beside the rusty Quonset hut up the street (the Arc 16 Experimental Station, do ya not recall it) are the gray cyborg horses. A few more have fallen over since the last time we visited; a few more click their heads restlessly back and forth, as if trying to see the riders who will come and untether them. But that will never happen, for the Breakers have been set free to wander and there's no more need of children to feed their talented heads.

And now, look you! At last comes what the lady has waited for all this long day, and the day before, and the day before that, when Ted Brautigan, Dinky Earnshaw, and a few others (not Sheemie, he's gone into the clearing at the end of the path, say sorry) bade her goodbye. The door of the Dogan opens, and a man comes out. The first thing she sees is that his limp is gone. Next she notices his new bluejeans and shirt. Nifty duds, but he's otherwise as ill-prepared for this cold weather as she is. In his arms the newcomer holds a furry animal with its ears cocked. That much is well, but the boy who should be holding the animal is absent. No boy, and her heart fills with sorrow. Not surprise, however, because she has known, just as yonder man (yonder chary man) would have known had she been the one to pass from the path.

She slips down from her seat on her hands and the stumps of her legs; she hoists herself off the boardwalk and into the street. There she raises a hand and waves it over her head. "Roland!" she cries. "Hey, gunslinger! I'm over here!"

He sees her and waves back. Then he bends and puts down the animal. Oy races toward her hellbent for election, head down, ears

flat against his skull, running with the speed and low-slung, leaping grace of a weasel on a crust of snow. While he's still seven feet away from her (seven at least), he jumps into the air, his shadow flying fleetly over the packed dirt of the street. She grabs him like a deep receiver hauling in a Hail Mary pass. The force of his forward motion knocks the breath from her and bowls her over in a puff of dust, but the first breath she's able to take in goes back out as laughter. She's still laughing as he stands with his stubby front legs on her chest and his stubby rear ones on her belly, ears up, squiggly tail wagging, licking her cheeks, her nose, her eyes.

"Let up on it!" she cries. "Let up on it, honey, 'fore you kill me!"

She hears this, so lightly meant, and her laughter stops. Oy steps off her, sits, tilts his snout at the empty blue socket of the sky, and lets loose a single long howl that tells her everything she would need to know, had she not known already. For Oy has more eloquent ways of speaking than his few words.

She sits up, slapping puffs of dust out of her shirt, and a shadow falls over her. She looks up but at first cannot see Roland's face. His head is directly in front of the sun, and it makes a fierce corona around him. His features are lost in blackness.

But he's holding out his hands.

Part of her doesn't want to take them, and do ya not kennit? Part of her would end it here and send him into the Badlands alone. No matter what Eddie wanted. No matter what Jake undoubtedly wanted, too. This dark shape with the sun blazing around its head has dragged her out of a mostly comfortable life (oh yes, she had her ghosts—and at least one mean-hearted demon, as well—but which of us don't?). He has introduced her first to love, then to pain, then to horror and loss. The deal's run pretty much downhill, in other words. It is his balefully talented hand that has authored her sorrow, this dusty knight-errant who has come walking out of the old world in his old boots and with an old death-engine on each hip. These are melodramatic thoughts, purple images, and the old Odetta, patron of The Hungry i and all-around cool kitty, would no doubt have laughed at them. But she has changed, he has changed her, and she reckons that if anyone is entitled to melodramatic thoughts and purple images, it is Susannah, daughter of Dan.

Part of her would turn him away, not to end his quest or break his spirit (only death will do those things), but to take such light as remains out of his eyes and punish him for his relentless unmeaning cruelty. But ka is the wheel to which we all are bound, and when the wheel turns we must perforce turn with it, first with our heads up to heaven and then revolving hellward again, where the brains inside them seem to burn. And so, instead of turning away—

TWO

Instead of turning away, as part of her wanted to do, Susannah took Roland's hands. He pulled her up, not to her feet (for she had none, although for awhile a pair had been given her on loan) but into his arms. And when he tried to kiss her cheek, she turned her face so that his lips pressed on hers. *Let him understand it's no halfway thing*, she thought, breathing her air into him and then taking his back, changed. *Let him understand that if I'm in it, I'm in to the end. God help me, I'm in with him to the end.*

THREE

There were clothes in the Fedic Millinery & Ladies' Wear, but they fell apart at the touch of their hands—the moths and the years had left nothing usable. In the Fedic Hotel (QUIET ROOMS, GUD BEDS) Roland found a cabinet with some blankets that would do them at least against the afternoon chill. They wrapped up in them—the afternoon breeze was just enough to make their musty smell bearable—and Susannah asked about Jake, to have the immediate pain of it out of the way.

“The writer again,” she said bitterly when he had finished, wiping away her tears. “God damn the man.”

“My hip let go and the . . . and Jake never hesitated.” Roland had almost called him *the boy*, as he had taught himself to think of Elmer's son as they closed in on Walter. Given a second chance, he had promised himself he would never do that again.

“No, of course he didn't,” she said, smiling. “He never would. He had a yard of guts, our Jake. Did you take care of him? Did you do

him right? I'd hear that part."

So he told her, not failing to include Irene Tassenbaum's promise of the rose. She nodded, then said: "I wish we could do the same for your friend, Sheemie. He died on the train. I'm sorry, Roland."

Roland nodded. He wished he had tobacco, but of course there was none. He had both guns again and they were seven Oriza plates to the good, as well. Otherwise they were stocked with little-going-on-none.

"Did he have to push again, while you were coming here? I suppose he did. I knew one more might kill him. Sai Brautigan did, too. And Dinky."

"But that wasn't it, Roland. It was his foot."

The gunslinger looked at her, not understanding.

"He cut it on a piece of broken glass during the fight to take Blue Heaven, and the air and dirt of that place was *poison!*" It was Detta who spat the last word, her accent so thick that the gunslinger barely understood it: *Pizen!* "Goddam foot swole up . . . toes like sausages . . . then his cheeks and throat went all dusky, like a bruise . . . he took fever . . ." She pulled in a deep breath, clutching the two blankets she wore tighter around her. "He was delirious, but his head cleared at the end. He spoke of you, and of Susan Delgado. He spoke with such love and such regret . . ." She paused, then burst out: "We *will* go there, Roland, we *will*, and if it isn't worth it, your Tower, somehow we'll make it worth it!"

"We'll go," he said. "We'll find the Dark Tower, and nothing will stand against us, and before we go in, we'll speak their names. All of the lost."

"Your list will be longer than mine," she said, "but mine will be long enough."

To this Roland did not reply, but the robot huckster, perhaps startled out of its long sleep by the sound of their voices, did. "Girls, girls, *girls!*" it cried from inside the batwing doors of the Gaiety Bar and Grill. "Some are humie and some are cybie, but who cares, you can't tell, who cares, they give, you tell, girls tell, you tell . . ." There was a pause and then the robot huckster shouted one final word—"SATISFACTION!"—and fell silent.

“By the gods, but this is a sad place,” he said. “We’ll stay the night and then see it no more.”

“At least the sun’s out, and that’s a relief after Thunderclap, but isn’t it *cold!*”

He nodded, then asked about the others.

“They’ve gone on,” she said, “but there was a minute there when I didn’t think any of us were going anywhere except to the bottom of yonder crevasse.”

She pointed to the end of the Fedic high street furthest from the castle wall.

“There are TV screens that still work in some of the traincars, and as we came up on town we got a fine view of the bridge that’s gone. We could see the ends sticking out over the hole, but the gap in the middle had to be a hundred yards across. Maybe more. We could see the train trestle, too. That was still intact. The train was slowing down by then, but not enough so any of us could have jumped off. By then there was no time. And the jump would likely have killed anyone who tried. We were going, oh I’m gonna say fifty miles an hour. And as soon as we were on the trestle, the fucking thing started to creak and groan. Or to queel and grale, if you’ve ever read your James Thurber, which I suppose you have not. The train was playing music. Like Blaine did, do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“But we could hear the trestle getting ready to let go even over that. Then everything started shaking from side to side. A voice—very calm and soothing—said, ‘We are experiencing minor difficulties, please take your seats.’ Dinky was holding that little Russian girl, Dani. Ted took my hands and said, ‘I want to tell you, madam, that it has been a pleasure to know you.’ There was a lurch so hard it damn near threw me out of my seat—would have, if Ted hadn’t been holding onto me—and I thought ‘That’s it, we’re gone, please God let me be dead before whatever’s down there gets its teeth into me,’ and for a second or two we were going backward. *Backward*, Roland! I could see the whole car—we were in the first one behind the loco—tilting up. There was the sound of tearing metal. Then the good old *Spirit of Topeka* put on a burst of speed. Say what you want to about the old

people, I know they got a lot of things wrong, but they built machines that had some *balls*.

“The next thing I knew, we were coasting into the station. And here comes that same soothing voice, this time telling us to look around our seats and make sure we’ve got all our personals—our gunna, you ken. Like we were on a damn TWA flight landing at Idlewild! It wasn’t until we were out on the platform that we saw the last nine cars of the train were gone. Thank God they were all empty.” She cast a baleful (but frightened) eye toward the far end of the street. “Hope whatever’s down there chokes on em.”

Then she brightened.

“There’s one good thing—at speeds of up to three hundred miles an hour, which is what that ain’t-we-happy voice said the *Spirit of Topeka* was doing, we must have left Master Spider-Boy in the dust.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Roland said.

She rolled her eyes wearily. “Don’t tell me that.”

“I *do* tell you. But we’ll deal with Mordred when the time comes, and I don’t think that will be today.”

“Good.”

“Have you been beneath the Dogan again? I take it you have.”

Susannah’s eyes grew round. “Isn’t it *something*? Makes Grand Central look like a train station someplace out in Sticksville, U.S.A. How long did it take you to find your way up?”

“If it had just been me, I’d still be wandering around down there,” Roland admitted. “Oy found the way out. I assumed he was following your scent.”

Susannah considered this. “Maybe he was. Jake’s, more likely. Did you cross a wide passage with a sign on the wall reading SHOW ORANGE PASS ONLY, BLUE PASS NOT ACCEPTED?”

Roland nodded, but the fading sign painted on the wall had meant little to him. He had identified the passage which the Wolves took at the beginning of their raids by the sight of two motionless gray horses far down the passage, and another of those snarling masks. He had also seen a moccasin he remembered quite well, one that had been made from a chunk of rubber. One of Ted’s or Dinky’s, he decided; Sheemie Ruiz had no doubt been buried in his.

“So,” he said. “You got off the train—how many were you?”

“Five, with Sheemie gone,” she said. “Me, Ted, Dinky, Dani Rostov, and Fred Worthington—do you remember Fred?”

Roland nodded. The man in the bankerly suit.

“I gave them the guided tour of the Dogan,” she said. “As much as I could, anyway. The beds where they stole the brains out of the kids and the one where Mia finally gave birth to her monster; the one-way door between Fedic and the Dixie Pig in New York that still works; Nigel’s apartment.

“Ted and his friends were pretty amazed by the rotunda where all the doors are, especially the one going to Dallas in 1963, where President Kennedy was killed. We found another door two levels down—this is where most of the passages are—that goes to Ford’s Theater, where President Lincoln was assassinated in 1865. There’s even a poster for the play he was watching when Booth shot him. *Our American Cousin*, it was called. What kind of people would want to go and watch things like that?”

Roland thought a lot of people might, actually, but knew better than to say so.

“It’s all very old,” she said. “And very hot. And very fucking scary, if you want to know the truth. Most of the machinery has quit, and there are puddles of water and oil and God knows what everywhere. Some of the puddles gave off a glow, and Dinky said he thought it might be radiation. I don’t like to think what I got growin on my bones or when my hair’ll start fallin out. There were doors where we could hear those awful chimes . . . the ones that set your teeth on edge.”

“Todash chimes.”

“Yep. And *things* behind some of em. Slithery things. Was it you or was it Mia who told me there are monsters in the todash darkness?”

“I might have,” he said. Gods knew there were.

“There are things in that crack beyond town, too. Was Mia told me that. ‘Monsters that cozen, diddle, increase, and plot to escape,’ she said. And then Ted, Dinky, Dani, and Fred joined hands. They made what Ted called ‘the little good-mind.’ I could feel it even though I wasn’t in their circle, and I was *glad* to feel it, because that’s one spooky old place down there.” She clutched her blankets more tightly. “I don’t look forward to going again.”

“But you believe we have to.”

“There’s a passage that goes deep under the castle and comes out on the other side, in the Discordia. Ted and his friends located it by picking up old thoughts, what Ted called ghost-thoughts. Fred had a piece of chalk in his pocket and he marked it for me, but it’ll still be hard to find again. What it’s like down there is the labyrinth in an old Greek story where this bull-monster was supposed to run. I *guess* we can find it again . . .”

Roland bent and stroked Oy’s rough fur. “We’ll find it. This fella will backtrail your scent. Won’t you, Oy?”

Oy looked up at him with his gold-ringed eyes but said nothing.

“Anyway,” she went on, “Ted and the others touched the minds of the things that live in that crack outside of town. They didn’t mean to, but they did. Those things are neither for the Crimson King nor against him, they’re only for themselves, but they *think*. And they’re telepathic. They knew we were there, and once the contact was made, they were glad to palaver. Ted and his friends said that they’ve been tunneling their way toward the catacombs under the Experimental Station for a long long time, and now they’re close to breaking through. Once they do, they’ll be free to roam wherever they want.”

Roland considered this silently for a few moments, rocking back and forth on the eroded heels of his boots. He hoped he and Susannah would be long gone before that breakthrough happened . . . but perhaps it would happen before Mordred got here, and the halfling would have to face them, if he wanted to follow. Baby Mordred against the ancient monsters from under the earth—that was a happy thought.

At last he nodded for Susannah to go on.

“We heard todash chimes coming from some of the passages, too. Not just from behind the doors but from passages with no doors to block em off! Do you see what that means?”

Roland did. If they picked the wrong one—or if Ted and his friends were wrong about the passageway they had marked—he, Susannah, and Oy would likely disappear forever instead of coming out on the far side of Castle Discordia.

“They wouldn’t leave me down there—they took me back as far as the infirmary before going on themselves—and I was damned glad. I

wasn't looking forward to finding my way alone, although I guess I probably could've."

Roland put an arm around her and gave her a hug. "And their plan was to use the door that the Wolves used?"

"Uh-huh, the one at the end of the ORANGE PASS corridor. They'll come out where the Wolves did, find their way to the River Whye, and then across it to Calla Bryn Sturgis. The *Calla-folken* will take them in, won't they?"

"Yes."

"And once they hear the whole story, they won't . . . won't lynch them or anything?"

"I'm sure not. Henchick will know they're telling the truth and stand up for them, even if no one else will."

"They're hoping to use the Doorway Cave to get back America-side." She sighed. "I hope it works for them, but I have my doubts."

Roland did, as well. But the four of them were powerful, and Ted had struck him as a man of extraordinary determination and resource. The Manni-folk were also powerful, in their way, and great travelers between the worlds. He thought that, sooner or later, Ted and his friends probably *would* get back to America. He considered telling Susannah that it would happen if ka willed it, then thought better of it. Ka was not her favorite word just now, and he could hardly blame her for that.

"Now hear me very well and think hard, Susannah. Does the word *Dandelo* mean anything to you?"

Oy looked up, eyes bright.

She thought about it. "It might have some faint ring," she said, "but I can't do better than that. Why?"

Roland told her what he believed: that as Eddie lay dying, he had been granted some sort of vision about a thing . . . or a place . . . or a person. Something named Dandelo. Eddie had passed this on to Jake, Jake had passed it to Oy, and Oy had passed it on to Roland.

Susannah was frowning doubtfully. "It's maybe been handed around too much. There was this game we used to play when we were kids. Whisper, it was called. The first kid would think something up, a word or a phrase, and whisper it to the next kid. You could only hear it once, no repeats allowed. The next kid would pass on what he

thought *he'd* heard, and the next, and the next. By the time it got to the last kid in line, it was something entirely different, and everyone would have a good laugh. But if this is wrong, I don't think we'll be laughing."

"Well," Roland said, "we'll keep a lookout and hope that I got it right. Mayhap it means nothing at all." But he didn't really believe that.

"What are we going to do for clothes, if it gets colder than this?" she asked.

"We'll make what we need. I know how. It's something else we don't need to worry about today. What we *do* need to worry about is finding something to eat. I suppose if we have to, we can find Nigel's pantry—"

"I don't want to go back under the Dogan until we have to," Susannah said. "There's got to be a kitchen near the infirmary; they must have fed those poor kids something."

Roland considered this, then nodded. It was a good idea.

"Let's do it now," she said. "I don't even want to be on the top floor of that place after dark."

FOUR

On Turtleback Lane, in the year of '02, month of August, Stephen King awakes from a waking dream of Fedic. He types "*I don't even want to be on the top floor of that place after dark.*" The words appear on the screen before him. It's the end of what he calls a subchapter, but that doesn't always mean he's done for the day. Being done for the day depends on what he hears. Or, more properly, on what he doesn't. What he listens for is Ves'-Ka Gan, the Song of the Turtle. This time the music, which is faint on some days and so loud on others that it almost deafens him, seems to have ceased. It will return tomorrow. At least, it always has.

He pushes the control-key and the S-key together. The computer gives a little chime, indicating that the material he's written today has been saved. Then he gets up, wincing at the pain in his hip, and walks to the window of his office. It looks out on the driveway slanting up at a steep angle to the road where he now rarely walks. (And on the

main road, Route 7, never.) The hip is very bad this morning, and the big muscles of his thigh are on fire. He rubs the hip absently as he stands looking out.

Roland, you bastard, you gave me back the pain, he thinks. It runs down his right leg like a red-hot rope, can ya not say Gawd, can ya not say Gawd-bomb, and he's the one who got stuck with it in the end. It's been three years since the accident that almost took his life and the pain is still there. It's less now, the human body has an amazing engine of healing inside it (*a hot-enj*, he thinks, and smiles), but sometimes it's still bad. He doesn't think about it much when he's writing, writing's a sort of benign todash, but it's always stiff after he's spent a couple of hours at his desk.

He thinks of Jake. He's sorry as hell that Jake died, and he guesses that when this last book is published, the readers are going to be just *wild*. And why not? Some of them have known Jake Chambers for twenty years, almost twice as long as the boy actually lived. Oh, they'll be wild, all right, and when he writes back and says he's as sorry as they are, as *surprised* as they are, will they believe him? Not on your tintype, as his grandfather used to say. He thinks of *Misery*—Annie Wilkes calling Paul Sheldon a cockadoodie brat for trying to get rid of silly, bubbleheaded Misery Chastain. Annie shouting that Paul was the *writer* and the writer is God to his characters, he doesn't have to kill any of them if he doesn't want to.

But he's *not* God. At least not in this case. He knows damned well that Jake Chambers wasn't there on the day of his accident, nor Roland Deschain, either—the idea's laughable, they're make-believe, for Christ's sake—but he also knows that at some point the song he hears when he sits at his fancy Macintosh writing-machine became Jake's death-song, and to ignore that would have been to lose touch with Ves'-Ka Gan entirely, and he must not do that. Not if he is to finish. That song is the only thread he has, the trail of breadcrumbs he must follow if he is ever to emerge from this bewildering forest of plot he has planted, and—

Are you sure you planted it?

Well . . . no. In fact he is not. So call for the men in the white coats.

And are you completely sure Jake wasn't there that day? After all, how much of the damned accident do you actually remember?

Not much. He remembers seeing the top of Bryan Smith's van appear over the horizon, and realizing it's not on the road, where it should be, but on the soft shoulder. After that he remembers Smith sitting on a rock wall, looking down at him, and telling him that his leg was broke in at least six places, maybe seven. But between these two memories—the one of the approach and the one of the immediate aftermath—the film of his memory has been burned red.

Or *almost* red.

But sometimes in the night, when he awakes from dreams he can't quite remember . . .

Sometimes there are . . . well . . .

"Sometimes there are voices," he says. "Why don't you just say it?"

And then, laughing: "I guess I just did."

He hears the approaching click of toenails down the hall, and Marlowe pokes his long nose into the office. He's a Welsh Corgi, with short legs and big ears, and a pretty old guy now, with his own aches and pains, not to mention the eye he lost to cancer the previous year. The vet said he probably wouldn't make it back from that one, but he did. What a good guy. What a *tough* guy. And when he raises his head from his necessarily low perspective to look at the writer, he's wearing his old fiendish grin. *How's it goin, bubba?* that look seems to say. *Gettin any good words today? How do ya?*

"I do fine," he tells Marlowe. "Hangin in. How are *you* doin?"

Marlowe (sometimes known as The Snoutmaster) waggles his arthritic rear end in response.

"You again." That's what I said to him. And he asked, "Do you remember me?" Or maybe he said it—"You remember me." I told him I was thirsty. He said he didn't have anything to drink, he said sorry, and I called him a liar. And I was right to call him a liar because he wasn't sorry a bit. He didn't care a row of pins if I was thirsty because Jake was dead and he tried to put it on me, son of a bitch tried to put the blame on me—

"But none of that actually happened," King says, watching Marlowe waddle back toward the kitchen, where he will check his dish again before taking one of his increasingly long naps. The house is empty except for the two of them, and under those circumstances he often talks to himself. "I mean, you *know* that, don't you? That none of it actually happened?"

He supposes he does, but it was so *odd* for Jake to die like that. Jake is in all his notes, and no surprise there, because Jake was supposed to be around until the very end. All of them were, in fact. Of course no story except a bad one, one that arrives DOA, is ever *completely* under the writer's control, but this one is so *out* of control it's ridiculous. It really *is* more like watching something happen—or listening to a song—than writing a damned made-up story.

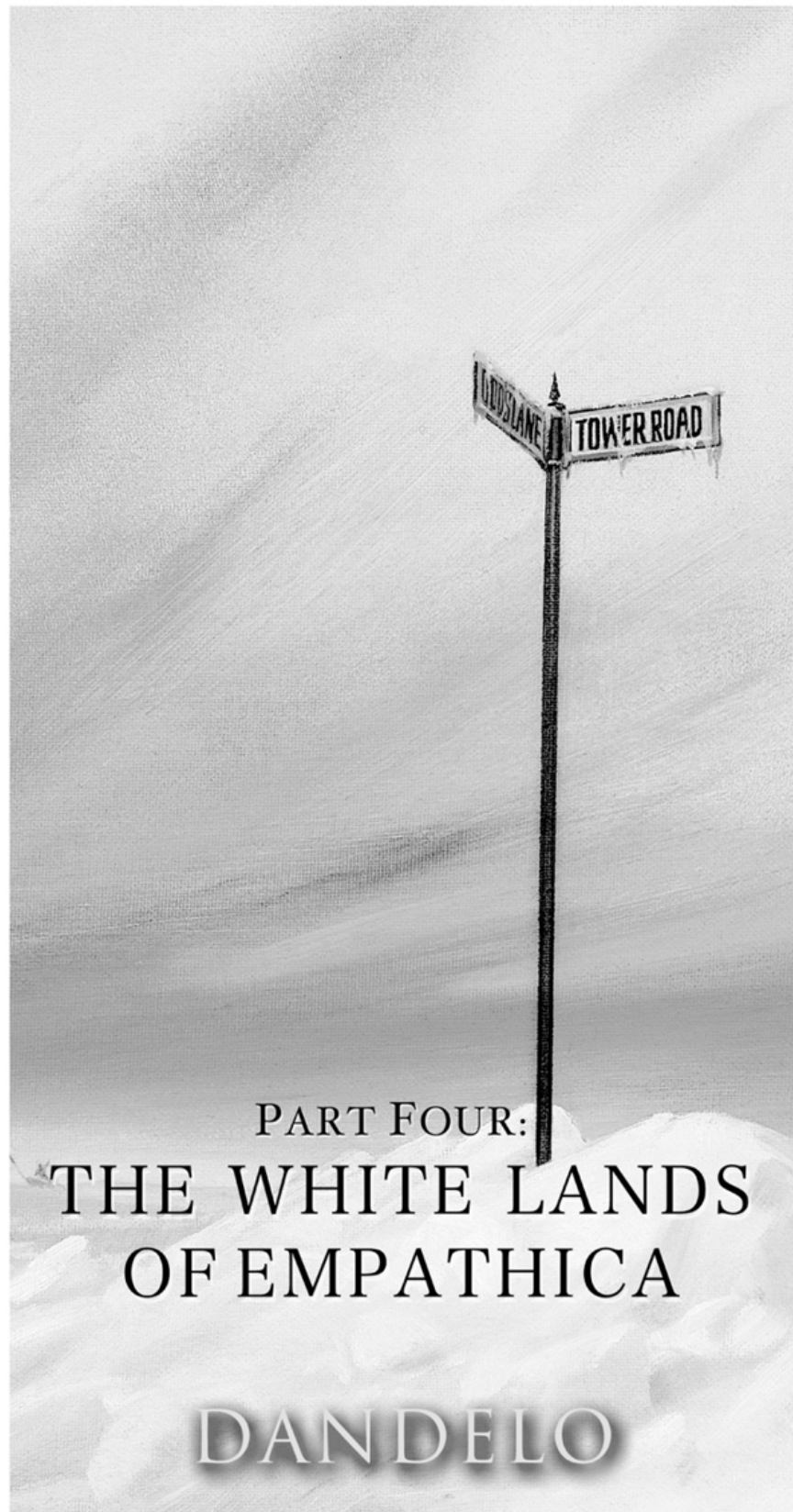
He decides to make himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch and forget the whole damned thing for another day. Tonight he will go to see the new Clint Eastwood movie, *Bloodwork*, and be glad he can go anywhere, do anything. Tomorrow he'll be back at his desk, and something from the film may slip out into the book—certainly Roland himself was partly Clint Eastwood to start with, Sergio Leone's Man with No Name.

And . . . speaking of books . . .

Lying on the coffee-table is one that came via FedEx from his office in Bangor just this morning: *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. It contains, of course, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," the narrative poem that lies at the root of King's long (and trying) story. An idea suddenly occurs to him, and it brings an expression to his face that stops just short of outright laughter. As if reading his feelings (and possibly he can; King has always suspected dogs are fairly recent émigrés from that great I-know-just-how-you-feel country of Empathica), Marlowe's own fiendish grin appears to widen.

"One place for the poem, old boy," King says, and tosses the book back onto the coffee-table. It's a big 'un, and lands with a thud. "One place and one place only." Then he settles deeper in the chair and closes his eyes. *Just gonna sit here like this for a minute or two*, he thinks, knowing he's fooling himself, knowing he'll almost certainly doze off. As he does.





PART FOUR:
THE WHITE LANDS
OF EMPATHICA

DANDELO

CHAPTER I: THE THING UNDER THE CASTLE

ONE

They did indeed find a good-sized kitchen and an adjoining pantry at ground-level in the Arc 16 Experimental Station, and not far from the infirmary. They found something else, as well: the office of sai Richard P. Sayre, once the Crimson King's Head of Operations, now in the clearing at the end of the path courtesy of Susannah Dean's fast right hand. Lying atop Sayre's desk were amazingly complete files on all four of them. These they destroyed, using the shredder. There were photographs of Eddie and Jake in the folders that were simply too painful to look at. Memories were better.

On Sayre's wall were two framed oil-paintings. One showed a strong and handsome boy. He was shirtless, barefooted, tousle-haired, smiling, dressed only in jeans and wearing a docker's clutch. He looked about Jake's age. This picture had a not-quite-pleasant sensuality about it. Susannah thought that the painter, sai Sayre, or both might have been part of the Lavender Hill Mob, as she had sometimes heard homosexuals called in the Village. The boy's hair was black. His eyes were blue. His lips were red. There was a livid scar on his side and a birthmark on his left heel as crimson as his lips. A snow-white horse lay dead before him. There was blood on its snarling teeth. The boy's marked left foot rested on the horse's flank, and his lips were curved in a smile of triumph.

"That's Llamrei, Arthur Eld's horse," Roland said. "Its image was carried into battle on the pennons of Gilead, and was the sigul of all In-World."

“So according to this picture, the Crimson King wins?” she asked. “Or if not him then Mordred, his son?”

Roland raised his eyebrows. “Thanks to John Farson, the Crimson King’s men won the In-World lands long ago,” he said. But then he smiled. It was a sunny expression so unlike his usual look that seeing it always made Susannah feel dizzy. “But I think *we* won the only battle that matters. What’s shown in this picture is no more than someone’s wishful fairy-tale.” Then, with a savagery that startled her, he smashed the glass over the frame with his fist and yanked the painting free, ripping it most of the way down the middle as he did so. Before he could tear it to pieces, as he certainly meant to do, she stopped him and pointed to the bottom. Written there in small but nonetheless extravagant calligraphy was the artist’s name: *Patrick Danville*.

The other painting showed the Dark Tower, a sooty-gray black cylinder tapering upward. It stood at the far end of Can’-Ka No Rey, the field of roses. In their dreams the Tower had seemed taller than the tallest skyscraper in New York (to Susannah this meant the Empire State Building). In the painting it looked to be no more than six hundred feet high, yet this robbed it of none of its dreamlike majesty. The narrow windows rose in an ascending spiral around it just as in their dreams. At the top was an oriel window of many colors—each, Roland knew, corresponding to one of the Wizard’s glasses. The inmost circle but one was the pink of the ball that had been left for awhile in the keeping of a certain witch-woman named Rhea; the center was the dead ebony of Black Thirteen.

“The room behind that window is where I would go,” Roland said, tapping the glass over the picture. “That is where my quest ends.” His voice was low and awestruck. “This picture wasn’t done from any dream, Susannah. It’s as if I could touch the texture of every brick. Do you agree?”

“Yes.” It was all she could say. Looking at it here on the late Richard Sayre’s wall robbed her breath. Suddenly it all seemed possible. The end of the business was, quite literally, in sight.

“The person who painted it must have been there,” Roland mused. “Must have set up his easel in the very roses.”

“Patrick Danville,” she said. “It’s the same signature as on the one of Mordred and the dead horse, do you see?”

“I see it very well.”

“And do you see the path through the roses that leads to the steps at the base?”

“Yes. Nineteen steps, I have no doubt. Chassit. And the clouds overhead—”

She saw them, too. They formed a kind of whirlpool before streaming away from the Tower, and toward the Place of the Turtle, at the other end of the Beam they had followed so far. And she saw another thing. Outside the barrel of the Tower, at what might have been fifty-foot intervals, were balconies encircled with waist-high wrought-iron railings. On the second of these was a blob of red and three tiny blobs of white: a face that was too small to see, and a pair of upraised hands.

“Is that the Crimson King?” she asked, pointing. She didn’t quite dare put the tip of her finger on the glass over that tiny figure. It was as if she expected it to come to life and snatch her into the picture.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Locked out of the only thing he ever wanted.”

“Then maybe we could go right up the stairs and past him. Give him the old raspberry on the way by.” And when Roland looked puzzled at that, she put her tongue between her lips and demonstrated.

This time the gunslinger’s smile was faint and distracted. “I don’t think it will be so easy,” he said.

Susannah sighed. “Actually I don’t, either.”

They had what they’d come for—quite a bit more, in fact—but they still found it hard to leave Sayre’s office. The picture held them. Susannah asked Roland if he didn’t want to take it along. Certainly it would be simple enough to cut it out of the frame with the letter-opener on Sayre’s desk and roll it up. Roland considered the idea, then shook his head. There was a kind of malevolent life in it that might attract the wrong sort of attention, like moths to a bright light. And even if that were not the case, he had an idea that both of *them* might spend too much time looking at it. The picture might distract them or, even worse, hypnotize them.

In the end, maybe it’s just another mind-trap, he thought. *Like Insomnia.*

“We’ll leave it,” he said. “Soon enough—in months, maybe even weeks—we’ll have the real thing to look at.”

“Do you say so?” she asked faintly. “Roland, do you really say so?”

“I do.”

“All three of us? Or will Oy and I have to die, too, in order to open your way to the Tower? After all, you *started* alone, didn’t you? Maybe you have to finish that way. Isn’t that how a writer would want it?”

“That doesn’t mean he can *do* it,” Roland said. “Stephen King’s not the water, Susannah—he’s only the pipe the water runs through.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I’m not sure I entirely believe it.”

Roland wasn’t completely sure he did, either. He thought of pointing out to Susannah that Cuthbert and Alain had been with him at the true beginning of his quest, in Mejis, and when they set out from Gilead the next time, Jamie DeCurry had joined them, making the trio a quartet. But the quest had really started after the battle of Jericho Hill, and yes, by then he had been on his own.

“I started lone-john, but that’s not how I’ll finish,” he said. She had been making her way quite handily from place to place in a rolling office-chair. Now he plucked her out of it and settled her on his right hip, the one that no longer pained him. “You and Oy will be with me when I climb the steps and enter the door, you’ll be with me when I climb the stairs, you’ll be with me when I deal with yon capering red goblin, and you’ll be with me when I enter the room at the top.”

Although Susannah did not say so, this felt like a lie to her. In truth it felt like a lie to both of them.

TWO

They brought canned goods, a skillet, two pots, two plates, and two sets of utensils back to the Fedic Hotel. Roland had added a flashlight that provided a feeble glow from nearly dead batteries, a butcher’s knife, and a handy little hatchet with a rubber grip. Susannah had found a pair of net bags in which to store this little bit of fresh gunna. She also found three cans of jelly-like stuff on a high shelf in the pantry adjacent to the infirmary kitchen.

“It’s Sterno,” she told the gunslinger when he inquired. “Good stuff. You can light it up. It burns slow and makes a blue flame hot enough to cook on.”

“I thought we’d build a little fire behind the hotel,” he said. “I won’t need this smelly stuff to make one, certainly.” He said it with a touch of contempt.

“No, I suppose not. But it might come in handy.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but . . .” She shrugged.

Near the door to the street they passed what appeared to be a janitor’s closet filled with piles of rickrack. Susannah had had enough of the Dogan for one day and was anxious to be out, but Roland wanted to have a look. He ignored the mop buckets and brooms and cleaning supplies in favor of a jumble of cords and straps heaped in a corner. Susannah guessed from the boards on top of which they lay that this stuff had once been used to build temporary scaffoldings. She also had an idea what Roland wanted the strappage for, and her heart sank. It was like going all the way back to the beginning.

“Thought I was done with piggybackin,” she said crossly, and with more than a touch of Detta in her voice.

“It’s the only way, I think,” Roland said. “I’m just glad I’m whole enough again to carry your weight.”

“And that passage underneath’s the only way through? You’re sure of that?”

“I suppose there might be a way through the castle—” he began, but Susannah was already shaking her head.

“I’ve been up top with Mia, don’t forget. The drop into the Discordia on the far side’s at least five hundred feet. Probably more. There might have been stairs in the long-ago, but they’re gone now.”

“Then we’re for the passage,” he said, “and the passage is for us. Mayhap we’ll find something for you to ride in once we’re on the other side. In another town or village.”

Susannah was shaking her head again. “I think this is where civilization ends, Roland. And I think we better bundle up as much as we can, because it’s gonna get *cold*.”

Bundling-up materials seemed to be in short supply, however, unlike the foodstuffs. No one had thought to store a few extra

sweaters and fleece-lined jackets in vacuum-packed cans. There were blankets, but even in storage they had grown thin and fragile, just short of useless.

“I don’t give a bedbug’s ass,” she said in a wan voice. “Just as long as we get out of this place.”

“We will,” he said.

THREE

Susannah is in Central Park, and it’s cold enough to see her breath. The sky overhead is white from side to side, a snow-sky. She’s looking down at the polar bear (who’s rolling around on his rocky island, seeming to enjoy the cold just fine) when a hand snakes around her waist. Warm lips smack her cold cheek. She turns and there stand Eddie and Jake. They are wearing identical grins and nearly identical red stocking caps. Eddie’s says MERRY across the front and Jake’s says CHRISTMAS. She opens her mouth to tell them “You boys can’t be here, you boys are dead,” and then she realizes, with a great and singing relief, that all that business was just a dream she had. And really, how could you doubt it? There are no talking animals called billy-bumblers, not really, no taheen-creatures with the bodies of humans and the heads of animals, no places called Fedic or Castle Discordia.

Most of all, there are no gunslingers. John Kennedy was the last, her chauffeur Andrew was right about that.

“Brought you hot chocolate,” Eddie says and holds it out to her. It’s the perfect cup of hot chocolate, mit schlag on top and little sprinkles of nutmeg dotting the cream; she can smell it, and as she takes it she can feel his fingers inside his gloves and the first flakes of that winter’s snow drift down between them. She thinks how good it is to be alive in plain old New York, how great that reality is reality, that they are together in the Year of Our Lord—

What Year of Our Lord?

She frowns, because this is a serious question, isn’t it? After all, Eddie’s an eighties man and she never got any further than 1964 (or was it ’65?). As for Jake, Jake Chambers with the word CHRISTMAS printed on the front of his happy hat, isn’t he from the seventies? And if the three of them represent three decades from the second half of the twentieth century, what is their commonality? What year is this?

“NINETEEN,” says a voice out of the air (perhaps it is the voice of Bango Skank, the Great Lost Character), “this is NINETEEN, this is CHASSIT. All your friends are dead.”

With each word the world becomes more unreal. She can see through Eddie and Jake. When she looks down at the polar bear she sees it's lying dead on its rock island with its paws in the air. The good smell of hot chocolate is fading, being replaced by a musty smell: old plaster, ancient wood. The odor of a hotel room where no one has slept for years.

No, *her mind moans.* No, I want Central Park, I want Mr. MERRY and Mr. CHRISTMAS, I want the smell of hot chocolate and the sight of December's first hesitant snowflakes, I've had enough of Fedic, In-World, Mid-World, and End-World. I want *My-World.* I don't care if I ever see the Dark Tower.

Eddie's and Jake's lips move in unison, as if they are singing a song she can't hear, but it's not a song; the words she reads on their lips just before the dream breaks apart are

FOUR

“Watch out for Dandelo.”

She woke up with these words on her own lips, shivering in the early not-quite-dawn light. And the breath-seeing part of her dream was true, if no other. She felt her cheeks and wiped away the wetness there. It wasn't quite cold enough to freeze the tears to her skin, but just-a-damn-bout.

She looked around the dreary room here in the Fedic Hotel, wishing with all her heart that her dream of Central Park had been true. For one thing, she'd had to sleep on the floor—the bed was basically nothing but a rust-sculpture waiting to disintegrate—and her back was stiff. For another, the blankets she'd used as a makeshift mattress and the ones she'd wrapped around her had all torn to rags as she tossed and turned. The air was heavy with their dust, tickling her nose and coating her throat, making her feel like she was coming down with the world's worst cold. Speaking of cold, she was shivering. And she needed to pee, which meant dragging herself down the hall on her stumps and half-numbed hands.

And none of that was really what was wrong with Susannah Odetta Holmes Dean this morning, all right? The problem was that she had just come from a beautiful dream to a world

(this is NINETEEN all your friends are dead)

where she was now so lonely that she felt half-crazy with it. The problem was that the place where the sky was brightening was not necessarily the east. The problem was that she was tired and sad, homesick and heartsore, griefstruck and depressed. The problem was that, in this hour before dawn, in this frontier museum-piece of a hotel room where the air was full of musty blanket-fibers, she felt as if all but the last two ounces of fuck-you had been squeezed out of her. She wanted the dream back.

She wanted Eddie.

“I see you’re up, too,” said a voice, and Susannah whirled around, pivoting on her hands so quickly she picked up a splinter.

The gunslinger leaned against the door between the room and the hall. He had woven the straps into the sort of carrier with which she was all too familiar, and it hung over his left shoulder. Hung over his right was a leather sack filled with their new possessions and the remaining Orizas. Oy sat at Roland’s feet, looking at her solemnly.

“You scared the living Jesus out of me, sai Deschain,” she said.

“You’ve been crying.”

“Isn’t any of your nevermind if I have been or if I haven’t.”

“We’ll feel better once we’re out of here,” he said. “Fedic’s curdled.”

She knew exactly what he meant. The wind had kicked up fierce in the night, and when it screamed around the eaves of the hotel and the saloon next door, it had sounded to Susannah like the screams of children—wee ones so lost in time and space they would never find their way home.

“All right, but Roland—before we cross the street and go into that Dogan, I want your promise on one thing.”

“What promise would you have?”

“If something looks like getting us—some monster out of the Devil’s Arse or one from the todash between-lands—you put a bullet in my head before it happens. When it comes to yourself you can do

whatever you want, but . . . what? What are you holding that out for?" It was one of his revolvers.

"Because I'm only really good with one of them these days. And because I won't be the one to take your life. If you should decide to do it yourself, however—"

"Roland, your fucked-up scruples never cease to amaze me," she said. Then she took the gun with one hand and pointed to the harness with the other. "As for that thing, if you think I'm gonna ride in it before I have to, you're crazy."

A faint smile touched his lips. "It's better when it's the two of us, isn't it?"

She sighed, then nodded. "A little bit, yeah, but far from perfect. Come on, big fella, let's blow this place. My ass is an ice-cube and the smell is killing my sinuses."

FIVE

He put her in the rolling office-chair once they were back in the Dogan and pushed her in it as far as the first set of stairs, Susannah holding their gunna and the bag of Orizas in her lap. At the stairs the gunslinger booted the chair over the edge and then stood with Susannah on his hip, both of them wincing at the crashing echoes as the chair tumbled over and over to the bottom.

"That's the end of *that*," she said when the echoes had finally ceased. "You might as well have left it at the top for all the good it's going to do me now."

"We'll see," Roland said, starting down. "You might be surprised."

"That thing ain't gonna work fo' shit an we bofe know it," Detta said. Oy uttered a short, sharp bark, as if to say *That's right*.

SIX

The chair *did* survive its tumble, however. And the next, as well. But when Roland hunkered to examine the poor battered thing after being pushed down a third (and extremely long) flight of stairs, one of the casters was bent badly out of true. It reminded him a little of

how her abandoned wheel-chair had looked when they'd come upon it after the battle with the Wolves on the East Road.

"There, now, dint I tell you?" she asked, and cackled. "Reckon it's time to start totin dat barge, Roland!"

He eyed her. "Can you make Detta go away?"

She looked at him, surprised, then used her memory to replay the last thing she had said. She flushed. "Yes," she said in a remarkably small voice. "Say sorry, Roland."

He picked her up and got her settled into the harness. Then they went on. As unpleasant as it was beneath the Dogan—as *creepy* as it was beneath the Dogan—Susannah was glad that they were putting Fedic behind them. Because that meant they were putting the rest of it behind them, too: Lud, the Callas, Thunderclap, Algul Siento; New York City and western Maine, as well. The castle of the Red King was ahead, but she didn't think they had to worry much about it, because its most celebrated occupant had run mad and decamped for the Dark Tower.

The extraneous was slipping away. They were closing in on the end of their long journey, and there was little else to worry about. That was good. And if she should happen to fall on her way to Roland's obsession? Well, if there was only darkness on the other side of existence (as she had for most of her adult life believed), then nothing was lost, as long as it wasn't *todash* darkness, a place filled with creeping monsters. And, hey! Perhaps there *was* an afterlife, a heaven, a reincarnation, maybe even a resurrection in the clearing at the end of the path. She liked that last idea, and had now seen enough wonders to believe it might be so. Perhaps Eddie and Jake would be waiting for her there, all bundled up and with the first down-drifting snowflakes of winter getting caught in their eyebrows: Mr. MERRY and Mr. CHRISTMAS, offering her hot chocolate. *Mit schlag*.

Hot chocolate in Central Park! What was the Dark Tower compared to that?

SEVEN

They passed through the rotunda with its doors to everywhere; they came eventually to the wide passage with the sign on the wall reading

SHOW ORANGE PASS ONLY, BLUE PASS NOT ACCEPTED. A little way down it, in the glow of one of the still-working fluorescent lights (and near the forgotten rubber moccasin), they saw something printed on the tile wall and detoured down to read it.

Roland, Susannah: We are on our way! Wish us goodluck!

Goodluck to you!

May God bless you!

We will never forget you!

Under the main message they had signed their names: Fred Worthington, Dani Rostov, Ted Brautigan, and Dinky Earnshaw. Below the names were two more lines, written in another hand. Susannah thought it was Ted's, and reading them made her feel like crying:

We go to seek a better world.

May you find one, as well

“God love em,” Susannah said hoarsely. “May God love and keep em all.”

“Keep-um,” said a small and rather timid voice from Roland's heel. They looked down.

“Decided to talk again, sugarpie?” Susannah asked, but to this Oy made no reply. It was weeks before he spoke again.

EIGHT

Twice they got lost. Once Oy rediscovered their way through the maze of tunnels and passages—some moaning with distant drafts, some alive with sounds that were closer and more menacing—and once Susannah came back to the route herself, spotting a Mounds Bar wrapper Dani had dropped. The Algul had been well-stocked with candy, and the girl had brought plenty with her. (“Although not one single change of clothes,” Susannah said with a laugh and a shake of her head.) At one point, in front of an ancient ironwood door that looked to Roland like the ones he'd found on the beach, they heard

an unpleasant *chewing* sound. Susannah tried to imagine what might be making such a noise and could think of nothing but a giant, disembodied mouth full of yellow fangs streaked with dirt. On the door was an indecipherable symbol. Just looking at it made her uneasy.

“Do you know what that says?” she asked. Roland—although he spoke over half a dozen languages and was familiar with many more—shook his head. Susannah was relieved. She had an idea that if you knew the sound that symbol stood for, you’d want to say it. Might *have* to say it. And then the door would open. Would you want to run when you saw the thing that was chewing on the other side? Probably. Would you be *able* to?

Maybe not.

Shortly after passing this door they went down another, shorter, flight of stairs. “I guess I forgot this one when we were talking yesterday, but I remember it now,” she said, and pointed to the dust on the risers, which was disturbed. “Look, there’s our tracks. Fred carried me going down, Dinky when we came back up. We’re almost there now, Roland, promise you.”

But she got lost again in the warren of diverging passages at the bottom of the stairs and this was when Oy put them right, trotting down a dim, tunnel-like passage where the gunslinger had to walk bent-over with Susannah clinging to his neck.

“I don’t know—” Susannah began, and that was when Oy led them into a brighter corridor (*comparatively* brighter: half of the overhead fluorescents were out, and many of the tiles had fallen from the walls, revealing the dark and oozy earth beneath). The bumbler sat down on a scuffed confusion of tracks and looked at them as if to say, *Is this what you wanted?*

“Yeah,” she said, obviously relieved. “Okay. Look, just like I told you.” She pointed to a door marked FORD’S THEATER, 1865 SEE THE LINCOLN ASSASSINATION. Beside it, under glass, was a poster for *Our American Cousin* that looked as if it had been printed the day before. “What we want’s just down here a little way. Two lefts and then a right—I think. Anyway, I’ll know it when I see it.”

Through it all Roland was patient with her. He had a nasty idea which he did not share with Susannah: that the maze of passageways

and corridors down here might be in drift, just as the points of the compass were, in what he was already thinking of as “the world above.” If so, they were in trouble.

It was hot down here, and soon they were both sweating freely. Oy panted harshly and steadily, like a little engine, but kept a steady pace beside the gunslinger’s left heel. There was no dust on the floor, and the tracks they’d seen off and on earlier were gone. The noises from behind the doors were louder, however, and as they passed one, something on the other side thumped it hard enough to make it shudder in its frame. Oy barked at it, laying his ears back against his skull, and Susannah voiced a little scream.

“Steady-oh,” Roland said. “It can’t break through. None of them can break through.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Yes,” said the gunslinger firmly. He wasn’t sure at all. A phrase of Eddie’s occurred to him: *All bets are off*.

They skirted the puddles, being careful not even to touch the ones that were glowing with what might have been radiation or witchlight. They passed a broken pipe that was exhaling a listless plume of green steam, and Susannah suggested they hold their breath until they were well past it. Roland thought that an extremely good idea.

Thirty or forty yards further along she bid him stop. “I don’t know, Roland,” she said, and he could hear her struggling to keep the panic out of her voice. “I thought we had it made in the shade when I saw the Lincoln door, but now this . . . this here . . .” Her voice wavered and he felt her draw a deep breath, struggling to get herself under control. “This all looks different. And the *sounds* . . . how they get in your head . . .”

He knew what she meant. On their left was an unmarked door that had settled crookedly against its hinges, and from the gap at the top came the atonal jangle of todash chimes, a sound that was both horrible and fascinating. With the chimes came a steady draft of stinking air. Roland had an idea she was about to suggest they go back while they still could, maybe rethink this whole going-under-the-castle idea, and so he said, “Let’s see what’s up there. It’s a little brighter, anyway.”

As they neared an intersection from which passages and tiled corridors rayed off in all directions, he felt her shift against him, sitting up. “There!” she shouted. “That pile of rubble! We walked around that! We walked around that, Roland, *I remember!*”

Part of the ceiling had fallen into the middle of the intersection, creating a jumble of broken tiles, smashed glass, snags of wire, and plain old dirt. Along the edge of it were tracks.

“Down there!” she cried. “Straight ahead! Ted said, ‘I think this is the one they called Main Street’ and Dinky said he thought so, too. Dani Rostov said that a long time ago, around the time the Crimson King did whatever it was that darkened Thunderclap, a whole bunch of people used that way to get out. Only they left some of their thoughts behind. I asked her what feeling that was like and she said it was a little like seeing dirty soap-scum on the sides of the tub after you let out the water. ‘Not nice,’ she said. Fred marked it and then we went all the way back up to the infirmary. I don’t want to brag and queer the deal, but I think we’re gonna be okay.”

And they were, at least for the time being. Eighty paces beyond the pile of rubble they came upon an arched opening. Beyond it, flickering white balls of radiance hung down from the ceiling, leading off at a downward-sloping angle. On the wall, in four chalkstrokes that had already started to run because of the moisture seeping through the tiles, was the last message left for them by the liberated Breakers:



They rested here for awhile, eating handfuls of raisins from a vacuum-sealed can. Even Oy nibbled a few, although it was clear from the way he did it that he didn’t care for them much. When they’d all eaten their fill and Roland had once more stored the can in the leather sack he’d found along the way, he asked her: “Are you ready to go on?”

“Yes. Right away, I think, before I lose my—*my God, Roland, what was that?*”

From behind them, probably from one of the passages leading away from the rubble-choked intersection, had come a low thudding

sound. It had a liquid quality to it, as if a giant in water-filled rubber boots had just taken a single step.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Susannah was looking uneasily back over her shoulder but could see only shadows. Some of them were moving, but that could have been because some of the lights were flickering.

Could have been.

“You know,” she said, “I think it might be a good idea if we vacated this area just about as fast as we can.”

“I think you’re right,” he said, resting on one knee and the splayed tips of his fingers, like a runner getting ready to burst from the blocks. When she was back in the harness, he got to his feet and moved past the arrow on the wall, setting a pace that was just short of a jog.

NINE

They had been moving at that near-jog for about fifteen minutes when they came upon a skeleton dressed in the remains of a rotting military uniform. There was still a flap of scalp on its head and tuft of listless black hair sprouting from it. The jaw grinned, as if welcoming them to the underworld. Lying on the floor beside the thing’s naked pelvis was a ring that had finally slipped from one of the moldering fingers of the dead man’s right hand. Susannah asked Roland if she could have a closer look. He picked it up and handed it to her. She examined it just long enough to confirm what she had thought, then cast it aside. It made a little clink and then there were only the sounds of dripping water and the todash chimes, fainter now but persistent.

“What I thought,” she said.

“And what was that?” he asked, moving on again.

“The guy was an Elk. My father had the same damn ring.”

“An elk? I don’t understand.”

“It’s a fraternal order. A kind of good-ole-boy katet. But what in the hell would an Elk be doing down here? A Shriner, now, that I could understand.” And she laughed, a trifle wildly.

The hanging bulbs were filled with some brilliant gas that pulsed with a rhythmic but not quite constant beat. Susannah knew there was something there to get, and after a little while she got it. While

Roland was hurrying, the pulse of the guide-lights was rapid. When he slowed down (never stopping but conserving his energy, all the same), the pulse in the globes also slowed down. She didn't think they were responding to his heartbeat, exactly, or hers, but that was part of it. (Had she known the term *biorhythm*, she would have seized upon it.) Fifty yards or so ahead of their position at any given time, Main Street was dark. Then, one by one, the lights would come on as they approached. It was mesmerizing. She turned to look back—only once, she didn't want to throw him off his stride—and saw that, yes, the lights were going dark again fifty yards or so behind. These lights were much brighter than the flickering globes at the entrance to Main Street, and she guessed that those ran off some other power-source, one that was (like almost everything else in this world) starting to give out. Then she noticed that one of the globes they were approaching remained dark. As they neared and then passed under it, she saw that it wasn't *completely* dead; a dim core of illumination burned feebly deep inside, twitching to the beat of their bodies and brains. It reminded her of how you'd sometimes see a neon sign with one or more letters on the fritz, turning PABST into PA ST or TASTY BRATWURST into TASTY RATWURST. A hundred feet or so further on they came to another burnt-out bulb, then another, then two in a row.

"Chances are good we're gonna be in the dark before long," she said glumly.

"I know," Roland said. He was starting to sound the teensiest bit out of breath.

The air was still dank, and a chill was gradually replacing the heat. There were posters on the walls, most rotted far beyond the point of readability. On a dry stretch of wall she saw one that depicted a man who had just lost an arena battle to a tiger. The big cat was yanking a bloody snarl of intestines from the screaming man's belly while the crowd went nuts. There was one line of copy in half a dozen different languages. English was second from the top. VISIT CIRCUS MAXIMUS! YOU WILL CHEER! it said.

"Christ, Roland," Susannah said. "Christ almighty, what *were* they?"

Roland did not reply, although he knew the answer: they were *folken* who had run mad.

At hundred-yard intervals, little flights of stairs—the longest was only ten risers from top to bottom—took them gradually deeper into the bowels of the earth. After they'd gone what Susannah estimated to be a quarter of a mile, they came to a gate that had been torn away, perhaps by some sort of vehicle, and smashed to flinders. Here were more skeletons, so many that Roland had to tread upon some in order to pass. They did not crunch but made a damp puttering sound that was somehow worse. The smell that arose from them was sallow and wet. Most of the tiles had been torn away above these bodies, and those that were still on the walls had been pocked with bullet-holes. A firelight, then. Susannah opened her mouth to say something about it, but before she could, that low thudding sound came again. She thought it was a little louder this time. A little closer. She looked behind her again and saw nothing. The lights fifty yards back were still going dark in a line.

"I don't like to sound paranoid, Roland, but I think we are being followed."

"I know we are."

"You want me to throw a shot at it? Or a plate? That whistling can be pretty spooky."

"No."

"Why not?"

"It may not know what we are. If you shoot . . . it will."

It took her a moment to realize what he was really saying: he wasn't sure bullets—or an Oriza—would stop whatever was back there. Or, worse, perhaps he *was* sure.

When she spoke again, she worked very hard to sound calm, and thought she succeeded tolerably well. "It's something from that crack in the earth, do you think?"

"It might be," Roland said. "Or it might be something that got through from todash space. Now hush."

The gunslinger went on more quickly, finally reaching jogging pace and then passing it. She was amazed by his mobility now that the pain that had troubled his hip was gone, but she could hear his breathing as well as feel it in the rise and fall of his back—quick,

gasping intakes followed by rough expulsions that sounded almost like cries of annoyance. She would have given anything to be running beside him on her own legs, the strong ones Jack Mort had stolen from her.

The overhead globes pulsed faster now, the pulsation easier to see because there were fewer of them. In between, their combined shadow would stretch long ahead of them, then shorten little by little as they approached the next light. The air was cooler; the ceramic stuff which floored the passage less and less even. In places it had split apart and pieces of it had been tossed aside, leaving traps for the unwary. These Oy avoided with ease, and so far Roland had been able to avoid them, too.

She was about to tell him that she hadn't heard their follower for awhile when something behind them pulled in a great gasping breath. She felt the air around her reverse direction; felt the tight curls on her head spring wildly about as the air was sucked backward. There was an enormous slobbering noise that made her feel like screaming. Whatever was back there, it was big.

No.

Enormous.

ELEVEN

They pelted down another of those short stairways. Fifty yards beyond it, three more of the pulsing globes bloomed with unsteady light, but after that there was just darkness. The ragged tiled sides of the passage and its uneven, decaying floor melted into a void so deep that it looked like a physical substance: great clouds of loosely packed black felt. They would run into it, she thought, and at first their momentum would continue to carry them forward. Then the stuff would shove them backward like a spring, and whatever was back there would be on them. She would catch a glimpse of it, something so awful and alien her mind would not be able to recognize it, and that might be a mercy. Then it would pounce, and—

Roland ran into the darkness without slowing, and of course they did not bounce back. At first there was a little light, some from behind them and some from the globes overhead (a few were still

giving off a last dying core of radiance). Just enough to see another short stairway, its upper end flanked by crumbling skeletons wearing a few wretched rags of clothing. Roland hurried down the steps—there were nine in this flight—without stopping. Oy ran at his side, ears back against his skull, fur rippling sleekly, almost dancing his way down. Then they were in pure dark.

“Bark, Oy, so we don’t run into each other!” Roland snapped. “Bark!”

Oy barked. A thirty-count later, he snapped the same order and Oy barked again.

“Roland, what if we come to another stairway?”

“We will,” he said, and a ninety-count after that, they did. She felt him tip forward, feet stuttering. She felt the muscles in his shoulders jump as he put his hands out before him, but they did not fall. Susannah could only marvel at his reflexes. His boots rapped unhesitatingly downward in the dark. Twelve steps this time? Fourteen? They were back on the flat surface of the passageway before she could get a good count. So now she knew he was capable of negotiating stairs even in the dark, even at a dead run. Only what if he stuck his foot in a hole? God knew it was possible, given the way the flooring had rotted. Or suppose they came to a stacked bone-barrier of skeletons? In the flat passageway, at the speed he was now running, that would mean a nasty tumble at the very least. Or suppose they ran into a jumble of bones at the head of one of the little stairways? She tried to block the vision of Roland swooping out into blackness like a crippled high-diver and couldn’t quite do it. How many of *their* bones would be broken when they crash-landed at the bottom? *Shit, sugar, pick a number*, Eddie might have said. This flat-out run was insanity.

But there was no choice. She could hear the thing behind them all too clearly now, not just its slobbering breath but a sandpapery rasping sound as something slid across one of the passageway walls—or maybe both. Every now and then she’d also hear a clink and a clitter as a tile was torn off. It was impossible not to construct a picture from these sounds, and what Susannah began to see was a great black worm whose segmented body filled the passage from side to side, occasionally ripping off loose ceramic squares and crushing them

beneath its gelatinous body as it rushed ever onward, hungry, closing the gap between it and them.

And closing it much more rapidly now. Susannah thought she knew why. Before, they had been running in a moving island of light. Whatever that thing behind them was, it didn't like the light. She thought of the flashlight Roland had added to their gunna, but without fresh batteries, it would be next to useless. Twenty seconds after flicking the switch on its long barrel, the damn thing would be dead.

Except . . . wait a minute.

Its barrel.

Its long barrel!

Susannah reached into the leather bag bouncing around at Roland's side, finding tins of food, but those weren't the tins she wanted. At last she found one that she did, recognizing it by the circular gutter running around the lid. There was no time to wonder why it should feel so immediately and intimately familiar; Detta had her secrets, and something to do with Sterno was probably one of them. She held the can up to smell and be sure, then promptly bashed herself on the bridge of the nose with it when Roland stumbled over something—maybe a chunk of flooring, maybe another skeleton—and had to battle again for balance. He won this time, too, but eventually he'd lose and the thing back there might be on them before he could get up. Susannah felt warm blood begin to course down her face and the thing behind them, perhaps smelling it, let loose an enormous damp cry. She thought of a gigantic alligator in a Florida swamp, raising its scaly head to bay at the moon. And it was so *close*.

Oh dear God give me time, she thought. *I don't want to go like this, getting shot's one thing, but getting eaten alive in the dark—*

That was another.

“Go *faster!*” she snarled at Roland, and thumped at his sides with her thighs, like a rider urging on a weary horse.

Somehow, Roland did. His respiration was now an agonized roar. He had not breathed so even after dancing the commala. If he kept on, his heart would burst in his chest. But—

“*Faster, Tex!* Let it all out, goddammit! I might have a trick up my sleeve, but in the meantime you give it every-damn-everything you got!”

And there in the dark beneath Castle Discordia, Roland did.

TWELVE

She plunged her free hand once more into the bag and it closed on the flashlight’s barrel. She pulled it out and tucked it under her arm (knowing if she dropped it they were gone for sure), then snapped back the tab-release on the Sterno can, relieved to hear the momentary hiss as the vacuum-seal broke. Relieved but not surprised—if the seal had been broken, the flammable jelly inside would have evaporated long ago and the can would have been lighter.

“Roland!” she shouted. “Roland, I need matches!”

“Shirt . . . pocket!” he panted. “Reach for them!”

But first she dropped the flashlight into the seam where her crotch met the middle of his back, then snatched it up just before it could slide away. Now, with a good hold on it, she plunged the barrel into the can of Sterno. To grab one of the matches while holding the can and the jelly-coated flashlight would have taken a third hand, so she jettisoned the can. There were two others in the bag, but if this didn’t work she’d never have a chance to reach for one of them.

The thing bellowed again, sounding as if it were *right behind them*. Now she could smell it, the aroma like a load of fish rotting in the sun.

She reached over Roland’s shoulder and plucked a single match from his pocket. There might be time to light one; not for two. Roland and Eddie were able to pop them alight with their thumbnails, but Detta Walker had known a trick worth two of that, had used it on more than one occasion to impress her whiteboy victims in the roadhouses where she’d gone trolling. She grimaced in the dark, peeling her lips away from her teeth, and placed the head of the match between the two front ones on top. *Eddie, if you’re there, help me, sugar—help me do right.*

She struck the match. Something hot burned the roof of her mouth and she tasted sulfur on her tongue. The head of the match

nearly blinded her dark-adapted eyes, but she could see well enough to touch it to the jelly-coated barrel of the flashlight. The Sterno caught at once, turning the barrel into a torch. It was weak but it was *something*.

“*Turn around!*” she screamed.

Roland skidded to a stop immediately—no questions, no protest—and pivoted on his heels. She held the burning flashlight out before her and for a moment they both saw the head of something wet and covered with pink albino eyes. Below them was a mouth the size of a trapdoor, filled with squirming tentacles. The Sterno didn’t burn brightly, but in this Stygian blackness it was bright enough to make the thing recoil. Before it disappeared into the blackness again, she saw all those eyes squeezing shut and had a moment to think of how sensitive they must be if even a little guttering flame like this could—

Lining the floor of the passageway on both sides were jumbled heaps of bones. In her hand, the bulb end of the flashlight was already growing warm. Oy was barking frantically, looking back into the dark with his head down and his short legs splayed, every hair standing on end.

“Squat down, Roland, squat!”

He did and she handed him the makeshift torch, which was already beginning to gutter, the yellow flames running up and down the stainless steel barrel turning blue. The thing in the dark let out another deafening roar, and now she could see its shape again, weaving from side to side. It was creeping closer as the light faltered.

If the floor’s wet here, we’re most likely done, she thought, but the touch of her fingers as she groped for a thighbone suggested it was not. Perhaps that was a false message sent by her hopeful senses—she could certainly hear water dripping from the ceiling somewhere up ahead—but she didn’t think so.

She reached into the bag for another can of Sterno, but at first the release-ring defied her. The thing was coming and now she could see any number of short, misshapen legs beneath its raised lump of a head. Not a worm after all but some kind of giant centipede. Oy placed himself in front of her, still barking, every tooth on display. It was Oy the thing would take first if she couldn’t—

Then her finger slipped into the ring lying almost flat against the lid of the can. There was a *pop-hissh* sound. Roland was waving the flashlight back and forth, trying to fan a little life into the guttering flames (which might have worked had there been fuel for them), and she saw their fading shadows rock deliriously back and forth on the decaying tile walls.

The circumference of the bone was too big for the can. Now lying in an awkward sprawl, half in and half out of the harness, she dipped into it, brought out a handful of jelly, and slathered it up and down the bone. If the bone was wet, this would only buy them a few more seconds of horror. If it was dry, however, then maybe . . . just maybe . . .

The thing was creeping ever closer. Amid the tentacles sprouting from its mouth she could see jutting fangs. In another moment it would be close enough to lunge at Oy, taking him with the speed of a gecko snatching a fly out of the air. Its rottedfish aroma was strong and nauseating. And what might be behind it? What other abominations?

No time to think about that now.

She touched her thighbone torch to the fading flames licking along the barrel of the flashlight. The bloom of fire was greater than she had expected—far greater—and the thing’s scream this time was filled with pain as well as surprise. There was a nasty squelching sound, like mud being squeezed in a vinyl raincoat, and it lashed backward.

“Git me more bones,” she said as Roland cast the flashlight aside. “And make sure they’re dem *drah* bones.” She laughed at her own wit (since nobody else would), a down-and-dirty Detta cackle.

Still gasping for breath, Roland did as she told him.

THIRTEEN

They resumed their progress along the passage, Susannah now riding backward, a position that was difficult but not impossible. If they got out of here, her back would ache a bitch for the next day or two. *And I’ll relish every single throb*, she told herself. Roland still had the Bridgton Old Home Days tee-shirt Irene Tassenbaum had bought

him. He handed it up to Susannah. She wrapped it around the bottom of the bone and held it out as far as she possibly could while still keeping her balance. Roland wasn't able to run—she would have surely tumbled out of the harness had he tried doing that—but he maintained a good fast walking pace, pausing every now and then to pick up a likely-looking arm- or legbone. Oy soon got the idea and began bringing them to the gunslinger in his mouth. The thing continued to follow them. Every now and then Susannah caught a glimpse of its slick-gleaming skin, and even when it drew back beyond the chancy light of her current torch they would hear those liquid stomping sounds, like a giant in mud-filled boots. She began to think it was the sound of the thing's tail. This filled her with a horror that was unreasoning and private and almost powerful enough to undo her mind.

That it should have a tail! her mind nearly raved. *A tail that sounds like it's filled with water or jelly or half-coagulated blood! Christ! My God! My Christ!*

It wasn't just light keeping it from attacking them, she reckoned, but fear of fire. The thing must have hung back while they were in the part of the passage where the glow-globes still worked, thinking (if it *could* think) that it would wait and take them once they were in the dark. She had an idea that if it had known they had access to fire, it might simply have closed some or all of its many eyes and pounced on them where a few of the globes were out and the light was dimmer. Now it was at least temporarily out of luck, because the bones made surprisingly good torches (the idea that they were being helped by the recovering Beam in this regard did not cross her mind). The only question was whether or not the Sterno would hold out. She was able to conserve now because the bones burned on their own once they were going—except for a couple of damp ones that she had to cast aside after lighting her next torches from their guttering tips—but you *did* have to get them going, and she was already deep into the third and last can. She bitterly regretted the one she'd tossed away when the thing had been closing in on them, but didn't know what else she could have done. She also wished Roland would go faster, although she guessed he now couldn't have maintained much speed even if she'd been faced around the right way and holding onto him.

Maybe a short burst, but surely no more. She could feel his muscles trembling under his shirt. He was close to blown out.

Five minutes later, while getting a handful of canned heat to slather on a bony bulb of knee atop a shinbone, her fingers touched the bottom of the Sterno can. From the darkness behind them came another of those watery stomping sounds. The tail of their friend, her mind insisted. It was keeping pace. Waiting for them to run out of fuel and for the world to go dark again. Then it would pounce.

Then it would eat.

FOURTEEN

They were going to need a fallback position. She became sure of that almost as soon as the tips of her fingers touched the bottom of the can. Ten minutes and three torches later, Susannah prepared to tell the gunslinger to stop when—and if—they came to another especially large ossuary. They could make a bonfire of rags and bones, and once it was going hot and bright, they'd simply run like hell. When—and if—they heard the thing on their side of the fire-barrier again, Roland could lighten his load and speed his heels by leaving her behind. She saw this idea not as self-sacrificing but merely logical—there was no reason for the monstrous centipede to get both of them if they could avoid it. And she had no plans to let it take her, as far as that went. Certainly not alive. She had his gun, and she'd use it. Five shots for Sai Centipede; if it kept coming after that, the sixth for herself.

Before she could say any of these things, however, Roland got in three words that stopped all of hers. "Light," he panted. "Up ahead."

She craned around and at first saw nothing, probably because of the torch she'd been holding out. Then she did: a faint white glow.

"More of those globes?" she asked. "A stretch of them that are still working?"

"Maybe. I don't think so."

Five minutes later she realized she could see the floor and walls in the light of her latest torch. The floor was covered with a fine scrim of dust and pebbles such as could only have been blown in from outside. Susannah threw her arms up over her head, one hand holding a blazing bone wrapped in a shirt, and gave a scream of triumph. The

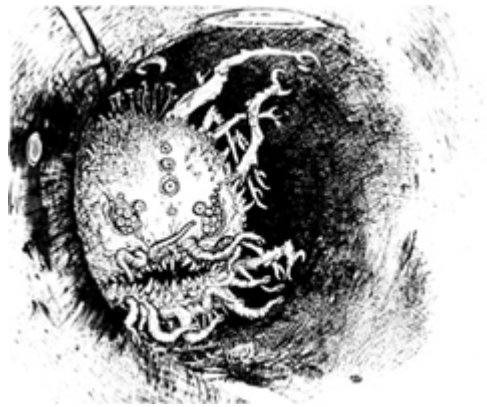
thing behind her answered with a roar of fury and frustration that did her heart good even as it pebbled her skin with goosebumps.

“Goodbye, honey!” she screamed. “Goodbye, you eye-covered muthafuck!”

It roared again and thrust itself forward. For one moment she saw it plain: a huge round lump that couldn't be called a face in spite of the lolling mouth; the segmented body, scratched and oozing from contact with the rough walls; a quartet of stubby armlike appendages, two on each side. These ended in snapping pincers. She shrieked and thrust the torch back at it, and the thing retreated with another deafening roar.

“Did your mother never teach you that it's wrong to tease the animals?” Roland asked her, and his tone was so dry she couldn't tell if he was kidding her or not.

Five minutes after that they were out.



CHAPTER II: ON BADLANDS AVENUE

ONE

They exited through a crumbling hillside arch beside a Quonset hut similar in shape but much smaller than the Arc 16 Experimental Station. The roof of this little building was covered with rust. There were piles of bones scattered around the front in a rough ring. The surrounding rocks had been blackened and splintered in places; one boulder the size of the Queen Anne house where the Breakers had been kept was split in two, revealing an interior filled with sparkling minerals. The air was cold and they could hear the restless whine of the wind, but the rocks blocked the worst of it and they turned their faces up to the sharp blue sky with wordless gratitude.

“There was some kind of battle here, wasn’t there?” she asked.

“Yes, I’d say so. A big one, long ago.” He sounded utterly whipped.

A sign lay facedown on the ground in front of the Quonset’s half-open door. Susannah insisted that he put her down so she could turn it over and read it. Roland did as she asked and then sat with his back propped against a rock, staring at Castle Discordia, which was now behind them. Two towers jutted into the blue, one whole and the other shattered off near what he judged had been the top. He concentrated on getting his breath back. The ground under him was very cold, and he knew already that their trek through the Badlands was going to be difficult.

Susannah, meanwhile, had lifted the sign. She held it with one hand and wiped off an ancient scum of dirt with the other. The words she uncovered were in English, and gave her a deep chill:

THIS CHECKPOINT IS CLOSED. FOR-EVER.

Below it, in red, seeming to glare at her, was the Eye of the King.

TWO

There was nothing in the Quonset's main room but jumbles of equipment that had been blasted to ruin and more skeletons, none whole. In the adjoining storeroom, however, she found delightful surprises: shelves and shelves of canned food—more than they could possibly carry—and also more Sterno. (She did not think Roland would sneer at the idea of canned heat anymore, and she was right.) She poked her head out of the storeroom's rear door almost as an afterthought, not expecting to find anything except maybe a few more skeletons, and there *was* one. The prize was the vehicle in which this loose agglomeration of bones was resting: a dogcart a bit like the one she'd found herself sitting in atop the castle, during her palaver with Mia. This one was both smaller and in much better shape. Instead of wood, the wheels were metal coated with thin rinds of some synthetic stuff. Pull-handles jutted from the sides, and she realized it wasn't a dogcart at all, but a kind of rickshaw.

Git ready to pull yo sweetie, graymeat!

This was a typically nasty Detta Walker thought, but it surprised a laugh out of her, all the same.

“What have you found that's amusing?” Roland called.

“You'll see,” she called back, straining to keep Detta out of her voice, at least. In this she did not entirely succeed. “You gonna see soon enough, sho.”

THREE

There was a small motor at the rear of the rickshaw, but both saw at a glance it had been ages since it had run. In the storeroom Roland found a few simple tools, including an adjustable wrench. It was

frozen with its jaw open, but an application of oil (in what was to Susannah a very familiar red-and-black 3-In-1 can) got it working again. Roland used the wrench to unbolt the motor from its mounts and then tumbled it off the side. While he worked and Susannah did what Daddy Mose would have called the heavy looking-on, Oy sat forty paces outside the arch through which they had exited, clearly on guard against the thing that had followed them in the dark.

“No more than fifteen pounds,” Roland said, wiping his hands on his jeans and looking at the tumbled motor, “but I reckon I’ll be glad we got rid of it by the time we’re done with this thing.”

“When do we start?” she asked.

“As soon as we’ve loaded as much canned stuff into the back as I think I can carry,” he said, and fetched a heavy sigh. His face was pale and stubbly. There were dark circles beneath his eyes, new lines carving his cheeks and descending to his jaw from the corners of his mouth. He looked as thin as a whip.

“Roland, you can’t! Not so soon! You’re done up!”

He gestured at Oy, sitting so patiently, and at the maw of darkness forty paces beyond him. “Do you want to be this close to that hole when dark comes?”

“We can build a fire—”

“It may have friends,” he said, “that aren’t shy of fire. While we were in yonder shaft, that thing wouldn’t have wanted to share us because it didn’t think it *had* to share. Now it might not care, especially if it’s vengeance-minded.”

“A thing like that can’t think. Surely not.” This was easier to believe now that they were out. But she knew she might change her mind once the shadows began to grow long and pool together.

“I don’t think it’s a chance we can afford to take,” Roland said.

She decided, very reluctantly, that he was right.

FOUR

Luckily for them, this first stretch of the narrow path winding into the Badlands was mostly level, and when they *did* come to an uphill stretch, Roland made no objection to Susannah’s getting out and hopping gamely along behind what she had dubbed Ho Fat’s Luxury

Taxi until they reached the crest of the hill. Little by little, Castle Discordia fell behind them. Roland kept going after the rocks had blocked the blasted tower from their view, but when the other one was gone as well, he pointed to a stony bower beside the path and said, “That’s where we’ll camp tonight, unless you have objections.”

She had none. They’d brought along enough bones and khaki rags to make a fire, but Susannah knew the fuel wouldn’t last long. The bits of cloth would burn as rapidly as newspaper and the bones would be gone before the hands of Roland’s fancy new watch (which he had shown her with something like reverence) stood together at midnight. And tomorrow night there would likely be no fire at all and cold food eaten directly from the cans. She was aware that things could have been ever so much worse—she put the daytime temperature at forty-five degrees, give or take, and they *did* have food—but she would have given a great deal for a sweater; even more for a pair of longjohns.

“Probably we’ll find more stuff we can use for fuel as we go along,” she said hopefully once the fire was lit (the burning bones gave off a nasty smell, and they were careful to sit downwind). “Weeds . . . bushes . . . more bones . . . maybe even deadwood.”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Not on this side of the Crimson King’s castle. Not even devilgrass, which grows damned near anywhere in Mid-World.”

“You don’t know that. Not for sure.” She couldn’t bear thinking about days and days of unvarying chill, with the two of them dressed for nothing more challenging than a spring day in Central Park.

“I think he murdered this land when he darkened Thunderclap,” Roland mused. “It probably wasn’t much of a shake to begin with, and it’s sterile now. But count your blessings.” He reached over and touched a pimple that had popped out of her skin beside her full lower lip. “A hundred years ago this might have darkened and spread and eaten your skin right off your bones. Gotten into your brain and run you mad before you died.”

“Cancer? Radiation?”

Roland shrugged as if to say it didn’t matter. “Somewhere beyond the Crimson King’s castle we may come to grasslands and even forests again, but the grass will likely be buried under snow when we get

there, for the season's wrong. I can feel it in the air, see it in the way the day's darkening so quickly."

She groaned, striving for comic effect, but what came out was a sound of fear and weariness so real that it frightened her. Oy pricked up his ears and looked around at them. "Why don't you cheer me up a little, Roland?"

"You need to know the truth," he said. "We can get on as we are for a good long while, Susannah, but it isn't going to be pleasant. We have food enough in yonder cart to keep us for a month or more, if we stretch it out . . . and we will. When we come again to land that's alive, we'll find animals even if there *is* snow. And that's what I want. Not because we'll be hungry for fresh meat by then, although we will be, but because we'll need the hides. I hope we won't need them desperately, that it won't be that near a thing, but—"

"But you're afraid it will."

"Yes," he said. "I'm afraid it will. For over a long period of time there's little in life so disheartening as constant cold—not deep enough to kill, mayhap, but always there, stealing your energy and your will and your body-fat, an ounce at a time. I'm afraid we're in for a very hard stretch. You'll see."

She did.

FIVE

There's little in life that's so disheartening as constant cold.

The days weren't so bad. They were on the move, at least, exercising and keeping their blood up. Yet even during the days she began to dread the open areas they sometimes came to, where the wind howled across miles of broken bushless rock and between the occasional butte or mesa. These stuck up into the unvarying blue sky like the red fingers of otherwise buried stone giants. The wind seemed to grow ever sharper as they trudged below the milky swirls of cloud moving along the Path of the Beam. She would hold her chapped hands up to shield her face from it, hating the way her fingers would never go completely numb but instead turned into dazed things full of buried buzzings. Her eyes would well up with water, and then the tears would gush down her cheeks. These tear-

tracks never froze; the cold wasn't that bad. It was just deep enough to make their lives a slowly escalating misery. For what pittance would she have sold her immortal soul during those unpleasant days and horrible nights? Sometimes she thought a single sweater would have purchased it; at other times she thought *No, honey, you got too much self-respect, even now. Would you be willing to spend an eternity in hell—or maybe in the todash darkness—for a single sweater? Surely not!*

Well, *maybe* not. But if the devil tempting her were to throw in a pair of earmuffs—

And it would have taken so little, really, to make them comfortable. She thought of this constantly. They had the food, and they had water, too, because at fifteen-mile intervals along the path they came to pumps that still worked, pulling great cold gushes of mineral-tasting water from deep under the Badlands.

Badlands. She had hours and days and, ultimately, weeks to meditate on that word. What made lands bad? Poisoned water? The water out here wasn't sweet, not by any means, but it wasn't poisoned, either. Lack of food? They had food, although she guessed it might become a problem later on, if they didn't find more. In the meantime she was getting almighty tired of corned beef hash, not to mention raisins for breakfast and raisins if you wanted dessert. Yet it was food. Body-gasoline. What made the Badlands bad when you had food and water? Watching the sky turn first gold and then russet in the west; watching it turn purple and then starshot black in the east. She watched the days end with increasing dread: the thought of another endless night, the three of them huddled together while the wind whined and twined its way through the rocks and the stars glared down. Endless stretches of cold purgatory while your feet and fingers buzzed and you thought *If I only had a sweater and a pair of gloves, I could be comfortable. That's all it would take, just a sweater and a pair of gloves. Because it's really not that cold.*

Exactly how cold *did* it get after sundown? Never below thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit, she knew, because the water she put out for Oy never froze solid. She guessed that the temperature dropped to around forty in the hours between midnight and dawn; on a couple of nights it might have fallen into the thirties, because she saw tiny spicules of ice around the edge of the pot that served Oy as a dish.

She began to eye his fur coat. At first she told herself this was nothing but a speculative exercise, a way of passing the time—exactly how hot did the bumbler’s metabolism run, and exactly how warm did that coat (that thick, *luxuriantly* thick, that *amazingly* thick coat) keep him? Little by little she recognized her feelings for what they were: jealousy that muttered in Detta’s voice. *L’il buggah doan feel no pain after the sun go down, do he? No, not him! You reckon you could git two sets o’ mittens outta that hide?*

She would thrust these thoughts away, miserable and horrified, wondering if there was any lower limit to the human spirit at its nasty, calculating, self-serving worst, not wanting to know.

Deeper and deeper that cold worked into them, day by day and night by night. It was like a splinter. They would sleep huddled together with Oy between them, then turn so the sides of them that had been facing the night were turned inward again. Real restorative sleep never lasted long, no matter how tired they were. When the moon began to wax, brightening the dark, they spent two weeks walking at night and sleeping in the daytime. That was a little better.

The only wildlife they saw were large black birds either flying against the southeastern horizon or gathered in a sort of convention atop the mesas. If the wind was right, Roland and Susannah could hear their shrill, gabby conversation.

“You think those things’d be any good to eat?” Susannah asked the gunslinger once. The moon was almost gone and they had reverted to traveling during the daytime so they could see any potential hazards (on several occasions deep crevasses had crossed the path, and once they came upon a sinkhole that appeared to be bottomless).

“What do *you* think?” Roland asked her.

“Prob’ly not, but I wouldn’t mind tryin one and finding out.” She paused. “What do you reckon they live on?”

Roland only shook his head. Here the path wound through a fantastic petrified garden of needle-sharp rock formations. Further off, a hundred or more black, crowlike birds either circled a flat-topped mesa or sat on its edge looking in Roland and Susannah’s direction, like a beady-eyed panel of jurors.

“Maybe we ought to make a detour,” she said. “See if we can’t find out.”

“If we lost the path, we might not be able to find it again,” Roland said.

“That’s bullshit! Oy would—”

“Susannah, I don’t want to hear any more about it!” He spoke in a sharply angry tone she had never heard before. Angry, yes, she had heard Roland angry many times. But there was a pettiness in this, a sulkiness that worried her. And frightened her a little, as well.

They went on in silence for the next half an hour, Roland pulling Ho Fat’s Luxury Taxi and Susannah riding. Then the narrow path (Badlands Avenue, she’d come to call it) tilted upward and she hopped down, catching up with him and then going along beside. For such forays she’d torn his Old Home Days tee-shirt in half and wore it wrapped around her hands. It protected her from sharp stones, and also warmed her fingers, at least a little.

He glanced down at her, then back at the path ahead. His lower lip was stuck out a bit and Susannah thought that surely he couldn’t know how absurdly willful that expression was—like a three-year-old who has been denied a trip to the beach. He couldn’t know and she wouldn’t tell him. Later, maybe, when they could look back on this nightmare and laugh. When they could no longer remember what, exactly, was so terrible about a night when the temperature was forty-one degrees and you lay awake, shivering on the cold ground, watching the occasional meteor scrape cold fire across the sky, thinking *Just a sweater, that’s all I need. Just a sweater and I’d go along as happy as a parakeet at feeding time.* And wondering if there was enough hide on Oy to make them each a pair of underdrawers and if killing him might not actually be doing the poor little beastie a favor; he’d just been so *sad* since Jake passed into the clearing.

“Susannah,” Roland said. “I was sharp with you just now, and I cry your pardon.”

“There’s no need,” she said.

“I think there is. We’ve enough problems without making problems between us. Without making resentments between us.”

She was quiet. Looking up at him as he looked off into the southeast, at the circling birds.

“Those rooks,” he said.

She was quiet, waiting.

“In my childhood, we sometimes called them Gan’s Blackbirds. I told you and Eddie about how my friend Cuthbert and I spread bread for the birds after the cook was hanged, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“They were birds exactly like those, named Castle Rooks by some. Never Royal Rooks, though, for they were scavenger birds. You asked what yonder rooks live on. Could be they’re scavenging in the yards and streets of *his* castle, now that he’s departed.”

“Le Casse Roi Russe, or Roi Rouge, or whatever you call it.”

“Aye. I don’t say for sure, but . . .”

Roland didn’t finish and didn’t need to. After that she kept an eye on the birds, and yes, they seemed to be both coming and going from the southeast. The birds might mean that they were making progress after all. It wasn’t much, but enough to buoy her spirits for the rest of that day and deep into another shivering rotten-cold night.

SIX

The following morning, as they were eating another cold breakfast in another fireless camp (Roland had promised that tonight they would use some of the Sterno and have food that was at least warm), Susannah asked if she could look at the watch he had been given by the Tet Corporation. Roland passed it over to her willingly enough. She looked long at the three sigils cut into the cover, especially the Tower with its ascending spiral of windows. Then she opened it and looked inside. Without looking up at Roland she said, “Tell me again what they said to you.”

“They were passing on what one of their good-minds told them. An especially talented one, by their accounts, although I don’t remember his name. According to him, the watch may stop when we near the Dark Tower, or even begin to run backward.”

“Hard to imagine a Patek Philippe running backward,” she said. “According to this, it’s eight-sixteen AM or PM back in New York. Here it looks about six-thirty AM, but I don’t guess that means much, one way or the other. How’re we supposed to know if this baby is running fast or slow?”

Roland had stopped storing goods in his gunna and was considering her question. “Do you see the tiny hand at the bottom? The one that runs all by himself?”

“The second-hand, yes.”

“Tell me when he’s straight up.”

She looked at the second-hand racing around in its own circle, and when it was in the noon position, she said, “Right now.”

Roland was hunkered down, a position he could accomplish easily now that the pain in his hip was gone. He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around his knees. Each breath he exhaled emerged in a thin mist. Susannah tried not to look at this; it was as if the hated cold had actually grown strong enough to appear before them, still ghostlike but visible.

“Roland, what’re you d—”

He raised a hand to her, palm out, not opening his eyes, and she hushed.

The second-hand hurried around its circle, first dipping down, then rising until it was straight up again. And when it had arrived there—

Roland opened his eyes and said, “That’s a minute. A *true* minute, as I live beneath the Beam.”

Her mouth dropped open. “How in the name of heaven did you do that?”

Roland shook his head. He didn’t know. He only knew that Cort had told them they must always be able to keep time in their heads, because you couldn’t depend on watches, and a sundial was no good on a cloudy day. Or at midnight, for that matter. One summer he had sent them out into the Baby Forest west of the castle night after uncomfortable night (and it was scary out there, too, at least when one was on one’s own, although of course none of them would ever have said so out loud, even to each other), until they could come back to the yard behind the Great Hall at the very minute Cort had specified. It was strange how that clock-in-the-head thing worked. The thing was, at first it didn’t. And didn’t. And didn’t. Down would come Cort’s callused hand, down it would come a-clout, and Cort would growl *Arrr, maggot, back to the woods tomorrow night! You must like it out there!* But once that headclock started ticking, it always seemed to run

true. For awhile Roland had lost it, just as the world had lost its points of the compass, but now it was back and that cheered him greatly.

“Did you count the minute?” she asked. “Mississippi-one, Mississippi-two, like that?”

He shook his head. “I just know. When a minute’s up, or an hour.”

“Bol-she-*vecky!*” she scoffed. “You guessed!”

“If I’d guessed, would I have spoken after exactly one revolution of the hand?”

“You mought got lucky,” Detta said, and eyed him shrewdly with one eye mostly closed, an expression Roland detested. (But never said so; that would only cause Detta to goad him with it on those occasions when she peeked out.)

“Do you want to try it again?” he asked.

“No,” Susannah said, and sighed. “I take your word for it that your watch is keeping perfect time. And that means we’re not close to the Dark Tower. Not yet.”

“Perhaps not close enough to affect the watch, but closer than I’ve ever been,” Roland said quietly. “Comparatively speaking, we’re now almost in its shadow. Believe me, Susannah—I know.”

“But—”

From over their heads came a cawing that was both harsh and oddly muffled: *Croo, croo!* instead of *Caw, caw!* Susannah looked up and saw one of the huge blackbirds—the sort Roland had called Castle Rooks—flying overhead low enough so that they could hear the labored strokes of its wings. Dangling from its long hooked bill was a limp strand of something yellowy-green. To Susannah it looked like a piece of dead seaweed. Only not *entirely* dead.

She turned to Roland, looked at him with excited eyes.

He nodded. “Devilgrass. Probably bringing it back to feather his mate’s nest. Certainly not for the babies to eat. Not *that* stuff. But devilgrass always goes last when you’re walking into the Nowhere Lands, and always shows up first when you’re walking back out of them, as we are. As we finally are. Now listen to me, Susannah, I’d have you listen, and I’d have you push that tiresome bitch Detta as far back as possible. Nor would I have you waste my time by telling me she’s not there when I can see her dancing the commala in your eyes.”

Susannah looked surprised, then piqued, as if she would protest. Then she looked away without saying anything. When she looked back at him again, she could no longer feel the presence of the one Roland had called “that tiresome bitch.” And Roland must no longer have detected her presence, because he went on.

“I think it will soon look like we’re coming out of the Badlands, but you’d do well not to trust what you see—a few buildings and maybe a little paving on the roads doesn’t make for safety or civilization. And before too long we’re going to come to his castle, Le Casse Roi Russe. The Crimson King is almost certainly gone from there, but he may have left a trap for us. I want you to look and listen. If there’s talking to be done, I want you to let me do it.”

“What do you know that I don’t?” she asked. “What are you holding back?”

“Nothing,” he said (with what was, for him, a rare earnestness). “It’s only a feeling, Susannah. We’re close to our goal now, no matter what the watch may say. Close to winning our way to the Dark Tower. But my teacher, Vannay, used to say that there’s just one rule with no exceptions: *before victory comes temptation*. And the greater the victory to win, the greater the temptation to withstand.”

Susannah shivered and put her arms around herself. “All I want is to be warm,” she said. “If nobody offers me a big load of firewood and a flannel union suit to cry off the Tower, I guess we’ll be all right awhile longer.”

Roland remembered one of Cort’s most serious maxims—*Never speak the worst aloud!*—but kept his own mouth shut, at least on that subject. He put his watch away carefully and then rose, ready to move on.

But Susannah paused a moment longer. “I’ve dreamed of the other one,” she said. There was no need for her to say of whom she was speaking. “Three nights in a row, scuttering along our backtrail. Do you think he’s really there?”

“Oh yes,” Roland said. “And I think he’s got an empty belly.”

“Hungry, Mordred’s a-hungry,” she said, for she had also heard these words in her dream.

Susannah shivered again.

SEVEN

The path they walked widened, and that afternoon the first scabby plates of pavement began to show on its surface. It widened further still, and not long before dark they came to a place where another path (which had surely been a road in the long-ago) joined it. Here stood a rusty rod that had probably supported a street-sign, although there was nothing atop it now. The next day they came to the first building on this side of Fedic, a slumped wreck with an overturned sign on the remains of the porch. There was a flattened barn out back. With Roland's help Susannah turned the sign over, and they could make out one word: **LIVERY**. Below it was the red eye they had come to know so well.

"I think the track we've been following was once a coach-road between Castle Discordia and the Le Casse Roi Russe," he said. "It makes sense."

They began to pass more buildings, more intersecting roads. It was the outskirts of a town or village—perhaps even a city that had once spread around the Crimson King's castle. But unlike Lud, there was very little of it left. Sprigs of devilgrass grew in listless clumps around the remains of some of the buildings, but nothing else alive. And the cold clamped down harder than ever. On their fourth night after seeing the rooks, they tried camping in the remains of a building that was still standing, but both of them heard whispering voices in the shadows. Roland identified these—with a matter-of-factness Susannah found eerie—as the voices of ghosts of what he called "housies," and suggested they move back out into the street.

"I don't believe they could do harm to us, but they might hurt the little fellow," Roland said, and stroked Oy, who had crept into his lap with a timidity very unlike his usual manner.

Susannah was more than willing to retreat. The building in which they had tried to camp had a chill that she thought was worse than physical cold. The things they had heard whispering in there might be old, but she thought they were still hungry. And so the three of them huddled together once more for warmth in the middle of Badlands Avenue, beside Ho Fat's Luxury Taxi, and waited for dawn to raise the temperature a few degrees. They tried making a fire from

the boards of one of the collapsed buildings, but all they succeeded in doing was wasting a double handful of Sterno. The jelly guttered along the splintered pieces of a broken chair they had used for kindling, then went out. The wood simply refused to burn.

“Why?” Susannah asked as she watched the last few wisps of smoke dissipate. “*Why?*”

“Are you surprised, Susannah of New York?”

“No, but I want to know why. Is it too old? Petrified, or something?”

“It won’t burn because it hates us,” Roland said, as if this should have been obvious to her. “This is *his* place, still his even though he’s moved on. Everything here hates us. But . . . listen, Susannah. Now that we’re on an actual road, still more paved than not, what do you say to walking at night again? Will you try it?”

“Sure,” she said. “Anything’s got to be better than lying out on the tarvy and shivering like a kitten that just got a ducking in a waterbarrel.”

So that was what they did—the rest of that first night, all the next, and the two after that. She kept thinking, *I’m gonna get sick, I can’t go on like this without coming down with something*, but she didn’t. Neither of them did. There was just that pimple to the left of her lower lip, which sometimes popped its top and trickled a little flow of blood before clotting and scabbing over again. Their only sickness was the constant cold, eating deeper and deeper into the center of them. The moon had begun to fatten once more, and one night she realized that they had been trekking southeast from Fedic nearly a month.

Slowly, a deserted village replaced the fantastic needle-gardens of rock, but Susannah had taken what Roland had said to heart: they were still in the Badlands, and although they could now read the occasional sign which proclaimed this to be THE KING’S WAY (with the eye, of course; always there was the red eye), she understood they were really still on Badlands Avenue.

It was a weirding village, and she could not begin to imagine what species of freakish people might once have lived here. The sidestreets were cobbled. The cottages were narrow and steep-roofed, the doorways thin and abnormally high, as if made for the sort of narrow folk seen in the distorted curves of funhouse mirrors. They were Lovecraft houses, Clark Ashton Smith houses, William Hope Hodgson

borderlands houses, all crammed together under a Lee Brown Coye sickle moon, the houses all a-tilt and a-lean on the hills that grew up gradually around the way they walked. Here and there one had collapsed, and there was an unpleasantly *organic* look to these ruins, as if they were torn and rotted flesh instead of ancient boards and glass. Again and again she caught herself seeing dead faces peering at her from some configuration of boards and shadow, faces that seemed to rotate in the rubble and follow their course with terrible zombie eyes. They made her think of the Doorkeeper on Dutch Hill, and that made her shiver.

On their fourth night on The King's Way, they came to a major intersection where the main road made a crooked turn, bending more south than east and thus off the Path of the Beam. Ahead, less than a night's walk (or ride, if one happened to be aboard Ho Fat's Luxury Taxi), was a high hill with an enormous black castle dug into it. In the chancy moonlight it had a vaguely Oriental look to Susannah. The towers bulged at the tops, as if wishing they could be minarets. Fantastic walkways flew between them, crisscrossing above the courtyard in front of the castle proper. Some of these walkways had fallen to ruin, but most still held. She could also hear a vast, low rumbling sound. Not machinery. She asked Roland about it.

"Water," he said.

"What water? Do you have any idea?"

He shook his head. "But I'd not drink what flowed close to that castle, even were I dying of thirst."

"This place is bad," she muttered, meaning not just the castle but the nameless village of leaning

(*leering*)

houses that had grown up all around it. "And Roland—it's not empty."

"Susannah, if thee feels spirits knocking for entrance into thy head—knocking or gnawing—then bid them away."

"Will that work?"

"I'm not sure it will," he admitted, "but I've heard that such things must be granted entry, and that they're wily at gaining it by trick and by ruse."

She had read *Dracula* as well as heard Pere Callahan's story of Jerusalem's Lot, and understood what Roland meant all too well.

He took her gently by the shoulders and turned her away from the castle—which might not be naturally black after all, she had decided, but only tarnished by the years. Daylight would tell. For the present their way was lit by a cloud-scummed quarter-moon.

Several other roads led away from the place where they had stopped, most as crooked as broken fingers. The one Roland wanted her to look upon was straight, however, and Susannah realized it was the only *completely* straight street she had seen since the deserted village began to grow silently up around their way. It was smoothly paved rather than cobbled and pointed southeast, along the Path of the Beam. Above it flowed the moon-gilded clouds like boats in a procession.

“Does thee glimpse a darkish blur at the horizon, dear?” he murmured.

“Yes. A dark blur and a whitish band in front of it. What is it? Do you know?”

“I have an idea, but I'm not sure,” Roland said. “Let's have us a rest here. Dawn's not far off, and then we'll both see. And besides, I don't want to approach yonder castle at night.”

“If the Crimson King's gone, and if the Path of the Beam lies that way—” She pointed. “Why do we need to go to his damn old castle at all?”

“To make sure he *is* gone, for one thing,” Roland said. “And we may be able to trap the one behind us. I doubt it—he's wily—but there's a chance. He's also young, and the young are sometimes careless.”

“You'd kill him?”

Roland's smile was wintry in the moonlight. Merciless. “Without a moment's hesitation,” said he.

EIGHT

In the morning Susannah woke from an uncomfortable doze amid the scattered supplies in the back of the rickshaw and saw Roland standing in the intersection and looking along the Path of the Beam.

She got down, moving with great care because she was stiff and didn't want to fall. She imagined her bones cold and brittle inside her flesh, ready to shatter like glass.

"What do you see?" he asked her. "Now that it's light, what do you see over that way?"

The whitish band was snow, which did not surprise her given the fact that those were true uplands. What did surprise her—and gladdened her heart more than she would have believed possible—were the trees beyond the band of snow. Green fir-trees. *Living things.*

"Oh, Roland, they look lovely!" she said. "Even with their feet in the snow, they look lovely! Don't they?"

"Yes," he said. He lifted her high and turned her back the way they had come. Beyond the nasty crowding suburb of dead houses she could see some of the Badlands they'd come through, all those crowding spines of rock broken by the occasional butte or mesa.

"Think of this," he said. "Back yonder as you look is Fedic. Beyond Fedic, Thunderclap. Beyond Thunderclap, the Callas and the forest that marks the borderland between Mid-World and End-World. Lud is further back that way, and River Crossing further still; the Western Sea and the great Mohaine Desert, too. Somewhere back there, lost in the leagues and lost in time as well is what remains of In-World. The Baronies. Gilead. Places where even now there are people who remember love and light."

"Yes," she said, not understanding.

"That was the way the Crimson King turned to cast his petulance," Roland said. "*He* meant to go the other way, ye must ken, to the Dark Tower, and even in his madness he knew better than to kill the land he must pass through, he and whatever band of followers he took with him." He drew her toward him and kissed her forehead with a tenderness that made her feel like crying. "We three will visit his castle, and trap Mordred there if our fortune is good and his is ill. Then we'll go on, and back into living lands. There'll be wood for fires and game to provide fresh food and hides to wrap around us. Can you go on a little longer, dear? Can *thee*?"

"Yes," she said. "Thank you, Roland."

She hugged him, and as she did, she looked toward the red castle. In the growing light she could see that the stone of which it had been

made, although darkened by the years, had once been the color of spilled blood. This called forth a memory of her palaver with Mia on the Castle Discordia allure, a memory of steadily pulsing crimson light in the distance. Almost from where they now were, in fact.

Come to me now, if you'd come at all, Susannah, Mia had told her. For the King can fascinate, even at a distance.

It was that pulsing red glow of which she had been speaking, but—
“It’s gone!” she said to Roland. “The red light from the castle—Forge of the King, she called it! It’s gone! *We haven’t seen it once in all this time!*”

“No,” he said, and this time his smile was warmer. “I believe it must have stopped at the same time we ended the Breakers’ work. The Forge of the King has gone out, Susannah. Forever, if the gods are good. That much we have done, although it has cost us much.”

That afternoon they came to Le Casse Roi Russe, which turned out not to be entirely deserted, after all.



CHAPTER III:

THE CASTLE OF THE CRIMSON KING

ONE

They were a mile from the castle and the roar of the unseen river had become very loud when bunting and posters began to appear. The bunting consisted of red, white, and blue swags—the kind Susannah associated with Memorial Day parades and small-town Main Streets on the Fourth of July. On the façades of these narrow, secretive houses and the fronts of shops long closed and emptied from basement to attic, such decoration looked like rouge on the cheeks of a decaying corpse.

The faces on the posters were all too familiar to her. Richard Nixon and Henry Cabot Lodge flashed V's-for-victory and car-salesmen grins (NIXON/LODGE, BECAUSE THE WORK'S NOT DONE, these read). John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson stood with their arms around each other and their free hands raised. Below their feet was the bold proclamation WE STAND ON THE EDGE OF A NEW FRONTIER.

“Any idea who won?” Roland asked over his shoulder. Susannah was currently riding in Ho Fat's Luxury Taxi, taking in the sights (and wishing for a sweater: even a light cardigan would do her just fine, by God).

“Oh, yes,” she said. There was no doubt in her mind that these posters had been mounted for her benefit. “Kennedy did.”

“He became your dinh?”

“Dinh of the entire United States. And Johnson got the job when Kennedy was gunned down.”

“Shot? Do you say so?” Roland was interested.

“Aye. Shot from hiding by a coward named Oswald.”

“And your United States was the most powerful country in the world.”

“Well, Russia was giving us a run for our money when you grabbed me by the collar and yanked me into Mid-World, but yes, basically.”

“And the folk of your country choose their dinh for themselves. It’s not done on account of fathership.”

“That’s right,” she said, a little warily. She half-expected Roland to blast the democratic system. Or laugh at it.

Instead he surprised her by saying, “To quote Blaine the Mono, that sounds pretty swell.”

“Do me a favor and don’t quote him, Roland. Not now, not ever. Okay?”

“As you like,” he said, then went on without a pause, but in a much lower voice. “Keep my gun ready, may it do ya.”

“Does me fine,” she agreed at once, and in the same low voice. It came out *Does ’ee ’ine*, because she didn’t even want to move her lips. She could feel that they were now being watched from within the buildings that crowded this end of The King’s Way like shops and inns in a medieval village (or a movie set of one). She didn’t know if they were humans, robots, or maybe just still-operating TV cameras, but she hadn’t mistrusted the feeling even before Roland spoke up and confirmed it. And she only had to look at Oy’s head, tick-tocking back and forth like the pendulum in a grandfather clock, to know he felt it, too.

“And was he a good dinh, this Kennedy?” Roland asked, resuming his normal voice. It carried well in the silence. Susannah realized a rather lovely thing: for once she wasn’t cold, even though this close to the roaring river the air was dank as well as chill. She was too focused on the world around her to be cold. At least for the present.

“Well, not everyone thought so, certainly the nut who shot him didn’t, but I did,” she said. “He told folks when he was running that he meant to change things. Probably less than half the voters thought he meant it, because most politicians lie for the same reason a monkey swings by his tail, which is to say because he can. But once he was elected, he started in doin the things he’d promised to do. There was a showdown over a place called Cuba, and he was just as brave as . . . well, let’s just say you would have been pleased to ride with him.

When some folks saw just how serious he was, the motherfucks hired the nut to shoot him.”

“Oz-walt.”

She nodded, not bothering to correct him, thinking that there was nothing to correct, really. *Oz-walt. Oz.* It all came around again, didn’t it?

“And Johnson took over when Kennedy fell.”

“Yep.”

“How did *he* do?”

“Was too early to tell when I left, but he was more the kind of fella used to playing the game. ‘Go along to get along,’ we used to say. Do you ken it?”

“Yes, indeed,” he said. “And Susannah, I think we’ve arrived.” Roland brought Ho Fat’s Luxury Taxi to a stop. He stood with the handles wrapped in his fists, looking at Le Casse Roi Russe.

TWO

Here The King’s Way ended, spilling into a wide cobbled forecourt that had once no doubt been guarded as assiduously by the Crimson King’s men as the Tower of London was by the Beefeaters of Queen Elizabeth. An eye that had faded only slightly over the years was painted on the cobbles in scarlet. From ground-level, one could only assume what it was, but from the upper levels of the castle itself, Susannah guessed, the eye would dominate the view to the northwest.

Same damn thing’s probably painted at every other point of the compass, too, she thought.

Above this outer courtyard, stretched between two deserted guard-towers, was a banner that looked freshly painted. Stenciled upon it (also in red, white, and blue) was this:

**WELCOME,
ROLAND AND SUSANNAH!
(OY, TOO!)
KEEP ON ROCKIN’ IN
THE FREE WORLD!**

The castle beyond the inner courtyard (and the caged river which here served as a moat) was indeed of dark red stone blocks that had darkened to near-black over the years. Towers and turrets burst upward from the castle proper, swelling in a way that hurt the eye and seemed to defy gravity. The castle within these gaudy brackets was sober and undecorated except for the staring eye carved into the keystone arch above the main entrance. Two of the overhead walkways had fallen, littering the main courtyard with shattered chunks of stone, but six others remained in place, crisscrossing at different levels in a way that made her think of turnpike entrances and exits where a number of major highways met. As with the houses, the doors and windows were oddly narrow. Fat black rooks were perched on the sills of the windows and lined up along the overhead walkways, peering at them.

Susannah swung down from the rickshaw with Roland's gun stuffed into her belt, within easy reach. She joined him, looking at the main gate on this side of the moat. It stood open. Beyond it, a humped stone bridge spanned the river. Beneath the bridge, dark water rushed through a stone throat forty feet wide. The water smelled harsh and unpleasant, and where it flowed around a number of fangy black rocks, the foam was yellow instead of white.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"Listen to those fellows, for a start," he said, and nodded toward the main doors on the far side of the castle's cobbled forecourt. The portals were ajar and through them now came two men—perfectly ordinary men, not narrow funhouse fellows, as she had rather expected. When they were halfway across the forecourt, a third slipped out and scurried along after. None appeared to be armed, and as the two in front approached the bridge, she was not exactly flabbergasted to see they were identical twins. And the one behind looked the same: Caucasian, fairly tall, long black hair. Triplets, then: two to meet, and one for good luck. They were wearing jeans and heavy pea-coats of which she was instantly (and achingly) jealous. The two in front carried large wicker baskets by leather handles.

"Put spectacles and beards on them, and they'd look exactly like Stephen King as he was when Eddie and I first met him," Roland said in a low voice.

“Really? Say true?”

“Yes. Do you remember what I told you?”

“Let you do the talking.”

“And before victory comes temptation. Remember that, too.”

“I will. Roland, are you afraid of em?”

“I think there’s little to fear from those three. But be ready to shoot.”

“They don’t look armed.” Of course there were those wicker baskets; anything might be in those.

“All the same, be ready.”

“Count on it,” said she.

THREE

Even with the roar of the river rushing beneath the bridge, they could hear the steady tock-tock of the strangers’ bootheels. The two with the baskets advanced halfway across the bridge and stopped at its highest point. Here they put down their burdens side by side. The third man stopped on the castle side and stood with his empty hands clasped decorously before him. Now Susannah could smell the cooked meat that was undoubtedly in one of the boxes. Not long pork, either. Roast beef and chicken all mingled was what it smelled like to her, an aroma that was heaven-sent. Her mouth began to water.

“Hile, Roland of Gilead!” said the dark-haired man on their right. “Hile, Susannah of New York! Hile, Oy of Mid-World! Long days and pleasant nights!”

“One’s ugly and the others are worse,” his companion remarked.

“Don’t mind him,” said the righthand Stephen King lookalike.

“Don’t mind him,” mocked the other, screwing his face up in a grimace so purposefully ugly that it was funny.

“May you have twice the number,” Roland said, responding to the more polite of the two. He cocked his heel and made a perfunctory bow over his outstretched leg. Susannah curtsied in the Calla fashion, spreading imaginary skirts. Oy sat by Roland’s left foot, only looking at the two identical men on the bridge.

“We are uffis,” said the man on the right. “Do you ken uffis, Roland?”

“Yes,” he said, and then, in an aside to Susannah: “It’s an old word . . . ancient, in fact. He claims they’re shape-changers.” To this he added in a much lower voice that could surely not be heard over the roar of the river: “I doubt it’s true.”

“Yet it is,” said the one on the right, pleasantly enough.

“Liars see their own kind everywhere,” observed the one on the left, and rolled a cynical blue eye. Just one. Susannah didn’t believe she had ever seen a person roll just one eye before.

The one behind said nothing, only continued to stand and watch with his hands clasped before him.

“We can take any shape we like,” continued the one on the right, “but our orders were to assume that of someone you’d recognize and trust.”

“I’d not trust sai King much further than I could throw his heaviest grandfather,” Roland remarked. “As troublesome as a trousers-eating goat, that one.”

“We did the best we could,” said the righthand Stephen King. “We could have taken the shape of Eddie Dean, but felt that might be too painful to the lady.”

“The ‘lady’ looks as if she’d be happy to fuck a rope, could she make it stand up between her thighs,” remarked the lefthand Stephen King, and leered.

“Uncalled-for,” said the one behind, he with his hands crossed in front of him. He spoke in the mild tones of a contest referee. Susannah almost expected him to sentence Badmouth King to five minutes in the penalty box. She wouldn’t have minded, either, for hearing Badmouth King crack wise hurt her heart; it reminded her of Eddie.

Roland ignored all the byplay.

“Could the three of you take three different shapes?” he inquired of Goodmouth King. Susannah heard the gunslinger swallow quite audibly before asking this question, and knew she wasn’t the only one struggling to keep from drooling over the smells from the food-basket. “Could one of you have been sai King, one sai Kennedy, and one sai Nixon, for instance?”

“A good question,” said Goodmouth King on the right.

“A stupid question,” said Badmouth King on the left. “Nothing at all to the point. Off we go into the wild blue yonder. Oh well, was there ever an action hero who was an intellectual?”

“Prince Hamlet of Denmark,” said Referee King quietly from behind them. “But since he’s the only one who comes immediately to mind, he may be no more than the exception that proves the rule.”

Goodmouth and Badmouth both turned to look at him. When it was clear that he was done, they turned back to Roland and Susannah.

“Since we’re actually one being,” said Goodmouth, “and of fairly limited capabilities at that, the answer is no. We could all be Kennedy, or we could all be Nixon, but—”

“Jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but never jam today,” said Susannah. She had no idea why this had popped into her head (even less why she should have said it out loud), but Referee King said “Exactly!” and gave her a go-to-the-head-of-the-class nod.

“Move on, for your father’s sake,” said Badmouth King on the left. “I can barely look at these traitors to the Lord of the Red wi’out puking.”

“Very well,” said his partner. “Although calling them traitors seems rather unfair, at least if one adds ka to the equation. Since the names we give ourself would be unpronounceable to you—”

“Like Superman’s rival, Mr. Mxyzptlk,” said Badmouth.

“—you may as well use those Los’ used. Him being the one you call the Crimson King. I’m ego, roughly speaking, and go by the name of Feemalo. This fellow beside me is Fumalo. He’s our id.”

“So the one behind you must be Fimalo,” Susannah said, pronouncing it *Fie*-ma-lo. “What’s he, your superego?”

“Oh brilliant!” Fumalo exclaimed. “I bet you can even say Freud so it doesn’t rhyme with lewd!” He leaned forward and gave her his knowing leer. “But can you *spell* it, you shor’-leg New York blackbird?”

“Don’t mind him,” said Feemalo, “he’s always been threatened by women.”

“Are you Stephen King’s ego, id, and superego?” Susannah asked.

“What a good question!” Feemalo said approvingly.

“What a *dumb* question!” Fumalo said, disapprovingly. “Did your parents have any kids that lived, Blackbird?”

“You don’t want to start in playing the dozens with me,” Susannah said, “I’ll bring out Detta Walker and shut you down.”

Referee King said, “I have nothing to do with sai King other than having appropriated some of his physical characteristics for a short time. And I understand that short time is really all the time you have. I have no particular love for your cause and no intention of going out of my way to help you—not *far* out of my way, at least—and yet I understand that you two are largely responsible for the departure of Los’. Since he kept me prisoner and treated me as little more than his court jester—or even his pet monkey—I’m not at all sorry to see him go. I’d help you if I can—a little, at least—but no, I won’t go out of my way to do so. ‘Let’s get that up front,’ as your late friend Eddie Dean might have said.”

Susannah tried not to wince at this, but it hurt. It hurt.

As before, Feemalo and Fumalo had turned to look at Fimalo when he spoke. Now they turned back to Roland and Susannah.

“Honesty’s the best policy,” said Feemalo, with a pious look. “Cervantes.”

“Liars prosper,” said Fumalo, with a cynical grin. “Anonymous.”

Feemalo said, “There were times when Los’ would make us divide into six, or even seven, and for no other reason than because it *hurt*. Yet we could leave no more than anyone else in the castle could, for he’d set a dead-line around its walls.”

“We thought he’d kill us all before he left,” Fumalo said, and with none of his previous fuck-you cynicism. His face wore the long and introspective expression of one who looks back on a disaster perhaps averted by mere inches.

Feemalo: “He *did* kill a great many. Beheaded his Minister of State.”

Fumalo: “Who had advanced syphilis and no more idea what was happening to him than a pig in a slaughterhouse chute, more’s the pity.”

Feemalo: “He lined up the kitchen staff and the women o’ work—”

Fumalo: “All of whom had been very loyal to him, very loyal indeed —”

Feemalo: “And made them take poison as they stood in front of him. He could have killed them in their sleep if he’d wanted to—”

Fumalo: “And by no more than wishing it on them.”

Feemalo: “But instead he made them take poison. *Rat* poison. They swallowed large brown chunks of it and died in convulsions right in front of him as he sat on his throne—”

Fumalo: “Which is made of skulls, do ye ken—”

Feemalo: “He sat there with his elbow on his knee and his fist on his chin, like a man thinking long thoughts, perhaps about squaring the circle or finding the Ultimate Prime Number, all the while watching them writhe and vomit and convulse on the floor of the Audience Chamber.”

Fumalo (with a touch of eagerness Susannah found both prurient and *extremely* unattractive): “Some died begging for water. It was a *thirsty* poison, aye! And we thought *we* were next!”

At this Feemalo at last betrayed, if not anger, then a touch of pique. “Will you let me tell this and have done with it so they can go on or back as they please?”

“Bossy as ever,” Fumalo said, and dropped into a sulky silence. Above them, the Castle Rooks jostled for position and looked down with beady eyes. *No doubt hoping to make a meal of those who don't walk away*, Susannah thought.

“He had six of the surviving Wizard's Glasses,” Feemalo said. “And when you were still in Calla Bryn Sturgis, he saw something in them that finished the job of running him mad. We don't know for sure what it was, for we didn't see, but we have an idea it was your victory not just in the Calla but further on, at Algul Siento. If so, it meant the end of his scheme to bring down the Tower from afar, by breaking the Beams.”

“Of course that's what it was,” Fumalo said quietly, and once more both Stephen Kings on the bridge turned to look at him. “It could have been nothing else. What brought him to the brink of madness in the first place were two conflicting compulsions in his mind: to bring the Tower down, and to get there before *you* could get there, Roland, and mount to the top. To destroy it . . . or to rule it. I'm not sure he has ever cared overmuch about *understanding* it—just about beating you to something you want, and then snatching it away from you. About such things he'd care much.”

“It’d no doubt please you to know how he raved about you, and cursed your name in the weeks before he smashed his precious playthings,” said Fumalo. “How he came to fear you, insofar as he *can* fear.”

“Not this one,” Feemalo contradicted, and rather glumly, Susannah thought. “It wouldn’t please this one much at all. He wins with no better grace than he loses.”

Fimalo said: “When the Red King saw that the Algul would fall to you, he understood that the working Beams would regenerate. More! That eventually those two working Beams would re-create the *other* Beams, knitting them forth mile by mile and wheel by wheel. If that happens, then eventually . . .”

Roland was nodding. In his eyes Susannah saw an entirely new expression: glad surprise. *Maybe he does know how to win*, she thought. “Then eventually what has moved on might return again,” the gunslinger said. “Perhaps Mid-World and In-World.” He paused. “Perhaps even Gilead. The light. The *White*.”

“No perhaps about it,” Fimalo said. “For ka is a wheel, and if a wheel be not broken, it will always roll. Unless the Crimson King can become either Lord of the Tower or its Lord High Executioner, all that was will eventually return.”

“Lunacy,” said Fumalo. “And *destructive* lunacy, at that. But of course Big Red always *was* Gan’s crazy side.” He gave Susannah an ugly smirk and said, “That’s *Froood*, Lady Blackbird.”

Feemalo resumed. “And after the Balls were smashed and the killing was done—”

“This is what we’d have you understand,” said Fumalo. “If, that is, your heads aren’t too thick to get the sense of it.”

“After those chores were finished, he killed *himself*,” Fimalo said, and once more the other two turned to him. It was as if they were helpless to do otherwise.

“Did he do it with a spoon?” Roland asked. “For that was the prophecy my friends and I grew up with. ’Twas in a bit of doggerel.”

“Yes indeed,” said Fimalo. “I thought he’d cut his throat with it, for the edge of the spoon’s bowl had been sharpened (like certain plates, ye ken—ka’s a wheel, and always comes around to where it started), but he swallowed it. *Swallowed* it, can you imagine? Great gouts of

blood poured from his mouth. *Freshets!* Then he mounted the greatest of the gray horses—he calls it Nis, after the land of sleep and dreams—and rode southeast into the white lands of Empathica with his little bit of gunna before him on the saddle.” He smiled. “There are great stores of food here, but *he* has no need of it, as you may ken. Los’ no longer eats.”

“Wait a minute, time out,” Susannah said, raising her hands in a T-shape (it was a gesture she’d picked up from Eddie, although she didn’t realize it). “If he swallowed a sharpened spoon and cut himself open as well as choking—”

“Lady Blackbird begins to see the light!” Fumalo exulted, and shook his hands at the sky.

“—then how could he do *anything?*”

“Los’ cannot die,” Feemalo said, as if explaining something obvious to a three-year-old. “And *you*—”

“You poor *saps*—” his partner put in with good-natured viciousness.

“You can’t kill a man who’s already dead,” Fimalo finished. “As he was, Roland, your guns might have ended him . . .”

Roland was nodding. “Handed down from father to son, with barrels made from Arthur Eld’s great sword, Excalibur. Yes, that’s also part of the prophecy. As he of course would know.”

“But now he’s safe from them. Has put himself *beyond* them. He is Un-dead.”

“We have reason to believe that he’s been shunted onto a balcony of the Tower,” Roland said. “Un-dead or not, he never could have gained the top without some sigul of the Eld; surely if he knew so much prophecy, then he knew that.”

Fimalo was smiling grimly. “Aye, but as Horatio held the bridge in a story told in Susannah’s world, so Los’, the Crimson King, now holds the Tower. He has found his way into its mouth but cannot climb to the top, ’tis true. Yet while he holds it hard, neither can you.”

“It seems old King Red wasn’t entirely mad, after all,” Feemalo said.

“Cray-zee lak-a de *focks!*” Fumalo added. He tapped his temple gravely . . . and then burst out laughing.

“But if you go on,” said Fimalo, “you bring to him the siguls of the Eld he needs to gain possession of that which now holds him captive.”

“He’d have to take them from me first,” Roland said. “From *us*.” He spoke without drama, as if merely commenting on the weather.

“True,” Fimalo agreed, “but consider, Roland. You cannot kill him with them, but it *is* possible that he might be able to take them from you, for his mind is devious and his reach is long. If he were to do so . . . well! Imagine a dead king, and mad, at the top of the Dark Tower, with a pair of the great old guns in his possession! He might rule from there, but I think that, given his insanity, he’d choose to bring it down, instead. Which he might be able to do, Beams or no Beams.”

Fimalo studied them gravely from his place on the far side of the bridge.

“And then,” he said, “all would be darkness.”

FOUR

There was a pause during which those gathered in that place considered the idea. Then Feemalo said, almost apologetically: “The cost might not be so great if one were just to consider this world, which we might call Tower Keystone, since the Dark Tower exists here not as a rose, as it does on many, or an immortal tiger, as it does on some, or the ur-dog Rover, as it does on at least one—”

“A dog named *Rover*?” Susannah asked, bemused. “Do you really say so?”

“Lady, you have all the imagination of a half-burnt stick,” Fumalo said in a tone of deep disgust.

Feemalo paid no heed. “In this world, the Tower is itself. In the world where you, Roland, have most lately been, most species still breed true and many lives are sweet. There is still energy and hope. Would you risk destroying that world as well as this, and the other worlds sai King has touched with his imagination, and drawn from? For it was not he that created them, you know. To peek in Gan’s navel does not make one Gan, although many creative people seem to think so. Would you risk it all?”

“We’re just asking, not trying to convince you,” Fimalo said. “But the truth is bald: now this is only your quest, gunslinger. That’s *all* it is. Nothing sends you further. Once you pass beyond this castle and into

the White Lands, you and your friends pass beyond ka itself. And you need not do it. All you have been through was set in motion so that you might save the Beams, and by saving them ensure the eternal existence of the Tower, the axle upon which all worlds and all life spins. That is done. If you turn back now, the dead King will be trapped forever where he is.”

“Sez *you*,” Susannah put in, and with a rudeness worthy of sai Fumalo.

“Whether you speak true or speak false,” Roland said, “I will push on. For I have promised.”

“To *whom* have you given your promise?” Fimalo burst out. For the first time since stopping on the castle side of the bridge, he unclasped his hands and used them to push his hair back from his brow. The gesture was small but expressed his frustration with perfect eloquence. “For there’s no prophecy of such a promise; I tell you so!”

“There wouldn’t be. For it’s one I made myself, and one I mean to keep.”

“This man is as crazy as Los’ the Red,” Fumalo said, not without respect.

“All right,” Fimalo said. He sighed and once more clasped his hands before him. “I have done what *I* can do.” He nodded to his other two thirds, who were looking attentively back at him.

Feemalo and Fumalo each dropped to one knee: Feemalo his right, Fumalo his left. They lifted away the lids of the wicker boxes they had carried and tilted them forward. (Susannah was fleetingly reminded of how the models on *The Price Is Right* and *Concentration* showed off the prizes.)

Inside one was food: roasts of chicken and pork, joints of beef, great pink rounds of ham. Susannah felt her stomach expand at the sight, as if making ready to swallow all of it, and it was only with a great effort that she stopped the sensual moan rising in her throat. Her mouth flooded with saliva and she raised a hand to wipe it away. They would know what she was doing, she supposed there was no help for that, but she could at least keep them from the satisfaction of seeing the physical evidence of her hunger gleaming on her lips and chin. Oy barked, but kept his seat by the gunslinger’s left heel.

Inside the other basket were big cable-knit sweaters, one green and one red: Christmas colors.

“There’s also long underwear, coats, fleece-lined shor’-boots, and gloves,” said Feemalo. “For Empathica’s deadly cold at this time of year, and you’ll have months of walking ahead.”

“On the outskirts of town we’ve left you a light aluminum sledge,” Fimalo said. “You can throw it in the back of your little cart and then use it to carry the lady and your gunna, once you reach the snowlands.”

“You no doubt wonder why we do all this, since we disapprove of your journey,” said Feemalo. “The fact is, we’re grateful for our survival—”

“We really did think we were done for,” Fumalo broke in. “‘The quarterback is toast,’ Eddie might have said.”

And this, too, hurt her . . . but not as much as looking at all that food. Not as much as imagining how it would feel to slip one of those bulky sweaters over her head and let the hem fall all the way to the middle of her thighs.

“My decision was to try and talk you out of going if I could,” said Fimalo—the only one who spoke of himself in the first-person singular, Susannah had noticed. “And if I couldn’t, I’d give you the supplies you’d need to go on with.”

“You can’t kill him!” Fumalo burst out. “Don’t you see that, you wooden-headed killing machine, don’t you *see*? All you can do is get over-eager and play into his dead hands! How can you be so *stu*—”

“Hush,” Fimalo said mildly, and Fumalo hushed at once. “He’s taken his decision.”

“What will you do?” Roland asked. “Once we’ve pushed on, that is?”

The three of them shrugged in perfect mirror unison, but it was Fimalo—the so-called uffi’s superego—who answered. “Wait here,” he said. “See if the matrix of creation lives or dies. In the meanwhile, try to refurbish Le Casse and bring it to some of its previous glory. It was a beautiful place once. It can be beautiful again. And now I think our palaver’s done. Take your gifts with our thanks and good wishes.”

“*Grudging* good wishes,” said Fumalo, and actually smiled. Coming from him, that smile was both dazzling and unexpected.

Susannah almost started forward. Hungry as she was for fresh food (for fresh *meat*), it was the sweaters and the thermal underwear that she really craved. Although supplies were getting thin (and would surely run out before they were past the place the uffi called Empathica), there were still cans of beans and tuna and corned beef hash rolling around in the back of Ho Fat's Luxury Taxi, and their bellies were currently full. It was the cold that was killing her. That was what it felt like, at least; cold working its way inward toward her heart, one painful inch at a time.

Two things stopped her. One was the realization that a single step forward was all it would take to destroy what little remained of her will; she'd run to the center of the bridge and fall on her knees before that deep basket of clothes and go grubbing through it like a predatory housewife at the annual Filene's white-sale. Once she took that first step, nothing would stop her. And losing her will wouldn't be the worst of it; she would also lose the self-respect Odetta Holmes had labored all her life to win, despite the barely suspected saboteur lurking in her mind.

Yet even that wouldn't have been enough to hold her back. What did was a memory of the day they'd seen the crow with the green stuff in its beak, the crow that had been going *Croo, croo!* instead of *Caw, caw!* Only devilgrass, true, but green stuff, all the same. Living stuff. That was the day Roland had told her to hold her tongue, had told her—what was it? *Before victory comes temptation*. She never would have suspected that her life's greatest temptation would be a cable-knit fisherman's sweater, but—

She suddenly understood what the gunslinger must have known, if not from the first then from soon after the three Stephen Kings appeared: this whole thing was a shuck. She didn't know what, exactly, was in those wicker baskets, but she doubted like hell that it was food and clothes.

She settled within herself.

"Well?" Fimalo asked patiently. "Will you come and take the presents I'd give you? You must come, if you'd have them, for halfway across the bridge is as far as I can go myself. Just beyond Feemalo and Fumalo is the King's dead-line. You and she may pass both ways. We may not."

Roland said, “We thank you for your kindness, sai, but we’re going to refuse. We have food, and clothing is waiting for us up ahead, still on the hoof. Besides, it’s really not that cold.”

“No,” Susannah agreed, smiling into the three identical—and identically dumbfounded—faces. “It’s really not.”

“We’ll be pushing on,” Roland said, and made another bow over his cocked leg.

“Say thankya, say may ya do well,” Susannah put in, and once more spread her invisible skirts.

She and Roland began to turn away. And that was when Feemalo and Fumalo, still down on their knees, reached inside the open baskets before them.

Susannah needed no instruction from Roland, not so much as a shouted word. She drew the revolver from her belt and shot down the one on her left—Fumalo—just as he swung a long-barreled silver gun out of the basket. What looked like a scarf was hanging from it. Roland drew from his holster, as blindingly fast as ever, and fired a single shot. Above them the rooks took wing, cawing affrightedly, turning the blue sky momentarily black. Feemalo, also holding one of the silver guns, collapsed slowly forward across his basket of food with a dying expression of surprise on his face and a bullet-hole dead center in his forehead.

FIVE

Fimalo stood where he was, on the far side of the bridge. His hands were still clasped in front of him, but he no longer looked like Stephen King. He now wore the long, yellow-complexioned face of an old man who is dying slowly and not well. What hair he had was a dirty gray rather than luxuriant black. His skull was a peeling garden of eczema. His cheeks, chin, and forehead were lumped with pimples and open sores, some pustulating and some bleeding.

“What are you, really?” Roland asked him.

“A hume, just as you are,” said Fimalo, resignedly. “Rando Thoughtful was my name during my years as the Crimson King’s Minister of State. Once upon a time, however, I was plain old Austin Cornwell, from upstate New York. Not the Keystone World, I regret to

say, but another. I ran the Niagara Mall at one time, and before that I had a successful career in advertising. You might be interested to know I worked on accounts for both Nozz-A-La and the Takuro Spirit.”

Susannah ignored this bizarre and unexpected résumé. “So he *didn’t* have his top boy beheaded, after all,” she said. “What about the three Stephen Kings?”

“Just a glammer,” said the old man. “Are you going to kill me? Go ahead. All I ask is that you make quick work of it. I’m not well, as you must see.”

“Was any of what you told us true?” Susannah asked.

His old eyes looked at her with watery amazement. “*All* of it was,” he said, and advanced onto the bridge, where two other old men—his assistants, once upon a time, she had no doubt—lay sprawled. “All of it, anyway, save for one lie . . . and this.” He kicked the baskets over so that the contents spilled out.

Susannah gave an involuntary shout of horror. Oy was up in a flash, standing protectively in front of her with his short legs spread and his head lowered.

“It’s all right,” she said, but her voice was still trembling. “I was just . . . startled.”

The wicker basket which had seemed to contain all sorts of freshly cooked roasts was actually filled with decaying human limbs—long pork, after all, and in bad shape even considering what it was. The flesh was mostly blue-black and a-teem with maggots.

And there were no clothes in the other basket. What Fimalo had spilled out of it was actually a shiny knot of dying snakes. Their beady eyes were dull; their forked tongues flickered listlessly in and out; several had already ceased to move.

“You would have refreshed them wonderfully, if you’d pressed them against your skin,” Fimalo said regretfully.

“You didn’t really expect that to happen, did you?” Roland asked.

“No,” the old man admitted. He sat on the bridge with a weary sigh. One of the snakes attempted to crawl into his lap and he pushed it away with a gesture that was both absent and impatient. “But I had my orders, so I did.”

Susannah was looking at the corpses of the other two with horrified fascination. Feemalo and Fumalo, now just a couple of dead old men, were rotting with unnatural rapidity, their parchment skins deflating toward the bone and oozing slack rivulets of pus. As she watched, the sockets of Feemalo's skull surfaced like twin periscopes, giving the corpse a momentary expression of shock. Some of the snakes crawled and writhed around these decaying corpses. Others were crawling into the basket of maggoty limbs, seeking the undoubtedly warmer regions at the bottom of the heap. Decay brought its own temporary fevers, and she supposed that she herself might be tempted to luxuriate in it while she could. If she were a snake, that was.

"Are you going to kill me?" Fimalo asked.

"Nay," Roland said, "for your duties aren't done. You have another coming along behind."

Fimalo looked up, a gleam of interest in his rheumy old eyes. "Your son?"

"Mine, and your master's, as well. Would you give him a word for me during your palaver?"

"If I'm alive to give it, sure."

"Tell him that I'm old and crafty, while he's but young. Tell him that if he lies back, he may live awhile yet with his dreams of revenge . . . although what I've done to him requiring his vengeance, I know not. And tell him that if he comes forward, I'll kill him as I intend to kill his Red Father."

"Either you listen and don't hear or hear and don't believe," Fimalo said. Now that his own ruse had been exposed (nothing so glamorous as an uffi, Susannah thought; just a retreaded adman from upstate New York), he seemed unutterably weary. "You cannot kill a creature that has killed itself. Nor can you enter the Dark Tower, for there is only one entrance, and the balcony upon which Los' is imprisoned commands it. And he's armed with a sufficiency of weapons. The sneetches alone would seek you out and slay you before you'd crossed halfway through the field of roses."

"That's our worry," Roland said, and Susannah thought he'd rarely spoken a truer word: she was worrying about it already. "As for you, will you pass my message on to Mordred, when you see him?"

Fimalo made a gesture of acquiescence.

Roland shook his head. “Don’t just flap thy hand at me, cully—let me hear from your mouth.”

“I’ll pass along your message,” said Fimalo, then added: “*If* I see him, and we palaver.”

“You will. ’Day to you, sir.” Roland began to turn away, but Susannah caught his arm and he turned back.

“Swear to me that all you told us was true,” she bade the ugly ancient sitting on the cobbled bridge and below the cold gaze of the crows, who were beginning to settle back to their former places. What she meant to learn or prove by this she had not the slightest idea. Would she know this man’s lies, even now? Probably not. But she pressed on, just the same. “Swear it on the name of your father, and on his face, as well.”

The old man raised his right hand to her, palm out, and Susannah saw there were open sores even there. “I swear it on the name of Andrew John Cornwell, of Tioga Springs, New York. And on his face, too. The King of this castle really did run mad, and really did burst those Wizard’s Glasses that had come into his hands. He really did force the staff to take poison and he really did watch them die.” He flung out the hand he’d held up in pledge to the box of severed limbs. “Where do you think I got those, Lady Blackbird? Body Parts R Us?”

She didn’t understand the reference, and remained still.

“He really has gone on to the Dark Tower. He’s like the dog in some old fable or other, wanting to make sure that if *he* can’t get any good from the hay, no one else will, either. I didn’t even lie to you about what was in these boxes, not really. I simply showed you the goods and let you draw your own conclusions.” His smile of cynical pleasure made Susannah wonder if she ought to remind him that Roland, at least, had seen through this trick. She decided it wasn’t worth it.

“I told you only one outright lie,” said the former Austin Cornwell. “That he’d had me beheaded.”

“Are you satisfied, Susannah?” Roland asked her.

“Yes,” she said, although she wasn’t; not really. “Let’s go.”

“Climb up in Ho Fat, then, and don’t turn thy back on him when thee does. He’s sly.”

“Tell me about it,” Susannah said, and then did as she was asked.

“Long days and pleasant nights,” said the former sai Cornwell from where he sat amid the squirming, dying snakes. “May the Man Jesus watch over you and all your clan-fam. And may you show sense before it’s too late for sense and *stay away from the Dark Tower!*”

SIX

They retraced their path to the intersection where they had turned away from the Path of the Beam to go to the Crimson King’s castle, and here Roland stopped to rest for a few minutes. A little bit of a breeze had gotten up, and the patriotic bunting flapped. She saw it now looked old and faded. The pictures of Nixon, Lodge, Kennedy, and Johnson had been defaced by graffiti which was itself ancient. All the glammer—such ragged glammer as the Crimson King had been able to manage, at any rate—was gone.

Masks off, masks off, she thought tiredly. *It was a wonderful party, but now it’s finished . . . and the Red Death holds sway over all.*

She touched the pimple beside her mouth, then looked at the tip of her finger. She expected to see blood or pus or both. There was neither, and that was a relief.

“How much of it do you believe?” Susannah asked him.

“Pretty much all of it,” Roland replied.

“So he’s up there. In the Tower.”

“Not *in* it. Trapped *outside* it.” He smiled. “There’s a big difference.”

“Is there really? And what will you do to him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think that if he did get control of your guns, that he could get back inside the Tower and climb to the top?”

“Yes.” The reply was immediate.

“What will you do about it?”

“Not let him get either of them.” He spoke as if this should have been self-evident, and Susannah supposed it should have been. What she had a way of forgetting was how goddamned *literal* he was. About everything.

“You were thinking of trapping Mordred, back at the castle.”

“Yes,” Roland agreed, “but given what we found there—and what we were told—it seemed better to move on. Simpler. Look.”

He took out the watch and snapped open the lid. They both observed the second-hand racing its solitary course. But at the same speed as before? Susannah didn’t know for sure, but she didn’t think so. She looked up at Roland with her eyebrows raised.

“Most of the time it’s still right,” Roland said, “but no longer *all* of the time. I think that it’s losing at least a second every sixth or seventh revolution. Perhaps three to six minutes a day, all told.”

“That’s not very much.”

“No,” Roland admitted, putting the watch away, “but it’s a start. Let Mordred do as he will. The Dark Tower lies close beyond the white lands, and I mean to reach it.”

Susannah could understand his eagerness. She only hoped it wouldn’t make him careless. If it did, Mordred Deschain’s youth might no longer matter. If Roland made the right mistake at the wrong moment, she, he, and Oy might never see the Dark Tower at all.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a great fluttering from behind them. Not quite lost within it came a human sound that began as a howl and quickly rose to a shriek. Although distance diminished that cry, the horror and pain in it were all too clear. At last, mercifully, it faded.

“The Crimson King’s Minister of State has entered the clearing,” Roland said.

Susannah looked back toward the castle. She could see its blackish-red ramparts, but nothing else. She was *glad* she could see nothing else.

Mordred’s a-hungry, she thought. Her heart was beating fast and she thought she had never been so frightened in her whole life—not lying next to Mia as she gave birth, not even in the blackness under Castle Discordia.

Mordred’s a-hungry . . . but now he’ll be fed.

The old man who had begun life as Austin Cornwell and who would end it as Rando Thoughtful sat at the castle end of the bridge. The rooks waited above him, perhaps sensing that the day's excitement was not yet done. Thoughtful was warm enough thanks to the pea-coat he was wearing, and he had helped himself to a mouthful of brandy before leaving to meet Roland and his blackbird ladyfriend. Well . . . perhaps that wasn't *quite* true. Perhaps it was Brass and Compson (also known as Feemalo and Fumalo) who'd had the mouthfuls of the King's best brandy, and Los's ex-Minister of State who had polished off the last third of the bottle.

Whatever the cause, the old man fell asleep, and the coming of Mordred Red-Heel didn't wake him. He sat with his chin on his chest and drool trickling from between his pursed lips, looking like a baby who has fallen asleep in his highchair. The birds on the parapets and walkways were gathered more thickly than ever. Surely they would have flown at the approach of the young Prince, but he looked up at them and made a gesture in the air: the open right hand waved brusquely across the face, then curled into a fist and pulled downward. *Wait*, it said.

Mordred stopped on the town side of the bridge, sniffing delicately at the decayed meat. That smell had been charming enough to bring him here even though he knew Roland and Susannah had continued along the Path of the Beam. Let them and their pet bumbler get fairly back on their way, was the boy's thinking. This wasn't the time to close the gap. Later, perhaps. Later his White Daddy would let down his guard, if only for a moment, and then Mordred would have him.

For dinner, he hoped, but lunch or breakfast would do almost as well.

When we last saw this fellow, he was only
(*baby-bunting baby-dear baby bring your berries here*)

an infant. The creature standing beyond the gates of the Crimson King's castle had grown into a boy who looked about nine years old. Not a handsome boy; not the sort anyone (except for his lunatic mother) would have called comely. This had less to do with his complicated genetic inheritance than with plain starvation. The face beneath the dry spall of black hair was haggard and far too thin. The flesh beneath Mordred's blue bombardier's eyes was a discolored,

pouchy purple. His complexion was a birdshot blast of sores and blemishes. These, like the pimple beside Susannah's mouth, could have been the result of his journey through the poisoned lands, but surely Mordred's diet had something to do with it. He could have stocked up on canned goods before setting out from the checkpoint beyond the tunnel's mouth—Roland and Susannah had left plenty behind—but he hadn't thought to do so. He was, as Roland knew, still learning the tricks of survival. The only thing Mordred had taken from the checkpoint Quonset was a rotting railwayman's pillowtick jacket and a pair of serviceable boots. Finding the boots was good fortune indeed, although they had mostly fallen apart as the trek continued.

Had he been a hume—or even a more ordinary were-creature, for that matter—Mordred would have died in the Badlands, coat or no coat, boots or no boots. Because he was what he was, he had called the rooks to him when he was hungry, and the rooks had no choice but to come. The birds made nasty eating and the bugs he summoned from beneath the parched (and still faintly radioactive) rocks were even worse, but he had choked them down. One day he had touched the mind of a weasel and bade it come. It had been a scrawny, wretched thing, on the edge of starvation itself, but it tasted like the world's finest steak after the birds and the bugs. Mordred had changed into his other self and gathered the weasel into his seven-legged embrace, sucking and eating until there was nothing left but a torn piece of fur. He would have gladly eaten another dozen, but that had been the only one.

And now there was a whole basket of food set before him. It was well-aged, true, but what of that? Even the maggots would provide nourishment. More than enough to carry him into the snowy woods southeast of the castle, which would be teeming with game.

But before them, there was the old man.

"Rando," he said. "Rando Thoughtful."

The old man jerked and mumbled and opened his eyes. For a moment he looked at the scrawny boy standing before him with a total lack of understanding. Then his rheumy eyes filled with fright.

"Mordred, son of Los'," he said, trying a smile. "Hile to you, King that will be!" He made a shuffling gesture with his legs, then seemed

to realize that he was sitting down and it wouldn't do. He attempted to find his feet, fell back with a bump that amused the boy (amusement had been hard to come by in the Badlands, and he welcomed it), then tried again. This time he managed to get up.

"I see no bodies except for those of two fellows who look like they died even older than you," Mordred remarked, looking around in exaggerated fashion. "I certainly see no dead gunslingers, of either the long-leg or shor'-leg variety."

"You say true—and I say thankya, o'course I do—but I can explain that, sai, and quite easily—"

"Oh, but wait! Hold thy explanation, excellent though I'm sure it is! Let me guess, instead! Is it that the snakes have bound the gunslinger and his lady, long fat snakes, and you've had them removed into yonder castle for safekeeping?"

"My lord—"

"If so," Mordred continued, "there must have been an almighty lot of snakes in thy basket, for I still see many out here. Some appear to be dining on what should have been my supper." Although the severed, rotting limbs in the basket would still be his supper—part of it, anyway—Mordred gave the old fellow a reproachful look. "*Have* the gunslingers been put away, then?"

The old man's look of fright departed and was replaced by one of resignation. Mordred found this downright infuriating. What he wanted to see in old sai Thoughtful's face was not fright, and certainly not resignation, but hope. Which Mordred would snatch away at his leisure. His shape wavered. For a moment the old man saw the unformed blackness which lurked beneath, and the many legs. Then it was gone and the boy was back. For the moment, at least.

May I not die screaming, the former Austin Cornwell thought. *At least grant me that much, you gods that be. May I not die screaming in the arms of yonder monstrosity.*

"You know what's happened here, young sai. It's in my mind, and so it's in yours. Why not take the mess in that basket—the snakes, too, do ya like em—and leave an old man to what little life he has left? For your father's sake, if not your own. I served him well, even at the end. I could have simply hunkered in the castle and let them go their course. But I didn't. I *tried*."

“You had no choice,” Mordred replied from his end of the bridge. Not knowing if it was true or not. Nor caring. Dead flesh was only nourishment. Living flesh and blood still rich with the air of a man’s last breath . . . ah, that was something else. That was *fine dining!* “Did he leave me a message?”

“Aye, you know he did.”

“Tell me.”

“Why don’t you just pick it out of my mind?”

Again there came that fluttering, momentary change. For a moment it was neither a boy nor a boy-sized spider standing on the far end of the bridge but something that was both at the same time. Sai Thoughtful’s mouth went dry even while the drool that had escaped during his nap still gleamed on his chin. Then the boy-version of Mordred solidified again inside his torn and rotting coat.

“Because it pleases me to hear it from your drooping old stew-hole,” he told Thoughtful.

The old man licked his lips. “All right; may it do ya fine. He said that he’s crafty while you’re young and without so much as a sip of guile. He said that if you don’t stay back where you belong, he’ll have your head off your shoulders. He said he’d like to hold it up to your Red Father as he stands trapped upon his balcony.”

This was quite a bit more than Roland actually said (as we should know, having been there), and more than enough for Mordred.

Yet *not* enough for Rando Thoughtful. Perhaps only ten days before it would have accomplished the old man’s purpose, which was to goad the boy into killing him quickly. But Mordred had seasoned in a hurry, and now withstood his first impulse to simply bolt across the bridge into the castle courtyard, changing as he charged, and tearing Rando Thoughtful’s head from his body with the swipe of one barbed leg.

Instead he peered up at the rooks—hundreds of them, now—and they peered back at him, as intent as pupils in a classroom. The boy made a fluttering gesture with his arms, then pointed at the old man. The air was at once filled with the rising whir of wings. The King’s Minister turned to flee, but before he’d gotten a single step, the rooks descended on him in an inky cloud. He threw his arms up to protect his face as they lit on his head and shoulders, turning him into a

scarecrow. This instinctive gesture did no good; more of them alit on his upraised arms until the very weight of the birds forced them down. Bills nipped and needled at the old man's face, drawing blood in tiny tattoo stipples.

"No!" Mordred shouted. "Save the skin for me . . . but you may have his eyes."

It was then, as the eager rooks tore Rando Thoughtful's eyes from their living sockets, that the ex-Minister of State uttered the rising howl Roland and Susannah heard as they neared the edge of Castle-town. The birds who couldn't find a roosting-place hung around him in a living thunderhead. They turned him on his levitating heels and carried him toward the changeling, who had now advanced to the center of the bridge and squatted there. The boots and rotted pillowtick coat had been left behind for the nonce on the town side of the bridge; what waited for sai Thoughtful, reared up on its back legs, forelegs pawing the air, red mark on its hairy belly all too visible, was Dan-Tete, the Little Red King.

The man floated to his fate, shrieking and eyeless. He thrust his hands out in front of him, making warding-off gestures, and the spider's front legs seized one of them, guided it into the bristling maw of its mouth, and bit it off with a candy-cane crunch.

Sweet!

EIGHT

That night, beyond the last of the oddly narrow, oddly unpleasant townhouses, Roland stopped in front of what had probably been a smallhold farm. He stood facing the ruin of the main building, sniffing.

"What, Roland? What?"

"Can you smell the wood of that place, Susannah?"

She sniffed. "I can, as a matter of fact—what of it?"

He turned to her, smiling. "If we can smell it, we can burn it."

This turned out to be correct. They had trouble kindling the fire, even aided by Roland's slyest tricks of trailcraft and half a can of Sterno, but in the end they succeeded. Susannah sat as close to it as she could, turning at regular intervals in order to toast both sides

equally, relishing the sweat that popped out first on her face and her breasts, then on her back. She had forgotten what it was to be warm, and went on feeding wood to the flames until the campfire was a roaring bonfire. To animals in the open lands further along the Path of the healing Beam, that fire must have looked like a comet that had fallen to Earth, still blazing. Oy sat beside her, ears cocked, looking into the fire as if mesmerized. Susannah kept expecting Roland to object—to tell her to stop feeding the damned thing and start letting it burn down, for her father’s sake—but he didn’t. He only sat with his disassembled guns before him, oiling the pieces. When the fire grew too hot, he moved back a few feet. His shadow danced a skinny, wavering commala in the firelight.

“Can you stand one or two more nights of cold?” he asked her at last.

She nodded. “If I have to.”

“Once we start climbing toward the snowlands, it will be *really* cold,” he said. “And while I can’t promise you we’ll have to go fireless for only a single night, I don’t believe it’ll be any longer than two.”

“You think it’ll be easier to take game if we don’t build a fire, don’t you?”

Roland nodded and began putting his guns back together.

“Will there be game as early as day after tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

He considered this, then shook his head. “I can’t say—but I do.”

“Can you smell it?”

“No.”

“Touch their minds?”

“It’s not that, either.”

She let it go. “Roland, what if Mordred sends the birds against us tonight?”

He smiled and pointed to the flames. Below them, a deepening bed of bright red coals waxed and waned like dragon’s breath. “They’ll not come close to thy bonfire.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow we’ll be further from Le Casse Roi Russe than even Mordred can persuade them to go.”

“And how do you know *that*?”

He shook his head yet again, although he thought he knew the answer to her question. What he knew came from the Tower. He could feel the pulse of it awakening in his head. It was like green coming out of a dry seed. But it was too early to say so.

“Lie down, Susannah,” he said. “Take your rest. I’ll watch until midnight, then wake you.”

“So now we keep a watch,” she said.

He nodded.

“Is he watching *us*?”

Roland wasn’t sure, but thought that Mordred was. What his imagination saw was a skinny boy (but with a potbelly pooched out in front of him now, for he’d have eaten well), naked inside the rags of a filthy, torn coat. A skinny boy laid up in one of those unnaturally skinny houses, perhaps on the third floor, where the sightline was good. He sits at a window with his knees pulled up against his chest for warmth, the scar on his side perhaps aching in the bony cold, looking out at the flare of their fire, jealous of it. Jealous of their companionship, as well. Half-mother and White Father, with their backs turned to him.

“It’s likely,” he said.

She started to lie down, then stopped. She touched the sore beside her mouth. “This isn’t a pimple, Roland.”

“No?” He sat quiet, watching her.

“I had a friend in college who got one just like it,” Susannah said. “It’d bleed, then stop, then almost heal up, then darken and bleed a little more. At last she went to see a doctor—a special kind we call a dermatologist—and he said it was an angioma. A blood-tumor. He gave her a shot of novocaine and took it off with a scalpel. He said it was a good thing she came when she did, because every day she waited that thing was sinking its roots in a little deeper. Eventually, he said, it would have worked its way right through the roof of her mouth, and maybe into her sinuses, too.”

Roland was silent, waiting. The term she had used clanged in his head: *blood-tumor*. He thought it might have been coined to describe the Crimson King himself. Mordred, as well.

“We don’t have no novocaine, Baby-Boots,” Detta Walker said, “and Ah know dat, sho! But if de time come and Ah tell you, you goan whip out yo’ knife and cut dat ugly mahfah right off’n me. Goan do it faster than yon bum’blah c’n snatch a fly out de air. You unnerstand me? Kitch mah drift?”

“Yes. Now lie over. Take some rest.”

She lay over. Five minutes after she had appeared to go to sleep, Detta Walker opened her eyes and gave him

(I watchin you, white boy)

a glare. Roland nodded to her and she closed her eyes again. A minute or two later, they opened a second time. Now it was Susannah who looked at him, and this time when her eyes closed, they didn’t open again.

He had promised to wake her at midnight, but let her sleep two hours longer, knowing that in the heat of the fire her body was *really* resting, at least for this one night. At what his fine new watch said was one o’ the clock, he finally felt the gaze of their pursuer slip away. Mordred had lost his fight to stay awake through the darkest watches of the night, as had innumerable children before him. Wherever his room was, the unwanted, lonely child now slept in it with his wreck of a coat pulled around him and his head in his arms.

And does his mouth, still caked with sai Thoughtful’s blood, purse and quiver, as if dreaming of the nipple it knew but once, the milk it never tasted?

Roland didn’t know. Didn’t particularly want to know. He was only glad to be awake in the still-watch of the night, feeding the occasional piece of wood to the lowering fire. It would die quickly, he thought. The wood was newer than that of which the townhouses were constructed, but it was still ancient, hardened to a substance that was nearly stone.

Tomorrow they would see trees. The first since Calla Bryn Sturgis, if one set aside those growing beneath Algul Siento’s artificial sun and those he’d seen in Stephen King’s world. That would be good. Meanwhile, the dark held hard. Beyond the circle of the dying fire a wind moaned, lifting Roland’s hair from his temples and bringing a faint, sweet smell of snow. He tilted his head back and watched the clock of the stars turn in the blackness overhead.



CHAPTER IV:

HIDES

ONE

They had to go fireless three nights instead of one or two. The last was the longest, most wretched twelve hours of Susannah's life. *Is it worse than the night Eddie died?* she asked herself at one point. *Are you really saying this is worse than lying awake in one of those dormitory rooms, knowing that was how you'd be lying from then on? Worse than washing his face and hands and feet? Washing them for the ground?*

Yes. This *was* worse. She hated knowing it, and would never admit it to anyone else, but the deep, endless cold of that last night was *far* worse. She came to dread every light breath of breeze from the snowlands to the east and south. It was both terrible and oddly humbling to realize how easily physical discomfort could take control, expanding like poison gas until it owned all the floor-space, took over the entire playing field. Grief? Loss? What were those things when you could feel cold on the march, moving in from your fingers, crawling up your motherfucking *nose*, and moving where? Toward the brain, do it please ya. And toward the heart. In the grip of cold like that, grief and loss were nothing but words. No, not even that. Only *sounds*. So much meaningless quack as you sat shuddering under the stars, waiting for a morning that would never come.

What made it worse was knowing there were potential bonfires all around them, for they'd reached the live region Roland called "the under-snow." This was a series of long, grassy slopes (most of the grass now white and dead) and shallow valleys where there were isolated stands of trees, and brooks now plugged with ice. Earlier, in daylight, Roland had pointed out several holes in the ice and told her they'd

been made by deer. He pointed out several piles of scat, as well. In daylight such sign had been interesting, even hopeful. But in this endless ditch of night, listening to the steady low click of her chattering teeth, it meant nothing. Eddie meant nothing. Jake, neither. The Dark Tower meant nothing, nor did the bonfire they'd had out the outskirts of Castle-town. She could remember the look of it, but the feel of heat warming her skin until it brought an oil of sweat was utterly lost. Like a person who has died for a moment or two and has briefly visited some shining afterlife, she could only say that it had been wonderful.

Roland sat with his arms around her, sometimes voicing a dry, harsh cough. Susannah thought he might be getting sick, but this thought also had no power. Only the cold.

Once—shortly before dawn finally began to stain the sky in the east, this was—she saw orange lights swirl-dancing far ahead, past the place where the snow began. She asked Roland if he had any idea what they were. She had no real interest, but hearing her voice reassured her that she wasn't dead. Not yet, at least.

“I think they're hobs.”

“W-What are th-they?” She now stuttered and stammered everything.

“I don't know how to explain them to you,” he said. “And there's really no need. You'll see them in time. Right now if you listen, you'll hear something closer and more interesting.”

At first she heard only the sigh of the wind. Then it dropped and her ears picked up the dry swish of the grass below as something walked through it. This was followed by a low crunching sound. Susannah knew exactly what it was: a hoof stamping through thin ice, opening the running water to the cold world above. She also knew that in three or four days' time she might be wearing a coat made from the animal that was now drinking nearby, but this also had no meaning. Time was a useless concept when you were sitting awake in the dark, and in constant pain.

Had she thought she had been cold before? That was quite funny, wasn't it?

“What about Mordred?” she asked. “Is he out there, do you think?”

“Yes.”

“And does he feel the cold like we do?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can’t stand much more of this, Roland—I really can’t.”

“You won’t have to. It’ll be dawn soon, and I expect we’ll have a fire tomorrow come dark.” He coughed into his fist, then put his arm back around her. “You’ll feel better once we’re up and in the doings. Meantime, at least we’re together.”

TWO

Mordred *was* as cold as they were, every bit, and he had no one.

He was close enough to hear them, though: not the actual words, but the sound of their voices. He shuddered uncontrollably, and had lined his mouth with dead grass when he became afraid that Roland’s sharp ears might pick up the sound of his chattering teeth. The railwayman’s jacket was no help; he had thrown it away when it had fallen into so many pieces that he could no longer hold it together. He’d worn the arms of it out of Castle-town, but then they had fallen to pieces as well, starting at the elbows, and he’d cast them into the low grass beside the old road with a petulant curse. He was only able to go on wearing the boots because he’d been able to weave long grass into a rough twine. With it he’d bound what remained of them to his feet.

He’d considered changing back to his spider-form, knowing that body would feel the cold less, but his entire short life had been plagued by the specter of starvation, and he supposed that part of him would always fear it, no matter how much food he had at hand. The gods knew there wasn’t much now; three severed arms, four legs (two partially eaten), and a piece of a torso from the wicker basket, that was all. If he changed, the spider would gobble that little bit up by daylight. And while there was game out here—he heard the deer moving around just as clearly as his White Daddy did—Mordred wasn’t entirely confident of his ability to trap it, or run it down.

So he sat and shivered and listened to the sound of their voices until the voices ceased. Maybe they slept. He might have dozed a little, himself. And the only thing that kept him from giving up and

going back was his hatred of them. That they should have each other when he had no one. No one at all.

Mordred's a-hungry, he thought miserably. Mordred's a-cold. And Mordred has no one. Mordred's alone.

He slipped his wrist into his mouth, bit deep, and sucked the warmth that flowed out. In the blood he tasted the last of Rando Thoughtful's life . . . but so little! So soon gone! And once it was, there was nothing but the useless, recycled taste of himself.

In the dark, Mordred began to cry.

THREE

Four hours after dawn, under a white sky that promised rain or sleet (perhaps both at the same time), Susannah Dean lay shivering behind a fallen log, looking down into one of the little valleys. *You'll hear Oy, the gunslinger had told her. And you'll hear me, too. I'll do what I can, but I'll be driving them ahead of me and you'll have the best shooting. Make every shot count.*

What made things worse was her creeping intuition that Mordred was very close now, and he might try to bushwhack her while her back was turned. She kept looking around, but they had picked a relatively clear spot, and the open grass behind her was empty each time save once, when she had seen a large brown rabbit lolloping along with its ears dragging the ground.

At last she heard Oy's high-pitched barking from the copse of trees on her left. A moment later, Roland began to yell. "H'yah! H'yah! Get on brisk! Get on brisk, I tell thee! Never tarry! Never tarry a single—" Then the sound of him coughing. She didn't like that cough. No, not at all.

Now she could see movement in the trees, and for one of the few times since Roland had forced her to admit there was another person hiding inside of her, she called on Detta Walker.

I need you. If you want to be warm again, you settle my hands so I can shoot straight.

And the ceaseless shivering of her body stopped. As the herd of deer burst out of the trees—not a small herd, either; there had to be at least eighteen of them, led by a buck with a magnificent rack—her

hands also stopped their shaking. In the right one she held Roland's revolver with the sandalwood grips.

Here came Oy, bursting out of the woods behind the final straggler. This was a mutie doe, running (and with eerie grace) on four legs of varying sizes with a fifth waggling bonelessly from the middle of her belly like a teat. Last of all came Roland, not really running at all, not anymore, but rather staggering onward at a grim jog. She ignored him, tracking the buck with the gun as the big fellow ran across her field of fire.

"This way," she whispered. "Break to your right, honey-child, let's see you do it. Commala-come-come."

And while there was no reason why he should have, the buck leading his little fleeing herd did indeed veer slightly in Susannah's direction. Now she was filled with the sort of coldness she welcomed. Her vision seemed to sharpen until she could see the muscles rippling under the buck's hide, the white crescent as his eye rolled, the old wound on the nearest doe's foreleg, where the fur had never grown back. She had a moment to wish Eddie and Jake were lying on either side of her, feeling what she was feeling, seeing what she was seeing, and then that was gone, too.

I do not kill with my gun; she who kills with her gun has forgotten the face of her father.

"I kill with my heart," she murmured, and began shooting.

The first bullet took the lead buck in the head and he crashed over on his left side. The others ran past him. A doe leaped over his body and Susannah's second bullet took her at the height of her leap, so that she crashed down dead on the other side, one leg splayed and broken, all grace gone.

She heard Roland fire three times, but didn't look to see how he'd done; she had her own business to attend to, and she attended to it well. Each of the last four bullets in the cylinder took down a deer, and only one was still moving when he fell. It didn't occur to her that this was an amazing piece of shooting, especially with a pistol; she was a gunslinger, after all, and shooting was her business.

Besides, the morning was windless.

Half the herd now lay dead in the grassy valley below. All the remainder save one wheeled left and pelted away downslope toward

the stream. A moment later they were lost in a screen of willows. The last one, a yearling buck, ran directly toward her. Susannah didn't bother trying to reload from the little pile of bullets lying beside her on a square of buckskin but took one of the 'Riza plates instead, her hand automatically finding the dull gripping-place.

"*Riza!*" she screamed, and flung it. It flew across the dry grass, elevating slightly as it did, giving off that weird moaning sound. It struck the racing buck at mid-neck. Droplets of blood flew in a garland around its head, black against the white sky. A butcher's cleaver could not have done a neater job. For a moment the buck ran on, heedless and headless, blood jetting from the stump of its neck as its racing heart gave up its last half a dozen beats. Then it crashed to its splayed forelegs less than ten yards in front of her hide, staining the dry yellow grass a bright red.

The previous night's long misery was forgotten. The numbness had departed her hands. There was no grief in her now, no sense of loss, no fear. For the moment Susannah was exactly the woman that ka had made her. The mixed smell of gunpowder and blood from the downed buck was bitter; it was also the world's sweetest perfume.

Standing up straight on her stumps, Susannah spread her arms, Roland's pistol clenched in her right hand, and made a *Y* against the sky. Then she screamed. There were no words in it, nor could there have been. Our greatest moments of triumph are always inarticulate.

FOUR

Roland had insisted that they eat a huge breakfast, and her protests that cold corned beef tasted like so much lumpy mush cut zero ice with him. By two that afternoon according to his fancy-schmancy pocket-watch—right around the time the steady cold rain fattened into an icy drizzle, in other words—she was glad. She had never done a harder day of physical labor, and the day wasn't finished. Roland was by her all the while, matching her in spite of his worsening cough. She had time (during their brief but crazily delicious noon meal of seared deer-steaks) to consider how strange he was, how remarkable. After all this time and all these adventures, she had still not seen the bottom of him. Not even close. She had seen him laughing and

crying, killing and dancing, she'd seen him sleeping and on the squat behind a screen of bushes with his pants down and his ass hung over what he called the Log of Ease. She'd never slept with him as a woman does with a man, but she thought she'd seen him in every other circumstance, and . . . no. Still no bottom.

"That cough's sounding more and more like pneumonia to me," Susannah remarked, not long after the rain had started. They were then in the part of the day's activities Roland called *aven-car*: carrying the kill and preparing to make it into something else.

"Never let it worry you," Roland said. "I have what I need here to cure it."

"Say true?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yar. And these, which I never lost." He reached into his pocket and showed her a handful of aspirin tablets. She thought the expression on his face was one of real reverence, and why not? It might be that he owed his life to what he called *astin*. *Astin* and *cheflet*.

They loaded their kill into the back of Ho Fat's Luxury Taxi and dragged it down to the stream. It took three trips in all. After they'd stacked the carcasses, Roland carefully placed the head of the yearling buck atop the pile, where it looked at them from its glazed eyes.

"What you want that for?" Susannah asked, with a trace of *Detta* in her voice.

"We're going to need all the brains we can get," Roland said, and coughed dryly into his curled fist again. "It's a dirty way to do the job, but it's quick, and it works."

FIVE

When they had their kill piled beside the icy stream ("At least we don't have the flies to worry about," Roland said), the gunslinger began gathering deadwood. Susannah looked forward to the fire, but her terrible need of the previous night had departed. She had been working hard, and for the time being, at least, was warm enough to suit her. She tried to remember the depth of her despair, how the cold had crept into her bones, turning them to glass, and couldn't do it. Because the body had a way of forgetting the worst things, she

supposed, and without the body's cooperation, all the brain had were memories like faded snapshots.

Before beginning his wood-gathering chore, Roland inspected the bank of the icy stream and dug out a piece of rock. He handed it to her, and Susannah rubbed a thumb over its milky, water-smoothed surface. "Quartz?" she asked, but she didn't think it was. Not quite.

"I don't know that word, Susannah. We call it chert. It makes tools that are primitive but plenty useful: axe-heads, knives, skewers, scrapers. It's scrapers we'll want. Also at least one hand-hammer."

"I know what we're going to scrape, but what are we going to hammer?"

"I'll show you, but first will you join me here for a moment?" Roland got down on his knees and took her cold hand in one of his. Together they faced the deer's head.

"We thank you for what we are about to receive," Roland told the head, and Susannah shivered. It was exactly how her father began when he was giving the grace before a big meal, one where all the family was gathered.

Our own family is broken, she thought, but did not say; done was done. The response she gave was the one she had been taught as a young girl: "Father, we thank thee."

"Guide our hands and guide our hearts as we take life from death," Roland said. Then he looked at her, eyebrows raised, asking without speaking a word if she had more to say.

Susannah found that she did. "Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallow'd be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation; deliver us from evil; Thou art the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever."

"That's a lovely prayer," he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "I didn't say it just right—it's been a long time—but it's still the best prayer. Now let's do our business, while I can still feel my hands."

Roland gave her an amen.

Roland took the severed head of the yearling deer (the antler-nubs made lifting it easy), set it in front of him, then swung the fist-sized chunk of rock against the skull. There was a muffled cracking sound that made Susannah's stomach cringe. Roland gripped the antlers and pulled, first left and then right. When Susannah saw the way the broken skull wiggled under the hide, her stomach did more than cringe; it did a slow loop-the-loop.

Roland hit twice more, wielding the piece of chert with near-surgical precision. Then he used his knife to cut a circle in the head-hide, which he pulled off like a cap. This revealed the cracked skull beneath. He worked the blade of his knife into the widest crack and used it as a lever. When the deer's brain was exposed, he took it out, set it carefully aside, and looked at Susannah. "We'll want the brains of every deer we killed, and that's what we need a hammer for."

"Oh," she said in a choked voice. "Brains."

"To make a tanning slurry. But there's more use for chert than that. Look." He showed her how to bang two chunks together until one or both shattered, leaving large, nearly even pieces instead of jagged lumps. She knew that metamorphic rocks broke that way, but schists and such were generally too weak to make good tools. This stuff was *strong*.

"When you get chunks that break thick enough to hold on one side but thin to an edge on the other," Roland said, "lay them by. Those will be our scrapers. If we had more time we could make handles, but we don't. Our hands will be plenty sore by bedtime."

"How long do you think it will take to get enough scrapers?"

"Not so long," Roland said. "Chert breaks lucky, or so I used to hear."

While Roland dragged deadwood for a fire into a copse of mixed willows and alders by the edge of the frozen stream, Susannah inspected her way along the embankments, looking for chert. By the time she'd found a dozen large chunks, she had also located a granite boulder rising from the ground in a smooth, weather-worn curve. She thought it would make a fine anvil.

The chert did indeed break lucky, and she had thirty potential scrapers by the time Roland was bringing back his third large load of firewood. He made a little pile of kindling which Susannah shielded

with her hands. By then it was sleeting, and although they were working beneath a fairly dense clump of trees, she thought it wouldn't be long before both of them were soaked.

When the fire was lit, Roland went a few steps away, once more fell on his knees, and folded his hands.

"Praying again?" she asked, amused.

"What we learn in our childhood has a way of sticking," he said. He closed his eyes for a few moments, then brought his clasped hands to his mouth and kissed them. The only word she heard him say was *Gan*. Then he opened his eyes and lifted his hands, spreading them and making a pretty gesture that looked to her like birds flying away. When he spoke again, his voice was dry and matter-of-fact: Mr. Taking-Care-of-Business. "That's very well, then," he said. "Let's go to work."

SEVEN

They made twine from grass, just as Mordred had done, and hung the first deer—the one already headless—by its back legs from the low branch of a willow. Roland used his knife to cut its belly open, then reached into the guts, rummaged, and removed two dripping red organs that she thought were kidneys.

"These for fever and cough," he said, and bit into the first one as if it were an apple. Susannah made a gurking noise and turned away to consider the stream until he was finished. When he was, she turned back and watched him cut circles around the hanging legs close to where they joined the body.

"Are you any better?" she asked him uneasily.

"I will be," he said. "Now help me take the hide off this fellow. We'll want the first one with the hair still on it—we need to make a bowl for our slurry. Now watch."

He worked his fingers into the place where the deer's hide still clung to the body by the thin layer of fat and muscle beneath, then pulled. The hide tore easily to a point halfway down the deer's midsection. "Now do your side, Susannah."

Getting her fingers underneath was the only hard part. This time they pulled together, and when they had the hide all the way down to the dangling forelegs, it vaguely resembled a shirt. Roland used his

knife to cut it off, then began to dig in the ground a little way from the roaring fire but still beneath the shelter of the trees. She helped him, relishing the way the sweat rolled down her face and body. When they had a shallow bowl-shaped depression two feet across and eighteen inches deep, Roland lined it with the hide.

All that afternoon they took turns skinning the eight other deer they had killed. It was important to do it as quickly as possible, for when the underlying layer of fat and muscle dried up, the work would become slower and harder. The gunslinger kept the fire burning high and hot, every now and then leaving her to rake ashes out onto the ground. When they had cooled enough so they would not burn holes in their bowl-liner, he pushed them into the hole they'd made. Susannah's back and arms were aching fiercely by five o'clock, but she kept at it. Roland's face, neck, and hands were comically smeared with ash.

"You look like a fella in a minstrel show," she said at one point. "Rastus Coon."

"Who's that?"

"Nobody but the white folks' fool," she said. "Do you suppose Mordred's out there, watching us work?" All day she'd kept an eye peeled for him.

"No," he said, pausing to rest. He brushed his hair back from his forehead, leaving a fresh smear and now making her think of penitents on Ash Wednesday. "I think he's gone off to make his own kill."

"Mordred's a-hungry," she said. And then: "You can touch him a little, can't you? At least enough to know if he's here or if he's gone."

Roland considered this, then said simply: "I'm his father."

EIGHT

By dark, they had a large heap of deerskins and a pile of skinned, headless carcasses that surely would have been black with flies in warmer weather. They ate another huge meal of sizzling venison steaks, utterly delicious, and Susannah spared another thought for Mordred, somewhere out in the dark, probably eating his own supper raw. He might have matches, but he wasn't stupid; if they saw another

fire in all this darkness, they would rush down upon it. And him. Then, bang-bang-bang, goodbye Spider-Boy. She felt a surprising amount of sympathy for him and told herself to beware of it. Certainly he would have felt none for either her or Roland, had the shoe been on the other foot.

When they were done eating, Roland wiped his greasy fingers on his shirt and said, "That tasted fine."

"You got *that* right."

"Now let's get the brains out. Then we'll sleep."

"One at a time?" Susannah asked.

"Yes—so far as I know, brains only come one to a customer."

For a moment she was too surprised at hearing Eddie's phrase (*one to a customer*)

coming from Roland's mouth to realize he'd made a joke. Lame, yes, but a *bona fide* joke. Then she managed a token laugh. "Very funny, Roland. You know what I meant."

Roland nodded. "We'll sleep one at a time and stand a watch, yes. I think that would be best."

Time and repetition had done its work; she'd now seen too many tumbling guts to feel squeamish about a few brains. They cracked heads, used Roland's knife (its edge now dull) to pry open skulls, and removed the brains of their kill. These they put carefully aside, like a clutch of large gray eggs. By the time the last deer was debrained, Susannah's fingers were so sore and swollen she could hardly bend them.

"Lie over," Roland said. "Sleep. I'll take the first watch."

She didn't argue. Given her full belly and the heat of the fire, she knew sleep would come quickly. She also knew that when she woke up tomorrow, she was going to be so stiff that even sitting up would be difficult and painful. Now, though, she didn't care. A feeling of vast contentment filled her. Some of it was having eaten hot food, but by no means all. The greater part of her well-being stemmed from a day of hard work, no more or less than that. The sense that they were not just floating along but *doing for themselves*.

Jesus, she thought, *I think I'm becoming a Republican in my old age.*

Something else occurred to her then: how quiet it was. No sounds but the sough of the wind, the whispering sleet (now starting to

abate), and the crackle of the blessed fire.

“Roland?”

He looked at her from his place by the fire, eyebrows raised.

“You’ve stopped coughing.”

He smiled and nodded. She took his smile down into sleep, but it was Eddie she dreamed of.

NINE

They stayed three days in the camp by the stream, and during that time Susannah learned more about making hide garments than she would ever have believed (and much more than she really wanted to know).

By casting a mile or so in either direction along the stream they found a couple of logs, one for each of them. While they looked, they used their makeshift pot to soak their hides in a dark soup of ash and water. They set their logs at an angle against the trunks of two willow trees (close, so they could work side by side) and used chert scrapers to dehair the hides. This took one day. When it was done, they bailed out the “pot,” turned the hide liner over and filled it up again, this time with a mixture of water and mashed brains. This “cold-weather hiding” was new to her. They put the hides in this slurry to soak overnight and, while Susannah began to make thread from strings of gristle and sinew, Roland re-sharpened his knife, then used it to whittle half a dozen bone needles. When he was done, all of his fingers were bleeding from dozens of shallow cuts. He coated them with wood-ash soak and slept with them that way, his hands looking as if they were covered with large and clumsy gray-black gloves. When he washed them off in a stream the following day, Susannah was amazed to see the cuts already well on their way to healing. She tried dabbing some of the wood-ash stuff on the persistent sore beside her mouth, but it stung horribly and she washed it away in a hurry.

“I want you to whop this goddam thing off,” she said.

Roland shook his head. “We’ll give it a little longer to heal on its own.”

“Why?”

“Cutting on a sore’s a bad idea unless you absolutely have to do it. Especially out here, in what Jake would have called ‘the boondogs.’”

She agreed (without bothering to correct his pronunciation), but unpleasant images crept into her head when she lay down: visions of the pimple beginning to spread, erasing her face inch by inch, turning her entire head into a black, crusted, bleeding tumor. In the dark, such visions had a horrible persuasiveness, but luckily she was too tired for them to keep her awake long.

On their second day in what Susannah was coming to think of as the Hide Camp, Roland built a large and rickety frame over a new fire, one that was low and slow. They smoked the hides two by two and then laid them aside. The smell of the finished product was surprisingly pleasant. *It smells like leather*, she thought, holding one to her face, and then had to laugh. That was, after all, exactly what it was.

The third day they spent “making,” and here Susannah finally outdid the gunslinger. Roland sewed a wide and barely serviceable stitch. She thought that the vests and leggings he made would hold together for a month, two at the most, then begin to pull apart. She was far more adept. Sewing was a skill she’d learned from her mother and both grandmothers. At first she found Roland’s bone needles maddeningly clumsy, and she paused long enough to cover both the thumb and forefinger of her right hand with little deerskin caps which she tied in place. After that it went faster, and by mid-afternoon of making-day she was taking garments from Roland’s pile and oversewing his stitches with her own, which were finer and closer. She thought he might object to this—men were proud—but he didn’t, which was probably wise. It quite likely would have been Detta who replied to any whines and queasies.

By the time their third night in Hide Camp had come, they each had a vest, a pair of leggings, and a coat. They also had a pair of mittens each. These were large and laughable, but would keep their hands warm. And, speaking of hands, Susannah was once more barely able to bend hers. She looked doubtfully at the remaining hides and asked Roland if they would spend another making-day here.

He considered the idea, then shook his head. “We’ll load the ones that are left into the Ho Fat Tack-see, I think, along with some of the

meat and chunks of ice from the stream to keep it cool and good.”

“The Taxi won’t be any good when we come to the snow, will it?”

“No,” he admitted, “but by then the rest of the hides will be clothing and the meat will be eaten.”

“You just can’t stay here any longer, that’s what it comes down to, isn’t it? You hear it calling. The Tower.”

Roland looked into the snapping fire and said nothing. Nor had to.

“What’ll we do about hauling our gunna when we come to the white lands?”

“Make a travois. And there’ll be plenty of game.”

She nodded and started to lie down. He took her shoulders and turned her toward the fire, instead. His face came close to hers, and for a moment Susannah thought he meant to kiss her goodnight. He looked long and hard at the crusted sore beside her mouth, instead.

“Well?” she finally asked. She could have said more, but he would have heard the tremor in her voice.

“I think it’s a little smaller. Once we leave the Badlands behind, it may heal on its own.”

“Do you really say so?”

The gunslinger shook his head at once. “I say *may*. Now lie over, Susannah. Take your rest.”

“All right, but don’t you let me sleep late this time. I want to watch my share.”

“Yes. Now lie over.”

She did as he said, and was asleep even before her eyes closed.

TEN

She’s in Central Park and it’s cold enough to see her breath. The sky overhead is white from side to side, a snow-sky, but she’s not cold. No, not in her new deerskin coat, leggings, vest, and funny deerskin mittens. There’s something on her head, too, pulled down over her ears and keeping them as toasty as the rest of her. She takes the cap off, curious, and sees it’s not deerskin like the rest of her new clothing, but a red-and-green stocking cap. Written across the front is MERRY CHRISTMAS.

She looks at it, startled. Can you have déjà vu in a dream? Apparently so. She looks around and there are Eddie and Jake, grinning at her. Their heads

are bare and she realizes she has in her hands a combination of the caps they were wearing in some other dream. She feels a great, soaring burst of joy, as if she has just solved some supposedly insoluble problem: squaring the circle, let us say, or finding the Ultimate Prime Number (take that, Blaine, may it bust ya brain, ya crazy choochoo train).

Eddie is wearing a sweatshirt that says I DRINK NOZZ-ALA!

Jake is wearing one that says I DRIVE THE TAKURO SPIRIT!

Both have cups of hot chocolate, the perfect kind mit schlag on top and little sprinkles of nutmeg dotting the cream.

“What world is this?” she asks them, and realizes that somewhere nearby carolers are singing “What Child Is This.”

“You must let him go his course alone,” says Eddie.

“Yar, and you must beware of Dandelo,” says Jake.

“I don’t understand,” Susannah says, and holds out her stocking cap to them. “Wasn’t this yours? Didn’t you share it?”

“It could be your hat, if you want it,” says Eddie, and then holds out his cup. “Here, I brought you hot chocolate.”

“No more twins,” says Jake. “There’s only one hat, do ya not see.”

Before she can reply, a voice speaks out of the air and the dream begins to unravel. “NINETEEN,” says the voice. “This is NINETEEN, this is CHASSIT.”

With each word the world becomes more unreal. She can see through Eddie and Jake. The good smell of hot chocolate is fading, being replaced by the smell of ash

(wednesday)

and leather. She sees Eddie’s lips moving and she thinks he’s saying a name, and then

ELEVEN

“Time to get up, Susannah,” Roland said. “It’s your watch.”

She sat up, looking around. The campfire had burned low.

“I heard him moving out there,” Roland said, “but that was some time ago. Susannah, are you all right? Were you dreaming?”

“Yes,” she said. “There was only one hat in this dream, and I was wearing it.”

“I don’t understand you.”

Nor did she understand herself. The dream was already fading, as dreams do. All she knew for sure was that the name on Eddie's lips just before he faded away for good had been that of Patrick Danville.



CHAPTER V: JOE COLLINS OF ODD'S LANE

ONE

Three weeks after the dream of one hat, three figures (two large, one small) emerged from a tract of upland forest and began to move slowly across a great open field toward more woods below. One of the large figures was pulling the other on a contraption that was more sled than travois.

Oy raced back and forth between Roland and Susannah, as if keeping a constant watch. His fur was thick and sleek from cold weather and a constant diet of deermeat. The land the three of them were currently covering might have been a meadow in the warmer seasons, but now the ground was buried under five feet of snow. The pulling was easier, because their way was finally leading downward. Roland actually dared hope the worst was over. And crossing the White Lands had not been too bad—at least, not yet. There was plenty of game, there was plenty of wood for their nightly fire, and on the four occasions when the weather turned nasty and blizzards blew, they had simply laid up and waited for the storms to wear themselves out on the wooded ridges that marched southeast. Eventually they did, although the angriest of these blizzards lasted two full days, and when they once more took to the Path of the Beam, they found another three feet of new snow on the ground. In the open places where the shrieking nor'east wind had been able to rage fully, there were drifts like ocean waves. Some of these had buried tall pines almost to their tops.

After their first day in the White Lands, with Roland struggling to pull her (and then the snow had been less than a foot deep),

Susannah saw that they were apt to spend months crossing those high, forested ridges unless Roland had a pair of snowshoes, so that first night she'd set out to make him a pair. It was a trial-and-error process ("By guess and by gosh" was how Susannah put it), but the gunslinger pronounced her third effort a success. The frames were made of limber birch branches, the centers of woven, overlapping deerskin strips. To Roland they looked like teardrops.

"How did you know to do this?" he asked her after his first day of wearing them. The increase in distance covered was nothing short of amazing, especially once he had learned to walk with a kind of rolling, shipboard stride that kept the snow from accumulating on the latticed surfaces.

"Television," Susannah said. "There used to be this program I watched when I was a kid, *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon*. Sergeant Preston didn't have a billy-bumbler to keep him company, but he *did* have his faithful dog, King. Anyway, I closed my eyes and tried to remember what the guy's snowshoes looked like." She pointed to the ones Roland was wearing. "That's the best I could do."

"You did fine," he said, and the sincerity she heard in his simple compliment made her tingle all over. This was not necessarily the way she wanted Roland (or any other man, for that matter) to make her feel, but she seemed stuck with it. She wondered if that was nature or nurture, and wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"They'll be all right as long as they don't fall apart," she allowed. Her first effort had done just that.

"I don't feel the strips loosening," he told her. "Stretching a little, maybe, but that's all."

Now, as they crossed the great open space, that third pair of snowshoes was still holding together, and because she felt as though she'd made some sort of contribution, Susannah was able to let Roland pull her along without too much guilt. She *did* wonder about Mordred from time to time, and one night about ten days after they had crossed the snow-boundary, she came out and asked Roland to tell her what he knew. What prompted her was his declaration that there was no need to set a watch, at least for awhile; they could both get a full ten hours' worth of sleep, if that's what their bodies could use. Oy would wake them if they needed waking.

Roland had sighed and looked into the fire for nearly a full minute, his arms around his knees and his hands clasped loosely between them. She had just about decided he wasn't going to answer at all when he said, "Still following, but falling further and further behind. Struggling to eat, struggling to catch up, struggling most of all to stay warm."

"To stay *warm*?" To Susannah this seemed hard to believe. There were trees all around them.

"He has no matches and none of the Sterno stuff, either. I believe that one night—early on, this would have been—he came upon one of our fires with live coals still under the ash, and he was able to carry some with him for a few days after that and so have a fire at night. It's how the ancient rock-dwellers used to carry fire on their journeys, or so I was told."

Susannah nodded. She had been taught roughly the same thing in a high school science class, although the teacher had admitted a lot of what they knew about how Stone Age people got along wasn't true knowledge at all, but only informed guesswork. She wondered how much of what Roland had just told her was also guesswork, and so she asked him.

"It's not guessing, but I can't explain it. If it's the touch, Susannah, it's not such as Jake had. Not seeing and hearing, or even dreaming. Although . . . do you believe we have dreams sometimes we don't remember after we awaken?"

"Yes." She thought of telling him about rapid eye movement, and the REM sleep experiments she'd read about in *Look* magazine, then decided it would be too complex. She contented herself with saying that she was sure folks had dreams every single night that they didn't remember.

"Mayhap I see him and hear him in those," Roland said. "All I know is that he's struggling to keep up. He knows so little about the world that it's really a wonder he's still alive at all."

"Do you feel sorry for him?"

"No. I can't afford pity, and neither can you."

But his eyes had left hers when he said that, and she thought he was lying. Maybe he didn't *want* to feel sorry for Mordred, but she was sure he did, at least a little. Maybe he wanted to hope that Mordred

would die on their trail—certainly there were plenty of chances it would happen, with hypothermia being the most likely cause—but Susannah didn't think he was quite able to do it. They might have outrun ka, but she reckoned that blood was still thicker than water.

There was something else, however, more powerful than even the blood of relation. She knew, because she could now feel it beating in her own head, both sleeping and waking. It was the Dark Tower. She thought that they were very close to it now. She had no idea what they were going to do about its mad guardian when and if they got there, but she found she no longer cared. For the present, all she wanted was to see it. The idea of entering it was still more than her imagination could deal with, but seeing it? Yes, she could imagine that. And she thought that seeing it would be enough.

TWO

They made their way slowly down the wide white downslope with Oy first hurrying at Roland's heel, then dropping behind to check on Susannah, then bounding back to Roland again. Bright blue holes sometimes opened above them. Roland knew that was the Beam at work, constantly pulling the cloud-cover southeast. Otherwise, the sky was white from horizon to horizon, and had a low *full* look both of them now recognized. More snow was on the come, and the gunslinger had an idea this storm might be the worst they'd seen. The wind was getting up, and the moisture in it was enough to numb all his exposed skin (after three weeks of diligent needlework, that amounted to not much more than his forehead and the tip of his nose). The gusts lifted long diaphanous scarves of white. These raced past them and then on down the slope like fantastical, shape-changing ballet-dancers.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" Susannah asked from behind him, almost wistfully.

Roland of Gilead, no judge of beauty (except once, in the outland of Mejis), grunted. He knew what would be beautiful to him: decent cover when the storm overtook them, something more than just a thick grove of trees. So he almost doubted what he saw when the latest gust of wind blew itself out and the snow settled. He dropped

the tow-band, stepped out of it, went back to Susannah (their gunna, now on the increase again, was strapped to the sledge behind her), and dropped on one knee next to her. Dressed in hides from top to toe, he looked more like a mangy bigfoot than a man.

“What do you make of that?” he asked her.

The wind kicked up again, harder than ever, at first obscuring what he had seen. When it dropped, a hole opened above them and the sun shone briefly through, lighting the snowfield with billions of diamond-chip sparkles. Susannah shaded her eyes with one hand and looked long downhill. What she saw was an inverted *T* carved in the snow. The cross arm, closest to them (but still at least two miles away) was relatively short, perhaps two hundred feet on either side. The long arm, however, was *very* long, going all the way to the horizon and then disappearing over it.

“Those are roads!” she said. “Someone’s plowed a couple of roads down there, Roland!”

He nodded. “I thought so, but I wanted to hear you say it. I see something else, as well.”

“What? Your eyes are sharper than mine, and by a lot.”

“When we get a little closer, you’ll see for yourself.”

He tried to rise and she tugged impatiently at his arm. “Don’t you play that game with me. What is it?”

“Roofs,” he said, giving in to her. “I think there are cottages down there. Mayhap even a town.”

“People? Are you saying *people*?”

“Well, it looks like there’s smoke coming from one of the houses. Although it’s hard to tell for sure with the sky so white.”

She didn’t know if she wanted to see people or not. Certainly such would complicate things. “Roland, we’ll have to be careful.”

“Yes,” he said, and went back to the tow-band again. Before he picked it up, he paused to readjust his gunbelt, dropping the holster a bit so it lay more comfortably near his left hand.

An hour later they came to the intersection of the lane and the road. It was marked by a snowbank easily eleven feet high, one that had been built by some sort of plow. Susannah could see tread-marks, like those made by a bulldozer, pressed into the packed snow. Rising out of this hardpack was a pole. The street sign on top was no

different from those she'd seen in all sorts of towns; at intersections in New York City, for that matter. The one indicating the short road said

ODD'S LANE

It was the other that thrilled her heart, however.

TOWER ROAD,

it read.

THREE

All but one of the cottages clustered around the intersection were deserted, and many lay in half-buried heaps, broken beneath the weight of accumulating snow. One, however—it was about three-quarters of the way down the lefthand arm of Odd's Lane—was clearly different from the others. The roof had been mostly cleared of its potentially crushing weight of snow, and a path had been shoveled from the lane to the front door. It was from the chimney of this quaint, tree-surrounded cottage that the smoke was issuing, feather-white. One window was lit a wholesome butter-yellow, too, but it was the smoke that captured Susannah's eye. As far as she was concerned, it was the final touch. The only question in her mind was who would answer the door when they knocked. Would it be Hansel or his sister Gretel? (And were those two twins? Had anyone ever researched the matter?) Perhaps it would be Little Red Riding Hood, or Goldilocks, wearing a guilty goatee of porridge.

"Maybe we should just pass it by," she said, aware that she had dropped her voice to a near-whisper, even though they were still on the high snowbank created by the plow. "Give it a miss and say thank ya." She gestured to the sign reading **TOWER ROAD**. "We've got a clear way, Roland—maybe we ought to take it."

"And if we should, do you think that Mordred will?" Roland asked. "Do you think he'll simply pass by and leave whoever lives there in peace?"

Here was a question that hadn't even occurred to her, and of course the answer was no. If Mordred decided he could kill whoever was in the cottage, he'd do it. For food if the inhabitants were edible, but food would only be a secondary consideration. The woods behind them had been teeming with game, and even if Mordred hadn't been able to catch his own supper (and in his spider form, Susannah was sure he would have been perfectly capable of doing that), they had left the remains of their own meals at a good many camps. No, he would come out of the snowy uplands fed . . . but not happy. Not happy at all. And so woe to whoever happened to be in his path.

On the other hand, she thought . . . only there *was* no other hand, and all at once it was too late, anyway. The front door of the cottage opened, and an old man came out onto the stoop. He was wearing boots, jeans, and a heavy parka with a fur-lined hood. To Susannah this latter garment looked like something that might have been purchased at the Army-Navy Surplus Store in Greenwich Village.

The old man was rosy-cheeked, the picture of wintry good health, but he limped heavily, depending on the stout stick in his left hand. From behind his quaint little cottage with its fairy-tale plume of smoke came the piercing whinny of a horse.

"Sure, Lippy, I see em!" the old man cried, turning in that direction. "I got a'least one good eye left, ain't I?" Then he turned back to where Roland stood on the snowbank with Susannah and Oy flanking him. He raised his stick in a salute that seemed both merry and unafraid. Roland raised his own hand in return.

"Looks like we're in for some palaver whether we want it or not," said Roland.

"I know," she replied. Then, to the bumbler: "Oy, mind your manners now, you hear?"

Oy looked at her and then back at the old man without making a sound. On the subject of minding his manners he'd keep his own counsel awhile, it seemed.

The old man's bad leg was clearly *very* bad—"Next door to nuthin," Daddy Mose Carver would have said—but he got on well enough with his stick, moving in a sideways hopping gait that Susannah found both amusing and admirable. "Spry as a cricket" was another of Daddy Mose's many sayings, and perhaps this one fit yonder old man better.

Certainly she saw no harm or danger in a white-haired fellow (the hair was long and baby-fine, hanging to the shoulders of his anorak) who had to hop along on a stick. And, as he drew closer, she saw that one of his eyes was filmed white with a cataract. The pupil, which was faintly visible, seemed to look dully off to their left. The other, however, regarded the newcomers with lively interest as the inhabitant of the cottage hopped down Odd's Lane toward them.

The horse whinnied again and the old man waved his stick wildly against the white, low-lying sky. "Shut up ya haybox, ya turd-factory, y'old clap-cunt gammer-gurt, ain't you ever seen cump'ny before? Was ya born in a barn, hee-hee? (For if y'wasn't, I'm a blue-eyed baboon, which there ain't no such thing!)"

Roland snorted with genuine laughter, and the last of Susannah's watchful apprehension departed. The horse whinnied again from the outbuilding behind the cottage—it was nowhere near grand enough to be called a barn—and the old man waved his stick at it once more, almost falling to the snowpack in the process. His awkward but nonetheless rapid gait had now brought him halfway to their location. He saved himself from what would have been a nasty tumble, took a large sidle-hop using the stick for a prop, then waved it cheerily in their direction.

"Hile, gunslingers!" the old man shouted. His lungs, at least, were admirable. "Gunslingers on pilgrimage to the Dark Tower, so y'are, so ya must be, for don't I see the big irons with the yaller grips? And the Beam be back, fair and strong, for I feel it and Lippy do, too! Spry as a colt she's been ever since Christmas, or what I call Christmas, not having a calendar nor seen Sainty Claus, which I wouldn't expect, for have I been a good boy? Never! Never! Good boys go to heaven, and all my friends be in t'other place, toastin marshmallows and drinkin Nozzy spiked with whiskey in the devil's den! Arrr, ne'mine, my tongue's caught in the middle and runs on both ends! Hile to one, hile to t'other, and hile to the little furry gobbins in between! Billy-bumbler as I live and breathe! *Yow*, ain't it good to see ya! Joe Collins is my name, Joe Collins of Odd's Lane, plenty odd m'self, one-eyed and lame I am, but otherwise at your service!"

He had now reached the snowbank marking the spot where Tower Road ended . . . or where it began, depending on your point of view

and the direction you were traveling, Susannah supposed. He looked up at them, one eye bright as a bird's, the other looking off into the white wastes with dull fascination.

“Long days and pleasant nights, yar, so say I, and anyone who'd say different, they ain't here anyway, so who gives a good goddam what they say?” From his pocket he took what could only be a gumdrop and tossed it up. Oy grabbed it out of the air easily: *Snap!* and gone.

At this both Roland *and* Susannah laughed. It felt strange to laugh, but it was a good feeling, like finding something of value long after you were sure it was lost forever. Even Oy appeared to be grinning, and if the horse bothered him (it trumpeted again as they looked down on sai Collins from their snowbank perch), it didn't show.

“I got a million questions for yer,” Collins said, “but I'll start with just one: how in the hell are yers gonna get down offa that snowbank?”

FOUR

As it turned out, Susannah slid down, using their travois as a sled. She chose the place where the northwestern end of Odd's Lane disappeared beneath the snow, because the embankment was a little shallower there. Her trip was short but not smooth. She hit a large and crusted snow-boulder three quarters of the way down, fell off the travois, and made the rest of her descent in a pair of gaudy somersaults, laughing wildly as she fell. The travois turned over—turned turtle, may it do ya—and spilled their gunna every whichway and hell to breakfast.

Roland and Oy came leaping down behind. Roland bent over her at once, clearly concerned, and Oy sniffed anxiously at her face, but Susannah was still laughing. So was the codger. Daddy Mose would have called his laughter “gay as old Dad's hatband.”

“I'm fine, Roland—took worse tumbles off my Flexible Flyer when I was a kid, tell ya true.”

“All's well that ends well,” Joe Collins agreed. He gave her a look with his good eye to make sure she was indeed all right, then began to pick up some of the scattered goods, leaning laboriously over on his stick, his fine white hair blowing around his rosy face.

“Nah, nah,” Roland said, reaching out to grasp his arm. “I’ll do that, thee’ll fall on thy thiddles.”

At this the old man roared with laughter, and Roland joined him willingly enough. From behind the cottage, the horse gave another loud whinny, as if protesting all this good humor.

“Fall on thy thiddles’! Man, that’s a good one! I don’t have the veriest clue under heaven what my thiddles are, yet it’s a good one! Ain’t it just!” He brushed the snow off Susannah’s hide coat while Roland quickly picked up the spilled goods and stacked them back on their makeshift sled. Oy helped, bringing several wrapped packages of meat in his jaws and dropping them on the back of the travois.

“That’s a smart little beastie!” Joe Collins said admiringly.

“He’s been a good trailmate,” Susannah agreed. She was now very glad they had stopped; would not have deprived herself of this good-natured old man’s acquaintance for worlds. She offered him her clumsily clad right hand. “I’m Susannah Dean—Susannah of New York. Daughter of Dan.”

He took her hand and shook it. His own hand was ungloved, and although the fingers were gnarled with arthritis, his grip was strong. “New York, is it! Why, I once hailed from there, myself. Also Akron, Omaha, and San Francisco. Son of Henry and Flora, if it matters to you.”

“You’re from America-side?” Susannah asked.

“Oh God yes, but long ago and long,” he said. “What’chee might call delah.” His good eye sparkled; his bad eye went on regarding the snowy wastes with that same dead lack of interest. He turned to Roland. “And who might you be, my friend? For I’ll call you my friend same as I would anyone, unless they prove different, in which case I’d belt em with Bessie, which is what I call my stick.”

Roland was grinning. Was helpless not to, Susannah thought. “Roland Deschain, of Gilead. Son of Steven.”

“Gilead! *Gilead!*” Collins’s good eye went round with amazement. “There’s a name out of the past, ain’t it? One for the books! Holy Pete, you must be older’n God!”

“Some would say so,” Roland agreed, now only smiling . . . but warmly.

“And the little fella?” he asked, bending forward. From his pocket, Collins produced two more gumdrops, one red and one green. Christmas colors, and Susannah felt a faint touch of *déjà vu*. It brushed her mind like a wing and then was gone. “What’s your name, little fella? What do they holler when they want you to come home?”

“He doesn’t—”

—*talk anymore, although he did once* was how Susannah meant to finish, but before she could, the bumbler said: “Oy!” And he said it as brightly and firmly as ever in his time with Jake.

“Good fella!” Collins said, and tumbled the gumdrops into Oy’s mouth. Then he reached out with that same gnarled hand, and Oy raised his paw to meet it. They shook, well-met near the intersection of Odd’s Lane and Tower Road.

“I’ll be damned,” Roland said mildly.

“So won’t we all in the end, I reckon, Beam or no Beam,” Joe Collins remarked, letting go of Oy’s paw. “But not today. Now what I say is that we ort to get in where it’s warm and we can palaver over a cup of coffee—for I have some, so I do—or a pot of ale. I even have sumpin I call eggnog, if it does ya. It does me pretty fine, especially with a teensy piss o’ rum in it, but who knows? I ain’t really *tasted* nuffink in five years or more. Air outta the Discordia’s done for my taste-buds and for my nose, too. Anyro’, what do you say?” He regarded them brightly.

“I’d say that sounds pretty damned fine,” Susannah told him. Rarely had she said anything she meant more.

He slapped her companionably on the shoulder. “A good woman is a pearl beyond price! Don’t know if that’s Shakespeare, the Bible, or a combination of the t—

“Arrr, Lippy, goddam what used to be yer eyes, where do you think *you’re* going? Did yer want to meet these folks, was that it?”

His voice had fallen into the outrageous croon that seems the exclusive property of people who live alone except for a pet or two. His horse had blundered its way to them and Collins grabbed her around the neck, petting her with rough affection, but Susannah thought the beast was the ugliest quadruped she’d seen in her whole life. Some of her good cheer melted away at the sight of the thing. Lippy was blind—not in one eye but in both—and scrawny as a

scarecrow. As she walked, the rack of her bones shifted back and forth so clearly beneath her mangy coat that Susannah almost expected some of them to poke through. For a moment she remembered the black corridor under Castle Discordia with a kind of nightmarish total recall: the slithering sound of the thing that had followed them, and the bones. All those bones.

Collins might have seen some of this on her face, for when he spoke again he sounded almost defensive. “Her an ugly old thing, I know, but when you get as old as she is, I don’t reckon you’ll be winnin many beauty contests yourself!” He patted the horse’s chafed and sore-looking neck, then seized her scant mane as if to pull the hair out by the roots (although Lippy showed no pain) and turned her in the road so she was facing the cottage again. As he did this, the first flakes of the coming storm skirled down.

“Come on, Lippy, y’old ki’-box and gammergurt, ye swayback nag and lost four-legged leper! Can’t ye smell the snow in the air? Because I can, and my nose went south years ago!”

He turned back to Roland and Susannah and said, “I hope y’prove partial to my cookin, so I do, because I think this is gonna be a three-day blow. Aye, three at least before Demon Moon shows er face again! But we’re well-met, so we are, and I set my watch and warrant on it! Ye just don’t want to judge my hospitality by my *horse*-pitality! Hee!”

I should hope not, Susannah thought, and gave a little shiver. The old man had turned away, but Roland gave her a curious look. She smiled and shook her head as if to say *It’s nothing*—which, of course, it was. She wasn’t about to tell the gunslinger that a spavined nag with cataracts on her eyes and her ribs showing had given her a case of the whim-whams. Roland had never called her a silly goose, and by God she didn’t mean to give him cause to do so n—

As if hearing her thoughts, the old nag looked back and bared her few remaining teeth at Susannah. The eyes in Lippy’s bony wedge of a head were pus-rimmed plugs of blindness above her somehow gruesome grin. She whinnied at Susannah as if to say *Think what you will, blackbird; I’ll be here long after thee’s gone thy course and died thy death*. At the same time the wind gusted, swirling snow in their faces, soughing in the snow-laden firs, and hooting beneath the eaves of Collins’s little house. It began to die away and then strengthened

again for a moment, making a brief, grieving cry that sounded almost human.

FIVE

The outbuilding consisted of a chicken-coop on one side, Lippy's stall on the other, and a little loft stuffed with hay. "I can get up there and fork it down," Collins said, "but I take my life in my hands ever time I do, thanks to this bust hip of mine. Now, I can't make you help an old man, sai Deschain, but if you would . . . ?"

Roland climbed the ladder resting a-tilt against the edge of the loft floor and tossed down hay until Collins told him it was good, plenty enough to last Lippy through even four days' worth of blow. ("For she don't eat worth what'chee might call a Polish fuck, as you can see lookin at her," he said.) Then the gunslinger came back down and Collins led them along the short back walk to his cottage. The snow piled on either side was as high as Roland's head.

"Be it ever so humble, et cet'ra," Joe said, and ushered them into his kitchen. It was paneled in knotty pine which was actually plastic, Susannah saw when she got closer. And it was delightfully warm. The name on the electric stove was Roscco, a brand she'd never heard of. The fridge was an Amana and had a special little door set into the front, above the handle. She leaned closer and saw the words MAGIC ICE. "This thing makes ice cubes?" she asked, delighted.

"Well, no, not exactly," Joe said. "It's the *freezer* that makes em, beauty; that thing on the front just drops em into your drink."

This struck her funny, and she laughed. She looked down, saw Oy looking up at her with his old fiendish grin, and that made her laugh harder than ever. Mod cons aside, the smell of the kitchen was wonderfully nostalgic: sugar and spice and everything nice.

Roland was looking up at the fluorescent lights and Collins nodded. "Yar, yar, I got all the 'lectric," he said. "Hot-air furnace, too, ain't it nice? And nobody ever sends me a bill! The genny's in a shed round to t'other side. It's a Honda, and quiet as Sunday morning! Even when you get right up on top of its little shed, you don't hear nuffink but *mmmmmm*. Stuttering Bill changes the propane tank and does the maintenance when it needs maintaining, which hasn't been

but twice in all the time I've been here. Nawp, Joey's lyin, he'll soon be dyin. Three times, it's been. Three in all."

"Who's Stuttering Bill?" Susannah asked, just as Roland was asking "How long have you been here?"

Joe Collins laughed. "One at a time, me foine new friends, one at a time!" He had set his stick aside to struggle out of his coat, put his weight on his bad leg, made a low snarling sound, and nearly fell over. *Would* have fallen over, had Roland not steadied him.

"Thankee, thankee, thankee," Joe said. "Although I tell you what, it wouldn't have been the first time I wound up with my nose on that lernoleum! But, as you saved me a tumble, it's your question I'll answer first. I've been here, Odd Joe of Odd's Lane, just about seb'nteen years. The only reason I can't tell you bang-on is that for awhile there, time got pretty goddam funny, if you know what I mean."

"We do," Susannah said. "Believe me, we do."

Collins was now divesting himself of a sweater, and beneath it was another. Susannah's first impression had been of a stout old man who stopped just short of fat. Now she saw that a lot of what she'd taken for fat was nothing but padding. He wasn't as desperately scrawny as his old horse, but he was a long shout from stout.

"Now Stuttering Bill," the old man continued, removing the second sweater, "he be a robot. Cleans the house as well as keepin my generator runnin . . . and a-course he's the one that does the plowin. When I first come here, he only stuttered once in awhile; now it's every second or third word. What I'll do when he finally runs down I dunno." To Susannah's ear, he sounded singularly unworried about it.

"Maybe he'll get better, now that the Beam's working right again," she said.

"He might last a little *longer*, but I doubt like hell that he'll get any *better*," Joe said. "Machines don't heal the way living things do." He'd finally reached his thermal undershirt, and here the stripdown stopped. Susannah was grateful. Looking at the somehow ghastly barrel of the horse's ribs, so close beneath the short gray fur, had been enough. She had no wish to see the master's, as well.

"Off with yer coats and your leggings," Joe said. "I'll get yez egnog or whatever else ye'd like in a minute or two, but first I'd show yer my

livin room, for it's my pride, so it is."

SIX

There was a rag rug on the living room floor that would have looked at home in Gramma Holmes's house, and a La-Z-Boy recliner with a table beside it. The table was heaped with magazines, paperback books, a pair of spectacles, and a brown bottle containing God knew what sort of medicine. There was a television, although Susannah couldn't imagine what old Joe might possibly watch on it (Eddie and Jake would have recognized the VCR sitting on the shelf beneath). But what took all of Susannah's attention—and Roland's, as well—was the photograph on one of the walls. It had been thumbtacked there slightly askew, in a casual fashion that seemed (to Susannah, at least) almost sacrilegious.

It was a photograph of the Dark Tower.

Her breath deserted her. She worked her way over to it, barely feeling the knots and nubbles of the rag rug beneath her palms, then raised her arms. "Roland, pick me up!"

He did, and she saw that his face had gone dead pale except for two hard balls of color burning in his thin cheeks. His eyes were blazing. The Tower stood against the darkening sky with sunset painting the hills behind it orange, the slitted windows rising in their eternal spiral. From some of those windows there spilled a dim and eldritch glow. She could see balconies jutting out from the dark stone sides at every two or three stories, and the squat doors that opened onto them, all shut. Locked as well, she had no doubt. Before the Tower was the field of roses, Can'-Ka No Rey, dim but still lovely in the shadows. Most of the roses were closed against the coming dark but a few still peeped out like sleepy eyes.

"Joe!" she said. Her voice was little more than a whisper. She felt faint, and it seemed she could hear singing voices, far and wee. "Oh, Joe! This *picture* . . .!"

"Aye, mum," he said, clearly pleased by her reaction. "It's a good 'un, ain't it? Which is why I pinned it up. I've got others, but this is the best. Right at sunset, so the shadow seems to lie forever back

along the Path of the Beam. Which in a way it does, as I'm sure ye both must know."

Roland's breathing in her right ear was rapid and ragged, as if he'd just run a race, but Susannah barely noticed. For it was not just the *subject* of the picture that had filled her with awe.

"This is a *Polaroid!*"

"Well . . . yar," he said, sounding puzzled at the level of her excitement. "I suppose Stuttering Bill could have brung me a Kodak if I'd ast for one, but how would I ever have gotten the fillum developed? And by the time I thought of a video camera—for the gadget under the TV'd play such things—I was too old to go back, and yonder nag 'uz too old to carry me. Yet I would if I could, for it's lovely there, a place of warm-hearted ghosts. I heard the singing voices of friends long gone; my Ma and Pa, too. I allus—"

A paralysis had seized Roland. She felt it in the stillness of his muscles. Then it broke and he turned from the picture so fast that it made Susannah dizzy. "You've been there?" he asked. "*You've been to the Dark Tower?*"

"Indeed I have," said the old man. "For who else do ye think took that pitcher? Ansel Fuckin Adams?"

"*When* did you take it?"

"That's from my last trip," he said. "Two year ago, in the summer—although that's lower land, ye must know, and if the snow ever comes to it, I've never seen it."

"How long from here?"

Joe closed his bad eye and calculated. It didn't take him long, but to Roland and Susannah it *seemed* long, very long indeed. Outside, the wind gusted. The old horse whinnied as if in protest at the sound. Beyond the frost-rimmed window, the falling snow was beginning to twist and dance.

"Well," he said, "ye're on the downslope now, and Stuttering Bill keeps Tower Road plowed for as far as ye'd go; what else does the old whatcha-macallit have to do with his time? O' course ye'll want to wait here until this new nor'east jeezer blows itself out—"

"How long once we're on the move?" Roland asked.

"Rarin t'go, ain'tcha? Aye, hot n rarin, and why not, for if you've come from In-World ye must have been many long years gettin this

far. Hate to think how many, so I do. I'm gonna say it'd take you six days to get out of the White Lands, maybe seven—"

"Do you call these lands Empathica?" Susannah asked.

He blinked, then gave her a puzzled look. "Why no, ma'am—I've never heard this part of creation called anything but the White Lands."

The puzzled look was bogus. She was almost sure of it. Old Joe Collins, cheery as Father Christmas in a children's play, had just lied to her. She wasn't sure why, and before she could pursue it, Roland asked sharply: "Would you let that go for now? Would you, for your father's sake?"

"Yes, Roland," she said meekly. "Of course."

Roland turned back to Joe, still holding Susannah on his hip.

"Might take you as long as nine days, I guess," Joe said, scratching his chin, "for that road can be plenty slippery, especially after Bill packs down the snow, but you can't get him to stop. He's got his orders to follow. His *programm*, he calls it." The old man saw Roland getting ready to speak and raised his hand. "Nay, nay, I'm not drawrin it out to irritate cher, sir or sai or whichever you prefer—it's just that I'm not much used to cump'ny.

"Once you get down b'low the snowline it must be another ten or twelve days a-walkin, but ain't no need in the world to walk unless you fancy it. There's another one of those Positronics huts down there with any number a' wheelie vehicles parked inside. Like golf-carts, they are. The bat'tries are all dead, natcherly—flat as yer hat—but there's a gennie there, too, Honda just like mine, and it was a-workin the last time I was down there, for Bill keeps things in trim as much as he can. If you could charge up one of those wheelies, why that'd cut your time down to four days at most. So here's what I think: if you had to hoof it the whole way, it might take you as long as nineteen days. If you can go the last leg in one o' them hummers—that's what I call em, hummers, for that's the sound they make when they're runnin—I should say ten days. Maybe eleven."

The room fell silent. The wind gusted, throwing snow against the side of the cottage, and Susannah once more marked how it sounded almost like a human cry. A trick of the angles and eaves, no doubt.

“Less than three weeks, even if we had to walk,” Roland said. He reached out toward the Polaroid photograph of the dusky stone tower standing against the sunset sky, but did not quite touch it. It was as if, Susannah thought, he were afraid to touch it. “After all the years and all the miles.”

Not to mention the gallons of spilled blood, Susannah thought, but she would not have said this even if the two of them had been alone. There was no need to; he knew how much blood had been spilled as well as she did. But there was something off-key here. Off-key or downright wrong. And the gunslinger did *not* seem to know *that*.

Sympathy was to respect the feelings of another. Empathy was to actually *share* those feelings. Why would folks call any land Empathica?

And why would this pleasant old man lie about it?

“Tell me something, Joe Collins,” Roland said.

“Aye, gunslinger, if I can.”

“Have you been right up *to* it? Laid your hand on the stone of it?”

The old man looked at first to see if Roland was joshing him. When he was sure that wasn’t the case, he looked shocked. “No,” he said, and for the first time sounded as American as Susannah herself. “That pitcher’s as close as I dared go. The edge of the rosefield. I’m gonna say two, two hundred and fifty yards away. What the robot’d call five hundred arcs o’ the wheel.”

Roland nodded. “And why not?”

“Because I thought to go closer might kill me, but I wouldn’t be able to stop. The voices would draw me on. So I thought then, and so I do think, even today.”

SEVEN

After dinner—surely the finest meal Susannah had had since being hijacked into this other world, and possibly the best in her entire life—the sore on her face burst wide open. It was Joe Collins’s fault, in a way, but even later, when they had much to hold against the only inhabitant of Odd’s Lane, she did not blame him for that. It was the last thing he would have wanted, surely.

He served chicken, roasted to a turn and especially tasty after all the venison. With it, Joe brought to table mashed potatoes with gravy,

cranberry jelly sliced into thick red discs, green peas (“Only canned, say sorry,” he told them), and a dish of little boiled onions bathing in sweet canned milk. There was also eggnog. Roland and Susannah drank it with childish greed, although both passed on “the teensy piss o’ rum.” Oy had his own dinner; Joe fixed a plate of chicken and potatoes for him and then set it on the floor by the stove. Oy made quick work of it and then lay in the doorway between the kitchen and the combination living room/dining room, licking his chops to get every taste of giblet gravy out of his whiskers while watching the humes with his ears up.

“I couldn’t eat dessert so don’t ask me,” Susannah said when she’d finished cleaning her plate for the second time, sopping up the remains of the gravy with a piece of bread. “I’m not sure I can even get down from this chair.”

“Well, that’s all right,” Joe said, looking disappointed, “maybe later. I’ve got a chocolate pudding and a butterscotch one.”

Roland raised his napkin to muffle a belch and then said, “I could eat a dab of both, I think.”

“Well, come to that, maybe I could, too,” Susannah allowed. How many eons since she’d tasted butterscotch?

When they were done with the pudding, Susannah offered to help with the cleaning-up but Joe waved her away, saying he’d just put the pots and plates in the dishwasher to rinse and then run “the whole happy bunch of em” later. He seemed spryer to her as he and Roland went back and forth into the kitchen, less dependent on the stick. Susannah guessed that the little piss o’ rum (or maybe several of them, adding up to one large piss by the end of the meal) might have had something to do with it.

He poured coffee and the three of them (four, counting Oy) sat down in the living room. Outside it was growing dark and the wind was screaming louder than ever. *Mordred’s out there someplace, hunkered down in a snow-hollow or a grove of trees*, she thought, and once again had to stifle pity for him. It would have been easier if she hadn’t known that, murderous or not, he must still be a child.

“Tell us how you came to be here, Joe,” Roland invited.

Joe grinned. “That’s a hair-raising story,” he said, “but if you really want to hear it, I guess I don’t mind tellin it.” The grin mellowed to a

wistful smile. “It’s nice, havin folks to talk to for a little bit. Lippy does all right at listenin, but she never says nuffink back.”

He’d started off trying to be a teacher, Joe said, but quickly discovered that life wasn’t for him. He liked the kids—loved them, in fact—but hated all the administrative bullshit and the way the system seemed set up to make sure no square pegs escaped the relentless rounding process. He quit teaching after only three years and went into show business.

“Did you sing or dance?” Roland wanted to know.

“Neither one,” Joe replied. “I gave em the old stand-up.”

“Stand-up?”

“He means he was a comedian,” Susannah said. “He told jokes.”

“Correct!” Joe said brightly. “Some folks actually thought they were funny, too. Course, they were the minority.”

He got an agent whose previous enterprise, a discount men’s clothing store, had gone bankrupt. One thing led to another, he said, and one *gig* led to another, too. Eventually he found himself working second- and third-rate nightclubs from coast to coast, driving a battered but reliable old Ford pickup truck and going where Shantz, his agent, sent him. He almost never worked the weekends; on the weekends, even the third-rate clubs wanted to book rock-and-roll bands.

This was in the late sixties and early seventies, and there’d been no shortage of what Joe called “current events material”: hippies and yuppies, bra-burners and Black Panthers, movie-stars, and, as always, politics—but he said he had been more of a traditional joke-oriented comedian. Let Mort Sahl and George Carlin do the current-events shtick if they wanted it; he’d stick to *Speaking of my mother-in-law* and *They say our Polish friends are dumb but let me tell you about this Irish girl I met*.

During his recitation, an odd (and—to Susannah, at least—rather poignant) thing happened. Joe Collins’s Mid-World accent, with its yers and yars and if-it-does-yas began to cross-fade into an accent she could only identify as Wiseguy American. She kept expecting to hear *bird* come out of his mouth as *boid*, *heard* as *hoid*, but she guessed that was only because she’d spent so much time with Eddie. She thought Joe Collins was one of those odd natural mimics whose voices are the

auditory equivalent of Silly Putty, taking impressions that fade as quickly as they rise to the surface. Doing a club in Brooklyn, it probably *was boid* and *hoid*; in Pittsburgh it would be *burrd* and *hurrd*; the Giant Eagle supermarket would become *Jaunt Iggle*.

Roland stopped him early on to ask if a comic was like a court jester, and the old man laughed heartily. "You got it. Just think of a bunch of people sitting around in a smoky room with drinks in their hands instead of the king and his courtiers."

Roland nodded, smiling.

"There are advantages to being a funnyman doing one-nighters in the Midwest, though," he said. "If you tank in Dubuque, all that happens is you end up doing twenty minutes instead of forty-five and then it's on to the next town. There are probably places in Mid-World where they'd cut off your damn head for stinking up the joint."

At this the gunslinger burst out laughing, a sound that still had the power to startle Susannah (although she was laughing herself). "You say true, Joe."

In the summer of 1972, Joe had been playing a nightclub called Jango's in Cleveland, not far from the ghetto. Roland interrupted again, this time wanting to know what a ghetto was.

"In the case of Hauck," Susannah said, "it means a part of the city where most of the people are black and poor, and the cops have a habit of swinging their billyclubs first and asking questions later."

"Bing!" Joe exclaimed, and rapped his knuckles on the top of his head. "Couldn't have said it better myself!"

Again there came that odd, babyish crying sound from the front of the house, but this time the wind was in a relative lull. Susannah glanced at Roland, but if the gunslinger heard, he gave no sign.

It was the wind, Susannah told herself. What else could it be?

Mordred, her mind whispered back. Mordred out there, freezing. Mordred out there dying while we sit in here with our hot coffee.

But she said nothing.

There had been trouble in Hauck for a couple of weeks, Joe said, but he'd been drinking pretty heavily ("Hitting it hard" was how he put it) and hardly realized that the crowd at his second show was about a fifth the size of the one at the first. "Hell, I was on a roll," he

said. "I don't know about anyone else, but I was knocking *myself* dead, rolling me in the aisles."

Then someone had thrown a Molotov cocktail through the club's front window (*Molotov cocktail* was a term Roland understood), and before you could say *Take my mother-in-law . . . please*, the place was on fire. Joe had boogied out the back, through the stage door. He'd almost made it to the street when three men ("all very black, all roughly the size of NBA centers") grabbed him. Two held; the third punched. Then someone swung a bottle. Boom-boom, out go the lights. He had awakened on a grassy hillside near a deserted town called Stone's Warp, according to the signs in the empty buildings along Main Street. To Joe Collins it had looked like the set of a Western movie after all the actors had gone home.

It was around this time that Susannah decided she did not believe much of sai Collins's story. It was undoubtedly entertaining, and given Jake's first entry into Mid-World, after being run over in the street and killed while on his way to school, it was not totally implausible. But she still didn't believe much of it. The question was, did it matter?

"You couldn't call it heaven, because there were no clouds and no choirs of angels," Joe said, "but I decided it was some sort of an afterlife, just the same." He had wandered about. He found food, he found a horse (Lippy), and moved on. He had met various roving bands of people, some friendly, some not, some true-threaded, some mutie. Enough so he'd picked up some of the lingo and a little Mid-World history; certainly he knew about the Beams and the Tower. At one point he'd tried to cross the Badlands, he said, but he'd gotten scared and turned back when his skin began to break out in all sorts of sores and weird blemishes.

"I got a boil on my ass, and that was the final touch," he said. "Six or eight years ago, this might have been. Me n Lippy said the hell with going any further. That was when I found this place, which is called Westring, and when Stuttering Bill found me. He's got a little doctorin, and he lanced the boil on my bottom."

Roland wanted to know if Joe had witnessed the passage of the Crimson King as that mad creature made his final pilgrimage to the Dark Tower. Joe said he had not, but that six months ago there had been a terrible storm ("a real boilermaker") that drove him down into

his cellar. While he was there the electric lights had failed, genny or no genny, and as he cowered in the dark, a sense had come to him that some terrible creature was close by, and that it might at any moment touch Joe's mind and follow his thoughts to where he was hiding.

"You know what I felt like?" he asked them.

Roland and Susannah shook their heads. Oy did the same, in perfect imitation.

"Snack-food," Joe said. "Potential snack-food."

This part of his story's true, Susannah thought. He may have changed it around a little, but basically it's true. And if she had any reason to think that, it was only because the idea of the Crimson King traveling in his own portable storm seemed horribly plausible.

"What did you do?" Roland asked.

"Went to sleep," he said. "It's a talent I've always had, like doing impressions—although I don't do famous voices in my act, because they never go over out in the sticks. Not unless you're Rich Little, at least. Strange but true. I can sleep pretty much on command, so that's what I did down in the cellar. When I woke up again the lights were back on and the . . . the whatever-it-was was gone. I know about the Crimson King, of course, I see folks from time to time still—nomads like you three, for the most part—and they talk about him. Usually they fork the sign of the evil eye and spit between their fingers when they do. You think that was him, huh? You think the Crimson King actually passed by Odd's Lane on his way to the Tower." Then, before they had a chance to answer: "Well, why not? Tower Road's the main throughfare, after all. It goes all the way there."

You know it was him, Susannah thought. What game are you playing, Joe?

The thin cry that was most definitely not the wind came again. She no longer thought it was Mordred, though. She thought that maybe it was coming from the cellar where Joe had gone to hide from the Crimson King . . . or so he'd said. Who was down there now? And was he hiding, as Joe had done, or was he a prisoner?

"It hasn't been a bad life," Joe was saying. "Not the life I expected, not by any manner or means, but I got a theory—the folks who end up living the lives they expected are more often than not the ones

who end up takin sleepin pills or stickin the barrel of a gun in their mouths and pullin the trigger.”

Roland seemed still to be a few turns back, because he said, “You were a court jester and the customers in these inns were your court.”

Joe smiled, showing a lot of white teeth. Susannah frowned. Had she seen his teeth before? They had been doing a lot of laughing and she *should* have seen them, but she couldn’t remember that she actually had. Certainly he didn’t have the mush-mouth sound of someone whose teeth are mostly gone (such people had consulted with her father on many occasions, most of them in search of artificial replacements). If she’d had to guess earlier on, she would have said he *had* teeth but they were down to nothing but pegs and nubbins, and—

And what’s the matter with you, girl? He might be lying about a few things, but he surely didn’t grow a fresh set of teeth since you sat down to dinner! You’re letting your imagination run away with you.

Was she? Well, it was possible. And maybe that thin cry was nothing but the sound of the wind in the eaves at the front of the house, after all.

“I’d hear some of your jokes and stories,” Roland said. “As you told them on the road, if it does ya.”

Susannah looked at him closely, wondering if the gunslinger had some ulterior motive for this request, but he seemed genuinely interested. Even before seeing the Polaroid of the Dark Tower tacked to the living room wall (his eyes returned to it constantly as Joe told his story), Roland had been invested by a kind of hectic good cheer that was really not much like him at all. It was almost as if he were ill, edging in and out of delirium.

Joe Collins seemed surprised by the gunslinger’s request, but not at all displeased. “Good God,” he said. “I haven’t done any stand-up in what seems like a thousand years . . . and considering the way time stretched there for awhile, maybe it *has* been a thousand. I’m not sure I’d know how to begin.”

Susannah surprised herself by saying, “Try.”

Joe thought about it and then stood up, brushing a few errant crumbs from his shirt. He limped to the center of the room, leaving his crutch leaning against his chair. Oy looked up at him with his ears cocked and his old grin on his chops, as if anticipating the entertainment to come. For a moment Joe looked uncertain. Then he took a deep breath, let it out, and gave them a smile. “Promise you won’t throw no tomatoes if I stink up the joint,” he said. “Remember, it’s been a long time.”

“Not after you took us in and fed us,” Susannah said. “Never in life.”

Roland, always literal, said, “We have no tomatoes, in any case.”

“Right, right. Although there are some canned ones in the pantry . . . forget I said that!”

Susannah smiled. So did Roland.

Encouraged, Joe said: “Okay, let’s go back to that magical place called Jango’s in that magical city some folks call the mistake on the lake. Cleveland, Ohio, in other words. Second show. The one I never got to finish, and I was on a roll, take my word for it. Give me just a second . . .”

He closed his eyes. Seemed to gather himself. When he opened them again, he somehow looked ten years younger. It was astounding. And he didn’t just *sound* American when he began to speak, he *looked* American. Susannah couldn’t have explained that in words, but she knew it was true: here was one Joe Collins, Made in U.S.A.

“Hey, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Jango’s, I’m Joe Collins and you’re not.”

Roland chuckled and Susannah smiled, mostly to be polite—that was a pretty old one.

“The management has asked me to remind you that this is two-beers-for-a-buck night. Got it? Good. With them the motive is profit, with me it’s self-interest. Because the more you drink, the funnier I get.”

Susannah’s smile widened. There was a rhythm to comedy, even *she* knew that, although she couldn’t have done even five minutes of stand-up in front of a noisy nightclub crowd, not if her life had depended on it. There was a *rhythm*, and after an uncertain beginning, Joe was finding his. His eyes were half-lidded, and she

guessed he was seeing the mixed colors of the gels over the stage—so like the colors of the Wizard’s Rainbow, now that she thought of it—and smelling the smoke of fifty smoldering cigarettes. One hand on the chrome pole of the mike; the other free to make any gesture it liked. Joe Collins playing Jango’s on a Friday night—

No, not a Friday. He said all the clubs book rock-and-roll bands on the weekends.

“Ne’mine all that mistake-on-the-lake stuff, Cleveland’s a beautiful city,” Joe said. He was picking up the pace a little now. Starting to rap, Eddie might have said. “My folks are from Cleveland, but when they were seventy they moved to Florida. They didn’t want to, but shitfire, it’s the law. Bing!” Joe rapped his knuckles against his head and crossed his eyes. Roland chuckled again even though he couldn’t have the slightest idea where (or even what) Florida was. Susannah’s smile was wider than ever.

“Florida’s a helluva place,” Joe said. “*Helluva* place. Home of the newly wed and the nearly dead. My grandfather retired to Florida, God rest his soul. When I die, I want to go peacefully, in my sleep, like Grampa Fred. Not screaming, like the passengers in his car.”

Roland roared with laughter at that one, and Susannah did, too. Oy’s grin was wider than ever.

“My grandma, she was great, too. She said she learned how to swim when someone took her out on the Cuyahoga River and threw her off the boat. I said, ‘Hey, Nana, they weren’t trying to teach you how to swim.’”

Roland snorted, wiped his nose, then snorted again. His cheeks had bloomed with color. Laughter elevated the entire metabolism, put it almost on a fight-or-flight basis; Susannah had read that somewhere. Which meant her own must be rising, because she was laughing, too. It was as if all the horror and sorrow were gushing out of an open wound, gushing out like—

Well, like blood.

She heard a faint alarm-bell start to ring, far back in her mind, and ignored it. What was there to be alarmed about? They were *laughing*, for goodness’ sake! Having a good time!

“Can I be serious a minute? No? Well, fuck you and the nag you rode in on—tomorrow when I wake up, I’ll be sober, but you’ll still be

ugly.

“And bald.”

(Roland roared.)

“I’m gonna be serious, okay? If you don’t like it, stick it where you keep your change-purse. My Nana was a great lady. Women in general are great, you know it? But they have their flaws, just like men. If a woman has to choose between catching a fly ball and saving a baby’s life, for instance, she’ll save the baby without even considering how many men are on base. Bing!” He rapped his head with his knuckles and popped his eyes in a way that made them both laugh. Roland tried to put his coffee cup down and spilled it. He was holding his stomach. Hearing him laugh so hard—to surrender to laughter so completely—was funny in itself, and Susannah burst out in a fresh gale.

“Men are one thing, women are another. Put em together and you’ve got a whole new taste treat. Like Oreos. Like Peanut Butter Cups. Like raisin cake with snot sauce. Show me a man and a woman and I’ll show you the Peculiar Institution—not slavery, marriage. But I repeat myself. Bing!” He rapped his head. Popped his eyes. This time they seemed to come ka-sproing halfway out of their sockets

(how does he do that)

and Susannah had to clutch her stomach, which was beginning to ache with the force of her laughter. And her temples were beginning to pound. It hurt, but it was a *good* hurt.

“Marriage is having a wife or a husband. Yeah! Check Webster’s! Bigamy is having a wife or husband too many. Of course, that’s also monogamy. Bing!”

If Roland laughed any harder, Susannah thought, he would go sliding right out of his chair and into the puddle of spilled coffee.

“Then there’s divorce, a Latin term meaning ‘to rip a man’s genitals out through the wallet.’

“But I was talking about Cleveland, remember? You know how Cleveland got started? A bunch of people in New York said, ‘Gee I’m starting to enjoy the crime and the poverty, but it’s not quite cold enough. Let’s go west.’”

Laughter, Susannah would reflect later, is like a hurricane: once it reaches a certain point, it becomes self-feeding, self-supporting. You

laugh not because the *jokes* are funny but because your own *condition* is funny. Joe Collins took them to this point with his next sally.

“Hey, remember in elementary school, you were told that in case of fire you have to line up quietly with the smallest people in front and the tallest people at the end of the line? What’s the logic in that? Do tall people burn slower?”

Susannah shrieked with laughter and slapped the side of her face. This produced a sudden and unexpected burst of pain that drove all the laughter out of her in a moment. The sore beside her mouth had been growing again, but hadn’t bled in two or three days. When she inadvertently struck it with her flailing hand, she knocked away the blackish-red crust covering it. The sore did not just bleed; it *gushed*.

For a moment she was unaware of what had just happened. She only knew that slapping the side of her face hurt *much* more than it should have done. Joe also seemed unaware (his eyes were mostly closed again), *must* have been unaware, because he rapped faster than ever: “Hey, and what about that seafood restaurant they have at Sea World? I got halfway through my fishburger and wondered if I was eating a slow learner! Bing! And speaking of fish—”

Oy barked in alarm. Susannah felt sudden wet warmth run down the side of her neck and onto her shoulder.

“Stop, Joe,” Roland said. He sounded out of breath. Weak. With laughter, Susannah supposed. Oh, but the side of her face hurt, and —

Joe opened his eyes, looking annoyed. “What? Jesus Christ, you wanted it and I was *giving* it to ya!”

“Susannah’s hurt herself.” The gunslinger was up and looking at her, laughter lost in concern.

“I’m not hurt, Roland, I just slapped myself upside the head a little harder than I m—” Then she looked at her hand and was dismayed to see it was wearing a red glove.

NINE

Oy barked again. Roland snatched the napkin from beside his overturned cup. One end was brown and soaking with coffee, but the

other was dry. He pressed it against the gushing sore and Susannah winced away from his touch at first, her eyes filling with tears.

“Nay, let me stop the bleeding at least,” Roland murmured, and grasped her head, working his fingers gently into the tight cap of her curls. “Hold steady.” And for him she managed to do it.

Through her watering eyes Susannah thought Joe still looked pissed that she had interrupted his comedy routine in such drastic (not to mention messy) fashion, and in a way she didn’t blame him. He’d been doing a really good job; she’d gone and spoiled it. Aside from the pain, which was abating a little now, she was horribly embarrassed, remembering the time she had started her period in gym class and a little trickle of blood had run down her thigh for the whole world to see—that part of it with whom she had third-period PE, at any rate. Some of the girls had begun chanting *Plug it UP!*, as if it were the funniest thing in the world.

Mixed with this memory was fear concerning the sore itself. What if it was cancer? Before, she’d always been able to thrust this idea away before it was fully articulated in her mind. This time she couldn’t. What if she’d caught her stupid self a cancer on her trek through the Badlands?

Her stomach knotted, then heaved. She kept her fine dinner in its place, but perhaps only for the time being.

Suddenly she wanted to be alone, *needed* to be alone. If she was going to vomit, she didn’t want to do it in front of Roland and this stranger. Even if she wasn’t, she wanted some time to get herself back under control. A gust of wind strong enough to shake the entire cottage roared past like a hotenj in full flight; the lights flickered and her stomach knotted again at the seasick motion of the shadows on the wall.

“I’ve got to go . . . the bathroom . . .” she managed to say. For a moment the world wavered, but then it steadied down again. In the fireplace a knot of wood exploded, shooting a flurry of crimson sparks up the chimney.

“You sure?” Joe asked. He was no longer angry (if he had been), but he was looking at her doubtfully.

“Let her go,” Roland said. “She needs to settle herself down, I think.”

Susannah began to give him a grateful smile, but it hurt the sore place and started it bleeding again, too. She didn't know what else might change in the immediate future thanks to the dumb, unhealing sore, but she *did* know she was done listening to jokes for awhile. She'd need a transfusion if she did much more laughing.

"I'll be back," she said. "Don't you boys go and eat all the rest of that pudding on me." The very thought of food made her feel ill, but it was something to say.

"On the subject of pudding, I make no promise," Roland said. Then, as she began to turn away: "If thee feels lightheaded in there, call me."

"I will," she said. "Thank you, Roland."

TEN

Although Joe Collins lived alone, his bathroom had a pleasantly feminine feel to it. Susannah had noticed that the first time she'd used it. The wallpaper was pink, with green leaves and—what else?—wild roses. The john looked perfectly modern except for the ring, which was wood instead of plastic. Had he carved it himself? She didn't think it was out of the question, although probably the robot had brought it from some forgotten store of stuff. Stuttering Carl? Was that what Joe called the robot? No, Bill. Stuttering Bill.

On one side of the john there was a stool, on the other a claw-foot tub with a shower attachment that made her think of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (but *every* shower made her think of that damned movie since she'd seen it in Times Square). There was also a porcelain washstand set in a waist-high wooden cabinet—good old plainoak rather than ironwood, she judged. There was a mirror above it. She presumed you swung it out and there were your pills and potions. All the comforts of home.

She removed the napkin with a wince and a little hissing cry. It had stuck in the drying blood, and pulling it away hurt. She was dismayed by the amount of blood on her cheeks, lips, and chin—not to mention her neck and the shoulder of her shirt. She told herself not to let it make her crazy; you ripped the top off something and it was going to bleed, that was all. Especially if it was on your stupid *face*.

In the other room she heard Joe say something, she couldn't tell what, and Roland's response: a few words with a chuckle tacked on at the end. *So weird to hear him do that*, she thought. *Almost like he's drunk*. Had she ever seen Roland drunk? She realized she had not. Never falling-down drunk, never mother-naked, never fully caught by laughter . . . until now.

Ten'yo business, woman, Detta told her.

"All right," she muttered. "All right, all right."

Thinking drunk. Thinking naked. Thinking lost in laughter. Thinking they were all so close to being the same thing.

Maybe they *were* the same thing.

Then she got up on the stool and turned on the water. It came in a gush, blotting out the sounds from the other room.

She settled for cold, splashing it gently on her face, then using a facecloth—even more gently—to clean the skin around the sore. When that was done, she patted the sore itself. Doing it didn't hurt as much as she'd been afraid it might. Susannah was a little encouraged. When she was done, she rinsed out Joe's facecloth before the bloodstains could set and leaned close to the mirror. What she saw made her breathe a sigh of relief. Slapping her hand incautiously to her face like that had torn the entire top off the sore, but maybe in the end that would turn out to be for the best. One thing was for sure: if Joe had a bottle of hydrogen peroxide or some kind of antibiotic cream in his medicine cabinet, she intended to give the damned mess a good cleaning-out while it was open. And ne'mine how much it might sting. Such a cleansing was due and overdue. Once it was finished, she'd bandage it over and then just hope for the best.

She spread the facecloth on the side of the basin to dry, then plucked a towel (it was the same shade of pink as the wallpaper) from a fluffy stack on a nearby shelf. She got it halfway to her face, then froze. There was a piece of notepaper lying on the next towel in the stack. It was headed with a flower-decked bench being lowered by a pair of happy cartoon angels. Beneath was this printed, bold-face line:

☺ ☹ RELAX! HERE COMES THE ☺ ☹
DEUS EX MACHINA!

And, in faded fountain pen ink:

Odd's Lane

Odd Lane

Turn this over after you think about it.

Frowning, Susannah plucked the sheet of notepaper from the stack of towels. Who had left it here? Joe? She doubted it like hell. She turned the paper over. Here the same hand had written:

You didn't think about it!

what a bad girl!

I've left you something in the medicine cabinet, but first

*** THINK ABOUT IT! ***

(Hint: Comedy + Tragedy = MAKE BELIEVE)

In the other room, Joe continued to speak and this time Roland burst out laughing instead of just chuckling. It sounded to Susannah as if Joe had resumed his monologue. In a way she could understand that—he'd been doing something he loved, something he hadn't had a chance to do in a good long stretch of years—but part of her didn't like the idea at all. That Joe would resume while she was in the bathroom tending to herself, that Roland would *let* him resume. Would listen and laugh while she was shedding blood. It seemed like a rotten, boys-clubby kind of thing to do. She supposed she had gotten used to better from Eddie.

Why don't you forget the boys for the time being and concentrate on what's right in front of you? What does it mean?

One thing seemed obvious: someone had expected her to come in here and find that note. Not Roland, not Joe. *Her*. *What a bad girl*, it said. *Girl*.

But who could have known? Who could have been sure? It wasn't as if she made a habit of slapping her face (or her chest, or her knee) when she laughed; she couldn't remember a single other instance when—

But she could. Once. At a Dean Martin–Jerry Lewis movie. *Dopes at Sea*, or something like that. She'd been caught up in the same fashion then, laughing simply because the laughter had reached some point of critical mass and become self-feeding. The whole audience—at the Clark in Times Square, for all she knew—doing the same, rocking and rolling, swinging and swaying, spraying popcorn from mouths that were no longer their own. Mouths that belonged, at least for a few minutes, to Martin and Lewis, those dopes at sea. But it had only happened that once.

Comedy plus tragedy equals make-believe. But there's no tragedy here, is there?

She didn't expect an answer to this, but she got one. It came in the cold voice of intuition.

Not yet, there isn't.

For no reason whatsoever she found herself thinking of Lippy. Grinning, gruesome Lippy. Did the *folken* laugh in hell? Susannah was somehow sure they did. They grinned like Lippy the Wonder-Nag when Satan began his

(take my horse . . . please)

routine, and then they laughed. Helplessly. Hopelessly. For all of eternity, may it please ya not at all.

What in the hell's wrong with you, woman?

In the other room, Roland laughed again. Oy barked, and that also sounded like laughter.

Odd's Lane, Odd Lane . . . think about it.

What was there to think about? One was the name of the street, the other was the same thing, only without the—

“Whoa-back, wait a minute,” she said in a low voice. Little more than a whisper, really, and who did she think would hear her? Joe was talking—pretty much nonstop, it sounded like—and Roland was laughing. So who did she think might be listening? The cellar-dweller, if there really was one?

“Whoa-on a minute, just wait.”

She closed her eyes and once more saw the two street-signs on their pole, signs that were actually a little below the pilgrims, because the newcomers had been standing on a snowbank nine feet high. **TOWER ROAD**, one of the signs had read—that one pointing to the

plowed road that disappeared over the horizon. The other, the one indicating the short lane with the cottages on it, had said **ODD'S LANE**, only . . .

"Only it *didn't*," she murmured, clenching the hand that wasn't holding the note into a fist. "It *didn't*."

She could see it clearly enough in her mind's eye: **ODD'S LANE**, with the apostrophe and the *S added*, and why would somebody do that? Was the sign-changer maybe a compulsive neatnik who couldn't stand—

What? Couldn't stand what?

Beyond the closed bathroom door, Roland roared louder than ever. Something fell over and broke. *He's not used to laughing like that*, Susannah thought. *You best look out, Roland, or you'll do yourself damage. Laugh yourself into a hernia, or something.*

Think about it, her unknown correspondent had advised, and she was trying. Was there something about the words *odd* and *lane* that someone didn't want them to see? If so, that person had no need to worry, because she sure wasn't seeing it. She wished Eddie was here. Eddie was the one who was good at the funky stuff: jokes and riddles and . . . an . . .

Her breath stopped. An expression of wide-eyed comprehension started to dawn on her face, and on the face of her twin in the mirror. She had no pencil and was terrible at the sort of mental rearrangements that she now had to—

Balanced on the stool, Susannah leaned over the waist-high washstand and blew on the mirror, fogging it. She printed **ODD LANE**. Looked at it with growing understanding and dismay. In the other room, Roland laughed harder than ever and now she recognized what she should have seen thirty valuable seconds ago: that laughter wasn't merry. It was jagged and out of control, the laughter of a man struggling for breath. Roland was laughing the way the *folken* laughed when comedy turned to tragedy. The way *folken* laughed in hell.

Below **ODD LANE** she used the tip of her finger to print **DANDELO**, the anagram Eddie might have seen right away, and surely once he realized the apostrophe-S on the sign had been added to distract them.

In the other room the laughter dropped and changed, becoming a sound that was alarming instead of amusing. Oy was barking crazily, and Roland—

Roland was choking.



CHAPTER VI: PATRICK DANVILLE

ONE

She wasn't wearing her gun. Joe had insisted she take the La-Z-Boy recliner when they'd returned to the living room after dinner, and she'd put the revolver on the magazine-littered endtable beside it, after rolling the cylinder and drawing the shells. The shells were in her pocket.

Susannah tore open the bathroom door and scrambled back into the living room. Roland was lying on the floor between the couch and the television, his face a terrible purple color. He was scratching at his swollen throat and still laughing. Their host was standing over him, and the first thing she saw was that his hair—that baby-fine, shoulder-length white hair—was now almost entirely black. The lines around his eyes and mouth had been erased. Instead of ten years younger, Joe Collins now looked twenty or even thirty years younger.

The son of a bitch.

The *vampire* son of a bitch.

Oy leaped at him and seized Joe's left leg just above the knee. "Twenny-five, sissy-four, nineteen, *hike!*" Joe cried merrily, and kicked out, now as agile as Fred Astaire. Oy flew through the air and hit the

wall hard enough to knock a plaque reading *GD BBS MW FWH* to

the floor. Joe turned back to Roland.

"What I think," he said, "is that women need a reason to have sex." Joe put one foot on Roland's chest—like a big-game hunter with his trophy, Susannah thought. "Men, on the other hand, only need a

place! Bing!” He popped his eyes. “The thing about sex is that God gives men a brain and a dick, but only enough blood to operate one at a—”

He never heard her approach or lift herself into the La-Z-Boy in order to gain the necessary height; he was concentrating too completely on what he was doing. Susannah laced her hands together into a single fist, raised them to the height of her right shoulder, then brought them down and sideways with all the force she could manage. The fist struck the side of Joe’s head hard enough to knock him away. She had connected with solid bone, however, and the pain in her hands was excruciating.

Joe staggered, waving his arms for balance and looking around at her. His upper lip rose, exposing his teeth—perfectly ordinary teeth, and why not? He wasn’t the sort of vampire who survived on blood. This was Empathica, after all. And the face around those teeth was changing: darkening, contracting, turning into something that was no longer human. It was the face of a psychotic clown.

“*You,*” he said, but before he could say anything else, Oy had raced forward again. There was no need for the bumbler to use his teeth this time because their host was still staggering. Oy crouched behind the thing’s ankle and Dandelo simply fell over him, his curses ceasing abruptly when he struck his head. The blow might have put him out if not for the homey rag rug covering the hardwood. As it was he forced himself to a sitting position almost at once, looking around groggily.

Susannah knelt by Roland, who was also trying to sit up but not doing as well. She seized his gun in its holster, but he closed a hand around her wrist before she could pull it out. Instinct, of course, and to be expected, but Susannah felt close to panic as Dandelo’s shadow fell over them.

“You bitch, I’ll teach you to interrupt a man when he’s on a—”

“*Roland, let it go!*” she screamed, and he did.

Dandelo dropped, meaning to land on her and crush the gun between them, but she was an instant too quick. She rolled aside and he landed on Roland, instead. Susannah heard the tortured *Owuff!* as the gunslinger lost whatever breath he had managed to regain. She raised herself on one arm, panting, and pointed the gun at the one on top, the one undergoing some horridly busy change inside his

clothes. Dandelo raised his hands, which were empty. Of course they were, it wasn't his hands he used to kill with. As he did so, his features began to pull together, becoming more and more surface things—not features at all but markings on some animal's hide or an insect's carapace.

“Stop!” he cried in a voice that was dropping in pitch and becoming something like a cicada's buzz. “I want to tell you the one about the archbishop and the chorus girl!”

“Heard it,” she said, and shot him twice, one bullet following another into his brain from just above what had been his right eye.

TWO

Roland floundered to his feet. His hair was matted to the sides of his swollen face. When she tried to take his hand, he waved her away and staggered to the front door of the little cottage, which now looked dingy and ill-lit to Susannah. She saw there were food-stains on the rug, and a large water-blemish on one wall. Had those things been there before? And dear Lord in heaven, what exactly had they eaten for supper? She decided she didn't want to know, as long as it didn't make her sick. As long as it wasn't poisonous.

Roland of Gilead pulled open the door. The wind ripped it from his grasp and threw it against the wall with a bang. He staggered two steps into the screaming blizzard, bent forward with his hands placed on his lower thighs, and vomited. She saw the jet of egested material, and how the wind whipped it away into the dark. When Roland came back in, his shirt and the side of his face were rimed with snow. It was fiercely hot in the cottage; that was something else Dandelo's glammer had hidden from them until now. She saw that the thermostat—a plain old Honeywell not much different from the one in her New York apartment—was still on the wall. She went to it and examined it. It was twisted as far as it would go, beyond the eighty-five-degree mark. She pushed it back to seventy with the tip of a finger, then turned to survey the room. The fireplace was actually twice the size it had appeared to them, and filled with enough logs to make it roar like a steel-furnace. There was nothing she could do about that for the time being, but it would eventually die down.

The dead thing on the rug had mostly burst out of its clothes. To Susannah it now looked like some sort of bug with misshapen appendages—almost arms and legs—sticking out of the sleeves of its shirt and the legs of its jeans. The back of the shirt had split down the middle and what she saw in the gap was a kind of shell on which rudimentary human features were printed. She would not have believed anything could be worse than Mordred in his spider-form, but this thing was. Thank God it was dead.

The tidy, well-lit cottage—like something out of a fairy-tale, and hadn't she seen that from the first?—was now a dim and smoky peasant's hut. There were still electric lights, but they looked old and long-used, like the kind of fixtures one might find in a flophouse hotel. The rag rug was dark with dirt as well as splotched with spilled food, and unraveling in places.

"Roland, are you all right?"

Roland looked at her, and then, slowly, went to his knees before her. For a moment she thought he was fainting, and she was alarmed. When she realized, only a second later, what was really happening, she was more alarmed still.

"Gunslinger, I was 'mazed," Roland said in a husky, trembling voice. "I was taken in like a child, and I cry your pardon."

"Roland, no! Git up!" That was Detta, who always seemed to come out when Susannah was under great strain. She thought, *It's a wonder I didn't say "Git up, honky,"* and had to choke back a cry of hysterical laughter. He would not have understood.

"Give me pardon, first," Roland said, not looking at her.

She fumbled for the formula and found it, which was a relief. She couldn't stand to see him on his knees like that. "Rise, gunslinger, I give you pardon in good heart." She paused, then added: "If I save your life another nine times, we'll be somewhere close to even."

He said, "Your kind heart makes me ashamed of my own," and rose to his feet. The terrible color was fading from his cheeks. He looked at the thing on the rug, casting its grotesquely misshapen shadow up the wall in the firelight. Looked around at the close little hut with its ancient fixtures and flickering electric bulbs.

"What he fed us was all right," he said. It was as if he'd read her mind and seen the worst fear that it held. "He'd never poison what he

meant to . . . eat.”

She was holding his gun out to him, butt first. He took it and reloaded the two empty chambers before dropping it back into the holster. The hut’s door was still open and snow came blowing in. It had already created a white delta in the little entryway, where their makeshift hide coats hung. The room was a little cooler now, a little less like a sauna.

“How did you know?” he asked.

She thought back to the hotel where Mia had left Black Thirteen. Later on, after they’d left, Jake and Callahan had been able to get into Room 1919 because someone had left them a note and

(*dad-a-chee*)

a key. Jake’s name and *This is the truth* had been written on the envelope in a hybrid of cursive script and printing. She was sure that if she had that envelope with its brief message and compared it to the message she’d found in the bathroom, she would find the same hand made both.

According to Jake, the desk-clerk at the New York Plaza–Park Hotel had told them the message had been left by a man named Stephen King.

“Come with me,” she said. “Into the bathroom.”

THREE

Like the rest of the hut, the bathroom was smaller now, not much more than a closet. The tub was old and rusty, with a thin layer of dirt in the bottom. It looked like it had last been used . . .

Well, the truth was that it looked to Susannah like it had *never* been used. The shower-head was clotted with rust. The pink wallpaper was dull and dirty, peeling in places. There were no roses. The mirror was still there, but a crack ran down the middle of it, and she thought it was sort of a wonder that she hadn’t cut the pad of her finger, writing on it. The vapor of her breath had faded but the words were still there, visible in the grime: **ODD LANE**, and, below that, **DANDELO**.

“It’s an anagram,” she said. “Do you see?”

He studied the writing, then shook his head, looking a bit ashamed.

“Not your fault, Roland. They’re our letters, not the ones you know. Take my word for it, it’s an anagram. Eddie would have seen it right away, I bet. I don’t know if it was Dandelo’s idea of a joke, or if there are some sort of rules glammer things like him have to follow, but the thing is, we figured it out in time, with a little help from Stephen King.”

“*You* figured it out,” he said. “I was busy laughing myself to death.”

“We both would have done that,” she said. “You were just a little more vulnerable because your sense of humor . . . forgive me, Roland, but as a rule, it’s pretty lame.”

“I know that,” he said bleakly. Then he suddenly turned and left the room.

A horrid idea came to Susannah, and it seemed a very long time before the gunslinger came back. “Roland, is he still . . . ?”

He nodded, smiling a little. “Still as dead as ever was. You shot true, Susannah, but all at once I needed to be sure.”

“I’m glad,” she said simply.

“Oy’s standing guard. If anything *were* to happen, I’m sure he’d let us know.” He picked the note up from the floor and carefully puzzled out what was written on the back. The only term she had to help him with was *medicine cabinet*. “‘I’ve left you something.’ Do you know what?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t have time to look.”

“Where is this medicine cabinet?”

She pointed at the mirror and he swung it out. It squalled on its hinges. There were indeed shelves behind it, but instead of the neat rows of pills and potions she had imagined, there were only two more brown bottles, like the one on the table beside the La-Z-Boy, and what looked to Susannah like the world’s oldest box of Smith Brothers Wild Cherry Cough Drops. There was also an envelope, however, and Roland handed it to her. Written on the front, in that same distinctive half-writing, half-printing, was this:

Childe Roland, of Gilead
Susannah Dear, of New York

*You saved my life,
I've saved yours,
All debts are paid.
S.K.*

“Childe?” she asked. “Does that mean anything to you?”

He nodded. “It’s a term that describes a knight—or a gunslinger—on a quest. A formal term, and ancient. We never used it among ourselves, you must ken, for it means holy, chosen by ka. We never liked to think of ourselves in such terms, and I haven’t thought of myself so in many years.”

“Yet you are Childe Roland?”

“Perhaps once I was. We’re beyond such things now. Beyond ka.”

“But still on the Path of the Beam.”

“Aye.” He traced the last line on the envelope: *All debts are paid.* “Open it, Susannah, for I’d see what’s inside.”

She did.

FOUR

It was a photocopy of a poem by Robert Browning. King had written the poet’s name in his half-script, half-printing above the title. Susannah had read some of Browning’s dramatic monologues in college, but she wasn’t familiar with this poem. She was, however, *extremely* familiar with its subject; the title of the poem was “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.” It was narrative in structure, the rhyme-scheme balladic (a-b-b-a-a-b), and thirty-four stanzas long. Each stanza was headed with a Roman numeral. Someone—King, presumably—had circled stanzas I, II, XIII, XIV, and XVI.

“Read the marked ones,” he said hoarsely, “because I can only make out a word here and there, and I would know what they say, would know it very well.”

“Stanza the First,” she said, then had to clear her throat. It was dry. Outside the wind howled and the naked overhead bulb flickered in its flyspecked fixture.

“My first thought was, he lied in every word,

*That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
Askance to watch the working of his lie
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby."*

"Collins," Roland said. "Whoever wrote that spoke of Collins as sure as King ever spoke of our ka-tet in his stories! 'He lied in every word!' Aye, so he did!"

"Not Collins," she said. "Dandelo."

Roland nodded. "Dandelo, say true. Go on."

"Okay; Stanza the Second.

*"What else should he be set for, with his staff?
What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare
All travellers who might find him posted there,
And ask the road? I guessed what skull-like laugh
Would break, what crutch 'gin write my epitaph
For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare."*

"Does thee remember his stick, and how he waved it?" Roland asked her.

Of course she did. And the thoroughfare had been snowy instead of dusty, but otherwise it was the same. *Otherwise it was a description of what had just happened to them.* The idea made her shiver.

"Was this poet of your time?" Roland asked. "Your when?"

She shook her head. "Not even of my country. He died at least sixty years before my when."

"Yet he must have seen what just passed. A version of it, anyway."

"Yes. And Stephen King knew the poem." She had a sudden intuition, one that blazed too bright to be anything but the truth. She looked at Roland with wild, startled eyes. "It was this poem that got King going! *It was his inspiration!*"

"Do you say so, Susannah?"

"Yes!"

"Yet this Browning must have seen *us*."

She didn't know. It was too confusing. Like trying to figure out which came first, the chicken or the egg. Or being lost in a hall of mirrors. Her head was swimming.

"Read the next one marked, Susannah! Read ex-eye-eye-eye."

"That's Stanza Thirteen," she said.

*"As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair
In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud
Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood.
One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,
Stood stupefied, however he came there;
Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!"*

"Now Stanza the Fourteenth I read thee.

*"Alive? He might be dead for aught I know,
With that red gaunt and colloped neck a-strain,
And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;
Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;
I never saw a brute I hated so;
He must be wicked to deserve such pain."*

"Lippy," the gunslinger said, and jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. "Yonder's pluggit, colloped neck and all, only female instead of male."

She made no reply—needed to make none. Of course it was Lippy: blind and bony, her neck rubbed right down to the raw pink in places. *Her an ugly old thing, I know*, the old man had said . . . the thing that had *looked* like an old man. *Ye old ki'-box and gammer-gurt, ye lost four-legged leper!* And here it was in black and white, a poem written long before sai King was even born, perhaps eighty or even a hundred years before: . . . *as scant as hair/In leprosy.*

"Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!" Roland said, smiling grimly. "And while she'll never stud nor ever did, we'll see she's back with the devil before we leave!"

"No," she said. "We won't." Her voice sounded drier than ever. She wanted a drink, but was now afraid to take anything flowing from the

taps in this vile place. In a little bit she would get some snow and melt it. Then she would have her drink, and not before.

“Why do you say so?”

“Because she’s gone. She went out into the storm when we got the best of her master.”

“How does thee know it?”

Susannah shook her head. “I just do.” She shuffled to the next page in the poem, which ran to over two hundred lines. “Stanza the Sixteenth.

“Not it! I fancied . . .”

She ceased.

“Susannah? Why do you—” Then his eyes fixed on the next word, which he could read even in English letters. “Go on,” he said. His voice was low, the words little more than a whisper.

“Are you positive?”

“Read, for I would hear.”

She cleared her throat. “Stanza the Sixteenth.

*“Not it! I fancied Cuthbert’s reddening face
Beneath its garniture of curly gold,
Dear fellow, till I almost felt him fold
An arm in mine to fix me to the place,
That way he used. Alas, one night’s disgrace!
Out went my heart’s new fire and left it cold.”*

“He writes of Mejis,” Roland said. His fists were clenched, although she doubted that he knew it. “He writes of how we fell out over Susan Delgado, for after that it was never the same between us. We mended our friendship as best we could, but no, it was never quite the same.”

“After the woman comes to the man or the man to the woman, I don’t think it ever is,” she said, and handed him the photocopied sheets. “Take this. I’ve read all the ones he mentioned. If there’s stuff in the rest about coming to the Dark Tower—or not—puzzle it out by yourself. You can do it if you try hard enough, I reckon. As for me, I don’t want to know.”

Roland, it seemed, did. He shuffled through the pages, looking for the last one. The pages weren’t numbered, but he found the end

easily enough by the white space beneath that stanza marked XXXIV. Before he could read, however, that thin cry came again. This time the wind was in a complete lull and there was no doubt about where it came from.

“That’s someone below us, in the basement,” Roland said.

“I know. And I think I know who it is.”

He nodded.

She was looking at him steadily. “It all fits, doesn’t it? It’s like a jigsaw puzzle, and we’ve put in all but the last few pieces.”

The cry came again, thin and lost. The cry of someone who was next door to dead. They left the bathroom, drawing their guns. Susannah didn’t think they’d need them this time.

FIVE

The bug that had made itself look like a jolly old joker named Joe Collins lay where it had lain, but Oy had backed off a step or two. Susannah didn’t blame him. Dandelo was beginning to stink, and little trickles of white stuff were beginning to ooze through its decaying carapace. Nevertheless, Roland bade the bumbler remain where he was, and keep watch.

The cry came again when they reached the kitchen, and it was louder, but at first they saw no way down to the cellar. Susannah moved slowly across the cracked and dirty linoleum, looking for a hidden trapdoor. She was about to tell Roland there was nothing when he said, “Here. Behind the cold-box.”

The refrigerator was no longer a top-of-the-line Amana with an icemaker in the door but a squat and dirty thing with the cooling machinery on top, in a drum-shaped casing. Her mother had had one like it when Susannah had been a little girl who answered to the name of Odetta, but her mother would have died before ever allowing her own to be even a tenth as dirty. A hundredth.

Roland moved it aside easily, for Dandelo, sly monster that he’d been, had put it on a little wheeled platform. She doubted that he got many visitors, not way out here in End-World, but he had been prepared to keep his secrets if someone *did* drop by. As she was sure

folken did, every once and again. She imagined that few if any got any further along their way than the little hut on Odd Lane.

The stairs leading down were narrow and steep. Roland felt around inside the door and found a switch. It lit two bare bulbs, one halfway down the stairs and one below. As if in response to the light, the cry came again. It was full of pain and fear, but there were no words in it. The sound made her shiver.

“Come to the foot of the stairs, whoever you are!” Roland called.

No response from below. Outside the wind gusted and whooped, driving snow against the side of the house so hard that it sounded like sand.

“Come to where we can see you, or we’ll leave you where you are!” Roland called.

The inhabitant of the cellar didn’t come into the scant light but cried out again, a sound that was loaded with woe and terror and—Susannah feared it—madness.

He looked at her. She nodded and spoke in a whisper. “Go first. I’ll back your play, if you have to make one.”

“Ware the steps that you don’t take a tumble,” he said in the same low voice.

She nodded again and made his own impatient twirling gesture with one hand: *Go on, go on.*

That raised a ghost of a smile on the gunslinger’s lips. He went down the stairs with the barrel of his gun laid into the hollow of his right shoulder, and for a moment he looked so like Jake Chambers that she could have wept.

SIX

The cellar was a maze of boxes and barrels and shrouded things hanging from hooks. Susannah had no wish to know what the dangling things were. The cry came again, a sound like sobbing and screaming mingled together. Above them, dim and muffled now, came the whoop and gasp of the wind.

Roland turned to his left and threaded his way down a zig-zag aisle with crates stacked head-high on either side. Susannah followed, keeping a good distance between them, looking constantly back over

her shoulder. She was also alert for the sound of Oy raising the alarm from above. She saw one stack of crates that was labeled TEXAS INSTRUMENTS and another stack with HO FAT CHINESE FORTUNE COOKIE CO. stenciled on the side. She was not surprised to see the joke name of their long-abandoned taxi; she was far beyond surprise.

Ahead of her, Roland stopped. “Tears of my mother,” he said in a low voice. She had heard him use this phrase once before, when they had come upon a deer that had fallen into a ravine and lay there with both back legs and one front one broken, starving and looking up at them sightlessly, for the flies had eaten the unfortunate animal’s living eyes out of their sockets.

She stayed where she was until he gestured for her to join him, and then moved quickly up to his right side, boosting herself along on the palms of her hands.

In the stonewalled far corner of Dandelo’s cellar—the southeast corner, if she had her directions right—there was a makeshift prison cell. Its door was made of crisscrossing steel bars. Nearby was the welding rig Dandelo must have used to construct it . . . but long ago, judging from the thick layer of dust on the acetylene tank. Hanging from an S-shaped hook pounded into the stone wall, just out of the prisoner’s reach—left close by to mock him, Susannah had no doubt—was a large and old-fashioned

(dad-a-chum dad-a-chee)

silver key. The prisoner in question stood at the bars of his detainment, holding his filthy hands out to them. He was so scrawny that he reminded Susannah of certain terrible concentration-camp photos she had seen, images of those who had survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald, living (if barely) indictments of mankind as a whole with their striped uniforms hanging off them and their ghastly bellboy’s pillbox hats still on their heads and their terrible bright eyes, so full of awareness. *We wish we did not know what we have become*, those eyes said, *but unfortunately we do*.

Something like that was in Patrick Danville’s eyes as he held out his hands and made his inarticulate pleading noises. Close up, they sounded to her like the mocking cries of some jungle bird on a movie soundtrack: *I-yeee, I-yeee, I-yowk, I-yowk!*

Roland took the key from its hook and went to the door. One of Danville's hands clutched at his shirt and the gunslinger pushed it off. It was a gesture entirely without anger, she thought, but the scrawny thing in the cell backed away with his eyes bulging in their sockets. His hair was long—it hung all the way to his shoulders—but there was only the faintest haze of beard on his cheeks. It was a little thicker on his chin and upper lip. Susannah thought he might be seventeen, but surely not much older.

“No offense, Patrick,” Roland said in a purely conversational voice. He put the key in the lock. “Is thee Patrick? Is thee Patrick Danville?”

The scrawny thing in the dirty jeans and billowing gray shirt (it hung nearly to his knees) backed into the corner of his triangular cell without replying. When his back was against the stone, he slid slowly to a sitting position beside what Susannah assumed was his slop-bucket, the front of his shirt first bunching together and then flowing into his crotch like water as his knees rose to nearly frame his emaciated, terrified face. When Roland opened the cell door and pulled it outward as far as it would go (there were no hinges), Patrick Danville began to make the bird-sound again, only this time louder: *I-YEEE! I-YOWK! I-YEEEEEE!* Susannah gritted her teeth. When Roland made as if to enter the cell, the boy uttered an even louder shriek, and began to beat the back of his head against the stones. Roland stepped back out of the cell. The awful head-banging ceased, but Danville looked at the stranger with fear and mistrust. Then he held out his filthy, long-fingered hands again, as if for succor.

Roland looked to Susannah.

She swung herself on her hands so she was in the door of the cell. The emaciated boy-thing in the corner uttered its weird bird-shriek again and pulled the supplicating hands back, crossing them at the wrists, turning their gesture into one of pathetic defense.

“No, honey.” This was a Detta Walker Susannah had never heard before, nor suspected. “No, honey, Ah ain’ goan hurt you, if Ah meant t’do dat, Ah’d just put two in yo’ haid, like Ah did that mahfah upstairs.”

She saw something in his eyes—perhaps just a minute widening that revealed more of the bloodshot whites. She smiled and nodded.

“Dass ri’! Mistuh Collins, he *daid!* He ain’ nev’ goan come down he’ no mo an . . . whuh? Whut he do to you, Patrick?”

Above them, muffled by the stone, the wind gusted. The lights flickered; the house creaked and groaned in protest.

“Whuh he do t’you, boy?”

It was no good. He didn’t understand. She had just made up her mind to this when Patrick Danville put his hands to his stomach and held it. He twisted his face into a cramp that she realized was supposed to indicate laughter.

“He make you laugh?”

Patrick, crouched in his corner, nodded. His face twisted even more. Now his hands became fists that rose to his face. He rubbed his cheeks with them, then screwed them into his eyes, then looked at her. Susannah noticed there was a little scar on the bridge of his nose.

“He make you cry, too.”

Patrick nodded. He did the laughing mime again, holding the stomach and going ho-ho-ho; he did the crying mime, wiping tears from his fuzzy cheeks; this time he added a third bit of mummery, scooping his hands toward his mouth and making *smack-smack* sounds with his lips.

From above and slightly behind her, Roland said: “He made you laugh, he made you cry, he made you eat.”

Patrick shook his head so violently it struck the stone walls that were the boundaries of his corner.

“*He ate,*” Detta said. “Dass whut you trine t’say, ain’t it? *Dandelo ate.*”

Patrick nodded eagerly.

“He made you laugh, he made you cry, and den he ate whut came out. Cause dass what he do!”

Patrick nodded again, bursting into tears. He made inarticulate wailing sounds. Susannah worked her way slowly into the cell, pushing herself along on her palms, ready to retreat if the head-banging started again. It didn’t. When she reached the boy in the corner, he put his face against her bosom and wept. Susannah turned, looked at Roland, and told him with her eyes that he could come in now.

When Patrick looked up at her, it was with dumb, doglike adoration.

“Don’t you worry,” Susannah said—Detta was gone again, probably worn out from all that nice. “He’s not going to get you, Patrick, he’s dead as a doornail, dead as a stone in the river. Now I want you to do something for me. I want you to open your mouth.”

Patrick shook his head at once. There was fear in his eyes again, but something else she hated to see even more. It was shame.

“Yes, Patrick, yes. Open your mouth.”

He shook his head violently, his greasy long hair whipping from side to side like the head of a mop.

Roland said, “What—”

“Hush,” she told him. “Open your mouth, Patrick, and show us. Then we’ll take you out of here and you’ll never have to be down here again. Never have to be Dandelo’s dinner again.”

Patrick looked at her, pleading, but Susannah only looked back at him. At last he closed his eyes and slowly opened his mouth. His teeth were there, but his tongue was not. At some point, Dandelo must have tired of his prisoner’s voice—or the words it articulated, anyway—and had pulled it out.

SEVEN

Twenty minutes later, the two of them stood in the kitchen doorway, watching Patrick Danville eat a bowl of soup. At least half of it was going down the boy’s gray shirt, but Susannah reckoned that was all right; there was plenty of soup, and there were more shirts in the hut’s only bedroom. Not to mention Joe Collins’s heavy parka hung on the hook in the entry, which she expected Patrick would wear hence from here. As for the remains of Dandelo—Joe Collins that was—they had wrapped them in three blankets and tossed them unceremoniously out into the snow.

She said, “Dandelo was a vampire that fed on emotions instead of blood. Patrick, there . . . Patrick was his cow. There’s two ways you can take nourishment from a cow: meat or milk. The trouble with meat is that once you eat the prime cuts, the not-so-prime cuts, and then the stew, it’s gone. If you just take the milk, though, you can go on forever . . . always assuming you give the cow something to eat every now and then.”

“How long do you suppose he had him penned up down there?” Roland asked.

“I don’t know.” But she remembered the dust on the acetylene tank, remembered it all too well. “A fairly long time, anyway. What must have seemed like forever to him.”

“And it hurt.”

“Plenty. Much as it must have hurt when Dandelo pulled the poor kid’s tongue out, I bet the emotional bloodsucking hurt more. You see how he is.”

Roland saw, all right. He saw something else, as well. “We can’t take him out in this storm. Even if we dressed him up in three layers of clothes, I’m sure it would kill him.”

Susannah nodded. She was sure, too. Of that, and something else: she could not stay in the house. *That* might kill *her*.

Roland agreed when she said so. “We’ll camp out in yonder barn until the storm finishes. It’ll be cold, but I see a pair of possible gains: Mordred may come, and Lippy may come back.”

“You’d kill them both?”

“Aye, if I could. Do’ee have a problem with that?”

She considered it, then shook her head.

“All right. Let’s put together what we’d take out there, for we’ll have no fire for the next two days, at least. Maybe as long as four.”

EIGHT

It turned out to be three nights and two days before the blizzard choked on its own fury and blew itself out. Near dusk of the second day, Lippy came limping out of the storm and Roland put a bullet in the blind shovel that was her head. Mordred never showed himself, although she had a sense of him lurking close on the second night. Perhaps Oy did, too, for he stood at the mouth of the barn, barking hard into the blowing snow.

During that time, Susannah found out a good deal more about Patrick Danville than she had expected. His mind had been badly damaged by his period of captivity, and that did not surprise her. What did was his capacity for recovery, limited though it might be. She wondered if she herself could have come back at all after such an

ordeal. Perhaps his talent had something to do with it. She had seen his talent for herself, in Sayre's office.

Dandelo had given his captive the bare minimum of food necessary to keep him alive, and had stolen emotions from him on a regular basis: two times a week, sometimes three, once in awhile even four. Each time Patrick became convinced that the next time would kill him, someone would happen by. Just lately, Patrick had been spared the worst of Dandelo's depredations, because "company" had been more frequent than ever before. Roland told her later that night, after they'd bedded down in the hayloft, that he believed many of Dandelo's most recent victims must have been exiles fleeing either from Le Casse Roi Russe or the town around it. Susannah could certainly sympathize with the thinking of such refugees: *The King is gone, so let's get the hell out of here while the getting's good. After all, Big Red might take it into his head to come back, and he's off his chump, round the bend, possessed of an elevator that no longer goes to the top floor.*

On some occasions, Joe had assumed his true Dandelo form in front of his prisoner, then had eaten the boy's resulting terror. But he had wanted much more than terror from his captive cow. Susannah guessed that different emotions must produce different flavors: like having pork one day, chicken the next, and fish the day after that.

Patrick couldn't talk, but he could gesture. And he could do more than that, once Roland showed them a queer find he'd come upon in the pantry. On one of the highest shelves was a stack of oversized drawing pads marked MICHELANGELO, FINE FOR CHARCOAL. They had no charcoal, but near the pads was a clutch of brand-new Eberhard-Faber #2 pencils held together by a rubber band. What qualified the find as especially queer was the fact that someone (presumably Dandelo) had carefully cut the eraser off the top of each pencil. These were stored in a canning jar next to the pencils, along with a few paper clips and a pencil-sharpener that looked like the whistles on the undersides of the few remaining Oriza plates from Calla Bryn Sturgis. When Patrick saw the pads, his ordinarily dull eyes lit up and he stretched both hands longingly toward them, making urgent hooting sounds.

Roland looked at Susannah, who shrugged and said, "Let's see what he can do. I have a pretty good idea already, don't you?"

It turned out that he could do a lot. Patrick Danville's drawing ability was nothing short of amazing. And his pictures gave him all the voice he needed. He produced them rapidly, and with clear pleasure; he did not seem disturbed at all by their harrowing clarity. One showed Joe Collins chopping into the back of an unsuspecting visitor's head with a hatchet, his lips pulled back in a snarling grin of pleasure. Beside the point of impact, the boy had printed **CHUNT!** And **SPLOOSH!** in big comic-book letters. Above Collins's head, Patrick drew a thought-balloon with the words **Take that, ya lunker!** in it. Another picture showed Patrick himself, lying on the floor, reduced to helplessness by laughter that was depicted with terrible accuracy (no need of the **Ha! Ha! Ha!** scrawled above his head), while Collins stood over him with his hands on his hips, watching. Patrick then tossed back the sheet of paper with that drawing on it and quickly produced another picture which showed Collins on his knees, with one hand twined in Patrick's hair while his pursed lips hovered in front of Patrick's laughing, agonized mouth. Quickly, in a single practiced movement (the tip of the pencil never left the paper), the boy made another comic-strip thought-balloon over the old man's head and then put seven letters and two exclamation points inside.

"What does it say?" Roland asked, fascinated.

"YUM! Good!" Susannah answered. Her voice was small and sickened.

Subject matter aside, she could have watched him draw for hours; in fact, she did. The speed of the pencil was eerie, and neither of them ever thought to give him one of the amputated erasers, for there seemed to be no need. So far as Susannah could see, the boy either never made a mistake, or incorporated the mistakes into his drawings in a way that made them—well, why stick at the words if they were the right words?—little acts of genius. And the resulting pictures weren't sketches, not really, but finished works of art in themselves. She knew what Patrick—this one or another Patrick from another world along the path of the Beam—would later be capable of with oil paints, and such knowledge made her feel cold and hot at the same time. What did they have here? A tongueless Rembrandt? It occurred to her that this was their second idiot-savant. Their third, if you counted Oy as well as Sheemie.

Only once did his lack of interest in the erasers cross Susannah's mind, and she put it down to the arrogance of genius. Not a single time did it occur to her—or to Roland—that this young version of Patrick Danville might not yet know that such things as erasers even existed.

NINE

Near the end of the third night, Susannah awoke in the loft, looked at Patrick lying asleep beside her, and descended the ladder. Roland was standing in the doorway of the barn, smoking a cigarette and looking out. The snow had stopped. A late moon had made its appearance, turning the fresh snow on Tower Road into a sparkling land of silent beauty. The air was still and so cold she felt the moisture in her nose crackle. Far in the distance she heard the sound of a motor. As she listened, it seemed to her that it was drawing closer. She asked Roland if he had any idea what it was or what it might mean to them.

"I think it's likely the robot he called Stuttering Bill, out doing his after-storm plowing," he said. "He may have one of those antenna-things on his head, like the Wolves. You remember?"

She remembered very well, and said so.

"It may be that he holds some special allegiance to Dandelo," Roland said. "I don't think that's likely, but it wouldn't be the strangest thing I ever ran across. Be ready with one of your plates if he shows red. And I'll be ready with my gun."

"But you don't think so." She wanted to be a hundred per cent clear on this point.

"No," Roland said. "He could give us a ride, perhaps all the way to the Tower itself. Even if not, he might take us to the far edge of the White Lands. That would be good, for the boy's still weak."

This raised a question in her mind. "We call him the boy, because he looks like a boy," she said. "How old do you think he is?"

Roland shook his head. "Surely no younger than sixteen or seventeen, but he might be as old as thirty. Time was strange when the Beams were under attack, and it took strange hops and twists. I can attest to that."

"Did Stephen King put him in our way?"

“I can’t say, only that he knew of him, sure.” He paused. “The Tower is so close! Do you feel it?”

She did, and all the time. Sometimes it was a pulsing, sometimes it was singing, quite often it was both. And the Polaroid still hung in Dandelo’s hut. That, at least, had not been part of the glammer. Each night in her dreams, at least once, she saw the Tower in that photograph standing at the end of its field of roses, sooty gray-black stone against a troubled sky where the clouds streamed out in four directions, along the two Beams that still held. She knew what the voices sang—*commala! commala! commala-come-come!*—but she did not think that they sang to her, or for her. No, say no, say never in life; this was Roland’s song, and Roland’s alone. But she had begun to hope that that didn’t necessarily mean she was going to die between here and the end of her quest.

She had been having her own dreams.

TEN

Less than an hour after the sun rose (firmly in the east, and we all say thankya), an orange vehicle—combination truck and bulldozer—appeared over the horizon and came slowly but steadily toward them, pushing a big wing of fresh snow to its right, making the high bank even higher on that side. Susannah guessed that when it reached the intersection of Tower Road and Odd Lane, Stuttering Bill (almost surely the plow’s operator) would swing it around and plow back the other way. Maybe he stopped here, as a rule, not for coffee but for a fresh squirt of oil, or something. She smiled at the idea, and at something else, as well. There was a loudspeaker mounted on the cab’s roof and a rock and roll song she actually knew was issuing forth. Susannah laughed, delighted. “California Sun’! The Rivas! Oh, doesn’t it sound *fine!*”

“If you say so,” Roland agreed. “Just keep hold of thy plate.”

“You can count on that,” she said.

Patrick had joined them. As always since Roland had found them in the pantry, he had a pad and a pencil. Now he wrote a single word in capital letters and held it out to Susannah, knowing that Roland could read very little of what he wrote, even if it was printed in letters

that were big-big. The word in the lower quadrant of the sketch-pad was **BILL**. This was below an amazing drawing of Oy, with a comic-strip speech-balloon over his head reading **YARK! YARK!** All this he had casually crossed out so she wouldn't think it was what he wanted her to look at. The slashed X sort of broke her heart, because the picture beneath its crossed lines was Oy to the life.

ELEVEN

The plow pulled up in front of Dandelo's hut, and although the engine continued to run, the music cut off. Down from the driver's seat there galumphed a tall (eight feet at the very least), shiny-headed robot who looked quite a lot like Nigel from the Arc 16 Experimental Station and Andy from Calla Bryn Sturgis. He cocked his metal arms and put his metal hands on his hips in a way that would likely have reminded Eddie of George Lucas's C3P0, had Eddie been there. The robot spoke in an amplified voice that rolled away across the snowfields:

"HELLO, J-JOE! WHAT DO YOU NUH-NUH-KNOW? HOW ARE TRICKS IN KUH-KUH-KOKOMO?"

Roland stepped out of the late Lippy's quarters. "Hile, Bill," he said mildly. "Long days and pleasant nights."

The robot turned. His eyes flashed bright blue. That looked like surprise to Susannah. He showed no alarm that she could see, however, and didn't appear to be armed, but she had already marked the antenna rising from the center of his head—twirling and twirling in the bright morning light—and she felt confident she could clip it with an Oriza if she needed to. Easy-peasy-Japaneezy, Eddie would have said.

"Ah!" said the robot. "A gudda-gah, gunna-gah, g-g-g—" He raised an arm that had not one elbow-joint but two and smacked his head with it. From inside came a little whistling noise—*Wheeeep!*—and then he finished: "A gunslinger!"

Susannah laughed. She couldn't help it. They had come all this way to meet an oversized electronic version of Porky Pig. *T'beya-t'beya-t'beya, that's all, folks!*

“I had heard rumors of such on the l-l-land,” the robot said, ignoring her laughter. “Are you Ruh-Ruh-Roland of G-Gilead?”

“So I am,” Roland said. “And you?”

“William, D-746541-M, Maintenance Robot, Many Other Functions. Joe Collins calls me Stuhhuttering B-Bill. I’ve got a f-f-fried sir-hirkit somewhere inside. I could fix it, but he fuh-fuh-forbade me. And since he’s the only h-human around . . . or was . . .” He stopped. Susannah could quite clearly hear the clitter-clack of relays somewhere inside and what *she* thought of wasn’t C3P0, who she’d of course never seen, but Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet*.

Then Stuttering Bill quite touched her heart by putting one metal hand to his forehead and bowing . . . but not to either her or to Roland. He said, “Hile, Patrick D-Danville, son of S-S-Sonia! It’s good to see you out and in the c-c-clear, so it is!” And Susannah could hear the emotion in Stuttering Bill’s voice. It was genuine gladness, and she felt more than okay about lowering her plate.

TWELVE

They palavered in the yard. Bill would have been quite willing to go into the hut, for he had but rudimentary olfactory equipment. The humes were better equipped and knew that the hut stank and had not even warmth to recommend it, for the furnace and the fire were both out. In any case, the palaver didn’t take long. William the Maintenance Robot (Many Other Functions) had counted the being that sometimes called itself Joe Collins as his master, for there was no longer anyone else to lay claim to the job. Besides, Collins/Dandelo had the necessary code-words.

“I w-was nuh-not able to g-give him the c-code wuh-wuh-hurds when he a-asked,” said Stuttering Bill, “but my p-programming did not pruh-prohibit bringing him cer-hertain m-manuals that had the ih-information he needed.”

“Bureaucracy is so wonderful,” Susannah said.

Bill said he had stayed away from “J-J-Joe” as often (and as long) as he could, although he had to come when Tower Road needed plowing—that was also in his programming—and once a month to bring provisions (canned goods, mostly) from what he called “the

Federal.” He also liked to see Patrick, who had once given Bill a wonderful picture of himself that he looked at often (and of which he had made many copies). Yet every time he came, he confided, he was sure he would find Patrick gone—killed and thrown casually into the woods somewhere back toward what Bill called “the Buh-Buh-Bads,” like an old piece of trash. But now here he was, alive and free, and Bill was delighted.

“For I do have r-r-rudimentary em-m-motions,” he said, sounding to Susannah like someone owning up to a bad habit.

“Do you need the code-words from us, in order to accept our orders?” Roland asked.

“Yes, sai,” Stuttering Bill said.

“*Shit*,” Susannah muttered. They had had similar problems with Andy, back in Calla Bryn Sturgis.

“H-H-However,” said Stuttering Bill, “if you were to c-c-couch your orders as suh-huh-hugestions, I’m sure I’d be huh-huh-huh-huh—” He raised his arm and smacked his head again. The *Wheep!* sound came once more, not from his mouth but from the region of his chest, Susannah thought. “—happy to oblige,” he finished.

“My first suggestion is that you fix that fucking stutter,” Roland said, and then turned around, amazed. Patrick had collapsed to the snow, holding his belly and voicing great, blurry cries of laughter. Oy danced around him, barking, but Oy was harmless; this time there was no one to steal Patrick’s joy. It belonged only to him. And to those lucky enough to hear it.

THIRTEEN

In the woods beyond the plowed intersection, back toward what Bill would have called “the Bads,” a shivering adolescent boy wrapped in stinking, half-scraped hides watched the quartet standing in front of Dandelo’s hut. *Die*, he thought at them. *Die, why don’t you all do me a favor and just die?* But they didn’t die, and the cheerful sound of their laughter cut him like knives.

Later, after they had all piled into the cab of Bill’s plow and driven away, Mordred crept down to the hut. There he would stay for at least two days, eating his fill from the cans in Dandelo’s pantry—and eating

something else as well, something he would live to regret. He spent those days regaining his strength, for the big storm *had* come close to killing him. He believed it was his hate that had kept him alive, that and no more.

Or perhaps it was the Tower.

For he felt it, too—that pulse, that singing. But what Roland and Susannah and Patrick heard in a major key, Mordred heard in a minor. And where they heard many voices, he heard only one. It was the voice of his Red Father, telling him to come. Telling him to kill the mute boy, and the blackbird bitch, and especially the gunslinger out of Gilead, the uncaring White Daddy who had left him behind. (Of course his Red Daddy had also left him behind, but this never crossed Mordred's mind.)

And when the killing was done, the whispering voice promised, they would destroy the Dark Tower and rule todash together for eternity.

So Mordred ate, for Mordred was a-hungry. And Mordred slept, for Mordred was a-weary. And when Mordred dressed himself in Dandelo's warm clothes and set out along the freshly plowed Tower Road, pulling a rich sack of gunna on a sled behind him—canned goods, mostly—he had become a young man who looked to be perhaps twenty years old, tall and straight and as fair as a summer sunrise, his human form marked only by the scar on his side where Susannah's bullet had winged him, and the blood-mark on his heel. That heel, he had promised himself, would rest on Roland's throat, and soon.





PART FIVE:

THE SCARLET FIELD OF
CAN'-KA NO REY

0607

CHAPTER I:
THE SORE AND THE DOOR
(GOODBYE, MY DEAR)

ONE

In the final days of their long journey, after Bill—just Bill now, no longer Stuttering Bill—dropped them off at the Federal, on the edge of the White Lands, Susannah Dean began to suffer frequent bouts of weeping. She would feel these impending cloudbursts and would excuse herself from the others, saying she had to go into the bushes and do her necessary. And there she would sit on a fallen tree or perhaps just the cold ground, put her hands over her face, and let her tears flow. If Roland knew this was happening—and surely he must have noted her red eyes when she returned to the road—he made no comment. She supposed he knew what she did.

Her time in Mid-World—and End-World—was almost at an end.

TWO

Bill took them in his fine orange plow to a lonely Quonset hut with a faded sign out front reading

FEDERAL OUTPOST 19
TOWER WATCH
TRAVEL BEYOND THIS POINT
IS FORBIDDEN!

She supposed Federal Outpost 19 was still technically in the White Lands of Empathica, but the air had warmed considerably as Tower

Road descended, and the snow on the ground was little more than a scrim. Groves of trees dotted the ground ahead, but Susannah thought the land would soon be almost entirely open, like the prairies of the American Midwest. There were bushes that probably supported berries in warm weather—perhaps even pokeberries—but now they were bare and clattering in the nearly constant wind. Mostly what they saw on either side of Tower Road—which had once been paved but had now been reduced to little more than a pair of broken ruts—were tall grasses poking out of the thin snow-cover. They whispered in the wind and Susannah knew their song: *Commala-come-come, journey's almost done.*

“I may go no further,” Bill said, shutting down the plow and cutting off Little Richard in mid-rave. “Tell ya sorry, as they say in the Arc o’ the Borderlands.”

Their trip had taken one full day and half of another, and during that time he had entertained them with a constant stream of what he called “golden oldies.” Some of these were not old at all to Susannah; songs like “Sugar Shack” and “Heat Wave” had been current hits on the radio when she’d returned from her little vacation in Mississippi. Others she had never heard at all. The music was stored not on records or tapes but on beautiful silver discs Bill called “ceedees.” He pushed them into a slot in the plow’s instrument-cluttered dashboard and the music played from at least eight different speakers. Any music would have sounded fine to her, she supposed, but she was especially taken by two songs she had never heard before. One was a deliriously happy little rocker called “She Loves You.” The other, sad and reflective, was called “Hey Jude.” Roland actually seemed to know the latter one; he sang along with it, although the words he knew were different from the ones coming out of the plow’s multiple speakers. When she asked, Bill told her the group was called The Beetles.

“Funny name for a rock-and-roll band,” Susannah said.

Patrick, sitting with Oy in the plow’s tiny rear seat, tapped her on the shoulder. She turned and he held up the pad through which he was currently working his way. Beneath a picture of Roland in profile, he had printed: **BEATLES, not Beetles.**

“It’s a funny name for a rock-and-roll band no matter which way you spell it,” Susannah said, and that gave her an idea. “Patrick, do

you have the touch?” When he frowned and raised his hands—*I don’t understand*, the gesture said—she rephrased the question. “Can you read my mind?”

He shrugged and smiled. This gesture said *I don’t know*, but she thought Patrick did know. She thought he knew very well.

THREE

They reached “the Federal” near noon, and there Bill served them a fine meal. Patrick wolfed his and then sat off to one side with Oy curled at his feet, sketching the others as they sat around the table in what had once been the common room. The walls of this room were covered with TV screens—Susannah guessed there were three hundred or more. They must have been built to last, too, because some were still operating. A few showed the rolling hills surrounding the Quonset, but most broadcast only snow, and one showed a series of rolling lines that made her feel queasy in her stomach if she looked at it too long. The snow-screens, Bill said, had once shown pictures from satellites in orbit around the Earth, but the cameras in those had gone dead long ago. The one with the rolling lines was more interesting. Bill told them that, until only a few months ago, that one had shown the Dark Tower. Then, suddenly, the picture had dissolved into nothing but those lines.

“I don’t think the Red King liked being on television,” Bill told them. “Especially if he knew company might be coming. Won’t you have another sandwich? There are plenty, I assure you. No? Soup, then? What about you, Patrick? You’re too thin, you know—far, *far* too thin.”

Patrick turned his pad around and showed them a picture of Bill bowing in front of Susannah, a tray of neatly cut sandwiches in one metal hand, a carafe of iced tea in the other. Like all of Patrick’s pictures, it went far beyond caricature, yet had been produced with a speed of hand that was eerie. Susannah applauded. Roland smiled and nodded. Patrick grinned, holding his teeth together so that the others wouldn’t have to look at the empty hole behind them. Then he tossed the sheet back and began something new.

“There’s a fleet of vehicles out back,” Bill said, “and while many of them no longer run, some still do. I can give you a truck with four-wheel drive, and while I cannot assure you it will run smoothly, I believe you can count on it to take you as far as the Dark Tower, which is no more than one hundred and twenty wheels from here.”

Susannah felt a great and fluttery lift-drop in her stomach. One hundred and twenty wheels was a hundred miles, perhaps even a bit less. They *were* close. So close it was scary.

“You would not want to come upon the Tower after dark,” Bill said. “At least I shouldn’t think so, considering the new resident. But what’s one more night camped at the side of the road to such great travelers as yourselves? Not much, I should say! But even with one last night on the road (and barring breakdowns, which the gods know are always possible), you’d have your goal in sight by mid-morning of tomorrowday.”

Roland considered this long and carefully. Susannah had to tell herself to breathe while he did so, because part of her didn’t want to.

I’m not ready, that part thought. And there was a deeper part—a part that remembered every nuance of what had become a recurring (and evolving) dream—that thought something else: *I’m not meant to go at all. Not all the way.*

At last Roland said: “I thank you, Bill—we all say thank you, I’m sure—but I think we’ll pass on your kind offer. Were you to ask me why, I couldn’t say. Only that part of me thinks that tomorrowday’s too soon. That part of me thinks we should go the rest of the way on foot, just as we’ve already traveled so far.” He took a deep breath, let it out. “I’m not ready to be there yet. Not quite ready.”

You too, Susannah marveled. *You too.*

“I need a little more time to prepare my mind and my heart. Mayhap even my soul.” He reached into his back pocket and brought out the photocopy of the Robert Browning poem that had been left for them in Dandelo’s medicine chest. “There’s something writ in here about remembering the old times before coming to the last battle . . . or the last stand. It’s well-said. And perhaps, really, all I need is what this poet speaks of—a draught of earlier, happier sights. I don’t know. But unless Susannah objects, I believe we’ll go on foot.”

“Susannah doesn’t object,” she said quietly. “Susannah thinks it’s just what the doctor ordered. Susannah only objects to being dragged along behind like a busted tailpipe.”

Roland gave her a grateful (if distracted) smile—he seemed to have gone away from her somehow during these last few days—and then turned back to Bill. “I wonder if you have a cart I could pull? For we’ll have to take at least some gunna . . . and there’s Patrick. He’ll have to ride part of the time.”

Patrick looked indignant. He cocked an arm in front of him, made a fist, and flexed his muscle. The result—a tiny goose-egg rising on the biceps of his drawing-arm—seemed to shame him, for he dropped it quickly.

Susannah smiled and reached out to pat his knee. “Don’t look like that, sugar. It’s not your fault that you spent God knows how long caged up like Hansel and Gretel in the witch’s house.”

“I’m sure I have such a thing,” Bill said, “and a battery-powered version for Susannah. What I don’t have, I can make. It would take an hour or two at most.”

Roland was calculating. “If we leave here with five hours of daylight ahead of us, we might be able to make twelve wheels by sunset. What Susannah would call nine or ten miles. Another five days at that rather leisurely speed would bring us to the Tower I’ve spent my life searching for. I’d come to it around sunset if possible, for that’s when I’ve always seen it in my dreams. Susannah?”

And the voice inside—that deep voice—whispered: *Four nights. Four nights to dream. That should be enough. Maybe more than enough.* Of course, ka would have to intervene. If they had indeed outrun its influence, that wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—happen. But Susannah now thought ka reached everywhere, even to the Dark Tower. Was, perhaps, embodied *by* the Dark Tower.

“That’s fine,” she told him in a faint voice.

“Patrick?” Roland asked. “What do you say?”

Patrick shrugged and flipped a hand in their direction, hardly looking up from his pad. Whatever they wanted, that gesture said. Susannah guessed that Patrick understood little about the Dark Tower, and cared less. And why would he care? He was free of the monster, and his belly was full. Those things were enough for him. He

had lost his tongue, but he could sketch to his heart's content. She was sure that to Patrick, that seemed like more than an even trade. And yet . . . and yet . . .

He's not meant to go, either. Not him, not Oy, not me. But what is to become of us, then?

She didn't know, but she was queerly unworried about it. Ka would tell. Ka, and her dreams.

FOUR

An hour later the three humes, the bumbler, and Bill the robot stood clustered around a cut-down wagon that looked like a slightly larger version of Ho Fat's Luxury Taxi. The wheels were tall but thin, and spun like a dream. Even when it was full, Susannah thought, it would be like pulling a feather. At least while Roland was fresh. Pulling it uphill would undoubtedly rob him of his energy after awhile, but as they ate the food they were carrying, Ho Fat II would grow lighter still . . . and she thought there wouldn't be many hills, anyway. They had come to the open lands, the prairie-lands; all the snow- and tree-covered ridges were behind them. Bill had provided her with an electric run-about that was more scooter than golf-cart. Her days of being dragged along behind ("like a busted tailpipe") were done.

"If you'll give me another half an hour, I can smooth this off," Bill said, running a three-fingered steel hand along the edge where he had cut off the front half of the small wagon that was now Ho Fat II.

"We say thankya, but it won't be necessary," Roland said. "We'll lay a couple of hides over it, just so."

He's impatient to be off, Susannah thought, and after all this time, why wouldn't he be? I'm anxious to be off, myself.

"Well, if you say so, let it be so," Bill said, sounding unhappy about it. "I suppose I just hate to see you go. When will I see humes again?"

None of them answered that. They didn't know.

"There's a mighty loud horn on the roof," Bill said, pointing at the Federal. "I don't know what sort of trouble it was meant to signal—radiation leaks, mayhap, or some sort of attack—but I do know the sound of it will carry across a hundred wheels at least. More, if the wind's blowing in the right direction. If I should see the fellow you

think is following you, or if such motion-sensors as still work pick him up, I'll set it off. Perhaps you'll hear."

"Thank you," Roland said.

"Were you to drive, you could outrun him easily," Bill pointed out. "You'd reach the Tower and never have to see him."

"That's true enough," Roland said, but he showed absolutely no sign of changing his mind, and Susannah was glad.

"What will you do about the one you call his Red Father, if he really does command Can'-Ka No Rey?"

Roland shook his head, although he had discussed this probability with Susannah. He thought they might be able to circle the Tower from a distance and come then to its base from a direction that was blind to the balcony on which the Crimson King was trapped. Then they could work their way around to the door beneath him. They wouldn't know if that was possible until they could actually see the Tower and the lay of the land, of course.

"Well, there'll be water if God wills it," said the robot formerly known as Stuttering Bill, "or so the old people did say. And mayhap I'll see you again, in the clearing at the end of the path, if nowhere else. If robots are allowed to go there. I hope it's so, for there's many I've known that I'd see again."

He sounded so forlorn that Susannah went to him and raised her arms to be picked up, not thinking about the absurdity of wanting to hug a robot. But he did and she did—quite fervently, too. Bill made up for the malicious Andy, back in Calla Bryn Sturgis, and was worth hugging for that, if nothing else. As his arms closed around her, it occurred to Susannah that Bill could break her in two with those titanium-steel arms if he wanted to. But he didn't. He was gentle.

"Long days and pleasant nights, Bill," she said. "May you do well, and we all say so."

"Thank you, madam," he said and put her down. "I say thudda-thank, thumma-thank, thukka—" *Wheep!* And he struck his head, producing a bright clang. "I say thank ya kindly." He paused. "I *did* fix the stutter, say true, but as I may have told you, I am not entirely without emotions."

Patrick surprised them both by walking for almost four hours beside Susannah's electric scooter before tiring and climbing into Ho Fat II. They listened for the horn warning them that Bill had seen Mordred (or that the instruments in the Federal had detected him), but did not hear it . . . and the wind was blowing their way. By sunset, they had left the last of the snow. The land continued to flatten out, casting their shadows long before them.

When they finally stopped for the night, Roland gathered enough brush for a fire and Patrick, who had dozed off, woke up long enough to eat an enormous meal of Vienna sausage and baked beans. (Susannah, watching the beans disappear into Patrick's tongueless mouth, reminded herself to spread her hides upwind of him when she finally laid down her weary head.) She and Oy also ate heartily, but Roland hardly touched his own food.

When dinner was done, Patrick took up his pad to draw, frowned at his pencil, and then held out a hand to Susannah. She knew what he wanted, and took the glass canning jar from the little bag of personals she kept slung over her shoulder. She held onto this because there was only the one pencil sharpener, and she was afraid that Patrick might lose it. Of course Roland could sharpen the Eberhard-Fabers with his knife, but it would change the quality of the points somewhat. She tipped the jar, spilling erasers and paperclips and the required object into her cupped palm. Then she handed it to Patrick, who sharpened his pencil with a few quick twists, handed it back, and immediately fell to his work. For a moment Susannah looked at the pink erasers and wondered again why Dandelo had bothered to cut them off. As a way of teasing the boy? If so, it hadn't worked. Later in life, perhaps, when the sublime connections between his brain and his fingers rusted a little (when the small but undeniably brilliant world of his talent had moved on), he might require erasers. For now even his mistakes continued to be inspirations.

He didn't draw long. When Susannah saw him nodding over his pad in the orange glare of the fading sunset, she took it from his unprotesting fingers, bedded him down in the back of the cart (propped level with the front end on a convenient boulder jutting from the ground), covered him with hides, and kissed his cheek.

Sleepily, Patrick reached up and touched the sore below her own cheek. She winced, then held steady at his gentle touch. The sore had clotted over again, but it throbbed painfully. Even smiling hurt her these days. The hand fell away and Patrick slept.

The stars had come out. Roland was looking raptly up at them.

“What do you see?” she asked him.

“What do *you* see?” he asked in turn.

She looked at the brightening celestial landscape. “Well,” she said, “there’s Old Star and Old Mother, but they seem to have moved west. And that there—oh my goodness!” She placed her hands on his stubbly cheeks (he never seemed to grow an actual beard, only a bristly scruff) and turned it. “That wasn’t there back when we left from the Western Sea, I know it wasn’t. That one’s in *our* world, Roland—we call it the Big Dipper!”

He nodded. “And once, according to the oldest books in my father’s library, it was in the sky of our world, as well. Lydia’s Dipper, it was called. And now here it is again.” He turned to her, smiling. “Another sign of life and renewal. How the Crimson King must hate to look up from his entrapment and see it riding the sky again!”

SIX

Not long after, Susannah slept. And dreamed.

SEVEN

She’s in Central Park again, under a bright gray sky from which the first few snowflakes are once more drifting; carolers nearby are singing not “Silent Night” or “What Child Is This” but the Rice Song: “Rice be a green-o, See what we seen-o, Seen-o the green-o, Come-come-commala!” She takes off her cap, afraid it will have changed somehow, but it still says MERRY CHRISTMAS! and

(no twins here)

she is comforted.

She looks around and there stand Eddie and Jake, grinning at her. Their heads are bare; she has gotten their hats. She has combined their hats.

Eddie is wearing a sweatshirt that says I DRINK NOZZ-A-LA!

Jake is wearing one that says I DRIVE THE TAKURO SPIRIT!

None of this is precisely new. What she sees behind them, standing near a carriage-path leading back to Fifth Avenue, most certainly is. It's a door about six and a half feet high, and made of solid ironwood, from the look of it. The doorknob's of solid gold, and filigreed with a shape the lady gunslinger finally recognizes: two crossed pencils. Eberhard-Faber #2's, she has no doubt. And the erasers have been cut off.


Eddie holds out a cup of hot chocolate. It's the perfect kind mit schlag on top, and a little sprinkling of nutmeg dotting the cream. "Here," he says, "I brought you hot chocolate."

She ignores the outstretched cup. She's fascinated by the door. "It's like the ones along the beach, isn't it?" she asks.

"Yes," Eddie says.

"No," Jake says at the same time.

"You'll figure it out," they say together, and grin at each other, delighted.

She walks past them. Writ upon the doors through which Roland drew them were THE PRISONER and THE LADY OF SHADOWS and THE PUSHER. Writ upon this one is . And below that:

THE ARTIST

She turns back to them and they are gone.

Central Park is gone.

She is looking at the ruination of Lud, gazing upon the waste lands.

On a cold and bitter breeze she hears four whispered words: "Time's almost up . . . hurry . . ."

EIGHT

She woke in a kind of panic, thinking I have to leave him . . . and best I do it before I can s'much as see his Dark Tower on the horizon. But where do I go? And how can I leave him to face both Mordred and the Crimson King with only Patrick to help him?

*This idea caused her to reflect on a bitter certainty: come a showdown, Oy would almost certainly be more valuable to Roland than Patrick. The bumbler had proved his mettle on more than one occasion and would have been worthy of the title *gunslinger*, had he*

but a gun to sling and a hand to sling it with. Patrick, though . . . Patrick was a . . . well, a pencil-slinger. Faster than blue blazes, but you couldn't kill much with an Eberhard-Faber unless it was *very* sharp.

She'd sat up. Roland, leaning against the far side of her little scooter and keeping the watch, hadn't noticed. And she didn't *want* him to notice. That would lead to questions. She lay back down, pulling her hides around her and thinking of their first hunt. She remembered how the yearling buck had swerved and run right at her, and how she'd decapitated it with the Oriza. She remembered the whistling sound in the chilly air, the one that resulted when the wind blew through the little attachment on the bottom of the plate, the attachment that looked so much like Patrick's pencil sharpener. She thought her mind was trying to make some sort of connection here, but she was too tired to know what it might be. And maybe she was trying too hard, as well. If so, what was she to do about that?

There was at least one thing she *did* know, from her time in Calla Bryn Sturgis. The meaning of the symbols writ upon the door was UNFOUND.

Time's almost up. Hurry.

The next day her tears began.

NINE

There were still plenty of bushes behind which she could go to do her necessary (and cry her tears, when she could no longer hold them back), but the land continued to flatten and open. Around noon of their second full day on the road, Susannah saw what she at first thought was a cloud-shadow moving across the land far up ahead, only the sky above was solid blue from horizon to horizon. Then the great dark patch began to veer in a very un-cloud-like way. She caught her breath and brought her little electric scooter to a stop.

"Roland!" she said. "Yonder's a herd of buffalo, or maybe they're bison! Sure as death n taxes!"

"Aye, do you say so?" Roland asked, with only passing interest. "We called em bannock, in the long ago. It's a good-sized herd."

Patrick was standing in the back of Ho Fat II, sketching madly. He switched his grip on the pencil he was using, now holding the yellow

barrel against his palm and shading with the tip. She could almost smell the dust boiling up from the herd as he shaded it with his pencil. Although it seemed to her that he'd taken the liberty of moving the herd five or even ten miles closer, unless his vision was a good deal sharper than her own. That, she supposed, was entirely possible. In any case, her eyes had adjusted and she could see them better herself. Their great shaggy heads. Even their black eyes.

"There hasn't been a herd of buffalo that size in America for almost a hundred years," she said.

"Aye?" Still only polite interest. "But they're in plenty here, I should say. If a little tet of em comes within pistol-shot range, let's take a couple. I'd like to taste some fresh meat that isn't deer. Would you?"

She let her smile answer for her. Roland smiled back. And it occurred to her again that soon she would see him no more, this man she'd believed was either a mirage or a daemon before she had come to know him both an-tet and dan-dinh. Eddie was dead, Jake was dead, and soon she would see Roland of Gilead no more. Would he be dead, as well? Would she?

She looked up into the glare of the sun, wanting him to mistake the reason for her tears if he saw them. And they moved on into the southeast of that great and empty land, into the ever-strengthening beat-beat-beat that was the Tower at the axis of all worlds and time itself.

Beat-beat-beat.

Commala-come-come, journey's almost done.

That night she stood the first watch, then awakened Roland at midnight.

"I think he's out there someplace," she said, pointing into the northwest. There was no need to be more specific; it could only be Mordred. Everyone else was gone. "Watch well."

"I will," he said. "And if you hear a gunshot, *wake* well. And fast."

"You can count on it," said she, and lay down in the dry winter grass behind Ho Fat II. At first she wasn't sure she'd be able to sleep; she was still jazzed from the sense of an unfriendly other in the vicinity. But she *did* sleep.

And dreamed.

TEN

The dream of the second night is both like and unlike the dream of the first. The main elements are exactly the same: Central Park, gray sky, spits of snow, choral voices (this time harmonizing “Come Go With Me,” the old Del-Vikings hit), Jake (I DRIVE THE TAKURO SPIRIT!) and Eddie (this time wearing a sweatshirt reading CLICK! IT’S A SHINNARO CAMERA!). Eddie has hot chocolate but doesn’t offer it to her. She can see the anxiety not only in their faces but in the tensed-up set of their bodies. That is the main difference in this dream: there is something to see, or something to do, or perhaps it’s both. Whatever it is, they expected her to see it or do it by now and she is being backward.

A rather terrible question occurs to her: is she being purposely backward? Is there something here she doesn’t want to confront? Could it even be possible that the Dark Tower is fucking up communications? Surely that’s a stupid idea—these people she sees are but figments of her longing imagination, after all; they are dead! Eddie killed by a bullet, Jake as a result of being run over by a car—one slain in this world, one in the Keystone World where fun is fun and done is done (must be done, for there time always runs in one direction) and Stephen King is their poet laureate.

*Yet she cannot deny that look on their faces, that look of panic that seems to tell her You have it, Suze—you have what we want to show you, you have what you need to know. Are you going to let it slip away? It’s the fourth quarter. It’s the fourth quarter and the clock is ticking and will continue to tick, *must* continue to tick because all your time-outs are gone. You have to hurry . . . hurry . . .*

ELEVEN

She snapped awake with a gasp. It was almost dawn. She wiped a hand across her brow, and it came away wet with sweat.

What do you want me to know, Eddie? What is it you’d have me know?

To this question there was no answer. How could there be? *Mistuh Dean, he daid*, she thought, and lay back down. She lay that way for another hour, but couldn’t get back to sleep.

TWELVE

Like Ho Fat I, Ho Fat II was equipped with handles. Unlike those on Ho Fat I, these handles were adjustable. When Patrick felt like walking, the handles could be moved apart so he could pull one and Roland the other. When Patrick felt like riding, Roland moved the handles together so he could pull on his own.

They stopped at noon for a meal. When it was done, Patrick crawled into the back of Ho Fat II for a snooze. Roland waited until he heard the boy (for so they continued to think of him, no matter what his age) snoring, then turned to her.

“What fashes thee, Susannah? I’d have you tell me. I’d have you tell me dan-dinh, even though there’s no longer a tet and I’m your dinh no more.” He smiled. The sadness in that smile broke her heart and she could hold her tears back no more. Nor the truth.

“If I’m still with you when we see your Tower, Roland, things have gone all wrong.”

“*How* wrong?” he asked her.

She shook her head, beginning to weep harder. “There’s supposed to be a door. It’s the Unfound Door. But I don’t know how to find it! Eddie and Jake come to me in my dreams and tell me I know—they tell me with their eyes—but I don’t! *I swear I don’t!*”

He took her in his arms and held her and kissed the hollow of her temple. At the corner of her mouth, the sore throbbed and burned. It wasn’t bleeding, but it had begun to grow again.

“Let be what will be,” said the gunslinger, as his own mother had once told him. “Let be what will be, and hush, and let ka work.”

“You said we’d outrun it.”

He rocked her in his arms, rocked her, and it was good. It was soothing. “I was wrong,” he said. “As thee knows.”

THIRTEEN

It was her turn to watch early on the third night, and she was looking back behind them, northwest along the Tower Road, when a hand grasped her shoulder. Terror sprang up in her mind like a jack-in-the-box and she whirled

(he’s behind me oh dear God Mordred’s got around behind me and it’s the spider!)

with her hand going to the gun in her belt and yanking it free.

Patrick recoiled from her, his own face long with terror, raising his hands in front of him. If he'd cried out he would surely have awakened Roland, and then everything might have been different. But he was too frightened to cry out. He made a low sound in his throat and that was all.

She put the gun back, showed him her empty hands, then pulled him to her and hugged him. At first he was stiff against her—still afraid—but after a little he relaxed.

“What is it, darling?” she asked him, *sotto voce*. Then, using Roland's phrase without even realizing it: “What fashes thee?”

He pulled away from her and pointed dead north. For a moment she still didn't understand, and then she saw the orange lights dancing and darting. She judged they were at least five miles away, and she could hardly believe she hadn't seen them before.

Still speaking low, so as not to wake Roland, she said: “They're nothing but foo-lights, sugar—they can't hurt you. Roland calls em hobs. They're like St. Elmo's fire, or something.”

But he had no idea of what St. Elmo's fire was; she could see that in his uncertain gaze. She settled again for telling him they couldn't hurt him, and indeed, this was the closest the hobs had ever come. Even as she looked back at them, they began to dance away, and soon most of them were gone. Perhaps she had *thought* them away. Once she would have scoffed at such an idea, but no longer.

Patrick began to relax.

“Why don't you go back to sleep, honey? You need to take your rest.” And she needed to take hers, but she dreaded it. Soon she would wake Roland, and sleep, and the dream would come. The ghosts of Jake and Eddie would look at her, more frantic than ever. Wanting her to know something she didn't, couldn't know.

Patrick shook his head.

“Not sleepy yet?”

He shook his head again.

“Well then, why don't you draw awhile?” Drawing always relaxed him.

Patrick smiled and nodded and went at once to Ho Fat for his current pad, walking in big exaggerated sneak-steps so as not to wake

Roland. It made her smile. Patrick was always willing to draw; she guessed that one of the things that kept him alive in the basement of Dandelo's hut had been knowing that every now and then the rotten old fuck would give him a pad and one of the pencils. He was as much an addict as Eddie had been at his worst, she reflected, only Patrick's dope was a narrow line of graphite.

He sat down and began to draw. Susannah resumed her watch, but soon felt a queer tingling all over her body, as if *she* were the one being watched. She thought of Mordred again, and then smiled (which hurt; with the sore growing fat again, it always did now). Not Mordred; Patrick. Patrick was watching her.

Patrick was *drawing* her.

She sat still for nearly twenty minutes, and then curiosity overcame her. For Patrick, twenty minutes would be long enough to do the *Mona Lisa*, and maybe St. Paul's Basilica in the background for good measure. That tingling sense was so *queer*, almost not a mental thing at all but something physical.

She went to him, but Patrick at first held the pad against his chest with unaccustomed shyness. But he *wanted* her to look; that was in his eyes. It was almost a love-look, but she thought it was the drawn Susannah he'd fallen in love with.

"Come on, honeybunch," she said, and put a hand on the pad. But she would not tug it away from him, not even if he wanted her to. He was the artist; let it be wholly his decision whether or not to show his work. "Please?"

He held the pad against him a moment longer. Then—shyly, not looking at her—he held it out. She took it, and looked down at herself. For a moment she could hardly breathe, it was that good. The wide eyes. The high cheekbones, which her father had called "those jewels of Ethiopia." The full lips, which Eddie had so loved to kiss. It was her, it was her to the very life . . . but it was also *more* than her. She would never have thought love could shine with such perfect nakedness from the lines made with a pencil, but here that love was, oh say true, say so true; love of the boy for the woman who had saved him, who had pulled him from the dark hole where he otherwise would surely have died. Love for her as a mother, love for her as a woman.

“Patrick, it’s wonderful!” she said.

He looked at her anxiously. Doubtfully. *Really?* his eyes asked her, and she realized that only he—the poor needy Patrick inside, who had lived with this ability all his life and so took it for granted—could doubt the simple beauty of what he had done. Drawing made *him* happy; this much he’d always known. That his pictures could make *others* happy . . . that idea would take some getting used to. She wondered again how long Dandelo had had him, and how the mean old thing had come by Patrick in the first place. She supposed she’d never know. Meantime, it seemed very important to convince him of his own worth.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, it *is* wonderful. You’re a fine artist, Patrick. Looking at this makes me feel good.”

This time he forgot to hold his teeth together. And that smile, tongueless or not, was so wonderful she could have eaten it up. It made her fears and anxieties seem small and silly.

“May I keep it?”

Patrick nodded eagerly. He made a tearing motion with one hand, then pointed at her. *Yes! Tear it off! Take it! Keep it!*

She started to do so, then paused. His love (and his pencil) had made her beautiful. The only thing to spoil that beauty was the black splotch beside her mouth. She turned the drawing toward him, tapped the sore on it, then touched it on her own face. And winced. Even the lightest touch hurt. “This is the only damned thing,” she said.

He shrugged, raising his open hands to his shoulders, and she had to laugh. She did it softly so as not to wake Roland, but yes, she did have to laugh. A line from some old movie had occurred to her: *I paint what I see.*

Only this wasn’t paint, and it suddenly occurred to her that he could take care of the rotten, ugly, painful thing. As it existed on paper, at least.

Then she’ll be my twin, she thought affectionately. *My better half; my pretty twin sis—*

And suddenly she understood—

Everything? Understood *everything?*

Yes, she would think much later. Not in any coherent fashion that could be written down—if $a + b = c$, then $c - b = a$ and $c - a = b$ —but yes, she understood everything. *Intuited* everything. No wonder the dream-Eddie and dream-Jake had been impatient with her; it was so obvious.

Patrick, *drawing* her.

Nor was this the first time she had been drawn.

Roland had drawn her to his world . . . with magic.

Eddie had drawn her to himself with love.

As had Jake.

Dear God, had she been here so long and been through so much without knowing what ka-tet *was*, what it meant? Ka-tet was family.

Ka-tet was love.

To *draw* is to make a picture with a pencil, or maybe charcoal.

To *draw* is also to fascinate, to compel, and to bring forward. *To bring one out of one's self.*

The *drawers* were where Detta went to fulfill herself.

Patrick, that tongueless boy genius, pent up in the wilderness. Pent up in the drawers. And now? Now?

Now he my forspecial, thought Susanna/Odetta/Detta, and reached into her pocket for the glass jar, knowing exactly what she was going to do and why she was going to do it.

When she handed back the pad without tearing off the sheet that now held her image, Patrick looked badly disappointed.

“Nar, nar,” said she (and in the voice of many). “Only there’s something I’d have you do before I take it for my pretty, for my precious, for my ever, to keep and know how I was at this where, at this when.”

She held out one of the pink rubber pieces, understanding now why Dandelo had cut them off. For he’d had his reasons.

Patrick took what she offered and turned it over between his fingers, frowning, as if he had never seen such a thing before. Susannah was sure he had, but how many years ago? How close might he have come to disposing of his tormentor, once and for all? And why hadn’t Dandelo just killed him then?

Because once he took away the erasers he thought he was safe, she thought.

Patrick was looking at her, puzzled. Beginning to be upset.

Susannah sat down beside him and pointed at the blemish on the drawing. Then she put her fingers delicately around Patrick's wrist and drew it toward the paper. At first he resisted, then let his hand with the pink nubbin in it be tugged forward.

She thought of the shadow on the land that hadn't been a shadow at all but a herd of great, shaggy beasts Roland called bannock. She thought of how she'd been able to smell the dust when Patrick began to *draw* the dust. And she thought of how, when Patrick had drawn the herd closer than it actually was (artistic license, and we all say thankya), it had actually *looked* closer. She remembered thinking that her eyes had adjusted and now marveled at her own stupidity. As if eyes could adjust to distance the way they could adjust to the dark.

No, Patrick had moved them closer. Had moved them closer by *drawing* them closer.

When the hand holding the eraser was almost touching the paper, she took her own hand away—this had to be all Patrick, she was somehow sure of it. She moved her fingers back and forth, miming what she wanted. He didn't get it. She did it again, then pointed to the sore beside the full lower lip.

"Make it gone, Patrick," she said, surprised by the steadiness of her own voice. "It's ugly, make it gone." Again she made that rubbing gesture in the air. "Erase it."

This time he got it. She saw the light in his eyes. He held the pink nubbin up to her. *Perfectly* pink it was—not a smudge of graphite on it. He looked at her, eyebrows raised, as if to ask if she was sure.

She nodded.

Patrick lowered the eraser to the sore and began to rub it on the paper, tentatively at first. Then, as he saw what was happening, he worked with more spirit.

FOURTEEN

She felt the same queer tingling sensation, but when he'd been drawing, it had been all over her. Now it was in only one place, to the right side of her mouth. As Patrick got the hang of the eraser and bore down with it, the tingling became a deep and monstrous itch. She had to clutch her hands deep into the dirt on either side of her

to keep from reaching up and clawing at the sore, scratching it furiously, and never mind if she tore it wide open and sent a pint of blood gushing down her deerskin shirt.

It be over in a few more seconds, it have to be, it have to be, oh dear God please LET IT END—

Patrick, meanwhile, seemed to have forgotten all about her. He was looking down at his picture, his hair hanging to either side of his face and obscuring most of it, completely absorbed by this wonderful new toy. He erased delicately . . . then a little harder (the itch intensified) . . . then more softly again. Susannah felt like shrieking. That itch was suddenly everywhere. It burned in her forebrain, buzzed across the wet surfaces of her eyes like twin clouds of gnats, it shivered at the very tips of her nipples, making them hopelessly hard.

I'll scream, I can't help it, I have to scream—

She was drawing in her breath to do just that when suddenly the itch was gone. The pain was gone, as well. She reached toward the side of her mouth, then hesitated.

I don't dare.

You better dare! Detta responded indignantly. *After all you been through—all we been through—you must have enough backbone left to touch yo' own damn face, you yella bitch!*

She brought her fingers down to the skin. The *smooth* skin. The sore which had so troubled her since Thunderclap was gone. She knew that when she looked in a mirror or a still pool of water, she would not even see a scar.

FIFTEEN

Patrick worked a little longer—first with the eraser, then with the pencil, then with the eraser again—but Susannah felt no itch and not even a faint tingle. It was as though, once he had passed some critical point, the sensations just ceased. She wondered how old Patrick had been when Dandelo snipped all the erasers off the pencils. Four? Six? Young, anyway. She was sure that his original look of puzzlement when she showed him one of the erasers had been unfeigned, and yet once he began, he used it like an old pro.

Maybe it's like riding a bicycle, she thought. Once you learn how, you never forget.

She waited as patiently as she could, and after five very long minutes, her patience was rewarded. Smiling, Patrick turned the pad around and showed her the picture. He had erased the blemish completely and then faintly shaded the area so that it looked like the rest of her skin. He had been careful to brush away every single crumb of rubber.

“Very nice,” she said, but that was a fairly shitty compliment to offer genius, wasn't it?

So she leaned forward, put her arms around him, and kissed him firmly on the mouth. “Patrick, it's *beautiful*.”

The blood rushed so quickly and so strongly into his face that she was alarmed at first, wondering if he might not have a stroke in spite of his youth. But he was smiling as he held out the pad to her with one hand, making tearing gestures again with the other. Wanting her to take it. Wanting her to have it.

Susannah tore it off very carefully, wondering in a dark back corner of her mind what would happen if she tore it—tore *her*—right down the middle. She noted as she did that there was no amazement in his face, no astonishment, no fear. He had to have seen the sore beside her mouth, because the nasty thing had pretty much dominated her face for all the time he'd known her, and he had drawn it in near-photographic detail. Now it was gone—her exploring fingers told her so—yet Patrick wasn't registering any emotion, at least in regard to that. The conclusion seemed clear enough. When he'd erased it from his drawing, he'd also erased it from his own mind and memory.

“Patrick?”

He looked at her, smiling. Happy that she was happy. And Susannah was *very* happy. The fact that she was also scared to death didn't change that in the slightest.

“Will you draw something else for me?”

He nodded. Made a mark on his pad, then turned it around so she could see:

?

She looked at the question-mark for a moment, then at him. She saw he was clutching the eraser, his wonderful new tool, very tightly.

Susannah said: "I want you to draw me something that isn't there."

He cocked his head quizzically to the side. She had to smile a little in spite of her rapidly thumping heart—Oy looked that way sometimes, when he wasn't a hundred per cent sure what you meant.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you."

And she did, very carefully. Patrick listened. At some point Roland heard Susannah's voice and awoke. He came over, looked at her in the dim red light of the embering campfire, started to look away, then snapped back, eyes widening. Until that moment, she hadn't been sure Roland would see what was no longer there, either. She thought it at least possible that Patrick's magic would have been strong enough to erase it from the gunslinger's memory, too.

"Susannah, thy face! What's happened to thy—"

"Hush, Roland, if you love me."

The gunslinger hushed. Susannah returned her attention to Patrick and began to speak again, quietly but urgently. Patrick listened, and as he did, she saw the light of understanding begin to enter his gaze.

Roland replenished the fire without having to be asked, and soon their little camp was bright under the stars.

Patrick wrote a question, putting it thriftily to the left of the question-mark he had already drawn:

How tall?

Susannah took Roland by the elbow and positioned him in front of Patrick. The gunslinger stood about six-foot-three. She had him pick her up, then held a hand roughly three inches over his head. Patrick nodded, smiling.

"And look you at something that has to be on it," she said, and took a branch from their little pile of brush. She broke it over her knee, creating a point of her own. She could remember the symbols, but it would be best if she didn't think about them overmuch. She sensed they had to be absolutely right or the door she wanted him to make

for her would either open on some place she didn't want to go, or would not open at all. Therefore once she began to draw in the mixed dirt and ash by the campfire, she did it as rapidly as Patrick himself might have done, not pausing long enough to cast her eye back upon a single symbol. For if she looked back at one she would surely look back at all, and she would see something that looked wrong to her, and uncertainty would set in like a sickness. Detta—brash, foulmouthed Detta, who had turned out on more than one occasion to be her savior—might step in and take over, finish for her, but she couldn't count on that. On her heart's deepest level, she still did not entirely trust Detta not to send everything to blazes at a crucial moment, and for no other reason than the black joy of the thing. Nor did she fully trust Roland, who might want to keep her for reasons he did not fully understand himself.

So she drew quickly in the dirt and ashes, not looking back, and these were the symbols that flowed away beneath the flying tip of her makeshift implement:



“Unfound,” Roland breathed. “Susannah, what—how—”

“Hush,” she repeated.

Patrick bent over his pad and began to draw.

SIXTEEN

She kept looking around for the door, but the circle of light thrown by their fire was very small even after Roland had set it to blazing. Small compared to the vast darkness of the prairie, at least. She saw nothing. When she turned to Roland she could see the unspoken question in his eyes, and so, while Patrick kept working, she showed him the picture of her the young man had drawn. She indicated the place where the blemish had been. Holding the page close to his face, Roland at last saw the eraser's marks. Patrick had concealed what few traces he'd left behind with great cunning, and Roland had found them only with the closest scrutiny; it was like casting for an old trail after many days of rain.

“No wonder the old man cut off his erasers,” he said, giving the picture back to her.

“That’s what I thought.”

From there she skipped ahead to her single true intuitive leap: that if Patrick could (in this world, at least) un-create by erasing, he might be able to create by drawing. When she mentioned the herd of bannock that had seemed mysteriously closer, Roland rubbed his forehead like a man who has a nasty headache.

“I should have seen that. Should have realized what it meant, too. Susannah, I’m getting old.”

She ignored that—she’d heard it before—and told him about the dreams of Eddie and Jake, being sure to mention the product-names on the sweatshirts, the choral voices, the offer of hot chocolate, and the growing panic in their eyes as the nights passed and still she did not see what the dream had been sent to show her.

“Why didn’t you tell me this dream before now?” Roland asked. “Why didn’t you ask for help in interpreting it?”

She looked at him steadily, thinking she had been right not to ask for his help. Yes—no matter how much that might hurt him. “You’ve lost two. How eager would you have been to lose me, as well?”

He flushed. Even in the firelight she could see it. “Thee speaks ill of me, Susannah, and have thought worse.”

“Perhaps I have,” she said. “If so, I say sorry. I wasn’t sure of what I wanted myself. Part of me wants to see the Tower, you know. Part of me wants that very badly. And even if Patrick can draw the Unfound Door into existence and I can open it, it’s not the real world it opens on. That’s what the names on the shirts mean, I’m sure of it.”

“You mustn’t think that,” Roland said. “Reality is seldom a thing of black and white, I think, of is and isn’t, be and not be.”

Patrick made a hooting sound and they both looked. He was holding his pad up, turned toward them so they could see what he had drawn. It was a perfect representation of the Unfound Door, she thought. THE ARTIST wasn’t printed on it, and the doorknob was plain shiny metal—no crossed pencils adorned it—but that was all right. She hadn’t bothered to tell him about those things, which had been for her benefit and understanding.

They did everything but draw me a map, she thought. She wondered why everything had to be so damn hard, so damn

(riddle-de-dum)

mysterious, and knew that was a question to which she would never find a satisfactory answer . . . except it was the human condition, wasn't it? The answers that mattered never came easily.

Patrick made another of those hooting noises. This time it had an interrogative quality. She suddenly realized that the poor kid was practically dying of anxiety, and why not? He had just executed his first commission, and wanted to know what his *patrono d'arte* thought of it.

"It's great, Patrick—terrific."

"Yes," Roland agreed, taking the pad. The door looked to him exactly like those he'd found as he staggered along the beach of the Western Sea, delirious and dying of the lobster's poisoned bite. It was as if the poor tongueless creature had looked into his head and seen an actual picture of that door—a fattergraff.

Susannah, meanwhile, was looking around desperately. And when she began to swing along on her hands toward the edge of the firelight, Roland had to call her back sharply, reminding her that Mordred might be out there anywhere, and the darkness was Mordred's friend.

Impatient as she was, she retreated from the edge of the light, remembering all too well what had happened to Mordred's body-mother, and how quickly it had happened. Yet it hurt to pull back, almost physically. Roland had told her that he expected to catch his first glimpse of the Dark Tower toward the end of the coming day. If she was still with him, if she saw it with him, she thought its power might prove too strong for her. Its glammer. Now, given a choice between the door and the Tower, she knew she could still choose the door. But as they drew closer and the power of the Tower grew stronger, its pulse deeper and more compelling in her mind, the singing voices ever sweeter, choosing the door would be harder to do.

"I don't see it," she said despairingly. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe there *is* no damn door. Oh, Roland—"

"I don't think you were wrong," Roland told her. He spoke with obvious reluctance, but as a man will when he has a job to do, or a

debt to repay. And he did owe this woman a debt, he reckoned, for had he not pretty much seized her by the scruff of the neck and hauled her into this world, where she'd learned the art of murder and fallen in love and been left bereaved? Had he not kidnapped her into this present sorrow? If he could make that right, he had an obligation to do so. His desire to keep her with him—and at the risk of her own life—was pure selfishness, and unworthy of his training.

More important than that, it was unworthy of how much he had come to love and respect her. It broke what remained of his heart to think of bidding her goodbye, the last of his strange and wonderful ka-tet, but if it was what she wanted, what she *needed*, then he must do it. And he thought he *could* do it, for he had seen something about the young man's drawing that Susannah had missed. Not something that was there; something that wasn't.

"Look thee," he said gently, showing her the picture. "Do you see how hard he's tried to please thee, Susannah?"

"Yes!" she said. "Yes, of course I do, but—"

"It took him ten minutes to do this, I should judge, and most of his drawings, good as they are, are the work of three or four at most, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't understand you!" She nearly screamed this.

Patrick drew Oy to him and wrapped an arm around the bumbler, all the while looking at Susannah and Roland with wide, unhappy eyes.

"He worked so hard to give you what you want that there's only the Door. It stands by itself, all alone on the paper. It has no . . . no . . ."

He searched for the right word. Vannay's ghost whispered it dryly into his ear.

"It has no context!"

For a moment Susannah continued to look puzzled, and then the light of understanding began to break in her eyes. Roland didn't wait; he simply dropped his good left hand on Patrick's shoulder and told him to put the door behind Susannah's little electric golf-cart, which she had taken to calling Ho Fat III.

Patrick was happy to oblige. For one thing, putting Ho Fat III in front of the door gave him a reason to use his eraser. He worked much more quickly this time—almost carelessly, an observer might

have said—but the gunslinger was sitting right next to him and didn't think Patrick missed a single stroke in his depiction of the little cart. He finished by drawing its single front wheel and putting a reflected gleam of firelight in the hubcap. Then he put his pencil down, and as he did, there was a disturbance in the air. Roland felt it push against his face. The flames of the fire, which had been burning straight up in the windless dark, streamed briefly sideways. Then the feeling was gone. The flames once more burned straight up. And standing not ten feet from that fire, behind the electric cart, was a door Roland had last encountered in Calla Bryn Sturgis, in the Cave of the Voices.

SEVENTEEN

Susannah waited until dawn, at first passing the time by gathering up her gunna, then putting it aside again—what would her few possessions (not to mention the little hide bag in which they were stored) avail her in New York City? People would laugh. They would probably laugh anyway . . . or scream and run at the very sight of her. The Susannah Dean who suddenly appeared in Central Park would look to most folks not like a college graduate or an heiress to a large fortune; not even like Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, say sorry. No, to civilized city people she'd probably look like some kind of freak-show escapee. And once she went through *this* door, would there be any going back? Never. Never in life.

So she put her gunna aside and simply waited. As dawn began to show its first faint white light on the horizon, she called Patrick over and asked him if he wanted to go along with her. Back to the world you came from or one very much like it, she told him, although she knew he didn't remember that world at all—either he'd been taken from it too young, or the trauma of being snatched away had erased his memory.

Patrick looked at her, then at Roland, who was squatted on his hunkers, looking at him. "Either way, son," the gunslinger said. "You can draw in either world, tell ya true. Although where she's going, there'll be more to appreciate it."

He wants him to stay, she thought, and was angry. Then Roland looked at her and gave his head a minute shake. She wasn't sure, but

she thought that meant—

And no, she didn't just think. She knew what it meant. Roland wanted her to know he was hiding his thoughts from Patrick. His desires. And while she'd known the gunslinger to lie (most spectacularly at the meeting on the Calla Bryn Sturgis common-ground before the coming of the Wolves), she had never known him to lie to *her*. To Detta, maybe, but not to her. Or Eddie. Or Jake. There had been times when he hadn't told them all he knew, but outright lie . . . ? No. They'd been katet, and Roland had played them straight. Give the devil his due.

Patrick suddenly took up his pad and wrote quickly on the clean sheet. Then he showed it to them:

I will stay. Scared to go sumplace new.

As if to emphasize exactly what he meant, he opened his lips and pointed into his tongueless mouth.

And did she see relief on Roland's face? If so, she hated him for it.

"All right, Patrick," she said, trying to show none of her feelings in her voice. She even reached over and patted his hand. "I understand how you feel. And while it's true that people can be cruel . . . cruel and mean . . . there's plenty who are kind. Listen, thee: I'm not going until dawn. If you change your mind, the offer is open."

He nodded quickly. *Grateful I ain't goan try no harder t'change his mine*, Detta thought angrily. *Ole white man probably grateful, too!*

Shut up, Susannah told her, and for a wonder, Detta did.

EIGHTEEN

But as the day brightened (revealing a mediumsized herd of grazing bannock not two miles away), she let Detta back into her mind. More: she let Detta take over. It was easier that way, less painful. It was Detta who took one more stroll around the campsite, briskly breathing the last of this world for both of them, and storing away the memory. It was Detta who went around the door, rocking first one way and then the other on the toughened pads of her palms, and saw the nothing

at all on the other side. Patrick walked on one side of her, Roland on the other. Patrick hooted with surprise when he saw the door was gone. Roland said nothing. Oy walked up to the place where the door had been, sniffed at the air . . . and then walked through the place where it was, if you were looking from the other side. *If we was over there*, Detta thought, *we'd see him walk right through it, like a magic trick.*

She returned to Ho Fat III, which she had decided to ride through the door. Always assuming it would open, that was. This whole business would be quite a joke if it turned out it wouldn't. Roland made to help her up into the seat; she brushed him brusquely away and mounted on her own. She pushed the red button beside the wheel, and the cart's electric motor started with a faint hum. The needle marked CHG still swung well over into the green. She turned the throttle on the right handlebar and rolled slowly toward the closed door with the symbols meaning UNFOUND marching across the front. She stopped with the cart's little bullet nose almost touching it.

She turned to the gunslinger with a fixed make-believe smile.

"All ri', Roland—Ah'll say g'bye to you, then. Long days n pleasant nights. May you reach y'damn Tower, and—"

"No," he said.

She looked at him, *Detta* looked at him with her eyes both blazing and laughing. Challenging him to turn this into something she didn't want it to be. Challenging him to turn her out now that she was in. *C'mon, honky white boy, lessee you do it.*

"What?" she asked. "What's on yo' mine, big boy?"

"I'd not say goodbye to you like this, after all this time," he said.

"What do you mean?" Only in Detta's angry burlesque, it came out *Whatchu mean?*

"You know."

She shook her head defiantly. *Doan.*

"For one thing," he said, taking her trail-toughened left hand gently in his mutilated right one, "there's another who should have the choice to go or stay, and I'm not speaking of Patrick."

For a moment she didn't understand. Then she looked down at a certain pair of gold-ringed eyes, a certain pair of cocked ears, and did. She had forgotten about Oy.

“If Detta asks him, he’ll surely stay, for she’s never been to his liking. If Susannah asks him . . . why, then I don’t know.”

Just like that, Detta was gone. She would be back—Susannah understood now that she would never be entirely free of Detta Walker, and that was all right, because she no longer wanted to be—but for now she was gone.

“Oy?” she said gently. “Will you come with me, honey? It may be we’ll find Jake again. Maybe not quite the same, but still . . .”

Oy, who had been almost completely silent during their trek across the Badlands and the White Lands of Empathica and the open rangelands, now spoke. “Ake?” he said. But he spoke doubtfully, as one who barely remembers, and her heart broke. She had promised herself she wouldn’t cry, and Detta all but *guaranteed* she wouldn’t cry, but now Detta was gone and the tears were here again.

“*Jake*,” she said. “You remember Jake, honey-bunch, I know you do. Jake and Eddie.”

“Ake? Ed?” With a little more certainty now. He *did* remember.

“Come with me,” she urged, and Oy started forward as if he would jump up in the cart beside her. Then, with no idea at all why she should say it, she added: “There are other worlds than these.”

Oy stopped as soon as the words were out of her mouth. He sat down. Then he got up again, and she felt a moment of hope: perhaps there could still be some little ka-tet, a dan-tete-tet, in some version of New York where folks drove Takuro Spirits and took pictures of each other drinking Nozz-A-La with their Shinnaro cameras.

Instead, Oy trotted back to the gunslinger and sat beside one battered boot. They had walked far, those boots, far. Miles and wheels, wheels and miles. But now their walking was almost done.

“Olan,” said Oy, and the finality in his strange little voice rolled a stone against her heart. She turned bitterly to the old man with the big iron on his hip.

“There,” she said. “You have your own glammer, don’t you? Always did. You drew Eddie on to one death, and Jake to a pair of em. Now Patrick, and even the bumbler. Are you happy?”

“No,” said he, and she saw he truly was not. She believed she had never seen such sadness and such loneliness on a human face. “Never was I farther from happy, Susannah of New York. Will you change

your mind and stay? Will thee come the last little while with me? That would make me happy.”

For a wild moment she thought she would. That she would simply turn the little electric cart from the door—which was one-sided and made no promises—and go with him to the Dark Tower. Another day would do it; they could camp at mid-afternoon and thus arrive tomorrow at sunset, as he wanted.

Then she remembered the dream. The singing voices. The young man holding out the cup of hot chocolate—the good kind, *mit schlag*.

“No,” she said softly. “I’ll take my chance and go.”

For a moment she thought he would make it easy on her, just agree and let her go. Then his anger—no, his *despair*—broke in a painful burst. “But you can’t be *sure!* Susannah, what if the dream itself is a trick and a glammer? What if the things you see even when the door’s open are nothing but tricks and glammers? What if you roll right through and into todash space?”

“Then I’ll light the darkness with thoughts of those I love.”

“And that might work,” said he, speaking in the bitterest voice she had ever heard. “For the first ten years . . . or twenty . . . or even a hundred. And then? What about the rest of eternity? Think of Oy! Do you think he’s forgotten Jake? Never! Never! Never in your life! Never in his! He senses something wrong! Susannah, don’t. I beg you, don’t go. I’ll get on my knees, if that will help.” And to her horror, he began to do exactly that.

“It won’t,” she said. “And if this is to be my last sight of you—my heart says it is—then don’t let it be of you on your knees. You’re not a kneeling man, Roland, son of Steven, never were, and I don’t want to remember you that way. I want to see you on your feet, as you were in Calla Bryn Sturgis. As you were with your friends at Jericho Hill.”

He got up and came to her. For a moment she thought he meant to restrain her by force, and she was afraid. But he only put his hand on her arm for a moment, and then took it away. “Let me ask you again, Susannah. *Are you sure?*”

She conned her heart and saw that she was. She understood the risks, but yes—she was. And why? Because Roland’s way was the way of the gun. Roland’s way was death for those who rode or walked beside him. He had proved it over and over again, since the earliest days of

his quest—no, even before, since overhearing Hax the cook plotting treachery and thus assuring his death by the rope. It was all for the good (for what he called the White), she had no doubt of it, but Eddie still lay in his grave in one world and Jake in another. She had no doubt that much the same fate was waiting for Oy, and for poor Patrick.

Nor would their deaths be long in coming.

“I’m sure,” said she.

“All right. Will you give me a kiss?”

She took him by the arm and pulled him down and put her lips on his. When she inhaled, she took in the breath of a thousand years and ten thousand miles. And yes, she tasted death.

But not for you, gunslinger, she thought. For others, but never for you. May I escape your glammer, and may I do fine.

She was the one who broke their kiss.

“Can you open the door for me?” she asked.

Roland went to it, and took the knob in his hand, and the knob turned easily within his grip.

Cold air puffed out, strong enough to blow Patrick’s long hair back, and with it came a few flakes of snow. She could see grass that was still green beneath light frost, and a path, and an iron fence. Voices were singing “What Child Is This,” just as in her dream.

It could be Central Park. Yes, it *could* be; Central Park of some other world along the axis, perhaps, and not the one she came from, but close enough so that in time she would know no difference.

Or perhaps it was, as he said, a glammer.

Perhaps it was the todash darkness.

“It could be a trick,” he said, most certainly reading her mind.

“*Life* is a trick, love a glammer,” she replied. “Perhaps we’ll meet again, in the clearing at the end of the path.”

“As you say so, let it be so,” he told her. He put out one leg, the rundown heel of his boot planted in the earth, and bowed to her. Oy had begun to weep, but he sat firmly beside the gunslinger’s left boot. “Goodbye, my dear.”

“Goodbye, Roland.” Then she faced ahead, took in a deep breath, and twisted the little cart’s throttle. It rolled smoothly forward.

“*Wait!*” Roland cried, but she never turned, nor looked at him again. She rolled through the door. It slammed shut behind her at once with a flat, declamatory clap he knew all too well, one he’d dreamed of ever since his long and feverish walk along the edge of the Western Sea. The sound of the singing was gone and now there was only the lonely sound of the prairie wind.

Roland of Gilead sat in front of the door, which already looked tired and unimportant. It would never open again. He put his face in his hands. It occurred to him that if he had never loved them, he would never have felt so alone as this. Yet of all his many regrets, the re-opening of his heart was not among them, even now.

NINETEEN

Later—because there’s always a later, isn’t there?—he made breakfast and forced himself to eat his share. Patrick ate heartily, then withdrew to do his necessary while Roland packed up.

There was a third plate, and it was still full. “Oy?” Roland asked, tipping it toward the billy-bumbler. “Will’ee not have at least a bite?”

Oy looked at the plate, then backed away two firm steps. Roland nodded and tossed away the uneaten food, scattering it into the grass. Mayhap Mordred would come along in good time, and find something to his liking.

At mid-morning they moved on, Roland pulling Ho Fat II and Patrick walking along beside with his head hung low. And soon the beat of the Tower filled the gunslinger’s head again. Very close now. That steady, pulsing power drove out all thoughts of Susannah, and he was glad. He gave himself to the steady beating and let it sweep away all his thoughts and all his sorrow.

Commala-come-come, sang the Dark Tower, now just over the horizon.
Commala-come-come, gunslinger may ya come.

Commala-come-Roland, the journey’s nearly done.



CHAPTER II:

MORDRED

ONE

The dan-tete was watching when the long-haired fellow they were now traveling with grabbed Susannah's shoulder to point out the dancing orange hobs in the distance. Mordred watched as she whirled, pulling one of the White Daddy's big revolvers. For a moment the far-seeing glass eyes he'd found in the house on Odd's Lane trembled in Mordred's hand, that was how hard he was rooting for his Blackbird Mommy to shoot the Artist. How the guilt would have bitten into her! Like the blade of a dull hatchet, yar! It was even possible that, overcome by the horror of what she had done, she'd've put the barrel of the gun to her own head and pulled the trigger a second time, and how would Old White Daddy like waking up to *that*?

Ah, children are such dreamers.

It didn't happen, of course, but there had been much more to watch. Some of it was hard to see, though. Because it wasn't just excitement that made the binoculars tremble. He was dressed warmly now, in layers of Dandelo's hume clothes, but he was still cold. Except when he was hot. And either way, hot or cold, he trembled like a toothless old gaffer in a chimney corner. This state of affairs had been growing gradually worse since he left Joe Collins's house behind. Fever roared in his bones like a blizzard wind. Mordred was no longer a-hungry (for Mordred no longer had an appetite), but Mordred was a-sick, a-sick, a-sick.

In truth, he was afraid Mordred might be a-dying.

Nonetheless he watched Roland's party with great interest, and once the fire was replenished, he saw even better. Saw the door come

into being, although he could not read the symbols there writ upon. He understood that the Artist had somehow drawn it into being—what a godlike talent that was! Mordred longed to eat him just on the chance such a talent might be transmittable! He doubted it, the spiritual side of cannibalism was greatly overrated, but what harm in seeing for one's self?

He watched their palaver. He saw—and also understood—her plea to the Artist and the Mutt, her whining entreaties

(come with me so I don't have to go alone, come on, be a sport, in fact be a couple of sports, oh boo-hoo)

and rejoiced in her sorrow and fury when the plea was rejected by both boy and beast; Mordred rejoiced even though he knew it would make his own job harder. (A *little* harder, anyway; how much trouble could a mute young man and a billy-bumbler really give him, once he changed his shape and made his move?) For a moment he thought that, in her anger, she might shoot Old White Daddy with his own gun, and that Mordred did *not* want. Old White Daddy was meant to be *his*. The voice from the Dark Tower had told him so. A-sick he surely was, a-dying he might be, but Old White Daddy was still meant to be *his* meal, not the Blackbird Mommy's. Why, she'd leave the meat to rot without taking a single bite! But she didn't shoot him. Instead she *kissed* him. Mordred didn't want to see that, it made him feel sicker than ever, and so he put the binoculars aside. He lay in the grass amid a little clump of alders, trembling, hot and cold, trying not to puke (he had spent the entire previous day puking and shitting, it seemed, until the muscles of his midsection ached with the strain of sending such heavy traffic in two directions at once and nothing came up his throat but thick, mucousy strings and nothing out of his backside but brown stew and great hollow farts), and when he looked through the binoculars again, it was just in time to see the back end of the little electric cart disappear as the Blackbird Mommy drove it through the door. Something swirled out around it. Dust, maybe, but he thought snow. There was also singing. The sound of it made him feel almost as sick as seeing her kiss Old White Gunslinger Daddy. Then the door slammed shut behind her and the singing was gone and the gunslinger just sat there near it, with his face in his hands, boohoo, sob-sob. The bumbler went to him and put its long snout on

one of his boots as if to offer comfort, how sweet, how puking sweet. By then it was dawn, and Mordred dozed a little. When he woke up, it was to the sound of Old White Daddy's voice. Mordred's hiding place was downwind, and the words came to him clearly: "Oy? Will'ee not have at least a bite?" The bumbler would not, however, and the gunslinger had scattered the food that had been meant for the little furry houken. Later, after they moved on (Old White Gunslinger Daddy pulling the cart the robot had made for them, plodding slowly along the ruts of Tower Road with his head down and his shoulders all a-slump), Mordred crept to the campsite. He did indeed eat some of the scattered food—surely it had not been poisoned if Roland had hoped it would go down the bumbler's gullet—but he stopped after only three or four chunks of meat, knowing that if he went on eating, his guts would spew everything back out, both north and south. He couldn't have that. If he didn't hold onto at least *some* nourishment, he would be too weak to follow them. And he *must* follow, had to stay close a little while longer. It would have to be tonight. It would have to be, because tomorrow Old White Daddy would reach the Dark Tower, and then it would almost certainly be too late. His heart told him so. Mordred plodded as Roland had, but even more slowly. Every now and then he would double over as cramps seized him and his human shape wavered, that blackness rising and receding under his skin, his heavy coat bulging restlessly as the other legs tried to burst free, then hanging slack again as he willed them back inside, gritting his teeth and groaning with effort. Once he shit a pint or so of stinky brown fluid in his pants, and once he managed to get his trousers down, and he cared little either way. No one had invited him to the Reap Ball, ha-ha! Invitation lost in the mail, no doubt! Later, when it came time to attack, he would let the little Red King free. But if it happened now, he was almost positive he wouldn't be able to change back again. He wouldn't have the strength. The spider's faster metabolism would fan the sickness the way a strong wind fans a low ground-fire into a forest-gobbling blaze. What was killing him slowly would kill him rapidly, instead. So he fought it, and by afternoon he felt a little better. The pulse from the Tower was growing rapidly now, growing in strength and urgency. So was his Red Daddy's voice, urging him on, urging him to stay within striking distance. Old White Gunslinger Daddy had

gotten no more than four hours' sleep a night for weeks now, because he had been standing watch-and-watch with the now-departed Blackbird Mommy. But Blackbird Mommy hadn't ever had to pull that cart, had she? No, just rode in it like Queen Shit o' Turd Hill did she, hee! Which meant Old White Gunslinger Daddy was plenty tired, even with the pulse of the Dark Tower to buoy him up and pull him onward. Tonight Old White Daddy would either have to depend on the Artist and the Mutt to stand the first watch or try to do the whole thing on his own. Mordred thought he could stand one more wakeful night himself, simply because he knew he'd never have to have another. He would creep close, as he had the previous night. He would watch their camp with the old man-monster's glass eyes for far-seeing. And when they were all asleep, he would change for the last time and rush down upon them. Scrabble-de-dee comes me, hee! Old White Daddy might never even wake up, but Mordred hoped he would. At the very end. Just long enough to realize what was happening to him. Just long enough to know that his son was snatching him into the land of death only hours before he would have reached his precious Dark Tower. Mordred clenched his fists and watched the fingers turn black. He felt the terrible but pleasurable itching up the sides of his body as the spider-legs tried to burst through—seven instead of eight, thanks to the terrible nasty awful Blackbird Mommy who had been both preg and not-preg at the same time, and might she rot screaming in todash space forever (or at least until one of the Great Ones who lurked there found her). He fought and encouraged the change with equal ferocity. At last he only fought it, and the urge to change subsided. He gave out a victory-fart, but although this one was long and smelly, it was silent. His asshole was now a broken squeeze-box that could no longer make music but only gasp. His fingers returned to their normal pinkish-white shade and the itching up and down the sides of his body disappeared. His head swam and slithered with fever; his thin arms (little more than sticks) ached with chills. The voice of his Red Daddy was sometimes loud and sometimes faint, but it was always there: *Come to me. Run to me. Hie thy doubleton self. Come-commala, you good son of mine. We'll bring the Tower down, we'll destroy all the light there is, and then rule the darkness together.*

Come to me.

Come.

TWO

Surely those three who remained (four, counting himself) had outrun ka's umbrella. Not since the *Prim* receded had there been such a creature as Mordred Deschain, who was part hume and part of that rich and potent soup. Surely such a creature could never have been meant by ka to die such a mundane death as the one that now threatened: fever brought on by food-poisoning.

Roland could have told him that eating what he found in the snow around to the side of Dandelo's barn was a bad idea; so could Robert Browning, for that matter. Wicked or not, actual *horse* or not, Lippy (probably named after another, and better-known, Browning poem called "Fra Lippo Lippi") had been a sick animal herself when Roland ended her life with a bullet to the head. But Mordred had been in his spider-form when he'd come upon the thing which at least *looked* like a horse, and almost nothing would have stopped him from eating the meat. It wasn't until he'd resumed his human form again that he wondered uneasily how there could be so much meat on Dandelo's bony old nag and why it had been so soft and warm, so full of uncoagulated blood. It had been in a snowdrift, after all, and had been lying there for some days. The mare's remains should have been frozen stiff.

Then the vomiting began. The fever came next, and with it the struggle not to change until he was close enough to his Old White Daddy to rip him limb from limb. The being whose coming had been prophesied for thousands of years (mostly by the Manni-folk, and usually in frightened whispers), the being who would grow to be half-human and half-god, the being who would oversee the end of humanity and the return of the *Prim* . . . that being had finally arrived as a naïve and bad-hearted child who was now dying from a bellyful of poisoned horsemeat.

Ka could have had no part in this.

THREE

Roland and his two companions didn't make much progress on the day Susannah left them. Even had he not planned to travel short miles so that they could come to the Tower at sunset of the day following, Roland wouldn't have been able to go far. He was disheartened, lonely, and tired almost to death. Patrick was also tired, but *he* at least could ride if he chose to, and for most of that day he did so choose, sometimes napping, sometimes sketching, sometimes walking a little while before climbing back into Ho Fat II and napping some more.

The pulse from the Tower was strong in Roland's head and heart, and its song was powerful and lovely, now seemingly composed of a thousand voices, but not even these things could take the lead from his bones. Then, as he was looking for a shady spot where they could stop and eat a little midday meal (by now it was actually mid-afternoon), he saw something that momentarily made him forget both his weariness and his sorrow.

Growing by the side of the road was a wild rose, seemingly the exact twin of the one in the vacant lot. It bloomed in defiance of the season, which Roland put as very early spring. It was a light pink shade on the outside and darkened to a fierce red on the inside; the exact color, he thought, of heart's desire. He fell on his knees before it, tipped his ear toward that coral cup, and listened.

The rose was singing.

The weariness stayed, as weariness will (on this side of the grave, at least), but the loneliness and the sadness departed, at least for a little while. He peered into the heart of the rose and saw a yellow center so bright he couldn't look directly at it.

Gan's gateway, he thought, not sure exactly what that was but positive that he was right. *Aye, Gan's gateway, so it is!*

This was unlike the rose in the vacant lot in one crucial way: the feeling of sickness and the faint voices of discord were gone. This one was rich with health as well as full of light and love. It and all the others . . . they . . . they must . . .

They feed the Beams, don't they? With their songs and their perfume. As the Beams feed them. It's a living force-field, a giving and taking, all spinning out from the Tower. And this is only the first, the farthest outrider. In Can'-Ka No Rey there are tens of thousands, just like this.

The thought made him faint with amazement. Then came another that filled him with anger and fear: the only one with a view of that great red blanket was insane. Would blight them all in an instant, if allowed free rein to do so.

There was a hesitant tap on his shoulder. It was Patrick, with Oy at his heel. Patrick pointed to the grassy area beside the rose, then made eating gestures. Pointed at the rose and made drawing motions. Roland wasn't very hungry, but the boy's other idea pleased him a great deal.

"Yes," he said. "We'll have a bite here, then maybe I'll take me a little siesta while you draw the rose. Will you make two pictures of it, Patrick?" He showed the two remaining fingers on his right hand to make sure Patrick understood.

The young man frowned and cocked his head, still not understanding. His hair hung to one shoulder in a bright sheaf. Roland thought of how Susannah had washed that hair in a stream in spite of Patrick's hooted protests. It was the sort of thing Roland himself would never have thought to do, but it made the young fellow look a lot better. Looking at that sheaf of shining hair made him miss Susannah in spite of the rose's song. She had brought grace to his life. It wasn't a word that had occurred to him until she was gone.

Meanwhile, here was Patrick, wildly talented but awfully slow on the uptake.

Roland gestured to his pad, then to the rose. Patrick nodded—that part he got. Then Roland raised two of the fingers on his good hand and pointed to the pad again. This time the light broke on Patrick's face. He pointed to the rose, to the pad, to Roland, and then to himself.

"That's right, big boy," Roland said. "A picture of the rose for you and one for me. It's nice, isn't it?"

Patrick nodded enthusiastically, setting to work while Roland rustled the grub. Once again Roland fixed three plates, and once again Oy refused his share. When Roland looked into the bumbler's gold-ringed eyes he saw an emptiness there—a kind of loss—that hurt him deep inside. And Oy couldn't stand to miss many meals; he was far too thin already. Trail-frayed, Cuthbert would have said, probably

smiling. In need of some hot sassafras and salts. But the gunslinger had no sassy here.

“Why do’ee look so?” Roland asked the bumbler crossly. “If’ee wanted to go with her, thee should have gone when thee had the chance! Why will’ee cast thy sad houken’s eyes on me now?”

Oy looked at him a moment longer, and Roland saw that he had hurt the little fellow’s feelings; ridiculous but true. Oy walked away, little squiggle of tail drooping. Roland felt like calling him back, but that would have been more ridiculous yet, would it not? What plan did he have? To apologize to a billy-bumbler?

He felt angry and ill at ease with himself, feelings he had never suffered before hauling Eddie, Susannah, and Jake from America-side into his life. Before they’d come he’d felt almost nothing, and while that was a narrow way to live, in some ways it wasn’t so bad; at least you didn’t waste time wondering if you should apologize to animals for taking a high tone to them, by the gods.

Roland hunkered by the rose, leaning into the soothing power of its song and the blaze of light—*healthy* light—from its center. Then Patrick hooted at him, gesturing for Roland to move away so he could see it and draw it. This added to Roland’s sense of dislocation and annoyance, but he moved back without a word of protest. He had, after all, asked Patrick to draw it, hadn’t he? He thought of how, if Susannah had been here, their eyes would have met with amused understanding, as the eyes of parents do over the antics of a small child. But she wasn’t here, of course; she’d been the last of them and now she was gone, too.

“All right, can’ee see howgit rosen-gaff a tweakit better?” he asked, striving to sound comic and only sounding cross—cross and tired.

Patrick, at least, didn’t react to the harshness in the gunslinger’s tone; *probably didn’t even ken what I said*, Roland thought. The mute boy sat with his ankles crossed and his pad balanced on his thighs, his half-finished plate of food set off to one side.

“Don’t get so busy you forget to eat that,” Roland said. “You mind me, now.” He got another distracted nod for his pains and gave up. “I’m going to snooze, Patrick. It’ll be a long afternoon.” *And an even longer night*, he added to himself . . . and yet he had the same consolation as Mordred: tonight would likely be the last. He didn’t

know for sure what waited for him in the Dark Tower at the end of the field of roses, but even if he managed to put paid to the Crimson King, he felt quite sure that this was his last march. He didn't believe he would ever leave Can'-Ka No Rey, and that was all right. He was very tired. And, despite the power of the rose, sad.

Roland of Gilead put an arm over his eyes and was asleep at once.

FOUR

He didn't sleep for long before Patrick woke him with a child's enthusiasm to show him the first picture of the rose he'd drawn—the sun suggested no more than ten minutes had passed, fifteen at most.

Like all of his drawings, this one had a queer power. Patrick had captured the rose almost to the life, even though he had nothing but a pencil to work with. Still, Roland would much have preferred another hour's sleep to this exercise in art appreciation. He nodded his approval, though—no more grouch and grump in the presence of such a lovely thing, he promised himself—and Patrick smiled, happy even with so little. He tossed back the sheet and began drawing the rose again. One picture for each of them, just as Roland had asked.

Roland could have slept again, but what was the point? The mute boy would be done with the second picture in a matter of minutes and would only wake him again. He went to Oy instead, and stroked the bumbler's dense fur, something he rarely did.

"I'm sorry I spoke rough to'ee, fella," Roland said. "Will you not set me on with a word?"

But Oy would not.

Fifteen minutes later, Roland re-packed the few things he'd taken out of the cart, spat into his palms, and hoisted the handles again. The cart was lighter now, had to be, but it felt heavier.

Of course it's heavier, he thought. It's got my grief in it. I pull it along with me everywhere I go, so I do.

Soon Ho Fat II had Patrick Danville in it, as well. He crawled up, made himself a little nest, and fell asleep almost at once. Roland plodded on, head down, shadow growing longer at his heels. Oy walked beside him.

One more night, the gunslinger thought. One more night, one more day to follow, and then it's done. One way or t' other.

He let the pulse of the Tower and its many singing voices fill his head and lighten his heels . . . at least a little. There were more roses now, dozens scattered on either side of the road and brightening the otherwise dull countryside. A few were growing in the road itself and he was careful to detour around them. Tired though he might be, he would not crush a single one, or roll a wheel over a single fallen petal.

FIVE

He stopped for the night while the sun was still well above the horizon, too weary to go farther even though there would be at least another two hours of daylight. Here was a stream that had gone dry, but in its bed grew a riot of those beautiful wild roses. Their songs didn't diminish his weariness, but they revived his spirit to some extent. He thought this was true for Patrick and Oy, as well, and that was good. When Patrick had awakened he'd looked around eagerly at first. Then his face had darkened, and Roland knew he was realizing all over again that Susannah was gone. The boy had cried a little then, but perhaps there would be no crying here.

There was a grove of cottonwood trees on the bank—at least the gunslinger thought they were cottonwoods—but they had died when the stream from which their roots drank had disappeared. Now their branches were only bony, leafless snarls against the sky. In their silhouettes he could make out the number nineteen over and over again, in both the figures of Susannah's world and those of his own. In one place the branches seemed to clearly spell the word *CHASSIT* against the deepening sky.

Before making a fire and cooking them an early supper—canned goods from Dandelo's pantry would do well enough tonight, he reckoned—Roland went into the dry streambed and smelled the roses, strolling slowly among the dead trees and listening to their song. Both the smell and the sound were refreshing.

Feeling a little better, he gathered wood from beneath the trees (snapping off a few of the lower branches for good measure, leaving dry, splintered stumps that reminded him a little of Patrick's pencils)

and piled kindling in the center. Then he struck a light, speaking the old catechism almost without hearing it: "Spark-a-dark, who's my sire? Will I lay me? Will I stay me? Bless this camp with fire."

While he waited for the fire to first grow and then die down to a bed of rosy embers, Roland took out the watch he had been given in New York. Yesterday it had stopped, although he had been assured the battery that ran it would last for fifty years.

Now, as late afternoon faded to evening, the hands had very slowly begun to move backward.

He looked at this for a little while, fascinated, then closed the cover and looked at the sigils inscribed there: key and rose and Tower. A faint and eldritch blue light had begun to gleam from the windows that spiraled upward.

They didn't know it would do that, he thought, and then put the watch carefully back in his lefthand front pocket, checking first (as he always did) that there was no hole for it to fall through. Then he cooked. He and Patrick ate well.

Oy would touch not a single bite.

SIX

Other than the night he had spent in palaver with the man in black—the night during which Walter had read a bleak fortune from an undoubtedly stacked deck—those twelve hours of dark by the dry stream were the longest of Roland's life. The weariness settled over him ever deeper and darker, until it felt like a cloak of stones. Old faces and old places marched in front of his heavy eyes: Susan, riding hellbent across the Drop with her blond hair flying out behind; Cuthbert running down the side of Jericho Hill in much the same fashion, screaming and laughing; Alain Johns raising a glass in a toast; Eddie and Jake wrestling in the grass, yelling, while Oy danced around them, barking.

Mordred was somewhere out there, and close, yet again and again Roland found himself drifting toward sleep. Each time he jerked himself awake, staring around wildly into the dark, he knew he had come nearer to the edge of unconsciousness. Each time he expected to see the spider with the red mark on its belly bearing down on him

and saw nothing but the hobs, dancing orange in the distance. Heard nothing but the sough of the wind.

But he waits. He bides. And if I sleep—when I sleep—he'll be on us.

Around three in the morning he roused himself by willpower alone from a doze that was on the very verge of tumbling him into deeper sleep. He looked around desperately, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms hard enough to make mirks and fouders and sankofites explode across his field of vision. The fire had burned very low. Patrick lay about twenty feet from it, at the twisted base of a cottonwood tree. From where Roland sat, the boy was no more than a hide-covered hump. Of Oy there was no immediate sign. Roland called to the bumbler and got no response. The gunslinger was about to try his feet when he saw Jake's old friend a little beyond the edge of the failing firelight—or at least the gleam of his gold-ringed eyes. Those eyes looked at Roland for a moment, then disappeared, probably when Oy put his snout back down on his paws.

He's tired, too, Roland thought, and why not?

The question of what would become of Oy after tomorrow tried to rise to the surface of the gunslinger's troubled, tired mind, and Roland pushed it away. He got up (in his weariness his hands slipped down to his formerly troublesome hip, as if expecting to find the pain still there), went to Patrick, and shook him awake. It took some doing, but at last the boy's eyes opened. That wasn't good enough for Roland. He grasped Patrick's shoulders and pulled him up to a sitting position. When the boy tried to slump back down again, Roland shook him. *Hard.* He looked at Roland with dazed incomprehension.

"Help me build up the fire, Patrick."

Doing that should wake him up at least a little. And once the fire was burning bright again, Patrick would have to stand a brief watch. Roland didn't like the idea, knew full well that leaving Patrick in charge of the night would be dangerous, but trying to watch the rest of it on his own would be even more dangerous. He needed sleep. An hour or two would be enough, and surely Patrick could stay awake that long.

Patrick was willing enough to gather up some sticks and put them on the fire, although he moved like a bougie—a reanimated corpse. And when the fire was blazing, he slumped back down in his former

place with his arms between his bony knees, already more asleep than awake. Roland thought he might actually have to slap the boy to bring him around, and would later wish—bitterly—that he had done just that.

“Patrick, listen to me.” He shook Patrick by the shoulders hard enough to make his long hair fly, but some of it flopped back into his eyes. Roland brushed it away. “I need you to stay awake and watch. Just for an hour . . . just until . . . look up, Patrick! Look! Gods, don’t you *dare* go to sleep on me again! Do you see that? The brightest star of all those close to us!”

It was Old Mother Roland was pointing to, and Patrick nodded at once. There was a gleam of interest in his eye now, and the gunslinger thought that was encouraging. It was Patrick’s “I want to draw” look. And if he sat drawing Old Mother as she shone in the widest fork of the biggest dead cottonwood, then the chances were good that he’d stay awake. Maybe until dawn, if he got fully involved.

“Here, Patrick.” He made the boy sit against the base of the tree. It was bony and knobby and—Roland hoped—uncomfortable enough to prohibit sleep. All these movements felt to Roland like the sort you made underwater. Oh, he was tired. *So* tired. “Do you still see the star?”

Patrick nodded eagerly. He seemed to have thrown off his sleepiness, and the gunslinger thanked the gods for this favor.

“When it goes behind that thick branch and you can’t see it or draw it anymore without getting up . . . you call me. Wake me up, no matter how hard it is. Do you understand?”

Patrick nodded at once, but Roland had now traveled with him long enough to know that such a nod meant little or nothing. Eager to please, that’s what he was. If you asked him if nine and nine made nineteen, he would nod with the same instant enthusiasm.

“When you can’t see it anymore from where you’re sitting . . .” His own words seemed to be coming from far away, now. He’d just have to hope that Patrick understood. The tongueless boy had taken out his pad, at least, and a freshly sharpened pencil.

That’s my best protection, Roland’s mind muttered as he stumbled back to his little pile of hides between the campfire and Ho Fat II. *He won’t fall asleep while he’s drawing, will he?*

He hoped not, but supposed he didn't really know. And it didn't matter, because he, Roland of Gilead, was going to sleep in any case. He'd done the best he could, and it would have to be enough.

"An hour," he muttered, and his voice was far and wee in his own ears. "Wake me in an hour . . . when the star . . . when Old Mother goes behind . . ."

But Roland was unable to finish. He didn't even know what he was saying anymore. Exhaustion grabbed him and bore him swiftly away into dreamless sleep.

SEVEN

Mordred saw it all through the far-seeing glass eyes. His fever had soared, and in its bright flame, his own exhaustion had at least temporarily departed. He watched with avid interest as the gunslinger woke the mute boy—the Artist—and bullied him into helping him build up the fire. He watched, rooting for the mute to finish this chore and then go back to sleep before the gunslinger could stop him. That didn't happen, unfortunately. They had camped near a grove of dead cottonwoods, and Roland led the Artist to the biggest tree. Here he pointed up at the sky. It was strewn with stars, but Mordred reckoned Old White Gunslinger Daddy was pointing to Old Mother, because she was the brightest. At last the Artist, who didn't seem to be rolling a full barrow (at least not in the brains department) seemed to understand. He got out his pad and had already set to sketching as Old White Daddy stumbled a little way off, still muttering instructions and orders to which the Artist was pretty clearly paying absolutely no attention at all. Old White Daddy collapsed so suddenly that for a moment Mordred feared that perhaps the strip of jerky that served the son of a bitch as a heart had finally given up beating. Then Roland stirred in the grass, resettling himself, and Mordred, lying on a knoll about ninety yards west of the dry streambed, felt his own heartbeat slow. And deep though the Old White Gunslinger Daddy's exhaustion might be, his training and his long lineage, going all the way back to the Eld himself, would be enough to wake him with his gun in his hand the second the Artist gave one of his wordless but devilishly loud cries. Cramps seized

Mordred, the deepest yet. He doubled over, fighting to hold his human shape, fighting not to scream, fighting not to die. He heard another of those long flabbering noises from below and felt more of the lumpy brown stew begin coursing down his legs. But his preternaturally keen nose smelled more than excreta in this new mess; this time he smelled blood as well as shit. He thought the pain would never end, that it would go on deepening until it tore him in two, but at last it began to let up. He looked at his left hand and was not entirely surprised to see that the fingers had blackened and fused together. They would never come back to human again, those fingers; he believed he had but only one more change left in him. Mordred wiped sweat from his brow with his right hand and raised the binoculars to his eyes again, praying to his Red Daddy that the stupid mutie boy would be asleep. But he was not. He was leaning against the cottonwood tree and looking up between the branches and drawing Old Mother. That was the moment when Mordred Deschain came closest to despair. Like Roland, he thought drawing was the one thing that would likely keep the idiot boy awake. Therefore, why not give in to the change while he had the heat of this latest fever-spike to fuel him with its destructive energy? Why not take his chance? It was Roland he wanted, after all, not the boy; surely he could, in his spider form, sweep down on the gunslinger rapidly enough to grab him and pull him against the spider's craving mouth. Old White Daddy might get off one shot, possibly even two, but Mordred thought he could take one or two, if the flying bits of lead didn't find the white node on the spider's back: his dual body's brain. *And once I pull him in, I'll never let him go until he's sucked dry, nothing but a dust-mummy like the other one, Mia.* He relaxed, ready to let the change sweep over him, and then another voice spoke from the center of his mind. It was the voice of his Red Daddy, the one who was imprisoned on the side of the Dark Tower and needed Mordred alive, at least one more day, in order to set him free.

Wait a little longer, this voice counseled. Wait a little more. I might have another trick up my sleeve. Wait . . . wait just a little longer . . .

Mordred waited. And after a moment or two, he felt the pulse from the Dark Tower change.

EIGHT

Patrick felt that change, too. The pulse became soothing. And there were words in it, ones that blunted his eagerness to draw. He made another line, paused, then put his pencil aside and only looked up at Old Mother, who seemed to pulse in time with the words he heard in his head, words Roland would have recognized. Only these were sung in an old man's voice, quavering but sweet:

*“Baby-bunting, darling one,
Now another day is done.
May your dreams be sweet and merry,
May you dream of fields and berries.*

*Baby-bunting, baby-dear,
Baby, bring your berries here.
Oh chussit, chissit, chassit!
Bring enough to fill your basket!”*

Patrick's head nodded. His eyes closed . . . opened . . . slipped closed again.

Enough to fill my basket, he thought, and slept in the firelight.

NINE

Now, my good son, whispered the cold voice in the middle of Mordred's hot and melting brains. *Now. Go to him and make sure he never rises from his sleep. Murder him among the roses and we'll rule together.*

Mordred came from hiding, the binoculars tumbling from a hand that was no longer a hand at all. As he changed, a feeling of huge confidence swept through him. In another minute it would be done. They both slept, and there was no way he could fail.

He rushed down on the camp and the sleeping men, a black nightmare on seven legs, his mouth opening and closing.

TEN

Somewhere, a thousand miles away, Roland heard barking, loud and urgent, furious and savage. His exhausted mind tried to turn away from it, to blot it out and go deeper. Then there was a horrible scream of agony that awoke him in a flash. He knew that voice, even as distorted by pain as it was.

“Oy!” he cried, leaping up. “Oy, *where are you? To me! To m—*”

There he was, twisting in the spider’s grip. Both of them were clearly visible in the light of the fire. Beyond them, sitting propped against the cottonwood tree, Patrick gazed stupidly through a curtain of hair that would soon be dirty again, now that Susannah was gone. The bumbler wriggled furiously to and fro, snapping at the spider’s body with foam flying from his jaws even as Mordred bent him in a direction his back was never meant to go.

If he’d not rushed out of the tall grass, Roland thought, that would be me in Mordred’s grip.

Oy sent his teeth deep into one of the spider’s legs. In the firelight Roland could see the coin-sized dimples of the bumbler’s jaw-muscles as he chewed deeper still. The thing squalled and its grip loosened. At that moment Oy might have gotten free, had he chosen to do so. He did not. Instead of jumping down and leaping away in the momentary freedom granted him before Mordred was able to re-set his grip, Oy used the time to extend his long neck and seize the place where one of the thing’s legs joined its bloated body. He bit deep, bringing a flood of blackish-red liquor that ran freely from the sides of his muzzle. In the firelight it gleamed with orange sparks. Mordred squalled louder still. He had left Oy out of his calculations, and was now paying the price. In the firelight, the two writhing forms were figures out of a nightmare.

Somewhere nearby, Patrick was hooting in terror.

Worthless whoreson fell asleep after all, Roland thought bitterly. But who had set him to watch in the first place?

“Put him down, Mordred!” he shouted. “Put him down and I’ll let you live another day! I swear it on my father’s name!”

Red eyes, full of insanity and malevolence, peered at him over Oy’s contorted body. Above them, high on the curve of the spider’s back, were tiny blue eyes, hardly more than pinholes. They stared at the gunslinger with a hate that was all too human.

My own eyes, Roland thought with dismay, and then there was a bitter crack. It was Oy's spine, but in spite of this mortal injury he never loosened his grip on the joint where Mordred's leg joined his body, although the steely bristles had torn away much of his muzzle, baring sharp teeth that had sometimes closed on Jake's wrist with gentle affection, tugging him toward something Oy wanted the boy to see. *Ake!* he would cry on such occasions. *Ake-Ake!*

Roland's right hand dropped to his holster and found it empty. It was only then, hours after she had taken her leave, that he realized Susannah had taken one of his guns with her into the other world. *Good*, he thought. *Good. If it is the darkness she found, there would have been five for the things in it and one for herself. Good.*

But this thought was also dim and distant. He pulled the other revolver as Mordred crouched on his hindquarters and used his remaining middle leg, curling it around Oy's midsection and pulling the animal, still snarling, away from his torn and bleeding leg. The spider twirled the furry body upward in a terrible spiral. For a moment it blotted out the bright beacon that was Old Mother. Then he hurled Oy away from him and Roland had a moment of *déjà vu*, realizing he had seen this long ago, in the Wizard's Glass. Oy arced across the fireshot dark and was impaled on one of the cottonwood branches the gunslinger himself had broken off for firewood. He gave an awful hurt cry—a death-cry—and then hung, suspended and limp, above Patrick's head.

Mordred came at Roland without a pause, but his charge was a slow, shambling thing; one of his legs had been shot away only minutes after his birth, and now another hung limp and broken, its pincers jerking spasmodically as they dragged on the grass. Roland's eye had never been clearer, the chill that surrounded him at moments like this never deeper. He saw the white node and the blue bombardier's eyes that were *his* eyes. He saw the face of his only son peering over the back of the abomination and then it was gone in a spray of blood as his first bullet tore it off. The spider reared up, legs clashing at the black and star-shot sky. Roland's next two bullets went into its revealed belly and exited through the back, pulling dark sprays of liquid with it. The spider slewed to one side, perhaps trying to run away, but its remaining legs would not support it. Mordred

Deschain fell into the fire, casting up a flume of red and orange sparks. It writhed in the embers, the bristles on its belly beginning to burn, and Roland, grinning bitterly, shot it again. The dying spider rolled out of the now scattered fire on its back, its remaining legs twitching together in a knot and then spreading apart. One fell back into the fire and began to burn. The smell was atrocious.

Roland started forward, meaning to stamp out the little fires the scattered embers had started in the grass, and then a howl of outraged fury rose in his head.

My son! My only son! You've murdered him!

"He was mine, too," Roland said, looking at the smoldering monstrosity. He could own the truth. Yes, he could do that much.

Come then! Come, son-killer, and look at your Tower, but know this—you'll die of old age at the edge of the Can'-Ka before you ever so much as touch its door! I will never let you pass! Todash space itself will pass away before I let you pass! Murderer! Murderer of your mother, murderer of your friends—aye, every one, for Susannah lies dead with her throat cut on the other side of the door you sent her through—and now murderer of your own son!

"Who sent him to me?" Roland asked the voice in his head. "Who sent yonder child—for that's what he is, inside that black skin—to his death, ye red boggart?"

To this there was no answer, so Roland re-holstered his gun and put out the patches of fire before they could spread. He thought of what the voice had said about Susannah, decided he didn't believe it. She might be dead, aye, *might* be, but he thought Mordred's Red Father knew for sure no more than Roland himself did.

The gunslinger let that thought go and went to the tree, where the last of his ka-tet hung, impaled . . . but still alive. The gold-ringed eyes looked at Roland with what might almost have been weary amusement.

"Oy," Roland said, stretching out his hand, knowing it might be bitten and not caring in the least. He supposed that part of him—and not a small one, either—wanted to be bitten. "Oy, we all say thank you. *I say thank you, Oy.*"

The bumbler did not bite, and spoke but one word. "*Olan,*" said he. Then he sighed, licked the gunslinger's hand a single time, hung his head down, and died.

ELEVEN

As dawn strengthened into the clear light of morning, Patrick came hesitantly to where the gunslinger sat in the dry streambed, amid the roses, with Oy's body spread across his lap like a stole. The young man made a soft, interrogative hooting sound.

"Not now, Patrick," Roland said absently, stroking Oy's fur. It was dense but smooth to the touch. He found it hard to believe that the creature beneath it had gone, in spite of the stiffening muscles and the tangled places where the blood had now clotted. He combed these smooth with his fingers as best he could. "Not now. We have all the livelong day to get there, and we'll do fine."

No, there was no need to hurry; no reason why he should not leisurely mourn the last of his dead. There had been no doubt in the old King's voice when he had promised that Roland should die of old age before he so much as touched the door in the Tower's base. They would go, of course, and Roland would study the terrain, but he knew even now that his idea of coming to the Tower on the old monster's blind side and then working his way around was not an idea at all, but a fool's hope. There had been no doubt in the old villain's voice; no doubt hiding behind it, either.

And for the time being, none of that mattered. Here was another one he had killed, and if there was consolation to be had, it was this: Oy would be the last. Now he was alone again except for Patrick, and Roland had an idea Patrick was immune to the terrible germ the gunslinger carried, for he had never been ka-tet to begin with.

I only kill my family, Roland thought, stroking the dead billy-bumbler.

What hurt most was remembering how unpleasantly he had spoken to Oy the day before. *If'ee wanted to go with her, thee should have gone when thee had thy chance!*

Had he stayed because he knew that Roland would need him? That when push came down to shove (it was Eddie's phrase, of course), Patrick would fail?

Why will'ee cast thy sad houken's eyes on me now?

Because he had known it was to be his last day, and his dying would be hard?

“I think you knew both things,” Roland said, and closed his eyes so he could feel the fur beneath his hands better. “I’m so sorry I spoke to’ee so—would give the fingers on my good left hand if I could take the words back. So I would, every one, say true.”

But here as in the Keystone World, time only ran one way. Done was done. There would be no taking back.

Roland would have said there was no anger left, that every bit of it had been burned away, but when he felt the tingling all over his skin and understood what it meant, he felt fresh fury rise in his heart. And he felt the coldness settle into his tired but still talented hands.

Patrick was *drawing* him! Sitting beneath the cottonwood just as if a brave little creature worth ten of him—no, a hundred!—hadn’t died in that very tree, and for both of them.

It’s his way, Susannah spoke up calmly and gently from deep in his mind. It’s all he has, everything else has been taken from him—his home world as well as his mother and his tongue and whatever brains he might once have had. He’s mourning, too, Roland. He’s frightened, too. This is the only way he has of soothing himself.

Undoubtedly all true. But the truth of it actually fed his rage instead of damping it down. He put his remaining gun aside (it lay gleaming between two of the singing roses) because having it close to hand wouldn’t do, no, not in his current mood. Then he rose to his feet, meaning to give Patrick the scolding of his life, if for no other reason than it would make Roland feel a little bit better himself. He could already hear the first words: *Do you enjoy drawing those who saved your mostly worthless life, stupid boy? Does it cheer your heart?*

He was opening his mouth to begin when Patrick put his pencil down and seized his new toy, instead. The eraser was half-gone now, and there were no others; as well as Roland’s gun, Susannah had taken the little pink nubbins with her, probably for no other reason than that she’d been carrying the jar in her pocket and her mind had been studying other, more important, matters. Patrick poised the eraser over his drawing, then looked up—perhaps to make sure he really wanted to erase at all—and saw the gunslinger standing in the streambed and frowning at him. Patrick knew immediately that Roland was angry, although he probably had no idea under heaven as to *why*, and his face cramped with fear and unhappiness. Roland saw

him now as Dandelo must have seen him time and time again, and his anger collapsed at the thought. He would not have Patrick fear him—for Susannah’s sake if not his own, he would not have Patrick fear him.

And discovered that it *was* for his own sake, after all.

Why not kill him, then? asked the sly, pulsing voice in his head. *Kill him and put him out of his misery, if thee feels so tender toward him? He and the bumbler can enter the clearing together. They can make a place there for you, gunslinger.*

Roland shook his head and tried to smile. “Nay, Patrick, son of Sonia,” he said (for that was how Bill the robot had called the boy). “Nay, I was wrong—again—and will not scold thee. But . . .”

He walked to where Patrick was sitting. Patrick cringed away from him with a doglike, placatory smile that made Roland angry all over again, but he quashed the emotion easily enough this time. Patrick had loved Oy too, and this was the only way he had of dealing with his sorrow.

Little that mattered to Roland now.

He reached down and gently plucked the eraser out of the boy’s fingers. Patrick looked at him questioningly, then reached out his empty hand, asking with his eyes that the wonderful (and useful) new toy be given back.

“Nay,” Roland said, as gently as he could. “You made do for the gods only know how many years without ever knowing such things existed; you can make do the rest of this one day, I think. Mayhap there’ll be something for you to draw—and then undraw—later on. Do’ee ken, Patrick?”

Patrick did not, but once the eraser was safely deposited in Roland’s pocket along with the watch, he seemed to forget about it and just went back to his drawing.

“Put thy picture aside for a little, too,” Roland told him.

Patrick did so without argument. He pointed first to the cart, then to the Tower Road, and made his interrogative hooting sound.

“Aye,” Roland said, “but first we should see what Mordred had for gunna—there may be something useful there—and bury our friend. Will’ee help me see Oy into the ground, Patrick?”

Patrick was willing, and the burial didn't take long; the body was far smaller than the heart it had held. By mid-morning they had begun to cover the last few miles on the long road which led to the Dark Tower.



CHAPTER III: THE CRIMSON KING AND THE DARK TOWER

ONE

The road and the tale have both been long, would you not say so? The trip has been long and the cost has been high . . . but no great thing was ever attained easily. A long tale, like a tall Tower, must be built a stone at a time. Now, however, as the end draws closer, you must mark yon two travelers walking toward us with great care. The older man—he with the tanned, lined face and the gun on his hip—is pulling the cart they call Ho Fat II. The younger one—he with the oversized drawing pad tucked under his arm that makes him look like a student in days of old—is walking along beside it. They are climbing a long, gently upsloping hill not much different from hundreds of others they have climbed. The overgrown road they follow is lined on either side with the remains of rock walls; wild roses grow in amiable profusion amid the tumbles of fieldstone. In the open, brush-dotted land beyond these fallen walls are strange stone edifices. Some look like the ruins of castles; others have the appearance of Egyptian obelisks; a few are clearly Speaking Rings of the sort where demons may be summoned; one ancient ruin of stone pillars and plinths has the look of Stonehenge. One almost expects to see hooded Druids gathered in the center of that great circle, perhaps casting the runes, but the keepers of these monuments, these precursors of the Great Monument, are all gone. Only small herds of bannock graze where once they worshipped.

Never mind. It's not old ruins we've come to observe near the end of our long journey, but the old gunslinger pulling the handles of the cart. We stand at the crest of the hill and wait as he comes toward us. He comes. And comes. Relentless as ever, a man who always learns to speak the language of the land (at least some of it) and the customs of the country; he is still a man who would straighten pictures in strange hotel rooms. Much about him has changed, but not that. He crests the hill, so close to us now that we can smell the sour tang of his sweat. He looks up, a quick and automatic glance he shoots first ahead and then to either side as he tops any hill—*Always con yer vantage* was Cort's rule, and the last of his pupils has still not forgotten it. He looks up without interest, looks down . . . and stops. After a moment of staring at the broken, weed-infested paving of the road, he looks up again, more slowly this time. Much more slowly. As if in dread of what he thinks he has seen.

And it's here we must join him—sink into him—although how we will ever con the vantage of Roland's heart at such a moment as this, when the single-minded goal of his lifetime at last comes in sight, is more than this poor excuse for a storyman can ever tell. Some moments are beyond imagination.

TWO

Roland glanced up quickly as he topped the hill, not because he expected trouble but because the habit was too deeply ingrained to break. *Always con yer vantage*, Cort had told them, drilling it into their heads from the time when they had been little more than babbies. He looked back down at the road—it was becoming more and more difficult to swerve among the roses without crushing any, although he had managed the trick so far—and then, belatedly, realized what he had just seen.

What you thought you saw, Roland told himself, still looking down at the road. *It's probably just another of the strange ruins we've been passing ever since we started moving again.*

But even then Roland knew it wasn't so. What he'd seen was not to either side of the Tower Road, but dead ahead.

He looked up again, hearing his neck creak like hinges in an old door, and there, still miles ahead but now visible on the horizon, real as roses, was the top of the Dark Tower. That which he had seen in a thousand dreams he now saw with his living eyes. Sixty or eighty yards ahead, the road rose to a higher hill with an ancient Speaking Ring moldering in the ivy and honeysuckle on one side and a grove of ironwood trees on the other. At the center of this near horizon, the black shape rose in the near distance, blotting out a tiny portion of the blue sky.

Patrick came to a stop beside Roland and made one of his hooting sounds.

“Do you see it?” Roland asked. His voice was dusty, cracked with amazement. Then, before Patrick could answer, the gunslinger pointed to what the boy wore around his neck. In the end, the binoculars had been the only item in Mordred’s little bit of gunna worth taking.

“Give them over, Pat.”

Patrick did, willingly enough. Roland raised them to his eyes, made a minute adjustment to the knurled focus knob, and then caught his breath as the top of the Tower sprang into view, seemingly close enough to touch. How much was visible over the horizon? How much was he looking at? Twenty feet? Perhaps as much as fifty? He didn’t know, but he could see at least three of the narrow slit-windows which ascended the Tower’s barrel in a spiral, and he could see the oriel window at the top, its many colors blazing in the spring sunshine, the black center seeming to peer back down the binoculars at him like the very Eye of Todash.

Patrick hooted and held out a hand for the binoculars. He wanted his own look, and Roland handed the glasses over without a murmur. He felt light-headed, not really there. It occurred to him that he had sometimes felt like that in the weeks before his battle with Cort, as though he were a dream or a moonbeam. He had sensed something coming, some vast change, and that was what he felt now.

Yonder it is, he thought. Yonder is my destiny, the end of my life’s road. And yet my heart still beats (a little faster than before, ’tis true), my blood still courses, and no doubt when I bend over to grasp the handles of this becurst

cart my back will groan and I may pass a little gas. Nothing at all has changed.

He waited for the disappointment this thought surely presaged—the letdown. It didn't come. What he felt instead was a queer, soaring brightness that seemed to begin in his mind and then spread to his muscles. For the first time since setting out at mid-morning, thoughts of Oy and Susannah left his mind. He felt free.

Patrick lowered the binoculars. When he turned to Roland, his face was excited. He pointed to the black thumb jutting above the horizon and hooted.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Someday, in some world, some version of you will paint it, along with Llamrei, Arthur Eld's horse. That I know, for I've seen the proof. As for now, it's where we must go.”

Patrick hooted again, then pulled a long face. He put his hands to his temples and swayed his head back and forth, like someone who has a terrible headache.

“Yes,” Roland said. “I'm afraid, too. But there's no help for it. I have to go there. Would you stay here, Patrick? Stay and wait for me? If you would, I give you leave to do so.”

Patrick shook his head at once. And, just in case Roland didn't take the point, the mute boy seized his arm in a hard grip. The right hand, the one with which he drew, was like iron.

Roland nodded. Even tried to smile. “Yes,” he said, “that's fine. Stay with me as long as you like. As long as you understand that in the end I'll have to go on alone.”

THREE

Now, as they rose from each dip and topped each hill, the Dark Tower seemed to spring closer. More of the spiraling windows which ran around its great circumference became visible. Roland could see two steel posts jutting from the top. The clouds which followed the Paths of the two working Beams seemed to flow away from the tips, making a great X-shape in the sky. The voices grew louder, and Roland realized they were singing the names of the world. Of *all* the worlds. He didn't know how he could know that, but he was sure of it. That lightness of being continued to fill him up. Finally, as they crested a

hill with great stone men marching away to the north on their left (the remains of their faces, painted in some blood-red stuff, glared down upon them), Roland told Patrick to climb up into the cart. Patrick looked surprised. He made a series of hooting noises Roland took to mean *But aren't you tired?*

“Yes, but I need an anchor, even so. Without one I’m apt to start running toward yonder Tower, even though part of me knows better. And if plain old exhaustion doesn’t burst my heart, the Red King’s apt to take my head off with one of his toys. Get in, Patrick.”

Patrick did so. He rode sitting hunched forward, with the binoculars pressed against his eyes.

FOUR

Three hours later, they came to the foot of a much steeper hill. It was, Roland’s heart told him, the last hill. Can’-Ka No Rey was beyond. At the top, on the right, was a cairn of boulders that had once been a small pyramid. What remained stood about thirty feet high. Roses grew around its base in a rough crimson ring. Roland set this in his sights and took the hill slowly, pulling the cart by its handles. As he climbed, the top of the Dark Tower once more appeared. Each step brought a greater length of it into view. Now he could see the balconies with their waist-high railings. There was no need of the binoculars; the air was preternaturally clear. He put the distance remaining at no more than five miles. Perhaps only three. Level after level rose before his not-quite-disbelieving eye.

Just shy of this hill’s top, with the crumbling rock pyramid twenty paces ahead of them on the right, Roland stopped, bent, and set the handles of the cart on the road for the last time. Every nerve in his body spoke of danger.

“Patrick? Hop down.”

Patrick did so, looking anxiously into Roland’s face and hooting.

The gunslinger shook his head. “I can’t say why just yet. Only it’s not safe.” The voices sang in a great chorus, but the air around them was still. Not a bird soared overhead or sang in the distance. The wandering herds of bannock had all been left behind. A breeze

soughed around them, and the grasses rippled. The roses nodded their wild heads.

The two of them walked on together, and as they did, Roland felt a timid touch against the side of his two-fingered right hand. He looked at Patrick. The mute boy looked anxiously back, trying to smile. Roland took his hand, and they crested the hill in that fashion.

Below them was a great blanket of red that stretched to the horizon in every direction. The road cut through it, a dusty white line perfectly straight and perhaps twelve feet wide. In the middle of the rose-field stood the sooty dark gray Tower, just as it had stood in his dreams; its windows gleamed in the sun. Here the road split and made a perfect white circle around the Tower's base to continue on the other side, in a direction Roland believed was now dead east instead of south-by-east. Another road ran off at right angles to the Tower Road: to the north and south, if he was right in believing that the points of the compass had been re-established. From above, the Dark Tower would look like the center of a blood-filled gunsight.

"It's—" Roland began, and then a great, crazed shriek floated to them on the breeze, weirdly undiminished by the distance of miles. *It comes on the Beam*, Roland thought. *And it's carried by the roses.*

"**GUNSLINGER!**" screamed the Crimson King. "**NOW YOU DIE!**"

There was a whistling sound, thin at first and then growing, cutting through the combined song of the Tower and the roses like the keenest blade ever ground on a wheel dusted with diamonds. Patrick stood transfixed, peering dumbly at the Tower; he would have been blown out of his boots if not for Roland, whose reflexes were as quick as ever. He pulled the mute boy behind the heaped stone of the pyramid by their joined hands. There were other stones hidden in the high grass of dock and jimson; they stumbled over these and went sprawling. Roland felt the corner of one digging painfully into his ribs.

The whistle continued to rise, becoming an earsplitting whine. Roland saw a golden something flash past in the air—one of the sneetches. It struck the cart and it blew up, scattering their gunna every which way. Most of the stuff settled back to the road, cans rattling and bouncing, some of them burst.

Then came high, chattering laughter that set Roland's teeth on edge; beside him, Patrick covered his ears. The lunacy in that laughter was almost unbearable.

"COME OUT!" urged that distant, mad, laughing voice. *"COME OUT AND PLAY, ROLAND! COME TO ME! COME TO YOUR TOWER, AFTER ALL THE LONG YEARS WILL YOU NOT?"*

Patrick looked at him, his eyes desperate and frightened. He was holding his drawing pad against his chest like a shield.

Roland peered carefully around the edge of the pyramid, and there, on a balcony two levels up from the Tower's base, he saw exactly what he had seen in sai Sayre's painting: one blob of red and three blobs of white; a face and two upraised hands. But this was no painting, and one of the hands moved rapidly forward in a throwing gesture and there came another hellish, rising whine. Roland rolled back against the tumble of the pyramid. There was a pause that seemed endless, and then the sneetch struck the pyramid's other side and exploded. The concussion threw them forward onto their faces. Patrick screamed in terror. Rocks flew to either side in a spray. Some of them rattled down on the road, but Roland saw not a single piece of shrapnel strike so much as a single rose.

The boy scrambled to his knees and would have run—likely back into the road—but Roland grabbed him by the collar of his hide coat and yanked him down again.

"We're safe enough here," he murmured to Patrick. "Look." He reached into a hole revealed by the falling rock, knocked on the interior with his knuckles, produced a dull ringing noise, and showed his teeth in a strained grin. "Steel! Yar! He can hit this thing with a dozen of his flying fireballs and not knock it down. All he can do is blast away the rocks and blocks and expose what lies beneath. Kennit? And I don't think he'll waste his ammunition. He can't have much more than a donkey's carry."

Before Patrick could reply, Roland peered around the pyramid's ragged edge once more. He cupped his hands around his mouth and screamed: *"TRY AGAIN, SAI! WE'RE STILL HERE, BUT PERHAPS YOUR NEXT THROW WILL BE LUCKY!"*

There was a moment of silence, then an insane scream: *"EEEEEEEEEEEE! YOU DON'T DARE MOCK ME! YOU DON'T DARE!"*

EEEEEEEEEEEE!”

Now came another of those rising whistles. Roland grabbed Patrick and fell on top of him, behind the pyramid but not against it. He was afraid it might vibrate hard enough when the sneetch struck to give them concussion injuries, or turn their soft insides to jelly.

Only this time the sneetch didn't strike the pyramid. It flew past it instead, soaring above the road. Roland rolled off Patrick and onto his back. His eyes picked up the golden blur and marked the place where it buttonhooked back toward its targets. He shot it out of the air like a clay plate. There was a blinding flash and then it was gone.

“OH DEAR, STILL HERE!” Roland called, striving to put just the right note of mocking amusement into his voice. It wasn't easy when you were screaming at the top of your lungs.

Another crazed scream in response—*“EEEEEEEEEEEE!”* Roland was amazed that the Red King didn't split his own head wide open with such cries. He reloaded the chamber he'd emptied—he intended to keep a full gun just as long as he could—and this time there was a double whine. Patrick moaned, rolled over onto his belly, and plunged his face into the rock-strewn grass, covering his head with his hands. Roland sat with his back against the pyramid of rock and steel, the long barrel of his sixgun lying on his thigh, relaxed and waiting. At the same time he bent all of his willpower toward one object. His eyes wanted water in response to that high, approaching whistle, and he must not let them. If he ever needed the preternaturally keen eyesight for which he'd been famous in his time, this was it.

Those blue eyes were still clear when the sneetches bolted past above the road. This time one buttonhooked left and the other right. They took evasive action, jiggling crazily first one way and then another. It made no difference. Roland waited, sitting with his legs outstretched and his old broken boots cocked into a relaxed V, his heart beating slow and steady, his eye filled with all the world's clarity and color (had he seen better on that last day, he believed he would have been able to see the wind). Then he snapped his gun up, blew both sneetches out of the air, and was once more reloading the empty chambers while the afterimages still pulsed with his heartbeat in front of his eyes.

He leaned to the corner of the pyramid, plucked up the binoculars, braced them on a convenient spur of rock, and looked through them for his enemy. The Crimson King almost jumped at him, and for once in his life Roland saw exactly what he had imagined: an old man with an enormous nose, hooked and waxy; red lips that bloomed in the snow of a luxuriant beard; snowy hair that spilled down the Crimson King's back almost all the way to his scrawny bottom. His pink-flushed face peered toward the pilgrims. The King wore a robe of brilliant red, dotted here and about with lightning strokes and cabalistic symbols. To Susannah, Eddie, and Jake, he would have looked like Father Christmas. To Roland he looked like what he was: Hell, incarnate.

"HOW SLOW YOU ARE!" the gunslinger cried in a tone of mock amazement. *"TRY THREE, PERHAPS THREE AT ONCE WILL DO YA!"*

Looking into the binoculars was like looking into a magic hourglass tipped on its side. Roland watched the Big Red King leaping up and down, shaking his hands beside his face in a way that was almost comic. Roland thought he could see a crate at that robed figure's feet, but wasn't entirely sure; the scrolled iron staves between the balcony's floor and its railing obscured it.

Must be his ammunition supply, he thought. *Must be. How many can he have in a crate that size? Twenty? Fifty?* It didn't matter. Unless the Red King could throw more than twelve at a time, Roland was confident he could shoot anything out of the air the old daemon sent his way. This was, after all, what he'd been made for.

Unfortunately, the Crimson King knew it as well as Roland did.

The thing on the balcony gave another gruesome, earsplitting cry (Patrick plugged his dirty ears with his dirty fingers) and made as if to dip down for fresh ammunition. Then, however, he stopped himself. Roland watched him advance to the balcony's railing . . . and then peer directly into the gunslinger's eyes. That glare was red and burning. Roland lowered the binoculars at once, lest he be fascinated.

The King's call drifted to him. *"WAIT THEN, A BIT—AND MEDITATE ON WHAT YOU'D GAIN, ROLAND! THINK HOW CLOSE IT IS! AND . . . LISTEN! HEAR THE SONG YOUR DARLING SINGS!"*

He fell silent then. No more whistling; no more whines; no more oncoming sneetches. What Roland heard instead was the sough of the

wind . . . and what the King wanted him to hear.

The call of the Tower.

Come, Roland, sang the voices. They came from the roses of Can'-Ka No Rey, they came from the strengthening Beams overhead, they came most of all from the Tower itself, that for which he had searched all his life, that which was now in reach . . . that which was being held away from him, now, at the last. If he went to it, he would be killed in the open. Yet the call was like a fishhook in his mind, drawing him. The Crimson King knew it would do his work if he only waited. And as the time passed, Roland came to know it, too. Because the calling voices weren't constant. At their current level he could withstand them. *Was* withstanding them. But as the afternoon wore on, the level of the call grew stronger. He began to understand—and with growing horror—why in his dreams and visions he had always seen himself coming to the Dark Tower at sunset, when the light in the western sky seemed to reflect the field of roses, turning the whole world into a bucket of blood held up by one single stanchion, black as midnight against the burning horizon.

He had seen himself coming at sunset because that was when the Tower's strengthening call would finally overcome his willpower. He would go. No power on Earth would be able to stop him.

Come . . . come . . . became *COME . . . COME . . .* and then *COME! COME!* His head ached with it. And *for* it. Again and again he found himself getting to his knees and forced himself to sit down once more with his back against the pyramid.

Patrick was staring at him with growing fright. He was partly or completely immune to that call—Roland understood this—but he knew what was happening.

FIVE

They had been pinned down for what Roland judged to be an hour when the King tried another pair of sneetches. This time they flew on either side of the pyramid and hooked back almost at once, coming at him in perfect formation but twenty feet apart. Roland took the one on the right, snapped his wrist to the left, and blew the other one out of the sky. The explosion of the second one was close enough to

buffet his face with warm air, but at least there was no shrapnel; when they blew, they blew completely, it seemed.

“*TRY AGAIN!*” he called. His throat was rough and dry now, but he knew the words were carrying—the air in this place was made for such communication. And he knew each one was a dagger pricking the old lunatic’s flesh. But he had his own problems. The call of the Tower was growing steadily stronger.

“*COME, GUNSLINGER!*” the madman’s voice coaxed. “*PERHAPS I’LL LET THEE COME, AFTER ALL! WE COULD AT LEAST PALAVER ON THE SUBJECT, COULD WE NOT?*”

To his horror, Roland thought he sensed a certain sincerity in that voice.

Yes, he thought grimly. And we’ll have coffee. Perhaps even a little fry-up.

He fumbled the watch out of his pocket and snapped it open. The hands were running briskly backward. He leaned against the pyramid and closed his eyes, but that was worse. The call of the Tower

(come, Roland come, gunslinger, commala-come-come, now the journey’s done)

was louder, more insistent than ever. He opened them again and looked up at the unforgiving blue sky and the clouds that raced across it in columns to the Tower at the end of the rose-field.

And the torture continued.

SIX

He hung on for another hour while the shadows of the bushes and the roses growing near the pyramid lengthened, hoping against hope that something would occur to him, some brilliant idea that would save him from having to put his life and his fate in the hands of the talented but soft-minded boy by his side. But as the sun began to slide down the western arc of the sky and the blue overhead began to darken, he knew there was nothing else. The hands of the pocket-watch were turning backward ever faster. Soon they would be spinning. And when they began to spin, he would go. Sneetches or no sneetches (and what else might the madman be holding in reserve?), he would go. He would run, he would zig-zag, he would fall to the ground and crawl if he had to, and no matter what he did, he knew

he would be lucky to make it even half the distance to the Dark Tower before he was blown out of his boots.

He would die among the roses.

“Patrick,” he said. His voice was husky.

Patrick looked up at him with desperate intensity. Roland stared at the boy’s hands—dirty, scabbed, but in their way as incredibly talented as his own—and gave in. It occurred to him that he’d only held out as long as this from pride; he had wanted to kill the Crimson King, not merely send him into some null zone. And of course there was no guarantee that Patrick could do to the King what he’d done to the sore on Susannah’s face. But the pull of the Tower would soon be too strong to resist, and all his other choices were gone.

“Change places with me, Patrick.”

Patrick did, scrambling carefully over Roland. He was now at the edge of the pyramid nearest the road.

“Look through the far-seeing instrument. Lay it in that notch—yes, just so—and look.”

Patrick did, and for what seemed to Roland a very long time. The voice of the Tower, meanwhile, sang and chimed and cajoled. At long last, Patrick looked back at him.

“Now take thy pad, Patrick. Draw yonder man.” Not that he *was* a man, but at least he looked like one.

At first, however, Patrick only continued to gaze at Roland, biting his lip. Then, at last, he took the sides of the gunslinger’s head in his hands and brought it forward until they were brow to brow.

Very hard, whispered a voice deep in Roland’s mind. It was not the voice of a boy at all, but of a grown man. A powerful man. *He’s not entirely there. He darkles. He tincts.*

Where had Roland heard those words before?

No time to think about it now.

“Are you saying you can’t?” Roland asked, injecting (with an effort) a note of disappointed incredulity into his voice. “That *you* can’t? That *Patrick* can’t? The *Artist* can’t?”

Patrick’s eyes changed. For a moment Roland saw in them the expression that would be there permanently if he grew to be a man . . . and the paintings in Sayre’s office said that he would do that, at least on some track of time, in some world. Old enough, at least, to

paint what he had seen this day. That expression would be hauteur, if he grew to be an old man with a little wisdom to match his talent; now it was only arrogance. The look of a kid who knows he's faster than blue blazes, the best, and cares to know nothing else. Roland knew that look, for had he not seen it gazing back at him from a hundred mirrors and still pools of water when he had been as young as Patrick Danville was now?

I can, came the voice in Roland's head. *I only say it won't be easy. I'll need the eraser.*

Roland shook his head at once. In his pocket, his hand closed around what remained of the pink nubbin and held it tight.

"No," he said. "Thee must draw cold, Patrick. Every line right the first time. The erasing comes later."

For a moment the look of arrogance faltered, but only for a moment. When it returned, what came with it pleased the gunslinger mightily, and eased him a little, as well. It was a look of hot excitement. It was the look the talented wear when, after years of just moving sleepily along from pillar to post, they are finally challenged to do something that will tax their abilities, stretch them to their limits. Perhaps even beyond them.

Patrick rolled to the binoculars again, which he'd left propped aslant just below the notch. He looked long while the voices sang their growing imperative in Roland's head.

And at last he rolled away, took up his pad, and began to draw the most important picture of his life.

SEVEN

It was slow work compared to Patrick's usual method—rapid strokes that produced a completed and compelling drawing in only minutes. Roland again and again had to restrain himself from shouting at the boy: *Hurry up! For the sake of all the gods, hurry up! Can't you see that I'm in agony here?*

But Patrick didn't see and wouldn't have cared in any case. He was totally absorbed in his work, caught up in the unknowing greed of it, pausing only to go back to the binoculars now and then for another long look at his red-robed subject. Sometimes he slanted the pencil to

shade a little, then rubbed with his thumb to produce a shadow. Sometimes he rolled his eyes back in his head, showing the world nothing but the waxy gleam of the whites. It was as if he were conning some version of the Red King that stood a-glow in his brain. And really, how did Roland know that was not possible?

I don't care what it is. Just let him finish before I go mad and sprint to what the Old Red King so rightly called "my darling."

Half an hour at least three days long passed in this fashion. Once the Crimson King called more coaxingly than ever to Roland, asking if he would not come to the Tower and palaver, after all. Perhaps, he said, if Roland were to free him from his balcony prison, they might bury an arrow together and then climb to the top room of the Tower in that same spirit of friendliness. It was not impossible, after all. A hard rain made for queer bedfellows at the inn; had Roland never heard that saying?

The gunslinger knew the saying well. He also knew that the Red King's offer was essentially the same false request as before, only this time dressed up in morning coat and cravat. And this time Roland heard worry lurking in the old monster's voice. He wasted no energy on reply.

Realizing his coaxing had failed, the Crimson King threw another sneetch. This one flew so high over the pyramid it was only a spark, then dove down upon them with the scream of a falling bomb. Roland took care of it with a single shot and reloaded from a plentitude of shells. He wished, in fact, that the King would send more of the flying grenados against him, because they took his mind temporarily off the dreadful call of the Tower.

It's been waiting for me, he thought with dismay. That's what makes it so hard to resist, I think—it's calling me in particular. Not to Roland, exactly, but to the entire line of Eld . . . and of that line, only I am left.

EIGHT

At last, as the descending sun began to take on its first hues of orange and Roland felt he could stand it no longer, Patrick put his pencil aside and held the pad out to Roland, frowning. The look made

Roland afraid. He had never seen that particular expression in the mute boy's repertoire. Patrick's former arrogance was gone.

Roland took the pad, however, and for a moment was so amazed by what he saw there that he looked away, as if even the eyes in Patrick's drawing might have the power to fascinate him; might perhaps compel him to put his gun to his temple and blow out his aching brains. It was that good. The greedy and questioning face was long, the cheeks and forehead marked by creases so deep they might have been bottomless. The lips within the foaming beard were full and cruel. It was the mouth of a man who would turn a kiss into a bite if the spirit took him, and the spirit often would.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?" came that screaming, lunatic voice. *"IT WON'T DO YOU ANY GOOD, WHATEVER IT IS! I HOLD THE TOWER—EEEEEEEE!—I'M LIKE THE DOG WITH THE GRAPES, ROLAND! IT'S MINE EVEN IF I CAN'T CLIMB IT! AND YOU'LL COME! EEEEE! SAY TRUE! BEFORE THE SHADOW OF THE TOWER REACHES YOUR PALTRY HIDING-PLACE, YOU'LL COME! EEEEEEEEE! EEEEEEEEE! EEEEEEEEE!"*

Patrick covered his ears, wincing. Now that he had finished drawing, he registered those terrible screams again.

That the picture was the greatest work of Patrick's life Roland had absolutely no doubt. Challenged, the boy had done more than rise above himself; he had *soared* above himself and committed genius. The image of the Crimson King was haunting in its clarity. *The far-seeing instrument can't explain this, or not all of it,* Roland thought. *It's as if he has a third eye, one that looks out from his imagination and sees everything. It's that eye he looks through when he rolls the other two up. To own such an ability as this . . . and to express it with something as humble as a pencil! Ye gods!*

He almost expected to see the pulse begin to beat in the hollows of the old man's temples, where clocksprings of veins had been delineated with only a few gentle, feathered shadings. At the corner of the full and sensuous lips, the gunslinger could see the wink of a single sharp

(tusk)

tooth, and he thought the lips of the drawing might come to life and part as he looked, revealing a mouthful of fangs: one mere wink

of white (which was only a bit of unmarked paper, after all) made the imagination see all the rest, and even to smell the reek of meat that would accompany each outflow of breath. Patrick had perfectly captured a tuft of hair curling from one of the King's nostrils, and a tiny thread of scar that wove in and out of the King's right eyebrow like a bit of string. It was a marvelous piece of work, better by far than the portrait the mute boy had done of Susannah. Surely if Patrick had been able to erase the sore from that one, then he could erase the Crimson King from this one, leaving nothing but the balcony railing before him and the closed door to the Tower's barrel behind. Roland almost expected the Crimson King to breathe and move, and so surely it was done! Surely . . .

But it was not. It was not, and wanting would not make it so. Not even needing would make it so.

It's his eyes, Roland thought. They were wide and terrible, the eyes of a dragon in human form. They were dreadfully good, but they weren't right. Roland felt a kind of desperate, miserable certainty and shuddered from head to toe, hard enough to make his teeth chatter. *They're not quite r—*

Patrick took hold of Roland's elbow. The gunslinger had been concentrating so fiercely on the drawing that he nearly screamed. He looked up. Patrick nodded at him, then touched his fingers to the corners of his own eyes.

Yes. His eyes. I know that! But what's wrong with them?

Patrick was still touching the corners of his eyes. Overhead, a flock of rusties flew through a sky that would soon be more purple than blue, squalling the harsh cries that had given them their name. It was toward the Dark Tower that they flew; Roland arose to follow them so they should not have what he could not.

Patrick grabbed him by his hide coat and pulled him back. The boy shook his head violently, and this time pointed toward the road.

"I SAW THAT, ROLAND!" came the cry. *"YOU THINK THAT WHAT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE BIRDS IS GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU, DO YOU NOT? EEEEEEEEEEE! AND IT'S TRUE, SURE! SURE AS SUGAR, SURE AS SALT, SURE AS RUBIES IN KING DANDO'S VAULT—EEEEEEEE, HA! I COULD HAVE HAD YOU JUST NOW, BUT WHY*

BOTHER? I THINK I'D RATHER SEE YOU COME, PISSING AND SHAKING AND UNABLE TO STOP YOURSELF!"

As I will, Roland thought. I won't be able to help myself. I may be able to hold here another ten minutes, perhaps even another twenty, but in the end . . .

Patrick interrupted his thoughts, once more pointing at the road. Pointing back the way they had come.

Roland shook his head wearily. "Even if I could fight the pull of the thing—and I couldn't, it's all I can do to bide here—retreat would do us no good. Once we're no longer in cover, he'll use whatever else he has. He has something, I'm sure of it. And whatever it is, the bullets of my revolver aren't likely to stop it."

Patrick shook his head hard enough to make his long hair fly from side to side. The grip on Roland's arm tightened until the boy's fingernails bit into the gunslinger's flesh even through three layers of hide clothing. His eyes, always gentle and usually puzzled, now peered at Roland with a look close to fury. He pointed again with his free hand, three quick jabbing gestures with the grimy fore-finger. *Not* at the road, however.

Patrick was pointing at the roses.

"What about them?" Roland asked. "Patrick, what about them?"

This time Patrick pointed first to the roses, then to the eyes in his picture.

And this time Roland understood.

NINE

Patrick didn't want to get them. When Roland gestured to him to go, the boy shook his head at once, whipping his hair once more from side to side, his eyes wide. He made a whistling noise between his teeth that was a remarkably good imitation of an oncoming sneetch.

"I'll shoot anything he sends," Roland said. "You've seen me do it. If there was one close enough so that I could pick it myself, I would. But there's not. So it has to be you who picks the rose and me who gives you cover."

But Patrick only cringed back against the ragged side of the pyramid. Patrick would not. His fear might not have been as great as his talent, but it was surely a close thing. Roland calculated the

distance to the nearest rose. It was beyond their scant cover, but perhaps not by too much. He looked at his diminished right hand, which would have to do the plucking, and asked himself how hard it could be. The fact, of course, was that he didn't know. These were not ordinary roses. For all he knew, the thorns growing up the green stem might have a poison in them that would drop him paralyzed into the tall grass, an easy target.

And Patrick would not. Patrick knew that Roland had once had friends, and that now all his friends were dead, and Patrick would not. If Roland had had two hours to work on the boy—possibly even one—he might have broken through his terror. But he didn't have that time. Sunset had almost come.

Besides, it's close. I can do it if I have to . . . and I must.

The weather had warmed enough so there was no need for the clumsy deerskin gloves Susannah had made them, but Roland had been wearing his that morning, and they were still tucked in his belt. He took one of them and cut off the end, so his two remaining fingers would poke through. What remained would at least protect his palm from the thorns. He put it on, then rested on one knee with his remaining gun in his other hand, looking at the nearest rose. Would one be enough? It would have to be, he decided. The next was fully six feet further away.

Patrick clutched his shoulder, shaking his head frantically.

"I have to," Roland said, and of course he did. This was his job, not Patrick's, and he had been wrong to try and make the boy do it in the first place. If he succeeded, fine and well. If he failed and was blown apart here at the edge of Can'-Ka No Rey, at least that dreadful *pulling* would cease.

The gunslinger took a deep breath, then leaped from cover and at the rose. At the same moment, Patrick clutched at him again, trying to hold him back. He grabbed a fold of Roland's coat and twisted him off-true. Roland landed clumsily on his side. The gun flew out of his hand and fell in the tall grass. The Crimson King screamed (the gunslinger heard both triumph and fury in that voice) and then came the approaching whine of another sneetch. Roland closed his mitted right hand around the stem of the rose. The thorns bit through the tough deerskin as if it were no more than a coating of

cobwebs. Then into his hand. The pain was enormous, but the song of the rose was sweet. He could see the blaze of yellow deep in its cup, like the blaze of a sun. Or a million of them. He could feel the warmth of blood filling the hollow of his palm and running between the remaining fingers. It soaked the deerskin, blooming another rose on its scuffed brown surface. And here came the sneetch that would kill him, blotting out the rose's song, filling his head and threatening to split his skull.

The stem never did break. In the end, the rose tore free of the ground, roots and all. Roland rolled to his left, grabbed his gun, and fired without looking. His heart told him there was no longer time to look. There was a shattering explosion, and the warm air that buffeted his face this time was like a hurricane.

Close. Very close, that time.

The Crimson King screamed his frustration—“EEEEEEEEEEEE!”—and the cry was followed by multiple approaching whistles. Patrick pressed himself against the pyramid, face-first. Roland, clutching the rose in his bleeding right hand, rolled onto his back, raised his gun, and waited for the sneetches to make their turn. When they did, he took care of them: one and two and three.

“*STILL HERE!*” he cried at the old Red King. “*STILL HERE, YOU OLD COCKSUCKER, MAY IT DO YA FINE!*”

The Crimson King gave another of his terrible howls, but sent no more sneetches.

“*SO NOW YOU HAVE A ROSE!*” he screamed. “*LISTEN TO IT, ROLAND! LISTEN WELL, FOR IT SINGS THE SAME SONG! LISTEN AND COMMALA-COME-COME!*”

Now that song was all but imperative in Roland's head. It burned furiously along his nerves. He grasped Patrick and turned him around. “Now,” he said. “For my life, Patrick. For the lives of every man and woman who ever died in my place so I could go on.”

And child, he thought, seeing Jake in the eye of his memory. Jake first hanging over darkness, then falling into it.

He stared into the mute boy's terrified eyes. “Finish it! *Show me that you can.*”

Now Roland witnessed an amazing thing: when Patrick took the rose, he wasn't cut. Not so much as scratched. Roland pulled his own lacerated glove off with his teeth and saw that not only was his palm badly slashed, but one of his remaining fingers now hung by a single bloody tendon. It drooped like something that wants to go to sleep. But Patrick was not cut. The thorns did not pierce him. And the terror had gone out of his eyes. He was looking from the rose to his drawing, back and forth with tender calculation.

“ROLAND! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? COME, GUNSLINGER, FOR SUNSET’S ALMOST NIGH!”

And yes, he would come. One way or the other. Knowing it was so eased him somewhat, enabled him to remain where he was without trembling too badly. His right hand was numb to the wrist, and Roland suspected he would never feel it again. That was all right; it hadn't been much of a shake since the lobstrosities had gotten at it.

And the rose sang Yes, Roland, yes—you’ll have it again. You’ll be whole again. There will be renewal. Only come.

Patrick plucked a petal from the rose, judged it, then plucked another to go with it. He put them in his mouth. For a moment his face went slack with a peculiar sort of ecstasy, and Roland wondered what the petals might taste like. Overhead the sky was growing dark. The shadow of the pyramid that had been hidden by the rocks stretched nearly to the road. When the point of that shadow touched the way that had brought him here, Roland supposed he would go whether the Crimson King still held the Tower approach or not.

“WHAT’S THEE DOING? EEEEEEEEEE! WHAT DEVILTRY WORKS IN THY MIND AND THY HEART?”

You’re a great one to speak of deviltry, Roland thought. He took out his watch and snapped back the cover. Beneath the crystal, the hands now sped backward, five o'clock to four, four to three, three to two, two to one, and one to midnight.

“Patrick, hurry,” he said. “Quick as you can, I beg, for my time is almost up.”

Patrick cupped a hand beneath his mouth and spat out a red paste the color of fresh blood. The color of the Crimson King's robe. And the exact color of his lunatic's eyes.

Patrick, on the verge of using color for the first time in his life as an artist, made to dip the tip of his right forefinger into this paste, and then hesitated. An odd certainty came to Roland then: the thorns of these roses only pricked when their roots still tied the plant to Mim, or Mother Earth. Had he gotten his way with Patrick, Mim would have cut those talented hands to ribbons and rendered them useless.

It's still ka, the gunslinger thought. *Even out here in End-W—*

Before he could finish the thought, Patrick took the gunslinger's right hand and peered into it with the intensity of a fortune-teller. He scooped up some of the blood that flowed there and mixed it with his rose-paste. Then, carefully, he took a tiny bit of this mixture upon the second finger of his right hand. He lowered it to his painting . . . hesitated . . . looked at Roland. Roland nodded to him and Patrick nodded in return, as gravely as a surgeon about to make the first cut in a dangerous operation, then applied his finger to the paper. The tip touched down as delicately as the beak of a hummingbird dipping into a flower. It colored the Crimson King's left eye and then lifted away. Patrick cocked his head, looking at what he had done with a fascination Roland had never seen on a human face in all his long and wandering time. It was as if the boy were some Manni prophet, finally granted a glimpse of Gan's face after twenty years of waiting in the desert.

Then he broke into an enormous, sunny grin.

The response from the Dark Tower was more immediate and—to Roland, at least—immensely gratifying. The old creature pent on the balcony howled in pain.

"WHAT'S THEE DOING? EEEEEEE! EEEEEEEE! STOP! IT BURNS! BURRRRNS! EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

"Now finish the other," Roland said. "Quickly! For your life and mine!"

Patrick colored the other eye with the same delicate dip of the finger. Now two brilliant crimson eyes looked out of Patrick's black-and-white drawing, eyes that had been colored with attar of rose and the blood of Eld; eyes that burned with Hell's own fire.

It was done.

Roland produced the eraser at last, and held it out to Patrick. “Make him gone,” he said. “Make yonder foul hob gone from this world and every world. Make him gone at last.”

ELEVEN

There was no question it would work. From the moment Patrick first touched the eraser to his drawing—to that curl of nostril-hair, as it happened—the Crimson King began to scream in fresh pain and horror from his balcony redoubt. And in *understanding*.

Patrick hesitated, looking at Roland for confirmation, and Roland nodded. “Aye, Patrick. His time has come and you’re to be his executioner. Go on with it.”

The Old King threw four more sneetches, and Roland took care of them all with calm ease. After that he threw no more, for he had no hands with which to throw. His shrieks rose to gibbering whines that Roland thought would surely never leave his ears.

The mute boy erased the full, sensuous mouth from within its foam of beard, and as he did it, the screams first grew muffled and then ceased. In the end Patrick erased everything but the eyes, and these the remaining bit of rubber would not even blur. They remained until the piece of pink gum (originally part of a Pencil-Pak bought in a Norwich, Connecticut, Woolworth’s during a back-to-school sale in August of 1958) had been reduced to a shred the boy could not even hold between his long, dirty nails. And so he cast it away and showed the gunslinger what remained: two malevolent blood-red orbs floating three-quarters of the way up the page.

All the rest of him was gone.

TWELVE

The shadow of the pyramid’s tip had come to touch the road; now the sky in the west changed from the orange of a reaptide bonfire to that cauldron of blood Roland had seen in his dreams ever since childhood. When it did, the call of the Tower doubled, then trebled. Roland felt it reach out and grasp him with invisible hands. The time of his destiny was come.

Yet there was this boy. This friendless boy. Roland would not leave him to die here at the end of End-World if he could help it. He had no interest in atonement, and yet Patrick had come to stand for all the murders and betrayals that had finally brought him to the Dark Tower. Roland's family was dead; his misbegotten son had been the last. Now would Eld and Tower be joined.

First, though—or last—this.

“Patrick, listen to me,” he said, taking the boy's shoulder with his whole left hand and his mutilated right. “If you'd live to make all the pictures ka has stored away in your future, ask me not a single question nor ask me to repeat a single thing.”

The boy looked at him, large-eyed and silent in the red and dying light. And the Song of the Tower rose around them to a mighty shout that was nothing but *commala*.

“Go back to the road. Pick up all the cans that are whole. That should be enough to feed you. Go back the way we came. Never leave the road. You'll do fine.”

Patrick nodded with perfect understanding. Roland saw he believed, and that was good. Belief would protect him even more surely than a revolver, even one with the sandalwood grips.

“Go back to the Federal. Go back to the robot, Stuttering Bill that was. Tell him to take you to a door that swings open on America-side. If it won't open to your hand, *draw* it open with thy pencil. Do'ee understand?”

Patrick nodded again. Of course he understood.

“If ka should eventually lead you to Susannah in any where or when, tell her Roland loves her still, and with all his heart.” He drew Patrick to him and kissed the boy's mouth. “Give her that. Do'ee understand?”

Patrick nodded.

“All right. I go. Long days and pleasant nights. May we meet in the clearing at the end of the path when all worlds end.”

Yet even then he knew this would not happen, for the worlds would never end, not now, and for him there would be no clearing. For Roland Deschain of Gilead, last of Eld's line, the path ended at the Dark Tower. And that did him fine.

He rose to his feet. The boy looked up at him with wide, wondering eyes, clutching his pad. Roland turned. He drew in breath to the bottom of his lungs and let it out in a great cry.

“NOW COMES ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER! I HAVE BEEN TRUE AND I STILL CARRY THE GUN OF MY FATHER AND YOU WILL OPEN TO MY HAND!”

Patrick watched him stride to where the road ended, a black silhouette against that bloody burning sky. He watched as Roland walked among the roses, and sat shivering in the shadows as Roland began to cry the names of his friends and loved ones and ka-mates; those names carried clear in that strange air, as if they would echo forever.

“I come in the name of Steven Deschain, he of Gilead!

“I come in the name of Gabrielle Deschain, she of Gilead!

“I come in the name of Cortland Andrus, he of Gilead!

“I come in the name of Cuthbert Allgood, he of Gilead!

“I come in the name of Alain Johns, he of Gilead!

“I come in the name of Jamie DeCurry, he of Gilead!

“I come in the name of Vannay the Wise, he of Gilead!

“I come in the name of Hax the Cook, he of Gilead!

“I come in the name of David the hawk, he of Gilead and the sky!

“I come in the name of Susan Delgado, she of Mejis!

“I come in the name of Sheemie Ruiz, he of Mejis!

“I come in the name of Pere Callahan, he of Jerusalem’s Lot, and the roads!

“I come in the name of Ted Brautigan, he of America!

“I come in the name of Dinky Earnshaw, he of America!

“I come in the name of Aunt Talitha, she of River Crossing, and will lay her cross here, as I was bid!

“I come in the name of Stephen King, he of Maine!

“I come in the name of Oy, the brave, he of Mid-World!

“I come in the name of Eddie Dean, he of New York!

“I come in the name of Susannah Dean, she of New York!

“I come in the name of Jake Chambers, he of New York, whom I call my own true son!

“I am Roland of Gilead, and I come as myself; *you will open to me.*”

After that came the sound of a horn. It simultaneously chilled Patrick's blood and exalted him. The echoes faded into silence. Then, perhaps a minute later, came a great, echoing boom: the sound of a door swinging shut forever.

And after that came silence.

THIRTEEN

Patrick sat where he was at the base of the pyramid, shivering, until Old Star and Old Mother rose in the sky. The song of the roses and the Tower hadn't ceased, but it had grown low and sleepy, little more than a murmur.

At last he went back to the road, gathered as many whole cans as he could (there was a surprising number of them, considering the force of the explosion that had demolished the cart), and found a deerskin sack that would hold them. He realized he had forgotten his pencil and went back to get it.

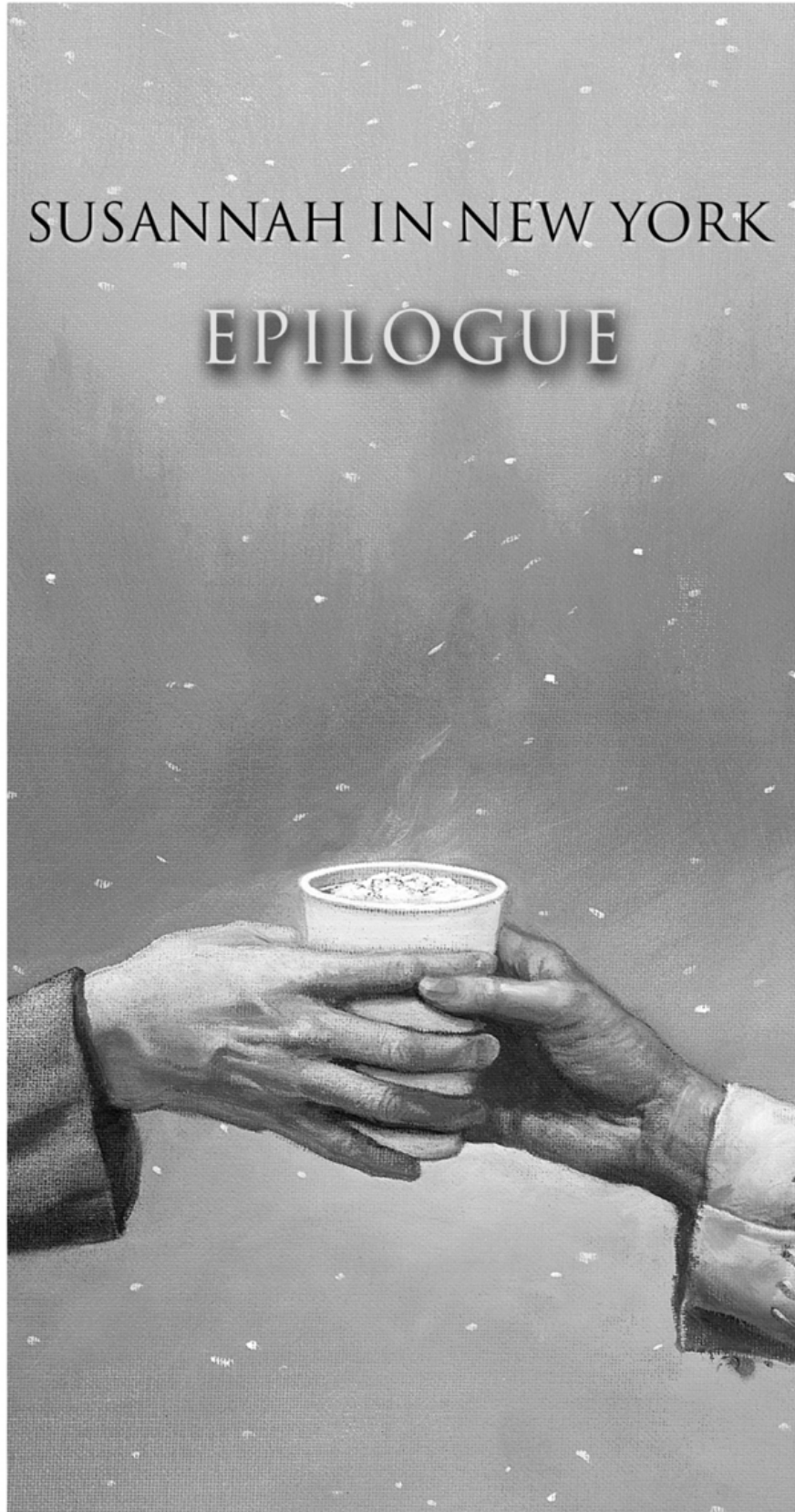
Beside the pencil, gleaming in the starlight, was Roland's watch.

The boy took it with a small (and nervous) hoot of glee. He put it in his pocket. Then he went back to the road and slung his little sack of gunna over his shoulder.

I can tell you that he walked until nearly midnight, and that he looked at the watch before taking his rest. I can tell you that the watch had stopped completely. I can tell you that, come noon of the following day, he looked at it again and saw that it had begun to run in the correct direction once more, albeit very slowly. But of Patrick I can tell you no more, not whether he made it back to the Federal, not whether he found Stuttering Bill that was, not whether he eventually came once more to America-side. I can tell you none of these things, say sorry. Here the darkness hides him from my storyteller's eye and he must go on alone.



SUSANNAH IN NEW YORK
EPILOGUE



SUSANNAH IN NEW YORK

(EPILOGUE)

No one takes alarm as the little electric cart slides out of nowhere an inch at a time until it's wholly here in Central Park; no one sees it but us. Most of those here are looking skyward, as the first snowflakes of what will prove to be a great pre-Christmas snowstorm come skirling down from a white sky. The Blizzard of '87, the newspapers will call it. Visitors to the park who aren't watching the snowfall begin are watching the carolers, who are from public schools far uptown. They are wearing either dark red blazers (the boys) or dark red jumpers (the girls). This is the Harlem School Choir, sometimes called The Harlem Roses in the *Post* and its rival tabloid, the New York *Sun*. They sing an old hymn in gorgeous doo-wop harmony, snapping their fingers as they make their way through the staves, turning it into something that sounds almost like early Spurs, Coasters, or Dark Diamonds. They are standing not too far from the environment where the polar bears live their city lives, and the song they're singing is "What Child Is This."

One of those looking up into the snow is a man Susannah knows well, and her heart leaps straight up to heaven at the sight of him. In his left hand he's holding a large paper cup and she's sure it contains hot chocolate, the good kind *mit schlag*.

For a moment she's unable to touch the controls of the little cart, which came from another world. Thoughts of Roland and Patrick have left her mind. All she can think of is Eddie—Eddie in front of her right here and now, Eddie alive again. And if this is not the Keystone World, not quite, what of that? If Co-Op City is in Brooklyn (or even in Queens!) and Eddie drives a Takuro Spirit instead of a Buick Electra, what of those things? It doesn't matter. Only one thing

would, and it's that which keeps her hand from rising to the throttle and trundling the cart toward him.

What if he doesn't recognize her?

What if when he turns he sees nothing but a homeless black lady in an electric cart whose battery will soon be as flat as a sat-on hat, a black lady with no money, no clothes, no address (not in *this* where and when, say thankee sai) and no legs? A homeless black lady with no connection to him? Or what if he *does* know her, somewhere far back in his mind, yet still denies her as completely as Peter denied Jesus, because remembering is just too hurtful?

Worse still, what if he turns to her and she sees the burned-out, fucked-up, empty-eyed stare of the longtime junkie? What if, what if, and here comes the snow that will soon turn the whole world white.

Stop thy grizzling and go to him, Roland tells her. You didn't face Blaine and the taheen of Blue Heaven and the thing under Castle Discordia just to turn tail and run now, did you? Surely you've got a moit more guts than that.

But she isn't sure she really does until she sees her hand rise to the throttle. Before she can twist it, however, the gunslinger's voice speaks to her again, this time sounding wearily amused.

Perhaps there's something you want to get rid of first, Susannah?

She looks down and sees Roland's weapon stuck through her crossbelt, like a Mexican *bandido's pistola*, or a pirate's cutlass. She pulls it free, amazed at how good it feels in her hand . . . how brutally right. Parting from this, she thinks, will be like parting from a lover. And she doesn't *have* to, does she? The question is, what does she love more? The man or the gun? All other choices will flow from this one.

On impulse she rolls the cylinder and sees that the rounds inside look old, their casings dull.

These'll never fire, she thinks . . . and, without knowing why, or precisely what it means: These are wets.

She sights up the barrel and is queerly saddened—but not surprised—to find that the barrel lets through no light. It's plugged. Has been for decades, from the look of it. This gun will never fire again. There is no choice to be made, after all. This gun is over.

Susannah, still holding the revolver with the sandalwood grips in one hand, twists the throttle with the other. The little electric cart—the one she named Ho Fat III, although that is already fading in her

mind—rolls soundlessly forward. It passes a green trash barrel with **KEEP LITTER IN ITS PLACE!** stenciled on the side. She tosses Roland's revolver into this litter barrel. Doing it hurts her heart, but she never hesitates. It's heavy, and sinks into the crumpled fast-food wrappers, advertising circulars, and discarded newspapers like a stone into water. She is still enough of a gunslinger to bitterly regret throwing away such a storied weapon (even if the final trip between worlds has spoiled it), but she's already become enough of the woman who's waiting for her up ahead not to pause or look back once the job is done.

Before she can reach the man with the paper cup, he turns. He is indeed wearing a sweatshirt that says I DRINK NOZZ-A-LA!, but she barely registers that. It's him: that's what she registers. It's Edward Cantor Dean. And then even that becomes secondary, because what she sees in his eyes is all she has feared. It's total puzzlement. He doesn't know her.

Then, tentatively, he smiles, and it is the smile she remembers, the one she always loved. Also he's clean, she knows it at once. She sees it in his face. Mostly in his eyes. The carolers from Harlem sing, and he holds out the cup of hot chocolate.

"Thank God," he says. "I'd just about decided I'd have to drink this myself. That the voices were wrong and I was going crazy after all. That . . . well . . ." He trails off, looking more than puzzled. He looks afraid. "Listen, you are here for *me*, aren't you? Please tell me I'm not making an utter ass of myself. Because, lady, right now I feel as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a roomful of rocking chairs."

"You're not," she says. "Making an ass of yourself, I mean." She's remembering Jake's story about the voices he heard arguing in his mind, one yelling that he was dead, the other that he was alive. Both of them utterly convinced. She has at least some idea of how terrible that must be, because she knows a little about other voices. Strange voices.

"Thank God," he says. "Your name is Susannah?"

"Yes," she says. "My name is Susannah."

Her throat is terribly dry, but the words come out, at least. She takes the cup from him and sips the hot chocolate through the cream. It is sweet and good, a taste of this world. The sound of the

honking cabs, their drivers hurrying to make their day before the snow shuts them down, is equally good. Grinning, he reaches out and wipes a tiny dab of the cream from the tip of her nose. His touch is electric, and she sees that he feels it, too. It occurs to her that he is going to kiss her again for the first time, and sleep with her again for the first time, and fall in love with her again for the first time. He may know those things because voices have told him, but she knows them for a far better reason: because those things have already happened. Ka is a wheel, Roland said, and now she knows it's true. Her memories of

(*Mid-World*)

the gunslinger's where and when are growing hazy, but she thinks she will remember just enough to know it's *all* happened before, and there is something incredibly sad about this.

But at the same time, it's good.

It's a damn miracle, is what it is.

"Are you cold?" he asks.

"No, I'm okay. Why?"

"You shivered."

"It's the sweetness of the cream." Then, looking at him as she does it, she pokes her tongue out and licks a bit of the nutmeg-dusted foam.

"If you aren't cold now, you will be," he says. "WRKO says the temperature's gonna drop twenty degrees tonight. So I bought you something." From his back pocket he takes a knitted cap, the kind you can pull down over your ears. She looks at the front of it and sees the words there printed in red: MERRY CHRISTMAS.

"Bought it in Brendio's, on Fifth Avenue," he says.

Susannah has never heard of Brendio's. *Brentano's*, maybe—the bookstore—but not Brendio's. But of course in the America where she grew up, she never heard of Nozz-A-La or Takuro Spirit automobiles, either. "Did your voices tell you to buy it?" Teasing him a little now.

He blushes. "Actually, you know, they sort of did. Try it on."

It's a perfect fit.

"Tell me something," she says. "Who's the President? You're not going to tell me it's Ronald Reagan, are you?"

He looks at her incredulously for a moment, and then smiles. “What? That old actor who used to host *Death Valley Days* on TV? You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. I always thought *you* were the one who was kidding about Ronnie Reagan, Eddie.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“That’s okay, just tell me who the President is.”

“Gary Hart,” he says, as if speaking to a child. “From Colorado. He almost dropped out of the race in 1980—as I’m sure you know—over that *Monkey Business* business. Then he said ‘Fuck em if they can’t take a joke’ and hung on in there. Ended up winning in a landslide.”

His smile fades a little as he studies her.

“You’re not kidding me, are you?”

“Are you kidding *me* about the voices? The ones you hear in our head? The ones that wake you up at two in the morning?”

Eddie looks almost shocked. “How can you know *that*?”

“It’s a long story. Maybe someday I’ll tell you.” *If I can still remember*, she thinks.

“It’s not just the voices.”

“No?”

“No. I’ve been dreaming of you. For months now. I’ve been waiting for you. Listen, we don’t know each other . . . this is crazy . . . but do you have a place to stay? You don’t, do you?”

She shakes her head. Doing a passable John Wayne (or maybe it’s Blaine the train she’s imitating), she says: “Ah’m a stranger here in Dodge, pilgrim.”

Her heart is pounding slowly and heavily in her chest, but she feels a rising joy. This is going to be all right. She doesn’t know how it can be, but yes, it’s going to be just fine. This time *ka* is working in her favor, and the force of *ka* is enormous. This she knows from experience.

“If I asked how I know you . . . or where you come from . . .” He pauses, looking at her levelly, and then says the rest of it. “Or how I can possibly love you already . . . ?”

She smiles. It feels good to smile, and it no longer hurts the side of her face, because whatever was there (some sort of scar, maybe—she can’t quite remember) is gone. “Sugar,” she tells him, “it’s what I said:

a long story. You'll get some of it in time, though . . . what I remember of it. And it could be that we still have some work to do. For an outfit called the Tet Corporation." She looks around and then says, "What year is this?"

"1987," he says.

"And do you live in Brooklyn? Or maybe the Bronx?"

The young man whose dreams and squabbling voices have led him here—with a cup of hot chocolate in his hand and a MERRY CHRISTMAS hat in his back pocket—bursts out laughing. "God, no! I'm from White Plains! I came in on the train with my brother. He's right over there. He wanted a closer look at the polar bears."

The brother. Henry. The great sage and eminent junkie. Her heart sinks.

"Let me introduce you," he says.

"No, really, I—"

"Hey, if we're gonna be friends, you gotta be friends with my kid brother. We're *tight*. Jake! Hey, Jake!"

She hasn't noticed the boy standing down by the railing which guards the sunken polar bears' environment from the rest of the park, but now he turns and her heart takes a great, giddy leap in her chest. Jake waves and ambles toward them.

"Jake's been dreaming about you, too," Eddie tells her. "It's the only reason I know I'm not going crazy. Any crazier than usual, at least."

She takes Eddie's hand—that familiar, well-loved hand. And when the fingers close over hers, she thinks she will die of joy. She will have many questions—so will they—but for the time being she has only one that feels important. As the snow begins to fall more thickly around them, landing in his hair and in his lashes and on the shoulders of his sweatshirt, she asks it.

"You and Jake—what's your last name?"

"Toren," he says. "It's German."

Before either of them can say anything else, Jake joins them. And will I tell you that these three lived happily ever after? I will not, for no one ever does. But there *was* happiness.

And they *did* live.

Beneath the flowing and sometimes glimpsed glammer of the Beam that connects Shardik the Bear and Maturin the Turtle by way of the Dark Tower, they *did* live.

That's all.

That's enough.

Say thankya.





CODA



FOUND

FOUND


(CODA)

ONE

I've told my tale all the way to the end, and am satisfied. It was (I set my watch and warrant on it) the kind only a good God would save for last, full of monsters and marvels and voyaging here and there. I can stop now, put my pen down, and rest my weary hand (although perhaps not forever; the hand that tells the tales has a mind of its own, and a way of growing restless). I can close my eyes to Mid-World and all that lies beyond Mid-World. Yet some of you who have provided the ears without which no tale can survive a single day are likely not so willing. You are the grim, goal-oriented ones who will not believe that the joy is in the journey rather than the destination no matter how many times it has been proven to you. You are the unfortunate ones who still get the love-making all confused with the paltry squirt that comes to end the lovemaking (the orgasm is, after all, God's way of telling us we've finished, at least for the time being, and should go to sleep). You are the cruel ones who deny the Grey Havens, where tired characters go to rest. You say you want to know how it all comes out. You say you want to follow Roland into the Tower; you say that is what you paid your money for, the show you came to see.

I hope most of you know better. *Want* better. I hope you came to hear the tale, and not just munch your way through the pages to the ending. For an ending, you only have to turn to the last page and see what is there writ upon. But endings are heartless. An ending is a closed door no man (or Manni) can open. I've written many, but most only for the same reason that I pull on my pants in the morning before leaving the bedroom—because it is the custom of the country.

And so, my dear Constant Reader, I tell you this: You can stop here. You can let your last memory be of seeing Eddie, Susannah, and Jake in Central Park, together again for the first time, listening to the children's choir sing "What Child Is This." You can be content in the knowledge that sooner or later Oy (probably a canine version with a long neck, odd gold-ringed eyes, and a bark that sometimes sounds eerily like speech) will also enter the picture. That's a pretty picture, isn't it? *I* think so. And pretty close to happily ever after, too. Close enough for government work, as Eddie would say.

Should you go on, you will surely be disappointed, perhaps even heartbroken. I have one key left on my belt, but all it opens is that final door, the one marked . What's behind it won't improve your love-life, grow hair on your bald spot, or add five years to your natural span (not even five minutes). There is no such thing as a happy ending. I never met a single one to equal "Once upon a time."

Endings are heartless.

Ending is just another word for goodbye.

TWO

Would you still?

Very well, then, come. (Do you hear me sigh?) Here is the Dark Tower, at the end of End-World. See it, I beg.

See it very well.

Here is the Dark Tower at sunset.

THREE

He came to it with the oddest feeling of remembrance; what Susannah and Eddie called *déjà vu*.

The roses of Can'-Ka No Rey opened before him in a path to the Dark Tower, the yellow suns deep in their cups seeming to regard him like eyes. And as he walked toward that gray-black column, Roland felt himself begin to slip from the world as he had always known it. He called the names of his friends and loved ones, as he had always promised himself he would; called them in the gloaming, and with

perfect force, for no longer was there any need to reserve energy with which to fight the Tower's pull. To give in—finally—was the greatest relief of his life.

He called the names of his *compadres* and *amoras*, and although each came from deeper in his heart, each seemed to have less business with the rest of him. His voice rolled away to the darkening red horizon, name upon name. He called Eddie's and Susannah's. He called Jake's, and last of all he called his own. When the sound of it had died out, the blast of a great horn replied, not from the Tower itself but from the roses that lay in a carpet all around it. That horn was the *voice* of the roses, and cried him welcome with a kingly blast.

In my dreams the horn was always mine, he thought. I should have known better, for mine was lost with Cuthbert, at Jericho Hill.

A voice whispered from above him: *It would have been the work of three seconds to bend and pick it up. Even in the smoke and the death. Three seconds. Time, Roland—it always comes back to that.*

That was, he thought, the voice of the Beam—the one they had saved. If it spoke out of gratitude it could have saved its breath, for what good were such words to him now? He remembered a line from Browning's poem: *One taste of the old times sets all to rights.*

Such had never been his experience. In his own, memories brought only sadness. They were the food of poets and fools, sweets that left a bitter aftertaste in the mouth and throat.

Roland stopped for a moment still ten paces from the ghostwood door in the Tower's base, letting the voice of the roses—that welcoming horn—echo away to nothing. The feeling of *déjà vu* was still strong, almost as though he had been here after all. And of course he had been, in ten thousand premonitory dreams. He looked up at the balcony where the Crimson King had stood, trying to defy ka and bar his way. There, about six feet above the cartons that held the few remaining sneetches (the old lunatic had had no other weapons after all, it seemed), he saw two red eyes, floating in the darkening air, looking down at him with eternal hatred. From their backs, the thin silver of the optic nerves (now tinted red-orange with the light of the leaving sun) trailed away to nothing. The gunslinger supposed the Crimson King's eyes would remain up there forever, watching Can'-Ka No Rey while their owner wandered the world to

which Patrick's eraser and enchanted Artist's eye had sent him. Or, more likely, to the space *between* the worlds.

Roland walked on to where the path ended at the steel-banded slab of black ghostwood. Upon it, a sigil that he now knew well was engraved three-quarters of the way up:



Here he laid two things, the last of his gunna: Aunt Talitha's cross, and his remaining sixgun. When he stood up, he saw the first two hieroglyphics had faded away:



UNFOUND had become FOUND.

He raised his hand as if to knock, but the door swung open of its own accord before he could touch it, revealing the bottom steps of an ascending spiral stairway. There was a sighing voice—*Welcome, Roland, thee of Eld*. It was the Tower's voice. This edifice was not stone at all, although it might look like stone; this was a living thing, Gan himself, likely, and the pulse he'd felt deep in his head even thousands of miles from here had always been Gan's beating life-force.

Commala, gunslinger. Commala-come-come.

And wafting out came the smell of alkali, bitter as tears. The smell of . . . what? What, exactly? Before he could place it the odor was gone, leaving Roland to surmise he had imagined it.

He stepped inside and the Song of the Tower, which he had always heard—even in Gilead, where it had hidden in his mother's voice as she sang him her cradle songs—finally ceased. There was another sigh. The door swung shut with a boom, but he was not left in blackness. The light that remained was that of the shining spiral windows, mixed with the glow of sunset.

Stone stairs, a passage just wide enough for one person, ascended.

"Now comes Roland," he called, and the words seemed to spiral up into infinity. "Thee at the top, hear and make me welcome if you would. If you're my enemy, know that I come unarmed and mean no ill."

He began to climb.

Nineteen steps brought him to the first landing (and to each one thereafter). A door stood open here and beyond it was a small round room. The stones of its wall were carved with thousands of overlapping faces. Many he knew (one was the face of Calvin Tower, peeping slyly over the top of an open book). The faces looked at him and he heard their murmuring.

Welcome Roland, you of the many miles and many worlds; welcome thee of Gilead, thee of Eld.

On the far side of the room was a door flanked by dark red swags traced with gold. About six feet up from the door—at the exact height of his eyes—was a small round window, little bigger than an outlaw's peephole. There was a sweet smell, and this one he could identify: the bag of pine sachet his mother had placed first in his cradle, then, later, in his first real bed. It brought back those days with great clarity, as aromas always do; if any sense serves us as a time machine, it's that of smell.

Then, like the bitter call of the alkali, it was gone.

The room was unfurnished, but a single item lay on the floor. He advanced to it and picked it up. It was a small cedar clip, its bow wrapped in a bit of blue silk ribbon. He had seen such things long ago, in Gilead; must once have worn one himself. When the sawbones cut a newly arrived baby's umbilical cord, separating mother from child, such a clip was put on above the baby's navel, where it would stay until the remainder of the cord fell off, and the clip with it. (The navel itself was called tetka can Gan.) The bit of silk on this one told that it had belonged to a boy. A girl's clip would have been wrapped with pink ribbon.

'Twas my own, he thought. He regarded it a moment longer, fascinated, then put it carefully back where it had been. Where it belonged. When he stood up again, he saw a baby's face

(Can this be my darling bah-bo? If you say so, let it be so!)

among the multitude of others. It was contorted, as if its first breath of air outside the womb had not been to its liking, already fouled with death. Soon it would pronounce judgment on its new situation with a squall that would echo throughout the apartments of Steven and Gabrielle, causing those friends and servants who heard it

to smile with relief. (Only Marten Broadcloak would scowl.) The birthing was done, and it had been a livebirth, tell Gan and all the gods thankya. There was an heir to the Line of Eld, and thus there was still the barest outside chance that the world's rueful shuffle toward ruin might be reversed.

Roland left that room, his sense of *déjà vu* stronger than ever. So was the sense that he had entered the body of Gan himself.

He turned to the stairs and once more began to climb.

FOUR

Another nineteen steps took him to the second landing and the second room. Here bits of cloth were scattered across the circular floor. Roland had no question that they had once been an infant's clout, torn to shreds by a certain petulant interloper, who had then gone out onto the balcony for a look back at the field of roses and found himself betaken. He was a creature of monumental slyness, full of evil wisdom . . . but in the end he had slipped, and now he would pay forever and ever.

If it was only a look he wanted, why did he bring his ammunition with him when he stepped out?

Because it was his only gunna, and slung over his back, whispered one of the faces carved into the curve of the wall. This was the face of Mordred. Roland saw no hatefulness there now but only the lonely sadness of an abandoned child. That face was as lonesome as a train-whistle on a moonless night. There had been no clip for Mordred's navel when he came into the world, only the mother he had taken for his first meal. No clip, never in life, for Mordred had never been part of Gan's tet. No, not he.

My Red Father would never go unarmed, whispered the stone boy. *Not once he was away from his castle. He was mad, but never that mad.*

In this room was the smell of talc put on by his mother while he lay naked on a towel, fresh from his bath and playing with his newly discovered toes. She had soothed his skin with it, singing as she caressed him: *Baby-bunting, baby dear, baby bring your basket here!*

This smell too was gone as quickly as it had come.

Roland crossed to the little window, walking among the shredded bits of diaper, and looked out. The disembodied eyes sensed him and rolled over giddily to regard him. That gaze was poisonous with fury and loss.

Come out, Roland! Come out and face me one to one! Man to man! An eye for an eye, may it do ya!

“I think not,” Roland said, “for I have more work to do. A little more, even yet.”

It was his last word to the Crimson King. Although the lunatic screamed thoughts after him, he screamed in vain, for Roland never looked back. He had more stairs to climb and more rooms to investigate on his way to the top.

FIVE

On the third landing he looked through the door and saw a corduroy dress that had no doubt been his when he'd been only a year old. Among the faces on this wall he saw that of his father, but as a much younger man. Later on that face had become cruel—events and responsibilities had turned it so. But not here. Here, Steven Deschain's eyes were those of a man looking on something that pleases him more than anything else ever has, or ever could. Here Roland smelled a sweet and husky aroma he knew for the scent of his father's shaving soap. A phantom voice whispered, *Look, Gabby, look you! He's smiling! Smiling at me! And he's got a new tooth!*

On the floor of the fourth room was the collar of his first dog, Ring-A-Levio. Ringo, for short. He'd died when Roland was three, which was something of a gift. A boy of three was still allowed to weep for a lost pet, even a boy with the blood of Eld in his veins. Here the gunslinger that was smelled an odor that was wonderful but had no name, and knew it for the smell of the Full Earth sun in Ringo's fur.

Perhaps two dozen floors above Ringo's Room was a scattering of breadcrumbs and a limp bundle of feathers that had once belonged to a hawk named David—no pet he, but certainly a friend. The first of Roland's many sacrifices to the Dark Tower. On one section of the wall Roland saw David carved in flight, his stubby wings spread above all the gathered court of Gilead (Marten the Enchanter not least

among them). And to the left of the door leading onto the balcony, David was carved again. Here his wings were folded as he fell upon Cort like a blind bullet, heedless of Cort's upraised stick.

Old times.

Old times and old crimes.

Not far from Cort was the laughing face of the whore with whom the boy had sported that night. The smell in David's Room was her perfume, cheap and sweet. As the gunslinger drew it in, he remembered touching the whore's pubic curls and was shocked to remember now what he had remembered then, as his fingers slid toward her slicky-sweet cleft: being fresh out of his baby's bath, with his mother's hands upon him.

He began to grow hard, and Roland fled that room in fear.

SIX

There was no more red to light his way now, only the eldritch blue glow of the windows—glass eyes that were alive, glass eyes that looked upon the gunless intruder. Outside the Dark Tower, the roses of Can'-Ka No Rey had closed for another day. Part of his mind marveled that he should be here at all; that he had one by one surmounted the obstacles placed in his path, as dreadfully single-minded as ever. *I'm like one of the old people's robots*, he thought. *One that will either accomplish the task for which it has been made or beat itself to death trying.*

Another part of him was not surprised at all, however. This was the part that dreamed as the Beams themselves must, and this darker self thought again of the horn that had fallen from Cuthbert's fingers—Cuthbert, who had gone to his death laughing. The horn that might to this very day lie where it had fallen on the rocky slope of Jericho Hill.

And of course I've seen these rooms before! They're telling my life, after all.

Indeed they were. Floor by floor and tale by tale (not to mention death by death), the rising rooms of the Dark Tower recounted Roland Deschain's life and quest. Each held its memento; each its signature aroma. Many times there was more than a single floor devoted to a single year, but there was always at least one. And after the thirty-eighth room (which is nineteen doubled, do ya not see it),

he wished to look no more. This one contained the charred stake to which Susan Delgado had been bound. He did not enter, but looked at the face upon the wall. That much he owed her. *Roland, I love thee!* Susan Delgado had screamed, and he knew it was the truth, for it was only her love that rendered her recognizable. And, love or no love, in the end she had still burned.

This is a place of death, he thought, *and not just here. All these rooms. Every floor.*

Yes, gunslinger, whispered the Voice of the Tower. *But only because your life has made it so.*

After the thirty-eighth floor, Roland climbed faster.

SEVEN

Standing outside, Roland had judged the Tower to be roughly six hundred feet high. But as he peered into the hundredth room, and then the two hundredth, he felt sure he must have climbed eight times six hundred. Soon he would be closing in on the mark of distance his friends from America-side had called a mile. That was more floors than there possibly could be—no Tower could be a mile high!—but still he climbed, climbed until he was nearly running, yet never did he tire. It once crossed his mind that he'd never reach the top; that the Dark Tower was infinite in height as it was eternal in time. But after a moment's consideration he rejected the idea, for it was his life the Tower was telling, and while that life had been long, it had by no means been eternal. And as it had had a beginning (marked by the cedar clip and the bit of blue silk ribbon), so it would have an ending.

Soon now, quite likely.

The light he sensed behind his eyes was brighter now, and did not seem so blue. He passed a room containing Zoltan, the bird from the weed-eater's hut. He passed a room containing the atomic pump from the Way Station. He climbed more stairs, paused outside a room containing a dead lobstrosity, and by now the light he sensed was *much* brighter and no longer blue.

It was . . .

He was quite sure it was . . .

It was sunlight. Past twilight it might be, with Old Star and Old Mother shining from above the Dark Tower, but Roland was quite sure he was seeing—or sensing—*sunlight*.

He climbed on without looking into any more of the rooms, without bothering to smell their aromas of the past. The stairwell narrowed until his shoulders nearly touched its curved stone sides. No songs now, unless the wind was a song, for he heard it sighing.

He passed one final open door. Lying on the floor of the tiny room beyond it was a pad from which the face had been erased. All that remained were two red eyes, glaring up.

I have reached the present. I have reached now.

Yes, and there was sunlight, commala sunlight inside his eyes and waiting for him. It was hot and harsh upon his skin. The sound of the wind was louder, and that sound was also harsh. Unforgiving. Roland looked at the stairs curving upward; now his shoulders *would* touch the walls, for the passage was no wider than the sides of a coffin. Nineteen more stairs, and then the room at the top of the Dark Tower would be his.

“I come!” he called. “If’ee hear me, hear me well! *I come!*”

He took the stairs one by one, walking with his back straight and his head held up. The other rooms had been open to his eye. The final one was closed off, his way blocked by a ghostwood door with a single word carved upon it. That word was

ROLAND.

He grasped the knob. It was engraved with a wild rose wound around a revolver, one of those great old guns from his father and now lost forever.

Yet it will be yours again, whispered the voice of the Tower and the voice of the roses—these voices were now one.

What do you mean?

To this there was no answer, but the knob turned beneath his hand, and perhaps that was an answer. Roland opened the door at the top of the Dark Tower.

He saw and understood at once, the knowledge falling upon him in a hammerblow, hot as the sun of the desert that was the apotheosis

of all deserts. How many times had he climbed these stairs only to find himself peeled back, curved back, turned back? Not to the beginning (when things might have been changed and time's curse lifted), but to that moment in the Mohaine Desert when he had finally understood that his thoughtless, questionless quest would ultimately succeed? How many times had he traveled a loop like the one in the clip that had once pinched off his navel, his own tet-ka can Gan? How many times *would* he travel it?

"Oh, no!" he screamed. *"Please, not again! Have pity! Have mercy!"*

The hands pulled him forward regardless. The hands of the Tower knew no mercy.

They were the hands of Gan, the hands of ka, and they knew no mercy.

He smelled alkali, bitter as tears. The desert beyond the door was white; blinding; waterless; without feature save for the faint, cloudy haze of the mountains which sketched themselves on the horizon. The smell beneath the alkali was that of the devil-grass which brought sweet dreams, nightmares, death.

But not for you, gunslinger. Never for you. You darkle. You tinct. May I be brutally frank? You go on.

And each time you forget the last time. For you, each time is the first time.

He made one final effort to draw back: hopeless. Ka was stronger.

Roland of Gilead walked through the last door, the one he always sought, the one he always found. It closed gently behind him.

EIGHT

The gunslinger paused for a moment, swaying on his feet. He thought he'd almost passed out. It was the heat, of course; the damned heat. There was a wind, but it was dry and brought no relief. He took his waterskin, judged how much was left by the heft of it, knew he shouldn't drink—it wasn't time to drink—and had a swallow, anyway.

For a moment he had felt he was somewhere else. In the Tower itself, mayhap. But of course the desert was tricky, and full of mirages. The Dark Tower still lay thousands of wheels ahead. That sense of having climbed many stairs and looked into many rooms where many faces had looked back at him was already fading.

I will reach it, he thought, squinting up at the pitiless sun. I swear on the name of my father that I will.

And perhaps this time if you get there it will be different, a voice whispered—surely the voice of desert delirium, for what other time had there ever been? He was what he was and where he was, just that, no more than that, no more. He had no sense of humor and little imagination, but he was steadfast. He was a gunslinger. And in his heart, well-hidden, he still felt the bitter romance of the quest.

You're the one who never changes, Cort had told him once, and in his voice Roland could have sworn he heard fear . . . although why Cort should have been afraid of him—a boy—Roland couldn't tell. *It'll be your damnation, boy. You'll wear out a hundred pairs of boots on your walk to hell.*

And Vannay: *Those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.*

And his mother: *Roland, must you always be so serious? Can you never rest?*

Yet the voice whispered it again
(*different this time mayhap different*)

and Roland *did* seem to smell something other than alkali and devil-grass. He thought it might be flowers.

He thought it might be roses.

He shifted his gunna from one shoulder to the other, then touched the horn that rode on his belt behind the gun on his right hip. The ancient brass horn had once been blown by Arthur Eld himself, or so the story did say. Roland had given it to Cuthbert Allgood at Jericho Hill, and when Cuthbert fell, Roland had paused just long enough to pick it up again, knocking the deathdust of that place from its throat.

This is your sigul, whispered the fading voice that bore with it the dusk-sweet scent of roses, the scent of home on a summer evening—O lost!—a stone, a rose, an unfound door; a stone, a rose, a door.

This is your promise that things may be different, Roland—that there may yet be rest. Even salvation.

A pause, and then:

If you stand. If you are true.

He shook his head to clear it, thought of taking another sip of water, and dismissed the idea. Tonight. When he built his campfire

over the bones of Walter's fire. Then he would drink. As for now . . .

As for now, he would resume his journey. Somewhere ahead was the Dark Tower. Closer, however, much closer, was the man (*was* he a man? *was* he really?) who could perhaps tell him how to get there. Roland would catch him, and when he did, that man would talk—aye, yes, yar, tell it on the mountain as you'd hear it in the valley: Walter would be caught, and Walter would talk.

Roland touched the horn again, and its reality was oddly comforting, as if he had never touched it before.

Time to get moving.

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

June 19, 1970–April 7, 2004:

I tell God thankya.



A black and white photograph of a concrete wall. A large, irregular hole is visible on the right side of the wall. In the foreground, there is a dense patch of foliage, including various leaves and stems. The word "APPENDIX" is centered on the wall in a serif font.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

ROBERT BROWNING

“CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER CAME”

I

*My first thought was, he lied in every word,
That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
Askance to watch the workings of his lie
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.*

II

*What else should he be set for, with his staff?
What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare
All travellers who might find him posted there,
And ask the road? I guessed what skull-like laugh
Would break, what crutch 'gin write my epitaph
For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare.*

III

*If at his counsel I should turn aside
Into that ominous tract which, all agree,*

*Hides the Dark Tower. Yet acquiescingly
I did turn as he pointed, neither pride
Nor hope rekindling at the end descried,
So much as gladness that some end might be.*

IV

*For, what with my whole world-wide wandering,
What with my search drawn out through years,
my hope
Dwindled into a ghost not fit to cope
With that obstreperous joy success would bring,
I hardly tried now to rebuke the spring
My heart made, finding failure in its scope.*

V

*As when a sick man very near to death
Seems dead indeed, and feels begin and end
The tears and takes the farewell of each friend,
And hears one bid the other go, draw breath
Freelier outside, ('since all is o'er,' he saith
'And the blow fallen no grieving can amend;')*

VI

*When some discuss if near the other graves
Be room enough for this, and when a day
Suits best for carrying the corpse away,
With care about the banners, scarves and staves
And still the man hears all, and only craves
He may not shame such tender love and stay.*

VII

*Thus, I had so long suffered in this quest,
Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ*

*So many times among 'The Band' to wit,
The knights who to the Dark Tower's
search addressed
Their steps—that just to fail as they, seemed best,
And all the doubt was now—should I be fit?*

VIII

*So, quiet as despair I turned from him,
That hateful cripple, out of his highway
Into the path he pointed. All the day
Had been a dreary one at best, and dim
Was settling to its close, yet shot one grim
Red leer to see the plain catch its estray.*

IX

*For mark! No sooner was I fairly found
Pledged to the plain, after a pace or two,
Than, pausing to throw backwards a last view
O'er the safe road, 'twas gone; grey plain all round:
Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound.
I might go on, naught else remained to do.*

X

*So on I went. I think I never saw
Such starved ignoble nature; nothing throve:
For flowers—as well expect a cedar grove!
But cockle, spurge, according to their law
Might propagate their kind with none to awe,
You'd think; a burr had been a treasure trove.*

XI

*No! penury, inertness and grimace,
In some strange sort, were the land's portion. 'See*

*Or shut your eyes, ' said Nature peevishly,
'It nothing skills: I cannot help my case:
'Tis the Last Judgement's fire must cure this place
Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free.'*

XII

*If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk
Above its mates, the head was chopped, the bents
Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents
In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk
All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk
Pushing their life out, with a brute's intents.*

XIII

*As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair
In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud
Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood.
One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,
Stood stupefied, however he came there:
Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!*

XIV

*Alive? he might be dead for aught I know,
With that red gaunt and colloped neck a-strain.
And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;
Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;
I never saw a brute I hated so;
He must be wicked to deserve such pain.*

XV

*I shut my eyes and turned them on my heart,
As a man calls for wine before he fights,
I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights,*

*Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.
Think first, fight afterwards, the soldier's art:
One taste of the old time sets all to rights.*

XVI

*Not it! I fancied Cuthbert's reddening face
Beneath its garniture of curly gold,
Dear fellow, till I almost felt him fold
An arm to mine to fix me to the place,
The way he used. Alas, one night's disgrace!
Out went my heart's new fire and left it cold.*

XVII

*Giles then, the soul of honour—there he stands
Frank as ten years ago when knighted first,
What honest man should dare (he said) he durst.
Good—but the scene shifts—faugh!
what hangman hands
Pin to his breast a parchment? His own bands
Read it. Poor traitor, spit upon and curst!*

XVIII

*Better this present than a past like that:
Back therefore to my darkening path again!
No sound, no sight as far as eye could strain.
Will the night send a howlet or a bat?
I asked: when something on the dismal flat
Came to arrest my thoughts and change their train.*

XIX

*A sudden little river crossed my path
As unexpected as a serpent comes.
No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms;*

*This, as it frothed by, might have been a bath
For the fiend's glowing hoof—to see the wrath
Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.*

XX

*So petty yet so spiteful! All along,
Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it;
Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit
Of mute despair, a suicidal throng:
The river which had done them all the wrong,
Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit.*

XXI

*Which, while I forded—good saints,
how I feared
To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,
Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek
For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!
—It may have been a water-rat I speared,
But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek.*

XXII

*Glad was I when I reached the other bank.
Now for a better country. Vain presage!
Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage,
Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank
Soil to a splash? Toads in a poisoned tank
Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage—*

XXIII

*The fight must so have seemed in that fell cirque,
What penned them there, with all the plain to choose?
No footprint leading to that horrid mews,*

*None out of it. Mad brewage set to work
Their brains, no doubt, like galley-slaves the Turk
Pits for his pastime, Christians against Jews.*

XXIV

*And more than that—a furlong on—why, there!
What bad use was that engine for, that wheel,
Or brake, not wheel—that harrow fit to reel
Men's bodies out like silk? With all the air
Of Tophet's tool, on earth left unaware
Or brought to sharpen its rusty teeth of steel.*

XXV

*Then came a bit of stubbed ground, once a wood,
Next a marsh it would seem, and now mere earth
Desperate and done with; (so a fool finds mirth,
Makes a thing and then mars it, till his mood
Changes and off he goes!) within a rood—
Bog, clay and rubble, sand, and stark black dearth.*

XXVI

*Now blotches rankling, coloured gay and grim,
Now patches where some leanness of the soil's
Broke into moss, or substances like boils;
Then came some palsied oak, a cleft in him
Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim
Gaping at death, and dies while it recoils.*

XXVII

*And just as far as ever from the end!
Naught in the distance but the evening, naught
To point my footstep further! At the thought,
A great black bird, Apollyon's bosom friend,*

*Sailed past, not best his wide wing dragon-penned
That brushed my cap—perchance the guide I sought.*

XXVIII

*For, looking up, aware I somehow grew,
'Spite of the dusk, the plain had given place
All round to mountains—with such name to grace
Mere ugly heights and heaps now stolen in view.
How thus they had surprised me—solve it, you!
How to get from them was no clearer case.*

XXIX

*Yet half I seemed to recognise some trick
Of mischief happened to me, God knows when—
In a bad dream perhaps. Here ended, then
Progress this way. When, in the very nick
Of giving up, one time more, came a click
As when a trap shuts—you're inside the den.*

XXX

*Burningly it came on me all at once,
This was the place! those two hills on the right,
Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight;
While to the left a tall scalped mountain . . . Duncce,
Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,
After a life spent training for the sight!*

XXXI

*What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?
The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,
Built of brown stone, without a counterpart
In the whole world. The tempest's mocking elf*

*Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf
He strikes on, only when the timbers start.*

XXXII

*Not see? because of night perhaps?—why day
Came back again for that! before it left
The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:
The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay,
Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay,—
'Now stab and end the creature—to the heft!'*

XXXIII

*Not hear? When noise was everywhere! it tolled
Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears
Of all the lost adventurers, my peers—
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
And such was fortunate, yet each of old
Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.*

XXXIV

*There they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! In a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
And blew. 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.'*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sometimes I think I have written more about the Dark Tower *books* than I have written about the Dark Tower itself. These related writings include the ever-growing synopsis (known by the quaint old word *Argument*) at the beginning of each of the first five volumes, and afterwords (most totally unnecessary and some actually embarrassing in retrospect) at the end of all the volumes. Michael Whelan, the extraordinary artist who illustrated both the first volume and this last, proved himself to be no slouch as a literary critic as well when, after reading a draft of Volume Seven, he suggested—in refreshingly blunt terms—that the rather lighthearted afterword I'd put at the end was jarring and out of place. I took another look at it and realized he was right.

The first half of that well-meant but off-key essay can now be found as an introduction to the first four volumes of the series; it's called "On Being Nineteen." I thought of leaving Volume Seven without any afterword at all; of letting Roland's discovery at the top of his Tower be my last word on the matter. Then I realized that I had one more thing to say, a thing that actually *needed* to be said. It has to do with my presence in my own book.

There's a smarmy academic term for this—"metafiction." I hate it. I hate the pretentiousness of it. I'm in the story only because I've known for some time now (consciously since writing *Insomnia* in 1995, unconsciously since temporarily losing track of Father Donald Callahan near the end of *Salem's Lot*) that many of my fictions refer back to Roland's world and Roland's story. Since I was the one who wrote them, it seemed logical that I was part of the gunslinger's ka.

My idea was to use the *Dark Tower* stories as a kind of summation, a way of unifying as many of my previous stories as possible beneath the arch of some *über*-tale. I never meant that to be pretentious (and I hope it isn't), but only as a way of showing how life influences art (and vice-versa). I think that, if you have read these last three *Dark Tower* volumes, you'll see that my talk of retirement makes more sense in this context. In a sense, there's nothing left to say now that Roland has reached his goal . . . and I hope the reader will see that by discovering the Horn of Eld, the gunslinger may finally be on the way to his own resolution. Possibly even to redemption. It was *all* about reaching the Tower, you see—mine as well as Roland's—and that has finally been accomplished. You may not like what Roland found at the top, but that's a different matter entirely. And don't write me any angry letters about it, either, because I won't answer them. There's nothing left to say on the subject. I wasn't exactly crazy about the ending, either, if you want to know the truth, but it's the *right* ending. The *only* ending, in fact. You have to remember that I don't make these things up, not exactly; I only write down what I see.

Readers will speculate on how "real" the Stephen King is who appears in these pages. The answer is "not very," although the one Roland and Eddie meet in Bridgton (*Song of Susannah*) is very close to the Stephen King I remember being at that time. As for the Stephen King who shows up in this final volume . . . well, let's put it this way: my wife asked me if I would kindly not give fans of the series very precise directions to where we live or who we really are. I agreed to do that. Not because I wanted to, exactly—part of what makes this story go, I think, is the sense of the fictional world bursting through into the real one—but because this happens to be my wife's life as well as mine, and she should not be penalized for either loving me or living with me. So I have fictionalized the geography of western Maine to a great extent, trusting readers to grasp the intent of the fiction and to understand why I treated my own part in it as I did. And if you feel a need to drop in and say hello, please think again. My family and I have a good deal less privacy than we used to, and I have no wish to give up any more, may it do ya fine. My books are my way of knowing you. Let them be your way of knowing me, as well. It's enough. And on behalf of Roland and all his ka-tet—now scattered, say sorry—I

thank you for coming along, and sharing this adventure with me. I never worked harder on a project in my life, and I know—none better, alas—that it has not been entirely successful. What work of make-believe ever is? And yet for all of that, I would not give back a single minute of the time that I have lived in Roland's where and when. Those days in Mid-World and End-World were quite extraordinary. Those were days when my imagination was so clear I could smell the dust and hear the creak of leather.

Stephen King
August 21, 2003



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by David King



Photo by Tabitha King

STEPHEN KING is the author of more than fifty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. Among his most recent are *From a Buick 8*, *Everything's Eventual*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *Bag of Bones*, the screenplay *Storm of the Century*, and *The Green Mile*. His acclaimed nonfiction book, *On Writing*, was also a bestseller. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

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KING

THE
DARK TOWER V

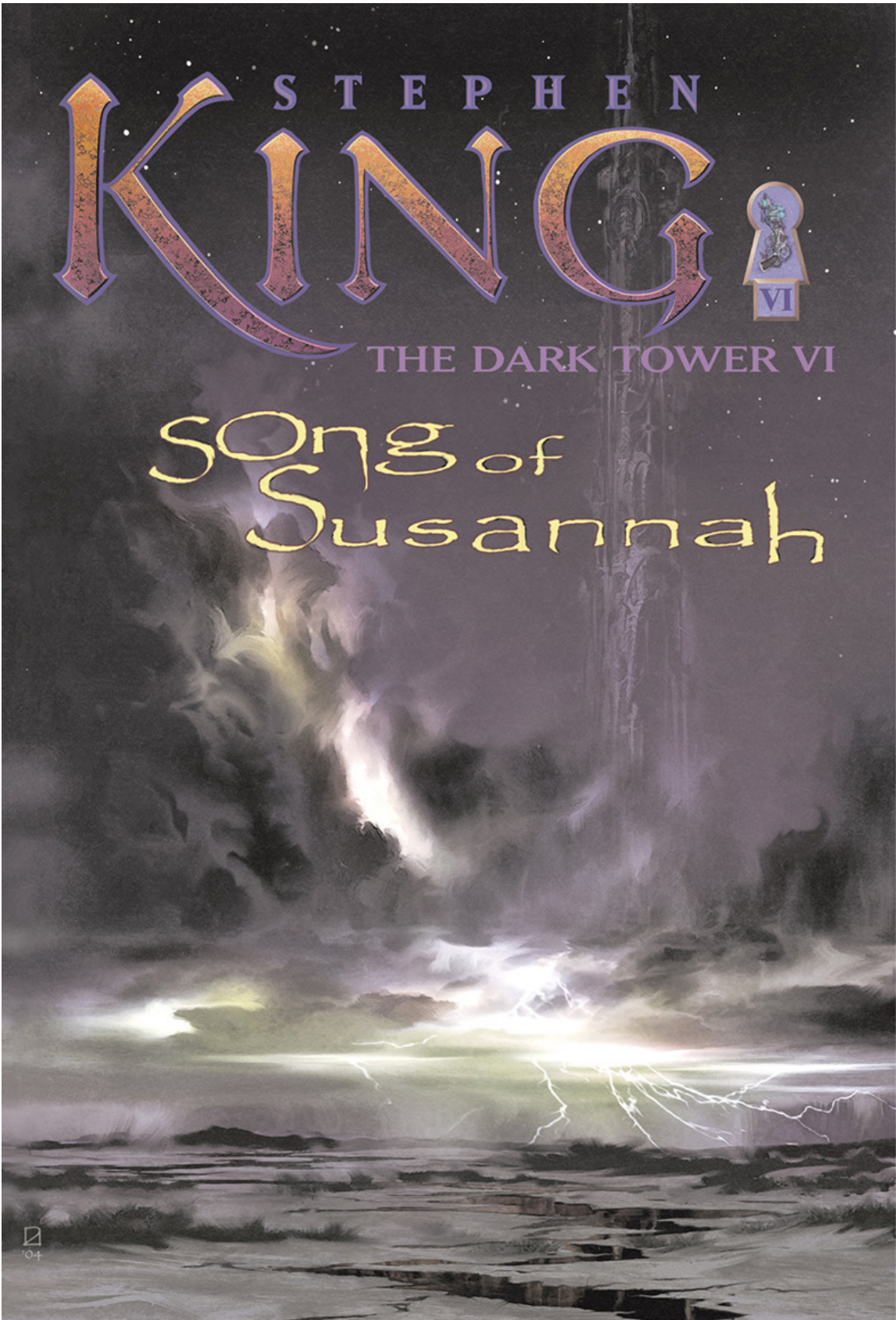


WOLVES
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THE DARK TOWER

